

# ORANGE COUNTY CATHOLIC

JANUARY 3, 2021



FORMING THE WHOLE CHILD  
PAGE 4

THE OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF ORANGE ■ OCCATHOLIC.COM

SPECIAL ISSUE  
SALUTE TO  
TEACHERS

## CATHOLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS MEET THE MOMENT

OUR EDUCATORS BRING INNOVATIVE AND CREATIVE  
APPROACHES TO THEIR CLASSROOMS. **PAGE 8**

LAUREN LIEBELT IS A FIRST-YEAR TEACHER AT ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI SCHOOL IN YORBA LINDA. PHOTO COURTESY DIOCESE OF ORANGE CATHOLIC SCHOOLS.



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# ORANGE COUNTY CATHOLIC

JANUARY 3, 2021

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## ORANGE COUNTY CATHOLIC MISSION STATEMENT

The Orange County Catholic Newspaper seeks to illuminate and animate the journey of faith for Catholics within the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange – building solidarity among the faithful and inviting a deeper understanding and involvement in the mission of Christ – through the timely sharing of news, commentary and feature content in an engaging, accessible and compelling format.

## ORANGE COUNTY CATHOLIC

The Official Newspaper of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange

Diocese of Orange Pastoral Center, 13280 Chapman Ave., Garden Grove 92840

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Delivered weekly to parishes and homes throughout Orange County, Calif., Orange County Catholic is published by SCNG Custom Content, a division of Southern California News Group that offers content development and design expertise to businesses and nonprofit institutions. The Orange County Catholic editorial staff and editorial council are responsible for the content contained herein. Events and products advertised in Orange County Catholic do not carry the implicit endorsement of the Diocese of Orange or SCNG Custom Content.

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# A REASON TO CELEBRATE

BY AUXILIARY BISHOP THANH THAI NGUYEN

**C**ATHOLIC SCHOOLS WEEK is one of our beautiful celebrations during the month of January. We honor and gratefully remember all those who work so hard to make our schools in the Diocese of Orange so meaningful and successful.

At Catholic schools, our children and young people learn faith, not just the basic of Christianity, but how to have a relationship with God. They benefit from high academic standards, which help each student reach his or her potential. They also learn the importance of service, both as an expression of faith and a manifestation of good citizenship. A good example for that is the recent food drive, helping Catholic Charities to reach out to

the needy in Orange County.

We know that education takes place in the context of the wider community. Schools cannot be isolated from the community and society as a whole. We work hard in our approach to Catholic education to form the whole person. We try to enable our students not only to know about the world, but to bring Catholic values to their lives and the lives of others now and in the future.

Catholic schools are not simply institutions, they are communities – communities of faith, knowledge and service, a living witness to Christ and his message of loving communion with others. Catholic schools are unique faith-centered communities that integrate thinking and believing in ways that encourage intellectual growth and nurture faith and

inspiration. They create a supportive and challenging climate which affirms the dignity of all persons within the school community.

I'd like to share with you a poem and a letter from two fifth graders, responding to my monthly talk about "Eucharist as Thanksgiving" to students in one of the Catholic schools where I served in Jacksonville, Florida as pastor. These are among the beautiful fruits of Catholic schools which we celebrate this month. It gives us a glimpse of how Catholic school has shaped students' lives.

## A SPECIAL POEM

*Thank you God for giving me life,  
Without it I wouldn't be here.  
Thank you God for giving me school,*

CONTINUES ON PAGE 15



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1340 N. Acacia Avenue, Fullerton, CA 92831

# A NEW SCHOOL YEAR

BY DR. ERIN BARISANO,  
SUPERINTENDENT, OC CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

**A**S WE KICK OFF THE new year, I am pleased to take this opportunity to pause and review the great work of OC Catholic Schools. One of our guiding principles throughout this pandemic has been transparency in communication and progress. As such, I am pleased to share a snapshot of the impact of the pandemic on our schools.

