

# Education: N.H. Private Schools

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## Catholic schools: Find your pathway

### Balancing traditional expectations with modern education

■ Enrollment is rising at many schools: Trinity has 350 students, up from 313 last year; St. Joseph has 150, up from 100 last year.

By Kathleen D. Bailey  
Special to the Union Leader

**W**HEN ASKED about discipline in her Catholic school upbringing, Brandy Houle admits that the teachers of her childhood occasionally rapped her knuckles with rulers. “They were Sister Monica, Sister Francina and Mrs. Reese,” recalled Houle, the Head of School at Saint Mary Academy in Dover. But Houle has a different perspective than some Catholic alumnae. “I deserved it,” she said cheerfully, adding, “These women shaped my character. They were strong, compassionate, decision-makers and fearless.”

Catholic schools are a viable option for families who want to foster their own faith tradition, or to experience the intimacy of a smaller school. While the discipline has changed, the values remain, according to both Houle and Nathan Stanton of Trinity High School in Manchester.

#### Trinity: Building on tradition

A young girl sprints into the school office and grabs her late pass, moaning that she hopes she doesn’t get detention. A father drops off a forgotten backpack, a mother drops off a lunch. Two smartly-dressed secretaries field the crises of the morning, juggling phone calls and visitors. It could be Any High School in Any Town USA — except that the front office also has a statue of St. Joseph, a pewter crucifix over a door, and a portrait of the Pope.

Manchester’s Trinity High School, established in 1970, is a consolidation of three old Catholic high schools: Immaculata, Saint Anthony and Bishop Bradley. The city’s tradition also included St. George, Ste. Marie, St. Joseph High School for Boys, St. Joseph High School for Girls, and, in Goffstown, Villa Augustina Academy.

Trinity welcomed St. Joseph Junior High School to the campus in 2024. According to Stanton, president of the school, the two schools share a chapel, some faculty and art rooms and science labs.

The traditional model for Catholic school was a priest or a nun as principal/administrator and priests or nuns as teachers. With a decline in religious vocations, the staffs of these schools were gradually replaced by lay-people. Trinity welcomed its first



Robotics professor Joe Pouliot consults with senior Isabella Conte in the Robotics Lab at Trinity High School in Manchester.

lay principal, Thomas Spaulding, in 1974. According to Stanton, the current staff of St. Joseph and Trinity is all laypeople, though the schools have a chaplain, the Rev. Eric Ouellette. “We do get clergy here to teach theology classes, as guest speakers, to celebrate Mass,” he said.

Stanton himself is in a relatively new role. The position of president involves fundraising, public relations and other operational issues, allowing Principal Michael Gaumont to concentrate on academics. “I am the outward-facing ‘head of school,’ and Principal Gaumont takes care of the day-to-day issues,” Stanton explained.

Stanton is in charge of a recent capital campaign for a \$25 million project. Phase I, recently completed, included a Fine Arts wing, fitness center, two new cafeterias, new locker rooms, and a robotics lab, in addition to adding 11 new classrooms for the St. Joseph contingent and renovating Trinity classrooms. Phase II plans for a new chapel and auditorium, according to Stanton. “It’s the largest investment in diocesan history, a \$20 million bond,” he said.

And it’s needed. Enrollment in both schools is on the rise, with a Trinity enrollment of 350, up over last year’s 313, and a St. Joseph enrollment of 150, up over last year’s 100.

Stanton led a tour of the chapel, art room, robotics lab and several classrooms. The classrooms are good-sized, sunny and sparkling clean. In the Academic Support Center, girls in plaid skirts or khakis and boys in shirts and ties consulted with teachers or worked quietly on laptops.

There’s no resistance to the dress code, which Stanton revamped last year. “It gets every student on the same playing field,” he said. “It reduces stress, and when they come here, they are prepared to learn.” It doesn’t hurt that the current uniforms were designed by Tommy Hilfiger, he added.

#### Saint Mary Academy: Keeping the faith

On a sunny weekday morning in Dover, little boys in shirts, ties and khakis and little girls in blue plaid jumpers run and toss balls in a fenced area outside a stately brick building. The scene could have happened when Saint Mary Academy opened in 1912. For 113 years the school has nourished young minds on the same Dover street corner. Head of School Brandy Houle knows the history: She was part of it, as a Saint Mary student in her youth.

Saint Mary opened as a girls’ school in 1912. The school, originally a high school, was operated by the Sisters of Mercy. “They had their convent where the gym is today,” Houle said. Eventually Saint Mary went to an elementary school format, and later merged with St. Charles, another local school, to form Dover Catholic. But the school went back to the Saint Mary name in 2004. Saint Mary Academy currently has 212 students, in grades Pre-K through eighth.

