

# Up, up, and away again: Principal for 32 years retires

Andrea Polcaro introduces devoted teacher Lisa Coppola as new leader at Blessed Sacrament

**By Tom Maguire**  
Associate editor

**T**he principal favors a clear path except when it extends through the floor.

Among Andrea Polcaro's education-related stunts was riding in a helicopter despite her fear of heights. "I could see through the floor of the helicopter," she recalled.

"Well," she said, "I want students to know you could conquer your fears with faith and support, ... like when I went up in the up, up, and away with reading, up in the helicopter."

That derring-do motivated pupils at Blessed Sacrament School to read thousands of books. It's a memorable accomplishment as she retires after 32 years as the principal of the school on the east side of Syracuse.

On June 20, she presided over her final end-of-school-year prayer service.

"We have all grown in many ways," she told the pupils and staff. "We gather as a school community to celebrate our personal, spiritual, and academic growth. ... We praise God for all the wonderful blessings and gifts we have received this year."

She added: "May your path be clear and joyous and your heart strengthened."

## Mystery solved

The outgoing principal thrilled the pupils with a mystery: Who will the new principal be?

"Hmmm," she told the assembly. "I see the students looking all around." She offered clues: The new principal "started as a Miss, became a Mrs., had four children. She was PTA president, auction chair, came back to us to teach again in first grade.

"Our new principal is Mrs. Lisa Coppola."

Coppola stepped to the front of the auditorium amid tremendous clapping and whistling.

"This is a wonderful, wonderful place," she told the gathering. "I've been here for 23 years [teacher and many other roles]."

Second-grade teacher Katie Stanczyk took the microphone too.

"Well, well, well," she said, "Mrs. Polcaro last week said, 'Well, at least all the surprises are over.' Well."

She announced that the faculty and staff love the retiring principal so much that, together with the parent-teacher association, they have created the Andrea Polcaro Scholarship. Yearly, it will honor the "most important gift" Polcaro has given the school: the "gift of *kindness*."

The first two recipients, receiving \$250 each because they exemplify Polcaro-like kindness, are Aria Briedis, who will move up from kindergarten to first grade in the fall, and Gian Herron, who will move up to second grade.

"They were just so precious," Polcaro said of the two who came up to accept their awards.



**Blessed Sacrament School pupils Maya White, left, entering fifth grade, and Cecilia O'Connor, entering sixth grade, celebrate with retiring Principal Andrea Polcaro. Maya won the school's \$125 Strive for Success Scholarship based on her essay on this topic: "How Blessed Sacrament School has helped me to be successful." Of her 45 years as an educator, Polcaro says: "I loved every minute." (Sun photo | Chuck Wainwright)**

"I'm just overwhelmed" about the scholarships named in her honor, she said. Her first surprise had been the renaming of Blessed Sacrament School's downstairs all-purpose room, now called the Andrea Polcaro Room.

"And then today," she said, "to award

scholarships based on *kindness*. ... It just tickled my heart just to think that everyone recognizes how important kindness is in this world. And it's powerful. Kindness is powerful."

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Pupil D'Metrique Godbolt, who will be entering the sixth grade, hugs retiring Principal Andrea Polcaro. The "support, the celebrations are embedded in my heart forever — forever and ever," Polcaro says. (Sun photos | Chuck Wainwright)

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## Love that motto

Polcaro's motto will live on at Blessed Sacrament: "Love God, love family, love learning."

She started as a teacher for 13 years at the former St. Matthew's School — "a variety of grades but most mostly kindergarten." One year she was the kindergarten teacher in the morning and the gym teacher in the afternoon. "Lots of fun. Lots of good memories," she said.

The eldest of five children, Polcaro has a brother who lives in Miami and three sisters who live close by. Their mother, Lura Bitterman, died last month. "Everyone called her 'Anne,'" Polcaro said, adding that her mom worked in the after-school program at Blessed Sacrament — "they called her 'Mrs. B.'"

Polcaro's father, Arnold "Arnie" Bitterman, is 90; the siblings take turns being with him every day. A retired structural engineer and architect, Arnie

drew a picture of the beach the family goes to in Cape Cod. The picture is on the wall next to Polcaro in the principal's office.

Retirement means Andrea will travel with her husband, Joseph, for a couple of months in the winter; and they have grandchildren, so she will be able to attend their sports events, including the soccer games of a granddaughter who is going off to college.

Even though Polcaro will now spend her days reading, relaxing, and enjoying family, she said, "I'm still going to be around. I will help Mrs. Coppola. Yeah. I will help her."

New Principal Coppola said she is sad that Polcaro is leaving "but also excited for our new adventure."

Asked what caused her to leap into the adventure, she said:

"Faith. A leap of faith. Really, my love of the children and of the school and of all the good things that Blessed Sacrament has to offer our students — from our teachers to our programs, but just the school and what it stands for,



Having a good time during the announcements are retiring Principal Andrea Polcaro, left, and incoming Principal Lisa Coppola. "She is so committed to the future of Blessed Sacrament School," Polcaro says of Coppola. "I am relieved and joyful and so confident that the legacy of Blessed Sacrament School will continue for many, many, many years."

what it's always stood for": Love God, love family, love learning.

Coppola, who lives in Syracuse, graduated from Our Lady of Pompei School. After Henninger High School came SUNY Geneseo and then Le Moyne College for a master's degree in education.

## Unstoppable Coppola

"I started [at Blessed Sacrament] at 25 years old," she said, "and I was Miss Pagano, and I have pictures of my class, and then I changed over to Mrs. Coppola. Oh, yeah, wow. It's been 23 years."

She taught first grade at Blessed Sacrament from 1996 to 2006. Then for 11 years she was a stay-at-home mom for her children, all of whom attend or have attended Blessed Sacrament School: Olivia, 16; Victoria, 13; Isabella, 11, who will be going into sixth grade in the fall; and Noah, 8, who will be going into third grade.

During those 11 years, Coppola was still a volunteer at the school, PTA president, and holiday auction chair. In 2017, she returned as a first-grade teacher. She also volunteers at Bishop Grimes Jr./Sr. High School, where she is president of the parent organization and the parent representative to the board.

That's a lot of work, but she said: "Everything that I do is for my children, so that they know that I'm invested in their education."

She takes over for Polcaro on July 1.

"Andrea Polcaro is a wonderful, amazing person, teacher, principal," Coppola said. "It's difficult to find the

words to describe such an amazing person who has given so much of her time, love, dedication, life to the school. ...

"I've always loved working with her; that's why I really never left; she brought me back; she always kept me connected to the school."

Polcaro's reading challenges over the years included being planted, kissing a pig, eating a fried worm, and riding a horse like a town crier.

Coppola might be expected to pull a few stunts herself in order to challenge the pupils to read, demonstrate kindness, and "grow their mind in a different direction."

"I hope to. I hope to," she said. "I might have to bring her back. I might have *her* challenge *me* to do something. I haven't quite thought it out yet. I haven't got all the details yet. ... To be announced. ... I've been playing around with a couple different ideas, but I have to make sure she agrees."

So after 45 years as an educator, the retired Polcaro will stay connected to Blessed Sacrament School as stunt-adviser and, perhaps, a role that second-grade teacher Stanczyk is promoting:

Presenter of the Andrea Polcaro Scholarships.

"You can't escape," Stanczyk said hopefully.