In the spirit of transparency, OC Catholic Schools has maintained a dashboard on our website since October which is updated daily and reports current active COVID-19 cases among students and staff. ([www.occatholicschools.org/covid-19-dashboard/](http://www.occatholicschools.org/covid-19-dashboard/)) As noted on the dashboard, there are 16,264 students and staff on our 35 campuses across the diocese. As of press time, 50 students and 15 staff members have known active cases of COVID-19. The entire OC Catholic School community prays for the safe and speedy recovery of our infected students and staff members. These students and staff members as well as others who have recovered from the virus since our campuses reopened in September, represent 0.4% of our on-campus school



population. In comparison, current Orange County infection rates are about 3% of the county's 3.1 million people. We are proud that our rate is well below the county rate. It is also important to note that there has been no transmission of the virus at any of our schools. We welcome this level of transparency as another effort to protect and promote the common good of our community.

OC Catholic Schools continue to take proactive steps to maintain safe and healthy working and learning environments for our students and staff. These

proactive steps, which are in line with the California Department of Public Health and Orange County Public Health Agency best practice recommendations, include: face coverings required by all staff and students in third grade and above at all times while on campus; physical distancing in classrooms and throughout the campus; reinforcement of hand hygiene practices; and screening of campus visitors during school hours. Many campuses have installed Plexiglas barriers and upgraded air filters for indoor settings. Outdoor

space is also being utilized for teaching and learning. Additionally, our schools continue to conduct contact tracing, allowing potentially exposed parties to be immediately notified. Students remain home for 14 days from exposure.

Our goal continues to be to remain open for in-person instruction. Research supports the benefits of in-person instruction for the social and emotional wellbeing of students, especially in times of crisis. Additionally, in-person instruction is the best way we can ensure equity and access to all of our students on a daily basis. We recognize that the virus continues to pose threats to our communities, so if schools are required to return to distance learning at any point during the year, principals, teachers, and staff will be ready to pivot on a dime.

I continue to be filled with awe and gratitude for the gift of our teachers and staff who have been stretched in mind, body, and spirit. Because of their great sacrifices and love for our children, we have been able to maintain in-person instruction. Please be extra kind to your school's educators. Your gratitude goes a long way in making it all feel worthwhile.

As we continue to navigate this extraordinary year, we give thanks for the moments of grace in our midst. St. Augustine reminds us that grace is given not because we have done good works, but in order that we may be able to do them. It is through God's grace that we will be able to continue the good work of Catholic education in the Diocese of Orange. Thank you for your prayers and companionship on our journey. ✚

## READINGS FOR THE WEEK

### MONDAY

1 JN 3:22 – 4:6; PS  
2:7BC-8, 10-12A;  
MT 4:12-17, 23-25

### TUESDAY

1 JN 4:7-10; PS  
72:1-4, 7-8; MK  
6:34-44

### WEDNESDAY

1 JN 4:11-18; PS  
72:1-2, 10, 12-13;  
MK 6:45-52

### THURSDAY

1 JN 4:19 – 5:4; PS  
72: 1-2, 14, 15BC, 17;  
LK 4:14-22A

### FRIDAY

1 JN 5:5-13; PS  
147:12-15, 19-20; LK  
5:12-16

### SATURDAY

1 JN 5:14-21; PS  
149:1-6A, 9B; JN  
3:22-30

### SUNDAY

IS 42:1-4, 6-7 OR IS  
55:1-11; PS 29:1-4,  
3, 9-10

# CATHOLIC SCHOOLS RISE TO THE CHALLENGE

WITH THE DAWNING OF A NEW YEAR, DIOCESE OF ORANGE SCHOOLS REFLECT ON WHAT THEY'VE ACCOMPLISHED AND THE WORK THAT LIES AHEAD

BY JENELYN RUSSO

AS THE CALENDAR TURNS from 2020 to 2021, Diocese of Orange Catholic Schools reflect on both the challenging year that was and the hopeful new year ahead, with pride in what they were able to achieve in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I just feel so proud of what we've been able to accomplish throughout this crisis," says Superintendent of Diocese of Orange Catholic Schools Dr. Erin Barisano. "We've been able to not only get our kids back for in-person instruction, but here we are at the peak, and we're still in school and our teachers are still safe."

After implementing distance learning across the diocese in the span of a few days last March to welcoming students back to campus at the start of the new school year in September, Barisano remains confident that the diocese's commitment to Catholic faith formation, academic excellence and service to others remains strong.

