Annunziata School

CREATING JOY

Catholic schools and public schools have a common goal: to get kids through high school and on to adulthood, outfitting them with the skills and knowledge that will help them succeed in the world. But Annunziata school Principal Gerre Book has a higher goal: to get her students to heaven. It was a visit from a priest before the school year opened that brought this ultimate goal to light; it’s a story she recounts to every new teacher who comes to the school. “He came to one of our open houses and we were all just nervous wrecks,” Book recalls. “We were all new teachers and we were worried about whether the bulletin boards were straight and if the staplers were in the right spot. He walked down the hall and said, ‘All you want to do is get these children to heaven. Why are you worried about all of this? Just get them to heaven.’” For Book, her staff, and her students, that’s the message that gets them through each school day. “That’s what we’re about,” she says. “I think that’s where God graces us and blesses us. Not that we don’t fall, but we get back up.”

Annunziata Parish school is one of three stand-alone schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis that are dedicated to serving kindergarten through 8th grade students who have special needs. The Archdiocese was the first diocese in our nation to step away from institutionalization for special needs children, and step into a special education program. Decades later, the Archdiocese continues this great effort in several schools, with the ultimate goal being to have the capacity to serve the full spectrum of special needs families, Dr. Cathy Johns, associate superintendent of curriculum and instruction, says. The model seeks to serve families who prefer a fully inclusive environment, one where students with special needs attend “general education” schools such as parish schools and Catholic high schools, as well as others who prefer to have their children educated at a stand alone school, where their student will learn alongside other students with special needs. “We are continuing to morph, because you will see that society is much more open and accepting, more inclusive in education,” she says. “So, we are trying to bridge that gap—how can we meet the needs of children who have learning issues...
in the least restrictive environment…the goal is to provide what we can at schools so that there is an option and a choice for Catholic families or families with children who want a Catholic education.”

Dr. Johns envisions this plan to resemble a funnel. “If you start at the top where it’s the wide mouth…that’s the least restrictive environment, that’s the gen-ed buildings and classrooms,” she says. In these cases, teachers would be able to provide in-classroom help to students. She’s adamant about the importance of equipping all teachers, not just those who study special education, with the skills to help these students. “In our classrooms today, you are going to have students who have needs. And they’re not going to be able to be taught [in the same way].”

The funnel model continues with students who need help in a particular subject area. “If it’s not the best environment in the gen-ed classroom, then let’s pull them out into what the public world calls a resource room; give them some intensive extra help in those subject areas, but they really don’t need the full instruction.” The next setting would help students who need a bit more one-on-one instruction. “Then we could have a self-contained classroom where kids could come and actually get instruction in a particular content area,” she says. Finally, we move to the traditional stand-alone schools that enroll only children with special needs. This funnel model is fit to serve all special needs families, Dr. Johns says. “I want no parent to be able, realistically, to say, you do not have a program that meets the needs of my child.” Dr. Johns does recognize that there are some situations that schools might not be properly equipped to handle, such as medical or mental health issues.

Johns and Book have the same end goal, to get the students to heaven, but there are lots of milestones in between, including getting the students back to general education Catholic schools when possible. “My goal is never to accept a child into our school with the thought that they will stay with us forever,” Johns says. “It’s to accept them with the thought that they’ll stay with us for as long as they need…we work with a diagnosis so that we know how to provide what they need, but we don’t let the diagnosis direct where they can be placed.” Book, who is a product of Catholic education from beginning to end, has been with the department since 1981. “It’s the only place I’ve ever worked because I just believe in Catholic education,” she says. “We’ve had different locations, but now there’s just this overflow into the parish schools, and the students who come here really need full time. Our goal is to give them what they need and then get them back into the mainstream as soon as they can.” The school is just steps away from Annunziata parish, which has always been a wealth of support for the school. “The parish totally supports our program, and they’ve always done that,” Book says. “There’s not one parishioner who attends the school; over the years there have been, but not currently, and they just continue to support us because they believe in what goes on in our school.”

At Annunziata, students are divided into three classrooms based on grade level: kindergarten-3rd grade, 4th-6th, and 7th and 8th. Even with multiple grade levels in one room, class sizes are still small,
which allows students much more small-group and one-on-one learning time, a valuable difference, noted by both staff and parents, from public schools. “The parents are so adamant about the difference in the class size,” Book says. “The public schools do the best they can, but their numbers are so large. The student that’s coming Monday, he’s a first grader, and it’s not that they’re not happy with their public school, but it’s just kind of like he’s just in the room. Because he doesn’t act out, he doesn’t ask for help, she says he’s really not getting that help.” She’s heard this same story over and over again. “I had a call yesterday from a mom whose son was here two or three years,” she says. “They just went back [to public school] because they moved to a different school district at the end of last year. She called me yesterday and said he wants to come visit.” Her family had discussed their son’s education and decided to keep him in public school for the time being, but planned to come back to Annunziata at the start of 5th grade. “He’s doing okay academically, but socially he just can’t handle everything that’s going on,” Book relayed. “The mother said, ‘you know what’s different about your school? You guys coach the students all day long, and you help them through those social events that are coming up.’” Cathy Johns says the stand-alone Catholic schools, with the small classes and like-minded populations, encourage an inclusive environment. “[Elsewhere] they play side by side in the sandbox, but they really don’t join together in the sand box,” she says. “In here, everybody gets to be an integral part of the sand box.” It’s this individual time that will prepare the students for their lives beyond their Annunziata education, and teaching the students the importance of advocating for themselves is a huge part of the battle. “What we’re all trying to do is to teach these students how they learn, so they can take those skills and apply them wherever they land, wherever they go,” Book says.

Incorporating Catholicism into every aspect of learning, not just religion class, is imperative to the education style at Annunziata. “It’s a way of life, it’s really not just a subject,” Dr. Johns says. It’s the greatest tool in helping Gerre achieve her aforementioned goal. “[Catholicism] is always in our school theme,” she says. “Our theme this year is JOY: Jesus, Others, Yourself. So everything that we try to do is around that whole aspect. How we treat each other, how we respect each other. I always say we don’t have to follow our state and government laws, but we follow God’s laws. What does he say? Love your neighbor as yourself.” This teaching flows from religion class, to math class, to the style of discipline. “I say, no you’re not automatically in trouble, let’s sit down and talk about what really happened,” Book says. “And so often with these kiddos it’s a matter of misreading the situation or not having the language to express themselves correctly…we’re always trying to say okay, now what would Jesus do?”

The theme of JOY truly envelops the school. “There’s a bulletin board at the end of the hall that says ‘be an ambassador of joy’ and every student could sign up for three areas that they would like to work on this year, being more Christ-like with others,” Book says. And the teaching goes even beyond the school day. “I took another step with the parents to ask how do you do this at home?” she says. “In all my newsletters I give them examples of how we have joy happening at school and how are you bringing joy, and that feeling that God loves you, even when we make mistakes, even when we have a bad day, when we mess up, it’s okay.” It’s all part of Book’s ultimate aforementioned goal. “We’re all on this journey together, we’re all figuring out how to get these students to heaven.”