



An Island of Opportunity

A Profile of
St. Rose of Lima
Catholic Academy



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Introduction

A few miles southwest of downtown Denver, warehouses and industrial sites intertwine with residential areas in an incongruous sea of concrete and metal. Situated on the west side of I-25 and the Platte River, this area evokes a quintessential image of the inner city. Iron bars cover the windows of local stores, stark industrial buildings and small homes with weedy lawns line the streets, and barbed wire adorns the tops of many fences. Graffiti coats many walls and dumpsters.

In the middle of this deeply urban neighborhood sits a red brick school building. Against the backdrop of the neighborhood, the school feels like a sort of island, its bright red walls contrasting sharply against the sea of industrial browns and grays beyond. Each morning, dozens of cars line up along the street in front of the building. Flocks of primarily Hispanic parents usher their PK-8 children onto the island before setting sail once again into the urban ocean beyond. On this par-

ticular autumn morning, I join the crowds of children streaming into the school for class as the sun breaks over the warehouses to the east.

The school is called St. Rose of Lima Catholic Academy, and it has been serving students as an integral part of this neighborhood for more than half a century. I've come to hear its story.

Expeditions in the City

When most people envision Catholic education, they think of strict discipline, old-fashioned approaches to classroom instruction, an emphasis on religion, and formal uniforms. For many years, these things did indeed define St. Rose. Many are still present at the school. As I make my way to the main office, children wearing blue and red uniforms bearing the school's logo hurry down a long, tile-walled main hallway past a statue of St. Rose of Lima, the school's patroness and the Peruvian saint who holds the distinction of being the first person in the Western Hemisphere to be



canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. At the end of the hallway hangs a simple sign that reads, “Goals: College, Heaven.”

Despite the initial appearance of a strictly traditional Catholic education, however, St. Rose has spent years reshaping its educational model. In fact, my first meeting of the day is designed to help me better understand how the school approaches student learning. After shaking hands with Elias Moo, the dedicated young principal of the school whose name I have been warned is pronounced “Moe,” I am introduced to a rugged-looking bearded man in a plaid shirt named Dave Manzella.

Mr. Manzella does not work for the school, but he is intimately acquainted with its educational approach thanks to his role as a school designer for EL Education, a nonprofit organization that supports schools in implementing the EL Education school model. The organization partners with a number of public schools in Denver, including the Odyssey School, the Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning, and the Downtown Denver Expeditionary School.

Born out of collaboration between the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Outward Bound program, which provides outdoor leadership programs for both youths and adults, the expeditionary model focuses heavily on interdisciplinary “expeditions” designed to help students learn in real-world contexts. In some cases, these expeditions involve physically leaving the school to explore the surrounding urban world. For instance, one class at St. Rose monitors the water quality of the nearby Platte River. Another class recently explored handicap access at local parks as a way to introduce students to local government issues. In other cases, expeditions may be more intellectual. I later observe one class that is exploring political, social, and philosophical issues by examining the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as it applies in contexts around the world.

The idea of learning expeditions is only part of what makes the EL model unique. While the model recognizes the importance of data, it is also built upon the belief that student achievement is about more than performance on standardized tests. Instead, the program takes a more holistic view of student achievement based on three distinct “dimensions”: mastery of knowledge and skills, character, and high-quality student work.





The materials, curricula, and professional development offered by EL Education are designed to promote all three of these dimensions rather than focusing on a more narrowly defined vision of achievement.

None of this is to say that St. Rose doesn't take data or results seriously. During my interview with Mr. Manzella, Principal Moo hands me a lengthy report full of colorful bar graphs conveying, among other things, three-year proficiency trends, schoolwide average academic growth, and grade-level scores on a nationally norm-referenced assessment, which students take every year. Mr. Moo proudly tells me that 91 percent of St. Rose students go on to graduate from high school and that 71 percent of those graduates are in college. He also notes that these results are produced at a cost of \$5,570 per student—thousands less than the per-pupil revenue in the surrounding public schools. Though the information Principal Moo provides is not based on state tests or data systems, it is every bit as detailed. It is clear throughout my visit that this information is taken very seriously.

When I express some level of surprise at the fusion of expeditionary learning and Catholic education, Mr. Manzella informs me that such partnerships are not unprecedented. The organization also works with Annunciation Catholic School in Denver. Asked whether the Catholic angle poses any problems in a model largely designed for use in public schools, he simply shrugs. "Not really," he says. "We've had a lot of success pulling in their core beliefs rather than shutting them out." Catholic education, it seems, is more flexible than some might think.

Roots

St. Rose's expeditionary learning model is fascinating, but there is far more to the school's work than

adherence to a particular educational approach. The school is deeply embedded in its community both geographically and culturally.

