

St. Benedict the Moor basketball coach Anthony Horn huddles up with his seventh- and eighth-graders during a recent game. "I just want the moral issues to be instilled in my kids," says Horn, a 1981 graduate. "It's all about that."

FAITH

LONG BEFORE FAITH-BASED GRANTMAKING BECAME A NATIONAL CAUSE CELEBRE, PITTSBURGH'S EXTRA MILE FOUNDATION WAS SENDING HUNDREDS OF INNER-CITY CHILDREN TO CATHOLIC SCHOOLS.

By Barry Alfonso
Photography by Joshua Franzos




When Anthony Horn talks about his years as a student at St. Benedict the Moor, he laughs at the bittersweet memories. “When I first graduated from here, I was happy to leave,” he says. “I couldn’t stand the school for the moral aspect in the teaching. Now I love it for the same reason. I think I could’ve gone down the wrong road if I hadn’t gone here.”

In the 22 years since Horn said good riddance to what he thought was an up tight and preachy little Catholic school in Pittsburgh’s Hill District, he went on to earn a computer science degree from Colgate University, married and started a family. In 1996, he reconnected with the school at the level of parent and role model: he coaches the basketball team, and his two children are students.

St. Ben’s, as it is known affectionately by many students and alumni, fosters that kind of loyalty. The school has become one of the jewels in the city’s Catholic diocesan school system because teachers and administrators accept no excuses for failing to learn. Among their 196 students, who come from some of the most economically depressed neighborhoods in the city, the excuses would be plentiful—and convincing. Acting as a buffer between the children and social ills that plague low-income communities is a learning-and-values culture established nearly a century ago. At St. Benedict, teachers and students interact like family. Parents make themselves available to help with tutoring and classroom duties.

In classrooms, teachers manage to fold a no-nonsense instruction style into a close-knit, welcoming environment. Students learn to see themselves as individuals but also as members of a group sharing distinct values and a common history. Wall prints depicting African family and village life, for instance, celebrate the heritage of most of the students. Also, Catholic-school markers are everywhere: There are the uniforms—boys in dress shirts and pants; girls in blue skirts—and crosses on classroom walls, statues in hallways, stained glass in windows.

FULL FOUR



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But what is remarkable about St. Benedict is that the young students, the intended consumers of all the Catholic religiosity, are overwhelmingly non-Catholic, and that the funding source behind this extraordinary pairing is secular. Since 1990, the Extra Mile Education Foundation, a nonprofit organization supported by corporations like PNC Financial Services and philanthropies like The Heinz Endowments, has been dedicated to making a high-quality education available to inner-city children, regardless of faith.

“On the surface, it’s highly unusual,” says Extra Mile Executive Director Ambrose Murray, who manages the foundation’s work at St. Benedict and three other Catholic schools located in troubled neighborhoods. “Many philanthropies have rules that discourage supporting sectarian causes. . . . We have been able to make the case that, while these are Catholic schools, they

are educating almost all non-Catholic children. Frankly, even though they aren’t Catholic, these families want these schools. They want that grounding in moral beliefs that everyone says the kids need.”

Extra Mile was created to meet the needs of children most at risk of falling through the cracks in the public school system, but it also came to the aid of the city’s Catholic Diocese, which had been unable to stop enrollments in its inner-city parishes and schools from plummeting. In late 1988, newly installed Bishop Donald Wuerl was confronted with the financial crisis and feared he would have to close the three most seriously under-funded schools. For decades, St. Benedict, Holy Rosary in Homewood-Brushton and St. Agnes in Oakland had provided solid education and spiritual nurturing to mostly African-American students. Searching for a way to keep the

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(Above) A change of classes at St. Benedict allows for some quick conversation among sixth-graders, from left, Keviera Bennett, Branford Phillips, Julius McGrady, Teraya James, Keira Lee and Treavor Smith. Left, the face of seventh-grader Hannah Butler hints at the intensity expected of students.

