

Our Commitment to Children With Learning Differences at Prince of Peace Catholic School

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Introduction

Prince of Peace Catholic School values disciplined learning and high academic achievement integrated into an environment where love for the Lord Jesus and His Church, the living of our baptismal convictions with the supports of God's grace, and reverence for the sacred liturgy can be ever present.

Our 2014 National Blue Ribbon Award from the US Department of Education serves as an endorsement of our educating efforts. Our attention to reverent worship at Holy Mass and the enthusiasm and joy with which our 2nd graders prepare for and receive their first sacraments, and the community of friendship attested to by our 8th graders on the eve of their graduation all serve as endorsements of our striving to live the gospel message. We have also just learned that one of our POPCS graduates from our second graduating class (2011) was just accepted into the seminary and will begin his study for the priesthood this fall (2015).

Often, however, our lofty goals in both faith and learning remain extraordinarily difficult to attain when a child faces academics with a learning difference or disability.

Learning Difference or Disability: Mission & Practice

Although we describe what we do as a "general education program for the typical student," we make an effort to make room for children with professionally diagnosed learning differences or disabilities. We work with parents to document special needs in the classroom, to communicate with parents, and to track achievement for the purpose of helping all our children succeed.

This process and school policies for working with children and parents can be found in our 2014-15 Parent Student Handbook under the heading "Admission of Students with Special Needs" beginning on page 13. Our handbook is on our school's main website and is a PDF file in Option C.

We have not always been successful in our work with children having learning differences, however, because we lacked qualified staff and the necessary tools to evaluate students or to track their achievement to better help them experience success along with their high performing peers.

When Mrs. Ann Burnett, our third grade teacher, had completed a Masters Degree in Special Education with an emphasis on Learning Disabilities at Clemson University, we saw this as an opportunity to correct our weakness in addressing the special needs of our children. In conversation with her and with our teaching colleagues at Prince of Peace Catholic School, and with Fr. Smith's endorsement and encouragement, I created the position of "Learning Specialist" with several key goals in mind.

We wanted to perform screening assessments especially in reading and language arts to determine whether a disability might be detected early in a child's education to better serve the child in reaching personal academic success over time. A key research statistic supporting the importance of this effort comes from a study in Austin Texas that showed that when undiagnosed or unaddressed reading disabilities go unrecognized and unaddressed in first grade, those children have an 88% likelihood of retaining that reading deficit by the fourth grade. At Prince of Peace Catholic School, I and our faculty agreed that we did not want our children to be another of this statistic.

Further, we wanted a qualified staff member who could serve as a liaison between the family and our teaching staff who could guide the process of learning for children with a learning difference or disability.

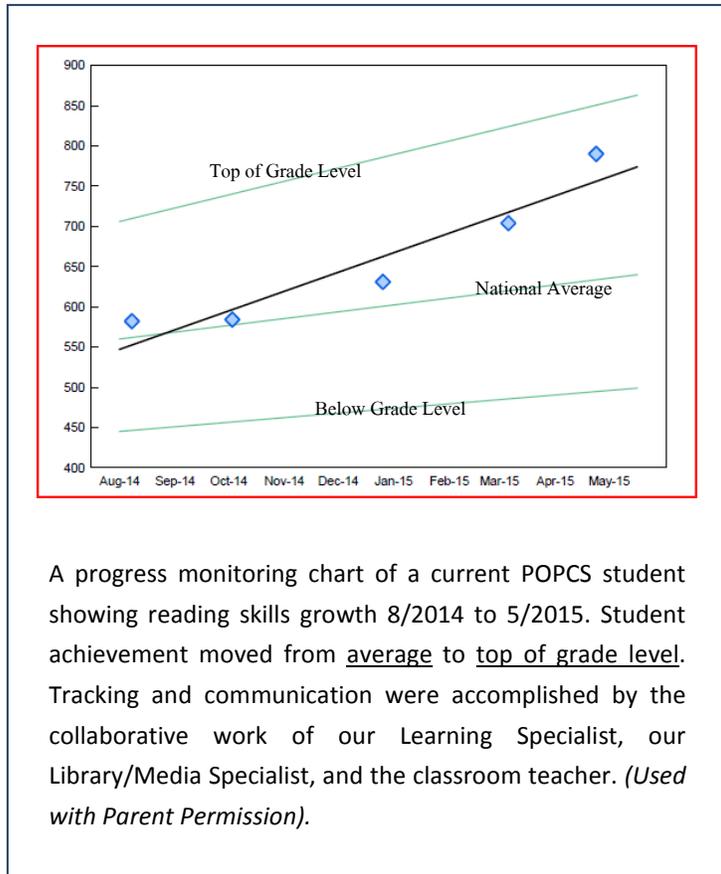
2014-2015: A Year of Great Progress Serving Children with Learning Differences

