

Success 101: Catholic school turns kids into achievers

By Ed Stannard, Register Metro Editor



NEW HAVEN — St. Martin de Porres Academy is the kind of school where, when a visitor enters a classroom, a student will pop out of his seat to offer a handshake and a welcome.

Its first eighth-grade class, 18 strong, will graduate this spring, and 15 of those students will go on to private prep schools, such as Notre Dame in West Haven and Mercy High in Middletown.

A visitor would never know that these young people, who live in or close to poverty, started at the independent, tuition-free Roman Catholic school a grade level or more behind others their age.

“We learn more stuff than we did in our last school,” says Xavier Fernandez, 12, who then describes an experiment to see whether an antacid tablet dissolves faster whole or ground up (ground up won).

Spanish teacher Martha Baloga used to teach at a well-to-do prep school in New Haven. She prefers St. Martin de Porres, she says.

“They’re good kids, like any teenagers,” she says. “They laugh with me; they love candy. I get really attached to the students in the building because they need love and I try to give the love that they need.”

The economic situation in which her students live also means something to Baloga. “I can see I’m making a difference here.”

Few schools, public or private, ask as much from their students. Their school day is 10 hours long. Every student plays a musical instrument. And everyone is expected to follow the “St. Martin de Porres Way” — live a life of faith, integrity and responsibility, act and dress well.

Principal Mary Surowiecki defines the “way” as “being respectful to others, greeting each other, greeting guests with a cordial smile ... dress as if you show respect for yourself ... people of faith doing service, giving back to others.”

Besides their classes, students must perform community service, totaling 12 hours as an eighth-grader. Expectations also are promoted in more subtle ways: college pennants line walls of the 134-year-old building, which previously housed Sacred Heart Academy and St. Peter’s School. The eighth-graders are not called the “class of 2009,” but the “class of 2017,” the year they expect to graduate from college.

Surowiecki says students learn “to take responsibility for their own learning, (knowing) that every day they’re preparing for their own future.”

Setting the bars high for academics and conduct has clearly paid off, and it’s obvious from the Notre Dame High shirts several eighth-grade boys are wearing on a recent Friday. The school started with just fifth grade three years ago at its first site in Hamden, then moved to Columbus Avenue in the Hill neighborhood two years ago.

Surowiecki says the new location helps in recruiting. The school now has 68 students in

four full grades, fifth through eighth.

“When you address the needs of the kids we address, to have as many as we have going to private high schools is off the charts,” says Jay Bowes, St. Martin de Porres’ president.

St. Martin de Porres was recently recognized by Ronald McDonald House Charities, which gave the school \$5,063 to buy lab equipment, science textbooks and other supplies for the eighth-grade science classes.

The school’s budget is approximately \$1 million a year. Most of the money comes from private donations.

There is also a religion class each day — not the traditional Catholic teachings, but focusing more on spiritual development, says Bowes. “Beyond religious education, we’re trying to teach kids what it means to have a relationship with God.”

Since most students are not Catholic and come from a variety of religious backgrounds, Surowiecki says, “Rather than emphasize the differences, we try to emphasize the similarities.”

He knows the teachers alone can’t ensure such success. Another requirement is that there be adult involvement at home. “Every kid really needs a parental authority in his life who’s willing to commit to our program,” Bowes says.

But the biggest commitment is probably the students’, with those 10-hour days. Bowes says the kids are engaged in “finding a passion — what is it that stirs me? For some it might be a trumpet, for some it might be a basketball, for some it might be science or math.”

For Philip Morrison, 13, of New Haven, it’s not just one thing. “I like going to science, math and my band class,” he says. Philip admits that when he first took up the trumpet “it was kind of boring because I was just playing an instrument, but as I progressed ... they

noticed my talent.” Now he’s first chair in a regional band.

Ki’Yonta Stevenson, 13, of Hamden feels more encouraged at St. Martin de Porres than she did in her previous school. “The way they teach, they help you more and give you more credit for what you do. They don’t just say ‘Let’s move on to the next thing’ if you don’t get it.”

Largely because of the small classes, “You have more attention, more focus,” says Jazmine Herring, 14, of New Haven. “You have people around who you can communicate with. It’s a nice friendship community to be in. Everybody gets treated the same.”

St. Martin de Porres is a Nativity school, based on the model started by the Nativity Mission Center in New York in 1971. In 1993, the Nativity schools and another network, which sprang from the Miguel School in Providence, R.I., joined to form the NativityMiguel Network, which now totals 64 schools serving 4,400 students in 27 states.

That network served the school well last month, when 15 of the eighth-graders took a bus to Washington to witness the inauguration of President Barack Obama. They stayed overnight at the Washington Jesuit Academy, a sister school.

The group had the thrill of seeing the first black president sworn in combined with the experience of being part of what probably was the largest crowd ever to jam onto the National Mall. They all held onto a rope to stay together.

“It was so packed, they actually had to stop the (Metro) train,” says Myeshia Brumell, 14, of New Haven. “They were going to have people get off it was so crowded.”

“It was the biggest crowd I’ve ever seen,” says Branden Rose, 13, of New Haven, who called carrying a rope “kind of embarrassing but it was safe at the same time.”

The best part, though, was “seeing a black president get sworn in ... everybody knows

that they can be what they want to be,” says Timothy Hutchinson Jr., 12, of New Haven.

For the students of St. Martin de Porres Academy, the goals are even nearer at hand.

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