Houle attended Saint Mary from fourth to eighth grade. She came back as a teacher before becoming head of school, and her three children also attended the school. “I’ve spent 40 years in this building,” she said with a smile. As Houle led a tour of the



Students in a work group at Saint Mary Academy in Dover.



Students at Saint Mary Academy in Dover await instruction from their teacher.

school, the children came back from weekly Mass in the gym, clanging lockers and digging into backpacks for their next class.

Houle greeted several of the children by name. “We make connections,” she explained. “We know their parents, most of their grandparents, and what they call them.”

The Saint Mary staff works with local high schools, especially St. Thomas Aquinas, to make sure their eighth-graders are prepared for that next step. They offer three levels of math in seventh and eighth grades, Spanish, and something called “Healthy Minds, Bodies and Spirits,” which looks at the whole child. One of the mainstays of their program is the WIN Time — “What I Need” to succeed. “We give them extra support if it’s needed, or we challenge them,” she said. “It’s what they need for high school and beyond.”

“We use actual books,” Houle added.

While necessary repairs have been made for safety and convenience, the building, outside and in, looks much like it did in Houle’s childhood or earlier. “We kept the original brick where we could,” she said, gesturing to a brick wall. “The stairway railings are original. We left the dark wood, and the transoms over the

doors.”

“We sometimes have alumni come in and ask them to stand at the top of the stairs,” she said, adding, “I’ve never seen one that didn’t cry.”

#### The “why” of it

Nathan Stanton has a few ideas as to why his schools are thriving. “Number one is the Catholic identity piece,” he said. Catholic parents want that for their children. Sixty percent of their enrollees are from Catholic backgrounds, he noted. But parents from other faith traditions like the smaller size and the emphasis on academics, he said.

Like Saint Mary, Trinity and St. Joseph have also moved to a student-success model, focused on the child’s needs. “We help each and every kid plan their pathway,” Stanton observed. That includes a robust academic program, with options. “People think Catholic education and automatically think ‘four-year college,’” he said. “We’re branching out.”

That includes exploration of the “trades” in partnership with Manchester Community College. The school has also added four business classes, for “real-life experience,” and offers 16 college

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*“We help each and every kid plan their pathway. People think Catholic education and automatically think ‘four-year college.’ We’re branching out.”*

**NATHAN STANTON**  
Trinity High School president



Freshman Conley Mochache concentrates on his school work in the Academic Center at Trinity High School.

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# Jesse Remington High School

## Student life at JRHS in photos

Located in Candia, Jesse Remington High School is a regional Christian high school serving grades 9 through 12. The school’s mission: “JRHS is a Christian community of students and faculty pursuing wisdom, knowledge and understanding, and is committed to raising this generation of youth to be effective leaders for Jesus Christ.” JRHS offers a demanding traditional curriculum in which students take successive years of all subjects to build their studies to advanced material. The school also offers project based learning including a project of 6 weeks or more that culminates in a public performance. Personal tours can be scheduled at the school, and upcoming “Taste and Tour” lunch events this fall are scheduled for Oct. 16 and Nov. 25. To learn more or to schedule a tour, visit jrhs.org.

David Lane Photos



Students including Meredith Higgins of Windham (at left) attend class at Jesse Remington High School in Candia earlier this month.



Students Faith Benedict of Derry, from left, Emma Cross of Deerfield and Andrew Carlson of Candia attend class at Jesse Remington High School.



Students play volleyball during lunch break outside on the campus of Jesse Remington High School in Candia.



Student Dylan Woodrow of Candia plays ping pong with Headmaster Jeff Philbrick during lunch break at JRHS.

## Catholic schools

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classes in partnership with MCC, at no extra cost to the student. But they’re also heavy on traditional academics, he added, with French and Spanish and possibly Latin next year.

He still deals with misconceptions about Catholic education. One, he said, is that “people don’t think our teachers are qualified,” while most of the faculty has master’s degrees. Potential parents sometimes think the schools don’t offer academic support. But, Stanton said, while the schools don’t have a formal special education program, both offer support plans and academic coaches.

A third misconception is that you have to be Catholic, he said. You don’t, he said. And there’s that four-year college track. “We have different pathways now,” he said.

He remembers two boys who graduated a couple of years ago. “One wanted to get into the trades, one wanted to be a firefighter.” An anonymous donor gave \$10,000 to each boy to help with their first year of training.

