



**STRIKE**  
A MATCH FOR  
**FIRE**

.....

**Help us raise \$100,000**  
to ignite more opportunities  
for kids with disabilities  
and learning differences to  
experience the blessings  
of Catholic education.

.....

2024 ANNUAL APPEAL



2023 ANNUAL REPORT

# Let's come together and strike a match for FIRE!

**WE'RE THRILLED TO ANNOUNCE AN  
OPPORTUNITY TO DOUBLE YOUR DONATION.**

FIRE partner schools located in the Diocese of Kansas City – St. Joseph are opening their doors to more students with disabilities than ever before. What a joy it is to witness students, educators and families coming together and creating a culture of belonging in our Catholic schools; there's simply no doubt that inclusive education creates kinder hearts and stronger communities.

During the past 27 years, we've learned a lot about creating learning environments that spark students' academic, social and spiritual growth. Catholic schools in our Diocese continue to demonstrate their unique capacity to nurture the development of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities and a wide range of learning challenges.

It takes a lot of faith, love and commitment to help students succeed. It also requires trained special educators, paraeducators, knowledge of best practices in inclusive education and access to specially designed curriculum and technology.

Not surprisingly, the need for these additional resources is rising. And FIRE Foundation is rising to the challenge. With help from friends like you, we can do even more to support inclusive Catholic education.



Every dollar raised  
through this campaign  
- up to \$50,000 -  
will be matched by a  
generous friend of FIRE.



WILL YOU HELP US TURN  
\$50K INTO \$100 GRAND?



## Dear Friends,

In 1978, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) declared, "It is not enough merely to affirm the rights of people with disabilities. We must actively work to make them real in the fabric of modern society." FIRE Foundation, in partnership with educators, parents and donors, has been working to bring this vision to life since 1996. During the past 27 years, with support from many generous benefactors, FIRE has championed the inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools located in the Diocese of Kansas City – St. Joseph.

Forty-five years later, in 2023, the USCCB approved the drafting of a new pastoral statement to address, and hopefully expand, the role of persons with disabilities within the Church. We're pretty excited about that! As advocates for children with disabilities and supporters of Catholic education, the FIRE Foundation Board of Directors and community of stakeholders is hopeful that this new statement will bring forth broader and deeper recognition that individuals with disabilities BELONG in the full life of Catholic communities. In the pews. On the altar. In sacramental life. In classrooms. On sports teams and playgrounds. And in virtually every Church ministry.

Psalm 139 reminds us that God made ALL children in His image – each with a unique purpose and with distinctive gifts.

**"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb... Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."**

As active participants in liturgies, as parish volunteers, as classmates and playmates, our friends with disabilities and learning differences share enormous gifts and talents with their communities and enrich our lives immeasurably. We know this is true because we witness it daily at FIRE Foundation's 14 partner schools. We're proud of all that's been done to open the doors wider and we're grateful to all of our supporters and stakeholders who have helped FIRE Foundation's model for supporting inclusive Catholic education become a beacon of hope and opportunity for families.

FIRE Foundation is standing at the threshold of a new and exciting era and we're seizing every opportunity to expand the impact and reach of our mission.

- In early 2024, the FIRE Board of Directors approved revised mission and vision statements that describe the Foundation's work more specifically using updated language. These new statements do not change the focus of our efforts; they serve to clarify the Foundation's role in fundraising, advocacy, providing resources and building support for inclusive Catholic education.
- For the first time, FIRE will support inclusive Catholic education in St. Joseph, Mo. during the 2024-25 school year with a grant to St. Joseph Catholic Academy.
- In fall 2023, FIRE announced the launch of two additional affiliates: FIRE Foundation of Northeast Florida (Diocese of St. Augustine) and FIRE Foundation of Northern Kentucky (Diocese of Covington). This brings our total number of independent affiliates to nine. Indeed, our FIRE is spreading!

With your support, FIRE helps partner school cover the costs of essential resources such as professional staff, training and technology that create success for students with special learning needs.

