

The Pilot

Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur 175th anniversary: Notre Dame Virtual School Networking for 21st Century Education

Sister Kristin Hokanson, SNDdeN
Friday 19th of July 2024

Sister Kristin Hokanson, SNDdeN, speaks with NDVS students. Photo courtesy/Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur

"In the schools, teach whatever is necessary to equip the students for life." These words of St. Julie Billiart, founder of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, written to the first Sisters of her young congregation, have continued to inspire them throughout the years in all their educational ministries. In the early days of the congregation, teaching what was "necessary to equip the students for life" meant teaching sewing and lacemaking in addition to



catechism. As the world's needs changed, so did what was "necessary." So, the Sisters responded by founding elementary schools, comprehensive high schools, and colleges that taught a wide range of subjects while always focusing on educating students about the good God.

In the 21st century, Julie's inspiration finds new expression in the Notre Dame Virtual School, an initiative begun in 2001 by Sister Kristin Hokanson, SNDdeN, that uses the tool of technology to network Notre Dame schools and sponsored ministries worldwide. Realizing that students and educators need to understand and use technology effectively to be "equipped for life," the Notre Dame Virtual School (NDVS) provides students and educators in dozens of schools in countries on five continents with access to high-quality educational materials about the latest developments in technology and digital citizenship. As the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in education expands, NDVS will ensure that its schools have the critical information to use these new tools effectively and responsibly to support Pope Francis' goal to use AI to improve the world by serving the common good.

NDVS benefits from the expertise of SNDdeN educators who create online projects to introduce students to topics such as the 1918 Flu and the Poets' Voice, a project, that uses recordings of poets reading their poetry. NDVS also makes an online project about the Sisters of Notre de Namur founder, St. Julie

Billiart, available. Education students from Emmanuel College have created "learning webs" that allow NDVS students to explore various topics by visiting multiple websites.

NDVS draws on open-source material that is available on the web. Through a weekly NDVS eNews mailing, schools and sponsored ministries can access webinars and resources from edWeb.net, eSchool News, Cyberwise, Tech and Learning, and the Digital Public Library of America.

A key focus of NDVS has been the Church's social teachings and efforts to promote justice and peace. The annual calendar lists monthly themes that, in recent years, have been linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, sdgs.un.org/goals. A goal for the year ahead is to promote activities such as 170 Daily Actions to Transform our World to enable students of all ages to find meaningful ways to express their faith by participating in actions to serve those in need and to care for the earth.

To support its schools' commitment to faith-based, values-based education, NDVS provides prayer services, reflections and other spiritual development resources for all seasons of the liturgical year, major feast days, and Saints' Day celebrations. The NDVS also provides a venue through which students and educators at schools throughout the Notre Dame world can network with each other, most notably through social media.

A companion to NDVS is NotreDameOnline, a website managed by the Congregational Communications Office of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. NotreDameOnline is another resource for educators seeking information about the SNDdeN mission and charism, including details about Sister Dorothy Stang (a Sister of Notre Dame who was martyred in Brazil in 2005). The site also links the schools' websites and sponsored ministries of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

As the Notre Dame Virtual School prepares to celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2026, its commitment to transforming education globally through technology and shared resources is stronger than ever. We can well imagine St. Julie Billiart smiling as she sees her worldwide vision to "equip students for life" lived out in this innovative way.

Sister Kristin Hokanson, SNDdeN, founder and principal of the Notre Dame Virtual School, is a lifelong educator. With degrees from Salem State University, Boston University, and the University of Massachusetts Boston, she has been a high school teacher and an administrator (dean of students, vice principal, and principal) at several different schools in the Archdiocese of Boston. Sister Kristin is currently a program supervisor at Emmanuel College and Bridgewater State University, where she mentors the next generation of teachers and school administrators. She has served on several school governing boards and committees, including at Notre Dame Academy in Worcester, Academy of Notre Dame Tyngsborough, Notre Dame Cristo Rey High School in Lawrence, Notre Dame Academy, Hingham, and Regis College, Weston. In addition to her work with the Notre Dame Virtual School, she coordinates the Catholic Independent School Consortium for the Virtual High School.