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CATHOLIC HERALD Seton Catholic Schools - Thriving and Growing





SPECIAL EDITION





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For Seton, Catholic Identity is 'The Soul of Who We Are'

COLLEEN JURKIEWICZ Catholic Herald Staff

At Seton Catholic Schools, helping to guide students into good high schools and colleges is a top priority. But, it still takes a backseat to Seton's biggest goal of all: helping to guide students to Heaven.

As much as academic excellence is important, the real cornerstone of Seton's mission is its Catholic identity. "When we're talking about our Catholic identity," said Fr. Javier Bustos, "we're talking about the soul of who we are."

Fr. Bustos sits on the board of directors for Seton Catholic Schools, and is also the pastor at a Seton school, Our Lady Queen of Peace in Milwaukee.

"Our percentage of students and families in the school that come to Sunday Mass is very high, and I'm very thankful for that," said Fr. Javier. "That means they understand we don't only want the students to be smart and successful in academics, but even better, we want them to be holy and we want them to understand the source of wisdom, who is God."

At Our Lady Queen of Peace, as at other Seton schools, this goal is accomplished in a number of ways. Janet Orlowski, principal at Our Lady Queen of Peace, said that one of the biggest ways that Catholic identity and teaching is promoted is through the presence and spiritual fatherhood of Fr. Javier himself.

"Fr. Javier takes a personal interest in the families of the school," she said, explaining that pre-pandemic, Fr. Javier scheduled home visits with school families to get to know them better and was a regular presence on the school playground and in the cafeteria. He took an active role in many school activities, including the annual small group



▲ Fr. Javier Bustos-Lopez, pastor at Our Lady Queen of Parish, engages with students around the altar during an all-school Mass.

retreats for grades five through eight.

"What we're trying to do, through the retreats and other faith-based events' is basically collaborate with mom and dad in providing the opportunity for these kids to develop the values and the faith they have received in baptism," said Fr. Javier. "At the retreat, we have very deep reflections. The kids feel free to talk. They talk about very deep topics, like reconciliation, like racism, like immigration issues. They talk about what hurts. After the retreat, when we come back to our parish and they look at me, they know that I know what's going on in their hearts, because I've listened to them already."

Many of those pastoral gestures have pivoted to a virtual platform during the pandemic, but Fr. Javier still finds ways to connect personally with the families of his school. He records weekly videos covering different religious topics that are shared in the classroom for in-person students and via Zoom for virtual students. Mass is also streamed into the classrooms and to the students at home. "Since we needed to limit visitors to the classroom for the sake of limiting exposure, this was a way for Fr. Javier and other pastors to remain involved and present with students," said Orlowski.

"In each video I give them homework. I love it, because some students come to Mass on Sunday, and say, 'Father, I saw you on Friday and I got the answer, can you listen to me?' And she gave me the answer to the question I asked in the video," said Fr. Javier . "I love that."

This year, about 40 graduates of Our Lady Queen of Peace were confirmed, said Orlowski — a testament to the impact of the school's Catholic identity.

To effectively minister to the souls of the school children, Seton schools like Our Lady Queen of Peace see themselves as partners with the parents and families in helping the students to know, love and serve God.

"Important to our Catholic identity is our care for those in need," said Fr. Javier. "Our school was able to give food during the beginning of the pandemic to thousands of people, not only to students and their parents, but anybody in their neighborhood. We had long lines of people coming to get lunch." Our Lady Queen of Peace Parish also established a charitable fund that assists low-income families with emergency expenses, in some cases paying for the funerals of family members who died from COVID-19.

The student population of Our Lady Queen of Peace is largely made up of Hispanic Catholics, said Fr. Javier, which makes the promotion of Catholic teaching and identity very natural. But, even in the Seton schools where there is a larger population of non-Catholic families, he added, Catholic identity is still critical to the curriculum.

"We do have some Seton schools who are majority non-Catholic," he said. "But when parents register their kids, they are told and they know: you are registering your children to a Catholic school, and what it means is that they will be provided with Catholic teaching." This has actually been a boon to enrollment, and not a deterrent, Fr. Javier said. "Most parents understand the value of Catholic teaching even if they belong to a different denomination. They understand that it is something that is very important."

When parents are deciding on a school for their child, said Fr. Javier, two issues are usually at the top of their minds: safety and academic excellence. "They want that for sure, and they know that in Catholic schools, we do very well with those two," he said. But at Seton schools, there is a third and more important prong of the mission.

"It is central that parents understand they're not just sending their kids to school, but they're sending their kids to a Catholic school," said Fr. Javier. "They are not only going to receive science and math, but they are going to receive the gift of faith, the opportunity to grow in faith.

