York Citv's Catholic schools

## Catholic Schools Week Directory

NURTURING

**How Catholic** schools offer exceptional education and ethical teaching

By MARY KAY LINGE

ries, Catholic education remains a force in New York, bringing children and their families into a community that challenges them

to think beyond themselves.
"The mission of Catholic schools is to teach as Jesus did. That's the basis of all we do," said Sister Mary Grace Walsh, superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of New York. "What we instill goes deep into their hearts," Walsh said. "And it's changed people's lives."

The latest state and national test scores attest that in terms of academic excel-

attest that in terms of academic excellence, New York City's Catholic schools "are second to none," Walsh said.

"But more importantly, we teach children what it means to be part of a community," she said. "And I think that is so crucial in the world we live in today."

In the Archdiocese of New York — which oversees 152 algorithms and high

which oversees 152 elementary and high schools in Manhattan, The Bronx, Staten of all Catholic school students in grades three through eight passed last year's state math tests, according to the New York State Education Department, with 64% proficient in English language arts. In comparison, 50% of students in New

See EDUCATION on Page 28



It's not just about book learning: Catholic schools help develop a strong sense of belonging and community.

## LEARNING FOR LIFE

From **EDUCATION** on Page 27

York City public schools were proficient in math in 2023, while 52% passed their state reading tests.

Nationwide, eighth graders in Catholic schools outscored their public school peers by an average of 20 points in reading and 15 points in math, according to the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress, otherwise known as "America's report card."

"If Catholic schools were a state, they'd be the highest performing in the nation," according to Kathleen Porter-Magee of Partnership Schools, a Catholic school management consortium with members in Harlem and the South Bronx.

"Obviously, standards are extremely important to us," Walsh said. "We aim not only to meet standards, but to exceed them. Our students are intellectually prepared to become lifelong learners. At the same time, when our young people graduate, they not only know the faith but they have a relationship with Jesus Christ, a personal relationship.

"They've learned what it means to be part of a community and to give back in service — what it is to live a virtuous life. And I think that really sets them up for their future."

Most Catholic elementary schools serve children from preschool through eighth grade, with enrollments generally ranging between 200 and 300 students.

"That means they're places where community can be formed easily," Walsh said. "They're small enough that every child feels welcomed, feels loved and is known by name."

It's all part of an ancient educational philosophy driven by the church's core values — in particular, the idea that each human being is a unique gift of God to be cherished.

"It's about helping children grow to become the best version of themselves," said Philip Heide, principal of St. Michael's Catholic Academy in Flushing, one of the Diocese of Brooklyn's 68 Catholic elementary schools.

"We truly celebrate diversity here - not just the students' backgrounds or ethnicities, but the individualness of each child," said Gina Auricchio, who heads a dedicated program for students with special learning needs at St. Athanasius Catholic Academy in Bensonhurst.

"We recognize and honor the diversity of how they learn."

Researchers have long suggested that the "secret sauce" of Catholic education is "the way they treat every student as having equal worth before God," Raymond Domanico of the Manhattan Institute wrote in a 2019 report.

"We see it as our mission to help each child develop socially, emotionally, academically and, most of all, spiritually," said Michael Phillips, principal of St. Ephrem Catholic Academy in Bay Ridge. "It's more than test scores, it's about how to be a better person."

"Here, everyone is respected," said Diane Competello, principal of St. Athanasius. "If we teach children how to respect

one another, that's probably the most important thing they leave this place with."

The embrace of the Catholic school community encompasses families of all religious backgrounds. About 40% of students in the Archdiocese of New York's schools come from non-Catholic families.

"We're not trying to convert them," Walsh said. "But we do want to spread the good news about Jesus and the beautiful aspects of the Catholic faith."

One of those singular Catholic aspects is the concept of charism: a spiritual gift bestowed on an individual or a group — such as a parish, a religious order or a school

to be used in the service of God or for the good of the church.

In the past, a school's charism was typically linked to the religious community of nuns, priests or brothers that founded and served it. Today, charism informs each Catholic school's mission and identity, and helps to make it distinctive.

The word "catholic" means "universal," and the charism of St. Michael's rejoices in the global Catholic church.

"Here in downtown Flushing, we serve a large Asian population, with many families that have emigrated from China," Heide explained, "We have a large Hispanic population, too, as well as English-speaking families.'

Catholic schools celebrate diversity in the ethnicities of their students, as well as their individual attributes.

To foster connections among these disparate groups, every St. Michael's student from preschool on up takes part in an immersive dual-language program, learning both English and Mandarin, unique in the Diocese of Brooklyn.

Kindergarten and first grade students take all their lessons math, science, religion, language arts — in English one day and in Mandarin the next.

"Studies show that's the most beneficial way to learn a new language," Heide said. "We're doing content-driven curriculum through the vehicle of language."

The results, Heide said, are im-

"We have students who are not only bilingual but trilingual," he said. "One of our second graders, who's Hispanic and speaks Spanish at home, now speaks Mandarin just as well as our native Mandarin speakers, and English just as well as our native English speakers. It's pretty remarkable.'

The program has also strengthened bonds within the parish and in the wider community.

"We strive to respect and honor and show the importance of all cultures, and that's really what makes up the mission of St. Michael's," Heide said. "This is a ministry and it's a calling to all of us."

The staff at St. Athanasius is dedicated to nurturing every student, including those who learn differently.

"Each child comes to us with their own gifts, and it may not be math, it may not be science, it may not be writing or spelling," said Competello.

About 30% of the school's 310 students have individualized education programs or are identified as being academically at risk.

"Our instruction is differentiated to meet the students where they are," said Auricchio, who heads St. Athanasius' Learning Center. "We teach them at their level and help move them forward."

The flexible program has Auricchio popping into multiple classrooms throughout the day, offering support to students as needed and working in tandem with her fellow teachers.

"They see me around the building, I'm in all of the classrooms and I'll circulate around to all of the students so there's not any sense of stigmatization," she said.

At St. Ephrem, students exalt God's gift of life by exploring the natural world through science.

The school last year installed two hydroponics labs, growing bountiful year-round indoor gardens in nutrient-drenched water. Students are experimenting with a range of crops, donating some of the harvest to neighbors in need.

"We're all learning at the same time," Phillips said. "I feel like I'm a scientist now, too."

Said Walsh: "As Catholic educators, we're definitely missiondriven, there's no question. We may never see the results of the seeds we plant today in a Catholic school — but we have faith that those seeds will blossom throughout our students' whole lifetime.'