

Ascension • St. John Paul II • St. Peter Claver • St. Pascal Regional

Goal of new St. Peter Claver house system is more unity

One of St. Peter Claver's mottos is "We are One Family." Now the family is moving into three new houses.

A house system is taking shape this year that joins grade levels into groups. These groups will provide opportunities for scholars to empower, challenge, include and nurture each other. Just like families.

"The scholars in each house stay together the entire time they are at SPC," said new Co-Principal Chris Smith. "This allows scholars to be mentored when young and leaders when they are older."

The houses and grades this year are

- Howard House, K-3-6
- Clark Atlanta House, 1-4-7
- Jackson State House, 2-5-8 and preschool

They are named after historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to promote higher education to the scholars, Smith said. "Students of color who attend HBCUs report a greater sense of community, a supportive

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First grade scholar Jennifer praying in class.

Prayer everywhere

Ascension School leans in

Prayer is an important part of Catholic education, and Ascension School is doubling down on it. There is a prayer request box in a prominent place near the school office. There are Power of Prayer services each month in addition to regular school Masses. It is all part of continuing to build a beloved community at the school.

Staff highlighted building a stronger faith community and further emphasizing Catholic identity as a priority on their annual spring survey, Principal Benito Matias said. **Turn to Page 6**

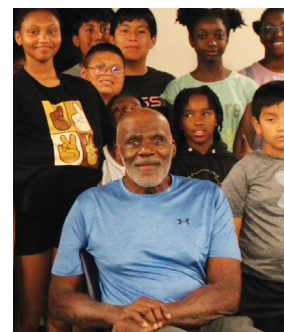
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Summer flies when you're at SLAM!

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Visit our website:
ACAmn.org

SCHOOL REPORTS

ST. JOHN PAUL II

We are so fortunate to have two wonderful assistant principals. Blaise Younce has been doing a great job for the past several years. He is joined this year by long-time 8th grade teacher Jessi Weakley.

Weakley earned a Master's Degree in Educational Studies with a concentration in Special Education in December of 2024. Last summer, she completed additional course work and received an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) certificate.

She serves on the Archdiocese Commission for Special Needs. "I am passionate about serving all scholars," she said. "I am excited about the advances being made in this area to

serve our Catholic school students."

The staff at JP II is authentically mission driven, Weakley added. "I take great pleasure in problem solving and connecting with our staff, scholars and families."

She is also happy to keep her hand in the classroom, teaching social-emotional learning (SEL) once a week to 8th grade scholars. "It has long been my favorite class, as SEL includes brain science, emotional regulation and relationship building skills."

Tricia Menzhuber

Tricia Menzhuber, Principal



Jessi Weakley: an award-winning middle school teacher and now a school administrator.



ST. PASCAL REGIONAL

Scholars in grades 5-8 spent quality time with nature thanks to the St. Pascal Men's Club. The experience took place at YMCA Camp St. Croix along the St. Croix River. The scholars stayed overnight and participated in activities, such as team building, archery and ecology education. We are grateful to the Men's Club for sponsoring this trip.

We also celebrated the achievement of St. Pascal Regional scholars who completed their summer reading challenge.

The scholars logged more than 30 hours of reading. They earned rewards, including out-of-uniform passes, treats and gift cards.

Thank you to teachers Bernadette Yarbrough and Barb Odhiambo for running this program.

Inna Collier Paske

Inna Collier Paske, Principal



Dorothy Lundstrum with a young dancer and today's Hip-Hop Dance class.



ASCENSION

Our new collaboration with Lundstrum Performing Arts proves that life often comes full circle.

In 1927, Dorothy Lundstrum took over our Ascension School of Dance. She was only 15 at the time! It was the start of an incredible career. Dorothy taught dance and "charm school" for more than 70 years. During that time, she worked with Ascension on its renown parish talent shows.

The nonprofit Lundstrum Performing Arts — and Ascension — are still going strong. And this year, Lundstrum staff is teaching after-school Hip-Hop Dance classes to our scholars, complete with recitals.

Benito P. Matias

Benito Matias, Principal

ST. PETER CLAVER

We are grateful in so many ways for our partnership with the University of St. Thomas (UST). This fall, we are especially thankful for the UST creative writing class that comes to St. Peter Claver to tutor our Kindergartners one on one. (Sometimes even two on one!) Recently, the college students helped our scholars write a story about fall or Halloween. They collaborated to write a beginning, middle and end, learning the various parts of a story.

Christopher Smith

Chris Smith, Co-Principal



A University of St. Thomas student and SPC scholar talk through a story.

ST. PETER CLAVER | Chris Smith

Chris Smith joined Ascension Catholic Academy in June as co-principal at St. Peter Claver Catholic School, assisting Terese Shimshock as she prepares for retirement next year. Smith was previously the principal at St. John's Area School in Foley, Minn. He also worked at Minnesota Catholic schools in Rochester, Owatonna, Roseville, St. Michael and Collegeville. He has degrees from the University of St. Thomas, St. Mary's University and the University of Notre Dame.

How would you describe your first few weeks at SPC?