Mr. Manzella excuses himself from Principal Moo's office as the school bell clangs and uniformed students again flood the hallways. The chatter that washes into Principal Moo's office is a mixture of Spanish and English interspersed with occasional giggles. Then the heavy office door swings shut, and the sounds fade behind the thick wood as students find their way to their next classes. Principal Moo looks at me expectantly.

I'm struck first by his age. In his early thirties, Principal Moo seems much younger than one might expect a principal in a school like St. Rose to be. A proudly Hispanic American, he has short black hair and a small goatee. He wears slacks, spectacles, and a tie that flaps wildly as he zips up and down the building's hallways. He seems rarely to sit still, even appearing somewhat uncomfortable about the prospect of

being tethered to his desk for our one-hour interview. Despite his

young age, he exudes a sense of confidence. His demeanor is warm, but I can feel steel behind it, a sort of quiet conviction that conveys his determination to do right by his students. He seems comfortable at the helm, like he's always been there.





But Principal Moo has not always been in the captain's seat. His origins are far more modest. The oldest of five siblings, Principal Moo was born into an immigrant family. His father and mother, who met in the United States, both immigrated to California from Mexico in the 1970s. The family settled in Oxnard, California, which is situated on the coast just north of Los Angeles. All seven members of the family lived in a small two-bedroom home, which meant the children had to share beds. The family had little money, though Principal Moo says the family "had everything we needed."

Despite these humble circumstances, Principal Moo's father despised the notion of victimhood. "He challenged us to be better versions of ourselves, never to be victims of our circumstances," Principal Moo tells me. The best way to beat the odds, his father believed, was through hard work and a high-quality education. Yet the family found themselves surrounded by struggling public

schools that Principal Moo's parents did not believe could provide the effective education needed to catapult their children into more prosperous futures.

A Catholic school in the area, however, could do

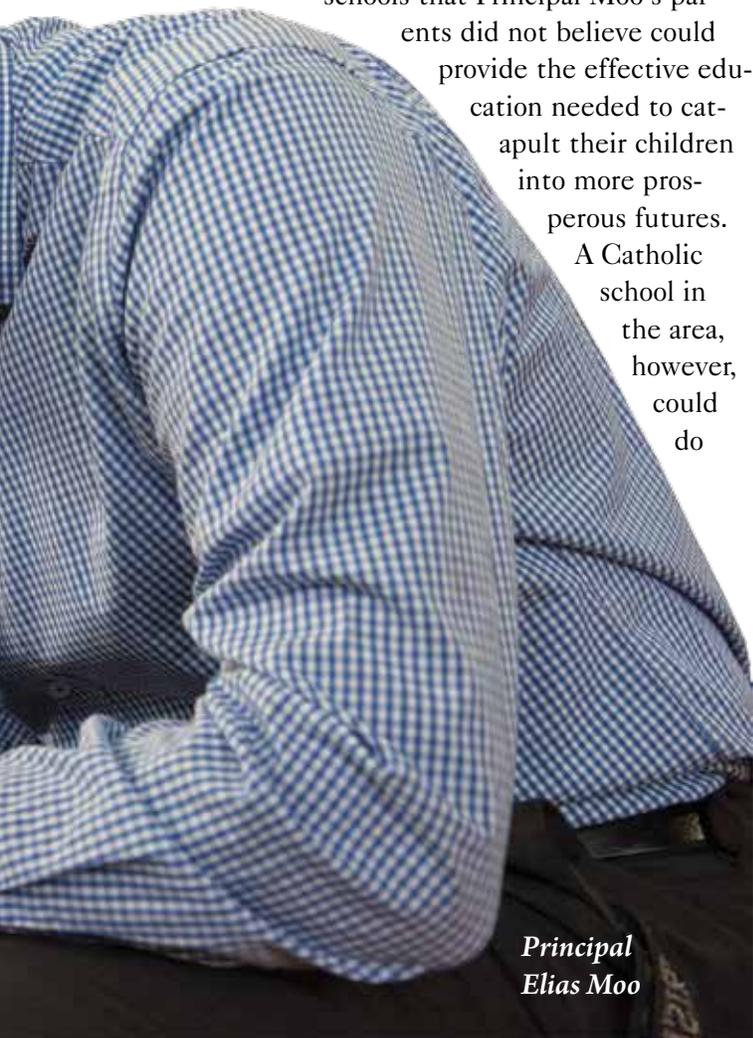
exactly that—if only they could find a way to pay for it.

Principal Moo's father worked as a laborer in the agricultural fields along the California coast. Lacking other options, he buckled down to earn the money necessary to pay the required tuition costs the only way he knew how: through hard work. He would often rise before the sun, disappearing for days or weeks at a time as he took every second of overtime he could find. At times, he worked nearly 24-hour shifts.

