

PRIDE program expands to Catonsville, Frederick

By Elizabeth Lowe

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Christine Cheli's prayers have been answered.

Cheli has re-enrolled her 11-year-old daughter, Catherine, at St. John Regional Catholic School in Frederick because it has added a program for students in kindergarten through eighth grade diagnosed with learning disabilities and average to above-average intelligence.

The Archdiocese of Baltimore's PRIDE (Pupils Receiving Inclusive Diversified Education) program is new this year to both St. John Regional and St. Mark School in Catonsville. PRIDE continues to be offered at St. Clement Mary Hofbauer School in Rosedale.

Catherine Cheli has Coffin-Lowry syndrome, a genetic disorder that affects her cognitive function. Catherine attended St. John Regional for preschool through part of second grade but was pulled out and attended a public elementary school in Frederick County because she required additional academic support.

"I knew she needed help," Cheli said. "That's the only reason we took her out of St. John."

Thanks to PRIDE, Catherine will enter the fifth grade at St. John Regional this month.

"I can't even describe how happy she (Catherine) was when she found out she was able to go back to St. John's," said Cheli, whose family worships at St. Joseph on Carrollton Manor in Buckeystown. "This is the hope for us, wanting a faith-based education for our children, which is so vital to who she is and is going to become. You can't put a price on that. This gives people a choice who maybe didn't think they had a choice."

PRIDE, established in 1994, provides students in the program with an adjusted curriculum for math and language arts classes. It also allows for small class sizes, individualized attention from PRIDE teachers, and can help build students' confidence, according to educators. PRIDE students are mainstreamed with their peers for all other subjects.

"What we have to do with any child who has a learning disability is make them understand they're not dumb, they just learn it in a different way," said Mary Jo

Warthen, principal of St. Mark. "Many students with learning disabilities are very bright. The key is to get them to understand how they learn."

"When you design a program specific to a child's needs you're doing the best you can in terms of meeting those needs and offering the opportunity for success," said Joan D'Loughy, PRIDE teacher at St. John Regional.

PRIDE students receive individualized attention and classroom accommodations.

"If you're having a problem with language arts, it affects all of your classes because you have to read," said Warthen, the mother of an adult daughter with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, known as ADHD, and an adult son with dyslexia.

"There is a tremendous need out there for it. I'm hoping that what we can do for these kids can be life-changing."

Offering PRIDE at Catholic schools is a matter of social justice, according to educators.

"We should be able to provide a Catholic education for as many students as we can reasonably accommodate," said Karen Smith, principal of St. John Regional. "It is discouraging when a parent comes and their child does have special needs or a learning disability that we might not be able to accommodate. By having this program it allows us to do that."

For the 2013-14 school year, 32 students are registered for PRIDE at St. Clement, 21 at St. Mark and about 10 at St. John Regional.

"Our students get to see students who struggle with learning but have all these other gifts," said Pamela Walters, principal of St. Clement. "God created us differently. It really is a special blessing for the whole school community."

PRIDE is offered for an additional fee and supplemented by the Archbishop's Annual Appeal, according to the archdiocese. For more information, call 410-686-3316 or email gjudge@stclemmh.org.

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