

The Catholic Light

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GAME *Changer*

New assessment tool changing the way Catholic School teachers teach & students learn

WILKES-BARRE – From a quick glance, Kaitlin Chmielewski's first grade classroom at Saint Nicholas/Saint Mary Catholic School in Wilkes-Barre might not have much in common with Debra Smith's eighth grade literature class at Our Lady of Peace Catholic School in Clarks Green. However, when you look closer at how each teacher prepares and delivers their lessons, you notice striking similarities.

For the last two years, both teachers have been using a new tool – NWEA Assessments – to deliver differentiated instruction in their classroom, setting each individual student up for greater growth and success.

The assessments from NWEA – which stands for Northwest Evaluation Association – provide educators with valuable data on each student three times a year allowing them to measure a student's growth over time. That data provides critical information that

helps educators understand each student's skills and abilities.

NWEA Assessments are currently being used at all 19 Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Scranton.

"It allows me to individualize my instruction to allow my students to grow much better than teaching a general lesson to the whole class," Chmielewski said.

Chmielewski explained how the assessments help her teach each one of her first graders in a better way.

"If I see that Student A is struggling on their consonant-vowel-consonant words, I can make sure they're working on those a little harder, whereas if Student B has already mastered that, I'm able to give them the

opportunity to work on the next skill up," she explained.

Debra Smith says the data she receives from the assessments is so specific; it really helps her focus on what every student in her classroom needs.

"It really helps me be a better teacher," Smith admitted. "I really bought into it from the beginning."

Students in grades K-8 take assessment tests in reading, language usage, math and

science three times each school year – once in the fall, once in the winter and once in the spring. Ninth grade students also take the assessment in high school Algebra I.

"I noticed some of my kids weren't as strong as I would have liked them to be in reading informational text, so I started adding more informational text into my curriculum so that was a wonderful way to identify that was what they needed," Smith said.

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Catholic schools serve as benchmark during COVID-19 pandemic

SCRANTON – Healthcare workers and grocery store employees have been widely recognized for being essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Catholic School teachers and administrators should also be among the individuals on that important list.

When all schools in Pennsylvania were ordered closed in March 2020, the Diocese of Scranton Catholic School System quickly and seamlessly transitioned to distance learning the following school day. In order to resume in-person learning in the fall of 2020, appropriate health and safety protocols were developed. To date, some other local school districts have still not been able to return to in-person instruction for all grades.

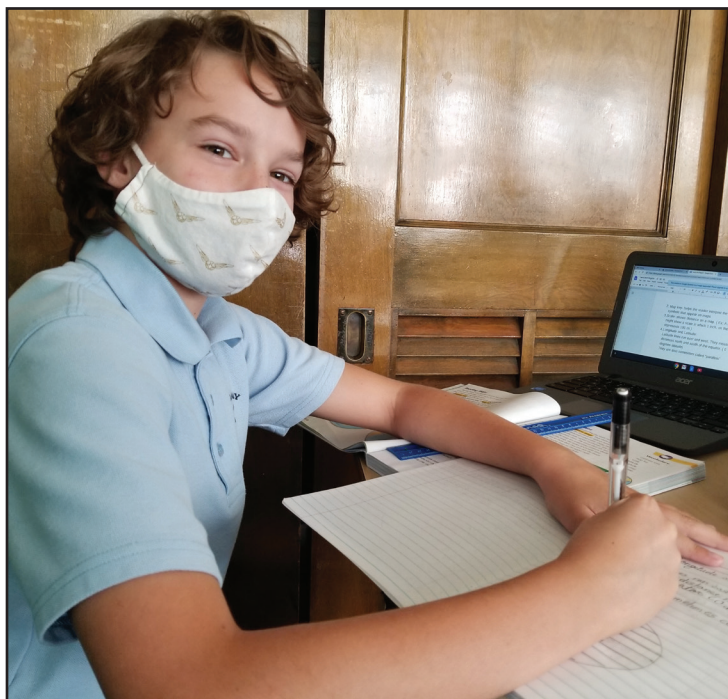
“The pandemic challenged us in so many ways but in our Catholic Schools, we’ve taken those challenges and created the opportunities behind them,” Jason Morrison, Diocesan Secretary for Catholic Education/Chief Executive Officer, said.

Reflecting on how Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Scranton saw such success during the pandemic, Superintendent Kristen Donohue credited not only the teachers, staff and administrators, but also the students and families who followed all safety protocols.