To this day, Principal Moo remembers his father arriving, exhausted and still wearing his dirt-covered field clothes, at his school events. Some of the other children's parents arrived in suits or formal work clothes, and he recalls occasionally feeling embarrassed. But his father would have none of it. "The suit we wear is hard work," he would tell his children. They would receive no monetary inheritance from their parents. There would be no trust funds, college savings accounts, or property to distribute. Instead, the education he worked so hard and sacrificed so much to provide was their inheritance. And there was no shame in that.

Principal Moo still thinks of his father, who has now risen to the position of quality-control manager in his agricultural company, when he sees St. Rose parents arrive at school events in work clothes from construction or other labor sites. He sees a reflection of his family in those who send their children to the school. Many St. Rose parents work multiple jobs to make ends meet for their families. All of them believe in the power of education. So does Principal Moo. "The same thing possible for a son of immigrants in Oxnard, California, should be possible for the children of immigrants in Denver, Colorado," he tells me.

The lessons inculcated by his father paid off, and Principal Moo eventually graduated from Catholic high school as the valedictorian of his class. He went on to receive a nearly full-ride scholarship from the University of Notre Dame. There, he worked for causes related to immigrant rights and started a mentoring program for Hispanic youths. He began developing ideas of going into law or politics. As he neared graduation, he began



*Principal
Elias Moo*



looking for ways to give back to communities like the one in which he was raised. He applied with Teach for America, a program that places talented young people into tough schools where they can develop their teaching skills during a rigorous two-year program, with hopes of being placed in inner-city Chicago. He also applied to the University of Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education, which has a mission similar to TFA's but focuses only on Catholic schools. The organization offered him a placement at a Catholic school working toward self-revitalization in Denver. That school was St. Rose of Lima.

Principal Moo had never been to Denver. In truth, he preferred the idea of going to Chicago. He could do good there, be in a city with which he was familiar, and bolster his resume before turning his attention to other ambitions. But something about the St. Rose offer interested him. He called his parents for advice. During that call, his mother said something that irrevocably altered the course of his life: "Don't go where you'll be most comfortable. Go where you're needed most." In 2007, Principal Moo arrived at St. Rose for the first time to begin teaching.

When he arrived at the school, Principal Moo

*Esther Gutierrez,
administrative
assistant*

quickly discovered that he had entered a vibrant community not unlike the one he left behind in Oxnard. Roughly 75 percent of St. Rose's students come from immigrant backgrounds, and nine in ten are being raised in low-income households. The overwhelming majority of students are Hispanic. The school is enmeshed with the surrounding community in a way that emphasizes its role as an island of hope and opportunity in a tough neighborhood, a promise that a better future was possible for children without many high-quality educational prospects.

Signs of the interconnection between the school and its community are everywhere at St. Rose. The school's administrative assistant, Esther Gutierrez, has been involved with St. Rose in some capacity for two decades. As a long-time resident of the neighborhood and a bus driver for Denver Public Schools, Esther became intimately familiar with the lives students face in the surrounding area. She recalls a student who boarded her bus with a gun sticking out of his pants and tells me about children who were shot for wearing the wrong color in what was once a gang-infested area. The choice then, she says, was for kids to join a gang or get hurt. Though the area has improved in subsequent years, it remains a true inner-city neighborhood. Esther's own children were in need of a safe, challenging educational environment. So, with financial assistance from the school, all three of them attended St. Rose. In a strange twist of fate illustrative of how educational choice can bring together people from different backgrounds, she tells me one of her sons

attended the same Lutheran high school that I did many years ago. He now works at St. Rose as a chef.

Today, Esther rents a small house directly across the street from St. Rose. Amazingly, she tells me she rents the house from the man living in the house next door to her—a man whose child also attended the school. Despite many job offers over the years, she says she simply can't stay away from the school. "St. Rose is a place that grabs your heartstrings and never lets go," she says with a smile. She adds, "When I leave this earth, I'll know I did the best I could."

Later in the visit, I meet St. Rose's assistant principal, Kate Kelly. Though Mrs. Kelly does not fit the typical ethnic profile of a St. Rose student, she attended the school all the way through eighth grade. Her family has lived in the area for many years and has long admired the school and its work. In fact, children from her family have been attending St. Rose on a continuous basis since 1957. Mrs. Kelly's own daughter is enrolled in the school's preschool program.

After finishing her teaching degree at the University of Northern Colorado, Mrs. Kelly took a job as a public school teacher in Las Vegas, Nevada. This excursion was short-lived. One year later, she moved back to her old neighborhood and took a job as a teacher at St. Rose. Mrs. Kelly taught students directly for nine years before becoming assistant principal. She tells me with pride that she has personally taught the majority of students currently enrolled in the school.

