

# Event celebrates school-biz partnership

**Arlene Edmonds**  
Tribune Correspondent

Inmaculately uniformed and well-behaved African-American youngsters of various Christian faiths were ready to showcase their talents at 7:30 a.m. on a recent Thursday morning. They lined up across the stage of the cafeteria in the church adjacent to the Our Mother of Sorrows and St. Ignatius of Loyola Schools in the heart of West Philadelphia.

The fourth-grade children clearly knew their routines as they belted out gospel selections like, "God is God" while stepping and clapping from side to side.

By 8 a.m. computer technology teacher Erika Thornton's classroom of middle school students were ready for those from the Business Leadership Organized for Catholic Schools (BLOCS) representatives.

After the interactive breakfast the entourage of business and community leaders explored the parochial campus.

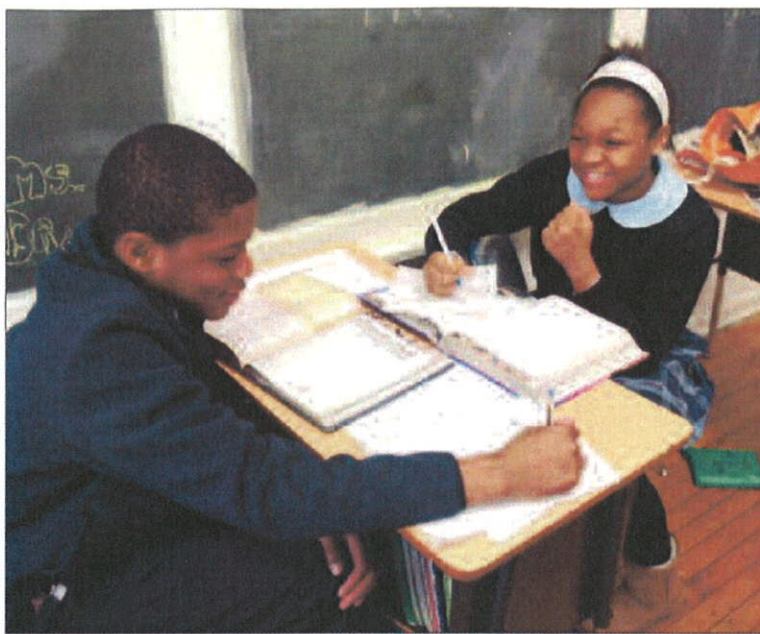
Among the tour guides was 13-year-old eighth-grader Kellie Holland, a student at St. Ignatius.

The visitors marveled over the new Dell computers that were donated to the schools and even ask what more they can do for the school.

This was the scene at the BLOCS "Business Leadership Breakfast in Partnership with Comcast and PHS KIDS Sprout" recently.

Among those on hand for the breakfast and tour were Mike O'Neill, chairman of BLOCS; Joseph Donnelly, senior president of Comcast programming; Sandy Wax, president of Sprout; Chican and Sean, stars of Sprout's "The Sunny Side Up" show; Sister Owen Patricia, principal of Our Mother of Sorrows and St. Ignatius of Loyola schools; and Councilwoman Janette Blackwell, whose district includes the West Philadelphia parochial schools.

"I love to hear about the glorious things you are doing here," said Blackwell. In her breakfast remarks as she stopped by briefly on her way to



Mecca Hammonds enjoys herself as she laughs with fellow student Jordan Brown, left, at Our Mother of Sorrows and St. Ignatius of Loyola Schools at the recent Business Leadership Organized for Catholic Schools event. — ANJELA BELMANTER/PHOTO CENTER

Thursday's City Council session. "This is a beautiful light in this city. I get to see first hand what partnerships can do. Thank you for all you've done and may God continue to bless you."

In his remarks to the breakfast crowd, Donnelly said that Comcast wanted to continue to support urban education and has targeted its resources at schools like Our Mother of Sorrows and St. Ignatius of Loyola schools.

"We are happy to give assistance to BLOCS to support their lofty goals at this time,

because of all the fantastic things that result," he said.

"I am impressed what I have seen here," Wax added. During the breakfast dozens of preschool to upper grade students gave performances to showcase the spiritual and academic education they are receiving at the school. This included the kindergarteners, who taught television personality Sean the gestures to their a cappella tunes.

The breakfast included remarks from eighth-grader Aaron Pringle. He explained how the quality education he

received at the parochial school has allowed him to be accepted at several of the area's top academic high schools. He is still deciding where he will attend secondary school this September, he said.

The faculty and staff at the school were equally animated about the progress being made at the school. Art teacher Carole Pollock explained that to raise money for tuition students are engaged in an art competition. While the fourth to eighth graders are creating African shields, the first to third grade pupils are doing

water color depictions. All the competing artwork will be displayed in a gallery in the coming weeks.

Thornton added that she is amazed at the resources that the school has been able to attract. A donor, she said, contributed 32 new computers to her classroom complete with printers with color lasers. "We are very appreciative of all of this and the fact that so many took their time today to come here for this," she said.

Perhaps vice principal Rosemary Halm was among the school's most enthusiastic

cheerleaders. "I think that what everyone is doing for this school is amazing," Halm said. "We have such great kids here. We have students who have been here through their whole education and have been accepted at the top Catholic high schools. We are able to do this because we work hard and have the help of BLOCS and the other donors."

Holland agreed. She said she feels ready to compete at any secondary school in the Delaware Valley when she graduates in June. Yet she did have one request for those who are interested in contributing to the school even after she graduates. She singled out the room with only a few older encyclopedias, several Bibles and dictionaries, and a small collection of books. "Our library resource room needs help," she said.

