



Eighth grade students work at computers in their writing innovations class at Our Lady of Black Rock School. (Derek Gee/Buffalo News)

With BISON Fund's help, small school proves obstacles are no excuse

By [Rod Watson](#) | Published Wed, Apr 11, 2018 | Updated Wed, Apr 11, 2018

While "opt-out" proponents continue urging that kids skip the state tests all public schools must give starting this week, it's noteworthy that one impoverished school that doesn't have to administer the English and math exams is doing so anyway.

At Our Lady of Black Rock, a small Catholic school on Peter Street, they give the dreaded tests even though they are not required to.

It's important for the school to see where its kids fit in, and "standardized tests are part of the world," says Principal Martha Eadie, who encourages parents to have their kids take the exams and only had two opt-outs last year.

That despite the fact that two-thirds of the 176 students are from refugee families that arrive speaking little or no English, and that 10 different languages are spoken at the school.

Given that reality, the school doesn't expect to rack up eye-popping scores. But that's not the point.

"I tell parents, 'Let your child take it. It's going to help us become better teachers,'" Eadie said. "It's a measure."

Nor is the language barrier the only one Our Lady of Black Rock faces. It also confronts the bane of all educators: poverty. The school has more students than any other being helped by the BISON Children's Scholarship Fund, the 23-year-old privately financed effort to give impoverished students the same opportunities more affluent kids enjoy. Close to 80 percent of Our Lady of Black Rock students rely on that help.

Given such challenges, you might expect the school's students to fall off the chart when it comes to test scores. But they don't. While no match for affluent suburban districts, the school holds its own against urban schools, many of which face far fewer challenges.

In English, Our Lady of Black Rock's 20.8 percent proficiency rate beat the Buffalo Public Schools' overall score last year and was better than 72 percent of the city's traditional and charter public schools. In math, its 16.7 percent trailed the city school district average by half a percentage point, but still was better than a third of the traditional and charter schools in Buffalo despite the language and poverty challenges its kids face.

In other words, those obstacles are not an excuse – and should not be accepted as such by the public. In fact, some BPS parents and community leaders are pushing the state exams as an accountability tool for that very reason.

The BISON Fund was founded precisely on that principle: Poverty should not be an obstacle to achievement or an excuse for low expectations. It now helps 1,850 kids in 70 elementary schools throughout the region, according to Executive Director Amy E. Popadick. Next school year, it will expand into high schools on a limited basis. Since its founding in 1995, it has tapped small donors, foundations and the national Children's Scholarship Fund to provide some \$26 million to assist more than 20,000 families, she said.

"Our school could not make it without BISON," said Judy Rusnak, Our Lady of Black Rock's family services coordinator.

But it also couldn't make it unless it was doing something right for families, most of whom hear about the school through word of mouth. Once predominantly Polish, it now has many families from the African continent and countries like Burma, with an enrollment of Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim and other faiths. Instead of paying the tuition with one big check, they come in with \$20 here or there – and sometimes with a utility bill in hand, wondering what it is, Eadie said of the cultural challenges.

Of course, the school – like all private, Catholic and charter schools – has one big advantage public schools don't always enjoy: Parents who care enough to want something better for their kids. In fact, all BISON Fund families have to pay something toward tuition. It averages about \$1,500, which means some pay a lot less, but paying even a little is important because it means the program is offering "a hand up, not a hand out," said Popadick.

What makes it worth the sacrifice? At Our Lady of Black Rock, parents cite everything from one-on-one attention to teachers who "bend over backwards" and the fact that the school is "family-oriented." With a language specialist and Title I support, it offers as much as it can to kids who come in with the least. Yet Eadie said six of this year's 14 eighth graders have earned full-ride scholarships to private high schools like Nardin, St. Joe's and Canisius.

At Our Lady of Black Rock, neither poverty nor language barriers are an excuse. There's a lesson there, not for students, but for other schools.



First graders huddle around a table while collaborating on a class project at Our Lady of Black Rock School. (Derek Gee/Buffalo News)