



(Photo by John Shaughnessy)

A garden reveals God’s creation and the fruits of a Catholic education

By John Shaughnessy

In the middle of winter, it may seem unusual to share the story of a garden and the woman who helps to bring it to life for children.

But this is the story of a garden at an archdiocesan school, a garden that overflows year-round—even when snow is on the ground—with the bountiful gifts that can blossom from a Catholic education.

Consider that the garden provides about 600 pounds of fresh produce every year, supplying tomatoes, squash, green beans and cucumbers for people in need—a gift that also teaches the school children to look out for others in kindness and empathy.

Consider also that while the children roam among the trees, the flower beds, the giant sunflowers and the chickens, they are also learning lessons about science, technology, engineering and math—the so-called STEM foundations of learning.

Now consider one more truth, the most important one: Everything in this garden and everything that is taught here is rooted in the belief that God provides so much abundance for us in life, and that we are called to take care of his creation and each other.

All these truths sprout to life in the garden at Christ the King School in Indianapolis, a place where joy, curiosity and wonder combine to form a wonderful bouquet of appreciation for nature, which is exactly what the Garden Lady—a parent volunteer also known as Jackie Chandler—strives to create for children.

Just understand that when Chandler starts to talk about the garden and the children, her enthusiasm, like one of those giant sunflowers, can’t be contained.

“Their sparked interest is so exciting for me and brings me so much joy in return,” she notes about the children. “My favorite thing is teaching these kids to be resourceful. We talk about water conservation, and reusing, repurposing and recycling items. We model caring for God’s Earth and all living things.

“We estimate in silly ways how tall a tree is, and we dig for worms. Seeing wonder through the students’ eyes is illuminating. Seeing the light come on inside of them about things they can do at home—or even on their own even though they are 5 to 10 years old—is miraculous.

“I am filled most with joy when I see the students in

awe with soil testing, or with the stories I hear about students going home from garden class and making their own bug hotel in their backyard. And, *oooh!*, the excitement when they find a worm and run over to show me, knowing that earthworms are my *favorite!*”

Her joy and her smile are ever-present in the garden now. Yet the reality is that when she first came here, it was a soul-searching time for her, a time when her spirits and the spirits of our entire country felt as lifeless as a garden during a Midwestern winter.

“I found peace and purpose”

Back then, Chandler worked as a full-time nurse practitioner at an Indianapolis hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I need to let you know what brought me to gardening in the first place, as this has led me into volunteering as the Garden Lady,” she begins. “I started really getting into gardening just before the COVID pandemic hit. During a time of uncertainty and isolation, while working overtime caring for hospital employees during the pandemic, I found peace and purpose watching my little seedlings in my garage grow.

“At times, I had trouble connecting with my family, too, during that time, and being outside with my hands in the dirt gave me a sense of calm and connection that I didn’t even know I needed.”

That need stayed with her as she and her husband Mike searched for a school for their son Walter as he entered kindergarten. At the time, Christ the King School had started a garden under the direction of then-principal Ed Seib. Seeing the garden, the couple knew they had



Jackie Chandler, the “Garden Lady,” helps children, including Marty Funk and Emelia Marshall, understand that everything that happens in the garden at Christ the King School in Indianapolis is rooted in the belief that God provides so much abundance for us in life. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

found their school home for Walter *and* a place of renewal for her.

“I really appreciated the school garden, equipped with real, live chickens and giant sunflowers,” Chandler recalls. “Around that time in my personal life, I went through my own ‘dark night of the soul.’

“We were a couple of years since the COVID-19 pandemic started, and I think the trauma and secondary trauma of caring for health care employees hit me once the hustle and bustle of being in survival mode faded. I had time off from work for my own healing. And that same comfort I initially felt watching those seedlings grow in my garage was renewed, as I felt comfort and strength in caring for our school garden. It became a source of healing and hope for me.”

The garden also soon became a calling to help the

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GARDEN

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students grow, and a way for her to serve God and help share his gifts of creation.

‘Caring for God’s great Earth’

“Over time, my love for the garden grew into a love for what it brings to our community, and it made me ponder what more it can provide for our kids as a place to learn, explore and see God’s hand in creation,” she says. She met with Seib to share her plan for expanding the garden to 18 raised beds, one garden bed for each class at the school. She recruited her friend and fellow Christ the King mother, Annie Feeney, to help. “Together, we spearheaded this adventure,” Chandler says. “Once transformed, we were excited to have the kids out in the space. I proposed classes with planned-out lesson plans, including STEM-based activities, to our current principal, Kortney Wenclewicz, and she approved. Not only that, the sign-up spots filled quickly



Even in the snow and cold of winter, there are lessons to be learned in the garden area and in the chicken coop at Christ the King School in Indianapolis. (Submitted photo)



Students keep a journal of the results of their experiments in the garden at Christ the King School in Indianapolis. (Submitted photo)

with kindergarten through fourth-grade classes. “I was honored—and still am—that they let the kids come learn with me in the garden. That first year, I figured the worst-case scenario was that the kids are outside in fresh air and playing in the dirt. Well, it turned out much greater than that. To see the kids learning about plants, trees, soil, being resourceful and caring for God’s great Earth has been such a joy to watch.” The children share the same joy. “In garden class, we get to plant our garden bed,” says Gemma Karpinski, a third-grade student. “The garden is so beautiful, and it’s so nice to have the plants and the birds. And it’s fun when we go on scavenger hunts as a group.” Evan Mennel, a fellow third-grader, adds, “We get to do a lot of fun activities. We have books, and whatever we learn, we write about it.” Both students also appreciate the opportunity to share the garden’s harvest with others. “We get to pick tomatoes and cucumbers, and they go to the food pantry,” Evan says. “And the chickens lay eggs, and some go to the food pantry, too.” When principal Wenclewicz views the garden, she sees it as a reflection of the difference that parent volunteers make *and* an opportunity for students to gain a close-up understanding of the world God has created.

“It has been a hands-on learning experience for our students to understand the importance of God’s creation,” she says. “The students and volunteers have been an integral part in building new raised beds, planting vegetables, weeding, and providing the grown produce to the local food pantry. Christ the King is very blessed to have this ecosystem on our campus to learn more about the world around us.” Wenclewicz also shares this thought about Chandler. “We rely on her expertise to continue to grow our garden and learn more about the animals, organisms and produce that live within this environment,” she says. “She is truly a remarkable addition to our school community.”

Seeing the world with wonder

Those thoughts touch Chandler, but the Garden Lady is quick to sow praise in all directions. Besides making sure that Annie Feeney is acknowledged for all she does, she mentions the dad who built the chicken coop, the parents who provide the soil and the vegetable shoots, and the parents who volunteer in the garden classes when they can. She sees all the efforts as an extension of the Catholic faith. “The garden’s official name is the St. Isidore and St. Maria Garden,” Chandler notes. “They share the values and virtues of commitment to family, love for the land, service to the poor and a deep spirituality. Thinking [about] and doing for others gets us out of our own heads, worries and concerns. “In classroom moments, we have taken a brief moment of pause and quiet to hear God’s greatest creation—birds chirping, wind blowing.”



Children show some of the produce that is grown in the garden at Christ the King School in Indianapolis, produce that is shared with people in need. (Submitted photo)

The Garden Lady has especially felt the breath of God in her life. “Though I have only been on God’s great Earth for 36 years, I have been given many second chances at life,” she says. “At times, I am quite surprised and feel very blessed to still be here. Feeling like I am on borrowed time drives my values and goals in life. This ‘Garden Lady’ chapter has been a beautiful adventure in my journey. I learn so much from the kids, and they remind me how to see the world with wonder.” That wonder has led her to make a dramatic change in her life. She has left her hospital nursing job—“my dream job”—to become a part-time nurse at Bishop Chatard High School in Indianapolis, a change that allows her to devote even more time to the garden and the children. “My rebellious teenage self—who was actually just riddled with fear—would *never* believe I would be working at a Catholic high school, or that I have become a member of a Catholic church and community. I am so grateful that my family and I are part of the caring and welcoming community at Christ the King. “It is important for me to continue to cultivate this community that I have always longed for, and this continues to take root in the garden. Gardening and playing in the dirt have been very therapeutic for me—the outdoors is where I connect most personally with God. And maybe just one of those kids in garden class needs to play in the dirt, feel the sun on their cheeks or hear birds chirping that day in garden class. “Maybe they won’t be able to put words to that need or understand how it helps them, but I hope to teach connection with the Earth, others, creatures, trees, flowers and God in the garden. And hopefully in turn, the students will later pass this on to others.” It’s the humble prayer of the Garden Lady, a prayer rooted in the abundant goodness of God. †

Catholic Schools: Drawing new maps of hope

By Brian Disney
Superintendent of Catholic schools in the archdiocese

Happy Catholic Schools Week! We are blessed to have 69 Catholic schools serving more than 23,000 students throughout the archdiocese. As we honor the gift of Catholic education, we renew our mission focused on the whole person, the power of community and the promise of hope in every student’s journey.



Brian Disney

Pope Leo XIV provided a vision for Catholic schools in his apostolic letter “Drawing New Maps of Hope” on Oct. 27, 2025, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the

conciliar declaration “*Gravissimum educationis*” (“Declaration on Catholic Education”). In the letter, he reminds us that education “is one of the highest expressions of Christian charity.” Catholic education does more than teach academic content. It also prioritizes the learning of virtues. At our Catholic schools, students discover the meaning of life, recognize their inalienable dignity, discern their vocations and apply their responsibility toward others. Catholic schools put the person at the center of our endeavors. By focusing on a student’s inherent dignity, Catholic schools embrace “the entire person: spiritual, intellectual, emotional, social, physical.” In forming the whole person, our schools avoid fragmentation and integrate the Catholic faith into all aspects of the student experience. Pope Leo also emphasizes that technological progress, including

artificial intelligence (AI), is part of God’s plan, but its use must be guided by careful discernment. “Let us educate in a judicious use of technology and of AI, placing the person before the algorithm and harmonizing technical, emotional, social, spiritual and ecological intelligence.” Pope Leo stresses, “Christian education is a collective endeavor: no one educates alone. The educational community is a ‘we’ where teachers, students, families, administrative and service staff, pastors and civil society converge to generate life.” With this emphasis on collaborative formation, our schools echo the vibrant, shared mission of the Gospel. Catholic school educators recognize that parents are the first teachers and support them in that effort. Not only are parents and teachers actively engaged in Catholic education, but so is the entire parish community.