(Opposite page) Tarai Washington is completely engaged in her fourth-grade classes at St. Benedict. While students in the schools served through the Extra Mile Foundation program wear uniforms, abide by Catholic values—centered rules and see religious symbols in classrooms, few are practicing Catholics.

doors open, Wuerl reached out to the city's corporations and foundations. In 1989, Archabbot Douglas Nowicki, then the diocesan secretary of education, and PNC Foundation supporter William Boyd Jr. organized a founder's group that included then-PNC Financial Services Chairman Thomas H. O'Brien and Westinghouse CEO John C. Marous, among others. The Heinz Endowments signed on soon after the board of directors was formed, offering challenge grants that helped Extra Mile attract funding from such heavyweights as the Allegheny and Richard King Mellon Foundations, and corporations such as Alcoa, PPG, USX and Federated Investors.

Extra Mile quickly became a model of organizational effectiveness, transcending religion, race and class in an effort to supply a private-school education to as many needy students as possible. "It was a personal matter with me," says PNC's Boyd, a non-Catholic, as are the majority of the board members. "I felt that the inner-city children were so vulnerable that it

just didn't occur to me that affluent people of the community wouldn't come up with the money."

After more than a decade of steady secular support, Extra Mile now has an enviable endowment of \$13 million, a lean administrative operation and some of the best business minds in the city guiding programs and investments. With the addition of St. James School in Wilkinsburg, total enrollment in Extra Mile schools now stands at 850 children, from kindergarten through eighth grade. Students are predominantly African-American and non-Catholic. About 65 percent qualify for federally subsidized lunches; 60 percent are in single-parent homes. Still, the academic scorecard is one most inner-city schools would envy, with a 95 percent daily attendance level. When test scores of students in Extra Mile schools are compared with the national norms for students from similar socio-economic backgrounds, Extra Milers score consistently better—as much as 18 points in reading and seven points in math.

St. Benedict's school chapel doubles as a quiet tutoring center for first-grader Alicia Rice and volunteer parent, Cecilia Zamarrita Zoucha. Parents at Extra Mile schools are expected to be involved with their children's studies and activities, but many go beyond their own families to assist others. Below, Holy Rosary School students, from left, Bijani Davis, Shahntayla Holiday and Curtis Parker mix it up during lunch period. Uniforms are a non-negotiable policy at the schools.

In the 14 years of the foundation's support, 834 students have graduated from the Extra Mile schools.

From the beginning, Extra Mile's mission was clear. "These kids deserve a shot," says Murray. "If this is the way their parents feel it should happen, are we going to let money get in the way of this? These schools are not only an [education] resource; they're havens and community beacons."

In fact, Extra Mile schools' success in directing students to better opportunities—96 percent graduate high school and 88 percent go on to college, trade school or the military—makes them powerful forces in their communities. The Extra Mile formula requires a community of families supporting schools, and depends on parents being personally and financially invested. While Extra Mile and the diocese split the operating costs, parents must pay all or a portion of the \$1,430 annual tuition, depending on financial circumstance. Often, parents are hired at the schools to meet their child's tuition cost. In one case, a husband and wife who signed on as janitors at St. Benedict to help pay their son's tuition ended up exceeding the amount needed and donated the extra earnings to help pay another student's way.

Coach Horn says making parents responsible for at least part of the tuition carries significance beyond the money. "Once kids know that their parents are actually paying for them to get an education, they take it seriously," he says. "With the public schools, you're just there." Parents also are required to attend report card conferences each school year—no exceptions—and to assist in school fundraisers.

Still, parents continue to choose the more demanding Extra Mile route for their children. Carol Iddriss, the mother of two St. Benedict graduates, was seeking an alternative to the overcrowded local public school where she feared her children would be anonymous. "It's like a family there," she says of St. Benedict. "I could go there and everyone would know me. All the teachers knew each of the students, so they couldn't act up." While she is not Catholic, she found the school's teachings of Catholic values worthwhile. "Saying prayers made my kids feel special," she says. "But no one forced them to go to church."

At a time when faith-based education grantmaking has become something of a lightning rod in foundation circles,

and when Bush administration policies have raised its profile, Extra Mile may serve as an instructive model. The foundation has been able to deliver a secular good without requiring students to follow Catholic religious doctrine.

Foundation support of faith-based, social service programs has grown in recent years. A study last year by the Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy found that 62 percent of the 50 largest independent foundations did not place restrictions on faith-based giving. "My sense is that foundations that haven't previously funded faith-based programs are re-examining their policies," says the report's author, Jason D. Scott. "But a lot of these foundations are acting under the assumption that the funding will go to secular rather than religious activities. The controversy comes when religious activities are actually funded."

