

New Villa Maria school in Harford “a blessing”

Rick Frank's eyes were noticeably red from tears minutes after he watched the chorus of the Villa Maria School of Harford County perform “I believe I can fly,” during a dedication Oct. 14.

“It's obviously very emotional,” said the principal of the new school. “These kids have a lot of difficulty getting up in front people or being with people. Some of them have had very bad experiences in the past. They were just fabulous.”

Catholic Charities' Villa Maria of Harford County is a nonpublic day school for children with severe emotional and/or specific learning disabilities. Students are referred by their previous school to receive a more intensive individualized treatment plan than is available in a traditional school.

The school opened Sept. 3 after years of planning and discussions.

Classes are taught by a psychoeducator who is paired with a classroom teaching assistant.

The Belcamp school is one of several Villa Maria locations including the main campus in Timonium, a school at St. Vincent's Center and one at Dr. Lillie M. Jackson in Baltimore City.

Frank arrived at the Timonium campus of Villa Maria two years ago. He then transitioned into becoming the Harford County principal and now calls it, “the highlight of 38 years of doing this.”

He said the goal is to prepare the students for a return to the general school population.

There are five classrooms for students from kindergarten through the eighth grade.

The 20,682-square-foot school was built by Towson's Oak Contracting and designed by Bel Air's Frederick Ward Associates.

The dedication in the gymnasium allowed dignitaries and supporters to see the school for the first time. Villa Maria has a capacity of 45 students and currently has 30 enrolled.

Students will receive art, music and physical education, while therapy includes individual, group and family sessions.

Psychiatry services are also provided, according to Catholic Charities. Diagnostic and prescriptive services and speech therapy are available. The school also features a media room/library and playground.

The media center is named after former Harford County Public Schools Superintendent Jacqueline C. Haas, who died last year after an asthma attack.

"It takes more than a village to build a school," said Jack Pumphrey, Villa Maria's director of education.

According to officials, the location is more convenient to students living in Harford County - who took buses to their previous Villa Maria schools, which could take several hours.

Frank said the students are making a "beautiful transition" to their new school.

William McCarthy, Catholic Charities' executive director, told parents at the dedication: "Each child will have an enriching experience here. We are honored, proud and humbled by the confidence that you have placed in us with the gift of working with your children."

Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden offered an invocation and blessing. He also dedicated a tree that will be planted on campus.

"I think we can't lose sight of the fact that these children they bring a blessing as well," Bishop Madden said. "One of the blessings we're experiencing right now ... is bringing diverse groups together to work for a common goal for a good."