Our Mother of Sorrows and its sister school, St. Ignatius, serve over 340 children from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. The school's population is 83 percent non-Catholic and 99 percent African American.

The average household income for the surrounding community of the school located at 1008 N. 48 St. is below \$20,000 and 66 percent of students live in single parent families. More than 85 percent of their school population graduates from high school on time. The schools have served West Philadelphia children for over 130 years.

BLOCS (Business Leadership Organized for Catholic Schools) is an independent scholarship organization that believes all children should have access to high quality education in a safe and nurturing environment, regardless of race, religious belief or income. BLOCS raises funds so financially disadvantaged children in the Greater Philadelphia region have access to a results-driven education. BLOCS is supported by more than 70 businesses and corporate partners. The scholarship organization teaches more children in more communities than most private education charities in the city. For more information, visit [www.bloc.org](http://www.bloc.org).

# West Oak Lane teacher gets national accolade

**Arlene Edmonds**  
Tribune Correspondent

It is clear that African-American kindergarten students are receiving a strong Christian, emotional and academic foundation at the St. Athanasius School-Inmaculate Conception School in West Oak Lane.

Just walk into her classroom of some 30 four- to six-year-olds and one will find them seated quietly on the rug listening attentively to teacher Olenka Zajac and her assistant Deborah Booth. The children are eager to share that Zajac teaches them about both their alphabet and why Jesus loves them.

Consequently, during Catholic Schools Week the school held a special liturgy in which they honored Zajac, who has been teaching at the school for 23 years. It was at that time that she was officially presented with the 2009 Certificate of Recognition from the National Catholic Educational Association. The entire school community was thrilled at Zajac's accolade.

Just ask Johnnie SITT, a longtime West Oak Lane block captain and neighborhood advocate. Zajac taught her children and is currently teaching her grandchildren.

Though SITT is Protestant, she decided to send her daughters and son to Catholic school to ensure that they received religion classes as part of their education. She said that Zajac not only teaches kindergarten, but mentors, works with and even occasionally tutors her former students until they graduate eighth grade.

"Mrs. Zajac has been a blessing to this school," said SITT, who was in the audience for the late January liturgy. "I have never seen anyone who was as dedicated to teaching and children as she has been. She not only made sure they knew their basics, but she prayed with them and just made it a real learning experience. When they leave her classroom they love learning and love God."

During her remarks after the religious portion of the program, principal Joan Almirde, SSJ, read some of the citations and correspondence that Zajac received after winning the national certificate. Almirde read the Pennsylvania House of Representative citation sponsored by State Rep.



Olenka Zajac talks to her kindergarten students at St. Athanasius Church after she was recognized as an outstanding kindergarten teacher by the National Catholic Teachers Association on Jan 29. — JENNIFER TOUSSAINT/PHOTO CENTER

Anthony J. Meis.

Among them was a congratulatory letter from the Rev. Stephen D. Thorne, director of the Office for Black Catholics of the Philadelphia Archdiocese.

Thorne, who is also pastor of St. Therese of the Child Jesus Church in Mount Airy, said that Catholic schools are vital in the African-American community. As a former parochial school teacher himself, he added that they provide life faith and academic education, and commended Zajac for her "selfless service."

State Rep. Dwight Evans of West Oak

Lane also sent a congratulatory letter. In it, the lawmaker noted that for teachers like Zajac teaching was "not just a profession or vocation, but a calling." He said that it was pleased that St. Athanasius School with teachers like Zajac was located in his district because "education has been the hallmark of my legislative career."

The Rev. Joseph F. Okonko, pastor of St. Athanasius Church, presented Zajac with a traditional Ukrainian crystal egg. Inside the artifact were a crucifix, rosary beads and a stone.

"The egg represents new life and inside is a small piece of limestone from our school's chimney symbolizing the strength and transforming power of Catholic education," he said. "Accept this as a symbol of your solid Godly faith and service to this school."

Also on hand for the liturgy were Zajac's family, including Aleksandra and Taras Penkalskyj and her husband, Thor Zajac. Her emotional and tearful mother, Natalie Rudyj, said that her daughter is committed to the Northwest Philadelphia students. "I am so proud

of her," said Rudyj. "She has always loved children. She loves what she's doing here and works well with the children."

"This is just a great school to work in," said Zajac, who earned her early education degree from Chestnut Hill College and her master's degree from Arcadia University. "The students and other staff make this an enjoyable place to work. The kids are just eager beavers who want to learn and enjoy expanding. Whether we are doing phonics or arithmetic, their minds are just wide open. I am just amazed at what they can do."

Zajac added that she particularly likes to share her Catholic faith with her students. She is a member of the Ukrainian Catholic Church.

Recently she introduced the kindergartners the sacraments. When they discussed baptism she shared videos and other visuals about young children getting baptized as well as Jesus' baptism. She asked them to bring in photographs of their own baptism or to explain what they knew about baptism.

"They just love to ask questions and share what they know and believe," Zajac said.

One of the partners that Zajac has found helpful in the educational process has been the MERT Center. The teacher said that they have offered their expertise in teacher development. She, like her students, welcomes continuing her education.

Almirde is quick to add that the Philadelphia School District has recognized Zajac's educational prowess. They have videotaped her teaching at the West Oak Lane parochial school to show to their student teachers and new teachers. She is often called upon to give educational workshops and over the years have mentioned many less experienced teachers.

"Olenka is so humble about all that she has done," said Almirde, who has been at the school for 21 years. "She is truly a beautiful person who loves children. It's unbelievable all the things that she has done for the students. She is dedicated which is evidenced by the fact that she teaches the students during her lunchtime, has helped students put together a newspaper, and keeps helping the students in different ways long after they've left her classroom."