



Student enrollment grows at Long Island's Catholic elementary schools

Efforts to revitalize system contribute to rise despite closures



Uniondale, NY— Student enrollment at Long Island's Catholic elementary schools is on pace to show a slight increase in the 2021-22 academic year as efforts to revitalize the system are expected to reverse a trend of declining admissions for the first time in more than two decades.

Several factors have contributed to the one percent rise, including last year's launch of the Morning Star Initiative, a robust plan led by Brother Thomas Cleary (Chief Revitalization Officer), the Marianist Brothers, and the Department of Education to strengthen Catholic elementary schools in the Diocese of Rockville Centre. Growing demand for early education and the ability to safely open schools during the COVID19 pandemic also helped with the expansion.

"Enrollment rates at most schools across the Diocese are trending upward despite the closure of three schools over the past year," said Ismini Scouras, Executive Director of Tomorrow's Hope Foundation, the leading fundraising partner of the Morning Star Initiative. "Programs implemented under the Morning Star Initiative have sharply improved many aspects of Long Island's Catholic elementary schools, ultimately leading to more sustainability."

Under the Morning Star Initiative, the network of 32 Catholic elementary schools within the Diocese now have access to the iReady program, the first-ever web-based student benchmarking tool, and the "Curriculum Leads" initiative, a forum for cross-school collaboration in the development of curriculum, both of which have led to significant academic improvement. As a result, students performing on grade level in math have increased to 60 percent from 26 percent, and students performing on grade level in reading have jumped to 72 percent from 49 percent. This compares with the 46 percent and 51 percent, respectively, for the "National In-School Population" of iReady schools, according to Curriculum Associates LLC, a provider of educational programs based in North Billerica, Mass.

In addition, funds raised through the Morning Star Initiative's ongoing, multi-year campaign have enabled the purchase last spring of 2,000 learning devices that were distributed to underserved families, as well as peripherals that provided connectivity for nearly 300 families. When schools open in September 2021, they will once again be ready to rise to any challenges brought on by the pandemic.

"The Garden City public schools did not handle the pandemic very well," said Janice Bateman, office manager at St. Joseph School, Garden City, N.Y., where enrollment is up by nearly 29 percent. "Parents were frustrated with how the public schools attempted to manage the pandemic and subsequently many families chose St. Joseph School when they learned how smoothly we were able to transition."

Bateman also attributed St. Joseph's larger student body to the recent closures of St. Thomas the Apostle School, West Hempstead, and St. Christopher School in Baldwin, two of three schools that were included in a restructuring designed to strengthen the academic rigor at existing elementary schools in the Diocese of Rockville Centre. St. Raymond School, East Rockaway, also shuttered its doors in June. More than 80 percent of students at this point have been retained from the three school closures over the past year.

Despite the school closures, overall enrollment is up, and several schools are experiencing waitlists, especially in the younger grades.

"I wish we had more space," said Kathleen Cotilletta, Principal, Our Lady of Lourdes School, Malverne, N.Y. "I have a lot on a waiting list for PreK but no space for a classroom."

St. William the Abbot School in Seaford, N.Y. is also experiencing an uptick with admissions up by 11 percent from the 2020-2021 academic year. Strong community involvement coupled with a holistic approach to educating Long Island's Catholic school students has been a long-standing tradition.

"Last year proved to be unique, and administration was key in developing a sense of security and calmness through transparency in communication to our school family," said Elizabeth Bricker, Principal. "St. William's stakeholders, both past and present, have always been our strongest supporters who share their positive experiences with family and friends thus increasing enrollment as well."

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The mission of Tomorrow's Hope Foundation is to ensure the excellence as well as the continuance of Catholic schools on Long Island, by increasing awareness and by providing scholarship and program funding for the needs of students and schools.

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