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FEATURED

St. Gabriel Catholic Parish School earns dual exemplary recognition from archdiocese

By Alex Stahl - Daily News Staff

Jul 2, 2025



RICHFIELD — St. Gabriel Catholic Parish School has been recognized by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee for its achievement in both Academic Excellence and Mission and Catholic Identity, two of the highest honors given to Catholic schools in the region.

"It's a testament to how hard our teachers work and how cohesive our staff and our community are," Principal Kimberly Lestina said. "We couldn't do this without the support of our parish and school families as well. They were generous enough to believe in what we were doing."

The archdiocese praised the school's strong connection between parish and school, visible leadership from Father Tim Bickel and Lestina, and the integration of faith throughout all areas of learning. Programs like Spirit Groups, mission-aligned decision-making and the use of faith-based materials were highlighted as exemplary.

Lestina explained how Spirit Groups, which consist of students from every grade level along with one or two teachers, are designed to strengthen community and leadership.

"We encourage our middle school students to take a lead and kind of direct and lead the lessons or the activities," she said. "It's really important to me that the kids get to know each other, and this is one of those opportunities."

Beyond Spirit Groups, the school emphasizes community outreach. During Catholic Schools Week, for example, seniors, parishioners and families were invited to join students for bingo and fellowship.

The recognition for Academic Excellence comes after a years-long investment in updating curriculum and technology. Over the course of four years, families and parishioners raised funds through annual auctions to help implement the Project Lead the Way science, technology, engineering and math curriculum; update core academic resources; and replace smartboards with 75inch interactive TVs.

"I mean each little piece, it takes time," Lestina said. "You can't do this in a year, and it's not something that just one or two people can do."

One of the initiatives central to the school's academic growth is its Response to Intervention (RtI) program, launched after St. Gabriel received a \$10,000 Archdiocese Gift Grant. The school uses data from math testing, IXL diagnostics, classroom performance, and teacher referrals to identify students who need additional support or advanced challenges. Those students are then scheduled for targeted instruction within the week.

“The reason that we felt that was so important is because you see such a diversity within each classroom as to what the students need,” Lestina said. “And that’s really our goal, to be able to meet the needs of all of our students.”

She added that the close-knit nature of the school plays a big role in the success of these efforts.

“That’s the beauty of this school, that we are able to keep closer tabs,” Lestina said. “We know each student personally and we’re able to track their skills individually.”

St. Gabriel’s staff includes 15 teachers, support staff, early childhood aides, and parish staff. Bickel is also a visible part of school life.

“Whenever he can, which is more often than not, he is out there in the morning greeting students with me,” Lestina said. “He knows every student by name.”

Looking ahead to the 2025–2026 school year, St. Gabriel plans to continue refining its RtI program and enhancing its Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) efforts.

“We are seeing more and more that kids have needs beyond the academics,” Lestina said.

The archdiocese will formally present the school with both awards in the fall when students return.