

# Principals, Pastors hosted at Celebration of Education

By Catherine Walsh

New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick and Red Sox manager Terry Francona have nothing on Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley and Secretary for Education/Superintendent Mary Grassa O'Neill when it comes to rallying the troops. At the Archdiocese of Boston's annual Celebration of Education recently, more than 150 Catholic school principals and pastors listened intently as the Cardinal and Grassa O'Neill lauded their work and challenged them to greater achievements.

Cardinal Seán opened the celebration by telling participants: "I see Catholic education as such an important ministry!" Catholic schools have never been more impressive than they are today, he continued. "Studies confirm the great job we do in providing a superior education to children of many different backgrounds," said Cardinal Seán. "Let us keep finding ways to do this critical work with great faith in Our Lord and a deep commitment to excellence."



Pointing out that Catholic schools prepare young people for service both to the church and the world at large, he also urged Catholic educators "not to be afraid to be evangelizers, to reach out to parents and families in school communities who may have fallen away from the faith."

Cardinal Seán's passionate leadership on Catholic education "means there is so much more that the rest of us can do and must do," said Grassa O'Neill when it came her turn to speak. "Cardinal Seán has charged us to revitalize and reinvigorate Catholic education throughout the Archdiocese."

Noting that the Patriots had come from far behind to win their first game of the season, and that the Red Sox had won a key game in the same week, Grassa O'Neill said: "Your job as school leaders is like the job of the managers of those teams. You make the calls. You choose the team. You set the expectations."



In her first year as Secretary for Education/Superintendent, Grassa O'Neill continued, she and her team at the Catholic Schools Office visited 80 out of the 129 schools in the Archdiocese – with the goal of visiting the remaining 49 schools this year. “I was very moved by the strong leadership I witnessed from principals, headmasters and pastors, and very grateful for the support, prayers and guidance I received,” she said. “I can honestly say that I’ve had the privilege of meeting some of the most talented and professional individuals of my entire career.”

Grassa O'Neill focused most of her comments on the strengths of Catholic schools, both as a phenomenon nationwide and specifically in the Archdiocese. Catholic school students consistently out-test and outperform public school children and

charter school children across the country, she said, and a number of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese are “outstanding performers.”

Several elementary schools in the Boston Archdiocese have students who achieved in the 90 percentile or above on standardized tests, said Grassa O'Neill, who also noted that Archdiocesan elementary school student test scores as a whole are nearly 50 percent above the



national average. Catholic high school students in the Archdiocese score about 100 points higher on the SAT tests than their public school peers, the superintendent continued, and Catholic high schools in the Archdiocese can claim more than a 90 percent rate of enrollment in a four-year college. “Four of our Catholic high schools recently sent 100

percent of their students to four-year colleges!” said Grassa O'Neill. She pointed out that, according to *Boston Magazine*, eight out of the top 10 private high schools in Greater Boston that offer the “best value” to students are Catholic.

But Grassa O'Neill also tackled challenging issues confronting Catholic schools. “Last year eight schools lost their viability and had to close their doors,” she reminded listeners. “Each of these closings is a loss for all of us.”

Finding new models of viability and vitality for Catholic schools is critical, said Grassa O'Neill. She called “very exciting” the Archdiocese’s opening of two new schools – South Boston Catholic Academy, which was formed from merging two schools, the former Gate of Heaven

and St. Brigid Schools, and Good Shepherd Pre-School, the first Catholic school in Charlestown in six years.

The Celebration of Education concluded by recognizing Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese that are having significant anniversaries this year. Those schools are:

- East Boston Central Catholic Elementary School, 35 years
- Bishop Fenwick High School in Peabody, 50 years
- St. Francis of Assisi Elementary School in Braintree, 50 years
- St. Tarcissius in Framingham, 50 years
- Archbishop Williams, 60 years
- Country Day School of the Holy Union, 60 years
- Central Catholic High School in Lawrence, 75 years
- Ste. Jeanne D'Arc Academy in Lowell, 100 years
- St. Mary's Elementary School in Melrose, 100 years
- Trinity Catholic High School in Newton, 115 years
- St. Mary of the Assumption in Lawrence, 150 years