

Local Nativity-model schools drawing praise, showing results

By Jennifer Brinker
Review Staff Writer

As two more Catholic schools celebrate their first anniversaries using the NativityMiguel educational model, educators in the archdiocese agree that it is doing well here.

Most Holy Trinity School and Central Catholic/St. Nicholas, both in North St. Louis, implemented the model in the fall of 2006. It provides an alternative schooling method for children who might not otherwise have the resources to succeed.

Both schools are using an embedded approach, in which the upper grades use an intensive curriculum and longer school day and year. The model also features extra services, including a follow-up program for graduates and other enrichment opportunities.

Other NativityMiguel schools in the archdiocese include St. Cecilia, which has an embedded academy for sixth through eighth grades; Loyola Academy; De La Salle Middle School; and Marian Middle School.

In the United States, 64 NativityMiguel schools serve more than 4,300 middle school age boys and girls in 27 states, according to the Washington, D.C.-based NativityMiguel Network.

The following are just a few highlights from NativityMiguel model schools in the archdiocese:

Central Catholic/St. Nicholas

Currently, 92 students are in the embedded Central Catholic Academy for sixth- through eighth-graders. The entire school, from kindergarten through eighth grade, has 252 students. There also are 87 attending a preschool program for infants through age five.



REBECCA VENEGONI TOWER

LEARNING OPPORTUNITY — Motivational speaker and author Katie Rodriguez Banister visits with students at Central Catholic/St. Nicholas School as she shows them how her motorized wheelchair works. Rodriguez Banister, who was paralyzed from a car accident, spoke to students on how to interact with people who have disabilities.

“Part of our vision is to make sure everything we’re doing is not just educating academically but making a partnership with parents, children and school where we’re all working together to accomplish this dream” of someday going to college, said Sister Gail Trippett, CSJ, principal of Central Catholic/St. Nicholas School.

“We want to help them to realize this is really possible, this is something they can visually set goals toward and see the outcome when they are enrolling in college and making it all the way through,” said Sister Gail.

“They are coming from 37 ZIP codes in the city, county and East St. Louis,” she said. “We still have a few slots in some rooms.” Enrollment for next fall already is under way.

Among some of the highlights at Central Catholic Academy is an architecture program through a partnership with The Alberti Program at Washington University, which teaches

problem solving through architecture, community and the environment.

“The students learn the implements of design. They look at community and how to beautify it,” said Sister Gail. “There are opportunities for creativity and group involvement, as well as problem solving.”

Last summer also was the first time students at the academy attended a summer session on the campus of St. Louis University, which Sister Gail said assists in getting them used to the idea of being on a college campus. University representatives, along with other partners, including the St. Louis Science Center, the Center for Archaeological Studies and The Missouri Department of Natural Resources State Parks Division, offer workshops to students.

Another addition to the school is president Father John Phelps, a Redemptorist priest who had most recently served as pastor of St.

Alphonsus Liguori "Rock" Parish. Part of his vision for the school, said Sister Gail, is to help support the parents in their mission to provide a good education for their children.

One example is the partnerships the school has made with organizations such as Employment Connection, to help parents maximize their role in providing for their children.

"He (Father Phelps) has forged partnerships with employers to train parents to be more employable so they can start accessing the revenues to help their child through college," said Sister Gail. "It's in the beginning stages. We want to build on this every year to strengthen parents to support (their children) all the way through college."

The school recently partnered with representatives from A.G. Edwards, who have spoken to parents about making a plan to save for college tuition. And beginning last year, all students in kindergarten on up opened savings accounts, thanks to a collaboration with National City Bank, to help them begin saving money for college.

"Our students know this is a 20-year commitment for them," said Sister Gail. "Planning begins now and not a few years before graduating high school."

Most Holy Trinity School

The first year of using the embedded academy model for fifth- through eighth-graders was a success for Holy Trinity School, located in the Hyde Park neighborhood of North St. Louis.

