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Brothers completely dedicated to education
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St. Jean Baptist de La Salle (1651–1719) was the son of wealthy parents living in Reims, France. Ordained in 1678, he soon received a doctorate in theology.

In pre-revolutionary France, most people were poor. Only a few could send their children to school.

Touched by their plight, De La Salle marshaled a group of young men to establish schools for poor boys.

He abandoned his family home, moved in with the teachers and renounced his wealth. That formed the community that became known as the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

He insisted that they not become priests, saying the work of teaching is too important to be deflected by other duties. Brothers, who take a vow not to be ordained, still work exclusively in the world of education.

Their traditional habit is a simple black robe with no belt and a white rabat around the neck, common wear in De La Salle's day. But the rabat was distinguished from others by its simplicity — small, with no lace or frill.

De La Salle's enterprise met opposition from church leaders, who resisted the new form of religious life. Despite the interference, De La Salle and his brothers succeeded in creating a network of schools throughout France that featured instruction in the vernacular, students grouped according to ability and achievement and integration of religious instruction with secular subjects. Worn out by austerities and exhausting labors, De La Salle died on Good Friday, 1719, only weeks before his 68th birthday.

Some Christian Brothers have paid the ultimate price for abiding by their education ministry. Three were executed after the French Revolution for refusing to take an oath they saw as apostasy.

In 1934 in Spain, eight were shot as an unwanted religious influence in the run up to the nation's civil war.

In the United States, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, or De La Salle Christian Brothers, are known simply as the Christian Brothers. But around the rest of the world, they are known as De La Salle Brothers. They are distinct from the Irish Christian Brothers.

In 1886, the brothers came to Portland and taught at St. Michael Parish and the Cathedral. They established a business college in 1907 near the present Holy Rosary Parish. It remained open until 1927. The brothers founded La Salle High in Milwaukie in 1966. They departed in 1991, confidently leaving school leadership with the laity, who carry on the tradition.

In the western United States, the brothers became well know for a California wine business they operated for more than a century. They sold the venture in 1989 and use the resulting endowment to fund their schools.

At a 2000 meeting of the world's De La Salle Christian Brothers, leaders decided to urge their men to turn traditional schools over to lay partners and get involved in projects that touch the lives of the underprivileged. It was an effort to return to the roots of the community.

The brothers in the United States had already been founding alternative middle schools. Then came the high schools that include internships and leadership training.

"All of this is a leap of faith," says Brother Jonathan Cord, director of the community at De La Salle North Catholic High School in Portland.

The typical size of Christian Brother communities at high schools is four to seven.

There are about 140 brothers in the west coast province, which is based in San Francisco.

Several U.S. provinces have consolidated and leaders expect that to continue.

