

Strategic Growth Plan in Action:

Diocese investing millions in school facilities projects

SCRANTON – The Diocese of Scranton Catholic School System is turning a key pillar of its recently completed Strategic Growth Plan into action – by investing millions of dollars in long-needed infrastructure improvements.

With 19 schools across five counties, and many of those buildings approaching a century old, the Strategic Growth Plan made clear that deferred maintenance had accumulated for many years.

The Plan's first goal – the development of a master facility plan at each school – underscored the need for updated roofs, windows, HVAC systems, electrical infrastructure, masonry work, and steady annual investments.

YEAR ONE: SUMMER OF ROOFS

After a comprehensive assessment of every school building was completed by an independent contractor, the Diocese of Scranton Catholic School System took the rare step of securing a major loan to accelerate capital improvements.

With the help of this financing, \$8 million in renovations are underway across multiple schools.

"It was the summer of roofs," Luke Alar, Schools Facilities Coordinator, said.

Alar joined the Catholic Schools Office in 2023 and has spearheaded the system-wide planning effort.

"The roofs were really the low-hanging fruit that needed to be done," Alar added.

Five major roof replacements were completed or are substantially complete at Holy Redeemer High School, Saint Jude School, All Saints Academy, Holy Rosary School, and La Salle Academy.

In some cases – the projects were urgent.

Take for example the gymnasium roof at Saint Jude School in Mountain Top which was damaged in March 2025 during a major windstorm. The age and condition of the roof contributed to its ultimate failure.

"It almost looked like a monster came in and opened it like a blanket," Alar explained. "These were projects that couldn't wait. The whole theory and concept on how we came up with the first projects was building envelope – keeping



During a major wind storm in March 2025, the roof of Saint Jude School in Mountain Top was severely damaged. This roof was among five major roof replacements completed this summer at Catholic schools.

the water out and the heat on."

YEAR TWO: HVAC AND WINDOWS

Because the financing can be drawn over 18 months, effectively giving the Catholic School System two summers for work – Alar said crews will be "going as strong as we can" in summer 2026.

"We're now switching to HVAC and windows," he noted.

Among the projects already in the planning process are new boilers at Notre Dame Elementary and High School – which have shared a single boiler since construction – and Holy Cross High School, which still has its original boiler from the 1960s.

With some buildings dating back to the early 1900s, the Catholic School System faces what Alar describes as a "university-level" infrastructure situation. But rather than seeing the scope as overwhelming, he calls it a blessing.

"It's exciting and I'm blessed to have this opportunity," he said. "It is not a job. We are bringing children to Jesus. We're making saints. We're preparing their souls for heaven. That gives you more motivation and excitement to do what you're doing."

Alar added that the long-term goal – spelled out in the Strategic Growth Plan



This is what the gymnasium at All Saints Academy in Scranton looked like in November 2024, prior to a roof replacement project being completed. Trash cans were often used to collect water that would come inside the building.

– is to establish a capital budget at each school so that investment becomes annual, consistent, and sustainable.

"This is not the end," Alar emphasized. "We want people to look back and say we made wise choices and were frugal with how we spent the money."

For Kristen Donohue, Diocesan Secretary for Catholic Education and Superintendent, the facility work is more than construction – it's a promise to families being fulfilled.

"We completed our Strategic Growth Plan and identified deferred maintenance as a key component that needed to be addressed so we can continue to deliver our strong product for years to come," she said. "We made it a priority."

Donohue echoed Alar's statements that the improvements focus first on the

overall building envelope of all schools.

"We are making sure we have a sound structure in which our students, teachers, and administrators can work and enjoy their Catholic education," she said.

Donohue praised Alar's leadership, calling the work underway a "huge task for anyone." She also noted the close partnership Alar has forged with the Diocesan Office for Property and Risk Management – an office that has been invaluable in assistance with all the projects.

"There are needs within each of our school buildings," Donohue said. "We are working to address as many outstanding issues as we can now and plan to continue addressing needs well into the future. Giving our students the best facilities we possibly can is paramount."



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The Diocese of Scranton is committed to educating our students in an environment that is academically excellent and facilitates the development of moral judgment and Christian decision-making. We are proud to share the following successes of our students in the classroom and in their service to others. Each day, our schools are fulfilling their mission of preparing today's youth and young adults to become tomorrow's faith-filled leaders.