And foundations are learning that, government hyping aside, the faith-based imprimatur doesn't necessarily guarantee better results. A Ford Foundation-funded study by Indiana University-Purdue University researchers found that of 2,830 Indiana residents who went through job training programs run by 27 government-funded organizations, there was no difference between secular and religious programs in job placement rates and starting wages. Clients of the faith-based groups, though, worked fewer hours, on average, and were less likely to receive health insurance. While that study took up only a narrow slice of the social services pie, it does point out the need for more scrutiny. As Robert W. Tuttle, a professor at George Washington University Law School who tracks faith-based initiatives, told the *Washington Post* "Those who think faith-based is better are going to have to start putting some numbers down to prove it."

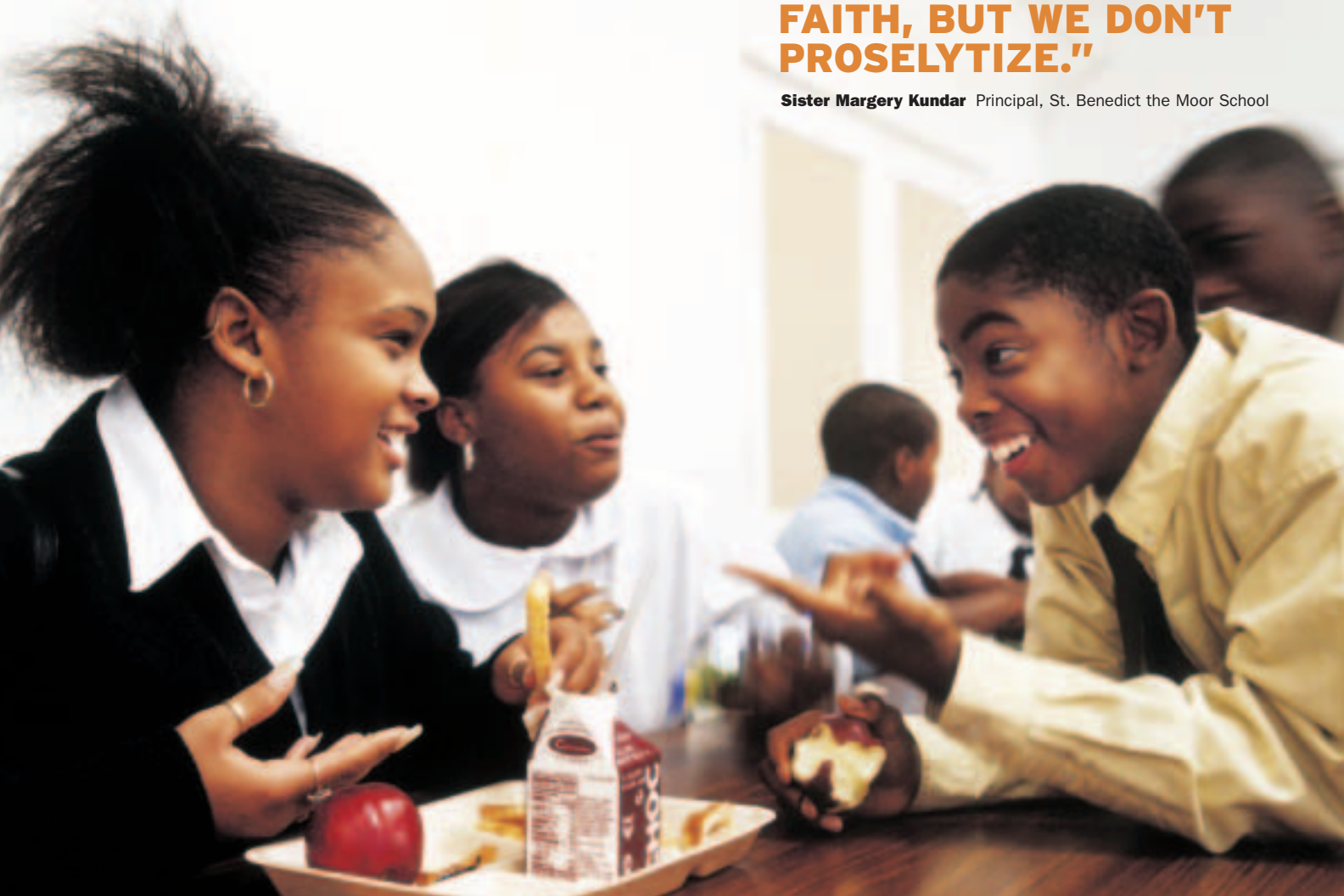
Answers to two key questions for public institutions and even private foundations like the Endowments, with a broad public mission, may determine whether a faith-based organization is the best route for an education-related grant. Is a particular religious group the best equipped, most experienced candidate for delivering on an educational goal? And if so, can its leaders manage a program without embarking on a conversion agenda?

