

VIENNA ST. MARK CHURCH

'The gift of students'

A meeting of pastors and principals highlights priorities for local Catholic schools.

By ELIZABETH A. ELLIOTT
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Pastors and principals met at St. Mark Church in Vienna Nov. 5 to talk about including students with special needs, retaining students and the importance of school safety. The meeting was hosted by the Office of Catholic Schools.

Jennifer Bigelow, diocesan superintendent of schools, said the meeting's agenda focused on the gift of students. She outlined the meeting for those in attendance by asking, "How can we continue to increase and retain our enrollment to provide Catholic education for all who want it; how can we expand our resources for serving children of varying abilities; and how can we continue to keep our children safe and secure in our midst?"

Bishop Michael F. Burbidge said it was wonderful to gather with pastors and principals.

"As we know — and studies will show this — the most successful schools are those that have a pastor and a principal who will work closely together, who will support each other, and who will communicate with each other frequently and consistently," Bishop Burbidge said.

Bishop Burbidge encouraged the pastors and principals to find a way to include all students of varying abilities through Porto Charities, which helps Catholic schools fund programs for schools with special needs.

"We are going to do this. If it's being done in other schools then the model is there," he said. "I really would like, as one of my goals for the diocese, that very soon every school in our diocese has found a way to be inclusive of all of God's children. It's a realistic goal and I'm asking you to pursue it with me."

Porto Charities board member Bill Dalgetty, and Leo Alonso, founder, spoke at the meeting. "Emily's simplicity and charity of heart has taught our family as much about God and his ways as any sermon or teaching or spiritual writing," said Dalgetty of his daughter, who was born with Down syndrome.

Alonso encouraged pastors to give their parishioners the opportunity to support the Porto Charities program.

St. Mark School principal Darcie Girmus introduced students and mentors from the Evangelist program for students with intellectual disabilities. St. Mark was the first diocesan elementary school to offer such a program.

Mary Stewart, diocesan director of risk management, and Bigelow led a presentation on school security. Bigelow said a diocesan safety task force has been created



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Pastors and principals meet at St. Mark Church in Vienna Nov. 5. The meeting is led by the Office of Catholic Schools. Bishop Michael F. Burbidge (below) encouraged those gathered to find a way to include all students of varying abilities through Porto Charities.

to look at best practices and take a look at what we already do in our schools. "We are cognizant that the recommendations take time and resources for implementation," she said. "We want to be thoughtful, measured and provide ways to implement them in the school."

While the task force is about school safety, Bigelow said it's larger than that. "We know that safety takes on a much bigger role. It's not just about our schools but our entire community. We have to continue the conversation."

Stewart said training is one of the big pieces they are looking at. "We want to make sure all of our teachers are ready," she said. Stewart said they are looking at what schools are doing inside and outside of the schools to be safe.

Father Patrick L. Posey, pastor of St. James Church in Falls Church, shared what they are doing at the parish and school. He encouraged everyone to spend the money for good equipment and cameras.

Renee White, assistant superintendent for the Office of Catholic Schools, said diocesan retention exceeds the national average. "We have a retention percentage of 92 percent. The national average for private schools is 89 percent and that is as reported by the National As-



sociation of Independent Schools," she said.

White said that another highlight is matriculation numbers from preschool to kindergarten have increased a percentage point to 87 percent from last year.

"The diocese continues to be a bright spot in enrollment overall," she said.

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