

Powers Catholic High School Diocese of Lansing

In the 1960s it was decided that a consolidation of seven parish high schools into a Catholic central high school would best meet the need for Catholic education in the City of Flint, Michigan in Genesee County. Powers Catholic High School opened in 1970 on a 67-acre site in the north part of the City of Flint. The school was named after a pastor from the area. The school opened with 1,497 students. Shortly after the school's opening, the demographics of Genesee County began a decades-long shift. Middle and upper income families migrated to the suburbs with the eventual result of economically prosperous communities in the southern reaches of Genesee County. This left a mostly struggling lower income in neighborhoods throughout the northern half of Flint. The population of 15 to 19 year olds in the City of Flint declined 21% from 1990 to 2000. Younger families were now living south/southeast of Flint. At the turn of the millennium, the enrollment base that once supported 1,500 students had dwindled, most families who came to the school did not live in the area, and the location of the school was a deterrent for many who might otherwise attend.

The Challenge

Powers was no longer located strategically. Enrollment was on a declining trajectory. The dilemma was locating the school where it would serve its traditional base including the City of Flint, but also be accessible and desirable to the growth suburbs further south. Meitler was asked to study the situation and recommend a plan for action. Based on demographics, market research, survey of the competition, and a careful analysis of all the factors, the Meitler study concluded, "If Powers Catholic High School remains at its current site, it will need to downsize its program and staff and anticipate enrollment of around 500 within ten years." Enrollment followed the exact trend the Meitler report predicted nine years earlier, declining from 790 in 2002-03 to 509 in 2012-13. Furthermore, the Meitler report said, "At this enrollment level (meaning 500 or less), it will be very difficult to offer competitive programs. Enrollment beyond ten years could decline further. In summary, the survey and demographic study confirms that Powers Catholic High School will find it very difficult to survive at its current location."

The Process

Meitler conducted a research study and included all the factors affecting enrollment:

- Increases or decreases in the pool of high school-age children in the community
- Growth or decline in the Catholic population
- Changes in the number of 8th graders graduating from Catholic elementary schools
- Competition from public high schools and charter schools
- Cost of tuition and availability of tuition assistance
- Location and accessibility of Powers Catholic High School
- Ability of Powers Catholic High School to offer competitive programs in the educational marketplace

Meitler has extensive experience in planning with Catholic high schools, opening new schools, and administering schools. Through the lens of experience and in collaboration with the leadership of Powers, Meitler produced a clear and compelling case for relocating the high school. Key leaders were engaged in the study process which ensured ownership for the conclusions. The study recommended where the school should be located, projected long-term potential for enrollment, gave specific actions to make the move, and shaped a strategic vision for the "new" Powers Catholic High School.

The Results

As a testimony to the importance of owning a vision and embodying it in a plan, Powers Catholic High School will move into new buildings and eventually take ownership of a 52 acre site strategically located on the south side of the City of Flint in fall 2013. The site is immediately accessible from I-69, the main east-west artery of Genesee County. The realization of a dream, thought impossible by many, has breathed new life and energy into the community. The capital campaign along with the sale of the school's original campus will raise the necessary \$14.7 million. Raising this much capital is a huge number given the economy of Flint. People believe in Powers and see its viability going forward.

The plan to move came together through a complex set of events that required strong leadership from the school administration, the school's boards, area pastors, community leaders, and the Diocese of Lansing. Here are the key pieces that built toward the \$14.7 million goal:

- The purchase of existing school property by a charter school for \$3.25 million.
- Significant lead gifts with two over \$1 million each.
- A local developer who purchased the new property from the State of Michigan and obtained state and federal tax credits to build a new Michigan School for the Deaf as well as the new Powers Catholic campus. The new Powers facility includes 68,000 square feet of rehabilitated classroom space and office space as well as 70,000 square feet in new additions.
- A loan from the Diocese of Lansing to bridge the school from construction to collection of capital campaign funds.
- Loan of \$2.2 million from the school's endowment.

In the end the case was compelling and the school never gave up on their plan. Former principal Joe Forlenza said, *"You have to be able to dream. And you have to put that dream in a workable plan. Meitler was a big part of what happened."* Joe Forlenza was principal from 1974 to 2002. Even after retiring as principal, Joe continued to be involved all the way through opening of the new school.

Every time a roadblock was thrown up, the leadership of Powers kept going back and finding another way. They would not settle for something less. What looked impossible a decade before has become reality. It started with capable leaders who pursued a plan built on excellent data and with a compelling case. That plan remained the vision of the school over ten years, and as a result much more capital was raised than would have been otherwise possible. Catholic secondary education truly has a future in the region. Powers Catholic remains a jewel for the City of Flint.