

Sisters support unique model for education in Buffalo

Selena Carrion is a serious student, listening attentively in Laura Derigo's math class on a recent Monday morning.

She is joined by a handful of classmates in the eighth-grade classroom at St. Monica's, the all-girls school that is home to 32 students and part of NativityMiguel Middle School, Buffalo. Just 10 minutes away by car, 52 boys are learning at the St. Augustine campus. Each campus offers an education in grades five through eight.

These are students from low-income families

who come to NativityMiguel with a commitment to education and maintaining a positive attitude toward self and others.



Tonisha Redfern, left, and Kori Slaughter are eighth graders at the St. Monica campus of NativityMiguel School in Buffalo.

Taking a moment to speak with a visitor from her seat, Selena said that she enjoys the teachers and students at St. Monica's and finds the atmosphere and education different from other schools she attended.

"I like the smaller classes," she said with a quiet smile. "You don't have the commotion and drama (as in other schools)."

Students at both campuses are called "Scholars" and are in school for eight-and-a-half hours a day. A fact sheet on the school boasts attendance of 97 percent.

In her second year at St. Monica's, Selena said that she is hoping to attend Mt. Mercy Academy next year and eventually pursue a career as an FBI agent.

Selena has hope for her future, and that is exactly what school president Nancy Langer wants to hear.

"I love to see the changes in students from the time they start here to the time when they take advantage of the opportunities the schools give them to change their lives through education," said Nancy, a former attorney. She was development director for both campuses in 2005 and became president in 2008.

The Jesuits started the faith-based "Nativity" model of schools for low-income students in lower Manhattan in 1971. Jesuit Father Edward Durkin, principal of the school, director of the St. Augustine campus and a math teacher there, was a founder of that first school.

In 1989, the model has developed as the NativityMiguel Network with some 60 middle schools in the United States.

The "Nativity Model" consists of three separate but interrelated programs: a Middle School Program with extended after-school hours and an extended school year; a mandatory Summer Leadership Program, focusing on character building and continued education; and a Graduate Support Program, providing academic support and tuition assistance to alumni in high school.

Jesuits from the New York Province started NativityMiguel in Buffalo in 2004. At the St. Monica campus, there are five teachers and another who comes to the school as part of Americorps Builds Lives Through Education. The list includes Laura Derigo, campus director, who also teaches math. St. Augustine has six teachers including Father Durkin. A Catholic Charities Volunteer Corps member also teaches.

Annual tuition is \$2,400, which represents about 25 percent of the cost which includes the extended day, summer and graduate support (except for high school tuition assistance) as well as the small classes for the regular academic school day.

"Many of our families can only afford to pay \$500 a year. These are the types of students we seek to serve," Nancy said.

The school provides financial assistance to make up the remainder of the cost, she said.

The Sisters of Mercy NyPPaW are one of the co-endorsing groups supporting the school. Others include the Jesuits, Christian Brothers, Daughters of the Heart of Mary and True Bethel Baptist Church.

Sister JoAnne Courneen, from NyPPaW's leadership team, serves on the school's board of members. "Our involvement is very consistent with the mission of the Sisters of Mercy and Catherine McAuley's belief that education is a way to empower others," she said.

Mercy Sisters Sally Maloney (Buffalo) and Bernadette Bell (Erie) are trustees.

The boys at St. Augustine's echo comments made by their peers at St. Monica's saying they like their teachers, classmates and learning. "It's fun," said seventh-grader Christopher Dargan, an aspiring singer.

Father Durkin quietly watched proudly as students – like those at St. Monica's – entered his math class greeting a visitor with a firm handshake, eye contact and warm words of welcome. "We try to expand their possibilities once they start seeing new possibilities," Father Durkin said. "It unlocks things inside of them they never knew they had."

According to Nancy, most students at the campuses are African-American. In fact, some have emigrated from Africa. A quarter of the students are Catholic. She said an emphasis on academics is meshed with art, sewing and a writer's workshop for the girls at St. Monica's, which is housed in a former Catholic elementary school.

As president, Nancy is responsible for fundraising, a difficult job seeing that parents pay only five percent of their child's tuition. The rest comes from grants, foundations, donations and other sources. "It's a lot of work," she said with a laugh.

The Sisters of Mercy provide some financial support, Nancy said. "We've been doing it," she said. "We are seeing more community support each year."