"It makes me so proud that we've been able to stay the course and remain committed to the mission of Catholic education here in the diocese," says Barisano.

While some families initially opted to stay in a distance-learning format in September, schools saw the number of

CONTINUES ON PAGE 7

## OC CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

As a ministry of the Diocese of Orange, in partnership with our parents and parish families, our schools are committed to making disciples of Christ. Through Catholic faith formation, academic excellence, and service to others, our students transform the world.

### BY THE NUMBERS - ORANGE COUNTY



15 PRE-SCHOOLS

31 CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

5 HIGH SCHOOLS

### ACCESSIBLE CATHOLIC EDUCATION

- TUITION ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE
- SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS
- PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES



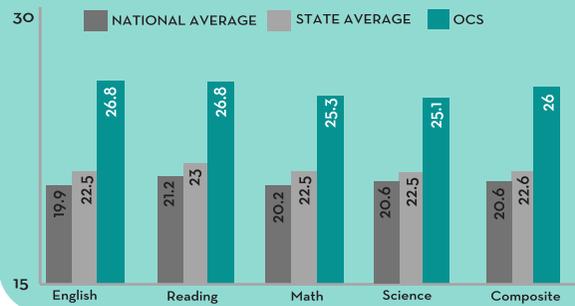
### TEST PERFORMANCE (TK-8) 2020 STAR TEST

76.5% AT OR ABOVE THE BENCHMARK



OF THESE STUDENTS, 60% SCORED ABOVE THE 75TH PERCENTILE

### 2020 ACT MEDIAN SCORES



### COLLEGE ENROLLMENT



VS



OC CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

STATE OF CALIFORNIA

### GRADUATION RATES

OC CATHOLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS 99.9%

STATE OF CALIFORNIA 82.9%

### 4 YEAR COLLEGE ACCEPTANCE

94.6% OC CATHOLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS

25.7% STATE OF CALIFORNIA STUDENTS

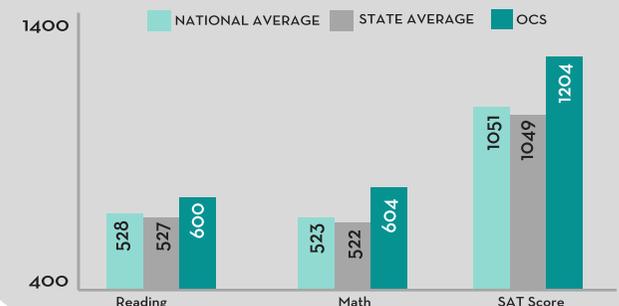
\$109,776,945  
IN SCHOLARSHIPS OFFERED TO OC CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL CLASS OF 2020 GRADUATES

### NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLARSHIP (2019-2020)



40 FINALISTS 250 COMMENDED

### 2020 SAT MEDIAN SCORES



OC CATHOLIC SCHOOLS.ORG

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

distance learners decrease over the fall months, signifying that once parents observed the school's health and safety protocols in action, they became more at ease with sending their students to campus for onsite instruction. As a support to this, the Catholic schools' district website maintains a COVID-19 dashboard to provide transparency.

"The transmission rate at the schools is very low...because of the health and safety protocols that are in place," says Associate Superintendent Dr. Denise Valadez.

In the area of faith formation, each school has continued to offer a number of experiences for students and families, albeit in a variety of formats. Virtual rosaries, weekly outdoor Mass with both livestream and limited in-person attendance and Eucharistic ministers visiting classrooms to distribute communion are just a few of the ways schools are fostering faith in their communities.

"Our principals are very adamant about not making any sacrifices to their religion program and what they are offering as far as faith formation," says Valadez. "The Catholic identity is still very strong in our schools. That has not been compromised."

After returning to school in the fall, students participated in standardized testing as a checkpoint for the distance-learning instruction that occurred in the spring months. Utilizing STAR assessments from Renaissance Learning, Diocese of Orange Catholic Schools scored 77 percent at or above proficiency in reading, compared to 51 percent nationally, and 83 percent in math, compared to 58 percent nationally. This reflects a one percent drop for the diocese in reading from a year prior, which aligns with the national average. In math, however, the diocese only saw a drop of three percent, while the national average trended down by seven percent. Testing will occur again



BISHOP KEVIN YANN MAKES AN APPEARANCE DURING A ZOOM LESSON IN MRS. LAM'S CLASS AT ST. CECILIA CATHOLIC SCHOOL IN TUSTIN. PHOTO COURTESY OF DIOCESE OF ORANGE CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

during the month of January.

