

## **Small Catholic school has big plans to grow in Richland**

Begun by parents, Vineyard Academy has mandatory studies of Latin, Spanish.

By Chris Meehan

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RICHLAND - Asked how much he likes his pre-kindergarten class at Vineyard Academy in Richland, Ben Sullivan raised his arms over his head and answered, "I like it all the way to heaven!"

Those fond feelings are echoed by other students and teachers at this independent Catholic school located in five portable classrooms in a farm field.

### **Core teachings**

There is an infectious spirit here that arises from the core teachings - of love and service to others - of the Roman Catholic Church, said kindergarten teacher Bambi Kolodzieczyk.

"Vineyard has so much to offer," said Kolodzieczyk, who has taught at the school for nearly all of the 10 years it has existed and has enrolled her children there.

"Even being a cradle (lifelong) Catholic, it has totally changed my family in terms of embracing God more and living the way he would want us to live."

As Vineyard celebrates its 10th anniversary of transmitting traditional Catholic values to elementary school children, it is raising money to build a permanent school on 37 nearby acres that it owns.

With more than 50 students and growing, the school hopes to be in a new facility within the next year or so. "We think there is a need for a school like this," said Alane Fifelski, the principal.

### **Parents founded school**

Vineyard began when a group of Catholic parents, most of whom were home schooling their children, met to discuss the formation of a Catholic school in the Richland area.

After learning from the Catholic Diocese of Kalamazoo that the diocese had no immediate plans to open a school in the area, the parents founded Vineyard. They were aided by the National Consultants for Education, a Georgia-based Catholic educational organization, in developing a program that includes regular religion and catechism classes, as well as mandatory studies of Latin and Spanish.

### **'A hidden treasure'**

The curriculum stems from teaching approaches developed by the Legionaries of Christ, a Catholic order of priests.

"The school is a hidden treasure," said Lisa Rowell, the mother of two Vineyard students. "They do teach the Catholic faith, but it is a Christian school" for people of many backgrounds.

"Vineyard is another good, faith-based option for a family," said Frank Wippel, superintendent of the 23 Catholic schools in the Diocese of Kalamazoo.

That Vineyard passes on a godly message is evident in many ways, including a virtue-of-the-month homework assignment, Rowell said.

Teachers pick a virtue, such as honesty or tolerance or kindness, and ask students to practice that virtue at home. When they do, their parents sign a paper acknowledging the child has done so.

"I can't believe how much my children have learned," Rowell said of her first- and third-grade sons.

### **6 parishes represented**

Vineyard displays statues and religious pictures but has no chapel. As a result, the children go to St. Anne Catholic Church in Richland for certain classes and for Mass.

Preparation for receiving such sacraments as Holy Communion takes place at the school. Students partake of the bread and wine while attending Mass at their respective parishes. At least six area parishes are represented at the school.

### **All 'on the same page'**

In English class, students read about the lives of the saints. In world history, they are taught a range of events, including the formation of the early Christian church. In science, students say, they learn how God's hand is evident in all of creation.

"They teach us about the human body and how amazing it is," said Cassidy Perkins, an eighth-grader. "We have ... discussions ... (about) how to make moral choices."

Being part of the school "feels like we are all part of a little family," Rowell said. "Everyone is on the same page."