High Academic Success at Seton

KAREN MAHONEY Special to the catholic herald

On any given day, students at Seton Catholic Schools can be found in the traditional classroom, behind a computer screen on Zoom, or in small groups working to accelerate their learning. In all instances, energetic teachers are working diligently to help their students achieve the most in their classes.

Selecting a school for their child to attend can involve significant considerations for parents. It is imperative to find a school to foster the child's development academically, socially and emotionally. Seton Catholic Schools can offer that and more, including spiritual growth, in a positive, supportive environment. According to Seton Chief Schools Officer Kristen Foster, one of the fundamental components to achieve student success is ongoing professional development for their teachers.

"One of the things we worked diligently on to come back this year was a focus on safety, as well as continuing our high level of academic excellence," said Foster. "Last year, we thought we were going to be shut down for two weeks, but we realized it would be for the remainder of the year. We switched to learning new skills and laid the groundwork for virtual teaching. We did not slow down but worked to align our curriculum to allow teachers to collaborate across all of our schools."

Courtney Albright, director of curriculum and instructional effectiveness, led practice camps to ensure they continued the high level of academic rigor, curricular resources and learning that parents and students had come to expect from Seton schools.

"We went into MAP (Measure of Academic Progress) testing in the fall and used the data to create small groups for kids experiencing some gaps," she said. "We fared better than most of the country but noticed the largest gaps were in math. We had teachers giving extra instruction in that area and were excited to see how quickly we closed the gap from fall to winter."

One of the resources used to address those gaps is small-group targeted instruction — titled WIN (What I Need Now), consisting of five to eight students — to address grade-level content in classes such as math, ELA, vocabulary and technology programs. Teachers see tremendous progress in learning and acceleration of skills when implementing WIN in the classroom.



▲ Prince of Peace School teacher Malena Torres provides individual help to one of her K5 students.

"By moving to concurrent teaching, where we teach students in the building and from home at the same time, we are ensuring an equitable learning experience in the home and classroom," said Foster. "We weren't sure how it was going to work at first, but there has been a greater sense of community among students, as well as the social and emotional benefits of learning together, and praying and building together. We have 70 percent back in the classrooms, but all of our students can all still interact, and we get to see their beautiful, smiling faces on our Smart Boards."

One considerable benefit to a unified curriculum across all Seton Catholic Schools is the ability for students to participate via Zoom in another class at another school if their teacher needed to be absent.

"No one ever stops learning," said Foster. "We also have great resources to aid in our collaborative efforts. Our teachers also gather each month and bring student data, their common stories, misconceptions, and connect growth and plans for enriching students' education."

In addition to MAPS testing three times a year, Albright said they are working to implement programs to allow for quick-progress monitoring and common assessments across the network of schools.

"We look at the data in a couple of ways. For example, (to see) whether kids are meeting individual growth goals, we look at their overall growth, ending percentile and achievements. With our small-group programs, every student needs to show growth; we would like to see 100 percent or more for a year's growth," she said. "It is important to close the gap with as many kids as possible to meet our gold standard. This year, due to COVID-19, we had a little dip but had action planning and worked with students in small groups. We identified kids who were struggling and accelerated their learning. We have noted much improvement."

Currently, Seton is planning for summer and looking into resources and options, such as ZEARN, a digital math curriculum, for students to remain on track with their learning and to refresh their gap areas.

"This is a great, engaging program for students with a digital component that monitors their progress. It was quickly adopted by all our schools in the network at the time, as it aligns at a high level and focuses on problemsolving," said Albright. "Walking into classrooms this year has been so inspiring and energizing. The amount of work our teachers put into planning to make sure they offer the best instruction is amazing. There is a lot of work with concurrent teaching, but they have done it well. It is a joy to see the smiles from the kids and teachers."

One of the most integral components of teaching at Seton Catholic Schools is the ongoing professional development for teachers; this includes continuing education, coaching, and feedback.

"One of the misconceptions for teachers is that veteran teachers might not need it," said Foster. "But even Aaron Rodgers needs a coach. It is just a shifting of that mindset to realize that coaching is just to grow skills and sharpen the skills they do have. Every teacher every year participates in our coaching cycle. Paul Hohl, our director of school engagement, and I meet with our principals weekly."

Foster is proud that Seton Catholic Schools include four five-star schools and five additional four-star schools. She credits the improvement to intentional instructional support.