The diocese is continuing to partner with Loyola Marymount University's iDEAL (Innovation in Digital Education and Leadership) program to create blended-learning campuses. St. Joseph's in Santa Ana, St. Joseph's in Placentia and La Purisima in Orange are part of a three-year program that, upon completion, will offer the opportunity for the schools to earn a blended-learning certification.

"We are using that interactive online adaptive technology to [allow] the teachers to meet the needs of all the individual students in their classes," says Director of Educational Programs Dr. Brad Snyder.

Creative solutions in the arts were

on display during the holiday season as annual Christmas programs were filmed ahead of time, featuring a variety of socially distanced performances, and families were invited watch them from the comfort of their homes.

One area that will continue to receive more of an intentional focus is the wellbeing of principals and teachers, as the demands have been great during the last nine months. The diocese will again partner with Loyola Marymount University beginning now and over the next few years to address the social-emotional needs of principals and teachers, as well as students.

"Our principals and our teachers are working harder than ever, and they are

the ones to be commended," says Valadez.

In the coming months, the diocese hopes to be able to reintroduce extra-curricular and athletic programming, as allowed by state guidelines. But maintaining in-person instruction remains at the forefront, as the diocese contends it is the best way for the schools to ensure the students are receiving the services, access and equity that they deserve, thanks to the tireless efforts of the principals and teachers.

"Our principals and teachers have gone above and beyond the call of duty," says Valadez. "They are really to be commended for their dedication to Catholic education. We wouldn't be where we are today without them." ❖

# CATHOLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS MEET THE MOMENT

**WITH CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION THESE EDUCATORS CONTINUE TO DELIVER ON THE PROMISE OF EDUCATING THE WHOLE CHILD**

**T**HE DIOCESE OF ORANGE Catholic School system is blessed to have some of the most committed, dedicated and innovative educators in the county. Not only do their students excel in academics, they are faith-filled children with their eyes set on servant leadership. That, thanks to their teachers, their role models. In the midst of the pandemic sweeping the globe, these instructors have introduced innovative teaching methods to further students' academic growth, while creating an atmosphere so that children feel safe and connected. Here are just some of the ways the teachers in the Diocese of Orange Catholic Schools are delivering on the promise of education and forming the whole child. ❖



A WALL OF STUDENT ARTWORK IN MRS. WENNINGER'S SECOND GRADE CLASSROOM AT ST. ANNE PARISH SCHOOL IN SANTA ANA. PHOTO COURTESY OF ST. ANNE PARISH SCHOOL



PHOTO COURTESY ST. ANNE PARISH SCHOOL

## ART THERAPY

**VANESSA WENNINGER, 2ND-GRADE TEACHER  
ST. ANNE PARISH SCHOOL, SANTA ANA**

The 2nd-grade class at St. Anne Parish School enjoys Friday fun, thanks to their teacher Vanessa Wenninger. She implemented an hour and a half of "art therapy" at the end of each week. Art lessons center around academic themes and seasonal celebrations. They make for a great end to the week and a wonderful stress reliever for all.



PHOTO BY AMY BELELLO

**'LET'S STRETCH!'**  
**AMY BELELLO,**  
**KINDERGARTEN**  
**TEACHER**  
**ST. ANNE PARISH**  
**SCHOOL, SANTA ANA**

Ms. Belello's kindergarten class starts the day with stretching. It does not matter if students are in class or on Zoom, everyone always starts the day with daily stretching. This allows students to move first thing in the morning (which they need to do as five and six year olds). It helps set the tone of the day. Ms. Belello says students stay calm for the rest of the day. They know the stretch routine, because they use the same order everyday. This helps build their confidence as they know what is going to happen next. This has really helped students remain focused when they have class on Zoom.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARIE UBL

