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Academy Experience Cultivates Fresh Perspective in Education

by Melissa McNally, Staff Writer
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The robotics club at the Academy of Our Lady of Peace received an award for research at the regional competition in Upper Montclair last December. The club also was invited to participate in the state tournament in Mount Olive.

Academic excellence and spiritual enrichment are the benchmarks of any Catholic school. In the Archdiocese of Newark, several elementary schools have gone above and beyond their traditional role to become academies. The Academy of Our Lady of Peace, New Providence; Our Lady of Mercy Academy, Park Ridge; and Saint Rose of Lima Academy, Short Hills, have taken the next step to facilitate a quality education for a generation of Catholic students.

In May 2008, Brother Ralph Darmento, F.S.C., deputy superintendent of schools, and Sister Joan Amelia Ferruggiario, S.S.J., assistant superintendent of elementary schools, Cluster 1, granted academy status to Our Lady of Peace School. As detailed in the "Guidelines for Transitioning a School to an Academy," written by Brother Ralph, a school must meet special criteria including additional curriculum requirements, a gifted-and-talented program, academically related activities, an Early Childhood program and religious education. (See related commentary article by Brother Ralph on page 24.)

After applying to become an academy, Brother Ralph and Sister Joan visited the school to speak with parents, teachers and students. An active school advisory board and home school association are also essential to becoming an academy.

"Academy designation implies that special skills and subjects are taught," Brother Ralph said. "It is not merely a merging of schools and inserting the word 'academy' into the school's new name."

The recent change in status has not been the only change at The Academy of Our Lady of Peace. Thomas Berrios became principal of the academy in July. Diane Pollack, former principal, spearheaded the movement from school to academy.

With only 160 students, the school created a great buzz due to the name change. "It was an exciting beginning to the school year," Berrios said. "We promoted the academy status in September and October. The school put up the sign and we had backpacks made with our new logo."

One of the school's innovative enrichment programs is the robotics team. Participating in the First Lego League, the school purchased a kit and built a working robot. Students conducted their own research and presented their creation to a board of judges.

While evaluating the school for academy status, a lack of sports programs was noted. This year, volleyball, after-school tennis and a track team will be open to the students.

The participation of faculty and parents has been essential to the growth of the elementary school. "The faculty members bring ideas to us. They want us to be better," Berrios pointed out. The change to an academy also has generated renewed interest in the school, its principal explained. "The community is very aware of our school and being named an academy is step forward."

The principal has seen a positive response in the community when the school participates in service projects. Clothing and food drives and ministry in action are emphasized at the academy. Older students visit Horizon School in Livingston, which serves more than 150 students with multiple disabilities. "When you ask in earnest, people respond with an open heart. I have learned that there is a great community feel to our school. So many parents want to be involved."

The students have joined in the academy spirit and feel a sense of pride in their school. "(Becoming an academy) is about the students—their work and their accomplishment. The eighth graders have been our biggest cheerleaders. They feel proud that the school they love and were committed to was recognized."

This June, The Academy of Our Lady of Peace will celebrate the 50th anniversary of its first graduating class. Berrios noted that alumni have responded with enthusiasm to the academic status. "Coming from this tiny little school to a nationally recognized institution, they were thrilled."

Our Lady of Mercy Interparochial School was granted academy status last November. Laraine Meehan, principal for 14 years, believed her school already had possessed the criteria of an academy.

"When I read the guidelines for academy status, I felt that Our Lady of Mercy qualified immediately. Brother Ralph and Sister Patricia Butler, S.C.—the associate superintendent for elementary school administration, Cluster 2—met with our executive advisory board and the home school association. After three weeks, we were found out we were qualified. We were approved before Thanksgiving and the school was thrilled and very pleased with the decision," she said.

"Truly, the hard work of this community has created an academy where students and teachers strive for excellence...where all achieve as a result of the dynamic teaching/learning interaction," Brother Ralph noted in the official letter granting the school academy status.

Foreign language and math clubs are some of the after-school activities offered. A special-education department, to address children who learn differently, has always been part of the curriculum. Forensics (the classical cultivation of public speaking, debating and extemporaneous presentations) is a highlight of the school, which received an "honorable mention" award in state mock trial three years ago. After school activities are another way students develop life skills, Meehan believes. "The extra-curricular activities show students that what they learn in class can be applied in real life. It shows them that what they learn from books is not useless."

Our Lady of Mercy Academy will have a celebratory Mass during Catholic Schools Week to commemorate their status change. The principal wants her school to be known for their excellent academics and a Christian environment.

Saint Rose of Lima Academy made the transition last January. When applying for academy status in August 2007, Principal Karen Fasanella was motivated by the passing of science teacher Oy Ling Chun, and a wish to create a science lab in her honor.

"I felt our school met the criteria for a status change," Fasanella said. "We thought becoming an academy would be great to market our school to an internal audience and give Saint Rose of Lima duly noted recognition. After our beloved science teacher passed, we began collecting funds for a new science lab. During this time, we underwent the process for academy status."

During Catholic Schools Week of last year, the state-of-the-art Oy Ling Chun Science Center was dedicated and the school officially became an academy (see *The Catholic Advocate*, March 5, 2008). "The school was so thrilled to receive that letter. It was great to have the science center opening aligned with the status change. It was a truly momentous occasion."

Celebrating its 140th anniversary this year, Saint Rose of Lima Academy has a tradition of pinning the graduating class during Catholic Schools Week. "The eighth grade class realized they will be the first class to graduate with the word 'academy' in the title. They are very excited," Fasanella explained. "For parents, becoming an academy gave them the affirmation they wanted. Our area has an extremely strong public school system. It shows the parents that we can keep up with (the public schools) and go beyond."

The evaluation process enlightened Fasanella to the good work parents, faculty and students do. "We all discovered things we were taking for granted, like our dedicated staff and extra-curricular activities."

Enrichment programs, like orbital studies—a systematic way to encourage students to become independent learners—is a 10-week program led by a faculty advisor, that meets on a weekly basis. Students choose topics that they are interested in and make a 10-15 minute presentation on their research at the orbital expo. Occurring at the end of each trimester, the expo gives parents and the student body an opportunity to see their hard work.

The parents and students sign a contract stipulating that the children do all of the documentation and research themselves. Topics ranging from the rise and fall of the Incas to great heroines of literature are presented. "The students respond to orbital studies because they are allowed a choice in what they are studying. They become interested on a much deeper level," Fasanella explained.

Sacramental and faith programs are essential to an academy, Fasanella said. Students live their faith through service to

Saint Mary's Soup Kitchen in Elizabeth. The upper grades prepare sandwiches for the needy and deliver and serve them every month. During the last two years, the entire school created fund-raisers to help build homes in Haiti. The program was so successful, that last year, they built two homes. Students were able to see a photo of the home they built and the families that they helped.

"The students are doing very inspiring types of work. A group of third graders sold hot chocolate during winter to raise money. The students think of these fund-raisers on their own. Their faith becomes more realistic and they know they can make a difference," the principal explained.