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By

[Beth Reese Cravey](#)

## New high school wing at Arlington Catholic school a 'blessing' for special-needs students

Bishop Felipe Estevez walked through the new high school wing at the Diocese of St. Augustine's Morning Star School in Jacksonville Friday, sprinkling holy water, blessing every hall, every room. Outside, he blessed the new St. Mark's Peace Garden as well.

Then Estevez formally dedicated the new addition, surrounded by the school's youngest students in front of him.

"Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me,' " he said.



Morning Star School students sign the lyrics to the hymn "My All in All" at the dedication of the Arlington Catholic school's new high school wing. Bishop Felipe Estevez of the Diocese of St. Augustine speaks at the dedication of the new high school wing of the Morning Star School in Arlington, the diocese's only special-education school. At rear are Principal Jean Barnes (left) and the Rev. Mark Waters, pastor of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Atlantic Beach.

The new \$1.5 million wing allows children who have a learning disability, attention deficit disorders, high-functioning autism and mild intellectual disorders to come to Morning Star in kindergarten and stay through 12th grade. Prior, they had to go elsewhere after eighth grade.

The project added four classrooms each for the middle school and new high school and a media technology center. As a result, enrollment increased from 108 to 132, 90 percent of whom are not Catholic, said Principal Jean Barnes.

"There are few special-education high schools in our city," she said, and Morning Star is the only one in the Diocese of St. Augustine's school system. "This is a long-awaited moment for the school and for parents who have few options for their children with learning disabilities."

Families were thrilled.

“It is amazing, a huge blessing,” said Kammy Cenicerros, whose son just started 10th grade at Morning Star. “To be in a new facility, to feel like we are wanted.”

The transition from Morning Star to another school for ninth grade and back to Morning Star for 10th grade was difficult for her son but worth the effort, she said.

“He is so happy,” she said. “He was welcomed by people who remembered him.”

The dedication, after years of planning and fundraising, was a “joyous celebration,” Barnes said.

“This is an amazing day for us,” she said. “Morning Star High School! Can you believe it? What once was just a dream is now a reality. A safe, nurturing high school program for students with disabilities.”

The school was founded in 1956 by Archbishop Joseph P. Hurley, sixth bishop of the diocese, who served from 1940 to 1967. Hurley “had the gift of vision and one of these visions was to provide a Catholic education for special children,” Estevez said. “This was a school with a great reputation. ... We just needed to expand.”

As part of a capital campaign, the Morning Star Circle of Friends was formed to spread the word about the school in the philanthropic community. Honorary chairmen Bob Shircliff, Jay Demetree and Lou Walsh helped raise funds for the new wing, which was named after Hurley.

“The real blessing ... was our benefactors who believe in stewardship, who didn’t get tired of giving,” Estevez said.

Barnes credited the Diocese, multiple area priests, families and donors for seeing the project through. The Rev. Mark Waters of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Atlantic Beach credited the principal. The school does not have a specific parish supporting it, as many other Catholic schools do, which complicated fundraising and awareness, he said.

“She didn’t just dream. She worked really hard,” he said of Barnes. “She put her whole heart and soul into the dream.”

Later Barnes received the only standing ovation of the dedication.

Morning Star also has a mentoring partnership with Bishop John Snyder High School. Morning Star students are invited to participate in Bishop Snyder pep rallies, homecoming and other events. In addition, Morning Star seniors will join the graduation ceremony at Bishop Snyder.



Bishop Felipe Estevez of the Diocese of St. Augustine (center) gathers Morning Star School students around him for the final blessing of the school’s new wing Friday. He is flanked by Scott Conway (left), the diocese’s superintendent of schools, and Jean Barnes, principal of Morning Star.