**VIRTUAL GREEK**  
**WEEK**  
**MEGAN RUNNELLS,**  
**6TH-GRADE TEACHER**  
**HOLY FAMILY**  
**CATHEDRAL SCHOOL,**  
**ORANGE**

Studying ancient civilizations is one of the highlights of the 6th-grade curriculum. So, when our Ancient Greece Day was canceled last spring, we had to think creatively how to engage our students with this highly anticipated unit. What we came up with was the 1st ever Virtual Greek Week, which included a variety of virtual Greek activities/classes for students to attend, including a Drive-thru Olympics where they participated in javelin toss and discus throw. These "Greek Masterclasses" were presented to the students by their teachers and some other guest presenters. And the almost bummer unit became a highlight of our quarantine distance learning! Opa!



PHOTO VIA MS. ROBY'S YOUTUBE CHANNEL

**PLANTING SEEDS**  
**MEGAN ROBY,**  
**4TH-GRADE TEACHER**  
**OUR LADY OF FATIMA**  
**ACADEMY, SAN**  
**CLEMENTE**

Our Lady of Fatima Academy 4th-grade teacher Megan Roby offered students a Life lab during distance learning. This is Ms. Roby's first year at the Academy. When the students left in March 2020, Ms. Roby stayed connected to her students through her private YouTube channel. She created short video segments of herself in the school garden. She planted zucchini and other vegetables seeds and then shared videos of herself documenting plant growth over the many weeks of distance learning. Ms. Roby actually delivered a plant to each student's residence so they could grow their own plant at home. Ms Roby effectively used her private YouTube channel to connect with students and foster Earth Science during distance learning.



PHOTO COURTESY OUR LADY QUEEN OF ANGELS

**LEARNING**  
**BUDDIES**  
**WELCOME**  
**ANNA WARDWELL,**  
**KINDERGARTEN**  
**/ 1ST-GRADE**  
**TEACHER**  
**OUR LADY**  
**QUEEN**  
**OF ANGELS,**  
**NEWPORT BEACH**

Miss Wardwell invites her students to bring a learning buddy to study hall when they log on to get help with independent work, ask questions, practice reading, and socialize with each other for a bit. Learning buddies sit with the students and help them do their best work.



PHOTO BY AMY BELELLO

**MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT**  
**KELLI MCCARTY, LMFT, COUNSELOR**  
**ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI SCHOOL,**  
**YORBA LINDA**

As schools have adapted to the new and unfamiliar guidelines for operations and instruction brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, educators and parents have been tasked with not only supporting children academically, but also emotionally. At St. Francis of Assisi Catholic School in Yorba Linda, counselor Kelli McCarty, LMFT, has met this new imperative head on through the creation of the SEEDs program and a special partnership with CHOC (Children's Hospital of Orange County) that focuses on mental health and wellness. Through SEEDs, which stands for Social Emotional Education and Development, McCarty conducts appropriately scaffolded

in-person and virtual lessons to each grade level on subjects such as expressing feelings, digital citizenship, and dealing with changes during the holidays. She also offers twice-monthly tips for parents in the school's newsletter. Most recently she has collaborated with CHOC to offer Zoom parent workshops focused on "Building Resiliency in Youth." Integrated with these larger scale efforts are smaller, more personalized supports. McCarty initiated and supervised a "lunch bunch" zoom for virtual students to have unstructured social time with their peers learning on campus. This builds relationships and fosters a sense of community in a time when physical distancing is a priority.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SAMANTHA BURTON

**REALITY SHOW**  
**SAMANTHA BURTON,**  
**5TH-GRADE TEACHER**  
**ST. PIUS V SCHOOL, BUENA PARK**

In Ms. Samantha Burton's 5th-grade class, students learn about real life. Now, during the pandemic, she has had to change the lesson to make it applicable to the students present in class and those learning virtually, using tools like Google slides and Flipgrid. In her class, students earn "Burton Bucks" by completing classroom jobs. These jobs include social distancing officers (who can issue small fines), bankers (who approve large purchases), and librarians (who organize monthly book spotlight events). There is also an entire newspaper staff comprised of an editor-in-chief, writers, and graphic designers. They create a new issue of the newspaper every week and it is distributed virtually.

