

Catholic Sentinel

Thursday, February 17, 2011

Center discovers the ways students learn

Ed Langlois
Staff Writer

Thursday, February 17, 2011

At St. Agatha School's Learning Support Center, a second grader who discovers words by picture instead of by letter can read his story to the class. A third grader who does math by tick marks can move on to a concept of 10s and 100s.

These are the students who, in years past, were thought to be slow or lazy. It turns out they just learn differently.

"Yes, we do have kids like this in Catholic schools, and it's OK," says Jeff Delegato, a former special education teacher in his fourth year as principal at St. Agatha.

Delegato knows the issue from both sides. As a boy, he had trouble with words. His teachers at Catholic schools warned that he was not working hard enough. Only later in life did he find he learned by seeing things and touching things, not by hearing people talk to him.

Students helped through the center may be unable to express themselves proficiently in words. Others cannot take in language. Some have attention disorders and others need work on their emotional lives. Many fit in several categories.

"We want all kids to have access to all the curriculum," says Andy Metzler, who runs the Learning Support Center. "No one wants to be saying to families, in effect, 'We'll take some of your kids, but not that one.'"

Metzler spends half her time helping students in their classrooms and half tutoring in the center.

Small tables dot the upstairs room. Posters list words in different colors. A crucifix and scripture verses hang on the walls. Everyone has a nose plunged into a project. Students with attention problems sit on large yoga balls instead of chairs, feeling a comforting bounce that sharpens focus.

Teachers can send any student who needs special help on any subject. The center has drop-in hours when any student can come in for help on their own. After classes on some days, the center stays open late so honors students can tutor schoolmates.

The key to progress, says Metzler, is personal attention. She has no more than five students to a group when she is teaching.

Metzler, who holds undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Portland, says children with learning differences work much harder than most students just to stay caught up.

Of St. Agatha's 194 students, she is keeping a close eye on 27. It's about an even split between boys and girls.

Her work requires that she masterfully walk the fine line between giving guidance and honoring independence.



Catholic Sentinel photo by Ed Langlois
Joseph Lampert, a second grader, works on reading with eighth-grade tutor Freddie Winter in the St. Agatha School Learning Support Center.

For example, when a child is confronting a problem, Metzler often asks, "How should we fix it?" The student gives suggestions and she guides the youngster to the most viable idea. Students get a boost when they come up with their own solutions.

Learning differences tend to manifest in second, third and fourth grades. Parents react in different ways, from denial to panic, but eventually come to embrace the idea — their child will be alright and just needs to learn using different techniques.

Families who use the Learning Support Center are not charged for it. Only a few students are enrolled in St. Agatha just for the center. Most who get a lot of help would have been in the school anyway.

In the future, Delegato plans to have offerings for students who are highly gifted and talented.

The point, Delegato says, is helping students who learn differently meet the school's high expectations.

Getting extra help for those students allows the rest of the class to continue rolling along. That is tough in schools without such a program because when the classroom teacher stops to help someone with learning differences, everyone else goes into a stall.

"The kids love going there," says Debbie Hushbeck, who teaches third grade. "It's such a nurturing environment." Hushbeck reports clear progress in students who get help from the center.

St. Agatha opened a literacy help project in 2005. As this term approached, Delegato wanted to expand the aid to everyone and all kinds of learning needs.

"It's not 'those different kids,'" Delegato explains. "It's all of us together."

The Archdiocese of Portland schools office has a committee that is promoting the issue.

Most Catholic grade schools in western Oregon have a reading specialist but budgets don't allow for a full center like the one at St. Agatha.

Catholic high schools in the area are starting to reach out to students with learning differences. Central Catholic and La Salle are just starting their own centers. The Jesuit High campus has long hosted a private high school serving the population. It's named after a star among those with learning differences — Thomas Edison. Albert Einstein, were he a child today, could well frequent the Learning Support Center.

"I hope the kids have the confidence to say, 'I don't know that,' but know how to ask and whom to ask," Metzler says of her students. "I hope they will be able to say, 'I think differently and boy are you guys lucky I do.'"

Related Links:

">Content © 2011

">Software © 1998-2011 **Iup! Software**. All Rights Reserved