

'From diapers to diploma' : Preschool programs abound in the Archdiocese of Baltimore



Gwynn Lee, a fourth grader at St. Michael the Archangel in Overlea works with pre-k students Ayonna Lucas, Alexander Hoang and Michael Carroll during stations May 27 last school year. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

By Elizabeth Lowe

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From Bradshaw to Frostburg to Gambrills, Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Baltimore have continued to add or expanded preschool programs, which educators say better prepares students for kindergarten and beyond.

The trend is not a coincidence.

In 2010, the archdiocesan Blue Ribbon Committee on Catholic Schools issued a report and strategic plan. Among its recommendations: that every elementary school implement a prekindergarten by this year and that half-day kindergarten programs be made full-day. It cited school readiness, long-term developmental benefits and competitiveness among schools as reasons to offer pre-K.

According to the committee, during the 2009-10 school year, 70 percent of elementary schools in the archdiocese had pre-K 4-year-old programs, with 1,029 students enrolled.

For the 2014-15 school year, 42 of 46 Catholic elementary schools in the archdiocese, 91 percent, offer pre-K. School of the Incarnation is among them, and principal Lisa Shipley said the program was established three years ago in part in response to the Blue Ribbon report.

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"I believe that when families are a part of our Catholic school communities, they stay a part of those communities," Shipley said. "It helps you to begin a relationship with a family. As their children begin school, that relationship continues."

The McCauleys are one example.

Mary Brigid McCauley enrolled her daughter, Kate, now a first-grader at

Incarnation, in its preschool in 2012 for myriad reasons, including to prepare her for kindergarten.

"You could see the differences of the kids who attended the Incarnation preschool to those who didn't," said McCauley, who noted students already knew one another, teachers and the school's rules. "It made the transition of going into kindergarten very easy."

Because there wasn't space at the Gambrills school, Incarnation's preschool program began at Our Lady of the Fields in Millersville. Church of the Holy Apostles, which had worshipped at Incarnation, recently joined with St. Joseph in Odenton and moved its offices there, to what is called the Greater Odenton Catholic Community. Shipley said that allowed the preschool to relocate to Incarnation for the 2014-15 academic year and expand.

Last year, the pre-K had 35 students in space that could accommodate 48. This year, on a school campus that serves five parishes in western Anne Arundel County, capacity is 60.

Like Shipley, Mary Patrick, principal of St. Stephen School in northeast Baltimore County, credits the Blue Ribbon report with highlighting the importance of pre-K.

"It reinforced that early childhood is an important part of our mission," Patrick said. Mary Vincent, who established the Bradshaw school's program 22 years ago, said the pint-sized students engage in hands-on learning.

"They're able to solve problems, work within a social group, look at what you're teaching them and apply it to all areas of learning," Vincent said. "Schools are seeing the need to prepare young children for school and help them to develop and grow to their potential."

In addition, pre-K bolsters enrollment.

"We want a 10-year relationship with our families, not just eight," Patrick said.

There were 22 3-year-olds and 30 4-year-olds enrolled last year; 26 3-year-olds and 30 4-year-olds are expected this year.

Because of its increasing size, St. Stephen built a new pre-K building, which features two classrooms and a multipurpose room. It is scheduled to open this month.

While St. Stephen has always offered pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds, the program for the latter group is now offered Monday through Friday and either two or three days a week for 3-year-olds, in addition to an enrichment program

Like St. Stephen, the preschool program at St. Michael the Archangel School is also expanding.

The Overlea school's pre-K for 4-year-olds began nearly a decade ago and this year will include 3-year-olds.

Bob Wuenschel, St. Michael's assistant principal, said there was a need to expand, in part to attract new students.

"There's a challenge to maintain your enrollment in Catholic schools and there was a need for it (preschool) in the community," he said. "We're a viable part of the community and we're meeting the needs the community."

Wuenschel said pre-K gives students a head start as they get in the routine of going to school.

"It's basically taking children from diapers to the (middle school) diploma," he said. Fifteen students were in St. Michael's full-day 4-year-old program last year and about 17 are anticipated this year. The school expects about a dozen students for its first year of full-day 3-year-old pre-K.

In addition, St. Michael also offers God's Little People Preschool, a half-day program affiliated with the school for 3- and 4-year-olds.

In Allegany County, Jennifer Jones manages the preschool program at St. Michael's Early Childhood Center which she helped establish nearly two decades ago. The Frostburg program is part of Bishop Walsh School in Cumberland.

Jones said the pre-K, which is for 3- and 4-year-olds, has grown by "leaps and bounds." Enrollment has more than tripled since the first class of nine students in 1995.

"More and more people are starting to realize that at this age they're so sociable," Jones said. "It can only be beneficial to start at an early age."

In addition to the social and educational components, Jones incorporates service projects in the classroom.

"It's important to realize that we've got to give back," she said. "It can't be too early to show them."

Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Baltimore that offer preschool programs

Archbishop Borders School, Highlandtown

Bishop Walsh School, Cumberland

Cardinal Shehan School, Baltimore

Holy Angels Catholic School, Baltimore

Immaculate Conception School, Towson

Immaculate Heart of Mary School, Baynesville

John Paul Regional Catholic School, Woodlawn

Monsignor Slade Catholic School, Glen Burnie

Mother Seton School, Emmitsburg

Our Lady of Grace School, Parkton

Our Lady of Hope-St. Luke School, Dundalk

Our Lady of Mount Carmel School, Essex

Our Lady of Perpetual Help School, Ellicott City

Our Lady of Victory School, Baltimore

Resurrection-St. Paul School, Ellicott City
Sacred Heart School, Glyndon
School of the Incarnation, Gambrills
Ss. James and John Catholic School, Baltimore
St. Agnes School, Catonsville
St. Augustine School, Elkridge
St. Casimir School, Canton
St. Clement Mary Hofbauer School, Rosedale
St. Francis of Assisi School, Baltimore
St. Jane Frances School, Pasadena
St. Joan of Arc School, Aberdeen
St. John the Evangelist School, Hydes
St. John the Evangelist School, Severna Park
St. John Regional Catholic School, Frederick
St. John School, Westminster
St. Joseph School, Fullerton
St. Louis School, Clarksville
St. Mark School, Catonsville
St. Margaret School, Bel Air
St. Mary Catholic School, Hagerstown
St. Michael the Archangel School, Overlea
St. Philip Neri School, Linthicum
St. Pius X School, Rodgers Forge
St. Stephen School, Bradshaw
St. Thomas Aquinas School, Hampden
St. Ursula School, Parkville
The Visitation Academy, Frederick
Trinity School, Ellicott City

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