Students earn a weekly salary and must budget their salary; they own "houses" and "cars" and optional "pets" and make monthly payments on these expenses. These purchases are all located virtually in "Beachtown" on a set of Google slides (made by the students). The Beachtown community includes a mayor and vice mayor, positions that were filled by a class-wide election following a month-long campaign season. During the campaign, candidates "hired" campaign managers, made posters, created "commercials" on Flipgrid, gave speeches, and debated one another on Zoom. The current Beachtown mayor is a virtual learner, while the vice mayor is an on-campus learner.



PHOTO BY VANESSA HALLIDAY

**SOCIAL DISTANCING  
WITH HULA HOOPS**  
COACH MORENO,  
P.E. TEACHER  
ST. ANGELA MERICI,  
BREA

Coach Moreno is an amazing PE teacher. This year, he has been so creative with his use of hula hoops to help with social distancing. He uses the hula hoops during PE to have the kids play Connect-4, Tic-tac-toe, Stretch, Bingo, kickball, relay races...and more. The hula hoops are especially helpful when lining up for activities and keeping students six feet apart. The students always have such a great time while doing these fun activities they don't even realize they are exercising!



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARIE UBL

**RELATIONSHIP BUILDER**  
SANDI HILL,  
KINDERGARTEN  
TEACHER  
ST. HEDWIG  
CATHOLIC SCHOOL,  
LOS ALAMITOS

She specializes in the building of social and emotional relationships with her students. Ms. Sandi dove into her teacher bag of tricks and implemented the Responsive Classroom program in our kindergarten classrooms. Every morning Sandi guides her students through a morning meeting consisting of a greeting, group activity, sharing time, and a morning message. This serves to build a sense of community, so that students feel safe, and learn how to respect each other and communicate in a group setting. The routine also provides much needed stability and comfort for the school's youngest Celtics, who may be dealing with uncertainty, worry and rising pandemic fears.



PHOTO COURTESY ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST SCHOOL

**TEACHING  
STEWARDSHIP**  
TRUC FERRER,  
K1 TEACHER  
ST. JOHN THE  
BAPTIST SCHOOL,  
COSTA MESA

This past fall, students at St. John the Baptist School in Costa Mesa learned about and practiced the virtue of stewardship. Mrs. Truc Ferrer and her K1 class planned an event right at the parish. To teach her students about being good stewards the kindergartners collected snacks, water bottles and personal necessities. They bagged the items and included special Thanksgiving cards that they had made. The bags will be used by the St. Vincent de Paul Society to pass out to people in need. The K1 stewards delivered the bags to the rectory where pastor Fr. Augustine blessed them.



PHOTO COURTESY ST. CATHERINE'S ACADEMY

**ATTENTION  
CADETS**  
CAPTAIN ANGEL  
RAMOS AND  
STAFF SERGEANT  
TYR MAY  
ST. CATHERINE'S  
ACADEMY,  
ANAHEIM

The military tradition of St. Catherine's Academy is an integral component in aiding the cadets to grow in discipline, honor, and respect. Captain Angel Ramos (pictured left) and Staff Sergeant Tyr May have worked tirelessly to ensure that a robust program enfolded in the charm of the Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose is present to both cadets on campus and those virtually learning. Each morning, the military, faculty, and staff welcome our virtual learners for Morning Colors, prayer, and school announcements via Google Meet. Both make sure that cadets are meeting the standards of the battalion.



PHOTO COURTESY ANNIE CORCORAN

**SPREADING JOY,  
SPARKING CREATIVITY**  
ANNIE CORCORAN,  
FINE ARTS AND MUSIC TEACHER  
SAINT JEANNE DE  
LESTONNAC SCHOOL,  
TUSTIN

Saint Jeanne de Lestonnac teacher Annie Corcoran has been lifting the spirits of her students and providing a bit of normalcy around campus this year. As the Fine Arts and Music teacher, spreading joy and sparking creativity are part of Mrs. Corcoran's daily agenda. However, during this pandemic she has detected a bit less joy in the hearts of her students. In place of a regular school assembly, Mrs. Corcoran recruited her student council representatives to help her create virtual morning "wake-up" assemblies. The student council members record videos with different subject matter or information on upcoming events. The commissioner of religious affairs begins with a prayer, the foundation of the community. Various commissioners record announcements about fundraisers, food drives, and the most recent Christmas Adopt-A-Family Program with Catholic Charities. Although Mrs. Corcoran cannot see the smiles of her students through their masks, she can see the sparkle in their eyes as they start the day off with a little morning "wake-up."



