Table of Contents

01. Our Vision

03. Stories of Impact

05. How You Can Help

06. Our Team

07. FAQs
The goal of the St. Margaret of Castello Granting Fund is to facilitate access to Catholic education for children who have been traditionally excluded from Catholic schools due to significant disabilities or special needs.

Few would question the premise that Catholic schools have a moral and spiritual obligation to educate children of all abilities. Yet, special education programs in Catholic schools remain very much the exception. Far more commonly, children with special needs are turned away from our schools due to lack of financial resources, adequate facilities, and trained staff. The St. Margaret of Castello Granting Fund exists to help Catholic schools overcome these obstacles.

In 2022, our committee funded a $10,000 grant to study the state of Catholic special education in Southeastern Michigan and the best practices of successful programs around the country. We learned some important things:

- Students with special needs are currently excluded from statistically almost all Catholic schools in Southeastern Michigan.

- A small handful of our schools are heroically attempting to establish and maintain special needs programs. Other schools are eager to do this work. All of these schools need help, support, and funding.

- There are excellent training resources available, numerous dedicated professionals who want to help, and untold hundreds and thousands of people in our community with true passion for this issue.

- We have learned that these programs can succeed. We have seen this locally at the elementary school level with St. William (Walled Lake) and at the high school level with St. Mary Catholic Central (Monroe), and we have seen it in other private schools around the country.

- Last, but certainly not least, when these programs succeed, they do not only benefit special needs children and their families, they bless an entire school community. Each and every student at a school that successfully implements such a program receives a gift and is made a better person for having been a part of it.
We join the entire Catholic community in proclaiming that those with different learning abilities should not be turned away; rather they should be educated with their siblings and be embraced for their gifts. They should be provided with the love and spiritual nourishment of a Catholic education. Moreover, our school communities should be enriched by the lessons of compassion, perseverance, and courage that special needs students offer every day.

It is our vision and goal to harness the tremendous passion, expertise, and resources of our community, remove the obstacles to inclusive Catholic education, and work toward the day when a Catholic education is available to any family and any child who wants one. When we are asked, what we did for the least of His children, we can answer that we did all that we could.

The patron saint and namesake of this Fund is St. Margaret of Castello. St. Margaret is the Patron Saint of Disabled Children. In her lifetime she was cast out because of her own disabilities and told that she could not participate in society because of her special needs. Yet, with God’s grace, she grew up to be a Third-Order Dominican and spent the rest of her life teaching children, especially those with disabilities.

*St. Margaret, pray for us!*
Izzy is a fifteen year old girl with Autism Spectrum Disorder and cognitive impairments. When Izzy reached school age, her older sister was in a Catholic school that provided no special education program or opportunities. The only option was that they would be separated and that Izzy would go through school without the protection and companionship of her siblings.

Izzy went to public school. Especially when she was younger, she struggled with communication. When the first day of school came, her parents were terrified to put her on the bus. They knew she would be unable to explain if anything happened to her. Her parents explored sewing a listening device into her clothes, but they discovered that such devices were not permitted at school. If things had been different, she would have been on the bus with her sister and would have known that she was down the hall if she needed anything. But that was not an option for Izzy.

A few years later, her two younger siblings started in Catholic school. Despite her impairments, Izzy was acutely aware that she was separated from everyone else for school, as she was when it came to sports, friends, and so many other things in her life. When it came time for her First Communion her parents had to make special arrangements in a different parish. They had to do the same thing for Confirmation.

Izzy met many wonderful special education teachers in public school, but the wish of her parents, to have all of their children in school together and to have Izzy receive a Catholic education, was never an option. Izzy’s experience is, unfortunately, typical.

Jacob’s two older siblings had graduated from St. Mary Catholic Central in Monroe, Michigan. His parents had a simple dream—for Jacob to graduate from the same school. They approached school staff and offered to help with funding. From this small spark was born the St. Andre Bessette Open Doors Inclusion Program—believed to be the first of its kind for a Catholic high school in Michigan. It is a model for what is possible.

The administration of St. Mary’s was “all-in”, conducting months of research, hiring a dedicated program director, coordinating services with the local ISD, establishing an enriching and successful peer mentor certification program, and developing an individualized curriculum for each student.

St. Mary’s also recently launched a post-secondary program to help with job skills and opportunities after high school. The program has steadily grown and is self-sustaining. It has blossomed and blessed the St. Mary’s community in innumerable ways and is a model for what is possible for the rest of the Catholic school system.

Read more about Jacob’s incredible story by visiting: www.smccinclusion.weebly.com.
Illustration of the opportunity

There is another Jacob—a four year old with Down syndrome. He has four older brothers who adore him—and whose lives have been enriched for having had Jacob in them. His brothers help him, protect him, and love him. Jacob’s closest sibling is less than one year older than him. Since the day Jacob was born, the two of them have done everything together.

