



Brittainy Holland (far l.) said scholarship helped daughter Faith (l.) attend St. Athanasius School in the Bronx. At Xavier HS (inset), more students are coming from public schools, the principal says.

# CATHOLIC ED. SURGES

## City schools claim low virus rates, in-person classes boost tally

BY JOANNE KROEGER

After nearly two years of a devastating pandemic that has wreaked havoc on the nation's school systems, the city's Catholic schools have been experiencing something only a little short of a miracle.

Consistent safety protocols, combined with clear and steady communication with parents, have resulted in high in-person attendance levels — and a surge in enrollment after decades of decline.

In the haze of COVID closures, chaos and confusion, Catholic schools have become a safe haven for students. Since September 2020, 100% of the city's 170 Catholic schools have remained open with very low infection rates even during the omicron surge, said Michael Deegan, superintendent of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of New York.

"Although there has been a surge in positive cases in our communities, and certainly New York, the number of transmissions in Catholic schools is as small as it was a year ago," Deegan said.

One clear benefit has been the rise in enrollments during the pandemic. As the nation's 6,000 schools celebrate the annual Catholic Schools Week through Saturday, a time marked by open houses and special events for prospective students and their parents, the schools have reason to rejoice. From a high of 5.2 million students in the 1960s to around 1.6 million in 2019, Catholic schools are again becoming an increasingly attractive option. What seemed a quaint mission of faith-based learning, service and community has become an appealing, value and values-based proposition.

After a 27-year enrollment decline, more than 2,500 new students joined the 54,000 pupils attending a New York-area Catholic School over the last two years. The Brooklyn Diocese saw an increase of 2.4%, or 1,000 students from nursery through eighth grade.

And most of these new students are coming from public schools, looking for in-person learning or an option to discontinued gifted and talented programs.

"Thirty years ago, the large majority of the kids would have been coming to us from Catholic schools. Now, we have more kids coming from public schools," said Jack Raslowsky, president of Xavier High School in Manhattan.

"In a world gone crazy, there is a desire for anchors and truths," he added. "People are coming back to wanting timeless values. We believe in young [people] taking responsibility for their lives, having accountability and a bedrock of respect."

Other Catholic school leaders see this almost as an existential yearning: Yes, parents want academic rigor and safe, open schools, but also crave the comfort of community. Principal Robert Billings of Our Lady of Refuge in the Bronx, said, "The academics and the structure are what parents want, but they also want community and warmth. We are here to help them," said Principal Robert Billings of Our Lady of Refuge in the Bronx.

Students from pricey private schools are also jumping ship, with parents realizing they will usually pay far less to attend a

Catholic school. The average cost of tuition at a Catholic school in the city is \$8,172 a year, less than half the average of private schools.

No matter where students are transferring from, they are often happy to have made the switch. "The school's priority is to keep kids in school safely," said Chari Corpuz about St. Savior Catholic Academy in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where her two daughters go.

Corpuz, a health care worker, moved her oldest daughter, Jocelyn, from public school after kindergarten three years ago. "She has food allergies and public school wasn't the safest environment for her; it didn't provide individual attention. St. Savior gives a sense of security, safety and individualized attention," Corpuz said.

Brittainy Holland, mother of 13-year old Faith, was nervous to transfer her daughter from a private Christian school to St. Athanasius School in Hunts Point in the Bronx.

"When Faith's former school closed, I didn't know what to do. I knew I wanted her in a similar school setting. I was concerned

I wouldn't be able to afford the tuition, but St. Athanasius offers scholarships," Holland said.

Faith was just happy that she was able to fit in immediately. "I didn't feel like a transfer student because everyone was nice, friendly and welcoming," she said.

Despite curriculums that include Catholic teachings, about 20% of students are not. Many schools say they are inclusive and teach broad lessons applicable to all faiths.

Adam Darty, an 11th-grader who was at public school before Xavier, was worried that going to a Catholic school meant "religion class would mostly be teaching me about Jesus, but it hasn't been like that. It's been broader lessons about religion," said Darty, who was also pleasantly surprised that what he'd heard about the "strict" rules wasn't at all what he expected.

"The discipline is not scary strict but supportively strict," he said.

Many of the city's Catholic schools are having open houses and tours this week. A list of schools can be found at catholic-schoolsny.org/.