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# With second Blue Ribbon award, St. Peter's School in Olney known for family spirit and faith

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Kristen Cocozzella, at right, the principal of St. Peter's Catholic School in Olney, and Nelson Abreu, the assistant principal, celebrate the Sept. 24 announcement that their school was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a National Blue Ribbon School for 2020. This is the second time the school has been so honored. St. Peter's School was also recognized as a Blue Ribbon School in 2012. (Photo courtesy of St. Peter's School)

As the U.S. Department of Education this year honored St. Peter's Catholic School in Olney, Maryland, with a National Blue Ribbon School Award signaling it as one of the best in the nation, one parent there called the honor "an outward recognition for all the fantastic work being done there."

"To get this Blue Ribbon is good news that was just so validating," said Megan Clark, the mother of a second- and a fourth-grader at the school who herself is a graduate of St. Peter's School. "This is a phenomenal welcoming school community where kids feel incredibly safe and loved and cared for."

St. Peter's Blue Ribbon designation was one of two awarded to Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Washington for 2020. Also recognized was Our Lady of Mercy School in Potomac, Maryland. The two schools are among only 10 Maryland schools – four of which are non-public – to be designated as Blue Ribbon Schools this year.

During the coronavirus pandemic, St. Peter's Catholic School's administrators, teachers and parents decided to offer 100 percent virtual learning to students there as the 2020-21 school year began. Parents were notified about the National Blue Ribbon Award through social media, and the school hopes to celebrate as a community when all the students return to in-person classes there.

This is second time St. Peter's School has been so honored. It previously won the Blue Ribbon Award in 2012. In addition, in the past 10 years, six teachers there have been honored as Golden Apple Award winners.

"I am a teacher myself and to see my kids excited to go (and learn at school) is all I could ask for," said Clark, who teaches history at Our Lady of Good Counsel High School in Olney. She is also a graduate of Good Counsel High School. "Students at St. Peter's are really well grounded," she added.

For Clark, no Blue Ribbon Award was needed to know the school was perfect for her children. Not only Clark, but both of her sisters are also graduates of the school. "St. Peter's has been part of my life for a very long time," she said.

When she and her husband were looking at schools for their own children, "St. Peter's was the first one we chose to look at. We just love it."

Kristen Cocozzella, the second-year principal of St. Peter's School, is not surprised by that.

"Families come to St. Peter's and they stay at St. Peter's because they feel like they join a family," she said. "They are not just dropping off their kids, they are connecting with other families and realize that the administration here wants their kids to flourish and succeed."

One way the school helps students "flourish and succeed" is through its participation in Project Lead the Way. The school was named a PLTW school in 2015.

Project Lead the Way is a nonprofit group that develops Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) programs for use in elementary, middle and high schools, and provides training for teachers to implement the curriculum. St. Peter's School was the first in the state of Maryland to implement Project Lead the Way's STEM program designed specifically for students in pre-kindergarten through the fifth grade.

"Since then, we have actually become a certified Project Lead the Way school all the way through eighth grade," Cocozzella said.

Robert Seubert has taught middle school science at St. Peter's for eight years.

"Everything seems to come together at this school – the staff that I work with is amazing, they are sincere and go the extra mile, and the students are super motivated," he said. "I've worked pretty much all over the county and it (teaching at St. Peter's) is like night and day. It is just a pleasure to come to school. The kids come in smiling every day."



In a file photo, students from St. Peter's Catholic School in Olney gather outside the Apostolic Nunciature in Washington, D.C., to greet Pope Francis during his September 2015 visit to the nation's capital. (CS photo/Jaclyn Lippelmann)

Father Thomas Kalita, the pastor of St. Peter's Parish, noted that school parents have a great role in how successful their students are.

"What we are able to build rests upon the solid foundation of faith and caring and concern which our families provide," he said. "Our students are eager to learn because their parents encourage them to develop all the gifts which God has given to them."

The school also offers an enriched arts and music program for students. St. Peter's established a partnership with nearby Olney Theatre to offer play writing courses to fifth graders and monologue training to fourth graders. In addition, puppeteers have taught students the art of puppetry.

At the end of the play writing class, students travel to Olney Theatre and stage the play. This year, because of the restrictions brought on by the coronavirus pandemic, the staging of the play was done remotely.