Houle hears the same misconceptions, with the addition of the financial piece. “Parents think we’re not affordable,” she said. “But we work with every family” to try and find solutions, including scholarships or state Education Freedom Accounts.

And even for non-Catholic families, she mused, “The values they have at home are the values we teach in school,” including respect and responsibility.

In the 20th century, most Catholic schools were sponsored by an individual parish. Now many are linked to the diocese, according to Alison Mueller, director of marketing, enrollment and development for the Diocese of Manchester. There are four



KATHLEEN BAILEY

Brandy Houle, Head of School at Saint Mary Academy, helps Ryleigh Kennedy with his tie.

“parish schools” in New Hampshire: Sacred Heart in Hampton, St. Francis in Litchfield, St. Catherine of Siena in Manchester, and most recently, Salve Regina Academy in Gorham opened in 2019-20. “And every one of them has a wait list,” Mueller added.

Other schools, such as Bishop Guertin in Nashua and Presentation of Mary in Hudson are operated by individual religious orders and approved by the bishop, according to Mueller.

For Mueller, part of the draw is that “Catholic schools don’t follow fads, or use the children as guinea pigs. We use the traditional, proven methods.” Because of the order and discipline in a class, the teachers are able to give personal, tailored attention, she said.

And Houle remembers that “tailored attention.” Her head-of-school office used to be upstairs, and was the same office in which Sister Monica, Sister Francina and Mrs. Reese shaped her character. When she took over she moved her office downstairs, so she could be closer to all the children, and the old office was repainted. But Houle pointed to a half-hidden, 3-by-3 foot corner of the wall. “I left some of the wallpaper from that time,” she said. “It’s an homage to them.”



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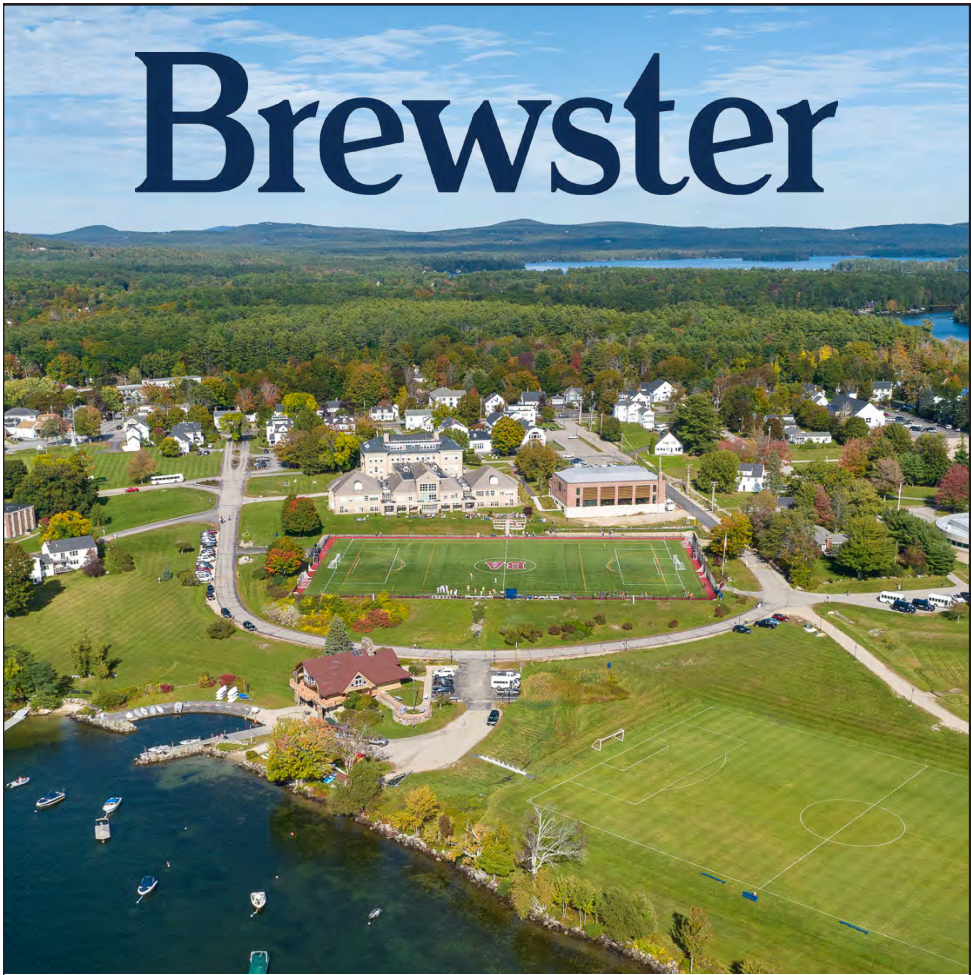
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# Student perspective: Flexibility is key

## Private schools challenge and support students when needed

■ Attending private schools helped Riyah Patel learn at a high level, gain confidence, try leadership roles and find motivation for community action. The current Georgetown University student founded New American Scholars while in high school at Phillips Exeter Academy.

