

# High school diplomas... a 30 year dream come true

By: Andrew Campanella



***Morning Star School in Jacksonville, FL celebrated an extraordinarily happy moment this year when its first three high school students graduated.***

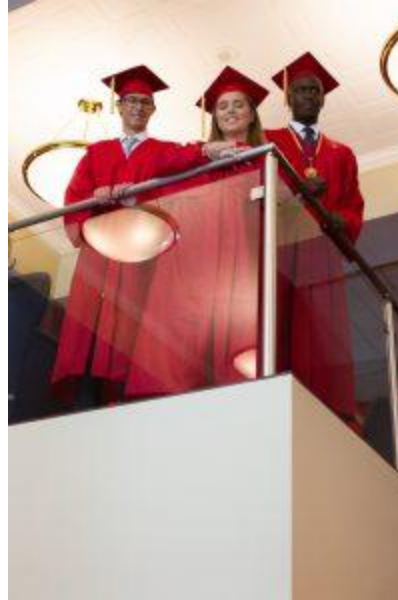


## **Morning Star School** Private school in FL

Number of students: 140  
Grades served: K-12

Years celebrating National School Choice Week:  
2018, 2019

This May, educator Jean Barnes of Morning Star School had one of her long-standing dreams come true. She was able to watch as three remarkable high school students— Anthony, Ricardo, and Madison— walked across the stage and received diplomas.



Barnes is a veteran teacher and administrator who has worked at Morning Star School in Jacksonville, FL for more than thirty years. But she wasn't sure she'd ever witness that moment.



Until recently, Morning Star School, a private Catholic school serving students with special needs, had no high school. When students finished eighth grade, they had to transition to other schools, which often lacked the special teachers, resources, and individualized curricula that Morning Star has equipped itself with.

“We serve such a specific population, kids with learning disabilities, ADD, ADHD, processing deficits, and high functioning autism, mild intellectual disabilities,” said

Barnes. "There was no appropriate high school placement. For years and years and years it was the same question: Where are they going to go when they graduate?"

Three years ago, Morning Star School inched closer to being able to answer that question when Barnes received diocesan permission to begin a high school program.



"It really was a dream come true to be able to look back on over 30 years and to say we finally were able to make this happen, said Barnes, "and to look forward to the future and think of the number of kids who are going to be able to get a high school diploma who might not have been able to otherwise."



When Morning Star's high school opened, Anthony, Ricardo, and Madison eagerly transferred in.

"Madison and Ricardo had gone to our school earlier, but left because we didn't have a high school," said Barnes. "They struggled where they were before and were so excited once the high school opened that they immediately came back."

While Morning Star knew it could offer the personalized classroom attention that its students needed for academic happiness, it partnered with nearby Bishop John J. Synder High School to ensure students didn't miss out on classic high school experiences like football games, pep rallies, and prom.

"They were able to participate in that full, big high school experience, socially and spiritually, while getting the academics they needed here," said Barnes. "It's just made such a huge difference because nobody wants to feel different. When we're at Snyder, they are so warm and welcoming that our kids are just a part of the Snyder student body."



Besides pep rallies at Bishop Synder and individualized academic attention, Morning Star's high school offers life skills classes that teach interviewing and other soft skills.

It's no surprise then that, by the time they walked at graduation, all three students already had plans for post-grad life.

Anthony is headed to Florida State College at Jacksonville to study geology, Ricardo is helping at a Jacksonville organization that works with people with disabilities, and Madison has landed a job at the Mayo Clinic.



Sometimes it is the unquantifiable moments—like the moments these three students walked across the stage— that are the best testament to student happiness.

“The sense of accomplishment in having a student start here who’s got selective mutism and

they don’t speak at all, then seeing them sing a solo in our musical at the end of the year,” described Barnes. Or, “Having a student who’s so riddled with anxiety that they won’t get out of the car the first month of school, who now just bounces happily into the school.”

“We can quantify their test scores and that is so important,” said Barnes. “But I think it’s the emotional and social growth in the kids that really touches me.”

As for next year? The high school is completely full and twelve students will be graduating.

As Barnes put it, “Once you place kids with special needs in the right environment with the right teachers, it’s amazing what they can do.”



