

First day of school brings hope throughout archdiocese

Alberta “Byrdie” Ricketts stood inside the entrance hallway of Our Lady of Grace School in Parkton Aug. 25, surrounded by faculty and staff.

It was 7:20 a.m. and the second-year principal was just 20 minutes away from her students arriving for the first day of school.

“We are here to bring the love and care our children need, besides the education,” Ricketts said. “We are also here to open up their hearts to each other and to the Lord and the knowledge of him.”

She read from a passage in Luke’s Gospel in which Jesus stressed the importance of entering the kingdom of heaven with a child’s enthusiasm. Then, they prayed the “Our Father” together.

Ricketts then commissioned her faculty to the parking lot to wait for their students, saying, “Thank you everybody! Good luck!”

Within minutes, streams of cars began filing by the school and smiling children dressed in uniforms emerged with lunch boxes and art work at the ready. Ricketts was out front, wearing sunglasses that read “2009” on them, welcoming children.

While not all school leaders donned sunglasses, many showed similar enthusiasm as they opened their doors to usher in the new school year.

“I think every new academic year brings exciting new sets of challenges but a great deal of hope,” said Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent of Catholic schools.

Enrollment at many schools has declined as some families struggle to pay tuition. The archdiocese, through a Blue Ribbon committee of education and business leaders, is charged with developing a strategic plan for the future of schools.

Final enrollment numbers for the 65 elementary/middle schools and 21 high schools are expected to be released in late September.

“Despite what we may be going through, we must maintain the excellent programs that continue to be a hallmark of who we are,” Dr. Valenti said. “I’m excited by the fact we have seen a great deal of growth in our kids, who are doing well on standardized tests. We are meeting our goals and offering the best education we can provide.”

Teachers found creative ways to usher in the year.

Our Lady of Grace teacher Karla Goodling made the transition with her class to the fifth grade. Because she wanted her former fourth-grade students to have a fresh experience this year, she put a beach chair in her classroom and presented students with Hawaiian leis upon their arrival.

At 160-student St. Casimir Catholic School in Canton, Principal Melanie Conley said middle school students were greeted by guitar-playing teachers, and younger grades found instructors who were reciting Miss Mary Mack rhymes.

“It was fantastic,” Conley said. “We have fun with it.”

Conley said many of the children who attend her school live in surrounding city neighborhoods. She said the parish school is trying to increase enrollment thanks to an active school board. An annual fund was started this year to aid in the process. St. Casimir has also been designated “a green school” for its environmental innovations.

“I’ve been here for 27 years and my favorite part of the day is greeting the kids at the front door,” Conley said.

Also on the longevity front, The Visitation Academy, Frederick’s all-girls Pre-K through eighth grade school, opened for its 164th year with 125 students. The school features a blossoming foreign language program.

“We want our girls to be ready for the 21st century and our language immersion program teaches children that really knowing a second language intimately is as important as learning to read, or do math problems,” said the principal, Susan Chase. “Our girls understand that even at this young age, the opportunities available to them are limitless.”

The first few days are typically more relaxed, educators said.

“They love to share with you what they did over the summer,” said Our Lady of Grace’s Goodling. “It’s a getting-to-know you day, but they already know me so I teased them last year that it means we can start right away with the academics and homework.”

One of her students, 10-year-old Catherine Keirn, said she gets “a little bit” nervous at the start of each year, but feels at home at her parish school.

“I like the community,” Catherine said. “They’re really nice. I learn a lot.”

Cumberland’s Bishop Walsh School, the state’s only Catholic educational institution west of Hagerstown, took in 25 students from the recently-closed St. Michael School in Frostburg. Bishop Walsh is also running St. Michael’s 27-student early childhood center.

“It’s going great,” said assistant principal Shelby Webb. “We’ve been able to keep them mainly together, which gives them some familiarity. They fit in very well.”

Bishop Walsh serves about 470 students, pre-K through 12th grade, and has room for more.

“Our older students look out for our younger students and our younger students look up to our older students,” Webb said. “We’re child-centered and Gospel-centered. That’s what we go about our day remembering.”