PHOTO COURTESY ANDREINA RODRIGUEZ-FRISCH

**MIDDLE SCHOOL  
MENTAL HEALTH COACH**  
ANDREINA RODRIGUEZ-FRISCH,  
LEARNING SUPPORT TEACHER  
ST. JOSEPH SCHOOL,  
PLACENTIA

Teaching social emotional learning is critical for middle schoolers. The 6th-8th graders at St. Joseph School participate in this course two times a week with Learning Support teacher Andreina Rodriguez-Frisch. The class opens with verbal check-ins, recognizing students' stress levels, and then they engage in an open-ended discussion from prompts that focus on collaboration, insight, compassion, and kindness. After that, the class meditates and reflects as their instructor reads scripts for them to promote relaxation, focus, self-awareness, and self-regulation. Ms. Andreina also visits classrooms to teach about the Zones of Regulation and provides resources for teachers, as well as visuals to bring a level of comfort for students about expressing their emotions and having the conversation.

# TWO TEACHERS WHO GO THE DISTANCE

THESE TWO CATHOLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS, ONE AT THE BEGINNING OF HER CAREER, THE OTHER A SEASONED VETERAN, BRING TREMENDOUS DEDICATION AND ENTHUSIASM TO THEIR PROFESSION—EVEN THROUGH A PANDEMIC

BY NICOLE GREGORY

**I**F THERE'S ONE THING the pandemic has made abundantly clear, it's the importance of school teachers. Their dedication to educating children, despite the difficult circumstances, has been nothing short of heroic. But teachers have always been critical to their communities, particularly Catholic school teachers who bring their faith into academic studies. Here are two Orange County teachers who demonstrate the faith-filled dedication and love that are hallmarks of Catholic education.

## MELANIE HARNER, ST. ANGELA MERICI PARISH SCHOOL, BREA

Melanie Harner has been teaching for 44 years—so long that she's even taught the children of some of her first students—and she is proud to be part of the Catholic education system.

"The pull of Catholic schools is the ability to work our Catholic faith into the curriculum—reading, science, social studies, all of it," she says. "Having a strong basis in our Catholic faith and identity makes us stand out."

Harner offers a few examples of how this works: "When I'm teaching reading and a character has a decision to make, I can ask students, 'What would Jesus do in this situation?' And in science I can justify scientific logic with our faith by asking 'Who started it all?'"

Harner was born and raised in Anaheim into a family of teachers. "My father and my grandfather on my mother's side were teachers," she says. After finishing college at Cal State Fullerton, Harner applied to work at public schools but "I didn't get the right feeling there."

Then came the offer to teach at St. Angela Merici. She jumped at the chance, but her first years were not easy. "When I started, the biggest challenge was the class size—I had 54 students."

After 38 years as a third-grade teacher, Harner became a diversified learner coordinator, a revolutionary new program in education, which she has been doing ever since. "It means we try to meet each child's need and learning style," she explains. "If we see a child who needs additional help, we get that help. We can offer an individual learning plan."

Children with learning disabilities usually do better when they can remain with their class, she explains. "Nine times out of ten I can supply children what they need to stay in their environment and get their needs met," Harner asserts. "The commitment to the diversified learning program has really grown strong in last 10 years," she adds. "The current diocese leadership is really supportive."

The idea is to create an inclusive learning environment where all students can thrive. "It's important to reach both ends of the spectrum—children who need enrichment and children who need support," Harner explains.

Harner's experience is demonstrated by her flexibility to address the needs of individual students. What would she tell a new teacher just beginning her career? "Take your enthusiasm and your job of teaching and meet each child where they are," she advises. "Some children will not respond in same way as other children, so be willing to realize that and adjust your approach and help that child find the love of learning as much as the other children."

