GESU SCHOOL
Educational Excellence in North Philadelphia in the Jesuit and IHM Traditions

Gesu Celebrates 15th Year as an Independent School with Appreciation for the Past and a Focus on the Future

MIDDLE STATES STRATEGIC PLANNING SHARPENS VISION FOR SCHOOL’S FUTURE

As part of the Middle States accreditation process and intensive self-study, Gesu School’s faculty and administration created a five-year internal strategic plan with three concrete academic goals: 1) improve the science curriculum, 2) develop an oral communication curriculum, and 3) strengthen the school’s spiritual focus.

Action steps towards the three goals are already in motion. The science curriculum now includes the brand-new LabLearner program that gives students hands-on experience in science. Student-read morning announcements already sound clearer and more confident as students receive additional coaching in speaking skills. A deeper spiritual focus pervades the school as classroom community meetings and new forms of prayer are introduced.

Gesu School is grateful to everyone who worked intensely over the last year to conduct the school’s self-study and devise the strategic plan for the Middle States process, especially 1st grade teacher Amelia Brignola and Resource Room teacher Colleen Comey, who both labored tirelessly as co-chairs for the Middle States reaccreditation process.

MIDDLE STATES ASSOCIATION VISITING TEAM EXTOLS GESU’S STRENGTH AS A COMMUNITY SCHOOL

On November 7th, Dr. Nancy Gilroy, chairman of the Middle States Association visiting team, addressed the faculty and staff of Gesu School after an intensive two and a half day on-site evaluation. “This truly is a community school... You just don’t find this in other schools,” lauded Dr. Gilroy, as she noted the ways Gesu School authentically embodies its axiom, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.”

The team’s visit is one of the final steps in the Middle States Association reaccreditation process, which helps the school identify its strengths and weaknesses. The timing of the Middle States visit couldn’t be more appropriate; Gesu’s 15th year as an independent school is a fitting time to celebrate how far we’ve come and to plan our vision for the future.

In her departing remarks, Dr. Gilroy praised the entire Gesu community for creating an environment full of happy children – children whose smiling faces tell the school’s story at a glance. Among the things that impressed Dr. Gilroy were the faculty’s enthusiasm for embracing instructional technology, Gesu’s wealth of volunteers, and the way President Chris Beck’s vision is concretely reflected in the school building. Gesu’s bright colors and stimulating environment – built by generous friends – “say that you love your children,” Dr. Gilroy commented.

Dr. Gilroy also explained that she encountered two things at Gesu she had never before experienced in 42 years in Catholic education. The first was the faculty’s profound “expression of feeling of commitment and loyalty to your principal,” for which she praised Principal Sr. Ellen Convey, IHM. Dr. Gilroy attributed this dedication to Sr. Ellen’s encouragement of staff initiative and emphasis on professional development. The second was a spontaneous outpouring of gratitude from the students’ parents. Dr. Gilroy recounted how her meeting with 15 Gesu parents ended with the exclamation, “Let’s stand up and cheer for Gesu!”

In the coming months, Gesu will receive written, formal recommendations from the visiting team. The school will receive a determination on its application for reaccreditation in May.

SAVE THE DATE:
Our 15th Anniversary Gala
Gesu celebrates its 15 YEARS WITH 15 STARS and presents the Gesu Spirit Medal to Ralph Saul and Jay Sherrerd.
THURSDAY, MAY 1, 2008

Winter 2008
DEAR FRIENDS,
I have paused several times in the last few days to reflect on an e-mail message that Win Churchill, chairman of Gesu’s board, sent me. He talked about the deep ecumenical roots of our school, adding that “one of Gesu’s greatest underlying achievements is that we represent the intersection of the great Western religions in action.” Stop and think about this!

Of course, we are an independent Catholic school sponsored by the Jesuits and the IHM Sisters. Nevertheless, our student body is mostly (90%) non-Catholic — with a handful of Muslim and Jewish students and a majority of Protestant and nondenominational Christians.

Our board of trustees brings together people of many faiths — Jewish, Quaker, Presbyterian, Episcopal, and, of course, Catholic. Our donors are diverse and ecumenical, as well. It is, indeed, one of Gesu’s greatest underlying achievements that individuals from so many faiths and backgrounds come together — to believe in our mission; to support our work; to help us break the cycle of poverty and violence; and, as Juan Williams challenged us, to make education work for all children. We are proud of our Catholic heritage; we are also proud of our common cause that brings so many people together.

These deep ecumenical roots continue to open doors. Within just four weeks this fall, Gesu welcomed:
- Tim Russert who put our 8th graders at ease as he conversed with them in our library.
- Jean Williams who drew a standing ovation in our gymnasium with his challenge to fight fearlessly for equality in education.
- Jay Roach, a professional film producer, who taught our 7th and 8th graders how to tell their own stories with video cameras.
- Ellen Bacchow, a new trustee, who is so passionate about Gesu School’s work that she, along with trustee Lisa Blank, orchestrated a brunch for over 40 friends to visit Gesu School.