Good Shepherd Academy, Kingston

“When you give your life to God, the ordinary becomes extraordinary,” was the message of the Most Reverend Joseph C. Bambera, Bishop of Scranton, celebrating Mass recently with students in our Diocesan Schools. “Everyone here is a saint-in-the-making; to do so, start by following Jesus’ teaching to love God with your whole heart and love your neighbor as yourself.”



Saint Jude School, Mountain Top



Members of the Class of 2026 enjoy the school’s annual Thanksgiving feast, prepared by the dedicated kitchen team at **Notre Dame Jr./Sr. High School in East Stroudsburg.**



The Living Nativity presented by the second grade class at **All Saints Academy in Scranton.**

Members of the Makers Space Club at **Our Lady of Peace School in Clarks Green** jumped into the holiday spirit by decorating gingerbread houses and gingerbread people. So much color, creativity, and Christmas cheer from these talented Falcons!



Members of the Students of Service Club at **Holy Family Academy in Hazleton** look at the donations shared by the school community for the Catholic Social Services’ food pantry.



Seventh graders from **Saint Clare/Saint Paul School in Scranton** recently finished reading “Tutors Teach Seniors” in literature and brought the story to life by meeting with their nursing home pen-pals, singing Christmas songs, sharing poems and skits, and delivering gifts and cookies.



On Monday, Dec. 8, students and faculty at **Holy Redeemer High School in Wilkes-Barre** celebrated the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in a special way by also celebrating Sister Susan Brown, IHM, as she joyfully renewed her vows in front of the school community. With a heart rooted in prayer, service, and love for God’s people, she continues to witness the charism of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary religious congregation.



Saint Nicholas brought treats for all students who left their shoes out on his Feast Day at **Saint Nicholas/Saint Mary School in Wilkes-Barre**. Mrs. Stewart's first grade class is pictured with the toys they purchase to donate to children that are less fortunate so they may feel the joy of receiving a toy during Christmas.



Families and parishioners were treated to the sweet sounds of students from **Saint Agnes School in Towanda** as they celebrated the Advent season by performing their Christmas Program.



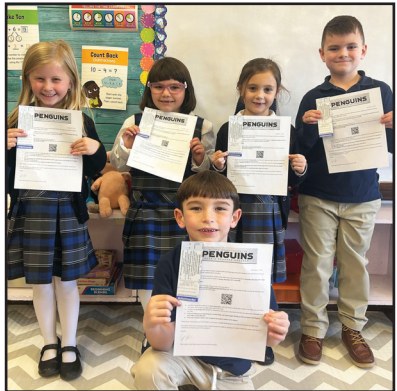
On the first week of Advent, students and faculty at **Saint John Neumann Jr./Sr. High School in Williamsport** hear from school chaplain, Father David Bechtel, pastor of St. Joseph the Worker, as he prepares for the lighting of the first candle, symbolizing hope.



Fifth and sixth graders at **Epiphany School in Sayre** had their instruments ready as they practiced for the school's annual Christmas concert.



Ben Mulvey, LSA alumnus and current cadet at the U.S. Military Academy West Point, made time to come and read to the Kindergarten class at **La Salle Academy in Jessup**.



The Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins sponsored "Robo's Readers" program at **Saint Mary of Mount Carmel School in Dunmore**, which rewards students who read 10 books with a free ticket voucher to see a home hockey game. These five well-read students will be going to see an ice hockey match soon.



Second graders at **Wyoming Area Catholic School in Exeter** teamed up with Mrs. Sedon for a festive STREAM challenge: How many Christmas mints can you stack? Students made thoughtful hypotheses, experimented with different strategies, and made several attempts to build the tallest mint tower they could.



Students at **Holy Cross High School in Dunmore** recently inducted the newest members of the National Honor Society at their Immaculate Conception Mass on Dec. 8.



Each year, the students, faculty & community at **Notre Dame Elementary School in East Stroudsburg** donate non-perishable goods as part of their annual Thanksgiving food drive to share with those in need in the Poconos.



Members of the Kindness Club at **Holy Rosary School in Duryea** deliver "birthday cake kits" to the Friends of the Poor, Weinberg Northeast Regional Food Bank, and the Gabriel House of Catholic Social Services. Students created the kits from donated items, knowing everyone deserves to feel special on their special day.



Catherine Melvin and Caroline McDermott, students at **Saint John Neumann Elementary School in Williamsport**, show donations students brought in for the High School's Key Club Food Drive.