Catholic education “is an act of hope and a passion that is renewed because it manifests the promise we see in the future of humanity,” Pope Leo notes. We see the immeasurable value of each student and assist them with growing in the universal call to holiness. Pope Leo reminds us, “Young people ask for depth; they need spaces for silence, discernment, and dialogue with their conscience and with God.” Through this contemplation, students understand they are sons and daughters of God, and they build trust in our divided world filled with conflicts and fear. This hope empowers them to engage their whole persons in transforming the world into the kingdom of God. As we celebrate Catholic Schools Week, we are inspired by Pope Leo to draw new maps of hope as we help young people grow in God’s grace and goodness. †



The love and faith of others help guide a student to share the same with her peers

By John Shaughnessy

To understand the impact that Mary Claire McCarthy tries to have on other people’s lives, you have to know the essential belief about God she has learned to embrace:

He often makes his presence known through the people he puts in our lives.

That reality frequently happens in the most heartbreaking and challenging times that people face, like the one that overwhelmed Mary Claire when she was in the third grade.

“My dad passed away in a car accident when I was in third grade,” says Mary Claire, now a senior at Bishop Chatard High School in Indianapolis. “It was really hard for my family because it was so sudden.”

A child then, she saw how that devastating tragedy tested and strained some people’s relationship with God. She also felt the impact it had on her in other ways.

“For a while, it was harder for me to trust God because I had a lot of anxiety about what if someone else dies. Anytime my mom left the house, I was really stressed, thinking she’d get in a car accident or something like that.

“I had opportunities to connect with God, but it took me a while to get there. I really saw a change in my relationship when I was going into high school. I just learned more about how much God loves me. I opened my eyes to all the things that God has given me, and how much better my life is with him in it. I started to see the ways that God has put people into my life along the way.”

She mentions “the great example” of her mom, Stacey, saying, “I trust her, and I can talk to her. I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

She also glows when she talks about her aunt, Moira McCarthy, the youngest sister of her dad, Kevin.

“She reminds me a lot of my dad as a person, which is really comforting for me. She’s also a good mentor for me. She’s the one who got me to start praying the Surrender novena. That definitely helps with my anxiety—to let go and let Jesus take the wheel helps a lot.”

She also smiles when she talks about her grandparents, especially her grandfather, Kevin McCarthy.

“He has taught me the most about my faith. From day one, he’s always done his best to encourage me to pray and go to church and all that.”

And there’s also the influence of the family for which she has served as a nanny since her freshman year.

“Now they’re like a second family to me. And the dad has even told me that he’d be happy to act as a father figure for me if that’s what I want or need. He also knows he could never replace my dad. He just wants to be there for me if I want someone. And that’s been really helpful.”

All those influences—passed down through the generations—have led her to want to be there for others, to help her fellow high school students draw closer to Christ too.

‘Just finding ways to let God bring peace’

Mary Claire has pursued that hope as a peer minister during her years at Bishop Chatard.

“We’re like spiritual mentors for younger students,” says Mary Claire, who previously attended St. Luke the Evangelist School in Indianapolis and is a member of that parish. “Part of that is I’ve led freshman, sophomore and



Mary Claire McCarthy smiles in her interactions with visitors to Bishop Chatard High School in Indianapolis, the place where the senior has grown as a person, including in her relationship with God. (Submitted photo)

junior retreats. I like it because it helps me connect them to God. And at the same time, I’m connecting to God.”

She views her involvement as a combination of giving back and living her faith.

“I feel as a peer minister, it holds me accountable. I know if I’m teaching other people to grow closer to God or helping people to do that, I need to be strong in my faith, too. I can’t be skipping Mass or not praying. I need to have a relationship with God if I’m going to try to teach other people to do that as well.”

She put those thoughts into practice again this past fall as she helped lead a retreat for juniors. During that retreat, she shared her own faith journey, including her struggles with the death of her dad—and the love and faith of the people who have been there for her ever since.

“During the junior retreat, there was a lot of really deep conversations. We also had small groups. We just had a lot of spiritual breakthroughs with people. I also gave a talk. Talking about my journey and the struggles I’ve faced and also the times I’ve seen God in that. And how I found God at my lowest points and how God has shown me everything I have at my highest points.”

She now describes her relationship with God as “the best it’s ever been.”

“I’m just prioritizing God and trying my best to influence other people around me. I take my little sister to church on Sundays. I pray about every little thing. I used to think if you prayed over things that are really small or silly, you’re just wasting God’s time. But now I’m like, he doesn’t care, he just wants you to talk to him and trust him.

“Like if I’m going to bed at night, I’ll say a prayer so I don’t oversleep in the morning. That kind of thing. Just finding ways to let God bring peace.”

‘I felt like I made a difference’

She sees the difference that her 13 years of Catholic education have made in her faith journey, her life.

“It’s taught me a lot, and I’m really thankful for it. I don’t know if I’d be as strong in my faith if I didn’t have the experience I’ve had. Especially coming to high school where I was taught about the personal connection you can form with God.”

Her smile grows even wider as she talks about one of her latest efforts to lead younger students closer to God.

Looking for an opportunity to connect again with the members of the small group she led at the junior retreat, Mary Claire proposed a few options, but there were too many conflicts. She nervously offered one more possibility, saying, “Hear me out. We could all just go to Mass.”

“They were actually excited,” she recalls. “I talked to them on the retreat about the importance of going to Sunday Mass, and how I understand that when you’re in high school, it can be hard to go. Because a lot of them struggle about how hard it is to go to Sunday Mass.

“I just decided I need to take them to Mass. I’ll plan it and take them. The best way to encourage someone to do something is to do it with them.”

It’s a lesson she has learned from the people who love her, including her dad who she knows is still with her.

After Mass together, the youths shared brunch at a restaurant.

“It felt like I made a difference, like I actually had a little bit of an impact on them, and that I had done something right,” Mary Claire says, beaming. “I did something. I tried.” †

Catholic education must form the whole person—intellect, heart and spirit

Dear Friends in Christ,

Our 2026 theme for Catholic Schools Week, “Catholic Schools: United in Faith and Community,” makes clear that formation and education involve



Archbishop Charles C. Thompson

more than a solitary endeavor. Human beings are communal by nature. Faith is more effectively celebrated and enriched within the context of community rather than in isolation from one another. The community of believers is more than a mere collection of individuals. It is for this reason that documents of the Second Vatican Council referred to the Church as the Body of Christ and Pilgrim People of God.

In his recent Oct. 27, 2025, Apostolic Letter, “*Drawing New Maps of Hope*,” commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Conciliar Declaration, “*Gravissimum educationis*,” Pope Leo XIV writes, “Christian education is a collective endeavor: no one educates alone. The educational community is a ‘we’ where teachers, students, families, administrative and

service staff, pastors and civil society converge to generate life” (#3).

The Holy Father emphasized that Catholic education must form the whole person (intellect, heart, spirit) within communities, integrating faith into all subjects and serving the common good. He also expressed concern about addressing modern challenges of technology, especially within the context of Catholic social teaching. The collective effort of education, he noted, is a true “act of hope.”

Hope is one of the three theological virtues, along with faith and charity, upon which all other virtues are hinged. Having just completed the Jubilee Year of Hope, we are reminded of how essential hope is for individuals, families and all forms of community to grow and prosper. Given the various ideologies and exaggerated individualism that underlie the ever-increasing polarization of practically every aspect of society, Catholic education is poised to provide a path to hope made available by authentic respect for both faith and reason.

Thus, our Catholic Schools Week theme aptly acknowledges how necessary the unity of faith and community are for Catholic schools to thrive in forming hearts and educating minds. Ultimately, the

salvation of souls and development of good citizens is all about being Christ-centered. Permeating all aspects of the educational experience—the subjects, activities, clubs, athletics, social and nutritional concerns—is the true purpose of Catholic identity; namely, to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, our hope and salvation. This is why our Catholic schools exist. This is the reason for all the sacrifice and resources made by so many individuals, families, parishes and religious communities.

There is no better time than Catholic Schools Week to thank our pastors, administrators, staff, faculty, benefactors, volunteers, families and especially students, for being incredible witnesses to Catholic education throughout central and southern Indiana. The Archdiocese of Indianapolis is truly blessed with such wonderful ambassadors of Catholic identity both within and outside our schools.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ Charles C. Thompson

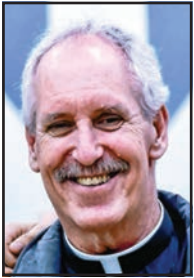
Archbishop Charles C. Thompson

Priests find life in passing on the faith in Catholic schools across the archdiocese

By Sean Gallagher

After leading St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Bloomington for nearly 15 years, Father Thomas Kovatch knows well where to go for a pick-me-up.

“If I’m having a bad day, all I have to do is walk into the school and visit the kids,” he said. “They lift me up like there’s no tomorrow. They are constantly joy-filled and excited to see me. They’re very uplifting. To go there and spend time in the school is one of my favorite things to do.”



Father Thomas Kovatch

Dozens of priests across central and southern Indiana who serve in elementary and high schools in the archdiocese could echo Father Kovatch’s sentiments.

But the benefits go both ways. The presence of priests in Catholic schools in the archdiocese enhances the formation and education of the more than 23,000 students enrolled in them.

In addition to Father Kovatch, two other priests who serve in schools in the archdiocese spoke with *The Criterion* about their experience of ministry in Catholic education.

As pastor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Richmond, Father Sengole Thomas Gnanaraj ministers in the faith community’s St. Elizabeth Ann Seton School and Seton Catholic Jr./Sr. High School.

Father Rick Nagel is pastor of Prince of Peace Parish in Madison and serves at its Pope John XXIII School and Father Michael Shawe Memorial Jr./Sr. High School.

Serving ‘the young Church’

Father Nagel began ministry at Prince of Peace Parish last July. He said that many strands in his life going back decades prepared him for leading a parish that has both an elementary school and high school.

He comes from a family of nine and has 34 nieces and nephews and 40 great-nieces and great-nephews. Before becoming an archdiocesan seminarian, he was a

high school teacher for six years and then served as the state director for the Future Farmers of America.

“I’ve been around kids my whole life,” Father Nagel said. “So, it’s kind of natural for me.”

And for the last 16 years, he’s ministered to many young adult Catholics at St. John the Evangelist Parish in Indianapolis and as chaplain of what is now Indiana University Indianapolis and Purdue University in Indianapolis.

“I absolutely love anything to do with faith formation and especially to do with the young Church,” Father Nagel said. “That’s a big part of my heart in the many years of my priesthood. It’s such a joy. It gives me life. It lifts me up.”

And he wants to return the favor for the students at Prince of Peace’s schools. He celebrates three school Masses each week, teaches theology classes at Shawe and visits classrooms when teachers ask him to come by, which he says happens regularly.

“Any requests that they have of me to come into the classroom to do something or an event, I’m there,” Father Nagel said. “I really try to be open and present to that.”

Last fall, Father Nagel also trained 62 students from the

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Father Rick Nagel, pastor of Prince of Peace Parish in Madison, teaches fourth-grade students at the faith community’s Pope John XXIII School how to be an altar server on Sept. 17, 2025, in St. Patrick Chapel, which is adjacent to the school. (Submitted photo)

Holy Spirit
school.holyspirit-indy.org




Little Flower
littleflowerparishschool.org



Our Lady of Lourdes
ollindy.org



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Catholic Schools
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St. Philip Neri
stphilipindy.org





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third through the 12th grade to be altar servers.