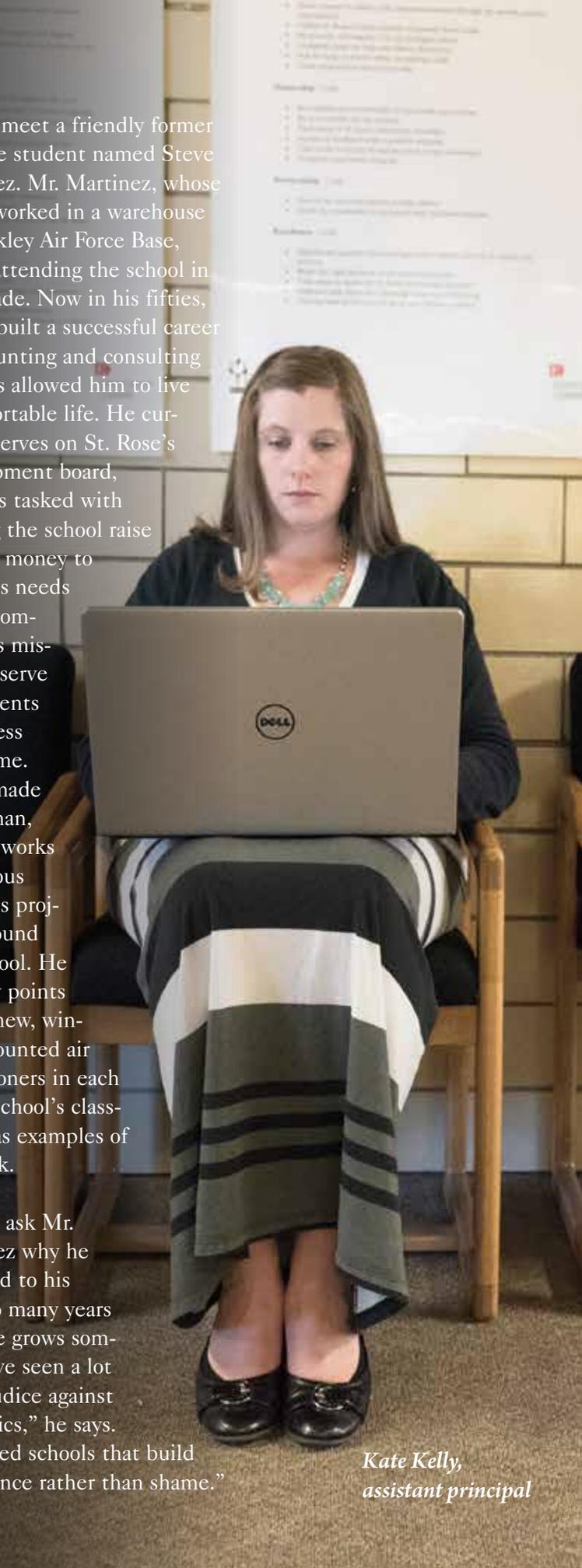
Asked why she returned to the school, she says, "It's comfortable. It's home." She feels the school has a responsibility to provide for more than students' academic needs. "Some of our families face tumultuous circumstances," she says. "You can just tell that for some of these students, this is the only place they can feel safe and fulfilled." Even small gestures—high-fives before class, eating lunch with students, etc.—can help brighten lives too often marred by trouble. "You can tell it really means something to them," she says.

The dedication to the school extends beyond its paid staff. I also have the opportunity during my

visit to meet a friendly former St. Rose student named Steve Martinez. Mr. Martinez, whose father worked in a warehouse on Buckley Air Force Base, began attending the school in first grade. Now in his fifties, he has built a successful career in accounting and consulting that has allowed him to live a comfortable life. He currently serves on St. Rose's development board, which is tasked with helping the school raise enough money to cover its needs and accomplish its mission to serve all students regardless of income. A self-made handyman, he also works on various facilities projects around the school. He proudly points to the new, window-mounted air conditioners in each of the school's classrooms as examples of his work.

When I ask Mr. Martinez why he returned to his roots so many years later, he grows somber. "I've seen a lot of prejudice against Hispanics," he says. "We need schools that build confidence rather than shame."

*Kate Kelly,
assistant principal*





Mr. Martinez is not alone. During my visit, I also meet several volunteers from the scholarship-granting organization Seeds of Hope, which provides scholarships to low-income students attending St. Rose and other Catholic schools. Some of these women have worked in the school's library for more than 10 years simply because they believe in the school's mission.

