

Masterpieces in the making

How Catholic schools are working to serve all students, including those with exceptional needs



Dennis O'Gorman

I will never forget the day last spring when, in desperation, I called Seattle's Assumption-St. Bridget School to ask if they might have room for our daughter. I'd heard they offered sequential, multisensory reading instruction that benefits all children, including those with dyslexia and other learning differences. Since transferring to ASB from the local public school, our daughter has blossomed in mind, body and spirit. During her first week as the "new kid," she announced: "Mom, I understood everything that I heard in class today. My teacher is a lifesaver!"



JULIE GUNTER

I soon realized that my experience as a parent searching for the right learning environment for a "differentiated learner" was not unique. It is entwined with the hopes, fears and dreams of countless families that include children with exceptional needs.

As a result, I decided to focus my graduate studies this year on better understanding the efforts in the Archdiocese of Seattle to provide inclusive learning opportunities to all students,

including those with exceptional needs. These efforts echo Pope Francis' call to reach out to the vulnerable and marginalized, as Christ did during his earthly ministry.

As part of an internship-based learning opportunity, I began a new Tuesday morning routine this school year: I drive to St. Madeleine Sophie School, check in at the main office and head to the second-grade classroom to help students with math worksheets or creative narratives. Over the next few hours, I encounter and engage with children of differing ages, backgrounds and abilities who — individually and collectively — animate this tucked-away campus in Bellevue.

The school, which has received national awards for outstanding contributions to inclusive Catholic education, serves a diverse student body ranging from exceptional learners and typically developing students to those who are English Language Learners or medically fragile. A designated Director of Inclusion Services oversees individualized

support plans for families drawn from 34 ZIP codes.

But it's the students who ultimately embody the spirit of this place — students like Grace, a vibrant second-grader with medical challenges whose mother shared that "being embraced and recognized as an important member of [this] community has really helped build her confidence and belief in what she can achieve."

Or Agatha, a veritable sunbeam who has not let legal blindness, low muscle tone and fine motor issues slow her down. Agatha has thrived at a "school that is changing lives, one day at a time," according to her family. Sarah Hickman, the school's second-grade teacher, fondly describes her classroom of students as "the kingdom of heaven on earth."

Serving academically diverse learners is increasingly a point of emphasis for the archdiocesan Office for Catholic Schools. Assistant Superintendent Sandra Barton Smith explained that Catholic schools and parishes around the archdiocese are responding "by mentoring, collaborating and networking together to design and enhance support structures that can serve all students with hope and dignity."

Driving home on Tuesday afternoons, I've sometimes wondered: How will these children apply the lessons they've learned here — acceptance, empathy, shared life — in a world that too often dismisses the contributions of those deemed different, other, disabled?

I've found one answer in a message Pope Francis sent to British and Irish Catholics in 2013: "Calling to mind the teaching of St. Irenaeus that the glory of God is seen in a living human being, the Holy Father encourages all of you to let the light of that glory shine so brightly that everyone may come to recognize the inestimable value of all human life. Even the weakest and most vulnerable, the sick, the old, the unborn and the poor, are masterpieces of God's creation, made in his own image, destined to live forever, and deserving of the utmost reverence and respect."

For those entrusted with these masterpieces, let's celebrate each brushstroke, and be transformed. Ω

Julie Gunter is a member of Assumption Parish in Seattle.

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