Dear Friends,

We are excited to share our fifth edition of our Gesu School Spotlight! These pages offer glimpses into our 2020–2021 school year and the resilience that our staff and 450 Pre-K–8th grade students have exhibited.

Gesu has evolved to deliver a safe, cutting-edge learning environment for our in-person and remote students. Teachers shifted deftly from fully virtual learning to a hybrid plan in January 2021, which phased students into in-person classes at their families’ discretion.

As a national model of transformative inner-city education, Gesu was poised to make these seamless transitions for many reasons:

• We establish deep-rooted, caring relationships with families, often over generations.
• Our teachers and staff remain exceptionally dedicated to our Jesuit and IHM Catholic principles of social justice, faith, creative hope, and love.
• Our solid infrastructure, from technology to financial health, has been in place for years.
• We remain steadfast in our mission to empower students to transcend all forms of poverty through holistic, innovative education.

Thank you for being part of the Gesu School community. We pray that you are well!

Peace and blessings,

Bryan H. Carter
President and CEO
Sr. Ellen Convey, IHM
Principal

Cover photo: Kindergartners plant an urban garden, learning outdoors and participating in the Catholic tradition of honoring Mary during the month of May.
Caring for the Whole Child

Gesu educates the whole child, integrating wellness, character development, and faith formation with academics. This holistic approach became even more imperative over the last year. Teachers intentionally infused social-emotional learning into daily instruction. Gesu counselors led weekly virtual mindfulness practice with each class, in addition to “lunch bunches” to socialize, individual sessions, and online resource rooms.

Counselors Denise Magnus and Amanda Rice guided a mindfulness lesson on goals. Third graders began with a meditation on positive thinking, including breathing techniques. They discussed goal setting and LeBron James’ book, I Promise. Students then declared their own promises to themselves for that trimester and beyond.

“I want to be a better listener.”

“My goal is to never say ‘I can’t,’ but instead, ‘How can I do this?’ Also to do my best and make it to college.”

“To never give up!”

“My promise to myself is to get good grades and study in the present term.”

— Third graders’ promises
Innovating in Instruction

Innovative learning starts with Gesu’s youngest students. This last year pushed Gesu’s pioneering methods even further. Due to space limitations in our lab, Science Coordinator Pat Leaf brought experiments to classrooms and virtual spaces.

Pre-K students learned the scientific method through a “Skittles experiment.” Ms. Leaf and Pre-K Teacher Peggy Moore guided students to predict outcomes when water is added to the sugary candy. They observed a rainbow form, discussed the experiment’s results, and reinforced interdisciplinary learning on colors. Students also discussed the importance of balancing occasional treats with healthy fruits and vegetables.

During winter, Pre-K and Kindergarten students witnessed caterpillars transform into butterflies. They learned about the animals’ phases of growth and released the butterflies on the Gesu rooftop in spring.

“It’s important to start the process of scientific inquiry as early as Pre-K to stimulate the mind with creativity and introduce the science curriculum.”

—Pat Leaf, Science Coordinator

“The young Gesu students love to explore and work hands-on. To learn, every child in our Pre-K science class must imagine, play, create, and laugh.”

—Peggy Moore, Pre-K Teacher
During hybrid learning, Gesu provided inventive instruction to in-person and at-home learners, adjusting methods to offer myriad ways to access material and achieve learning objectives safely, while employing experiential techniques. Gesu maximized our technology to ensure that at-home learners accessed live instruction and could interact with classmates. Teachers embraced our urban outdoor space. Gesu created ongoing opportunities for community building and faith sharing to support one another.

Partners like Dancing with the Students reimagined programming online. Seventh graders learned ballroom dance in pods. Program managers fused video to create a one-of-a-kind celebration for students to watch their performance.

Monthly Mass broadcast virtually from our chapel. Each day online, administrators replicated morning prayer, birthday blessings, moments in Black history, and our motivational rap.

Kindergarten enjoyed picnic lunches. Second grade learned about plants in outdoor science class. Our inaugural staff vs. students track meet lifted everyone’s spirits and included popsicles for the student cheering section.
Integrating Service

Hallmarks of a Gesu education include civic engagement and community service. Our Jesuit roots emphasize teaching students how to develop as “women and men for others.”

Even as young as Pre-K, students learn to be good stewards through research, prayer, and action. For Earth Day, 7th grade girls held a cleanup on the Gesu rooftop during their recess. All students took home seeds to grow. Our Mission and Ministry team shared a prayer service to reflect on how we can nurture our common home.

The Gesu and St. Joseph’s Prep communities came together to care for our North Philadelphia neighborhood by participating in the Philly Spring Cleanup. Students, families, and staff raked and recycled leaves and yard waste, removed trash, and planted trees.

“Service is at Gesu’s core. Faculty, staff, and students take to heart Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s belief that ‘Everyone can be great, because everyone can serve.’ This is the foundation of our community: the pouring out of oneself in service, whether as a teacher giving her all in the classroom, a student participating in a service project, or a parent giving back as a volunteer.”

—Ed Beckett, Gesu’s New Vice President for Mission, Identity, and Inclusion
Gesu recognizes the arts as an outlet for exploration, mindfulness, and as creative response to social issues. Art Teacher Bria Hawkins ‘09 welds classical techniques with modern themes. Students composed still life and self-portraits with charcoal and digital tools. Second graders learned about color theory and Kandinsky, listening to music and drawing colors they “hear,” like purples to interpret calm, moody music.

Ms. Hawkins teaches Black artists’ cultural significance and contributions. Middle school students studied the history of quilting in African and African American cultures and told stories of influential Black figures, such as author Jesmyn Ward, with paper quilting. They learned about surrealism and expressed their feelings on the Black Lives Matter movement in their own pieces.

“Art and music classes are so essential because our students are extremely creative and need a place to have those skills nurtured. My favorite part of a project is seeing students have that moment of victory, when they allow themselves to try something different, and it just clicks. The most important thing I can teach my students is to concentrate and learn from the process of making art, rather than the end results.”

— Bria Hawkins ‘09, Art Teacher
Reflecting on Faith

Gesu teaches Catholic beliefs and traditions. We emphasize developing strong morals and understanding social justice. We teach respect for all faiths, exposing students to the world’s major religions. Students grow spiritually, socially, and emotionally, whatever their faith background.

During Catholic Schools Week Mass, an 8th grader shared about Gesu’s impact on her faith:

“My relationship with God grew and still grows every day with my school’s guidance. I plan to continue my Catholic school journey at high school. When I think about Catholic schools, I think about their communities. I’ve never felt lonely or unloved at any of them. They always make sure that we learn to love and respect the people around us.

I love the way Gesu makes me feel included as a Christian. They make sure to include us when they go to Mass at the Prep, and they help us grow in our religion. I always have fun with the Catholic Student Union. Catholicism has always been important to me. My grandma is very spiritual and always told me to solve my problems with prayer. She goes to Church every Sunday. I hope that one day I could be like her, and Catholic schools make me feel like I can.”

— Vandalyn, 8th Grade
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Save the Date
November 18, 2021
at 5pm

gesuschool.org/2021symposium

Virtual Gesu 24th Symposium
Working Together to Manage Pandemic Stress in Our School Communities

with
Marsha Richardson, Psy.D., University of Pennsylvania
Jabari Whitehead, Ed.D., Saint Joseph’s University

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