



## St. Cassian School: A gem hiding in plain sight (SPONSORED)



*This article is paid content provided by St. Cassian School, 190 Lorraine Ave., which has been educating pre-K through eighth-grade students in Montclair since 1953.*

**by Anne Keys Biebel**

Ever wonder how many schools in Montclair are nationally recognized for exemplary academics? Just one! In 2016, the US Department of Education recognized St. Cassian School as a Blue Ribbon School for “exemplary high performance” in academics. Surprised? Never heard of St. Cassian School?

St. Cassian School is the only school in Montclair recently recognized as a “National Blue Ribbon School for Exemplary High Performance.”

Well, Montclair’s gem of a school has been hiding in plain sight on Lorraine Avenue since 1953, educating PreK-3 through 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in the Catholic tradition. To St. Cassian’s principal, Mrs. Maria Llanes, achieving national academic recognition came as no surprise, “St. Cassian students have always performed well, but to receive the highest recognition, we needed to take the students to the next level, academically, and that involves teaching concepts in ways that play to learners’ strengths and expands their conceptualization.”

**“Gifted and Talented” Experiences for Every Student:** To help with this, the school adopted Harvard psychologist, Howard Gardner’s theory that every learner has innate preferences or “multiple intelligences” for how they learn best. “On close analysis, we found that our students love learning in tactile, visual, spatial, linguistic and musical ways, and we all know that 21<sup>st</sup> century learners love technology, too.”

All Gifted and Talented classes are “open to all learners here.” The *many* sports teams are also open to all.

As a result, the school invests in Chromebooks, iPads, Laptops, and, recently, 3D printers to integrate into the learning experience for PreK-3 through 8<sup>th</sup> grades. In addition to technology, the teachers took steps to integrate the Arts, especially visual and performing arts, into the electives program, named “Multiple Intelligences Arts Domain.” Mrs. Llanes explained that a popular MIAD is Mini Model Congress. “The middle school students write original legislation and then debate it in the Capitol building in Trenton. This is the type of Gifted and Talented elective that defines our MIAD program and is open to all learners here.” Other electives incorporate skills, like musical theater, dance, digital photography, robotics, 3D printing, architecture and engineering into specific projects or outcomes.

**Unique Partnerships and Scholars-In-Residence to Elevate Learning:** But it’s Mrs. Llanes’ next move that sets St. Cassian above the rest: “Every year, we bring in the area’s best institutions, like the Lincoln Center, NJPAC, Bergen Performing Arts Center, Liberty Science Center, and local artists and scholars to teach science exploration, law, and engineering, ballroom dancing, musical theater, chamber music appreciation, and more.”

“Every year we bring in the area’s best institutions, local artists, and scholars” to elevate learning in and outside the classroom.

Mrs. Llanes chuckles, “When a professional ballroom dancer asks 5<sup>th</sup> graders, who are paired up for the Fox Trot, to hold their arms at 90 degrees or create a 360-degree formation, geometry suddenly becomes very important and concrete.” A similar ‘aha’ moment occurs when students, trained by water quality experts, compare the water quality results of Verona Lake to drinking water sources in Africa. “Once the students realize the scarcity of clean water and the health repercussions, they want to figure out how to solve this problem as well as other world challenges by engineering prototypes.” These are displayed at the school’s annual STREAM fair (R is for religion) and usually several compete at the Archdiocesan level, which is among the nation’s largest by population.

**What’s next for St. Cassian School?** Without missing a beat, Mrs. Llanes talks about the exciting year ahead which marks the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Cassian Parish, with a visit from Cardinal Tobin. Mrs. Llanes, the pastor, Father Marc Vicari, and the faculty are thinking about the ways the students can contribute. “We want to expand our partnerships with local artists to help the students explore mediums such as film to bring the symbols and saints in our church windows to life. And, since the church was founded by immigrants, the students will no doubt reflect on their own families’ immigration stories.”

Turning standardized testing into a positive: less time, faster results, individualized help for each student.

**Standardized Testing?** As dismissal approaches, I notice how busy the office becomes, but I squeeze in one more question: can you describe the standardized testing here? At this, Mrs. Llanes grins and then practically burst into song about how the yearly standardized tests were recently replaced with “MAP Growth,” a much shorter, less nerve-wracking test given in September, February, and May. “We receive the results almost immediately, so teachers can differentiate instruction for each student. This really empowers the students, too, because they receive their very own plan for growth. We are blessed with the technology that makes the shift to MAP possible.” With that, Mrs. Llanes, a principal with lot of energy and enthusiasm, thanks me and I leave thinking that she’s a gem within the gem of a school.

*To learn more, consider visiting St. Cassian School, which is hosting its annual **Open House on Sunday, Jan. 26, from 10 to 1 p.m.** Once there, you can meet the teachers and many of the students and parents who give school tours to all visitors. St. Cassian School is located on 190 Lorraine Avenue, in Upper Montclair, [www.stcassianschool.org](http://www.stcassianschool.org).*

*Author Anne Keys Biebel is a certified K-8 teacher, a former corporate public affairs and policy specialist and former Deputy Under Secretary of Natural Resources and Environment with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. A resident of Montclair whose child attends SCS, she is a parishioner of St. Cassian Church and a former employee of the school.*