"There's a higher level of student engagement in the learning process," said principal Carol Werner. "And we feel that the evidence is in their performance, in terms of their report card, their attitude toward school and their test scores."

Werner called the school's enrollment "level," with 80 students currently enrolled in pre-kindergarten through eighth-grade. Werner said the goal is to have an enrollment of 100, and the focus is on recruiting families in the neighborhood. There are 27 students in the embedded academy program.

Werner credited an increase in enrollment to the archdiocese's Today and Tomorrow Foundation, which was able to provide \$2,000 scholarships each to 11 families with children entering kindergarten.

"It will carry them through the eighth grade, and that was such an attraction for these families," said Werner. "It has been a tremendous benefit for us."

The embedded academy model uses an extended program four days a week for the fifth- through eighth-graders. Werner added that the focus is on language arts, including reading and writing, as well as math. Part-time staff members have been hired to run the extended program.

The school also integrated into the model several practices it already was using, including multi-age classrooms, with both small group and individualized instruction; and an integration of music and arts into the curriculum for the entire school, in which local artisans are hired to teach classes in subjects such as violin, dance and art.

"Those (subjects) are integrated as much as possible with basic skills so there is a connection made between the art form and reading, writing and arithmetic," said Werner. "These classes are not add-ons. They are an integral part of the curriculum."

The school also has a peacemaker program, which teaches students to develop personal skills. Subjects include decision-making, problem-solving and anger management.

Parent involvement also is a strong component of the entire program, said Werner. "Without the parent support, we couldn't do this," she said.

The school also participates in a program at Webster University, in which students take elective courses on topics such as Photoshop, forensic science and drama. The school has been participating in the program, sponsored by the Lewis and Clark Institute, for 10 years. This past summer was the first in which it was included as part of the academy model.

"Put all of this together, and we find that the benefits are significant," Werner said. "It's a combination of everything."

Loyola Academy

The archdiocese's first Nativity school, Loyola Academy, moved to a new location in December.

The all-boys school for sixth through eighth grades is now at 3851 Washington Ave. near Cardinal Ritter College Prep High School.

The former manufacturing building took a little more than a year to

renovate at a cost of \$3.8 million. The new school has approximately 16,500 square feet of space, according to Loyola president Kevin Lee. Funding came from several groups and individuals, including local philanthropist Lester Miller and the Jesuits of the Missouri Province, who sponsor the school.

"We're exploring the possibility of starting a fifth grade in September of 2009, and the new space provides that opportunity," said Lee.

The new school building is part of a larger \$5 million capital campaign, of which more than \$4.4 million already has been raised, said Lee. The campaign also will fund a new gymnasium, and Loyola hopes to break ground on that in the spring.

"We've seen an increase in applications," Lee noted, adding that there were 80 applications for 30 open spots this school year. The school has set an enrollment cap at 60, and 54 of those spots currently are filled.

"We definitely feel there's more awareness of us in the community," he said. "It's exciting that more are coming forward. We're trying to make sure applicants qualify academically and financially. We try to get those who can't afford a Catholic education."

The school also had its first convert to Catholicism this year. Former student Malik Farmer, now a sophomore at Christian Brothers College High School, is expected to enter the Church this Easter.

The school also is striving to diversify its student body, said Lee.

"Our kids are still coming from all over — Normandy, Hazelwood, Jennings, Riverview," he said. "Right now, we're making a big recruit for Vietnamese kids. We need to diversify our body. Most (of our students) are African American. We're also trying to increase Catholic enrollment. We remain convinced there are Catholic kids from low-income areas not being served by Catholic education."

Marian Middle School

This is the first school year with new principal Christy Leming at the helm at Marian Middle School.

Leming, who also used to teach at the South St. Louis school, said she is "thrilled" that Marian is now in its own building, the former Holy Family School, which it moved into about two years ago.

The all-girls school for sixth-through eighth-graders is small by design, she said, and for the first time this year is at capacity with 60 enrollees. The school was opened in 2000 by eight women religious communities.