In the Extra Mile schools, the answers are carefully articulated. "We teach them honesty; to be upright; to be aware of social justice issues," says St. Benedict's Principal, Sister



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Sister Margery Kunder Principal, St. Benedict the Moor School





Margery Kunder. “We don’t water down our Catholic faith, but we don’t proselytize.”

For Joe Dominic, director of the Endowments’ Education Program, supporting Extra Mile was not a difficult call. “It was a given that these schools would be highlighting elements of belief,” he says. “Our goal was to make sure that these kids could succeed academically. But the spiritual dimension of these schools was not an initial problem for us. The main questions were all on performance. Would the schools deliver on quality? Would they not just be good to a certain point, but would they continue to become better?”

One of the Endowments’ education strategies is to increase the range of school choices available to lower-income families. “Where you live tends to determine where your child goes to

school,” says Dominic. “Lower-income families don’t have the flexibility to spend the money on schooling, so they literally have no choice at all. There are plenty of urban schools that haven’t done well for years, for decades. Now we’re in a new era where adults should be able to have better educational choices for their kids.”

The region’s universities also are involved in promoting quality education across the board, and have extended programming to Extra Mile schools. The University of Pittsburgh was an early partner in providing tutoring programs like Success of All in Reading, thanks to the influence of former Westinghouse CEO Marous. Carnegie Mellon University has contributed with My True Voice, an innovative speech and language arts program offered by the school’s drama students.



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(Above) Sixth-grade singers from St. James School in Wilkinsburg uphold the long-standing Extra Mile Foundation tradition of presenting a Christmas carol program at the annual Duquesne Club luncheon held for supporters and staff in December. After the concert, students scatter to supporters’ tables to share in the holiday meal. At left, thrilled sixth-grader Brittany Johnson sits next to St. Agnes School Principal Michelle Peduto.

(Opposite page) Kindergartners Savion Agnew, Lana Macklin and Myles Swain are beginners in the Extra Mile Foundation system. Testing and evaluations show that 96 percent of students graduate high school and 88 percent go on to college, job training or military service.

Duquesne University has supplied music tutors and developed a summer computer enrichment program, while Slippery Rock University has assisted with teaching environmental science.

The University of Pittsburgh also has played a crucial role in evaluating the schools’ performance. With funding support from the Endowments, Pitt educators have monitored progress in the classrooms and tried to pinpoint areas for improvement. “Getting the schools used to ongoing external evaluation was something new,” says Dominic. “But when the first external review pointed out that some of the classrooms weren’t as successful as they needed to be in helping children achieve in mathematics, the educators worked hard to improve.”

While grades and attendance can be measured, what’s harder to assess on paper is moral development, especially

given outside pressures facing most Extra Mile students.

Asked to cite the most important formative lesson he took away from St. Benedict, Coach Horn settled on his developing a sense of humility. “I was an athlete and one of the brighter kids, and I was cocky. But I saw how humble some of the teachers were, and I saw that was one of the things I lacked. I found out it was all right to be humble. That helped me a lot, not only to learn, but to be a better person. I’ve learned to sit back and listen to other people’s views, to compromise.”

Horn wants his children to benefit from St. Benedict’s moral influence, whether specifically Catholic or not. “I’ve never had any problem with that,” he says. “As long as my kids get that foundation, I’m all right with it. I just want the moral issues to be instilled in my kids. It’s all about that.” *h*