With the addition of the Learning Specialist to our staff last August 2014, Prince of Peace Catholic School has grown in what we can provide for our students who learn differently.

What is most remarkable is that our learning specialist achieves so much in a position that is *part time*. Here is a sampling of the progress she has made since August 2014:

- Our Learning Specialist now works with 20 students with a variety of learning differences; these differences include dyslexia, Asperger's Syndrome, ADD, and ADHD. We anticipate working with children with autism in the future. These students receive ongoing evaluations and progress monitoring. Parents receive timely communications. Teachers communicate on student progress and receive the support of our specialist.
- She has established contact with private and public organizations that provide diagnostic services and skill development opportunities to children.
- She has developed student tracking forms and a filing and records system aligning with a Diocese of Charleston model for documenting assessments, meetings with parents and teachers, student goal setting, and more.

- In collaboration with the principal, she has helped to write and refine a position profile that best addresses the very specific services we think it is in our scope to offer in helping children find success in the classroom.



- She consulted with a Special Education Councilor for Greenville County Public Schools to learn about federal legislation (currently, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA reauthorized by Congress in 2004) governing the world of

special education and by which millions of children with disabilities – whether enrolled in public or private schools – receive special services designed to meet their unique learning needs.

- She has cooperated in helping Prince of Peace Catholic School bring up to date its status consistent with the State of South Carolina’s Education Accountability Act of 1998 which created the Education Oversight Committee (EOC) to review and track all educational improvement initiatives in our state.

Accurate and timely reporting obligations to the EOC make Prince of Peace Catholic School not only publicly accountable in our efforts to help children, but eligible for our parents to apply for and receive tuition funds from the Aquinas Program managed through the Diocese of Charleston. These tuition funds will help our families who have children with learning disabilities or differences to better afford Catholic education that can serve their child’s unique learning needs at Prince of Peace Catholic School.

- Finally, our learning specialist has made it possible to embed services for our children with learning disabilities within our school delivered by a qualified LD professional. An employee of Greenville County Public Schools currently visits our school every Tuesday

afternoon providing small group speech therapy sessions for students qualified for speech therapy through Greenville County Schools' Child Find program. The therapist works with approximately ten of our Prince of Peace Catholic School students ranging from grades K-5 through 4th grade.

POPCS Supports the Learning Process: Making Achievement Possible

The new Learning Specialist's role in improving services to our children with unique learning needs this year is just one piece of a larger strategy for making student achievement possible. We have several:

- Supportive and generous families in a parish and school community who value achievement and personal effort in the attaining of goals.¹
- Hiring and retaining of high quality teaching staff which research shows has (among all factors) the most significant impact on classroom learning.
- The deliberately small class sizes below national averages.²
- The two-teacher-per-grade-level goal of our school where collaboration in planning and goal setting helps teachers check each other for executing lessons aimed at high achievement.
- Educational technology integrated into learning environments with full time technical support for both students and staff. Teachers have access to technology based student assessment data accompanied by achievement tracking from the earliest grades to help identify student weaknesses and student goal-attainment.

While we have families in our community who have asked more from our 12-year old school faculty and staff, I consider the list of accomplishments above rather remarkable. We will be embarking on a project to expand square footage in our facility by 6,000 square feet by August of 2016 thanks to the generosity of benefactors.

This is what we can do for now. One day, maybe we can do more, with your help and your prayers.

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¹ According to a study by the Harvard Family Research Project, "*parental involvement is associated with higher student achievement outcomes*" – something we know from over 6,000 volunteer hours annually from POPCS families!

² According to the National Center for Education Statistics: 22 students for primary grades and 26 students for middle grades.