

Priests relish partnerships with Catholic schools

By Matt Palmer

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Archdiocese of Baltimore priests are offering their hands, hearts and spiritual gifts for the resurgence of Catholic schools.

During her 26-year run as principal of St. Ursula School in Parkville, Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Joan Kelly has had pastors who were great partners in education. She believes that with Father Stephen Hook, she's hit the jackpot again.

"I've got a winner here," Sister Joan said of Father Hook, who was assigned to St. Ursula in January 2011.

Upon their first meeting, Sister Joan offered a key to the 600-student school to Father Hook.

"I said 'You're welcome here at all times,' " Sister Joan remembered.

Since then, Father Hook has become a popular figure at the school by opening doors when children arrive in the morning, chatting with them in the cafeteria and visiting classrooms.

"Hopefully they see a holy priest, a joyful priest," Father Hook said.

Most importantly, Father Hook has teamed with Sister Joan to improve the school's already important Catholic identity.

"He's very serious about it and I am too," Sister Joan said. "We're committed to it."

Father Hook celebrates a weekly Mass for various grades and also leads regular adoration of the Blessed Sacrament for students.

"The kids come and pray before the Blessed Sacrament and the staff teaches the kids to genuflect," Father Hook said. "When they walk out, they're as quiet as church mice. It's a great experience for the kids."

Other priests connect with Catholic schools in similarly concrete ways.

Assigned to be pastor of Our Lady of Grace in Parkton in July 2010, Father Samuel V. Young said he patterns his involvement with the parish's school after the priests of his youth at St. Michael the Archangel in Overlea and Archbishop Curley High School.

"It was a big part of my vocational formation," Father Young said.

Prior to coming to Our Lady of Grace, Father Young was pastor at St. Joan of Arc in Aberdeen. It was there that he began to have regular Masses with school students, a tradition he continues at the Parkton parish school.

"The church is kind of my classroom," he said. "Catholic education is important to me. It inspires me."

In addition to teaching the faith, he makes visits to school throughout the week. During Halloween, he dresses up and attempts to scare students.

No matter what, the children always see the same thing: a regular guy.

"I feel like I have a good rapport with the kids and am pretty good at relating to them," he said. "I will always afford the opportunity to be there, time-wise."

Both Father Hook and Father Young are attempting to strengthen the bonds between their parishes and respective schools, hoping it results in fuller pews on the weekends.

"It's working," Sister Joan said of Father Hook's efforts at St. Ursula. "People are coming to church. The kids are talking about his presence."