

# Park Heights educator honored as principal of the year

Pamela Sanders was thinking about retiring from a three-decade career in the Baltimore City public school system when her former pastor at St. Ambrose in Park Heights asked a favor. The former principal was stepping down and Father John Pfannenstiel, O.F.M. Cap., wanted Ms. Sanders to succeed her at the inner-city school.

"It was a totally different kind of setting, and I think I was ready for a change of pace," remembered Ms. Sanders, who eagerly accepted the offer.

"The ability to include faith in my work really makes such a big difference in the lives of the children," she said. "It's amazing to me the peace you find when you walk in the doors here."

Eight years after that conversation with the pastor, Ms. Sanders said accepting the job at St. Ambrose was one of her best decisions. The principal was recently honored as the archdiocese's distinguished principal of the year. She will be eligible for national recognition from the National Catholic Educational Association when it holds its annual convention in Indianapolis this spring.

"I have not been more fulfilled in my career than here," said Ms. Sanders. "I enjoyed my years I spent in the public schools, but there's something really special about the atmosphere in a Catholic school."

The principal said she enjoys establishing personal relationships with the children of her school. She maintains an open-door policy to encourage students to come to her with any concerns or difficulties. It's especially fulfilling to see children grow in their Christian faith, she said.

"We have children who were going to no church who were baptized and joined St. Ambrose," said Ms. Sanders, noting that about 90 percent of her students are non-Catholic. "It's good to see that the religion is of value and they are taking it to heart."

Heading an inner-city school hasn't been without significant challenges. Unlike her days in the public schools, Ms. Sanders said she has become much more of a "business executive" responsible for fundraising, academics, staffing and more.

She was able to raise money for a mobile computer lab outfitted with laptop computers. She also introduced an intercom system and other campus improvements.

The school has begun participating in a federally-funded program called "Reading First" that has raised language arts proficiency in the primary grades, she said.

"God just watches out for us," she said with a laugh.

The principal described St. Ambrose as very much a parish school. Even though there are very few families who have children enrolled, there is strong support for the school's mission, she said.

"Parishioners take a lot of pride in the school," she said. "They want it to flourish and they do whatever they can to support it."

A major focus for the future is increasing enrollment. The number of students has held steady at about 215 over the last five years, Ms. Sanders said - a number not at the level she would like.

"We receive a lot of financial support for tuition assistance, but there's still that economic factor that's a challenge for many parents," she said.

Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent of Catholic schools, said Ms. Sanders "personifies what a committed, Catholic educator is all about."

In addition to her work at St. Ambrose, Dr. Valenti pointed out that Ms. Sanders serves generously on a variety of archdiocesan educational committees.

"She shows a dynamic energy and commitment to what we do in the archdiocese," he said.