“We could not have done what we did this year without the cooperation of our families, our students who are doing the work, along with our teachers and administrators,” Donohue said.

In order to reopen in the fall, the Diocese of Scranton Catholic School System was intentional, focused and data-driven in its planning process. A Diocesan Health & Safety Committee, made up of educators, health professionals and clergy, developed appropriate safety guidelines.

“We really had to think, from start to finish, about the school day and every detail



that happens,” Donohue said.

While some might point to smaller class sizes in Catholic schools as the reason for success, Morrison said flexibility and balance were much more critical factors.

“We ended up using cafeterias as classrooms in some schools to create space and ensure physical distancing. We had to adjust and be flexible and be creative,” he explained.

Administrators faced constant questions and always needed to adapt Morrison said, pointing to another example, “If we were making a gym into a classroom, we had to determine what gym looks like for students to provide them an opportunity to have physical exercise, whether that be outside in the warmer months or inside.”

Throughout the health crisis, Catholic Schools continued to be innovative.

“We implemented new technologies, we implemented new ways of learning and

everybody got on board with that and I don’t think we can underestimate the team mentality that came into play,” Morrison said.

As a result, parents and families continue to respond. Inquiries about Catholic education continue to come in for the 2021-2022 academic year. Registration is now underway in all 19 Diocesan schools.

“Looking at the numbers relative to other years, we’re on track to have one of our largest growths if things continue as they have been. We’re about three-percent ahead of where we were two years ago, which is the best we’ve had since 2010,” Morrison added.

Another important statistic that Morrison tracks is the retention rate for current students. He says it is currently five-percent higher than it has been in the last three years.

“That trend tells me that the people

who came to us, and maybe they came to us because we were providing an in-person education, are now staying with us because it’s not just that educational environment, it’s that they appreciate, understand and want what we are providing in our schools every day,” Morrison said.

Diocesan schools have promptly dealt with any COVID-19 cases that have arisen. With the end of the academic year quickly approaching, administrators say this has been a year like none other.

“The pace of this year is definitely faster than any other school year that I’ve experienced in my career,” Donohue admitted.

“It has been very inspiring and impressive to watch, not only as a parent with children in the school system, but being part of the school system professionally to watch and be inspired by everybody,” Morrison added.



Assessments provide personalized data to help Catholic School students grow

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Smith calls the new assessments a “game changer” when it comes to thinking about the way lessons are taught.

“I can deliver direct instruction for the students but with that direct instruction, I can break them out into small groups and target specific needs. For the students who might not understand a concept that much, I can offer reinforcement activities and more instruction. For the students on the other end of the spectrum, I’m able to give them differentiated learning that is more challenging to them, that really expands their thinking. I’ll use different depth of knowledge questions,” she explained.

Kristen Donohue, Superintendent of Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Scranton, says no other local school district is using NWEA Assessments, so having this tool makes Catholic Schools unique.

“Our real goal is to make sure all of our students are growing. We believe firmly that all students can grow and all students can learn,” Donohue explained.

Donohue recently visited several schools across the Diocese to see how teachers are utilizing the assessment data to help all students reach their God-given potential.

“It’s exciting. This type of planning is very different than years ago when

a teacher would plan one lesson for an entire group of students,” she added. “The outcome is worth every second of planning because you are able to see each student access their education at an appropriate level and really maximize their time in the classroom. This assessment data is one piece that supports our teachers as they provide instruction at the readiness level of our students.”

Many school districts only rely on one standardized test at the end of the academic year and often the results are stale by the time an educator wants to use them. That is the difference between being “achievement-driven” versus “growth-driven.”

“This data is living. We’re continuing to use it and continuing to reflect upon it,” Donohue said.

Using the NWEA Assessment Tool is just another example of how Catholic Schools continue to raise the bar in terms of innovation, Jason Morrison, Diocesan Secretary for Catholic Education and Chief Executive Officer, explained.

“In the local area, we’re the only ones that are using this assessment tool and it gives us a greater understanding of each child,” Morrison said. “We owe it to students ... We need to ensure that we are creating an environment that is faith-filled and academically excellent.”

Diocese of Scranton
CATHOLIC
 SCHOOL SYSTEM
 FAITH • ACADEMICS • SERVICE

The Diocese of Scranton is committed to educating our students in an environment that is academically excellent and facilitates the development of moral judgment and Christian decision-making. We are proud to share the following successes of our students in the classroom and in their service to others. Each day, our schools are fulfilling their mission of preparing today's youth and young adults to become tomorrow's faith-filled leaders.