“It’s really beautiful,” he said. “We’ve had at least three families I know of that have come back to the Church through these kids being involved in serving.”

Father Nagel is grateful for all the life and joy he’s experienced in just one semester at Pope John XXIII and Shawe.

“I feel super blessed as a priest to be here,” he said. “God’s led me here. It’s so full of life, goodness and opportunities to help grow the faith within families within the life of the schools and broadly through the parish life.”

‘A ministry of being available’

Like other priests who lead parishes with schools, Father Kovatch makes sure to be present during the day when classes are in session at St. Charles.

He interacts a lot with students when preaching during the weekly school Mass.

“I ask them questions about the readings and various things,” Father Kovatch said. “They get excited. They’ll answer the questions. They’re really smart.”

But he knows the importance of spending time with the school community outside of regular hours, too.

“I go to their ball games,” Father Kovatch said. “There are a lot of Saturdays where I’m at the gym the whole day because there are games after games after games.”

While being the person ultimately responsible for the administration of his parish’s school, Father Kovatch sees his service as more focused on simply being present.

“It’s a ministry of being available,” he said. “A priest needs to be available to the school, to the kids and to the staff, just as I need to be available to my parishioners. It all comes out of the same mentality that your life is not your own. It’s given away.”

Giving himself to St. Charles Borromeo Parish and its school since coming to Bloomington in 2011 has allowed Father Kovatch to accompany students as they’ve grown from children to adults.

“I’ve had weddings of kids who were in the fourth grade when I came here,” he said. “I just baptized the child of one of those [couples] last weekend. And they come to Mass every weekend.”

Nurturing a ‘friendship with Christ’

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Richmond uses



Father Sengole Thomas Gnanaraj, pastor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Richmond, poses with first-grade students at the faith community’s elementary school. (Submitted photo)

all three of its campuses for its schools. Students in pre-kindergarten through the second grade go to classes on the St. Mary campus. Third through sixth graders are at the Holy Family campus. And Seton Catholic Jr./Sr. High School is on the St. Andrew campus.

Father Gnanaraj says that keeps him “on wheels every day.”

But he wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I love it 100%,” he said.

Father Gnanaraj especially likes preaching during the Masses he celebrates weekly on each of the three campuses.

“I consider that my teaching time,” he said. “To the little ones, you have to talk like a 100% entertainer to get their attention. Intermediate is another style. They are just in that cusp of understanding things in a better way.”

In preaching to the high school students, Father Gnanaraj wants to stretch their hearts and minds.

The Indian priest who has served in the archdiocese since 2011 has done graduate studies on the theology of

St. Thomas Aquinas and wants to pass on the wisdom of this great doctor of the Church to the Seton students.

“I make sure that I kind of translate at least some of the major teachings of Aquinas into their own language,” Father Gnanaraj said. “I talk about virtues. I talk about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the sacraments. I spend a lot of time talking about some of those basic building blocks that they should get a good grip on.”

All of his preaching and interaction with students in classrooms, high school retreats and other settings is geared toward helping them nurture a lifelong friendship with Christ.

“My goal is to help our young people to see Jesus our Lord, to see Christ as early as possible and begin to develop a relationship with him,” Father Gnanaraj said. “That is my goal.”

“If the students graduate from Seton with a pretty good understanding of what it means to have faith and what it means to have friendship with Christ, the success story begins right there.” †



The West Deanery Celebrates Catholic Schools Week

United in Faith and Community

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ST. CHRISTOPHER SCHOOL



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ST. MALACHY PARISH SCHOOL



ST. MONICA CATHOLIC SCHOOL



ST. SUSANNA CATHOLIC SCHOOL



Teacher crosses a bridge in life and finds a closer bond with Christ and her students

(This story is an edited version of the one that first appeared in The Criterion on April 4, 2025.)

By John Shaughnessy

FLOYD COUNTY—Driving from her home in southern Indiana to her work in Kentucky, Maggie Banet had the growing feeling that she needed to make a dramatic change in her life.

For years, she had been teaching at a public school that was ranked first academically in Kentucky, a school where she loved the students, their supportive families and her caring colleagues. It was a dream job in the eyes of many, but something was missing for Banet.

As she crossed the bridge spanning the two states, a short Bible verse often jumped into her thoughts, a verse from Colossians 3:23 that she summed up in this way, “Work for the Lord and not for men.”

“I wanted to please my principal and the administration,” she recalls. “The pressure from the top down to stay at the number one spot was extremely difficult. I would repeat that verse to myself to remember that, ultimately, I need to please God first.”

Amid those thoughts, she heard from a friend—a secretary at St. Mary-of-the-Knobs School in Floyd County—that there was an opening for a teacher.

“It was literally divine providence,” says Banet about that moment seven years ago. “I feel like the Lord just picked me up out of my toughest year of teaching. He opened the door at St. Mary’s. I came to interview, and they offered me the job. I literally cried tears of joy.”

Banet had another moment of joy when the fifth-grade teacher was chosen as the recipient of the 2025 Saint Theodora Excellence in Education Award, the highest honor given to an educator in the archdiocese.

‘We’re going to sing to the Lord because we love him’

The atmosphere that Banet strives to create for her students is one of joy, discovery and faith.

The emphasis on faith is especially evident, from the Christian songs that sometimes serve as background music during religion and even math classes, to the

various Bible verses that are printed on colorful pieces of paper and displayed prominently around the room.

“Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10).

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

“I cannot think of a more boring way to start teaching, especially during religion class, than to say, ‘OK, open your book to page seven,’ ” Banet says. “When you’re talking about God and how absolutely amazing he is, I just can’t bring myself to open a textbook.

“Sometimes we’ll start with a song or end with a song and the kids’ faces just light up. ‘Hey, we’re going to sing to the Lord because we love him.’ The goal is for them to have a relationship with Jesus.”

While she’s laser-focused on helping her students move closer to Jesus, Banet continues to strive to bring out the best in them academically.

“Maggie isn’t just enthusiastic, she is also effective,” says Tracy Jansen, principal of St. Mary-of-the-Knobs School. “Her students respond to the energy she brings daily. Her students consistently score in the top 15% of ILEARN math scores [administered by the Indiana Department of Education]. After assessments are administered, she eagerly analyzes the data and fills in learning gaps, ever focused on student learning and growth.”

Her high energy approach shows in the fact that she doesn’t have a chair for herself in her classroom. And instead of a desk, she has a large, rolling cart with shelves, where she keeps her computer and phone.

“I just walk around the room and put myself close to the kids that are struggling. I’m looking over their shoulder, figuring out who’s got it and who needs help.”

She also knows where to turn when she needs help.

‘I’m forever grateful’

“I have an ongoing conversation with God throughout the day. Just a quick ‘thank you.’ A quick ‘help me,’ ” she says. “And I truly feel he talks back.”

She also encourages her students to understand the importance of seeking God’s words and wisdom in their lives. She has them memorize one Scripture verse a week.

“I hope I give them a taste of how God can use



Maggie Banet is the recipient of the 2025 Saint Theodora Excellence in Education Award, the highest honor given to an educator in the archdiocese. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

Scripture in your life. You pull that verse from your memory bank when you’re feeling frightened or when you’re feeling discouraged or when you’re feeling joyful. If they know how to make that connection, I hope they will do that more as they get older.”

Receiving the Saint Theodora award thrilled Banet, yet not nearly as much as what she gets to do as a Catholic school educator.

“The Bible says to go and make disciples of all nations. If I’m going to share my faith like the Lord tells me to, what better way to do it—‘here’s a group of children, mold them, teach them,’ ” she says. “It’s such a gift to be given the opportunity to share my faith in such an easy, enjoyable manner.”

That gift ties into a Scripture verse that has become crucial to her. It’s a verse she’s had her students memorize, all in her hope that they will rely upon it throughout their lives: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Prv 3:5).

“I don’t know how people make it through life without faith,” she says. “It is just the driving force behind everything I do. In the end, all that matters is my faith and did I share it. When I have my ups and downs in life, I always remember that Jesus is the constant.

“He’s the one doing the work. He’s the one changing hearts. I’m just the tool he’s chosen to use. And for that, I’m forever grateful.” †



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Two archdiocesan schools receive first-ever recognition for excellence

(This story first appeared in The Criterion on Nov. 7, 2025.)

By John Shaughnessy

After learning the great news, the students and staff of Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Indianapolis cheered.

The community of St. Mary School in North Vernon was also thrilled to receive their exciting recognition.

Both archdiocesan schools were among the 11 public and private schools to be the first-ever recipients of the Indiana Blue Ribbon Schools designation, celebrating their “exceptional academic achievement and commitment to student success.”

In announcing the Blue Ribbon Schools on Oct. 28, 2025, Indiana Gov. Mike Braun said, “Through the unwavering collaboration of teachers, school leaders, parents and entire communities, Indiana students are achieving strong results. This inaugural cohort of Indiana Blue Ribbon Schools are a model for others across our state and nation of what is possible when we put students first.”

Brian Disney, superintendent of Catholic schools in the archdiocese, also praised St. Mary and Immaculate Heart of Mary schools for continuing the long tradition of archdiocesan schools being recognized for excellence.

“We are excited that Immaculate Heart of Mary and St. Mary schools are being recognized for their strong cultures and academic excellence,” Disney noted. “They are two examples of the outstanding Catholic schools throughout the archdiocese. Our Catholic schools are built on the foundation of Jesus Christ and strive to develop the full potential of every student in mind, body and spirit.”

Since 1982, archdiocesan schools have received 43 Blue Ribbon School designations from the U.S. Department of Education. And the principals of both Immaculate Heart of Mary and St. Mary schools were privately informed in the summer of 2025 that their schools had also earned that national honor, and it would be announced in September.

Instead, the U.S. Department of Education discontinued the Blue Ribbon program in September of 2025, placing the

future of such recognition in the hands of the individual states. And the Indiana Department of Education embraced the program as its own.

The 11 schools were celebrated during the Educational Excellence Awards gala in Indianapolis on Nov. 21, 2025.

“Receiving the Blue Ribbon is a really nice public recognition of the good work I get to see our teachers and our students do every day. And how involved our parent volunteer base is,” said Chris Kolakovich, principal of Immaculate Heart of Mary School.

The principal first shared the news with teachers.

“They cheered. I told them that this validates their commitment to excellence, their commitment to collaborating and supporting each other, and their working together to provide the best experience for the students. They were super excited.”

So were the students when Kolakovich shared the news with them in an announcement.

“The students were cheering. Some of them congratulated me. I said, ‘The congratulations belong to you as well. This award belongs to all of us.’ They have a part in it for the good work they do, in working hard every day for their teachers.”