Growing Pains

St. Rose has occupied its urban island for more than half a century, but times have not always been easy. During the 1990s, the school experienced a crisis that nearly ended its work. Many Catholic schools in the Denver area were struggling to make ends meet and maintain enrollment, and St. Rose was no exception. In one of the school's entryways hang pictures of every graduating eighth-grade class in St. Rose's history. The story the pictures tell is striking. The number of students in the photographs decreases gradually until the 1990s, when only a handful of students appear.

These were dark days for St. Rose. Many assumed the school was doomed. Father Jerry Rohr, a cheerful priest with short gray hair who has headed the Catholic parish with which St. Rose is affiliated since 2005, says that his friends at the Archdiocese of Denver still half-jokingly say they can't believe St. Rose remains open. But, he says, the school had to survive. "A lot of folks make excuses for these kids. They're poor. They're Hispanic," he says before shouting, "Exactly! We can't fail these kids. It would be morally wrong. We are a shining beacon in a landscape that is otherwise very dim."

St. Rose's miraculous turnaround began when a woman named Jeannie Courchene took the reins in 1999. A product of

Denver Catholic schools, Mrs. Courchene had spent the previous 30 years teaching high school in St. Louis, Missouri. She moved back to Denver when she retired from teaching. Hoping to give back to the Catholic education that had served her so well, she applied for the principal position at St. Rose. During the interview, she quickly fell in love with the idea of working at the school. She agreed to take the job before she had ever seen the building.

The reality she was thrust into was less promising. Her first visit to St. Rose revealed that the school, which had suffered badly in the years preceding her arrival, "was a physical disaster." The facility was in desperate need of maintenance and cleaning. The school's doors were inadequate and raised a number of security concerns. The curriculum and materials at the school were also in need of improvement, and there were a wide variety of other critical needs that needed to be met in the decades-old building.

After shaking off the initial shock of the school's predicament, Mrs. Courchene and Father Patrick Dolan, the new pastor of the St. Rose of Lima parish at the time, threw themselves into the herculean task of turning St. Rose around.

Mrs. Courchene, who had never had to fundraise as a public school teacher, began building relationships with individuals and organizations that believed in the school's work. The generosity and commitment she found was astonishing. Fr. Dolan, an accomplished musician, booked singing gigs to help pay for cleaning work at the school. Upon hearing about the school's security issues, a man named Bob Tynan provided all new doors for the school that were painted and installed within two weeks. Lisa Heule, the wife of philanthropist Tom Heule, served as a first-grade aide at St. Rose. She often went home and told

*... "We are
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her husband what the school needed, and those things—a fax machine, coats for students, etc.—would materialize shortly thereafter. Tom and Lisa Heule continue to support St. Rose today. Among other things, their family helped the school construct the Crimmins Library where I conduct several of my interviews.

In her second year, Mrs. Courchene gathered donors, staff members, and allies around a table to discuss what else needed to be done. This group would eventually grow into the school’s development board, on which Mrs. Courchene is still active. The group realized that the school could meet some of its identified needs, but more work needed to be done. Mrs. Courchene and her team continued their efforts.

Things weren’t always easy. In the early years of St. Rose’s revitalization, the school had to combine ingenuity and hard work with the generosity

of its supporters to meet its needs. Old doors and shelves were converted into computer desks by an elderly carpenter and St. Rose parishioner named Eloi Vigil, cardboard boxes became temporary window shades, a storage closet became a concession stand for parents attending school events, and cubicle walls donated by a local company became bulletin boards. As the St. Rose team says, “We’ve turned old lumber into computer tables, cardboard boxes into window shades, and hundreds of at-risk children into high school graduates.”

The years that followed were marked by continued relationship building, outreach efforts, and generosity. The school built relationships with nonprofit K-12 scholarship-granting organizations like ACE Scholarships and Seeds of Hope, both of which provide scholarships to low-income students seeking private education opportunities. Cathy Grant Wanstrath, a former St. Rose student, helped the school write grant requests. Another



*Jeannie Courchene,
former principal*



alumna named Ellie Valdez Honeyman used the printing company she owned with her husband to assist the school with mailings. Former Denver Nuggets player Bill Hanzlik and his family bussed students to their basketball facility, where they provided students, many of whom had little to look forward to over the holidays, with a fun day and Christmas presents.

The crowning moment of St. Rose's success story came in 2007, when the school completed its gymnasium. Ralph and Trish Nagel offered to match up to \$600,000 for the project. Mr. Nagel is one of ACE Scholarships' founders, and the couple has long supported educational

choice. Ralph Nagel's name still graces the external wall of the gym he helped build. To this day, Mr. and Mrs. Nagel generously provide a substantial portion of the school's annual operating budget. Many of the school's other supporters—the Daniels Fund, the Denver-based Gates Family Foundation, Tom Gamel, Dorothy King, and others—also contributed toward the gym. The school's parish, comprised mostly of lower-income, older men and women whose children had long since grown up, gave \$21,000 toward the project. A variety of other donors, including alumni, also contributed.