By Kaarin L. Clausen  
Special to the Union Leader

WHEN IT COMES to education, many factors — curriculum, religion, price and location — play a role in the decision a parent makes about school choice. For the parents of Concord student Riyah Patel, the key was flexibility.

Patel, now 19 and a sophomore at Georgetown University, said it was the early start program at Shaker Road School that initially convinced her parents to choose a private school education for her. But it was Patel’s academic prowess and ambition, however, that soon became the primary reason for continuing down the private-school path.

Her private school education began in preschool, where she thrived at Shaker Road School during her elementary years. By fifth grade, Patel said she was three levels ahead in math, and her parents knew that she needed to attend a school that challenged her academically.

She was then enrolled at the Derryfield School in Manchester, where Patel said she was able to participate in high school math classes during middle school without having to sacrifice her other grade-level classes.

By the time Patel reached high school, the young scholar knew she had exhausted Derryfield’s math curriculum. The next logical step was to transfer to Phillips Exeter Academy, which offered math courses that Patel said would keep her engaged, such as linear algebra, multivariable

calculus and game theory.

Another benefit of Phillips Exeter was the small class size — approximately 8 to 12 students per class, all sitting around the Harkness table sharing ideas.

### Meeting students where they are

Pioneered at Phillips Exeter Academy, the Harkness method of teaching was developed by Edward Harkness and features an oval table around which the instructor and students sit and engage in face-to-face discussions that promote equality and accountability in learning. Rather than lecture, teachers guide the students and serve as facilitators to knowledge, encouraging them to participate in collaborative discussions. For young Patel, it took a little getting used to.

“At first, the Harkness table was intimidating,” she said. “But I think that it really pushed me to listen better, think more critically and express myself with confidence. Over time, it became second nature, and I now use the Harkness approach in almost everything.”

Patel said that Exeter’s small class sizes allowed her to build strong relationships with her classmates and teachers.

“Compared to my friends in public school, I feel like I had a really strong community of support,” she said. “I had teachers who knew me not just academically but also personally. I think that sense of belonging really stuck with me.”

At Phillips Exeter, the school day doesn’t end after classes finish. Students are involved in a plethora of clubs, sports, service projects and performances, in



Riyah Patel, who grew up in Concord and is currently a sophomore at Georgetown University, works with a young student at New American Scholars, an initiative she founded when she was a student at Phillips Exeter Academy.

which teachers also participate. Patel said the feeling of a “shared mission” held by both instructors and students resonated with her.

Patel said she also appreciated that Phillips Exeter was able to shape each student’s curriculum based on where they were academically. If she needed to move faster in math, PEA was able to make that happen. If she wanted to explore a subject in depth, it had the resources and adaptability that she needed. She felt similarly about her experiences at both Shaker Road School and the Derryfield School.

“For me, one of the greatest benefits to attending private school was flexibility,” she said. “Whether I needed more challenges or support, they met me where I was. There were also more opportunities for me to have lateral growth — to try things outside of academics like

arts, sports and leadership roles.”

### Paying it forward

Patel said she put the leadership skills she acquired at Phillips Exeter to good use when she decided to form a nonprofit during the pandemic. New American Scholars (NAS) is an organization that directly benefits refugees in New Hampshire who are struggling academically. Initially focused on tutoring in reading and writing, NAS has now expanded to include aspects of mentorship, family support and confidence-building in children who often feel left behind by the school system.

Patel began her work at NAS by tutoring 11 students at a local library in Concord during the summer. Word quickly spread throughout the community and local resettlement agencies, and she was inundated with requests

to join her program.

NAS now reaches over 240 students across the state in Concord, Manchester, Nashua, the Seacoast and surrounding communities, offering an enriching blend of in-person and continuous online programming.

From the New American Scholars website: With a dedicated team of 56 tutors and strategic partnerships with state-wide nonprofits and educational institutions, New American Scholars is rewriting the narrative on educational equity.

Depending on a student’s needs, available initiatives they might become involved with are intensive, small group, and “Study-Buddy” programs; the NAS Reading and Writing Program; Science Explorers and Adaptive Learning Technology.

▶ See Patel, Page A12

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