On behalf of the thousands of Catholic school students who benefit from inclusive Catholic education, we invite you to Strike a Match for FIRE. Your gifts ignite FIRE's mission and light the way for students to reach their God-given potential. Thank you for your consideration.

Gratefully,

**Erin Neuburger**  
BOARD PRESIDENT

**M. Lynn Hire**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

# By the Numbers



# 4,504

Students enrolled at  
14 schools whose lives  
are enhanced by  
inclusive education.

# 27

Years that FIRE  
has supported inclusive  
Catholic education.



# 7

MILLION DOLLARS  
granted by FIRE  
to support inclusion.



# 444

Students with significant  
support needs learning alongside  
their peers with direct support  
from trained staff.

# 849

Students benefit from enriched  
special education support.



# 14

## PARTNER SCHOOLS

FIRE, an independent nonprofit foundation, is pleased to partner with and make grants to 14 schools located in the Diocese of Kansas City – St. Joseph. Grants funds are used to support the learning and development of students with disabilities and learning differences who attend the following schools:

HOLY CROSS ★ NATIVITY OF MARY ★ NOTRE DAME DE SION  
OUR LADY OF HOPE ★ OUR LADY OF THE PRESENTATION ★ ST. ELIZABETH  
ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL HIGH SCHOOL ★ ST. PATRICK  
ST. PETER'S ★ ST. PIUS X HIGH SCHOOL ★ ST. REGIS ACADEMY  
ST. THERESE ★ ST. THOMAS MORE ★ VISITATION

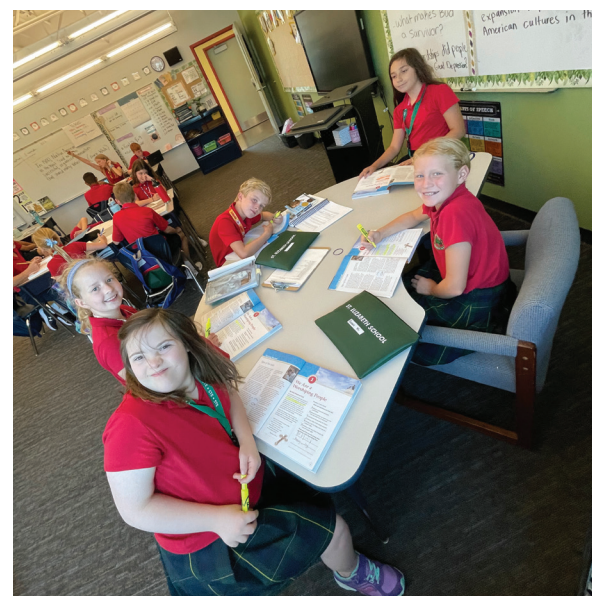


## Inclusive Catholic Education Brought Our Family to Kansas City

Our family moved from Texas to Kansas City this past summer. When meeting people around town, we are inevitably asked our reason for moving. We share that inclusive Catholic education for our children brought us here to Kansas City. Truly! After touring several schools and churches, our family has found a welcoming home at St. Elizabeth Parish (daughter Avery is in 5th grade at St. Elizabeth and son Peyton is in 9th at Rockhurst).

Avery has found the sweetest crew - girls with whom she learns, laughs, belongs and is valued. The boys are super kind too! In addition to finding community, Avery loves all the special St. Elizabeth traditions like bringing our dog Mabel to the blessing of the animals and serving as a fifth-grade buddy to a pre-k student. She also gets to pursue her passion for performing arts as a member of drumline and show choir. On Sundays, Avery enjoys seeing friends, classmates and teachers at Mass (and often joins them in their pews).

Academically, Avery has access to several learning accommodations as well as assistance with writing. Recently, in a planning meeting with a teacher, Avery shared that math was her most difficult subject and an area in which she needs help. Our wonderful Director of Inclusion identified an interactive, multi-sensory math curriculum as a good fit for Avery, and she's making progress in math utilizing this program. Beyond learning accommodations and special curriculum, we treasure the spirit of collaboration with Avery's teachers and paraeducators. We are so grateful for all the wonderful St. Elizabeth teachers, staff and administrators and the incredible community who believe in and love Avery and her classmates!