One day, Mrs. Courchene gave a school tour to an anonymous couple who have long supported St. Rose. During the tour, she mentioned that the school still needed a considerable amount to complete the gym. At the end of the visit, the couple wrote a check for the required amount on the spot—an act that drove Mrs. Courchene, normally a model of poise and composure, to tears. Today, the gym serves as a symbol of the school's recovery under Mrs. Courchene's leadership.

Building Relationships

There was more that needed to happen at St. Rose than financial recovery. The school's approach to education needed to be reevaluated, as did its culture. As several staff members describe it to me during my visit, the school was utilizing a "factory model of education" under which teachers and staff too often believed that they, the experts, needed to impart their wisdom to families.

Before Mrs. Courchene and her team could begin rebuilding the school financially, they had to renew its focus on academics. Thus, early in her tenure as principal, Mrs. Courchene reevaluated her teaching staff and drove aggressively toward improved academic performance—efforts that laid the foundation of St. Rose's transformation into its current state. When Principal Moo arrived at the school as an Alliance for Catholic Education fellow in 2007, Mrs. Courchene predicted that he would be the one to lead the school into the next phase of its work. She was right. It was Principal Moo who took the next critical steps in redesigning the school's culture to be truly student centered when he became the school's leader in 2014.



St. Rose's educational model has been reimagined to promote bottom-up rather than top-down learning. There is no such thing as a parent-teacher conference at St. Rose. Instead, the school uses student-led conferences in which students show their parents and teachers their portfolios of work, identify their strengths, and set goals for addressing their areas of weakness. Parents are seen as partners in their children's education rather than receptacles of wisdom imparted by experts. Student-led projects have largely replaced standard homework regimens. Each morning, students participate in "crew" sessions, which are personal, small group conversations or projects designed to build bonds between students and teachers. Once a week, every student in the school packs into the gym—the same gym that fittingly symbolizes the school's reinvention of itself—for a schoolwide crew session.

This collaborative approach to education requires a deep personal commitment to students that goes far beyond academics. Such commitment can be trying with St. Rose's population of students. Perhaps not surprisingly given the school's high number of immigrant students, a number of children are struggling with the deportation of a parent or loved one. Others are coping with other difficult situations.

Later in the day, I sit down in the school's library with Mairaed Gillooly, a new fifth-grade teacher at St. Rose. After finishing her teaching degree at Colorado State University, Ms. Gillooly, like Principal Moo, entered teaching through the Alliance for Catholic Education. She tells me stories of the situations her students describe during their morning crew sessions, including those about students who have lost or fear losing their parents or guardians through deportation. She also shows me a small, green memo pad that she keeps on her desk. Called the "Dear Ms. Gillooly Notebook," this pad is meant for students who need support or comfort during situations too personal to mention in crew or other settings. She tells me a couple of these stories, but they are too personal—and still too raw and heartbreaking for the students involved—to share here. The trust her students place in her comes with a price. Ms. Gillooly tells me that she sometimes drives home crying for her students.

I feel compelled to ask Ms. Gillooly a simple but important question: Why St. Rose? Teachers at St. Rose make considerably less than their public school counterparts, and landing a job with an urban district would not be difficult for any of these talented educators. But money, she says, is not the point.



*Mairaed Gillooly,
fifth-grade teacher*



“I see these kids working so hard to overcome things in their lives. Here, we’re able to give them the individualized love and attention needed to overcome their baggage. Everybody here is making sacrifices, but you do what it takes to make it work.”

These sentiments are echoed by the other teachers I meet at St. Rose. Savannah Valdez, a fourth-year preschool teacher at the school, tells me she feels called to be at St. Rose. During our interview, two little girls wander into the preschool office from the classroom. Mrs. Savannah, as the students call her, bends down from her chair and kisses them. She tells me they are her own daughters. “The work we do here is personal. You really fall in love with your students. And helping these families is worth way more than any monetary reward.”

Mark Dennis, a tall man with a bold goatee and a thunderous voice who teaches social studies and religion classes, expresses the same feelings. “I make a difference here. I see kids who are happy, who are being successful, who are really driving their lives forward. And a lot of these kids aren’t the ones you’d look at and automatically expect great things.”

An Island of Opportunity

Faced with a lack of high-quality education prospects, the families who send their children to St. Rose are often desperate for a ray of hope. I am given the privilege during my time at the school to sit down with two families who are willing to share their stories.

