

A model that works: Sisters Academy celebrates 10 years

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For Sister Debbie Liesen, empowerment is the secret to the success of Sisters Academy of Baltimore.

Children from low-income families arrive at the all-girls middle school in fifth grade, often far behind where they should be academically. Through individualized attention, school days that run from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. and a focus on a holistic approach to learning, they leave the Lansdowne school more equipped for success.

"They find the power to grow as individuals - not just educationally, but also emotionally and spiritually," said Sister Debbie, a School Sister of Notre Dame and founding principal of the 57-student school. "We see them take that power and then move on to high school and college and grow into fine young women."

Sisters Academy was established 10 years ago by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and the Sisters of Bon Secours as a way of transforming deteriorating communities in Southwest Baltimore through education.



Sixth-graders Tenea Robinson and Jarely Anaya decorate their class folders on their first session of art class at Sisters Academy of Baltimore Aug. 26. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

Initially comprised of just the fifth grade, the school added a new grade level each year up to grade eight. It is housed in the former parish school of St. Clement I.

Fourth-graders applying to the tuition-free school complete a three-week summer program, with up to 20 students accepted each year. Sponsors and other supporters commit \$6,000 a year per child to help cover costs, with families contributing \$30 a month.

Families are very involved in the school, Sister Debbie said, volunteering and providing other assistance.

In 10 years, 89 students have graduated. Nearly 90 percent of those who have already completed high school are now in college.

"The class size is small, so that's really good," said Ayanna Jacobs, a 13-year-old eighth-grader. "It's easy to concentrate because it's all girls."

School Sister of Notre Dame Delia Dowling, founding president, said there are five religious sisters currently serving on the Sisters Academy staff.

Religious communities see the school “as a way for us to further the mission for which we were founded,” she said.

“I think we have to continue trying some new things in Catholic education,” she said.

“This is one model that is working.”

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