

# 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

**F**AITH, 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.

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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," Cassato 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-



Robert Kalius

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

## See the difference

National Catholic Schools Week runs Jan. 29 to Feb. 4, and celebrates Catholic education in the US. Started in 1974, it's an opportunity for Catholic schools across the country to open their doors with events for students, their families, anyone interested in a Catholic education, parishioners and the local community at large. This year, the theme is "Catholic Schools: Faith. Excellence. Service."



Courtesy of the Diocese of Brooklyn/St. Mark's Catholic Academy

**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," Cassato 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



**Girls at Saint Barnabas enjoy a sisterhood, said the 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."

— Erika Welz



# GREAT EXPECTATIONS

By MARY KAY LINGE

Here's what to consider if you're thinking about Catholic school for your child

**L**AURA Cermisa moved to Brooklyn's Windsor Terrace so her two young daughters could attend District 15's excellent public schools. Then came the pandemic.

"Online classes were really hard on my first grader. You can't learn to read on Zoom," Cermisa recalled. "She wasn't progressing academically, and she was also quite depressed."

The desperate mom called St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Academy, her local parochial school. "And I was amazed. They were open — like, actually open, full time. I enrolled them," Cermisa said. "Catholic school was never part of our plan. But then I stayed because of the experience here. I couldn't be happier."

Eula Buckley of Queens grew up in a staunch Baptist family, but when her fifth-grade son was unhappy in his school, she sought an alternative at Divine Wisdom Academy in Douglaston.

"It's more of a community than a school," Buckley said. "When you're walking in, you're walking into a family. And I got that feeling right away."

Every Catholic school family has its own story. And every January, as parochial schools in New York and nationwide open their doors to celebrate Catholic Schools Week, prospective parents and students have a chance to see these faith-filled communities in action.

Here are some questions that visitors often ask — or should.

## Do all students have to take religion class?

In a word, yes. Catholic schools welcome students of all faiths, and all of them take religion as a required classroom subject at every grade level.

"Even if a child didn't sit through a formal religion class, they are immersed in who we are as a Catholic community," noted Linda Dougherty of the Archdiocese of New York. "Everything we do has a meaning and purpose rooted in our faith: We pray, we attend mass, we do all kinds of acts of social justice and service."



At schools like St. Joseph the Worker, you'll find a nurturing environment for all.

nasius in Bensonhurst, have dedicated learning centers for students who need extra academic support. "We're here to help each one individually achieve," Cassato said.

## Is faith in the forefront?

"When parents visit our schools, we hope they'll see evidence of our faith-based activities," Dougherty said. "Look for a bulletin board that reflects the social service projects the students are doing, or displays about what they're learning in religion class."

Each month, the archdiocese asks its schools to highlight a particular Christian value — such as hospitality, prudence or charity — as a focus of action and reflection. Teachers explain the idea with the help of a biblical quote and design lessons on the theme.

"It's faith, it's academics, it's community, it's family," Buckley said.

"They learn everything about life when they're here. And when they walk out of these doors, I think they have everything they need to be a total human being. That's worth every bit of effort we put into it."



Eric Hafker from St. Francis Prep (see Page 44)

"I feel the religious instruction has a big influence on the character of the school," Cermisa said.

## Is it expensive?

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.

High school tuition costs vary widely, from a low of about \$2,500 at Cristo Rey HS — where students take work-study jobs to help fund their education — to \$50,000 or more. Some schools offer full or partial academic scholarships.

At the elementary school level, privately funded need-based scholarship programs are available in each diocese.

"We raise about \$7 million every year to help kids who need scholarships through a group called Futures in Education," said Monsignor David Cassato of the Diocese of Brooklyn.

## Do parents feel like partners?

"At St. Joe's, it's really a partnership between teachers, administrators and parents," Cermisa said. "They're so invested in the well-being of the children, emotionally as well as educationally."

Her daughters immediately picked up on their new school's commitment to *cura personalis*, or "care for the whole person" — not in those words, of course.

"I just remember her saying, 'Mom, my old principal never knew my name. This principal does,'" Cermisa recalled. "It really made her feel special. So, it's good to speak with the school leadership to understand how open they are to parental opinions and ideas," she advised. "Is this someone you can see yourself partnering with?"

## Can my child have a trial run?

Divine Wisdom and many other Catholic schools offer "shadow days" for prospective students.

"They pair them up with a buddy at their age level, and they go through a whole day with the class," Buckley said.

For her son, that single school day sealed the deal.

"He loved it — he actually didn't want to wait to enroll the following year, he wanted to start at the school the following week," she recalled, laughing. "He actually went back to his old school and told everyone he was leaving. After that one day, he was all in."

## Are there academic 'extras'?

Catholic schools follow the same state curriculum standards taught in public schools, plus religion classes. But many schools take pride in academic and extracurricular

ular programs that offer students further enrichment or assistance.

For example, St. Stanislaus Kostka in Greenpoint recently installed a Wi-Fi-connected rooftop weather station for the school's science classes and Meteorology Club to use. The robotics program at St. Bartholomew's in Elmhurst develops students' teamwork, engineering and communication skills. Many schools, including St. Atha-



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