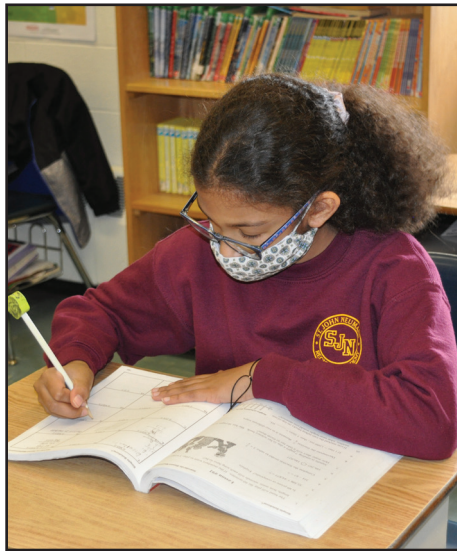
Thomas Rohan, a junior at Holy Cross High School in Dunmore, receives the 8th Carmen Alu "Pay it Forward" award, which honors HCHS student service by Bishop Hannan Class of 2000 alumnus Carmen Alu.



Juniors at Holy Redeemer High School in Wilkes-Barre recently celebrated "Ring Night" with their families. Some of 11th graders proudly show off their new adornments.



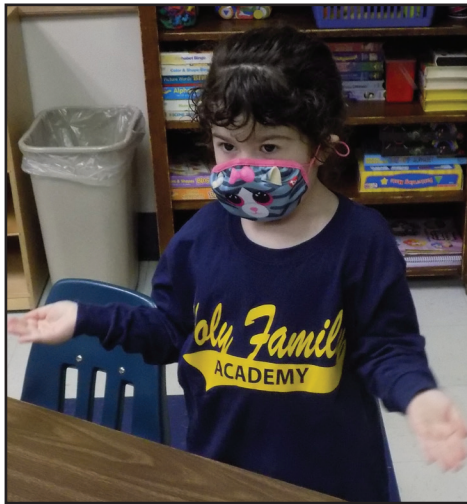
Mateo Antonucci, a seventh grade student at Notre Dame Jr./Sr. High School in East Stroudsburg, works on an assignment using his laptop. The school recently purchased 200 Chromebooks using money received from a local county grant.



Saint John Neumann
 Elementary School, Williamsport



On a beautiful spring day, Joey Pontious, an eighth grade student at Saint John Neumann Jr./Sr. High School in Williamsport, enjoys Religion class outdoors.



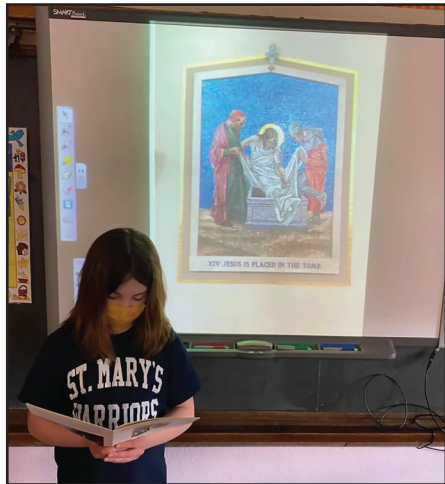
Holy Family Academy in Hazleton



Saint Agnes School in Towanda



Epiphany School in Sayre



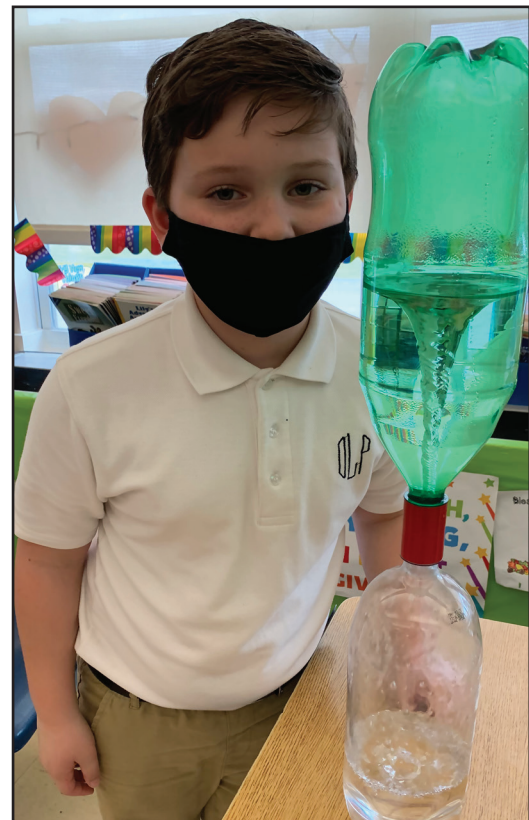
The fourth grade class at Saint Mary of Mount Carmel School in Dunmore led the school in the Stations of the Cross during the last week of Lent.