Diocesan youth return from NCYC energized by faith and hope

INDIANAPOLIS – Eighty-six young people and chaperones from the Diocese of Scranton traveled by bus to Indianapolis in late November to join more than 16,000 participants at the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC).

During the 2025 Jubilee Year of Hope, the event served as a major opportunity for Catholic teenagers to learn more about their faith and was a reminder that the future of the Church is vibrant, joyful, and deeply rooted in Christ.

Pilgrims from nine different parishes attended this year's conference. The parishes included: Our Lady Queen of Peace, Brodheadsville; Saints Peter and Paul, Towanda; Saint Matthew, East Stroudsburg; Saint Luke, Stroudsburg; Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Hanover Township; Saint Catherine of Siena, Moscow; Saint Eulalia, Roaring Brook Township; Our Lady of the Snows, Clarks Summit; and Saint Gregory, Clarks Green.



A total of 86 young adults and chaperones from the Diocese of Scranton made the trip to Indianapolis to participate in the National Catholic Youth Conference from Nov. 20-Nov. 22, 2025.

"We were with 16,000 other Catholic kids. I've never been able to experience that before," Edward Scavone, a junior from Our Lady of the Snows Parish, said. "That was so cool."

Breakout sessions covered topics including discipleship, vocations, and social challenges.

Several Diocesan participants highlighted a session led by Bishop Joseph Espallat of the Archdiocese of New York called "Faith Amidst the Storm."

"His energy and his

compassion for humanity – and for being so real with our kids – was incredibly moving," Christian Brown, youth minister for Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Eulalia Parishes, said.

During the session, the young adults were asked what the world needs right now. While many answered peace, hope, love, or kindness – Bishop Espallat challenged them that what is needed more than anything right now is faith.

Marinellys Marte, from Saint Matthew Parish, said the session

encouraged teens to approach their faith with courage.

"We talked about how there are a lot of problems in the world and how we have to use the tools God gives us to fight our battles," Marte said. "Saints weren't wimps. They were strong people who leaned on God."

Other participants repeatedly cited Eucharistic Adoration inside Lucas Oil Stadium – the home of the Indianapolis Colts football team – as a defining moment of the conference.

"It was very moving for me.

There were 16,000 people all kneeling. I was trying to fight back the tears – but then everyone on the ground floor went up and kneeled as close as they could – and I started crying," she said.

"It was a very beautiful event because we got one-on-one time with God," Layla Reyes of Saints Peter and Paul Parish, added.

Going into the conference, Natalie Weidner of Exaltation of the Holy Cross Parish, was excited to participate in a digital encounter with Pope Leo XIV.

"I think it's just great that I got to listen to him talk. Not a lot of people get that opportunity," Weidner said.

As the conference ended, participants said NCYC renewed their enthusiasm to live and share their faith.

"The power of the Holy Spirit was present here," Hannah Rocco, a senior from Saint Eulalia Parish who is preparing for college, stated. "I'm excited to see where God is calling me in the next steps of my life."

Pope tells U.S. high school students their voice, ideas, faith matter

VATICAN CITY (CNS) - Pope Leo XIV urged U.S. high school students to be "intentional" with their screen time, their prayer time and their involvement in a parish.

"One of my own personal heroes, one of my favorite saints, is St. Augustine of Hippo," the pope told 16,000 young Catholics meeting in Indianapolis.

"He searched everywhere for happiness, but nothing satisfied him until he opened his heart to God. That is why he wrote, 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.'"

With a livestream connection, Pope Leo spoke for close to an hour Nov. 21 with participants at NCYC.

One student asked for the pope's advice on balancing the use of smartphones and social media with "making faith connections outside of technology.



(CNS photo/Vatican Media)

Pope Leo listed many good things technology does. For example, "it lets us stay connected with people who are far away," he said, and there are "amazing tools for prayer, for reading the Bible, for learning more about what we believe, and it allows us to share the Gospel with people we may never meet in person."

"But even with all that, technology can never replace real, in-person relationships; simple things (like) a hug, a handshake, a smile - all those things are essential to being human," he

Jesus is the 'king of our hearts,' Philly archbishop shares at NCYC Closing Mass

INDIANAPOLIS (OSV News) - At the Closing Mass of NCYC, Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez shared a message of hope with 16,000 young people.

He shared with them a message he wanted them to nurture in their hearts as they returned to their homes.