Jacob’s brothers have all attended a Catholic school, where they have received an excellent education, been surrounded by a wonderful community, and attend daily mass. But their school currently does not offer any program or accommodations for students with special needs. If nothing changes, Jacob will be separated from his brothers and excluded from the Catholic school system, along with hundreds of other students like him. Like all little kids, Jacob wants to do everything his big brothers do. But at this time, it is possible that he will not be able to join his brothers at school.

Our Need

The St. Margaret of Castello Granting Fund seeks to raise a minimum of $2 million and to provide grants of up to $50,000 per year to Catholic schools that demonstrate a commitment and a sustainable plan for a special education program.

Along with the grant of funds, schools will be provided with best practices, guides to resources, and other knowledge to help their programs succeed.
HOW YOU CAN HELP

01  GIVE TODAY
Special education programs require significant financial assistance to get off the ground. You can help make these programs a reality with your generosity and financial contribution. To give, visit bit.ly/castello23 or scan the barcode to the right with your phone camera.

02  SPREAD THE WORD
We are looking for pastors, principals, schools, and families that are passionate about this cause and want to join our work. Please spread the word and kindly reach out to Angela Moloney at (248) 204-0332, ext. 2.

03  PRAY, PRAY, PRAY!
Please pray for the success of this mission and its granted programs. We are not naïve about the challenges, but we firmly believe that with God all things are possible.
OUR TEAM

Angela Moloney
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Angela serves as the founding President and CEO of the Catholic Foundation of Michigan. Angela brings her passion to this work, believing children with severe learning differences can teach us all a great deal. She has learned love, patience and joy from her adult nephews with autism.

Beth Van Hove
Beth.Vanhowe@uticak12.org

Beth has been teaching Special Education for over 20 years, specializing in Early Childhood Development. She works daily to support the needs of unique learners and they inspire her daily to be the best she can be. Her and her husband, Paul are proud parents to two boys.

Joe Viviano
JViviano@khvpf.com

Joe is a partner at Kienbaum, Hardy, Viviano, Pelton & Forrest PLC. He and his wife, Laura, are proud parents of four children, including Isabelle, who has Autism Spectrum Disorder and cognitive impairment. Her example of courage, perseverance, and cheerfulness in the face of great adversity has changed their lives. Anything he does for this project is in her name and in her honor.

Karen Mersino
Karen@Mersino.com

Karen has worn many hats over the years—as a serial entrepreneur, business owner, investor, bank director, and a Board of Education president—but her most treasured accomplishment is being a mother and grandmother. It wasn’t until she became the grandmother of a sweet boy with Down Syndrome that she realized the difficulties faced by parents of special needs kids seeking a Catholic education.

Patty Sherer
Patssherer@yahoo.com

Patty is a retired Special Educator with 19 years of experience teaching in both public and Catholic schools. She enjoys spending time with her two grandchildren but misses the interaction with students. To nurture her passion for teaching, she tutors former students and substitutes at Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic School in Grosse Pointe Woods.

Paul Mersino
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Paul is the President & CEO of Butzel Long, one of the largest and oldest law firms in Michigan. Paul and his wife Erin are parents to five boys, the youngest of whom—Jacob—was blessed with Down Syndrome. Jacob makes his family better people and Paul and Erin hope for him to have the same opportunities and Catholic upbringing as his brothers.
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What will the grant dollars fund?
The grant provides funding to build and foster inclusive education programs that promote human dignity of all of God’s children as outlined by Catholic teaching. This includes teacher salaries, trainings, and facility support. Student tuition is not included as part of this grant.

What type of schools will be funded by this grant?
Schools must be K-12 Catholic Schools located in Michigan that fully embody an inclusive culture with support and collaboration among the school community.

What is the criteria for student admission for a funded program?
The grant is intended to benefit students who have been traditionally excluded from Catholic education, including those with Down syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder, or other significant learning difference.

How many grants will you be awarding?
The grant will support 1-2 schools annually in the first year. An additional 2-4 schools possible in subsequent years.

How can schools apply? When does the process open?
Interested schools should visit the Catholic Foundation website for details about the application process that starts annually in May.

Is this a one time or recurring grant? How much will be granted?
This is a 2 year grant of up to $50,000 per year, renewable. The goal is for the programs to become self-sufficient.

How will the programs be evaluated year to year?
Annually, schools will provide follow up to share collected learnings and best practices with the Foundation and Catholic community.

Is this for new programs or existing programs?
New and existing programs are welcome to apply.
“Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. For the one who is least among all of you is the one who is the greatest.”

Luke 9:48