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MELANIE HARNER HAS BEEN TEACHING FOR 44 YEARS. AFTER 38 YEARS OF TEACHING THIRD GRADE, SHE IS NOW A DIVERSIFIED LEARNER COORDINATOR. PHOTO COURTESY DIOCESE OF ORANGE CATHOLIC SCHOOLS.

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## LAUREN LIEBELT, ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI SCHOOL, YORBA LINDA

This first-year teacher is bursting with enthusiasm for her profession. “I was inspired to be a teacher because I wanted a chance to make an impact in a child’s life,” she says.

Liebelt was raised in Yorba Linda and recently completed her master’s degree in teaching from Chapman University. “I feel such strong passion for what I do—working with kids is energizing and exciting! Their spirits fill the classroom and there is truly no place I would rather be.”

The Catholic school system is just right for Liebelt. “I am especially excited to work at St. Francis of Assisi because it provides an opportunity to merge my two greatest passions: my faith and education,” she says. “I love the Lord, I love working with children, I love to learn, and I hope that through my work I can make a difference.”

The first year for any teacher is challenging, but nothing compares to 2020. “They don’t teach you how to handle a worldwide pandemic in teacher preparation courses!” says Liebelt. “I have had to master online learning while also teaching in the classroom for the first time—I have kids in my room and kids online every single day.”

Thankfully, teachers don’t work alone—they thrive with support, and this has been a source of unexpected joy for Liebelt. “What has surprised me most is the outpouring support from the Saint Francis staff,” she says. “Each day I am overwhelmed with love, support, kindness, and generosity! I have made so many friendships with my colleagues that have been the biggest blessings to me.”

And then there are the students. “I absolutely adore my class as well, but that was no surprise!” she says.

Liebelt’s hopes for her young students? “That they learn and grow in my classroom not only academically, but in their faith; that they feel comfortable and connected in my classroom; that they know how loved they are and that they grow up to make a difference in this world, whether it be big or small.” ❖



LAUREN LIEBELT IS IN HER FIRST YEAR OF TEACHING AT ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI SCHOOL IN YORBA LINDA. PHOTO COURTESY DIOCESE OF ORANGE CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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*Without it I wouldn't be able to write this. Thank you God for giving me the Catholic Church, Without it I wouldn't be able to learn about you. Thank you God for giving me family, Without it I would either be dead or starving or freezing. Thank you God for my parish, Without it, I wouldn't be able to praise you. Thank you God for your only Son, Without Him, I wouldn't be able to go to heaven.*

**A SPECIAL LETTER**

*Every time I and many other children of God walk up to the altar, I think of all the bad things I have done and I personally ask God to find somewhere in his merciful heart to forgive me. It truly is a thanksgiving as I now realize, because I am so very thankful for my life, family, school, parish church and Jesus.*

*I am so grateful that I am not a poor, abandoned child on the streets. I am happy to have a family, who loves me. One could not be more than thankful and happy to go to a school where there is a bond between the students, teachers and priests, even the poor, when we donate food. Church is a light, like Jesus, that leads us in the right direction to eternal life with our Father in heaven.*

*Eucharist is a splendid time to give thanks for all wonderful things only God has given us because God is only the*

*Creator of good.*

As we celebrate Catholic Schools Week, we give thanks to God for all those who have dedicated their lives to educating the young. Sincere gratitude goes to our teachers who have played a vital role in our Catholic education. Every day in the classroom, they are working hard with competency and compassion at reweaving the tattered fabric of society on which we all depend. Without teachers there would be no education. We all need teachers who care for our children. We all need teachers who care about what they teach. We need teachers who can connect with our children and help them to learn and grow. We need teachers who have faith in the importance of the work. Keeping that faith over time hasn't been easy especially during this Covid-19 pandemic.

Here in the Diocese of Orange, we are so blessed to have many teachers who have dedicated many years of their lives to our Catholic education. We need to give them what they deserve – something more fitting than endless demands and mindless criticism. They deserve our sincere thanks. We thank God for their many years of service and pray that they continue to share their gifts in our excellent tradition of Catholic education.

Today, Catholic schools need your support, both spiritually and financially. We pray that the Lord continues to bless our parochial schools to help us face the many challenges in our society. ✚

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