Eye-opening and deeply humbling. Entering urban Catholic education for the first time has challenged me to see schooling through a broader lens — one shaped by perseverance, faith, and community. I've been moved by the tireless dedication of our teachers and staff, whose commitment to helping every scholar succeed is unwavering. Meeting more than 90 bright, talented and resilient scholars has been a true joy. I am also profoundly grateful for Ms. Shimshock's patient guidance and servant leadership.

What's been most rewarding?

Witnessing the power of community rooted in our shared mission. The spirit of ubuntu — "I am because we are" — is not just a phrase here; it's a way of life. Watching teachers, staff, and families come together with love, generosity and a shared commitment to our scholars' growth has been transformative. Together, we are building something extraordinary: a school where every child is seen, valued and empowered to achieve greatness.

What's been most challenging?

Balancing all that I aspire to do with the realities of time. I want to be everywhere — listening to scholars, supporting teachers, connecting with families and advancing the behind-the-scenes work that drives school improvement. Each of these areas is vital to creating a culture of trust, high

expectations, and joy in learning. The challenge, though, is also a blessing — it reminds me that transformation is a journey, one built through small, daily acts of faith, patience and perseverance.

How is SPC different than other schools where you've worked?

Those schools were primarily white, rural or suburban communities, often well-resourced and deeply connected to the Catholic tradition through service and enrichment programs. SPC, however, reflects a different and equally beautiful reality — one where faith, culture and social justice intersect in powerful ways. Here, education is not just about academics; it's about affirming the dignity and brilliance of each scholar and helping them see themselves as vital contributors to our world.

We are building something extraordinary: a school where every child is seen, valued and empowered to achieve greatness.

**Chris Smith,
SPC Co-Principal**

How do you want to help transform SPC in the future?

I hope to collaborate with our teachers, staff, families and Ascension Catholic Academy to make SPC a beacon of academic excellence and cultural pride. I envision a school where Black history and culture are fully woven into our identity, where scholars express themselves through the arts, and where every classroom reflects the belief that each child is made in the image and likeness of God. Together, we can nurture scholars who not only excel academically but who also grow into compassionate, socially conscious leaders — young people equipped to create a more just, inclusive, and hope-filled world.



'We get by with a little help from our friends...'

ACA Partnerships

Ascension Catholic Academy has about 150 partner organizations that help our scholars in many ways. From parishes that conduct collections to groups that give scholars enrichment opportunities they otherwise would never have, we are so grateful for each one! Here are some that are new this year.

STAFF SUPPORT



- Provides programs and distributes books that teach positive relational skills and prevent bullying.



CLIPBOARD

- Connects schools with vetted substitute teachers, paraprofessionals and education support staff.



**SAINT JOHN VIANNEY
COLLEGE SEMINARY**

- Volunteers help in classrooms and in other roles in our schools.



**CATHOLIC ATHLETIC
ASSOCIATION**

- Administers athletic programs in Catholic schools to promote scholar development, skills and sportsmanship.
- Low fees allow Ascension School to field both basketball and volleyball teams.

- Lets scholars practice wilderness skills like canoeing in an urban setting.

- Arranges a small-group trip for scholars to the Boundary Waters.

ENRICHMENT

- Empowers African-American communities through programs in health and wellness, civic engagement and economic empowerment.
- Partnering with Ascension School by providing out of school time classes for scholars and families.



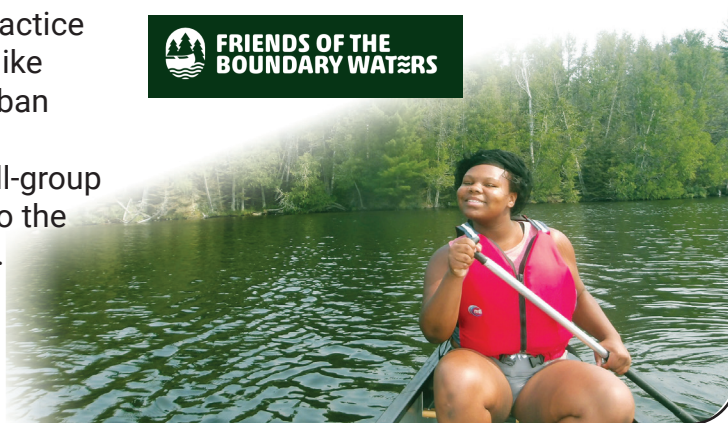
- Provides free tickets for scholars and their families for sporting events, arts performances and museums.
- Partnership began at St. John Paul II, and now has expanded to all four schools.



- Gives scholars a sapling on Earth Day to plant and watch grow.



- Leads faith-based retreats for middle schoolers.



Prayer everywhere at Ascension

Continued from Page 1

"We, of course, pray within the school daily," Matias said. "Yet, I have personally experienced an increase in the instances when I come across entire classes praying ... just before they eat lunch, and throughout the day for middle school scholars, who have different teachers for different subjects and pray with each one."

The initiative is written into staff goals for this school year: "By the end of the 2025-26 school year, we will have built a school-wide culture that centers our shared faith and our school's Catholic identity." As part of building that culture, all stakeholders in our community will have the opportunity to grow in their personal faith journey. The culture of prayer will be consistently infused in classroom and school-wide routines and events.