Eighth graders at Saint Nicolas/Saint Mary School in Wilkes-Barre honored their grandparents and the special seniors in their lives at their annual Mass and celebration.



Students from **Saint Clare/Saint Paul School in Scranton** collected supplies to fill up the St. Joseph's Baby Pantry in support of the Jude Zayac Foundation.



Third graders at **Our Lady of Peace School in Clarks Green** recently learned about severe weather and weather safety in science class. They were able to create tornado tubes to visualize how a tornado formulates and descends.



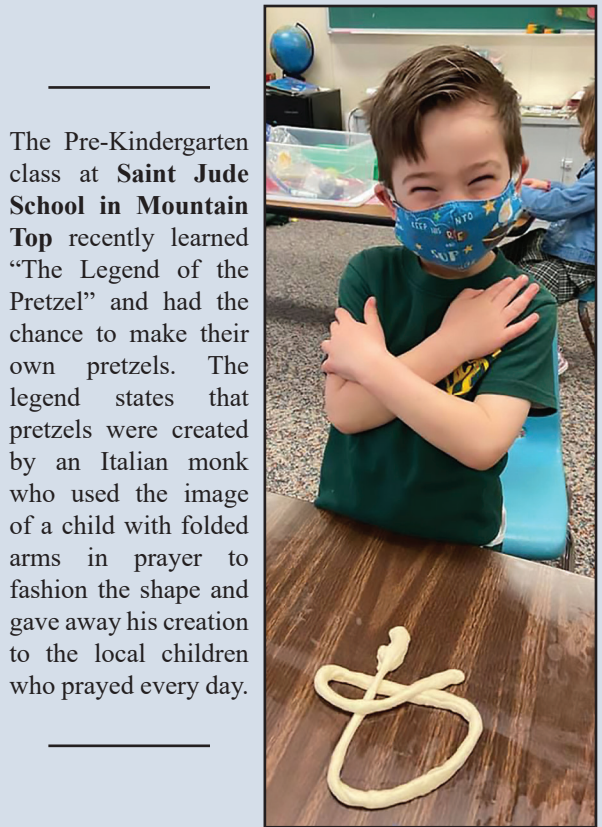
Students from **Notre Dame Elementary School in East Stroudsburg** who have been selected to compete on the state level of the Zaner-Bloser National Handwriting Competition hold their proficiency certificates from the company.



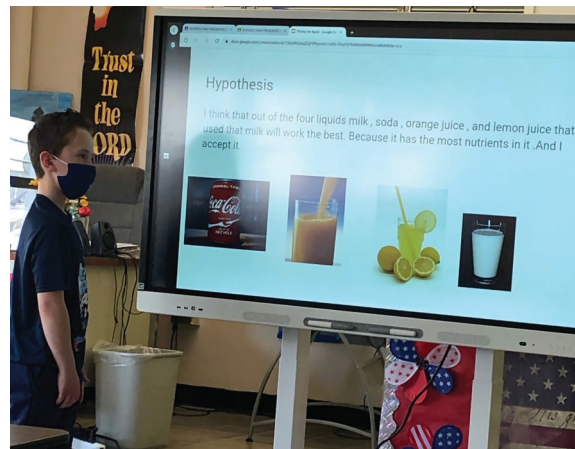
In honor of Earth Day, Ellie Faulent and her eighth grade classmates at **Holy Rosary School in Duryea** helped clean their school's local town park.



Students at **Wyoming Area Catholic School in Exeter** are creating their own ark as a physical reminder of the Acts of Random Kindness (ARK) project they are piloting locally for Unite the World. Students will make donations into smaller ARK banks to help those in need.



The Pre-Kindergarten class at **Saint Jude School in Mountain Top** recently learned "The Legend of the Pretzel" and had the chance to make their own pretzels. The legend states that pretzels were created by an Italian monk who used the image of a child with folded arms in prayer to fashion the shape and gave away his creation to the local children who prayed every day.



Students in fourth and fifth grades at **All Saints Academy in Scranton** presented their Science Fair projects with their classes utilizing Smartboard technology.