"When you feel lost, Jesus is your shepherd," Archbishop Pérez said in his homily during the conference's closing Mass on Nov. 22. "Remember that. When you feel you're in darkness, Jesus is your light. When you feel you're absolutely hungry and your soul is weighed down, Jesus is your bread."

Jesus, he returned to again and again in his homily on the feast of Christ the King, is the "king of our hearts."

In reflecting on Christ the King, Archbishop Pérez said that he is not a king in the way that the world views such



(OSV News photo/Sean Gallagher, The Criterion)

rulers.

"His throne is a cross," he said. "His crown is not made of gold and gems. It's made of thorns. He doesn't wear fancy, beautiful, priceless rings on his hands. He has nails."

According to the world, Christ's death on the cross was "the worst of all ways to execute a criminal."

But, because of Christ's resurrection, the church in faith proclaims that his crucifixion was actually a great victory for him and all who believe in him.

New sensory room at Good Shepherd Academy to support students' learning and well-being

KINGSTON – An LED bubble tube and a musical touch wall are just two of many items that students can interact with while visiting a new sensory room at Good Shepherd Academy in Kingston.

The calming space is designed to help children relax, refocus, and build coping skills so they can return to class ready to learn.

The new space – the first sensory room in the Diocese of Scranton's Catholic School System – was made possible through a generous grant from the William G. McGowan Charitable Fund.

After celebrating an all-school Mass on Tuesday, Nov. 25, 2025, the Most Rev. Joseph C. Bambera, Bishop of Scranton, visited the room, prayed a special blessing, and sprinkled the space with holy water.

"Allow me to offer my words of thanks to all of you, the McGowan Foundation and all of you who had a hand in making this space possible," Bishop Bambera said. "It's incredible. We read more and more about opportunities like this in many schools. I'm so proud that we have one here at Good Shepherd Academy. It's an incredible space and it is a calming space, isn't it?"

For Good Shepherd Academy principal Jim Jones, the sensory room represents the fulfillment of a long-held hope for his school, the largest Catholic elementary school in the Diocese of Scranton.

"It has been a dream of mine," Jones said. "After COVID, many of our children were having a heightened sense of anxiety and tension, so we needed a place where our students could decompress."

The room officially opened on Oct. 1, and it has been busy ever since.

"We have multiple children in there every day," Jones noted. "Our I.I. (Individualized



A new sensory room for students was blessed at Good Shepherd Academy in Kingston on Nov. 25, 2025. (Photo/Eric Deabill)

Instruction) students are in there continuously. We're so grateful for the McGowan Foundation for their support of Catholic education."

The foundation funded the approximately \$50,000 in structural and electrical elements of the project in full.

"If it was not for the McGowan Foundation, this would not be possible," Jones added. "They were gracious that they got behind our project 100 percent. They were on board from the get-go. They have been a blessing to Good Shepherd Academy."

Installed in a quiet, second-floor area of the school, the new sensory room is filled with specialized visual, auditory, and tactile equipment designed to help students self-regulate, manage anxiety, and build coping skills.

"The bubble tower is one of the highlights," Jones said with a laugh. "Everything is controlled by a cube. When you roll the cube, whatever color comes up, the lights change in the sensory room based on that."

In addition to the technology, the school also incorporated special seating from a local vendor in Hanover Township, giving students comfortable, flexible options while they relax and engage with the equipment.

"Having the students be able to go to a space where they can self-regulate and learn the

necessary coping skills for both an academic setting and a real-life setting is going to have immeasurable effects on both their personal development as well as their academic development," Mary Siejak, who has taught Individualized Instruction at Good Shepherd Academy for ten years, said.

Siejak, who primarily teaches mathematics to students who need an adapted curriculum, said she already sees the impact when she brings students into the new room.

"When I take them to the room, maybe in about 10 minutes, I notice a measurable difference in their ability to stay focused, not only on content, but then also

to perform to their potential in the classroom," she explained.

What makes the difference? "It's a nice quiet space. It is the resources that the McGowan Foundation put into the sensory room. Just having those elements," she added, noting that the room is designed to help regulate multiple senses in the body and allow students to become truly calm.

While the sensory room is

open on an as-needed basis to the entire student body, it is used most frequently by students in Good Shepherd's Individualized Instruction program.

The sensory room builds on the school's track record of innovation, including its S.T.R.E.A.M. (Science, Technology, Religion, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics) Discovery Room and expanded arts opportunities introduced in recent years.



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