

Catholic Schools Week Directory

Catholic schools offer an exemplary education and the fundamentals for life

TAKE IT AS GOSPEL

Special Section

By MARY KAY LINGE

FAITH, excellence, service: This three-part mission of New York's Catholic schools has held firm for more than two centuries.

"We're not just a public school with a crucifix on the wall," said Linda Dougherty, the Archdiocese of New York's associate superintendent for Catholic identity. "In our schools, we're working to live our faith every day."

Education is a fundamental pillar of the Catholic church's mission, explained Dougherty, a longtime teacher and administrator who coaches each archdiocesan school in defining and embracing its unique Catholic character.

"We believe that every student can achieve, because we believe each child is created in the image and likeness of God," Dougherty said. "That's rooted in our

Gospel values. That's nonnegotiable."

The commitment to academic excellence has tangible results, said Monsignor David Cassato, the vicar for Catholic schools in the Diocese of Brooklyn.

"I mean, just look at the test scores right now," Cassato said.

Test results released in October showed that 64% of the Archdiocese of New York's elementary school students passed state reading exams in 2022, compared to just 49% in the city's public schools. In math, 52% passed, outpacing public schools' 38%, and 99% graduate on time. They are more likely to go on to higher education — and to succeed there. According to a 2014 study, 62% of Catholic high school graduates nationwide earned bachelor's degrees or beyond, twice the 31% rate for public schools.

"It's not that they're all academic stars — we take kids that have real challenges,"

Cassato said. "It's that we take them from where they are, and we help each one individually achieve."

But the value of a Catholic education goes beyond the numbers.

"We bring out the whole child," Cassato said. "Not only academically, not only through sports and fun time, but on a third level. Our schools work to deepen a child's sense of spirituality, helping them develop a personal spiritual life. I think that's the greatest gift we can give to a kid."

A history of learning

Catholic schooling in New York City began in 1800, when the immigrant Irish and German parishioners of St.

See **EDUCATION** on Page 38

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From EDUCATION on Page 37

Peter's Church in lower Manhattan founded a school for 100 students — six years before the city's first public school.

Forty years later, the Jesuit order opened the city's first Catholic secondary school, Fordham Prep, in The Bronx. When St. Francis Preparatory School in Queens welcomed its first students in 1858, the Diocese of Brooklyn got a high school as well.

Today, more than 250 parochial elementary schools serve nearly 85,000 children in the Archdiocese of New York (which comprises Manhattan, The Bronx, Staten Island, Westchester and northern counties) and the Diocese of Brooklyn (which also includes Queens). Many go on to attend one of the 46 Catholic high schools in New York's five boroughs, in which nearly 30,000 students are enrolled.

Multiple studies have found that, as they grow to adulthood, Catholic school graduates benefit the city and the wider world in myriad ways: They're much more likely to serve as community volunteers, more likely to vote and make charitable donations, and more likely to perform roles in public service. "It's because we offer a real values-based education," Cassaro said.

Every school has its own unique flavor, or charism, said Dougherty. "Catholic identity is who we are, mission is what we do and who we serve, and charism is a spiritual asset which further defines our identity."

In the past, a school's charism was typically linked to the religious community of nuns or priests that founded and served it. Today, it defines what makes a Catholic school distinctive.

"Sometimes it relates to the his-



Fordham Prep was the first Catholic secondary school in New York.



St. Mark Catholic Academy in Sheepshead Bay has been welcoming refugees from Ukraine with open arms.

Learning for life

tory of the school, if it's an older parish with long-standing traditions," Dougherty said. "Sometimes it's a focus on the school's patron saint and the work that saint is known for. Other schools emphasize the diversity of languages or cultures in the communities they serve."

A welcome for all

St. Mark Catholic Academy in Sheepshead Bay has found its charism in the virtue of hospitality, welcoming in a stream of refugee children from Ukraine and Eastern Europe.

"That's happening in the moment," said principal Mark Wilson. "Just the other day, a family got here from Ukraine on Sunday, and they're in my office on Monday to enroll their child. We have other students here who haven't seen their parents in months."

Children and teachers have welcomed the newcomers "so quickly and so benevolently that you'd think they've been here forever," Wilson said. "We have a number of other Ukrainian and Eastern European students here, so the teachers will pair them up and some students will translate for others in the classroom."

When it's time to give a test, teachers "are going the extra mile

to put their questions through a translation program so students can take assessments in their native language," Wilson said.

"That speaks to their vocation as Catholic educators," he added, "taking that extra step."

The school has hired several parents as classroom aides who double as translators.

"We can only hope that the camaraderie and the love and the respect our families have for each other here trickles out to the world outside these walls," said Wilson.

A sense of belonging

In Elmhurst, the students and parents of St. Bartholomew Catholic Academy strive to embody brotherly love.

"We try to always be mindful of our mission, which is basically to minister to all our students regardless of their race, their national origin or creed," said principal Lisandro Peña. "We try to bring out the values that identify us as Catholics, as people who are universal, as people who are welcoming, as people who are able to see life every day with happiness, with joy."

The school and parish are about 85% Latino, with many Spanish speakers, including Peña himself, who grew up in Ecuador and was

educated in Rome. But an influx of Asian residents in the neighborhood has spurred the church to offer a weekly Chinese-language Mass. "The members of the Asian community haven't always received the support they need," said Peña. "Now they are also eager to bring their children to our school."

Chinese-speaking parents are coming on board to boost his outreach efforts, which include computer-literacy assistance for recent immigrants of all backgrounds.

"Our schools are a mosaic of this city," Cassaro said. "I'm 50 years a priest, and for all those 50 years, I have met people from every religion and every nationality and have seen how they've always been welcomed into our schools. It's a beautiful experience."



Saint Barnabas High School

Century of excellence

THEY'RE 99 years and counting

Saint Barnabas HS, in The Bronx, was founded in 1924 as an all-girls Catholic high school, and will celebrate their centennial anniversary next year.

The independent, not-for-profit school's mission has not changed in that time, said Saint Barnabas board member and alum Linda Corcoran. The school aims to provide young women with a stellar academic education, rounded out with sports and clubs to help develop confident and capable grads.

With a student body of just 200, the institution offers a value-oriented, personalized experience, said Corcoran.

"It's friendly and welcoming, and our guidance counselor tracks you from freshman through senior year," she said. "And there's a long history here — a sisterhood that students are expected to live up to."

A new, state-of-the-art science, technology, robotics, engineering, art and math center was launched last year "to ensure that students have an opportunity to be integrated" into STREAM fields, said Corcoran.

As for Barnabas' teachers, "the faculty not only give of themselves in the classroom, but are mentors who provide extra help," said principal Henry Triana. "Two of our teachers are alumnae, who continue passing along the tradition of academic excellence and values that were instilled in them as students here."

"Many are also role models in extracurricular activities," Triana added, "from coaching winning sports teams to clubs to our choir, who will be performing at Carnegie Hall on Feb. 19. I'm proud to be working with this talented and dedicated group of professionals."

— Erko Weis