St. Mary principal Meredith Inman offered similar praise for the staff, students and parents who comprise their school community.

“This was so special to be recognized,” she said. “We know we are a great school. We know our students are awesome and our staff is awesome. We know that our



Students at Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Indianapolis celebrate the school's selection as one of the schools to receive a first-ever Indiana Blue Ribbon School designation. (Photo courtesy of Alex Rodman)

parents and families are awesome.

“There’s just a feeling you get when you walk through our doors. It’s a family environment, and every parent knows the staff members here are willing to go above and beyond to help every student meet their fullest potential and to succeed. Everybody wants the best for the students and the families.”

That approach marks Catholic schools across the archdiocese. Kolakovich and Inman know that approach will continue at their schools.

“We have a really outstanding and high-achieving school, and I get to see it on a daily basis,” Kolakovich said.

Inman noted, “This place has been standing for over 100 years because of people who love St. Mary’s and love our parish and our school. There are very deep family roots and traditions here, and lots of generations have been through the halls of this school. It’s a very well-loved and respected school.” †



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RONCALLI.ORG



Principal of the Year Kent Clady has a ‘genuine desire to serve others’

By Natalie Hoefer

Kent Clady views his approach and accomplishments as principal of Our Lady of the Greenwood School (OLG) in Greenwood as nothing special.

“I just do what I do because it needs to be done,” he told *The Criterion*.



Kent Clady

But his fellow archdiocesan Catholic principals view him differently.

“Mr. Clady leads with both humility and conviction,” observed Amy Wilson, principal of St. Roch School in Indianapolis. “Kent’s approachable demeanor, tireless work ethic and genuine care for all those he encounters have earned him immense respect

from colleagues and profound love from his school community.”

She wrote her comments in a letter nominating Clady for the archdiocese’s Principal of the Year Award.

Wilson’s peer at Holy Name of Jesus School in Beech Grove agreed.

“I can think of no one more deserving of this recognition,” wrote Amy Wright, the school’s principal. “Kent exemplifies the qualities we hope to see in every Catholic school leader—faith-filled, compassionate, visionary and deeply devoted to the mission of Catholic education.”

These and glowing comments from other Catholic school leaders in central and southern Indiana led to Clady’s selection by the archdiocesan Office of Catholic Schools as Principal of the Year.

Praying together ‘is the greatest gift’

Clady began his academic career 39 years ago. He taught for 13 years then worked as a principal for three years, with both roles at public schools.

“I’m a convert to the faith,” said Clady. “So, when [he and his wife] were raising our three boys, it became evident that we wanted them to go to Catholic schools.”

Then something became more evident to him.

“I decided I always wanted to provide for students in school what I wanted my own kids to have, and now my own grandkids,” said Clady, whose granddaughter attends fourth grade at OLG. “I decided I wouldn’t want families to send their kids to a school I wouldn’t want to send my own kids to.”

So, 23 years ago, he was hired as principal of OLG. There, he has been able to do what he could not do in the public schools—pray and worship at Mass.

Clady starts each day with his own personal devotion time. “Then every morning, we have morning prayer at 8:05, ... and we have three Masses a week” for different grade groupings, he said. “That’s important to me to experience that with them.

“I feel it’s important for me to be an example for prayer and faith. ... The greatest gift we can have is to pray together.”

“Under Kent’s leadership, Our Lady of the Greenwood Catholic School has flourished spiritually and academically,” Wright wrote in her letter of recommendation.

During Clady’s time as principal, OLG received national recognition as a Blue Ribbon School of Excellence in 2010.

He attributes the accolades to his “amazing staff.”

“One of the things that says the most about our school as a whole is the high retention rate of our staff,” said Clady.

He noted that six personnel are OLG graduates, and several other members are graduates of Roncalli High School, which Indianapolis South

Deanery elementary schools—including OLG—feed into.

“One teacher spent her whole 40-year career here,” said Clady. “That says a lot when the staff is so invested and teachers and families stick around.”

‘He puts everyone else first’

In an interview with *The Criterion*, Wright recalled Clady being assigned as her mentor when she became principal of Holy Name School seven years ago.

“He always brought everything back to how we treat people,” she said. “Conversations [with him] are always rooted in love and our faith and the reason we’re here every day—academics are important, but the love and relationships you have with the people in your building are the most important thing. ... That’s why he does what he does—those conversations that help people grow in their faith. That’s his true passion.”

Wright admires Clady’s “servant leadership.”

“Everything he says and does just oozes that love and compassion he has for the students and teachers in his building.”

That compassion includes finding the best solution for his students—even if that means finding another school that better suits a particular child’s needs.

“On numerous occasions, he has reached out to me regarding students needing a new beginning—young people he recognized as having untapped potential,” wrote the St. Roch principal.

“Each student he has referred to us has thrived, a testament to his deep understanding of children and his unwavering belief in their capacity for growth and renewal.”

‘One of my greatest accomplishments’

Clady recently announced that he will retire at the end of this school year.

Reflecting on his career at OLG, he is struck by some “amazing transitions.”

When he became principal 23 years ago, the school served children from both Our Lady of the Greenwood Parish and SS. Francis and Clare of Assisi Parish, also in Greenwood.

See CLADY, page 16B



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Archbishop shares a special prayer with seniors— and a perspective to remember

By John Shaughnessy

Sometimes a different perspective opens our eyes to the gifts we have in life and the other people who share them.

As one of 19 seniors at Seton Catholic High School in Richmond, Makayla Minor had that awakening moment before the annual Mass that Archbishop Charles C. Thompson celebrates for the Catholic high school seniors from across the archdiocese.

As St. Malachy Church in Brownsburg filled up with more than 1,000 students from 11 different high schools on Dec. 10, 2025, Makayla marveled at the scene.

“I think it’s so powerful,” said Makayla, 18, a member of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Richmond.

“We’re such a small school, and our graduating class is so small, so being in a church with all these people, it’s definitely very awesome and very amazing.

“Honestly, just looking around here, I’m surprised that so many people in this state also have the same faith.”

During his homily, Archbishop Thompson strived to give the Catholic high school seniors from Clarksville, Indianapolis, Madison, Oldenburg and Richmond a different perspective, too—one that opens their eyes to the gifts they have that the world needs *and* the gifts they are in the eyes of God.

At the beginning of his homily, the archbishop shared a simple prayer of 11 words that he hoped the seniors would take to heart—the Surrender Prayer that notes, “O Jesus, I surrender myself to you, take care of everything.”

That prayer became a constant through his homily as the archbishop involved the seniors after telling them he would shout the “O Jesus” part, followed by the young men roaring “I surrender myself to you,” and the young women belting out, “Take care of everything.”

Amid the repeated calls for connectedness in offering that prayer together, the archbishop shared several key points with the seniors of Bishop Chatard, Brebeuf Jesuit, Cardinal Ritter, Cathedral, Father Michael Shawe Memorial, Father Thomas Scecina Memorial, Oldenburg Academy of the Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Providence, Providence Cristo Rey, Roncalli and Seton Catholic.

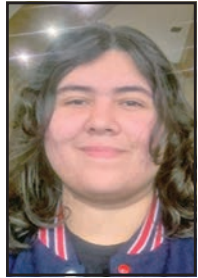
—**Be a force for peace and unity**

“We have to cultivate our culture because if we don’t cultivate the culture, the culture cultivates us,” Archbishop Thompson told the seniors. “It cultivates and affects the way we think. We have to be aware of that. Pope Leo talks a lot about peace and unity. How do we get there? We get there by us cultivating the culture.”

—**Recognize the unique connection you and Pope Leo XIV have**

“You have something that no other generation in our country has experienced: A pope that speaks your language,” the archbishop noted. “Other popes have spoken English, but this is his first language. That’s something unique. A pope that speaks your language firsthand and knows your culture.”

Archbishop Thompson also shared an insight with the



Makayla Minor

seniors that showed their importance to Pope Leo.

For the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis in November 2025, Pope Leo was initially asked to share 15 minutes in conversation with the youths who attended the event. Instead, the pope committed to 45 minutes, which actually extended to nearly an hour during the event.

“Time doesn’t mean as much to him as you mean to him,” the archbishop said.

—**Write your story—don’t let AI do it**

“One thing the pope talks a lot about is AI [artificial intelligence],” Archbishop Thompson said. “He’s concerned at how AI is having a cultural effect on us. And how it can have a devastating effect, if we’re not careful. AI can do some great things, but AI can’t heal. AI can’t discern. AI doesn’t have the human ability to think and act.

“One of the things I thought was very powerful, he said, ‘We can’t let AI write our narrative.’ AI shouldn’t be writing our personal stories. We have to claim our own identity. And our identity is created in the image of God. Our identity is God-given. We don’t create our identity. We discern it, and we receive it, and we embrace it. We have to make sure we use AI for our benefit and not let AI control us.”

—**Be thankful**

“You did a lot of work, of course. But you got here with a lot of people,” the archbishop reminded the seniors. “Parents, grandparents, teachers in grade school and high school, administrators, counselors, all the different people who walked with you.”

—**Remember the one constant you have in life**

“Some of your classmates, after you graduate, you’ll never see,” the archbishop said. “You’ll go on to make other friends. Some will come and go. The one constant in our lives is Jesus Christ. He’s with us wherever we go. But we also have to cultivate a relationship with God.

“It’s not enough to know about Jesus. The demons in the Scriptures knew about Jesus. The Scripture people who hated Jesus knew about Jesus. We have to have a personal encounter with him. If we want true peace, if we want true meaning, if we want a true sense of belonging, it begins first in a relationship with him.”

—**‘Don’t forget your souls’**

“As you look forward to your goals, don’t take for granted the journey, the encounters along the way,” Archbishop Thompson told the seniors. “The late Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that our goal as Christians is not to possess the truth but to allow the truth to possess us. He reminds us that truth is a person, Jesus Christ.

“Wherever you go, cultivate that relationship—with prayer, with Scripture, through sacrament, through service to the Gospel. Don’t forget your souls. Don’t forget what ultimately matters. Our souls were made for eternal life.”

—**‘It was such a beautiful experience’**

The opportunity to share the Mass with seniors across the archdiocese left its impact on Jamison Williams, one of 36 seniors from Father Michael Shawe Memorial Jr./Sr. High School in Madison.



Archbishop Charles C. Thompson shares a moment of joy with students from Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School in Indianapolis following the Mass he celebrated for high school seniors from across the archdiocese on Dec. 10, 2025, at St. Malachy Church in Brownsburg. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

“It’s uplifting to see that there are other people from these schools who have the same faith and the same experience as us,” said Jamison, a member of Prince of Peace Parish in Madison. “It’s very powerful.”

Cardinal Ritter senior Ashley Escamilla had the same reaction.

