



Roger Mooney: Choice Scholarships essential to Key West Catholic school expansion

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'They took the leap, and we have been able to continue.'

The dream, the goal, the answer to many prayers is a three-story building that houses seven classrooms, a chemistry lab, a library — and since school resumed after Christmas break, 54 students in grades nine through 11.

Welcome to Basilica High School, located on the campus of The Basilica School of Saint Mary Star of the Sea, the only Catholic school in Key West and Monroe County.

For decades, the school served only PK3-8 students. However, the first senior class will be added during the 2025-26 school year, making it PK3-12.

"It's been three years of fear, hope, prayers, and a lot of hard work to get here, and it's amazing now to have the students in the classrooms in the building. It feels like we have a home," said Angela Wallace, the school's Advancement Director.

Florida's education choice scholarship programs were instrumental in making it possible, an achievement worth celebrating during National School Choice Week and Catholic Schools Week, which run concurrently from Jan. 26 to Feb. 1.

Key West had a Catholic secondary school for 100 years until Mary Immaculate High School closed in 1986 because of declining enrollment. That meant the nearest Catholic high schools were in Dade County, with the closest being Archbishop Coleman Carroll High School, a mere 145 miles from Key West.

That left few options for parents whose children graduated from The Basilica School of Saint Mary Star of the Sea after the eighth grade: send them to Key West High School or one of Key West's two charter schools or move closer to a Catholic school.

School administrators and parents have always hoped for another Catholic high school, and beginning last decade, several factors combined to make that hope a reality.

First, Catholic school enrollment in Florida continued its steady rise, with a 4.4% growth in pre-K-12 students between

2013 and 2023. After a COVID-related drop to 77,689 students in 2021, enrollment rebounded to 89,267 in 2023. Enrollment has continued to rise, from 90,870 in the 2023-24 school year to 93,455 this academic year — a healthy 2.8% year-over-year increase.

Enrollment doubled at The Basilica School of Saint Mary Star of the Sea between 2013 and 2019.

Second, HB1 became law in 2023, expanding the state's education choice scholarship programs to include all K-12 students in Florida.

"(HB1 has) been an incredible blessing," Wallace said. "So much of our operational and economic vitality is because of the scholarship program."

There are 524 students enrolled at The Basilica School of Saint Mary Star of the Sea during this school year, 450 attending with the help of a scholarship managed by Step Up For Students: the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options, which average \$8,000 per student, or the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities, which averages \$10,000 per student.

The programs have been a boon to families seeking more options in their children's education, with participation this year passing the 500,000 students milestone for the first time. They also have helped Catholic schools in Florida grow, bucking the national trend of declining enrollments. Last year, 56,192 students used scholarships to attend Catholic schools. This year, that number has jumped to 72,851.

Three years ago, the Basilica School of Saint Mary Star of the Sea conducted a feasibility study to determine whether adding a high school would work. The results led to a pilot program during the 2021-22 school year when 13 students enrolled in the ninth grade.

"Those students took an enormous risk," Wallace said. "We basically said we have been approved to offer high school classes for this year, and possibly this year only if we can't get all the numbers to work. You may be transferring

elsewhere for your sophomore year.

“They took the leap, and we have been able to continue.”

A 10th grade was added the following year, increasing the high school’s enrollment to 33. With the three grades, that increased to 54 this year. The hope is to have 80 students enrolled in the four grades during the 2025-26 school year.

Until January, those students were “nomads,” according to The Basilica School of Saint Mary Star of the Sea President Robert Wright, as they used classrooms on the elementary school campus. Now they have a home, and Wright said the excitement permeates the entire campus.

“It is one of the greatest blessings in my life to witness the seeds of faith and virtue that have been planted and nurtured in our students during the elementary and middle school years come to fruition as they transition to adulthood,” he said.

The new school building was an auditorium, previously a gymnastics studio. It is now called The Howley Family Building after Nick and Lorie Howley, who helped fund its transformation.

Riella Sims, whose daughter Kallisto is one of the original 13 ninth graders, was among the parents who lobbied for a high school as their children graduated from elementary and middle school.

“I felt it was in Kallisto’s best interest for her to continue on in The Basilica High School, as I believe The Basilica provides a more well-rounded education for the well-being of all the children attending,” she said. “They become more responsive to their community’s needs and others around them.”

Kallisto said she is “proud” to be a member of the first graduating class. She said their legacy would be built on “faith, understanding, a sense of adventure, and the courage to take on challenges,” all the qualities needed to enroll in a high school that might not exist after one year.

“We all feel an immense sense of pride not just in ourselves but also in our extraordinary teachers, who have worked tirelessly to provide us with an excellent education, from late nights to helping us around the clock with any questions we have,” she said. “This moment is as much a celebration of their dedication as it is of our achievements.”

Hadley Bardoni, a 10th grader, enrolled at Basilica High School in the ninth grade after visiting all four secondary school options for Key West students.

“Basilica just clicked with us and our daughter, and it’s been the best choice that we could have made for her,” said Jennifer Bardoni, Hadley’s mom.

Though not Catholic, Jennifer and her husband Damian wanted a faith-based education for Hadley and her sister Ansley, who is in the eighth grade. It’s a small school with a favorable teacher-to-student ratio and a curriculum based on moral values.

“The students are treated as young adults,” Jennifer said. “It’s a very welcoming, loving community that nurtures education and gives our kids the right values.”

That was the motivation for the push to add a high school. The values taught in grades one through eight will continue through grade 12.

“It’s such a crucial time in their development, that transition from adolescence to being young adults,” Wallace said. “They’re able to continue that in an environment where they feel very safe. They know the teachers and they’re with the friends and families that they’ve grown up with.”

Roger Mooney is the communications manager for Step Up For Students.