

# Trending up: Some schools see substantial enrollment gains



How does a Catholic school not just maintain a solid student body, but grow it? Enrollment at the 19 Catholic high schools, three middle schools and 42 K-8s in the Archdiocese of Baltimore remains stable across the board, thanks in part to the BOOST scholarship program – and innovative leadership and marketing.

More than 750 students at Catholic schools in the archdiocese are receiving more than \$1.75 million in scholarships during the 2018-19 school year through the state of Maryland's Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) program, which benefits families based on household income.

In its third year, the BOOST program's influence is seen in Baltimore City, where it has contributed to gains at Archbishop Borders School, Holy Angels Catholic School and Cardinal Shehan School, which have enjoyed enrollment growth of 70, 44 and 37 percent, respectively, over the last five years.

"BOOST has been of substantial impact to providing Catholic educational opportunities for children in Baltimore City," said James Sellinger, chancellor of education for the archdiocese.

It's also benefited schools beyond the Beltway, which have carved distinctive success stories, often with the help of local pastors.

## **Cumberland**

Bishop Walsh School made a splash in prep basketball last spring with the hiring of coach Dan Prete. His international roster includes players from Botswana, Canada, Ghana, Finland, Spain and Turkey, the homeland of former John Carroll School star Yavuz Gultekin, familiar to Baltimore Catholic League fans.

“Athletics are part of our strategic plan,” said Ray Kiddy, principal. “Your scores are in the paper, whether you win or not.”

A renaissance in Cumberland preceded the basketball emphasis. Bishop Walsh, a K-12 school, had fewer than 300 students when Kiddy became principal in 2016. The petitions at a Jan. 8 school Mass included a prayer for five students who were added after Christmas, bringing enrollment to 370.

BOOST helped, as did dedicated financial support for new students from the Department of Catholic Schools, similar to that offered to Archbishop Curley High School and the former Seton Keough High School.

“That allowed us to attract some new families that had been on the fence,” said Connie Milligan, director of admissions and communications, who has broadened the school’s social media presence.

More than 130 Bishop Walsh students live in West Virginia, where the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston was lending support before Archbishop William E. Lori became its apostolic administrator. The school’s regional brand extends into Pennsylvania.

“Bishop Walsh is the only Catholic school (in the archdiocese) west of Hagerstown,” said Father Edward Hendricks, pastor of Divine Mercy Parish in Frostburg, who sits on its board. “We have hopefully turned a corner.”

## **Linthicum Heights**

At the recommendation of the Department of Catholic Schools, St. Philip Neri School began partnering in 2015 with the Healey Education Foundation, which, in a news release, said the school shifted from traditional candy and bake sales and “invigorated its alumni base and created sustainable fundraising.”

It has since grown by 24 percent, 11 percent of that coming in the last year. It went from 365 students in 2017-18 to 408 at the start of 2018-19. Dividends include \$20,000 in awards from the Healey foundation.

The surge included Sue Wenzlick, a former St. Philip Neri parent and math teacher, becoming advancement director at the urging of principal Kate Daley. Wenzlick

knew not just the school, but the community in northern Anne Arundel County, as she serves as one of the emcees of the Linthicum Fair. Local options include nearby Linthicum Elementary, a 2014 National Blue Ribbon School.

As Father Michael A. DeAscanis, pastor, put it to Wenzlick, “What makes us different?” That led to his collaboration on a new logo, “Nourishing the soul, mind and body,” and increased social media.

Father DeAscanis and associate pastor Father Isaac Makovo, equally athletic, serve as moving billboards.

“Father Isaac said ‘I run a lot, I can advertise the school.’ They’re big parts of the success here,” Wenzlick said.

The school’s academic substance includes Notre Dame of Maryland University helping prepare teachers for a new Maker Space lab.

## **Westminster**

How did St. John School increase enrollment by 13 percent, from 231 students to 265, over one summer?

In addition to an academic base that has produced a robotics team that beats high schools, “Catholic identity has grown here,” according to Jo Marie Tolj, principal. For that she credits Father Mark Bialek, the pastor who placed her on the parish leadership team, which involved attending an Amazing Parish Conference in Dallas last April.

“He is the strongest supporter I have,” Tolj said. “When the parish makes decisions, it includes the school. That includes fundraising, use of the building and planning the liturgical season. How do we involve school students in Mass, help us foster our ‘young disciples’?”

Ninety-four percent of St. John’s students are Catholic. It’s the only Catholic school in Carroll County, and Tolj points 16 miles south to Sykesville, where Marianist Father Neville O’Donohue is the pastor of St. Joseph.

“Father Neville is another big supporter, of us and other Catholic schools,” Tolj said.  
“I’ll speak at one his Masses at Catholic Schools Week.”