“It was such a beautiful experience,” said Ashley, a member of St. Gabriel the Archangel Parish in Indianapolis. “As Catholic schools, we usually don’t have much time to be united all as one. But being able to have Mass here today was truly special. You got to see all the other seniors who are going to be graduating.”

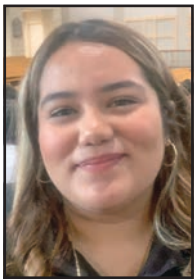
She had similar praise for Archbishop Thompson’s homily.

“I truly loved his message. His reminder to us all that we can’t let AI write our narrative was truly amazing. In the end, that is the truth. We are made in the image and likeness of God, and God has already written our story for us.

“Archbishop Thompson also reminded us that with Jesus we are able to do everything. So yes, we have goals in life, but we should always be thankful and grateful for all the people who come within our path and that make our story amazing.” †



Jamison Williams



Ashley Escamilla

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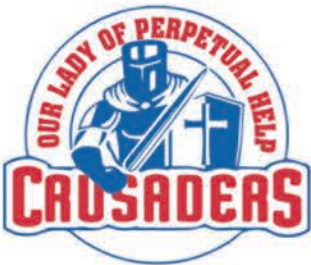
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Special needs programs at Roncalli build ‘Christian men and women with character’

By Natalie Hoefer

When Elle Howe started as a freshman at Roncalli High School in the fall of 2022, she was quiet, shy and very anxious.

“I was so nervous, I said to my mom, ‘What if I just drop out of high school?’ And she said, ‘I don’t think we’re going to do that,’” says Elle, now a senior at the archdiocese’s Indianapolis South Deanery high school.

Michelle Roberts recalls the timid person Elle was back then.



Michelle Roberts

“But now she is just full of confidence,” says Roncalli’s director of special services.

That change came about through Elle’s efforts and her four-year participation in the school’s STARS program that Roberts oversees.

“It’s a resource program for those with a range of learning challenges, from learning disabilities to autism to ADHD [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder],” Roberts explains.

She also spearheads Roncalli’s Life Academy for those with intellectual disabilities.

Both programs adhere to the philosophy stated on the special services page of the school’s website: “All students can succeed when provided with the right atmosphere to meet their needs. It is our job ... to provide an atmosphere that will assist students to reach their potential and realize their God-given talents.”

‘Recognize they’re a whole person’

Roncalli launched the resource program STARS—a name, not an acronym—in 1994.

“It can be different for every student,” Roberts explains.

Students can enroll in a daily resource class with several teachers on hand for help.

“We work on their [individualized] service plan goals—maybe to develop better study habits as evidenced by test scores, or to be better organized, or to be re-taught certain content material,” she says.

“We also have kids who ... don’t qualify for a service plan but still need some help. We’re able to address those needs and move them out in about a year.”

The school also offers testing accommodations separate from the resource class.

“Perhaps a student needs extra time to take a test or have a reader or have a different location so they can focus and show a teacher what they know,” says Roberts, noting English-learning students often use this option.

STARS students receive help connecting with one of Roncalli’s many clubs, especially when developing social skills is part of their individualized plan. The school’s guidance counselors also help them determine their post-graduation plan and steps to accomplish it.

The end goal of the program is far greater than “making sure a kid gets an A on a test,” says Roberts.

“One of the biggest things we want to tackle is that they understand themselves and can advocate for themselves and be successful here.

“A big part of what we do as a whole school is work to develop kids to recognize ‘I have gifts God has given me.’ Rather than be embarrassed that ‘I have dyslexia,’ we want them to realize, ‘This is who God made me. I have dyslexia, but I’m a great basketball player.’ We want them to recognize they’re a whole person, that their needs are all a part of their whole, and help them determine what they’re good at, what they’re not, and what they’re good at that they’re surprised by.”

Those same concepts apply to Roncalli’s Life Academy program for those with intellectual disabilities.

Life Academy: ‘A blended program’

Roncalli had already welcomed a few students with intellectual disabilities before creating the Life Academy program in 2009.

Roberts describes it as “a blended program of some academic classes plus life skills and independent skills.”

Students work one on one with aids, and the school partners with local businesses to help them develop vocational skills.

“A big part of [Life Academy] is connecting them with the Roncalli community so they can fully participate,” says Roberts. “For instance, we have a senior who loves basketball. Life Academy coordinators met with the coach and some peers to figure out how he could have a real role with the team. He is now a basketball manager for some home games.”

Life Academy students are also paired with peers through Roncalli’s Royal Buddies club.

“They have peer buddies in class and during lunch,” says Roberts. “It’s a way for [Life Academy students] to build multiple friendships rather than focus on one.

“We also look at class rosters or ask teachers who might be a natural at lending a hand to a Life Academy kid in a class. We tap into who is right there rather than put someone next to [a Life Academy student], because that’s not what happens with everyone else in class. ... We really try to build as much independence for them as possible.”

Life Academy works to find clubs that match a student’s interests. The program is also connected with Special Olympics and that organization’s Unified Sports athletics teams that include those with and without intellectual disabilities.

Life Academy has been a great success, says Roberts. “A lot of Life Academy alumni have gone on to have a college experience,” she says.

Others find meaningful employment.

“One alum is on the football coaching staff at Franklin College [in Franklin],” says Roberts. “And Roncalli hired an alum as an assistant coach for the Unified [Sports] track team. She also aids at a [Roncalli] feeder grade school and works at a day school she did a work study with.

“Most students that graduate are gainfully employed, have successful lives and stay connected to the community through connections we helped them develop when they were here.”

Building ‘Christian men and women with character’

Roberts sees the overall success of the STARS and Life Academy programs. But the testimonies of students drive home the positive impact the programs have on a personal level.

“I like how I can have help on things from multiple teachers” present during her STARS class period, says Elle. “They show me how I could maybe do something different that I’m struggling with.



Roncalli senior and Life Academy student Suri Diaz works on a project as part of a work study experience at Catholic Concepts in Indianapolis. (Submitted photo)

“I made new friends in the resource period and [by] putting myself out there in clubs.”

Elle says the STARS program “made me realize how strong a person I am deep down and gave me the confidence to push myself. It helped me realize I’m not a quiet person like I was when I started [at Roncalli] and that God made me an extrovert.”

And the senior had some exciting news to share about her future plans. She learned she was accepted into the Empire Beauty School’s program for cosmetology on Indianapolis’ south side.

Senior Suri Diaz is just as enthusiastic about her Roncalli experience through the Life Academy.

The school is “amazing,” she says. “I like it. I like the teachers. I like making new friends.”

Suri says she “learned to be a leader at Roncalli,” a fact she backs up with a long list of sports and club activities, including serving on the student council.

She says her time at Roncalli has taught her to be “holy, kind, welcoming and serving to others,” like the school’s namesake Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli—St. John XXIII.

Roberts says the two programs are successful because of the philosophy behind them.

“Our philosophy is not about accommodating them,” she says. “It’s about, ‘This is who God made them to be. Let’s get them as far as we can and let them go.’

“We want kids to be successful, and kids are successful when we hold them accountable. Accountability builds them as Christian men and women with character.”

(For more information on Roncalli High Schools STARS and Life Academy programs, go to roncalli.org/academics/stars or contact Michelle Roberts at mroberts@roncalli.org or 317-787-8277.) †

A senior’s plan to lead others closer to Christ touches his own life

By John Shaughnessy

Liam Matta wanted to get to know people at his high school better.

He also wanted to explore his faith and his relationship with God on a deeper level—and invite his fellow students to do the same.

So, in his sophomore year at Our Lady of Providence High School in Clarksville, Liam did something unusual. He started a faith-discussion group, hoping that other people would be drawn to the opportunity to talk about their spiritual life—one teenager to another.

“I feel it’s a good mission,” Liam says.

“As Catholics, we’re called to preach the Gospel to everybody. And I think it’s a really great opportunity to do it in a way that’s more casual and conversational—that people don’t feel they’re being talked at. We’re all just sitting around and sharing our experiences. I thought it would also be a good opportunity for me to share about my faith and get to know other people.”

Now a senior, Liam feels blessed that his effort has continued to have an impact on him and others—“whether they’re practicing the

faith, whether they’re Catholic or not.”

“I get to learn from so many other students, especially if they have a different perspective,” Liam says. “I’ve had conversations with people who don’t necessarily believe. We just talk about what they might believe about heaven or God. It also forces me to know what I believe really well, when people have questions. It gives me opportunities to look into different things about our faith.

And to be supportive of one another because everyone is in a different place.”



Liam Matta



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Scecina High School’s Catholic identity is exemplified in its cultural diversity

By Sean Gallagher

Father Thomas Scecina Memorial High School on the east side of Indianapolis has about 450 students and 70 faculty and staff members.

While a decent-sized school, it’s still just a small part of the Church in central and southern Indiana.

But a closer look at the Scecina community shows it to be like a beautiful icon of the universal Church.

Many of its students are the children of parents born in numerous countries around the world who have migrated to the U.S. This academic year, Scecina also has 29 international students from 12 countries, including China, Vietnam, Thailand, Brazil, Germany, Spain and Italy.

Its teachers also hail from countries around the world such as the Philippines, India and the Dominican Republic.

“What a gift it is to have such a rich diversity of cultures, backgrounds and perspectives among the student body and staff,” said Scecina principal Peg Dispenzieri. “Diversity helps students and staff develop and use real-world skills such as communicating across cultures, navigating differences respectfully and working with others whose life experiences are very different.”

‘It is a huge gift’

Scecina junior Miguelangel Flores came to the high school from Holy Spirit School in Indianapolis. There were many students there who were Hispanic like himself. He was born in the U.S. to parents who came to Indianapolis from the Mexican state of Jalisco. So, coming to Scecina with students and teachers from so many races and ethnicities was an eye-opener for him.

But it is a difference that he has welcomed.

“It was really interesting getting to know all these new people from different ethnic backgrounds. You learn their culture, the way that they interact,” Miguelangel said. “I’ve made a lot of friends that come from various ethnic backgrounds. It’s really cool that you get to come here and experience that.”

Onoseh Akpeokhai, a member of St. Lawrence Parish in Indianapolis, was born in the U.S. to parents who immigrated here from Nigeria in west Africa.

She appreciates how Scecina is more culturally diverse than the public elementary and middle schools she previously attended.

“I take every opportunity as a learning moment,” Onoseh said. “I can learn from a single person I meet from an Asian country or any Hispanic person that I’ve met. It’s interesting. I like it.”

John Hegarty, director of international programs at Scecina, made efforts to increase the number of its students from around the world when he served as its principal from 2011-17.

That growth took a downturn during the COVID pandemic, but it’s now back to its pre-pandemic numbers.

“It is a huge gift,” said Hegarty, who over the years has hosted dozens of international students in his home. “Our students get the opportunity to see the United States through the eyes of someone who’s not from the United States, the good and the bad. I think that’s huge.”