We'll forever feel blessed to be a part of the generous and faith-filled FIRE family that makes inclusive Catholic education a reality. It is an answered prayer. Thank you, FIRE Foundation!

CANDICE CUNNINGHAM, PARENT

## An Invitation to Inclusion is Life-Changing for Student, Family and St. Thomas More School Community

It's so heartwarming to witness the positive impact Emmaus has had on our school community. Her radiant spirit, coupled with the genuine kindness shown by her peers, exemplifies the inclusive and supportive environment we strive to foster at St. Thomas More School. Despite facing unique challenges, Emmaus has become a beloved member of our community, teaching all of us valuable lessons about empathy, acceptance, and the power of genuine friendship. We are blessed to have Emmaus enriching the lives of both students and staff at our school.

LINDA CROSTHWAIT  
PRINCIPAL, ST. THOMAS MORE SCHOOL



The opportunity to have Emmaus attend St. Thomas More (STM) with her sisters, supported by FIRE Foundation, has been a gift to our family. Emmaus doesn't learn like other children. She has a significant global developmental delay. However, this year she has been given the gift of inclusion. Inclusion reaches far beyond the individual with disabilities. It also gives typically developing peers the opportunity to become friends with her. Children like Emmaus are seen as a burden by most of our society. Throughout her life we have had to fight for every educational step along the way. However, the leadership at STM has embraced Emmaus as a delight and a gift from the start. In fact, Linda Crosthwait, STM principal, reached out to ask if we would ever consider sending Emmaus to STM with her sisters. We never imagined it would be possible! Kids learn through our example. The students at STM have seen the teachers and principal value Emmaus at school, and so they too value her.

When we drop her off each morning she is greeted by numerous girls in her grade, two who stop and wait with her and then walk with her to class. Her classmates choose to sit with her at lunch, she's invited to birthday parties and when she is out sick, her friends ask about her. This inclusive STM community has changed her life, and I know that she has changed the lives of the peers she interacts with every day.

In Matthew 24, Jesus tells us how we should treat those we encounter. He ends in verse 40 by saying 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' FIRE Foundation and STM are tangible examples of how to treat those who the world values as "the very least of these. We're eternally grateful."

LAURISA BALLEW, PARENT





## Inclusive Catholic Education at St. Therese Reveals Students' Hearts for Christ



I'm a lifelong parishioner of St. Therese and my wife and I always dreamed our kids would attend school here together, learning the teachings of Jesus Christ. When our youngest son, Zachary was diagnosed with a genetic disorder involving deletion of his 18th chromosome, a condition that causes learning delays, it didn't appear that this dream would be possible.

After several meetings with many leaders in the Diocese of Kansas City – St. Joseph and FIRE Foundation, this dream has become a reality. This year, Zachary started attending St. Therese with his brother Isaac and his other second grade classmates, attending Mass, and learning the teachings of Jesus. This was very exploratory, and we were all a little unsure of what to expect, but by the second week, it was obvious that we made the right decision after a field trip at the Fun Farm. When Zachary walked up, he was greeted with love by his classmates (seen here at lunch). On that day, we learned that welcoming Zachary to St. Therese School was not only a positive experience for Zachary, but also for his classmates and the entire St. Therese community.

The caring and Christ-like hearts of Zachary's classmates have been infectious. Truly, God has shown us the way. We're all so grateful for this opportunity and look forward to many more opportunities to grow in God's love. Thank you to all the staff at St. Therese for making this possible.

At the heart of FIRE's mission is Matthew 19:13-14 - Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.

JAMES AND JENNIFER REYES

# WE'RE ON A MISSION

TO SUPPORT KIDS AND SCHOOLS.

To champion the inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools by providing educational resources, fundraising and promoting a culture of belonging.



