

Gifted students get boost at Catonsville school

By Maria Wiering

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Katie Norden, a seventh-grader at St. Mark School in Catonsville, spent last summer engrossed in S.E. Hinton's "The Outsiders" to prepare for the school's new gifted learning program.

"I really, really enjoyed it" she said of the classic coming-of-age novel.

She even enjoyed the book-related assignments she had to complete in the fall, especially because she could choose what she wanted to do. She made a timeline and wrote a paper about gang violence, a recurring theme in the 1967 book.

The opportunity for students to pick individually appealing assignments is part of St. Mark's Siena program, an alternate learning track in math and language arts for academically talented students. It debuted this academic year.

"It (the program) really expands your knowledge more than the usual curriculum would," Katie said. "It definitely motivates me to work harder, and it really makes my learning experience very pleasant."

Named for the 14th-century saint and doctor of the church Catherine of Siena, the program is open to students in grades four to eight and currently has 45 participants. St. Mark has 372 pre-kindergarten to eighth-grade students.

The Siena program attracts students who show academic talent, creativity and an ability to work independently, said Principal Mary Jo Warthen, who spearheaded the program's implementation. Participants were chosen by standardized test scores; grades; and parent, teacher and student recommendations.

When Warthen arrived at St. Mark six years ago, the school already had a program for students with learning disabilities, now part of the Archdiocese of Baltimore's PRIDE (Pupils Receiving Inclusive Diversified Education) program. Nothing was in place for students who needed an extra challenge.

"I've always believed that a Catholic education is meant to serve a full spectrum of

students,” Warthen said. “Over the years, I realized that we were doing a pretty good job with kids on the lower end of the spectrum, but what were we doing for the kids on the upper end of the spectrum?”

For Warthen, the program responds to Jesus’ parable of the talents.

“We’re all called to develop the talents God gave us. If you’re not challenged, and you’re academically talented, then you are not really developing that talent,” she said.

She based Siena on the work of gifted-education pioneer Joseph Renzulli, who teaches at the University of Connecticut. Four of St. Mark’s teachers have attended his summer “Confratute” program on the topic; four others plan to attend this summer.

Siena students are taught alongside their standard-learning peers. Teachers manage the two tracks through differentiated instruction, where content is taught in different ways to appeal to various learning abilities and styles. For Siena students, this includes “curriculum compacting” - “We don’t teach them what they already know,” Warthen explained.

Terry Ferro, an eighth-grade language arts instructor, said the Siena program benefits students at every learning level.

“The two groups are learning from each other,” she said. “While the Siena students feel much more comfortable going at their pace and do things that are more advanced for them, the standard students are still reaching outside the box and seeing that ... everybody can gain more than they thought they could.”

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