"I am really proud to be part of this organization, and with COVID-19 hitting during my first year, I was impressed with the response to the care for the safety of the families and students at Seton," she said. "We have utilized a lot of technology to improve their education. We have a great team who pulled together and became stronger because of COVID. It could have been negative, but we came together and thrived."

Seton sets up DSHA Student for Success

COLLEEN JURKIEWICZ Catholic Herald Staff

It's hard to gauge a person's level of success when they're only a sophomore in high school. But, despite her young age of 16, Lidia Mora-Gallegos already has a few promising indicators that, so far, she's on the right track.

Not only has Mora-Gallegos successfully transitioned to an academically rigorous high school, Divine Savior Holy Angels (DSHA), she did it confidently, without knowing any other students when she started on campus in the fall of 2019. And, since that time, throughout the upheaval of pandemic life and virtual schooling, she has maintained pristine grades in advanced classes.

Mora-Gallegos is a young woman with goals and plenty of capability, to be sure, but she credits her background at St. Rafael the Archangel School in Milwaukee with laying the foundation for her success.

"I really appreciate the fact that my parents sent me there," said Mora-Gallegos, who attended the school from kindergarten all the way through eighth grade. "It just made me who I am today."

St. Rafael was the family's school of choice because of its Catholic identity and strong ties to their parish, said Mora-Gallegos' father, Jose. "That was a really important factor for me," he said.

Throughout the family's time at St. Rafael, he said he felt included in his children's education. "The teachers were always willing to talk to you about anything that related to your child," he said. "They had the consideration and they took the time to make sure they were informing you of how your child was doing at school, and how you could help them."

For her part, Lidia said that she felt



▲ Lidia Mora-Gallegos, an alumna of St. Rafael the Archangel School, speaks to guests about her educational experience at St. Rafael during a Seton event in June 2019.

especially supported in her preparation for high school. As early as sixth grade, her teacher was encouraging students to begin considering what high schools they would like to attend, taking into account their own passions, skills and goals for the future. At that time, DSHA caught Mora-Gallegos' eye, and when she attended a middle school leadership conference later that year, "that definitely solidified my goal to get into DSHA," she said.

St. Rafael counselors, administration and teaching staff supported her

through the next two years as she worked toward being accepted to her dream high school. The variety of academic classes offered at St. Rafael helped to prepare her for the entrance exam, Mora-Gallegos said, as did experiencing the different instructional styles of the St. Rafael teachers. She attributes her proficiency in math to using the app Dreambox, an online math program that Seton schools utilize to develop math skills.

When she was accepted to DSHA, she felt "able to snap into things"

academically. "They really prepared me, and I think it shows in my grades," she said. Mora-Gallegos has maintained a First Honors GPA throughout high school, even while taking challenging courses like Advanced Biology and Algebra 2, into which she placed as a freshman.

Looking to the future, Mora-Gallegos hopes to tackle a double-major in college and eventually have a career in biomedical engineering — another passion that was developed through curriculum at St. Rafael.

"I always wanted to go into an engineering career path," she said. "What definitely encouraged my interest in engineering was the fact that I took a coding class when I was at St. Rafael for my entire eighth grade year. There was also an elective called Boatworks, where we literally built a boat, and I think that really helped amplify my interest in building things."

That interest carried over to DSHA, where she enrolled in a stagecraft class building props for theater productions. "I think that really did pique my interest in a lot of these engineering programs. There is a lot of creativity to it, and a lot of putting the pieces together to build these bigger things."

Wherever her future takes her, Mora-Gallegos still feels she has a home at St. Rafael, as well as a trusted community that she regards as "a safety net" if she ever needs advice, support or guidance.

"I can definitely say that I still count on the teachers there, those who no longer teach there and those who still do, for support and guidance," she said. "That has been really important — the fact that I can contact them for any help that I may need, and any advice. I can go back and talk to people there if I need any help."

Seton Catholic Schools - Located Throughout Milwaukee



- 1 Catholic East Elementary School
- 2 Mary Queen of Saints Catholic Academy
- 3 Northwest Catholic School
- Our Lady Queen of Peace School
- 5 Prince of Peace School
- 6 St. Catherine School
- 7 St. Charles Borromeo Parish School
- 8 St. Margaret Mary Catholic School
- 9 St. Rafael the Archangel School
- 10 St. Roman Parish School
- St. Thomas Aquinas Academy



Catholic East Elementary 2038 N. Bartlett Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53202 414-964-1770 catholiceast.org

Mary Queen of Saints Catholic Academy 1227 S. 116th Street, West Allis, WI 53214 414-476-0751 mqsca.org



Northwest Catholic School 7140 N. 41st Street, Milwaukee, WI 53209 414-352-6927 nwcschool.org

Our Lady Queen of Peace School 2733 W. Euclid Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53215 414-672-6660 olqpmke.org

ORTHWEST

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Seton Schools Become Part of the Community

CALLIE GAY Special to the catholic herald

Since 2016, Seton Catholic Schools have established themselves in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee as a vital link between parishes and their surrounding communities. Director of School Engagement, Paul Hohl, said, as they've continued to grow, "we are finding more and more that one of the biggest measurements of a successful school is its connection to the community that the families come from."

