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Catholic Schools Week Directory

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STARTED in 1974 by the National Catholic Educational Association, National Catholic Schools Week begins on the last Sunday in January, this year running from January 30 to February 5. The theme this year is "Faith, Excellence, Service." Throughout the country, Catholic schools will celebrate with Masses and engagement with the community, as well as school open houses. These offer great opportunities for prospective students and their families to tour the facilities, talk with the staff and current students and learn about the school. Note that some schools may have a virtual event this year. For more details, go to [NCEA.org](https://www.ncea.org).

Catholic schools build a foundation for children that will last a lifetime

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By MARY KAY LINGE

NEW York's Catholic schools are on a mission — and the families who choose them for their children are caught up in their joyous zeal.

"Catholic school is not just a way to educate children in math and reading and history," said Staten Island mom Mary Beth Russo. "It's about teaching them to

respect others, to respect life and to put good into the world."

Education is a fundamental pillar of the Catholic Church, explained Michael J. Deegan, superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of New York.

"We believe that parents are the primary educators of their children, and we respect and honor that role," Deegan said. "Our schools support parents as they

shape their children into becoming other-centered, generous and faithful adults."

The history of Catholic schooling in New York City stretches back more than two centuries. The first parish school in Manhattan opened in 1800, several years before the launch of the city's first public school.

"When you walk into a Catholic school, you know instantly that it's

Catholic," Deegan said. "It's not the name on the building or the symbols on the walls; it's the greeting you receive, the welcome, the respect and kindness that teachers and children show to one another."

Russo, whose oldest child is a freshman at St. Peter's Boys High School in Staten Island, said the fruits of a Catholic education are apparent even to the casual ob-

server.

"We were at my son's football game the other day, and we were saying how you can tell which kids came from Catholic schools," she said. "You can see the inherent respect they have for the coaches, the referees, for other people in general."

There are more than 250 paro-

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A path to success

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chial elementary schools and 50-plus Catholic high schools in New York City and its surrounding suburbs. They are independently run, but overseen by the Archdiocese of New York (Manhattan, the Bronx, Staten Island, Westchester and northern counties), the Diocese of Brooklyn (Brooklyn and Queens), and the Diocese of Rockville Centre (Nassau and Suffolk).

The system offers a values-driven education program where each child is cherished for his or her individual gifts and needs.

"It's just like the show 'Cheers,'" said Antonio Marano, a Long Island dad whose four young children attend Trinity Regional School in East Northport, NY. "A Catholic school really is where everybody knows your name."

No child is anonymous in a place like Trinity, Marano said. "Mom, dad, teachers, principal — they're all in this to help form a better person, to make sure kids come out with a strong character as well as a strong education."

The all-hands approach benefits society as a whole, Deegan said.

"Researchers at Pew and Harvard have found that graduates of Catholic schools are much more likely to volunteer in the community," he pointed out. "They're more generous in their donations to charity and more likely to participate in the life of our society — they're faithful voters, faithful to public service, faithful to military service."

It leads to high educational achievement, too.

"Our scores on New York State's standardized tests exceed those of New York City schools and most charters," Deegan said. "And we participate in a nationally normed standardized testing program, which confirms that our students' results in ELA and math are above national norms."

"I like to say our goal is not only to get them into Harvard, but to get them into heaven," he laughed.



Michael J. Deegan, superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of New York (right, and above, pre-pandemic) is proud of his schools' high academic achievements.

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The sense of shared responsibility grows from the fact that each Catholic school is rooted in a local community — a parish or a group of parishes that supports school families on a daily basis.

"That's the biggest thing for me, the feeling of community," said Michele Pizzo, whose two children attend Our Lady of Good Counsel School in Staten Island.

"I was never a big church-goer," she said. "Now I go to church because with the kids, we're part of this community. I love seeing everyone. I know all their friends; I know all their friends' parents."

Russo recalled how the whole parish rallied around with hot meals and prayer when her daughter, then a Good Counsel second grader, battled cancer.

"Her doctors took care of her physically," Russo said, "and that wonderful school family took care of us emotionally and spiritually."

The family feeling isn't limited to parents who are practicing Catholics, Deegan said. About 40 percent of students in the archdiocesan schools come from non-Catholic families, he estimated.

"We like to say that we teach them not because they're Catholic, but because we're Catholic," he said. "We don't shy away from demonstrating our faith during the school day — morning and afternoon

prayer, the regular celebration of mass. Our non-Catholic students take part in all of that."

Families of other faiths find themselves at home in a Catholic school's prayerful atmosphere.

"You have the feeling that you belong, no matter what your religion is," said Shelley Weintraub, whose son Ethan recently graduated from St. Francis Preparatory High School in Fresh Meadows, Queens.

"We're a very traditional Jewish family, and they were so respectful," she said. "More than religion, it's just the way they teach people to be kind. We looked at Jewish schools and we didn't get the same feeling."

Religion is a required classroom subject for Catholic school students in every grade, from preschool through grade 12.

"Ethan started at a deficit in his religion classes, but



he enjoyed them and excelled," Weintraub said. "The content was nothing preachy; it was kindness and values and life."

"We have extraordinary teachers and extraordinary principals. Their dedication is remarkable," Deegan said. "That's because they don't consider it to be a job: It's a vocation and a ministry."

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, as public schools slammed their doors shut, Catholic schools carried on.

"This pandemic proved that government schools

have failed our children," Deegan said. "And the reason for that is we make decisions based on what is best for the child, not what is best for the adults."

The archdiocesan schools spent millions of dollars in the spring of 2020 to equip 2,100 classrooms with the technology needed to stream live, synchronous lessons. To undo the learning loss that many students experienced that year, the schools set up a suite of remedial instruction programs called Catapult offering after-school and summer lessons.

In September 2020, all the Catholic schools in the region reopened their doors to students, and never shut them again.

"I'm delighted to say that in the last two years, we have registered over 2,500 children transferring into archdiocesan schools from public schools," Deegan said. "That's our first enrollment increase in 26 years."

Each Catholic school sets its own tuition rates. Fees for elementary schools in the Archdiocese of New York and the Diocese of Brooklyn commonly range between \$4,500 and \$6,000 per child per year, with steep discounts when siblings are enrolled.

Scholarships are available in each diocese for students in need.

High school tuition costs vary much more widely, from a low of about \$2,500 at Cristo Rey High School — where students take work-study jobs to help fund their education — to \$50,000 or more.

"It is absolutely worth it," Marano said. "Your children are the most important thing in your life. When you think of it that way, the cost is negligible."

"I'm just here to raise good humans," Russo agreed. "It's about making the world a better place, because they've made my world a better place."

More information on Catholic schools in the area is available from the Archdiocese of New York at CatholicSchoolsNY.org; Diocese of Brooklyn at DioceseOfBrooklyn.org and Diocese of Rockville Centre at DRVC.org.