In addition, volunteers from all walks of life come weekly to assist classroom teachers and to mentor individual children.

Thanks to each of you for your commitment to social justice through many faiths!
Christine S. Beck
President and CEO

FLOWERS
A Poem by Michelle, Grade 4

Flowers smell so good
Flowers are beautiful
They make me feel carefree
Flowers, oh, flowers
Are so lovely
Flowers make me think about
All the good things
And good people
Not about hateful people
And shooting
They make me feel
Like God is beside me
And no one can harm me
Flowers make me want to dance
And sing around the whole world
They make me feel
Like I’m the only person in the world
Flowers make me feel happy
And no one can make me sad.

Michelle’s poem won first place in the Children’s Scholarship Fund Philadelphia Art and Essay Contest, 3rd-5th grade essay category, while “Mind of a 3rd Grade President” by third grader Nyia won honorable mention. First grader Jada’s painting also won honorable mention in the K-2 art category.

AN ENVIABLE ASSET
Rard and Judy Davies Exemplify the Generosity of Gesu’s Many Committed Volunteers

Two volunteers who bring their love and talents to Gesu’s classrooms are husband and wife team Rard and Judy Davies. Rard and Judy began volunteering at Gesu in September of 2006, shortly after Rard’s retirement. They learned about Gesu through their sons’ alma mater, Rosemont School of the Holy Child, which offers an after-school technology program to Gesu students and coordinates a social exchange between the two schools. The couple is very thankful for their many blessings and they “consider it very important to give back,” explains Judy. They felt technology program to Gesu students and coordinates a social exchange between the two schools. The couple is very thankful for their many blessings and they “consider it very important to give back,” explains Judy. They felt

Middle States visiting team chairman Dr. Nancy Gilroy expressed, “evey and a deep sense of appreciation for the number of volunteers” present in Gesu’s classrooms. She noted that Gesu’s diverse corps of volunteers, which draws from North Philadelphia to the Main Line, makes Gesu a true community school.
Parent Meeting Reveals Gratitude for Gesu’s Support System

Sr. Pat McGrenra, IHM, Plays Integral Role

A Middle States meeting with 15 Gesu parents revealed that they not only value the education their children receive at Gesu, they also appreciate Gesu’s counseling and support services that help them raise their children. Hearing this was “really a boost,” for Sr. Pat McGrenra, IHM, who serves as the school’s full-time counselor with the help of teammate Margaret Mary O’Neill, a part-time Title I social worker from Capuot Learning. On average Sr. Pat sees 15-25 students per week to address troubles ranging from school phobia to death, abuse, and parental divorce. Growing up in North Philadelphia can be tough; an appalling number of students have lost family or friends to gun violence. Sr. Pat helps them through.

Jesuits Bestow Magis Spirit Award on Tim Russert of Meet the Press

Acclaimed Journalist Extols Catholic Education

On October 16th, Tim Russert, managing editor and moderator of Meet the Press, addressed Gesu’s 8th graders in the library. He shared stories from his own childhood, pointing out that he too got his start in his elementary school, where his 4th grade teacher first introduced him to journalism as a means to “channel” his “excessive” energy. “The lessons I learned at St. Bonaventure, the lessons you’re learning at Gesu, prepare you to compete with anybody anywhere,” he told them.

Following a Q&A session with the students, Mr. Russert departed for the Shererd Gymnasium, where the Jesuits of the Philadelphia-Camden area and their colleagues presented him with the Magis Spirit Award in honor of his longtime support of Jesuit ministries. The award’s Latin name, Magis, refers to the Jesuit ideal that calls us to strive for goals beyond the limits of human horizons, goals we can achieve only with God’s help. The event, and Mr. Russert, saluted Gesu School’s Sponsor A Child scholarship donors, who cover the full cost of one child’s annual Gesu education with a gift of $5400.

Mr. Russert, an assistant trustee of Gesu School, is a graduate of St. Bonaventure elementary school, Jesuit-sponsored Canisius High School, Jesuit-sponsored John Carroll University, and Cleveland-Marshall College of Law at Cleveland State University. In 1997, he moderated the first of Gesu’s ten symposia on inner-city education.

Famed political analyst Tim Russert answers a student’s question in Gesu’s library. The 8th graders had the unique opportunity to view the roles and play moderators of Meet the Press. “You can achieve almost anything with the right kind of direction and guidance and the preparation you’re getting now,” Mr. Russert told the students in his address.