The first parent I meet is Hilda, an attractive Hispanic woman with black hair and a pleasant accent. Hilda’s parents immigrated to the United States from a small town in Mexico when she was 12. Shortly thereafter, she found herself in a public school that showed little interest in helping her adapt to her new educational surroundings. She and the other Spanish-speaking students were left to sit at the back of the classroom and instructed to read *James and the Giant Peach* for the rest of the semester. She resolved never to let her children go through the same experience.

*Savannah Valdez,
preschool teacher*





Hilda's son, Isaac, started out in the public school system. As Isaac grew older, he began falling in with crowds and engaging in behaviors that made her uncomfortable. Using financial assistance, they tried another Catholic school in the area. But, she says, Isaac didn't fit well with that school's educational approach. Eventually, the family enrolled Isaac at St. Rose with help from a scholarship from ACE.

Several years later, Isaac decided that he wanted to once again try public school. His mother reluctantly agreed. Just one semester later, Isaac asked his family to place him back in St. Rose. However, his departure from the school resulted in the cancellation of his ACE scholarship. When his family reapplied to the organization, they were told that there were not enough scholarships available to provide one to Isaac. Sadly, these situations are not uncommon. Funded entirely by philanthropy, ACE and organizations like it have had to turn away thousands of students in need of better educational options.

Fortunately, St. Rose provided enough financial assistance to Isaac's family that he was able to re-enroll in the school. Though Hilda once worried

that Isaac would not make it through school, he is now making plans for high school and college. When I ask Isaac what makes St. Rose different from the other schools he has experienced, he says, "You don't have to be afraid here. You can go to anyone for help. There's lots of support."

Toward the end of my visit, I meet another parent named Luis. Luis is a former Puerto Rican police officer who now works security at federal buildings in the Denver area. His family moved to Colorado after one of his two daughters was diagnosed with a respiratory condition best treated by a hospital in the state. Both daughters attend St. Rose, and he wants to tell me the story of what the school means to his family.

Luis tells me that he, like Principal Moo's father, believes all things in life must be earned, not given. He recognizes that his daughters face a competitive world, and he wants to give them every opportunity to build independent, successful lives. He hoped the public school system in Colorado would help them do that.

Unfortunately, the family's experience with public education did not match their high expectations. They found the system rigid and unable to provide individualized attention. One of Luis's daughters began falling badly behind her peers, in part because of a previously undiagnosed



*Isaac with his mother
Hilda and little brother*



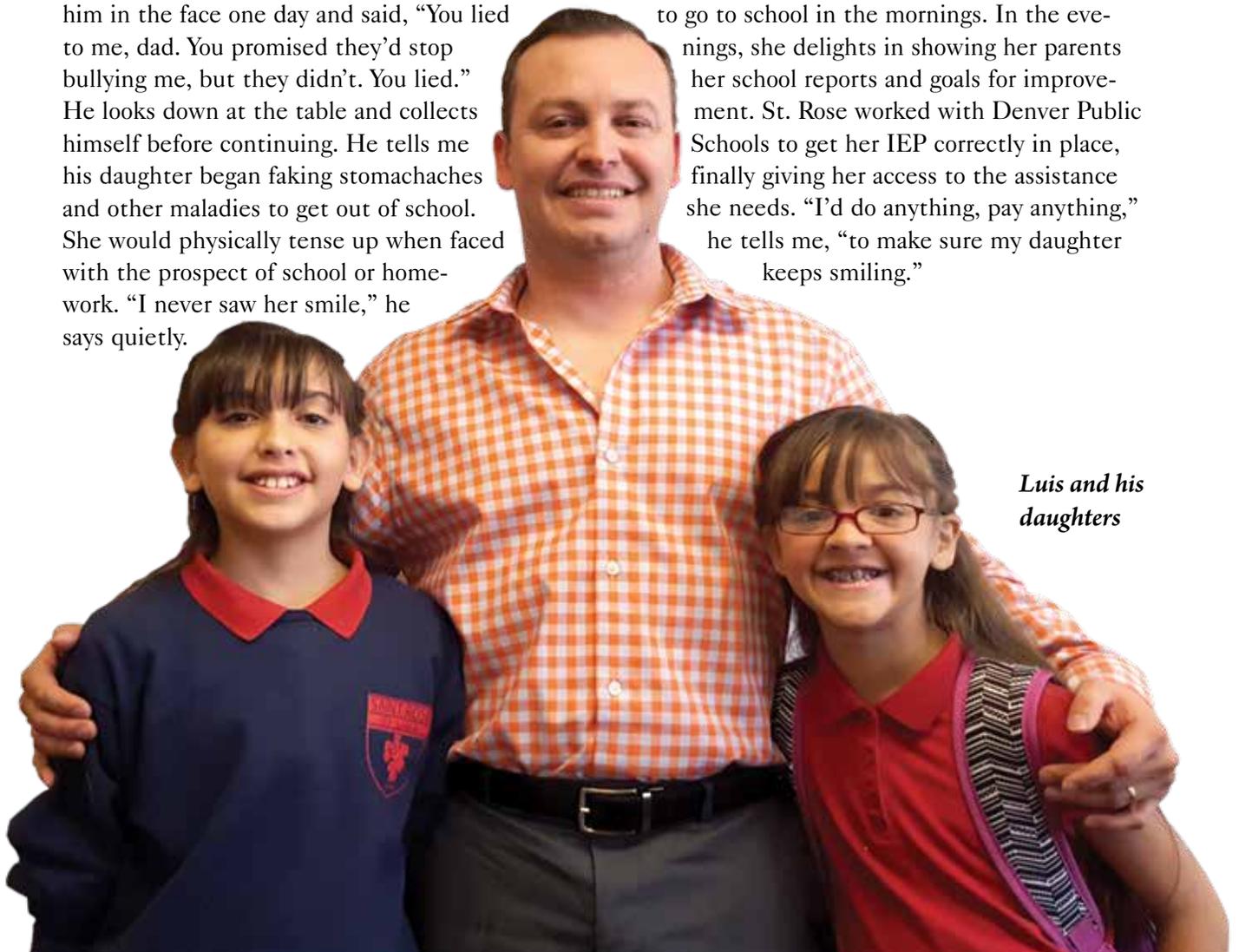
learning disability. Luis attempted to secure an individualized education program, or IEP, that would provide her with access to the additional support she needed, but he felt stymied at every turn. Frustration turned to despair as his daughter, already struggling with feelings of inadequacy, fell victim to increasingly severe bullying.