“Unlike the old building, we are able to spread out,” said Leming. “In the basement, we have an after-school program. Administration is on first floor. And we have our own gym, which is wonderful.”

This year, the school began offering a van service for students in need of transportation, which was made possible by a donation from Centaur Building Services. Thanks to a grant from the Mental Health Board of St. Louis, a full-time staff member has been hired to run the graduate support program, which provides guidance to Marian graduates who are in high school and moving on to college.

Technology development is being pushed this year, too, said Leming. This year, the school has bought its first SmartBoard through a donation from Cardinals Care.

Graduates who have been through all three years at Marian have heading off to college this year, said Leming. Schools include St. Louis Community College at Meramec, Harris-Stowe State University and the University of Missouri-Columbia.

St. Cecilia Academy

St. Cecilia Academy for sixth-through eighth-graders is the first embedded Nativity model “school within a school” format in the country, according to principal Jim Ford.

Enrollment is slightly down this year at the South St. Louis school, said Ford, with a little more than 40 students attending the co-ed embedded academy, and a total enrollment of 135 in grades kindergarten through eighth.

Ford said the embedded academy, which launched in 2004, already has had a positive impact on the lower grades of the school as well.

This past year, grades first through fifth joined the academy students in participating in an afternoon enrichment program. Classes offered include physical education, piano, a service club, circus performance, African dance, art and quilting, said

Ford, with some of those classes offered just to the older students.

The entire school also is participating in an accelerated reading program, in which students participate in activities such as reading parties. “They set goals for themselves and work on them throughout the year to achieve them,” said Ford. “Every student has a half and hour to 40 minutes of independent reading outside of the language arts curriculum.

“Those reading skills need to be higher for high school,” he said.

This year’s theme for the school is “Time for Me To Shine,” and students and faculty are being asked to choose an activity in which they can excel and stick to it during the school year.

“Some are doing exercise, some are learning Spanish,” said Ford. “It goes beyond the curriculum. I think that reflects the spirit of the academy. We challenge kids and are pleased with the spirit this year.”

De La Salle Middle School

Located in the Ville neighborhood of North St. Louis near St. Matthew the Apostle Parish, De La Salle Middle School continues to do well.

“One hundred percent of our graduates, that is the class of 2004, are on track to graduate from high school this year,” said principal Phil Pusateri. “And 96 percent of all 54 (De La Salle) graduates are on track to be high school graduates.”

The school recently added two new rooms to its building, according to Pusateri, and students no longer have to walk to a nearby annex.

The school also is planning several trips this spring, including a college

exposure trip to Lewis University outside of Chicago for seventh-graders and a civil rights-themed trip to Memphis for sixth-graders. Eighth-graders will make a trip to Washington, D.C.

The entire school also will camp this spring at Sherwood Forest Camp in Ozarks, where they will work on issues such as team building and improving self-identity.

Pusateri said that the theme for this school year is “Literacy Across the Curriculum.” Students have been holding weekly book-sharing sessions and setting individual reading goals. They also have been reading individually during assigned class time as well as on their own. Teachers also have been evaluating their peers to see how much they have incorporated reading and writing into their classrooms.

The school also has a Renaissance Program in the afternoons, in which students participate in non-academic activities, such as sports, music and art. The opportunity lets them “explore their own interests and then decide if that’s something they want to continue on in their lives,” said Pusateri.

Another recent development is the “YEA! Team,” a youth empowerment program for seventh-graders. Through an affiliation with the University of Missouri-St. Louis, students have been developing an anti-tobacco literacy program to implement in the local community.

Students also have been performing other service work in the community, including at Northside Community Center, Annie Malone Children’s Home and Karen House.

Local educational leaders hope to improve students’ ACCESS

**By Jennifer Brinker
Review Staff Writer**

Taking good, faith-based schools and making them even more effective is the ultimate goal for ACCESS Academies.