# WE'VE GOT A VISION

FOR THE FUTURE.

Catholic school students with disabilities are welcomed, supported, and valued.

# 2023 Accomplishments

Revenue continued to grow, making it possible for FIRE to **invest nearly \$800,000** in inclusive Catholic education. Support included grants for academic support, professional development for educators, student and teacher scholarships, as well as speech/language and occupational therapy services. In total, students at 14 partner schools benefited from FIRE support.

FIRE board approved a new **long-range strategic plan** to guide the organization's financial, geographic and program growth during the next three to five years.

FIRE launched an **updated and refreshed website** that is sharp, modern, easy to navigate and loaded with helpful content.

FIRE expanded delivery of **Speech-Language and Occupational Therapy** services to nine partner schools. Further expansion is planned for the 2023-24 school year. The Therapy Program, now in its fourth year, is made possible through a partnership with Speech and Language Solutions. The program has received highly favorable response from partner school communities. Therapy services are customized to meet the unique needs of classes and students.

FIRE continued to work with individuals and groups across the country, sharing our model of inclusion support and advocacy. FIRE partners with eight affiliates:

- FIRE FOUNDATION OF CENTRAL ILLINOIS
- FIRE FOUNDATION OF DALLAS
- FIRE FOUNDATION OF DENVER
- FIRE FOUNDATION OF MILWAUKEE
- FIRE FOUNDATION OF NEW HAMPSHIRE
- FIRE FOUNDATION OF NORTHEAST IOWA
- FIRE FOUNDATION OF NORTHWEST INDIANA
- FIRE FOUNDATION OF NORTHWEST IOWA

FIRE Foundation, in partnership with eight FIRE affiliates, was awarded a five-year, \$1.2 million dollar grant from the Lilly Endowment to support capacity building, expand professional development on inclusive learning teaching strategies, and to build awareness of inclusive Catholic education and FIRE's efforts across the country through marketing and advocacy. FIRE Foundation and its affiliates will use grant funds to launch Project BonFIRE. This grant, part of Lilly Endowment's Christian Parenting and Caregiving Initiative, is making it possible for FIRE to enter a formal partnership with University of Notre Dame's Program for Inclusion (PIE) to develop and offer a series of new professional development opportunities for educators who teach in dioceses where FIRE affiliates operate. Additional initiatives will launch in the upcoming year.

# 2023 Annual Report

This report reflects income and expenses July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023. The financial results for this fiscal year reflect our commitment to strategically increase FIRE's support for inclusive education in our partner schools.

## Board of Directors

2022-2023

Erin Neuburger, PRESIDENT	Katheigh Degen Todd DeMint Chris Gaughan
Jenny Stasi, VICE PRESIDENT	Nicolette Gibson, ex officio Buffy Gunter Marie Kissick
John Joyce, SECRETARY	Francie Knackendoffel Brian Madden Mary Madden Clare McClaren Courtney Root Mark Rieger Jim Still Mary Stuckey Sean Switzer Ryan Underwood Mark Ungashick Peggy Van Dyke
Gretchen Vosburgh, TREASURER	

## Financial Report

FISCAL YEAR JULY 2022 – JUNE 2023

### INCOME

Contributions	\$ 177,904
Grants	\$ 182,800
Events Net Revenue	
FIRE Ball	\$ 382,605
Golf Tournament	\$ 92,559
Purses with Purpose	\$ 92,342
Conference	\$ 89,024
Interest and Other Income	\$ 52,828
Affiliate Income	\$ 10,972
In-Kind Contribution (phone/rent)	\$ 15,276