Three Cheers

3rd grade girls’ teacher Shirley Bright received the Honorary Alumni Award from Saint Joseph’s Prep. She is the first woman among the Prep’s Honorary Alumni. Trustee Rev. William Byen, SJ received an award for Outstanding Catholic Leadership from the Catholic Leadership Institute... Donor Aleda Harmon has been recognized by the Sturgis One Room School Museum as the oldest living one-room school teacher... Aleda McGrenra’s supervision. Sr. Pat coordinates the after-school Homework Club, where students get help with their homework assignments, as well as the mission to complete them. Sr. Pat’s mission is prevention – getting the students on the path to a healthy life now. She is encouraged by the fact that more and more students seek Gesu’s counseling services on their own, a good sign that they will do so in the future if needed. Increasingly, parents seek the Counseling Office’s aid with uniforms, food, or tuition, while the school’s emergency fund, administered by Fr. Neil, comes to the rescue in many situations. “We’ve established a chain of communication,” Sr. Pat explains, “they know that we’re here for them.” Sr. Pat credits front office worker Dolores John with forging the bridge between the parents and the Counseling Office.

Fourteen years ago, Sister Pat started at Gesu as a full-time 7th grade teacher, fresh from her Master’s program in Counseling Psychology at Immaculata University. She began counseling students during her break on Tuesday afternoons, but the students’ tremendous needs quickly grew Sister Pat’s side-role as school counselor to a full-time position with the administration’s encouragement. Sr. Pat reports that the biggest challenge in the counseling office today is that “There’s so much to do!” Gesu hopes to expand to two full-time counselors once funding is secured.

First-Ever Standing Ovation at Gesu’s Annual Symposium on Inner-City Education

Panelist Juan Williams’s Message Moved Audience to Its Feet

“People are making excuses for educational failure,” lamented panelist Juan Williams, senior correspondent for NPR’s Morning Edition and political analyst for Fox News. “All of those arguments ignore what is in my mind essential about schools, which is educating children and putting children first.”

On November 1st, Mr. Williams addressed the one hundred fifty plus audience of educators, funders, and concerned citizens who attended Gesu’s 10th Annual Symposium on Inner-City Education, Transforming Inner-City Education. What’s Old? What’s New? What’s Next? Mr. Williams’ commentary was part of a larger panel discussion that considered topics ranging from national legislation affecting low-income children as described by James Brown, Chief of Staff for U.S. Senator Casey’s office, to the role of scholarships and parental choice in education as addressed by Kathleen deLaski, President of the Sallie Mae Fund.

Mr. Williams spoke to the fact that schools must compensate for broken homes, a culture of failure, and a void of positive African-American role models in order to educate low-income minority children. He urged the audience to remain courageous and to stand up for the needed changes in society’s values to better serve our children. “...There’s a degree of fearlessness that’s required of us in this time in history in speaking to these issues honestly, if we are to save this generation of young people, much as you have intervened in this neighborhood to save a generation of children... and I ask you to understand, therefore, the necessary commitment, the fearlessness of spirit required to extend that, now, to the broader conversation about education in this city.” The audience applauded Mr. Williams with the first-ever standing ovation in the symposium’s 10-year history.

The other panelists who contributed to the discussion included Winston Churchill, Board Chairman of Gesu School and the Gesu Institute and Chris University moderated the discussion. This year’s symposium, hosted in conjunction with the Gesu Institute, was generously sponsored by Cozen O’Connor, Old Saint Joseph’s Church, Jay Sherrerd, and the Robert A. Fox Leadership Program at the University of Pennsylvania. A complete transcript of the symposium is available at www.GesuSchool.org/announcements.htm.

Remember, our United Way Donor Choice Number is 7408 (Gesu Community Service Project).
Producer sparks students’ creativity
Jeff Boortz of Concrete Pictures instructs Gesu students in the art of filmmaking

“This is just the beginning. I’ll be really disappointed if I don’t see another movie out of you guys,” producer Jeff Boortz told his team of 7th and 8th grade filmmakers in the Gesu School library one afternoon. It was the last of the group’s Wednesday after-school and Saturday meetings where 12 Gesu students learned to shoot and edit their own films. Jeff Boortz and his Bala Cynwyd–based production company Concrete Pictures, which has produced shows for the likes of the Discovery Channel, ESPN and PBS, spearheaded the project with a generous donation of time, talent, and equipment. Concrete Pictures will incorporate the students’ footage of their lives in North Philadelphia into a pro bono DVD promoting Gesu’s Sponsor A Child Scholarship Program.

7th grader Bria catches a good angle. “I liked walking around with the camera,” says Bria, who filmed her frequently distracting younger siblings. Many students go home to environments that can make studying and completing homework difficult.

Jeff Boortz shows 8th grader Kwadre a software program to create music for his video on a Saturday afternoon. Kwadre’s footage included an interview with his twin brother as well as choreographed fight scenes on the street. Violence is a daily reality for our students in North Philadelphia.