

THE Catholic Spirit

THE OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER OF THE DIOCESE OF METUCHEN

OCTOBER 20, 2016 • VOL. 21 NO. 19 • \$2.00



Students at St. Augustine of Canterbury School, Kendall Park, cheer the announcement it was named a National Blue Ribbon School for 2016 at an assembly.

— Mike Ehrmann photo

This issue was mailed on Oct. 18
Your next issue will be November 3

School celebrates national award for excellence

By Chris Donahue
Associate Editor

KENDALL PARK — On Sept. 28, St. Augustine of Canterbury School's staff, students and parents gathered at a spirited assembly to hear and then celebrate the announcement that it had been named a Blue Ribbon School.

United States Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. announced the 329 National Blue Ribbon Schools for 2016 in a

video message.

"National Blue Ribbon Schools are proof that we can prepare every child for college and meaningful careers," King said. "Your schools are on the cutting edge, pioneering innovative educational practices — professional learning communities, project-based learning, social and emotional learning, positive behavior systems — making you shining examples for your communities, your state and the nation."

The National Blue Ribbon Schools program honors public and private elementary, middle and high schools, where students perform at very high levels or where significant improvements are being made in students' levels of achievement.

St. Augustine is the fourth school in the diocese named a National Blue Ribbon School award winner. Previous Blue Ribbon winners were: Immaculata High, Somerville (1998); St. Matthias, Somerset

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Faithful gather at Carmelite Monastery chapel for blessing of roses, veneration of first-class relic of 'Little Flower'
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St. Augustine of Canterbury School honored for academic excellence

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(2001); and Immaculate Conception, Annapolis (2013).

Father Robert G. Lynam, pastor, St. Augustine of Canterbury Parish; and Religious Teachers Filippini Sister Mary Louise Shulas, principal, led the ceremony.

Distinguished guests included: Msgr. Michael J. Corona, executive director, diocesan Department of Education; Ellen F. Ayoub, superintendent, and Donna M. Kanowitz, assistant superintendent, from the diocesan Office of Schools; Sister Ascenza Tizzano, provincial superior of the Religious Teachers Filippini, who staff the school; and Father Edmund A. Luciano III, a 1997 graduate of the school who serves the diocese as director, Youth and Young Adult Ministry, and director, Donor Relations, Development Office.

Bishop James F. Checchio spoke to the assembly via Skype from the St. John Neumann Pastoral Center, Piscataway. He congratulated the staff and students for their hard work in making the honor possible.

"It is not only a good place to learn but good for faith formation — learning to become disciples of Christ," the bishop said. "Thanks to the parents, too, for sending their children there and to make the sacrifices to do so."

He concluded by saying, "Congratulations. Know that I love you and I am praying for you and I can't wait to see

you all soon."

Before giving a blessing, Msgr. Corona told the students, "Because you are on holy ground, because God loves you, that with Father Bob and Sister Mary Louise and all of your teachers and your parents, you are able to do all of the wonderful things that you do here. So let us thank God for the gifts he has given you."

"It is not only a good place to learn but good for faith formation — learning to become disciples of Christ."
— **Bishop James F. Checchio**

Ayoub reminded the students how blessed they were "to be in this beautiful school with so many wonderful people looking out for you, starting with your parents, who saw that your faith needs came first and chose this school to meet them."

"And," she added, "I am fortunate to have Father Bob and Sister Mary Louise and all of these wonderful teachers to guide you every day."

All Blue Ribbon winners are recognized in one of two performance categories. St. Augustine was one of 10 New Jersey school selected as an Exemplary High Performing Schools as measured by state assessments or nationally normed tests.

To put give the students an idea how prestigious the Blue Ribbon award is, Father Bob Lynam told them it was like winning a Gold Medal in the Olympics.

Father Lynam said one of the strengths of the school is its technology and the way teachers use it. "It gives the kids the challenge to be the best they can be," he said.

The school's technology, for example, allows him to speak to the children and give blessings by its student-led Knights Television Network (KTN) instead of having to call an assembly.

In 2014, the school became one of the first institutions in the area to acquire a 3D printer for faculty, staff and students, according to its AdvancedEd executive summary. The technology is intended to serve as a catalyst for introducing and integrating STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) concepts into curriculum. The printer is also used to help expand the scope of projects created by the school's Odyssey of the Mind, Engineering and Robotics clubs.

Sister Mary Louise said a key factor in the school receiving the Blue Ribbon award is the teamwork amongst the staff and the parents.

The school began to work on the application by meeting in groups in the library every Tuesday for three months, said Sister Mary Louise, who was named Distinguished Principal of the Year by the diocese's Office of Schools in 2008.

"I have to give credit to the Schools Office. As a result of AdvancedEd [accreditation agency], everything was in



Above, Bishop James F. Checchio speaks via Skype to students at St. Augustine of Canterbury School, Kendall Park, during an assembly to hear the announcement the parochial institution was named one of the 329 National Blue Ribbon Schools for 2016. Right, Father Robert G. Lynam, pastor of St. Augustine of Canterbury Parish, congratulates the students.



place," she said. "One of the great benefits of AdvancedEd was it went deep into the core of who we were as a school and as a Catholic school."

In the meetings, groups focused on spirituality, academics, curriculum, finances, support and marketing. "We set the goals, we set the objectives and we set the activities," she said.

Sister Mary Louise also cited the quality of the faculty for the students' test scores. "Some of them are here until 4:30 or 5 p.m. at night, some at six in the morning. They talk together, they do a lot of collaborative grading," she said.

Karen Wilhelm, a librarian who also helps with reading instruction, has two sons at the school: Everett, a seventh-grader; and Aaron, a fifth-grader. Her daughter, Kaitlyn, is scheduled to start pre-K3 there next year.

She also cited teamwork as well as Sister Mary Louise's leadership as keys to St. Augustine's success.

"Because we are a smaller, more intimate school community we do have many opportunities to discuss the children and if we see some successes in one area or if we are seeing someone struggle in another area we can collaborate together," she said.

"We have staff meetings constantly. We are always meeting before and after school. We have a lot of communication here and many open doors."

With a perspective of an employee and a teacher, Wilhelm said, "I know Sister [Mary Louise] as a boss and a parent and she truly is committed to Catholic education and St. Augustine's. And because of her and because of her dedication, that is why we have flourished. Her

door is always open for us and she is always willing to try new things and she really lets us, as teachers, work together to help the children."

Among the parents who attended the event was Doreen Dixon, whose three daughters began at the school since pre-K: Alexandra, now an eighth-grader; Danielle, a sixth-grader; and Elisabeth, a fifth-grader.

"We are extremely proud to have a Blue Ribbon School," said Dixon, who is a member of St. Augustine of Canterbury Parish. "They [her children] have excelled in science and math and all of the things that are challenging to the public schools. They keep advancing."

"And Sister [Mary Louise] does a wonderful job keeping them up to par with everything that they need to be doing. We are very, very proud and very excited that sister has stayed here with us this long and continues to."

Since it was established in 1982, the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program has bestowed the award on fewer than 8,500 schools.

On Nov. 7 and 8, the Department of Education is scheduled to recognize the 279 public and 50 private schools at an awards ceremony in Washington, D.C.

For more information about the Blue Ribbon Award, visit the Web site <http://nationalblueribbonschools.ed.gov/>



Religious Teachers Filippini Sister Mary Louise Shulas, principal, St. Augustine of Canterbury School, reflects on the award at the Sept. 28 assembly.

— **Mike Ehrmann photos**