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Seton Catholic Schools launched a partnership with the Boys and Girls Club, providing on-site after-school care and programming for little to no cost at Prince of Peace Catholic School on the south side of Milwaukee and Northwest Catholic School on the north side. "It was huge, and we were lucky to get off to such a great start," Hohl said. "They set up Community Learning Centers (CLCs) at two locations, making us officially the first non-Milwaukee Public School to partner with the organization."

Before the pandemic, the programming extended from school dismissal until 6 p.m. The Boys and Girls Club brought their staff onsite and parents registered directly through the club. Because the organization is funded mainly from Department of Public Instruction grants and the fundraising from their development team, families were able to have childcare that they wouldn't have been able to access otherwise, and students found a safe place to learn and have fun with their friends. The club offers a variety of high-interest activities to students, bringing in outside programs to teach things like art and computer programming that gave instruction on the basics of coding, as well as offering tutoring to anyone who needed it. Part of the time is dedicated to play, after which the Boys and Girls Club provided dinner for the kids.

When things shut down in March, they had to amend the services provided to adhere to protocols, so the program came back this year on a much smaller scale. They do have an eye on working together with more schools in future years, and are planning a summer program at the current sites. "It's an amazing blessing



▲ Seton Catholic Schools foodservice staff played an important role in meal distribution during the pandemic-related school shutdown, distributing 211,000 meals to school students, families and neighborhood children.

and we look forward to a long future partnering with the Boys and Girls Club," Hohl said. "All of our families have been thrilled with the care and service that the Club provides."

In addition to the Boys and Girls Club, Seton has fostered a relationship with the School of Nursing at Marquette University, where student nurses go into the community to do their coursework. "It's such an unexpected gift," Hohl said. Once a week, the student nurses go into the classroom and conduct a lesson on a wide variety of topics. They talk to the students about things like friendship and proper hand washing, and they give eye tests and talk about healthy eating." Anything you can think of that would be good practical life advice," Hohl said, "they do."

When COVID-19 hit, the nursing students came back to the school virtually and their partnership increased to six schools. Prince of Peace, St. Rafael, Our Lady Queen of Peace, St. Roman, St. Thomas Aquinas Academy and Catholic East have all been more than impressed with the impact that the student nurses have had on their students and hope to bring them back in person when it's safe.

The need for student tutoring in the schools, proved to be a great match for the Ignatian Volunteer Corps, a faith-based, non-profit organization founded by the Jesuits to help connect volunteers in their communities. Ignatian volunteers tutor students in reading and math. Before the pandemic, 10-20 volunteers supported students at St. Catherine and St. Rafael twice a week. During COVID, 25-30 volunteers came to the schools via Zoom, with the help of Marquette University's School of Education students, providing one-on-one tutoring and additional service programs for students. Seton is continuing their collaboration with the Ignatian Volunteers next year, going back to the old model and adding two more schools to the partnership. "We're in neighborhoods where this kind of support is so important." Hohl said. Seton's goal is to make their students and family feel helped and supported, so they experience community as something that's tangible, not just a word in a mission statement.

Regular health screenings are important for every child and they prepare students for success in the classroom. Recently, Seton partnered with HEAR WI, which operates mobile auditory labs that provide free hearing screenings for students. Seton also works with SMILE, a group that sends dental vans to schools to do checkups and screenings for students. "What we're trying to do is big, but we're working hard on accomplishing it every day," Hohl said. "We know it's our duty to love one another, to care for one another."

Students at Seton schools are expected to make an impact, and staff and administration do everything they can to model that for them daily ."It's part of our religion program and our faith and formation. We take it very seriously," Hohl said.

Service projects based on grade level and specific school needs are the cornerstone of every Seton school, and each student is expected to take part in making their community, family and school a better place. "Ownership is an important lesson to learn," Hohl said. "Each one of us is nothing if not Christ's hands and feet."

Seton Founded to Provide Better Urban Catholic Education Model

KAREN MAHONEY Special to the catholic herald

Historically, children in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee received their education at their parish schools. However, with the changing demographics, many of the urban Catholic schools closed or lacked the funding to be competitive with larger and more affluent parish schools in the area. As a result, children either transferred to local public schools or continued in their underfunded parish schools.

