

September 23, 2009 09:39 AM

## Grey Nun celebrates Blue Ribbon award

By: Manasee Wagh

Bucks County Courier Times

**Teachers have revamped the curriculum and upgraded methods over the past four years. They try to recognize individual students' learning styles.**

"Having a true community of learners" is one local school's secret of success.

"This is about all of us, students, their families, teachers," said Marianne Finnegan, principal of Grey Nun Academy in Lower Makefield, which the U.S. Department of Education recently honored as one of 314 national Blue Ribbon Schools. The pre-K through eighth-grade private Catholic academy is the only school in Bucks County to have won the award for academic excellence this year.

The Council for American Private Education, a national group, recommended Grey Nun for the award because its students have demonstrated advanced academic achievement, including stellar standardized test scores in math and reading over the past five years.

Over the past four years, administrators and faculty have revamped the curriculum and upgraded teaching tools and methods. Teachers spend a great deal of time developing their own skills and trying to recognize their pupils' individual learning styles. They also provide the necessary support for special needs students, Finnegan said.

Children are taught to be independent from an early age and develop confidence and self-worth, thanks to teachers who foster their individual talents and interests, she said.

Science classes are hands-on and use observation and experimentation often.

"The property lends itself to environmental study," said Finnegan. The 90-acre grounds are home to lush greenery, a pond, deer, foxes, birds and butterflies.

In the classroom, students use SMART Board technology, which allows teachers to put together interactive visual presentations using an overhead projector and a computer.

Using the SMART Board is a favorite part of math class for first-graders Giovanni Amuroso and Alessia Scanlan, because it makes it easy to draw fun pictures of their math problems, they said.

Nearly every student raised his or her hand to volunteer for addition and subtraction activities at the board Tuesday.

"I want you to make some stars up there," teacher Patty Kent told one of her students.

Elli McLaughlin touched the white screen and a colorful star appeared under her fingers. She made more to add and took some away to do subtraction.

Like other pre-K to second-grade classes, theirs had two teachers.

The class learns the day's lesson together and then splits into two groups for practice, said Elizabeth Ramsey, the primary teacher in the room. One teacher works with those who need more help, while the other supplements the lesson by delving a little deeper.

Later in the year, the class will study fractions, algebra, geometry and other math skills.

In her fourth-grade class, teacher Denise Duszak engages students in activities that get them out of their seats as much as possible, such as going to the library for research. She caters to particular learning needs: Some students learn best by taking notes, others by listening, and still others through visual means.

On Tuesday, her students were sitting on the floor, reading a story aloud from their textbooks during English class, an activity that student Grace Sowa enjoys. She also has fun with writing weekly essays in Duszak's class. This week's topic was her favorite restaurant.

"I like going to a small school," she said. "You know everyone. A lot of kids are here since kindergarten."

The close-knit community of 181 students and 24 teachers feels like family, said teachers.

Duszak was chosen to put together a report for the Department of Education describing the faculty's thoughts on their teaching principles and school philosophy.

"It's just been so exciting for us to win the Blue Ribbon. When I was asked to author the report I was very nervous," said Duszak. "When we got that confirmation, it was the biggest achievement of my career."

Another of her students, James Marek, said the Blue Ribbon award makes him feel like a winner.

"You can make great friends over the years here," added James, whose favorite subject is math. He enjoys class multiplication drills three times a week.

Students' teachers and families are intensely interested in both their academic success and personal development, said Finnegan.

"Our philosophy of growing, nurturing and achieving permeates the whole school. Teachers are willing to stretch themselves," said Assistant Principal Sister Martha Moyle.

The Grey Nun family is looking forward to a November celebration of its achievement, said Finnegan. Families, alumni, the school board of trustees and representatives from the state Department of Education are expected to attend.

Manasee Wagh can be reached at 215-949-4206 or [mwagh@phillyBurbs.com](mailto:mwagh@phillyBurbs.com).

### **Bucks County winners since 1985**

Buckingham Elementary School, Buckingham, 1985-86  
Central Bucks High School East, Buckingham, 2001-02  
John M. Grasse Elementary School, Hilltown, 1991-92  
Holicong Middle School, Buckingham, 2001-02  
Holy Ghost Preparatory School, Bensalem, 1992-93  
Log College Middle School, Warminster, 1999-2000  
Maple Point Middle School, Middletown, 2001-02  
Neshaminy Middle School, Middletown, 1999-2000  
Our Lady of Mount Carmel School, Doylestown Borough, 2006  
Palisades High School, Nockamixon, 2001-02  
Palisades Middle School, Nockamixon, 1999-2000  
Pennsbury High School, Falls, 1984-85  
Saint Ignatius of Antioch Catholic School, Lower Makefield, 2007  
Tamanend Middle School, Warrington, 1994-96  
Tinicum Elementary School, Tinicum, 2000-01  
Villa Joseph Marie High School, Northampton, 1994-96  
Wrightstown Elementary School, Wrightstown, 1998-99 and 2004

Source: U.S. Department of Education  
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