Otto Hernandez, a Spanish teacher at Scecina who is from the Dominican Republic, says the benefits of diversity at the school enrich all of its students.

“International students can have a stereotype of what America is,” said Hernandez, who also has hosted many international students. “Then, when they come over here, they face the reality. This is not what they watch on the news or see in the movies. This is a whole different thing.

“And it’s the same for our kids [from the U.S.]. The majority of these kids have never been out of the United States. These international students give them the chance to experience the culture of all those countries right here.”



Otto Hernandez, left, John Hegarty, Onoseh Akpeokhai and Miguelangel Flores pose on Dec. 11, 2025, in the lobby of Father Thomas Scecina Memorial High School in Indianapolis. Hernandez is a teacher in the school. Hegarty is its director of international programs. Onoseh and Miguelangel are both juniors at Scecina. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)

‘We’re all children of God at the end of it all’

Dispenzieri emphasized that the broad array of cultures and races represented at Scecina is an expression of the Catholic belief in the dignity of all people as created in the image and likeness of God that stands at the heart of the school’s Catholic identity.

“Diversity allows students to encounter that truth firsthand—seeing God’s image expressed in many cultures, languages and backgrounds,” she said. “A diverse school embodies the very meaning of the word ‘catholic,’ which means ‘universal.’ ”

Onoseh and Miguelangel agreed.

“We all come together for one common goal,” said Miguelangel. “We’re all trying to get closer to God.”

“We’re all made in the image of God, no matter if we come from the eastern part of the world or the northern part of the world,” Onoseh said. “We’re all children of God at the end of it all.”

Hernandez hopes that students at Scecina learn from this belief in the dignity of all people, and how they in the U.S. have deep connections with other peoples around the world.

“This is a great country, one of the greatest countries ever,” he said. “We call it the country of freedom. But we still need one another. The United States needs the help of other countries, help from other peoples.

“It doesn’t matter if someone comes from Peru, El Salvador, Ecuador—we’re all the same.”

Hegarty said that Scecina’s racial and ethnic diversity “magnifies the fact that we’re all created in the image of God.”

“When you can see that on a daily basis that this image is not exactly the same, but it is still the image of God, I think that in itself creates respect.”

And he’s seen this Catholic belief put into action in the school where students rub shoulders with so many peers who are so different from them at an age when fitting in is often highly valued.

“I never see any disrespect,” Hegarty said. “I never hear any of the international kids say they’re being bullied or they’re being made fun of because of their accent.”

‘It’s just preparing you even more for the outside world’

While racial and ethnic diversity are valued at Scecina, it can be a challenge at times, especially for its international students, something that Dispenzieri says the school community helps them overcome.

“We have a very specific onboarding process for the students who join us from different countries,” she said. “We have specialized classes for those whose English is not yet fluent, then the rest of the student body takes if from there, welcoming new students through class discussions, athletics and extracurriculars.

“Sharing in introducing someone new to our community creates a sense of shared identity without requiring everyone to be the same.”

Onoseh and Miguelangel both remarked how their experience of being fellow students alongside peers from so many countries and cultural backgrounds is preparing them well for life as an adult in a very diverse world.

“Going through what you go through here, seeing everybody having their own opinion, their own stand on certain circumstances, it’s just preparing you even more for the outside world,” Onoseh said.

“The diversity here and getting to interact with so many different people from so many different backgrounds really helps to give you an idea of the world that we’re going into,” Miguelangel said. “It really helps you to learn how to interact, not just with people from specific cultures but people in general.”

(For more information about Father Thomas Scecina Memorial High School in Indianapolis, visit www.scecina.org.) †

SENIOR

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really impactful. But I’ve also learned a lot academically. And I’ve become friends with kids from different grades. I haven’t always had that.”

Providence has also given him opportunities to explore different interests, including being involved in the speech team, joining the school’s pro-life club and working behind the scenes in theater productions.

“Especially with the theater shows,

even though I’m not involved with acting, just running the sound or running the lights you become very involved with the people who are super passionate about what they are doing,” says Liam, a member of St. Martin of Tours Parish in Louisville, Ky. “We all go out to eat before the shows. Through that way, I’ve become a lot closer to some of my friends who I don’t have classes with.”

He also says he has become closer to God by attending Mass before school on Thursdays and participating in eucharistic adoration and the sacrament of penance.

“You’re not required to take advantage of those opportunities, but having them there and being able to invite other people to go with you really allows you and your friends to experience the faith together.”

That focus on faith is helping him through some of the uncertain elements of his senior year.

“I’m working on trust in God, especially as I’m super unsure about where I’ll even be living in a few months once I graduate, where I’ll be going to school, what I’ll be studying,” he says. “I’m just having a lot of confidence that

God has a plan and that it will be good.”

He is also certain that his parents’ plan to have him attend Providence has given him the foundation he will need for the future.

“More than anything, it’s been the connections you form with other people,” he says. “From a spiritual perspective, that can really strengthen your faith. It’s been a lot of meeting really great people who otherwise I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to know. And that’s really allowed me to draw closer to God and inspect and strengthen my faith further.” †

A defining moment in adoration leads to a commitment to Catholic education

By John Shaughnessy

In his journey to helping advocate for all the Catholic schools and other non-public schools in Indiana, James McNeany traces his path back to a moment of doubt, when he listened to the one voice he couldn't ignore.

The defining moment came during a spiritual retreat 18 years ago when McNeany listened for God's guidance as he prayed during eucharistic adoration.

"I feel God speaks to me in adoration every time I'm there, but sometimes it's *really* loud. And this was the loudest he's ever spoken to me," he recalls with a smile.

At the time, McNeany was in his sixth year of teaching and coaching in a public school in the northern Indiana community of Logansport—a time when there was an opening for a principal at the nearby Catholic school of All Saints Parish in the Lafayette Diocese, where he served as a volunteer youth minister.

McNeany had already applied and interviewed for the principal job, before withdrawing his name. Still, it stayed in his mind, especially at a point in the retreat when everyone was asked to meditate on the Gospel story in which Christ calls Peter to walk on water.

"Peter does, then he realizes what he's doing, gets scared and falters," McNeany notes. "Jesus has to catch him and says, 'Oh ye of little faith, why did you doubt?' " (Mt 14:31)

That theme hit home to McNeany, leading him to hear God speaking to him in adoration: "What are your doubts? Why are you doubting me? I have this plan for you. Just say yes, and you'll be fine. I've got you."

McNeany contacted All Saints—and became its principal for the next six years.

He smiles again and says, "I realized God was right. I fell in love with Catholic education in so many ways. I just love what it provides for our students, and the faith foundation it provides. I love the family connection. You can take what's happening in the home and build that up in so many ways at a Catholic school. It not only builds the kids up, it builds the families up in a lot of ways, too."

A success story and a great gift

As McNeany shares that story and that belief, 18 years have passed, including the 12 years he served as the principal of Guerin Catholic High School in Noblesville, Ind., in the Lafayette Diocese.

For the past seven months, he has been settling into his position as the executive director of the Indiana Non-Public Education Association (INPEA). The association advocates on behalf of the state's 400 non-public schools, according to its website, including the 69 Catholic schools in the archdiocese.

"I really just had an appreciation for the support INPEA gave to leaders of Catholic schools," McNeany says about his time as the principal of All Saints and Guerin.

"I wholeheartedly believe, too, that in order for Catholic schools to thrive in Indiana, this association is necessary.

"Someone needs to be here to make sure that each school has the ability and the freedom to boldly proclaim their mission and the freedom to carry it out. For that to happen, this association needs to be there to liaison from Catholic schools to our state. It's work I'm passionate about. We're just trying to make sure that Indiana provides rich soil for Catholic schools to continue to grow and thrive."

One of the greatest success stories of INPEA is its involvement in working with Indiana's legislature to make sure that school choice and the state's voucher program are extended to every Hoosier family without exception—a reality that will start in the 2026-27 school year.

"It's a gift in so many ways," McNeany says. "For so many families, Catholic education may not be an option without it. So, it's a tremendous tool to make Catholic education affordable to Hoosier families, which is incredibly important.

"It also does another thing. I mentioned before about providing that rich soil, that environment where Catholic schools can remain viable. Choice allows Catholic families to find environments where the values that are taught in school are the values that are taught at home.

"When parents have the opportunity to make that choice—and finances can be less a part of that decision—then they're really free to find the environment that fits for them. I'm very grateful we have that here in Indiana."

The beauty of God's plans

McNeany has also seen the impact of a Catholic education from his family's perspective. He and his wife of 27 years, Jennifer, have made Catholic education a foundation for the lives of their five children, who range in age from 24 to 12.

"It's been nothing short of a gift and a blessing," McNeany says. "Parenting is difficult, and anyone who tells you it's not, I'm not sure they're fully invested in it. It takes more than just two people dedicated to raising a child. You want them in an environment that mirrors what's happening at home.



The members of the McNeany family—Jennifer, left, Noah, Colin, Evan, Adam, Mary and James—know the benefits of a Catholic education. (Submitted photo)

"I've always been one who's inspired by other faithful men and women I've encountered, and I want that for my kids, too. I want them to be around faithful men and women who they see as smart and motivating but also faithful. That's what I want for them in their teachers and school leaders. So, it's been a gift to have them in Catholic schools."

He views the gift of a Catholic education from another perspective, too.

"Catholic education is this beautiful intersection of learning about God and learning about the world he created at the same time," he says.

McNeany views mathematics as "not just numbers that make sense, but the language that God wrote the world with." He sees science through the lens of "the beauty of God's creation and the respect for that." He considers the history of the world and the United States as "woven into God's bigger history which is God's plan for salvation."

He also marvels at God's plan for him.

"I wholeheartedly believe I'm where God wants me to be. There's a lot of good work that needs to be done to support our Catholic schools and our Catholic school leaders and educators throughout our state.

"I see the importance of that every single day in the work our team does in helping to advance school choice in Indiana and the mission of our Catholic schools."

He also still relies on hearing God's voice to guide him.

"I pray that God shows me the meaning of my work and gives me the courage to undertake it. That's been my daily prayer." †

CLADY

continued from page 8B

"We had over 500 kids," Clady said. "It became evident that SS. Francis and Clare needed their own school."

The new school opened in 2006, and "we helped families navigate what would be the best place for them and

their children," he said.

Meanwhile, the Hispanic population in the area also grew.

As Our Lady of the Greenwood Parish added bilingual options for Mass and the sacraments, "a large number of Hispanic families started sending kids to the school," said Clady. "Thirty-five percent of our students are now Hispanic bilingual speakers."

Speakers of eight other languages are also enrolled at the school, he added.

"Our diversity now is one of the best legacies I helped foster, so now it's just who we are," said Clady. "Allowing our families and kids to be able to share what's alike and what's different and to be a part of each other's lives—that's, I feel, one of my greatest accomplishments, that we made that work and made it feel safe and comfortable for families to make a transition to a different school."