Formed in 2005, ACCESS is a non-profit organization that assists in providing an intensive and values-based education for low-income children. ACCESS stands for Academies Creat-

ing Challenging Education for St. Louis Students.

Executive director Tom Nolan noted that ACCESS provides the means to embed a middle-school program, referred to as an academy, into existing schools. The academy is based on the NativityMiguel model, which provides an alternative schooling method for children who might not have the resources to succeed.

“As with all NativityMiguel schools, the goal is to put all kids in the best high schools in town and then on to post-secondary schooling,” said Nolan. “We have said that this is a program that is aimed at moving children out of poverty.

“The reason we’re doing this in faith-based schools that is it provides the basis on which the kids’ moral development occurs,” he continued. “We want them to become generous, caring, committed folks who will be great parents, great workers in the workplace and great citizens in the community.”

Since its inception, Nolan said that ACCESS has embedded the model in into four existing St. Louis schools: St. Cecilia and King of Glory Lutheran in South St. Louis and Central Catholic/St. Nicholas and Most Holy Trinity in North St. Louis. ACCESS is working to bring several more schools on board within the next three to four years.

The idea of embedding the NativityMiguel model in existing schools came from a group involved with Loyola Academy, a standalone Catholic middle school in North St. Louis that also uses the model. Before coming to ACCESS, Nolan had served as director at Loyola.

Nolan credited John Vatterott, chairman of the ACCESS’ board of directors, founder of Vatterott College and board member at Loyola, for his vision to boost faith-based schools and make them more accessible to low-income families.

Vatterott acknowledged that one of the motivating factors behind starting ACCESS was the archdiocesan school closings in the last several years.

“Besides the educational benefits, we thought we could preserve an asset that took decades to develop,” Vatterott said of the schools. He added that it also would help enable the Church to maintain its presence as an educational and evangelizing effort.

ACCESS raises about \$1.7 million a year and provides start-up funding — anywhere from \$250,000 to \$450,000 — to each school, according to Nolan. He stressed that the funding is ongoing, provided the resources are available.

“Some funders will get you going and walk away,” said Nolan. “Our thought at ACCESS is in order to get the long-term results we are looking for, we have to provide long-term support to the schools.”

Nolan and Vatterott said that the or-

ganization doesn’t get involved in the operations at the schools it supports, but it upholds each to a high standard of quality and makes them accountable for their actions in order to continue to receive funding.

ACCESS also provides other means of support to the embedded academies as well as the standalone NativityMiguel schools in St. Louis. In addition to Loyola, they include De La Salle Middle School in North St. Louis and Marian Middle School in South St. Louis.

For example, all seven NativityMiguel schools here use the graduate support program to assist graduates as they move on to high school and beyond. Resources include tutoring, preparation for college entrance tests and collaborative social events among the schools.

Carolyn Dubuque, director of mission effectiveness at ACCESS, said a high school night is being planned for 100 eighth-graders at the seven schools. With the assistance of St. Louis University, students will learn how to apply for financial aid, and ACCESS will help pay for their application fees.

Dubuque said social activities also have been planned for students, including a skating party for eighth-graders that also will teach them survival skills for high school.

Nolan said that St. Louis currently holds the record for largest number of NativityMiguel schools in one city. He said his organization hopes to implement the organization’s concept within other schools across the country someday.

Asked about his motivation behind launching ACCESS, Vatterott said, “It just bothered me to see these schools closed when I knew in fact that they could be salvaged. With my background in education, I could see very clearly that this would work. We want to get enough people behind it.”

Nolan said the response from individual and group donors “has been very generous, and I think we will continue. We’re seeking new donors all the time, and gifts large and small.”

“We know this was going to work,” agreed Nolan. “The ‘why’ is simply because our faith urges us to act justly and to promote social justice. This is a very concrete way of promoting the faith.”

These stories appeared in the St. Louis Review, the weekly newspaper of

the St. Louis Archdiocese, on Feb. 8, 2008.