

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Faith in small school results in big honor

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Aquinas Academy in Hampton has more to celebrate this year than its 10th anniversary.

The tiny Catholic school for grades kindergarten through 12 -- with an overall enrollment of 213 and high school students numbering just 44 -- is listed among the top 50 Catholic high schools in the nation.

Oakland Catholic High School; Our Lady of the Sacred Heart High School in Moon; Quigley Catholic High School in Baden, Beaver County; and Seton-LaSalle High School in Mt. Lebanon.

Tuition at the schools ranges from \$5,995 at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart to \$6,770 at Oakland Catholic.

Quigley appeared on the first honor roll issued last year by the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion & Liberty, an international research and educational organization in Grand Rapids, Mich. The

organization produced the honor roll in consultation with a national advisory board made up of Catholic college presidents and scholars.

Schools from 21 states made the honor roll. Florida led with seven schools selected; followed by Texas and New York, with six each; and Pennsylvania and Illinois, with five each.

Schools were judged on academics, Catholic identity and civic education. Aquinas Academy and Oakland Catholic High School rank among the Top 20 in academics. And Aquinas, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart and Seton-La Salle rank among the Top 20 in Catholic identity.

"Pennsylvania did an outstanding job this year. It says a lot for Pittsburgh, and Pennsylvania as a whole, that you have such quality schools," said project coordinator Anthony Pienta.

According to the National Catholic Educational Association,

about 2.7 million children attend 6,000 Catholic elementary schools and 1,235 Catholic high schools nationwide. Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh schools have about 29,000 students for the 2005-06 school year.

A high percentage of Catholic school students take advanced-placement and college courses. Students also exceed state averages in achievement, and about 98 percent graduate, said Sister Mary Tracy, the association's associate director of secondary schools.

"A lot of the research points to the environment of the Catholic high school, where the expectations are high and every student is expected to succeed at the highest level -- and they do," Tracy said.

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