"It is important to us as educators to recognize that there are so many opportunities available to kids these days, and we want to make sure they have a well-rounded education and they can find their strengths and where their interests are peaked," Cocozzella said.

Clark said the variety of offerings at the school "makes students really well grounded."

"STEM, a wonderful drama and music and choral program and other programs are fantastic and top notched," she said. "It really allows them (students) to pursue who they really want to be. St. Peter's exposes them to different things because they know there is not one 'cookie cutter' kind of student."

“Mrs. Coccozzella and her faculty at St. Peter School have always strived for academic excellence,” said Wendy Anderson, associate superintendent of Catholic schools for the Archdiocese of Washington. “They are committed to meeting all learners where they are and bringing them to their greatest potential.”

When the school received its second national Blue Ribbon Award earlier this month, Father Thomas Kalita, pastor of Saint Peter’s Parish, said the “primary credit for this honor goes to our dedicated faculty and administration who use all their talents and gifts in the ministry of education.”

“Our teachers and our administrators truly understand that what they do is ministry for the sake of the Gospel and of the kingdom of God,” he said.

Having caring, involved teachers and staff is a longtime hallmark of the school. Clark said her own decision to become a teacher was spurred by the example of teachers at St. Peter’s.

“I was inspired to be a teacher by my social studies teacher, Mrs. Cumberland, who was just so engaging and did all of these interactive lessons with us, and Mrs. Belding, the language arts teacher who pushed us to read and to think about things in a way we never thought of before,” Clark said. “I have such clear memories of them and positive memories.”

While singling out those two teachers, Clark said, “I loved the relationships I had with all of my teachers and the way they treated me with dignity and integrity and allowed me to grow as an individual. I have always valued that, and I wanted that for my children.”

Both Seubert and Clark also praised the work of the school administration.

“The administration is probably one of the best I ever worked with,” Seubert said. “It was a really good transfer when Liz (Whelan, the longtime principal of St. Peter’s who retired at the end of the 2019 school year) left and Kristen (Coccozzella) took over.”

He added he is particularly impressed that “the classroom is a better learning environment” at St. Peter’s than at the public schools he has taught in. “There is better discipline, and that makes it easier to teach children when you are not constantly correcting someone’s behavior.”

Speaking of Coccozzella, Clark said she was “grateful my children get to see a strong, young confident principal lead with such integrity and honesty.”

“She just truly loves her job and is passionate about it, and it resonates with their teachers,” Clark said of the principal. “She has a genuine happiness for being there, and as a teacher and as a parent I appreciate that.”

Father Kalita noted that “Mrs. Coccozzella provides leadership” and as the pastor of the parish he provides “encouragement for her and her staff to continue their excellent work.”

Cocozzella, for her part, also credits her predecessor, under whom she served as assistant principal for two years. “I have to give so much credit to Liz for setting the precedent and setting so much of the groundwork for this,” Blue Ribbon Award, she said.

Cocozzella said that as proud as she is of her school's academic successes, she is equally proud of its Catholic identity and its work to pass on the faith. The majority of the staff is completely catechist certified.



In a file photo from 2016, students at St. Peter's Catholic School in Olney pray a living rosary. (CS photo/Jaclyn Lippelmann)

“Obviously our Catholic identity is paramount for us – it is why we exist,” she said. “The minute a family walks through our doors, our main goal is to help that family grow in the faith.”

The principal stressed that “we strive to have our teachers incorporate our Catholic faith across all subjects every single day. We teach that we are disciples of Christ, and we must live as Christ wanted. “

“I love the values that come with a Catholic education, and I love that a Catholic education allows the whole person – mind, body and soul – to be educated,” said Clark. “I love our kids seeing the administration live out their faith. That is a powerful, powerful experience.”

When the Blue Ribbon designation was announced, Cocozzella called it “such an honor for the whole community.” She praised “the unwavering support of our pastor, Father Kalita, our teachers and staff, the eagerness and curiosity of our students and the trust and commitment of our parents.”

Kelly Branaman, secretary for Catholic Schools and superintendent of Schools for the Archdiocese of Washington, congratulated “Mrs. Cocozzella and the entire Saint Peter Catholic School community for their continued excellence in academics,” and said the Blue Ribbon Award “validates the hard work of students, families, teachers and leadership” at the school.