Luis forced his way in front of anyone he could find. He spoke to teachers, the school's principal, members of district headquarters, and even a police detective. Finally, he was assured that school leadership had addressed the bullying issue. And, at long last, his daughter was granted the IEP he believed she needed.

But things did not improve. Luis says the district made little effort to fully measure his daughter's needs in order to put the necessary supports in place, and the bullying grew worse. Choking slightly, he tells me that his daughter looked him in the face one day and said, "You lied to me, dad. You promised they'd stop bullying me, but they didn't. You lied." He looks down at the table and collects himself before continuing. He tells me his daughter began faking stomachaches and other maladies to get out of school. She would physically tense up when faced with the prospect of school or homework. "I never saw her smile," he says quietly.

As their options dwindled and their hopes dimmed, the family found St. Rose. They scheduled a meeting to discuss the possibility of enrolling their daughter. The school sounded like exactly what they had been searching for, but Luis's heart sank when he heard about the tuition costs. Living paycheck to paycheck and struggling under expensive medical bills for the treatment of his daughter's respiratory disease, he knew his family could never afford to send their children to the school. For a terrible moment, Luis lost hope. Then the school staff told him about the financial assistance options available. His heart leapt into his throat. "I could breathe again. I realized I could give my daughter a better education. I could finally keep my promise to her."

Luis still remembers his daughter's smile after her first day at St. Rose. He saw the same smile the next week, and the week after that. Her academic performance has improved, and she wants to go to school in the mornings. In the evenings, she delights in showing her parents her school reports and goals for improvement. St. Rose worked with Denver Public Schools to get her IEP correctly in place, finally giving her access to the assistance she needs. "I'd do anything, pay anything," he tells me, "to make sure my daughter keeps smiling."



Luis and his daughters



Conclusion

When I leave the building, the sun is setting as a cool autumn breeze scatters orange leaves across the cracked pavement and against the chain-link fences of the neighborhood. Dozens of students climb into cars to head home for the evening. One by one, the cars pull away, disappearing back into a sea of darkening gray concrete. Tomorrow, each of them will again arrive at this island of opportunity in a community hungry for better prospects and brighter days. One day, these students may be the ones who make that dream into a reality.

St. Rose of Lima Catholic Academy is not just a school. It isn't just a place where students go to learn how to read, write, and do math. It's a statement, a symbol of the idea that anyone—even the children of immigrants living in inner-city Denver—can succeed in this nation if they are given a fair opportunity and are willing to work for the lives they want. These children are, as Principal Moo says, learning to wear the suit of hard work and earned success. And that's a fine suit indeed.



Ross Izard is the Senior Education Policy Analyst at the Independence Institute. He has authored or coauthored a number of pieces on a variety of topics, including policy briefs, blogs, op-eds, and articles published by both the Independence Institute and media outlets throughout the Front Range. Ross frequently speaks to legislators, school board members, local media, and outside groups about school choice and education reform.

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