

► St. Benedict School faculty members, students and their families feed the fish in the Great Outdoor Learning Center pond.

Mary Stadnyk photos



▲ The Great Outdoor Learning Center includes a number of flower beds to help students learn about different types of plant life and harvesting, as well as a playhouse for children in younger grades.



## Outdoor learning center a breath of fresh air for Holmdel school

**BY MARY STADNYK ■**  
Associate Editor

**I**f there's one good thing to come out of COVID, this is it," Principal Kevin Donohue says of the new Great Outdoor Learning Center at St. Benedict School, Holmdel.

The learning center is a 7,000-square-foot outdoor classroom geared to enhance the school's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) education. It includes five garden spaces for planting and

harvesting; an area with a balance beam, geo-dome and playhouse; and a pond with several goldfish and a frog that the kindergarten class named "Prince."

In addition, each PreK3-5 grade level – the center's target age group – has a specialized project that explores the question: "How can we care for God's creation?"

"With the addition of the GOLC, we are able to teach multiple classes outside in a safe, socially distanced setting while dealing with COVID," Donohue said, noting that except when the weather is

harsh, the school plans to have students outside as much as possible.

"This unique outdoor classroom setting allows us to safely operate classes and help differentiate our school community from neighboring schools and districts," he continued, citing the benefits of outdoor learning such as increased activity and health; broadening child development; advancing civic attitudes and behaviors, and engaging

► "This is a labor of love."

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families and the community.

"We want to make the most of our resources and give our families the highest quality Catholic education," he said.

The learning center project began with kindergarten teacher Tara Guido, who was inspired by a similar idea she heard about years ago while teaching in a private school in North Jersey. It took three years to develop the unused property behind St. Benedict School into the outdoor classroom. The finished project was officially unveiled in November.

Vice principal Christine Keeling praised members of the school

community who helped with fundraising and donating supplies and manpower toward the project.

"This is a labor of love," Keeling said. "This is a real community effort."

In addition, Donohue noted that the National Wildlife Federation – America's largest wildlife conservation and education organization – also recognized the Great Outdoor Learning Center for successfully creating a Certified Schoolyard Habitat through its Garden for Wildlife program. St. Benedict School is one of more than 5,000 schools throughout the country to transform a schoolyard into a habitat that provides natural food sources, clean water, cover and places for animals to raise their young.

Erin Michels, who has a second-grader and pre-K3 student

enrolled in St. Benedict School, said the learning center is a blessing to the school and parish community.

"This place is not just for the school," she said, sharing that she often sees parishioners visiting the learning center after Mass on weekends.

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Diocese sharing about their lives. Plus, more content will be coming, including a page for parents of young men discerning the priesthood.

"The more information we put out there and stories these men can teach through videos will hopefully give younger men the courage to