In retirement, Clady will still work with children. Well, just one, actually.

"Our grandson just turned 6 months, so I'll take turns with caregiving to help his parents," he said.

Retiring after being named Principal of the Year could be seen as leaving on top. But that is not Clady's character.

"It's a great honor, but also humbling, because I work with an amazing group of principals who answer the call, and I'm proud to be part of that group." †

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Contact IQE at (317) 951-8781 with any questions.

Tax Credit Examples

This chart illustrates the potential tax savings for a donation to the Institute for Quality Education Scholarship Granting Organization.

Contribution of \$5,000	Federal Tax Brackets			
	25%	28%	33%	35%
Indiana Tax Savings (50%)	\$2,500	\$2,500	\$2,500	\$2,500
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Total State & Federal Tax Savings	\$3,125	\$3,200	\$3,325	\$3,375
True Cost of Donation	\$1,875	\$1,800	\$1,675	\$1,625

(1) The federal tax savings is generally equal to the net federal deduction multiplied by the donor’s federal tax rate. The net federal deduction is equal to the donation amount less the state tax credit as state income taxes are deductible as itemized deductions for federal income tax purposes. Actual federal tax savings will vary based on your individual income tax status. Please consult your tax advisor.



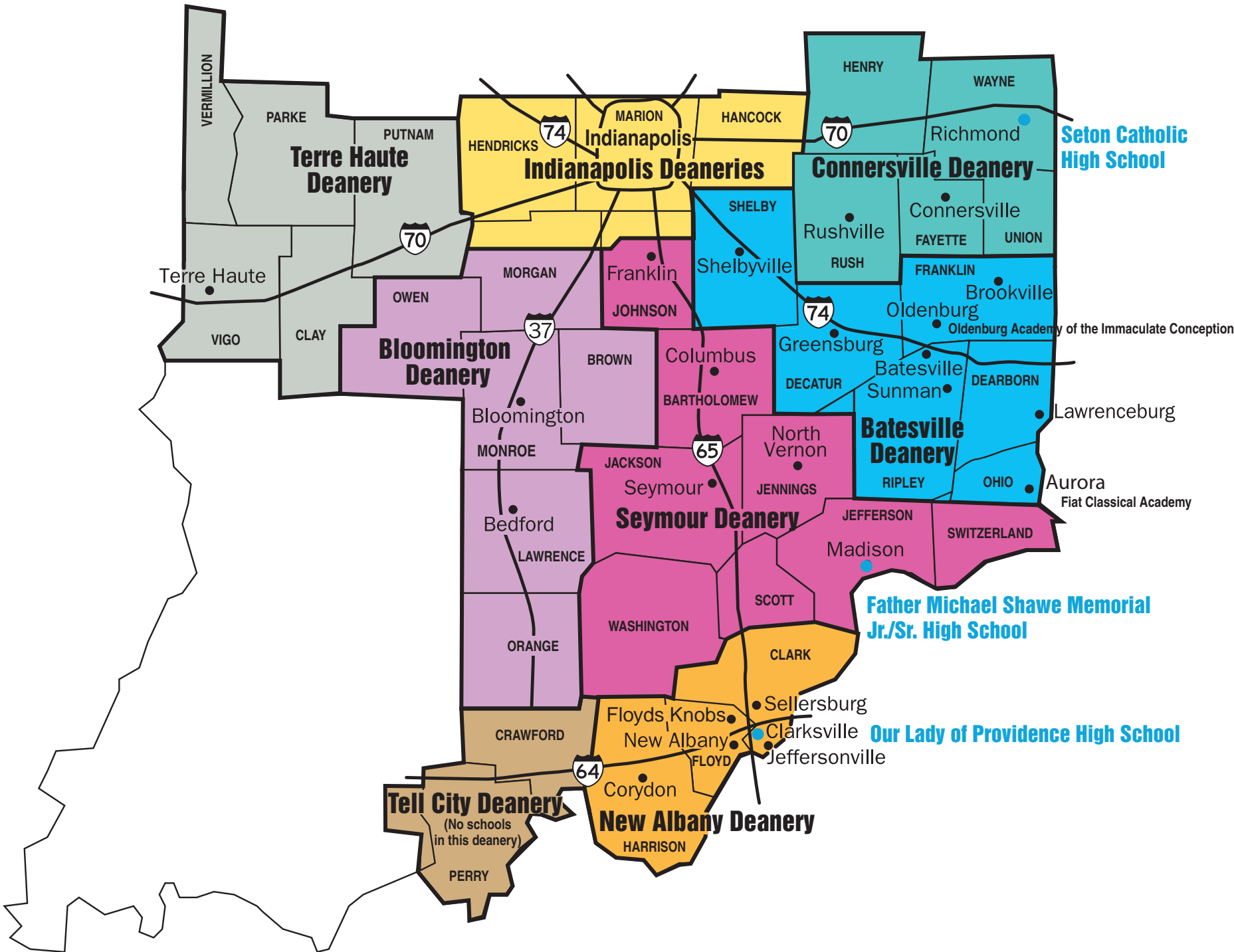
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Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis



DEANERY SCHOOLS

Batesville Deanery

- Batesville**
St. Louis School (PK–8)
17 St. Louis Place
Batesville, IN 47006
812-934-3310
- Brookville**
St. Michael School (PK–8)
275 High St.
Brookville, IN 47012
765-647-4961
- Greensburg**
St. Mary School (PK–8)
1331 E. Hunter Robbins Way
Greensburg, IN 47240
812-663-2804
- Lawrenceburg**
St. Lawrence School (K–8)
524 Walnut St.
Lawrenceburg, IN 47025
812-537-3690
- Ripley County**
St. Nicholas School (PK–8)
6459 E. St. Nicholas Drive
Sunman, IN 47041
812-623-2348
- Shelbyville**
St. Joseph School (PK–5)
127 E. Broadway
Shelbyville, IN 46176
317-398-4202

Bloomington Deanery

- Bedford**
St. Vincent de Paul School (PK–8)
923 18th St.
Bedford, IN 47421
812-279-2540
- Bloomington**
St. Benedict Classical School (K–12)
4609 W. State Road 46
Bloomington, IN 47404
812-606-4917
- St. Charles Borromeo School (PK–8)**
2224 E. Third St.
Bloomington, IN 47401
812-336-5853
- Connersville Deanery**
- Connersville**
St. Gabriel School (PK–6)
224 W. Ninth St.
Connersville, IN 47331
765-825-7951
- Richmond**
Seton Catholic High School (7-12)
233 S. 5th St.
Richmond, IN 47374
765-965-6956
- St. Elizabeth Ann Seton School (PK–6)**
801 W. Main St.
Richmond, IN 47374
765-962-4877
- Rushville**
St. Mary School (PK–6)
226 E. Fifth St.
Rushville, IN 46173
765-932-3639

New Albany Deanery

- Clarksville**
Our Lady of Providence High School (9–12)
707 Providence Way
Clarksville, IN 47129
812-945-2538
- St. Anthony of Padua School (PK–8)**
320 N. Sherwood Ave.
Clarksville, IN 47129
812-282-2144
- Corydon**
St. Joseph School (PK–8)
512 N. Mulberry St.
Corydon, IN 47112
812-738-4549
- Floyd County**
St. Mary-of-the-Knobs School (PK–8)
3033 Martin Road
Floyds Knobs, IN 47119
812-923-1630
- Jeffersonville**
Most Sacred Heart of Jesus School (PK–8)
1842 E. Eighth St.
Jeffersonville, IN 47130
812-283-3123
- New Albany**
Holy Family School (PK–8)
217 W. Daisy Lane
New Albany, IN 47150
812-944-6090
- Our Lady of Perpetual Help School (PK–8)**
1752 Scheller Lane
New Albany, IN 47150
812-944-7676

- Sellersburg**
St. John Paul II School (PK–8)
105 St. Paul St.
Sellersburg, IN 47172
812-246-3266

Seymour Deanery

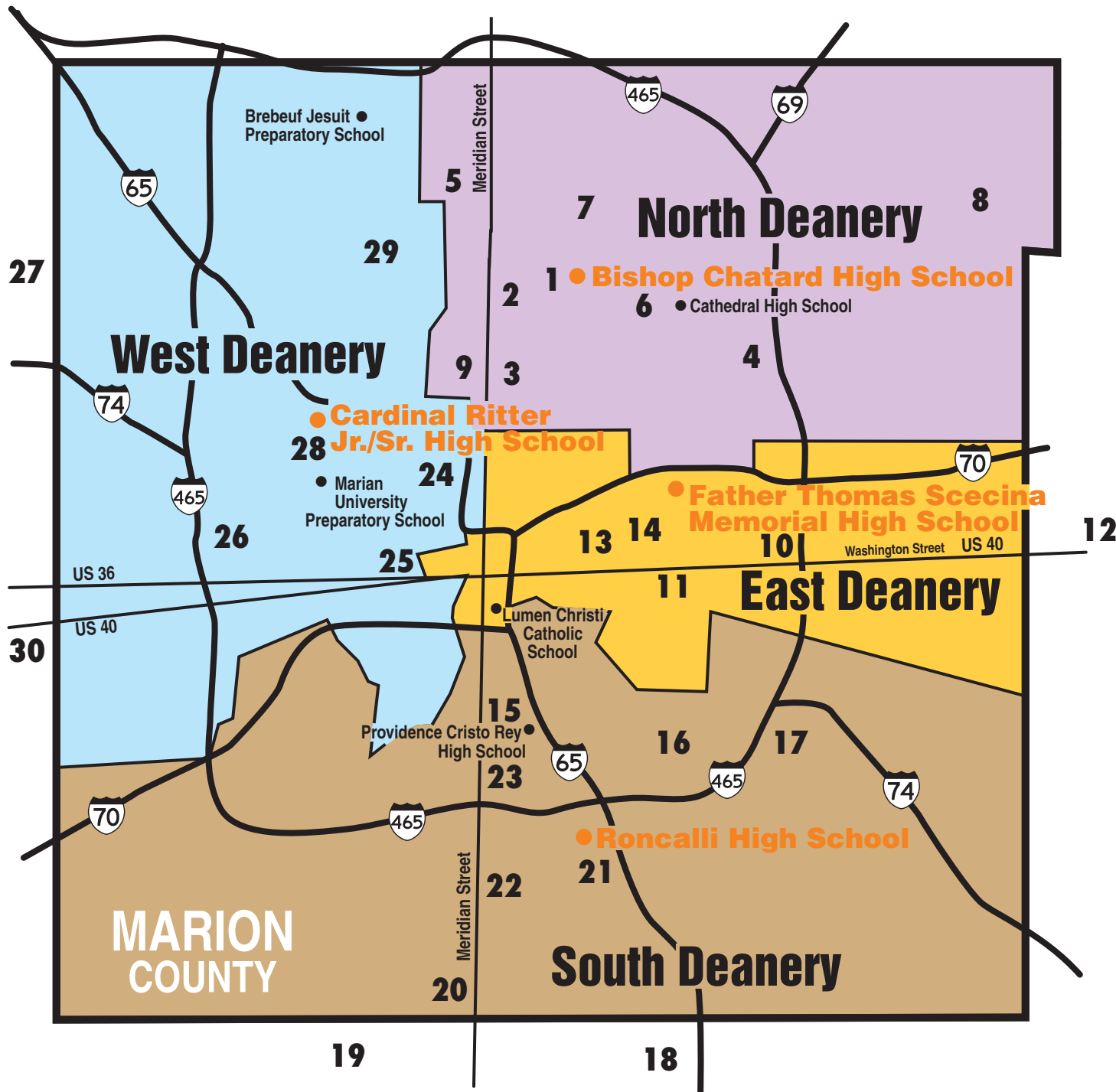
- Columbus**
St. Bartholomew School (K–8)
1306 27th St.
Columbus, IN 47201
812-372-6830
- Franklin**
St. Rose of Lima School (PK–7)
114 Lancelot Drive
Franklin, IN 46131
317-738-3451
- Madison**
Father Michael Shawe Memorial Jr./Sr. High School (7–12)
201 W. State St.
Madison, IN 47250
812-273-2150
- Pope John XXIII School (PK–6)**
221 W. State St.
Madison, IN 47250
812-273-3957
- North Vernon**
St. Mary School (PK–8)
209 Washington St.
North Vernon, IN 47265
812-346-3445
- Seymour**
St. Ambrose School (PK–8)
301 S. Chestnut St.
Seymour, IN 47274
812-522-3522

