

## TRANSFIGURATION ACADEMY

# Successes, challenges of its first year

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Transfiguration Academy is in the process of evaluating the successes and challenges of its first year of operation.

And the pre-K through grade eight school has had plenty of both.

In 2006, the Archdiocese of Newark closed three local parochial schools, Ascension in New Milford, St. Mary's in Dumont, and St. John's in Bergenfield, merging the three parish schools into a single school with two campuses.

A lower school for children in pre-K through fourth grade is housed in the former St. John's School building in Bergenfield; and an upper school for students in grades five through eight is located in the former Ascension School building in New Milford.

Transfiguration School Director Sal Tralongo, who is also principal of the upper school, said he is proud of two accomplishments in particular.

The first is the new school's accreditation by the Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools, which has approved Transfiguration Academy's merger of three former parish schools into one.

By meeting commission standards, he said, a school community signals its commitment to becoming a better school, and the public is assured of the quality of the school's educational offerings.

"We want to be the best school in the archdiocese," said Tralongo, adding with a smile, "Every school wants that."

A second source of pride, he said, is the success of the upper school's team in the "Future Cities

Competition" at Brooklyn Poly-Technical University. The students received an award from the American Society of Civil Engineers for the "Best Transportation System."

## New science curriculum

This event has sparked a whole new approach to the teaching of science. Transfiguration is working with Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken to create a curriculum titled "Engineering Our Future."

This initiative, which will focus on developing students' problem-solving and creative skills, will be embedded in the curriculum from kindergarten on up.

Students will be asked to apply what they learn to concrete projects, using sophisticated software like computer assisted design (CAD), according to Tralongo, who even anticipates launching a course in robotics. Transfiguration has already decided to change the name of its Science Fair to Engineering Fair.

The new curriculum is targeted for a September launch.

Technology is high on the list of SEE ACADEMY, PAGE 18

priorities for the Academy. Last year, the school installed state-of-the-art Smart Boards at both campuses with the help of a state grant.

Other major accomplishments were Transfiguration's success in the St. Joseph's Regional High School Academic Olympics, in which Academy students took first place in spelling and second place in history; the Brady Memorial Challenge at Bergen Catholic High School, in which students were in third place overall and also in science; and the Bergen Catholic High School art show, in which students in fifth through eighth grades placed second and third.

Another point of pride, said Tralongo, is the placement of the 67 eighth-grade graduates of the

upper school in top-notch Catholic high schools, including Regis High School, Bergen Catholic High School, St. Peter's Prep, The Academy of the Holy Angels, Immaculate Heart Academy and Paramus Catholic High School, as well as the publicly financed Bergen County Academies.

The graduating students won a total \$100,000 in scholarships for their high school education, he noted.

And not to be overlooked is the participation of students in community service programs. Students at both Transfiguration campuses were actively involved in faith-based giving.

They collected more than 2,100 pounds of clothing for the needy; held an aluminum-can drive to benefit St. Barnabas Hospital's Burn Unit; conducted a food drive for the poor; and raised money for the Holy Childhood Society.

## Growing pains

The scene hasn't been completely rosy, however.

Like many startup enterprises, Transfiguration Academy has had to re-create its business plan to reflect the realities, particularly financial, of its first-year experience.

There was a shortfall in funding for the 2006-07 academic year.

Based on past data, the school had anticipated receiving a total \$100,000 to be raised by the Home School Association and through a levy on individual families sending students to the school.

The final amount raised was \$65,000.

To make up for the shortage of funds, the school turned to the Archdiocese of Newark for help, which came in the form of grants and loans with no specific deadline for repayment.

There also was a shortfall in total anticipated tuition, since not all students in the three former



parish schools opted to attend Transfiguration Academy.

### New rate structure

The school has responded by revamping its rate structure. It has eliminated the fund-raising and service hour responsibility for students' individual families and put in place a parishioner and non-parishioner tuition structure consistent with that of other schools in the diocese.

For example, a family belonging to one of the three parishes supporting Transfiguration Academy – Ascension, St. Mary's and St. John the Evangelist – will pay tuition of \$3,440 to send one child to the Academy.

This represents savings of \$160 over last year's total fee of \$3,700 for a single child, which was comprised of \$2,900 tuition, a \$100 registration fee, a \$500 fund-raising expectation and \$200 in service hours.

In comparison, a family not affiliated with one of the parishes will pay \$4,240.

In either instance, there will be discounted tuition for families that have additional children enrolled in the school.

The plan is designed to align income and expenditures more closely, since the anticipated per student cost for the 2007-08 year is \$4,865.

The exact amount depends on the number of students enrolled: The more students, the lower the

cost.

This figure is dramatically lower than the per-student cost spent by public schools, Tralongo pointed out.

"There's no finer value in education today than Catholic schools," observed Msgr. Richard J. Arnols, pastor of St. John the Evangelist R.C. Church in Bergenfield and Transfiguration's pastoral administrator.

### A bright future

The administrators of Transfiguration Academy are undeterred by any of the financial disappoint-

SEE ACADEMY, PAGE 19  
ments of the school's first year of operating. They are launching several academic initiatives in addition to the new engineering curriculum.

One is adding another level to the pre-K programs – the Pre-K 2+ program that will allow 2-year-olds turning 3 by Oct. 31 to enter pre-K in September.

The program is designed for young children mature enough to enter a pre-K program, but who miss the October cutoff most schools use. Before- and after-care will be available.

The Pre-K 2+ program will take place at Transfiguration Academy's Bergenfield campus, which features an Early Childhood Learning Center and has its own computer lab and outdoor playground.

Then there is the social aspect.

"The children need experience with playing with other kids," said Sister Madeline Hansen, principal of the lower school in Bergenfield.

### Future goals

The school plans to upgrade its Intranet servers and network, to replace some computers entering obsolescence and to add more Smart Boards.

Administrators also are continuing to review and enhance the curriculum through initiatives like the Engineering Our Future program.

Emphasis will continue to be on interdisciplinary skills and development and on math, science, language arts and fine arts, according to Tralongo.

The school also prides itself on offering a broad selection of extracurricular activities.

Tralongo gives credit to the three Heritage Schools – St. John's, Ascension and St. Mary's – that were replaced by the two-campus Academy for much of the success of the smooth transition to the present school.

"Is everything perfect?" Tralongo queries rhetorically. "No.

"But based on our accomplishments this year, enrollment will grow," he said. "We plan to deliver on everything we promised and be here for a long time."

