



# BECAUSE *we are* CATHOLIC

## St. Frances Academy a “Miracle” Despite Tough Obstacles

More than thirty years before the Civil War, St. Frances Academy was founded by Mother Mary Lange. Now the oldest existing school for African-American Catholics in the United States, the East Baltimore school is prospering against all odds.

“The original mission was to teach children of color to read the Bible,” said St. Frances Principal Curtis Turner. “We like to say that we are pretty much doing the same thing now. The school has always had a strong history, a strong character, and a strong spirit.”

That spirit was tested in 2010 when 11 of the 14 feeder schools into St. Frances were closed due to rising costs and declining enrollment.

“That was a scary time for us because when you look west there is not a Catholic school left in the city. We felt like we were the last man standing,” Turner said. “We went from 300 students down to 150 by design and had to create a new economic model. We had to sacrifice some programs and make some tough decisions around personnel. In the past two or three years, God has just blessed us for our fortitude.”

In 2016, the Maryland General Assembly expanded educational options for low-income students by providing the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) Scholarship, a program providing assistance toward attending a nonpublic school. During the 2017 session, the legislature responded to high program demand by reauthorizing the program with an increase from \$5 million to \$6 million for the 2017-18 school year. Under the program, students transferring from public school receive either \$4,000 or \$4,400 in scholarship assistance while students already attending a nonpublic school receive either



*Founded in 1828, the St. Frances Academy in East Baltimore is the oldest existing school for African-American Catholics.*

\$1,000 or \$1,400 in assistance. Twenty-four of the 172 students at St. Frances are receiving BOOST scholarships.

“Seventy-four percent of our students are free and reduced lunch meaning they are living at or below the poverty level,” Turner added. “What happens is that when we call a parent and tell them they have an extra \$1,000 or an extra \$4,000 from BOOST it makes all the difference in the world. For many people \$1,000 might not seem much, but for our parents it is everything. Our poorest parents are getting financial aid and if you add the BOOST funding to it that makes a difference for whether or not they come.”

Turner, who graduated from DeMatha Catholic High School and was an educator at The Seton Keough High School before coming to St. Frances 10 years ago, indicated that 97 percent of graduates go to college and 89 percent of them receive a bachelor’s degree within five years.

“Things are absolutely amazing at the school right now,” he said. “We have a boarding program for 30 kids who live on the campus. Eleven of those students are legally homeless. They live with us 365 days a year, seven days a week. We are everything to them. Our school exists in an environment where we are not supposed to exist, especially when inner-city Catholic schools are really an endangered species. To me, our existence is the miracle of Mother Lange.”

The St. Frances athletic program has also become a powerhouse with its football, girls’ basketball and boys’ basketball teams all ranked number one in the Baltimore metropolitan area.

“It is amazing,” Turner explained. “One of the things legendary DeMatha basketball coach Morgan Wootton used to say was your priorities should be God, family, academics and then everything else. I have used that here. With all these things in order, we are having a lot of fun in sports as well.”

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