

Pivot to bilingual education

Catholic schools revive enrollment with new program

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Two Catholic grammar schools on Long Island were struggling with enrollment, so church leaders came up with a bold plan: turn them into a bilingual, dual language school.

Six months into the Diocese of Rockville Centre's first venture into dual language programs, the dual-campus Our Lady of Guadalupe School in Central Islip and Deer Park is thriving, with waiting lists in some grades, including nursery and pre-K, school officials said.

The school is getting support from Boston College and Notre Dame University, and recently hosted a visit from El Salvador's consul general for Long Island, who said he would report back to the Central American nation's president about the project.

"I've been in Catholic education for 30 years, I worked recruitment at the high school level, and I've never seen the amount of interest that is coming" to the schools by parents, said Valerie Serpe, head of the Our Lady of Guadalupe School.

Students in nursery and pre-K at the sister schools in Central Islip and Deer Park spend half the day studying in English and the other half in Spanish. The program will move up a grade each year until the entire school is dual language.

By graduation from 8th grade, students should be completely fluent in both languages.

"We're growing it up from the bottom up," Serpe said.

The schools have a mix of children whose parents are immigrants from Latin America and whose first language is Spanish, and others whose parents are longtime residents and whose first language is English.

The schools were previously known as Our Lady of Providence in Central Islip and SS Cyril and Methodius in Deer Park.

Their turnaround is notable because the number of Catholic grammar schools on Long Island is dwindling amid declining enrollment — a trend made worse by the COVID-19



Consulate General of El Salvador Henry Salgado visits Celica Villegas-King's pre-K class at Our Lady of Guadalupe School in Central Islip.

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pandemic, church officials say.

Between 2020 and 2021, the diocese closed five grammar schools, leaving it with 31. At its height in the 1960s, the diocese had 92.

Innovative instruction

The Guadalupe school is receiving support from the Marianist Brothers, who are helping to oversee a revitalization of Catholic grammar schools on Long Island. The Marianists run highly regarded Chaminade High School in Mineola and Kellenberg High School in Uniondale.

Brother Thomas Cleary, the president of Chaminade who also is spearheading the revitalization effort, said it was critical to keep the two Catholic schools afloat since if they closed there would be few other nearby options for parents who want a Catholic education for their children.

Cleary said numerous studies showed that children who learned a second language at an early age exhibit enhanced cognitive abilities later.

The old model of studying a second language starting in middle or high school is far less effective than starting at a young age, he said.

"Who wouldn't want to be learning a second language from



A bilingual feelings chart in Villegas-King's classroom. Nursery and pre-K students split their day between English and Spanish.

the early grades up instead of the traditional ways of studying it in later years?" he said.

The schools accept children of any religion, though about three-fourths of their 400 students are Catholic. Tuition is about \$6,000 a year, and includes before- and after-school care from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Both Boston College and Notre Dame are providing support through regular training, access to research, guidance on how to attract students, and visits to other dual language schools.

There are at least 2,000 dual language schools or programs in the United States, with about 100 of them in Catholic institutions, said Elena Sada, head of the Two-Way Immersion Net-

work of Catholic Schools at Boston College.

The programs span 18 languages, including Portuguese, Mandarin, Haitian Creole, Arabic, Hebrew, Japanese, Korean, Native American and Russian.

Bilingual benefits

Parents at the schools in Central Islip and Deer Park said they had various reasons for signing up.

Blanca Umanson, an immigrant from El Salvador who lives in Central Islip, said she was worried her 4-year-old son Matthew knew almost no Spanish since the family speaks mainly English at home.

Now, he is speaking Spanish regularly and comes home from school asking her how to

say certain things in Spanish.

Sandiya Quackenbush, whose first language is English, said it was critical to have her 5-year-old daughter Amiyah become bilingual.

Amiyah was in a Spanish immersion preschool, and when Quackenbush heard about the new school in Central Islip, she signed up immediately.

"It was a no-brainer," she said.

Berlyne Roche, a native of Haiti who lives in Brentwood, wants her 5-year-old son Cedrick to become trilingual. He already speaks Haitian Creole and English.

With the Latino population on Long Island booming, "I think in the future it will give him a lot of opportunity" if he speaks Spanish, she said.

Serpe said the goal of the school was to turn out bilingual students and build bridges between different ethnic groups.

Henry Paul Salgado, El Salvador's consul general for the region, said he was impressed during his visit last month.

"You see the cultures reflected, where there is no difference between whites and Hispanics and Blacks," he said in Spanish. "This is very important because we are in a globalized world."

Besides teaching languages, the schools are showing the children "how to live in peace," he said.