**TOTAL** **\$ 1,096,311**

### EXPENSES

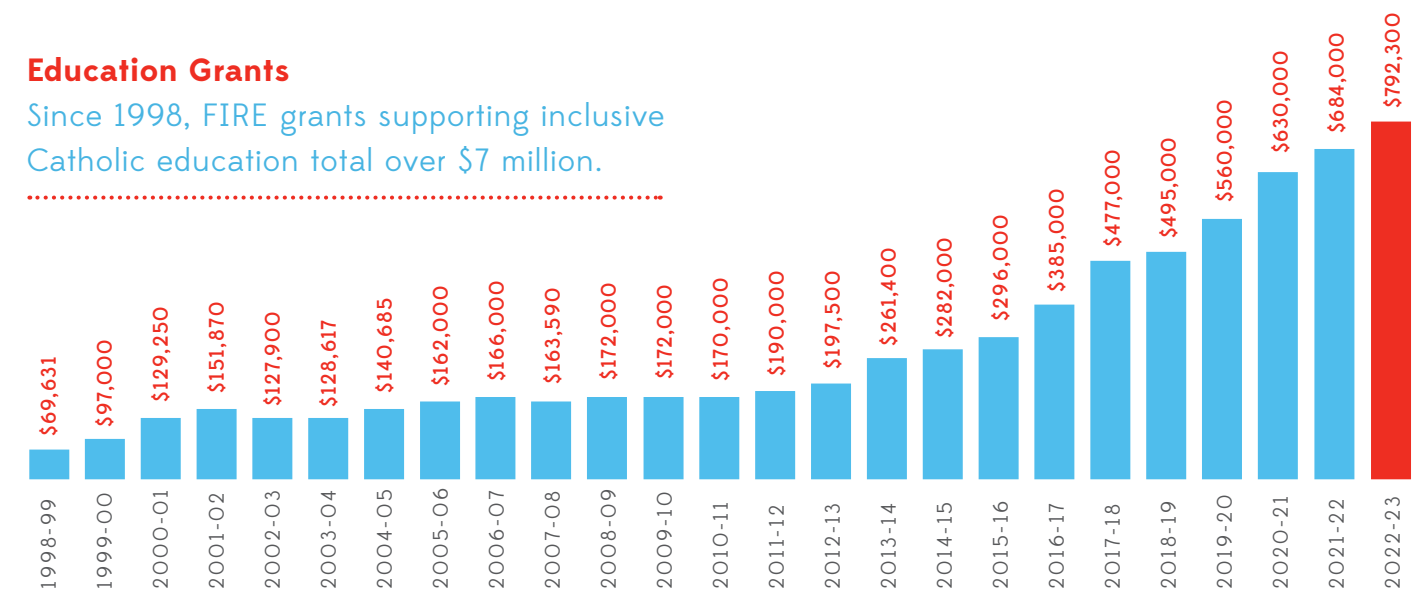
Program (School Grants, Initiatives)	\$ 919,719
Fundraising Expenses	\$ 107,073
General and Administrative	\$ 129,022
In-Kind Expense	\$ 15,276

**NET INCOME** **\$ -74,779**

**TOTAL** **\$ 1,096,311**

## Education Grants

Since 1998, FIRE grants supporting inclusive Catholic education total over \$7 million.





## Prayer for Inclusion

Living and true God,  
You created all that is good and holy in Your image.  
Be close to us, your servants, who gather here today.  
Be our constant help and protector as we lovingly reach out  
To welcome and embrace all Your children,  
Regardless of their abilities, in our parishes and schools.  
Bless our children as they grow together in faith,  
knowledge and friendship.  
Bless their parents and educators who guide them  
through challenges, who celebrate their special gifts  
and who encourage them to reach their potential.  
We ask this through Jesus Christ, Your Son, Our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,  
One God, forever and ever.  
Amen.

WE'RE IGNITING SUPPORT FOR INCLUSIVE CATHOLIC EDUCATION ALL YEAR LONG - JOIN US!

**April 26**  
PLAY WITH FIRE  
GOLF TOURNAMENT

**June 20**  
PURSES  
WITH PURPOSE

**October 12**  
FIRE BALL  
2024

**816.226.4365**

The Catholic Center 20 W. 9th Street  
Kansas City, MO 64105

**fire**  
FOUNDATION

[Firefoundation.org](https://www.firefoundation.org)