Each teacher is expected to establish a personalized plan and routines that align to the school-wide vision. "As a team, we self-reflect on the execution of our individual plan and progress toward our collective vision and commit to next steps at least six times throughout the year with a peer accountability/support group."



Staff has been adding intentions to this box located prominently in the hall near the main office. As scholars learn about the practice, they will be invited to add prayer requests.

Thomas Johnson, Assistant Principal of School Culture and Athletics, administers the project. It goes hand in hand with The Positivity Project that Ascension uses for social-emotional learning.

"The P2 Prayer Service was an idea to help enrich our Catholic identity and gather for intentional prayer to help support our scholars, teachers and greater community," Johnson said.

At the monthly service, all intentions submitted to the prayer box are read.

In addition, scholars learn about two of the school classrooms' patron saints. They also celebrate those who have been nominated for displaying the month's Positivity Project's character traits.

Matthew 18:19-20 was the inspiration for the service: "Again, amen I say to you, if two of you agree on Earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."



OUR CORPORATE SPONSORS

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Houses give leadership opportunities

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environment, more affordable costs, a rich cultural heritage, academic success, strong mentorships and valuable networking opportunities," Smith said.

Through house activities, scholars will learn to empower, challenge, include and nurture each other. Captains from the upper grade levels, chosen by faculty based on applications, will assist grade-level teachers in leading house members.

Houses will sit together for school assemblies, have opportunities to pair up academically, do service projects and mentor new scholars. They will create a unique identity with projects such as creating a banner, writing a house prayer or motto and establishing a connection with the HBCU for which they are named.

St. John Paul II, another ACA school,



Scholars in grades 2, 5 and 8 shared lunchtime recess, trying out their skills at Double Dutch rope jumping.

uses the house model, too, but in a different form. It involves only middle school scholars and is built around leadership opportunities. SPC's houses will expand that model.

Scholars are expected to benefit in many ways, according to the plan developed by Co-Principal Smith.

- The system encourages academic achievement, positive school

culture, teamwork, friendship, service and leadership.

- It allows for constructive competition and positive peer influence.
- It helps to foster student mentoring relationships across grade levels.
- It allows for a new dimension in student-teacher relationships by sharing house leadership.

Please consider becoming an ACA sustaining giver today!

Becoming a sustaining donor to Ascension Catholic Academy creates powerful, lasting change for our scholars. Monthly gifts provide a reliable foundation we can count on. It allows us to plan ahead, respond quickly, ensuring every child has the academic, social, and spiritual support they need to thrive. Instead of relying solely on one-time donations, sustaining support fuels consistent access to high-quality teaching, enrichment and holistic care year-round. Please consider becoming an ACA sustainer today!

• **\$10/month** contributes to field trip transportation costs giving scholars hands-on learning experience.

• **\$20/month** ensures access to out-of-school and extracurricular activities like sports teams and chess club for one scholar, fostering leadership, teamwork and problem-solving skills.

• **\$35/month** provides weekly art and music classes, opening doors to creativity and self-expression that support academic success.

• **\$50/month** covers the cost of essential classroom supplies for one scholar for the entire school year, keeping them equipped and ready to learn every day.

• **\$75/month** funds one-on-one tutoring and literacy support, helping a struggling reader achieve grade-level proficiency and academic confidence.

Use the enclosed envelope or the information below to give online.

Visit our website:
ACAmn.org



MAKE A GIFT

Scan the code or visit ACAmn.org/give/ to make a gift to Ascension Catholic Academy or any of our schools.



A scholar eagerly waited to start an art project during the Summer Language and Math program.

A summer well spent: Listening and learning

SLAM program kept more than 200
ACA scholars academically sharp

"There will be challenges. But if you learn how to learn ... you will be able to overcome those challenges."

Those were just some of the inspiring words retired Minnesota Supreme Court Justice and NFL Hall-of-Famer Alan Page shared with scholars while visiting the Summer Language and Math (SLAM) program this summer.

SLAM brings together scholars from all four Academy schools for six weeks each summer, offering scholars the opportunity to grow academically and socially. More than 200 scholars participated this past summer.

"The most rewarding part of SLAM was working directly with the scholars and seeing their growth, engagement, and excitement over the summer," said Kha Dinh, who led SLAM for the first time this summer. "Beyond that, though, I want to dedicate a lot of gratitude to the staff and teachers on our team for helping me expand my own horizons and professional experience.

"Our mission was to serve as a positive and welcome space where scholars can grow academically, socially, and



Justice Alan Page showed scholars his permanently bent pinkie finger, the subject of a children's book he wrote with his daughter.

spiritually – and looking back, we met those goals," said Dinh, a middle school teacher at St. John Paul II. "Through rigorous classroom instruction, implementing and adapting the RISE summer learning curriculum for the first time to meet the needs of our scholars, we engaged scholars in meaningful ways."

In addition to classroom instruction, scholars enjoyed field trips to places including historic Fort Snelling and a boat ride on the Mississippi. Other guest speakers visiting SLAM were model and actress Janae Moore and Ch. 4 reporter Jonah Kaplan.