Terre Haute Deanery

- Terre Haute**
St. Patrick School (PK–8)
449 S. 19th St.
Terre Haute, IN 47803
812-232-2157
- Private High Schools**
- Aurora**
Fiat Classical Academy
211 Fourth Street
Aurora, IN 47001
812-954-2045
- Oldenburg**
Oldenburg Academy of the Immaculate Conception (9–12)
1 Twister Circle
P.O. Box 200
Oldenburg, IN 47036
812-934-4440



Catholic Schools in the Greater Indianapolis Area



GREATER INDIANAPOLIS DEANERY SCHOOLS

Indianapolis North Deanery

- **Bishop Chatard High School (9-12)**
5885 N. Crittenden Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46220
317-251-1451
- 1. **Christ the King School (K-8)**
5858 N. Crittenden Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46220
317-257-9366
- 2. **Immaculate Heart of Mary School (K-8)**
317 E. 57th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46220
317-255-5468
- 3. **St. Joan of Arc School (PK-8)**
500 E. 42nd St.
Indianapolis, IN 46205
317-283-1518
- 4. **St. Lawrence School (PK-8)**
6950 E. 46th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46226
317-543-4923
- 5. **St. Luke the Evangelist School (PK-8)**
7575 Holliday Dr. East
Indianapolis, IN 46260
317-255-3912
- 6. **St. Matthew the Apostle School (PK-8)**
4100 E. 56th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46220
317-251-3997

- 7. **St. Pius X School (K-8)**
7200 Sarto Drive
Indianapolis, IN 46240
317-466-3361
- 8. **St. Simon the Apostle School (PK-8)**
8155 Oaklandon Road
Indianapolis, IN 46236
317-826-6000
- 9. **St. Thomas Aquinas School (PK-8)**
4600 N. Illinois St.
Indianapolis, IN 46208
317-255-6244

Indianapolis East Deanery

- **Father Thomas Scecina Memorial High School (9-12)**
5000 Nowland Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46201
317-356-6377
- 10. **Holy Spirit School (PK-8)**
7241 E. 10th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46219
317-352-1243
- 11. **Our Lady of Lourdes School (PK-8)**
30 S. Downey St.
Indianapolis, IN 46219
317-357-3316
- 12. **St. Michael School (PK-8)**
515 Jefferson Blvd.
Greenfield, IN 46140
317-462-6380

- 13. **St. Philip Neri School (PK-8) ***
545 N. Eastern Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46201
317-636-0134
- 14. **St. Therese of the Infant Jesus (Little Flower) School (PK-8)**
1401 N. Bosart Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46201
317-353-2282

Indianapolis South Deanery

- **Roncalli High School (9-12)**
3300 Prague Road
Indianapolis, IN 46227
317-787-8277
- 15. **Central Catholic School (PK-8) ***
1155 E. Cameron St.
Indianapolis, IN 46203
317-783-7759
- 16. **Holy Name of Jesus School (PK-8)**
21 N. 17th Ave.
Beech Grove, IN 46107
317-784-9078
- 17. **Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ School (PK-8)**
3310 S. Meadow Drive
Indianapolis, IN 46239
317-357-1459

- 18. **Our Lady of the Greenwood School (PK-8)**
399 S. Meridian St.
Greenwood, IN 46143
317-881-1300
- 19. **SS. Francis and Clare of Assisi School (PK-8)**
5901 Olive Branch Road
Greenwood, IN 46143
317-215-2826
- 20. **St. Barnabas School (PK-8)**
8300 Rahke Road
Indianapolis, IN 46217
317-881-7422
- 21. **St. Jude School (PK-8)**
5375 McFarland Road
Indianapolis, IN 46227
317-784-6828
- 22. **St. Mark the Evangelist School (PK-8)**
541 E. Edgewood Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46227
317-786-4013
- 23. **St. Roch School (PK-8)**
3603 S. Meridian St.
Indianapolis, IN 46227
317-784-9144

Indianapolis West Deanery

- **Cardinal Ritter Jr./Sr. High School (7-12)**
3360 W. 30th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46222
317-924-4333

- 24. **Holy Angels School (PK-6) ***
2822 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. St.
Indianapolis, IN 46208
317-926-5211
- 25. **St. Anthony School (PK-8)**
349 N. Warman Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46222
317-636-3739
- 26. **St. Christopher School (PK-6)**
5335 W. 16th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46224
317-241-6314
- 27. **St. Malachy School (PK-8)**
330 N. Green St.
Brownsburg, IN 46112
317-852-2242
- 28. **St. Michael-St. Gabriel Archangels School (PK-8)**
3352 W. 30th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46222
317-926-0516
- 29. **St. Monica School (PK-8)**
6131 N. Michigan Road
Indianapolis, IN 46228
317-255-7153

- 30. **St. Susanna School (PK-8)**
1212 E. Main St.
Plainfield, IN 46168
317-839-3713

Private Schools

- **Lumen Christi Catholic School (PK-12)**
580 E. Stevens St.
Indianapolis, IN 46203
317-632-3174
- **Marian University Preparatory School (K-12)**
2916 W. 30th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46222
855-777-0679
- **Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School (9-12)**
2801 W. 86th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46268
317-524-7128
- **Cathedral High School (9-12)**
5225 E. 56th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46226
317-542-1481
- **Providence Cristo Rey High School (9-12)**
2717 S. East St.
Indianapolis, IN 46225
317-860-1000

* Mother Theodore Catholic Academies

A year of celebrating the fun and friendships of the Catholic Youth Organization



School’s surge in student literacy reflects archdiocese’s overall success

(This story is an edited version of the one that first appeared in The Criterion on Sept. 19, 2025)

By John Shaughnessy

When Tami Clouse received the invitation from the Indiana Board of Education to share the remarkable story of what happened at Central Catholic School in Indianapolis, she became emotional, viewing the honor as a celebration of “a beautiful community.”

In just one year, the school made a dramatic improvement in student literacy, with a 51.7 percentage-point increase in its Indiana Reading Evaluation and Determination (IREAD) testing scores. The school’s pass rate among its third-grade students improved from 48.3% in the 2023-24 school year to 100% in 2024-25.

“The celebrations that we have had at my school with the children are phenomenal,” said Clouse, the school’s principal, during her presentation to the state’s board of education on Aug. 13, 2025. “So, we are very excited about that. Makes me a little emotional.”

That success at Central Catholic, one of the archdiocese’s three Mother Theodore Catholic Academies, also reflects the overall success of the 55 Catholic elementary schools in the

archdiocese regarding IREAD.

Combined, archdiocesan elementary schools achieved a 93% total pass rate compared to the state average of 87.3%, according to Sarah Watson, assistant superintendent of elementary education in the archdiocese.

Watson also noted that 23 of the 55 schools had a pass rate of 100% while six more schools surpassed the 90% rate. At the same time, she added, 82% of second-grade students in the archdiocese passed the literacy test and won’t have to take it again.

The success of the Catholic grade schools drew high praise from Brian Disney, superintendent of Catholic schools in the archdiocese.

“We are very happy for the success our Catholic school students had on IREAD,” Disney said. “Our students, schools and families deserve credit for their efforts to ensure all students can read by the end of third grade. Some students need additional support and time, which our schools provided. The parent-school partnership was essential for our success.”

Watson also noted that the Catholic schools’ success in the past year reflected “a clear plan at the archdiocesan, state and local levels, and the daily fidelity of teachers to practices that work.”

“In our Catholic schools, that plan

meets our mission,” she said. “We want children to read with confidence because we are preparing them for life and for heaven. Literacy opens minds to truth and hearts to beauty, and our schools take that charge seriously.”

“What is most encouraging is that gains reached students across the board. Black and Latino students grew. Students with disabilities grew. English learners grew. Students from low-income households grew. That breadth tells us the strategy is working for all of God’s children, not only for some.”

Statewide statistics showed that Black students, Hispanic students and students in special education all achieved a 7.5% increase in student literacy in the past school year, while English learners improved at a 7.2% rate.

That achievement reflects both the success and diversity at Central Catholic School. In her presentation to the state board of education, Clouse noted that the school serves 239 students from across Indianapolis, with 97% of the children identifying as “Hispanic, multi-cultural, multi-racial or Black.”

“They represent 11 countries across the world,” she said. “At home, they speak English, Spanish and Swahili.”

Clouse credits the success at Central Catholic to several factors, factors that

Watson also credits for the overall success of Catholic schools in the archdiocese.

Schools tapped into approaches that include tutoring, after-school labs and family involvement, as well as skilled coaches, earlier and more frequent assessment, and curriculum that focused on the science of reading.

The cooperation of parents is always a key, they both note.

Watson praised the overall collaboration that led to the success achieved at Central Catholic and the overall success of the 55 Catholic elementary schools in the archdiocese.

“Central Catholic stands out as a witness to what is possible when mission meets method,” she said. “Tami and her team set a culture where every minute of instruction counts, families are true partners and children are known by name and loved. The academic results are impressive. The deeper story is formation. Students are growing in confidence, perseverance and joy.”

That same goal is being achieved in Catholic schools across central and southern Indiana, she said.

“In the archdiocese, we have seen what happens when parishes, community partners and schools pull together. Families leaned in, teachers stayed the course, and students felt the support around them.” †