The need for a better model attracted the attention of various business leaders in the city as well as members of the archdiocese, especially Dr. Kathleen Cepelka, the superintendent of Catholic schools.

"This issue was raised to a new level of awareness by the book, 'Lost Classroom, Lost Community: Catholic Schools' Importance in Urban America,' by Margaret F. Brinig and Nicole Stelle Garnett," Cepelka said.

The book chronicles the past 30 years of urban education, during which more than 1,600 Catholic elementary and secondary schools have closed, and more than 4,500 charter schools, which are public schools that are often privately operated, have opened in urban areas. Focusing on Catholic school closures, the book examines the implications of these dramatic shifts in the urban educational landscape, including the unraveling of the social fabric of neighborhoods that often followed.

"This was brought to the forefront of our attention and discernment: that urban Catholic schools needed investment to meet the needs of their students for the broader benefit of their neighborhoods. This is no indictment of the schools, as they all had caring teachers, principals and staff, but with limited resources, they were not able to find ways to improve their situation and thrive," Cepelka said. "It was heartbreaking and doubly handicapping to 2,500 children, who amount to 10 percent of the Catholic school population in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee."

Out of great love for the children, their futures and families, Seton Catholic Schools were developed to standardize Catholic education and teaching methods, providing each child with an equal footing.

Seton Catholic Schools began operations with nine schools for the 2016-17 academic year after intense research and study.

"We learned a lot of valuable lessons in the beginning,

and while there were challenges, our vision was to do the best for the families and children through what Catholic education in a holistic sense could offer," said Cepelka. "In addition to a standardized curriculum and teaching methods, we also require extensive professional development for principals and school leaders. We likewise provide extra resources for students with individualized needs."

By pooling resources and creating a network to give children the best possible education and provide spiritual support for families, Seton has made a tremendous impact in the community. Throughout the pandemic, they shined by providing students with Chromebooks, internet access, homework packets and thousands of meals for students and their families.

"Under our new model, these urban Catholic schools can grow as they will be financially viable and have the benefits Seton can provide as an integrated network to serve their community. We are constantly re-evaluating how best to employ our resources to the benefit of students and their families," said Cepelka. "We are so happy that we have teachers who choose to be part of Seton, as well as parents who are not Catholic and those who are Catholic that choose to send their children to our schools. My heart is thrilled with how many believe in this model and are passionate about the Seton Family of Catholic Schools, and we are thus able to drive forward in success."

Seton Family Continues to Grow

CALLIE CAY Special to the catholic herald

This summer, the Seton Family of Catholic Schools will grow to 11 schools with the addition of St. Margaret Mary School in Milwaukee. Seton President, Brian Couch, said of the northside school, "We're very excited to have them with us and to use our experience operating Seton schools as they are integrated into our family."

Over the last five years, Seton schools have deepened their Catholic identity and made significant progress in advancing academic excellence, business operations and community partnerships. They're anxious to bring everything they've learned to the integration of St. Margaret Mary and other schools that will join their family thereafter.

"We've spent the last year working with St. Margaret Mary, bringing the Seton formation and education model into the school," Couch said. In that time, Seton has been able to hire a principal and other staff for the school that have enabled them to begin to work with the school's team to adopt best practices used in Seton schools.

With an enrollment of 130 students, St. Margaret Mary brings the total Seton student population to approximately 2,600 students at the 11 schools, which is roughly 10 percent of the total students in the Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Our schools are primarily in economically disadvantaged areas, with seven out of eight of our students attending through either the Milwaukee or Wisconsin Parent Choice Programs" Couch said. "In particular, we're working with schools that are financially challenged with Seton providing students opportunities that they wouldn't have otherwise, with nine out of our ten schools rated 4-stars or 5-stars by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction."

Seton is also focusing on organic enrollment growth in the current schools. They aim to offer a compelling opportunity for parents to enroll their students in irresistible Catholic schools, where those who walk through the doors feel a sense of joy and know that the students within that building are loved and their relationship with the Lord is being fostered and growing. Safety is also a top priority for parents as we educate students in-person during the pandemic. Recently, parents rated Seton 9 out of 10 on keeping their children safe during the COVID pandemic. The culture of community and family is one that every Seton school works to develop, and it begins with their principal, teachers and staff. Seton Schools are dedicated to being part of the fabric that stitches neighborhoods together.

"We want our schools to have a reputation for delighting Seton families," Couch said. "Parents are the best ambassadors to share their student's Seton story with other parents."

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