

CROSS-AGE MENTORING

Program Handbook



Welcome

Mentoring is powerful. It reflects a basic human need. Do you remember looking up to “big kids” as an elementary student? As children we become aware of our limitations. We discover the world is a complicated place with problems that exceed our experience. We need someone to emulate, preferably a big kid who has figured out the tough stuff. Therefore, we studied them carefully. We copied their mannerisms, speech, and dress. We admired their sophistication and attitude. The big kids had it together. They raised the bar, inspired us, and offered an example for personal growth.

We live in a strange time. Relationships often develop through social media, an artificial filter for human interactions. Big kids are particularly important in our context. Some elementary students may have older siblings or cousins who can serve as *de facto* mentors. But many students have nothing. There is no substitute for a trusting relationship with an older mentor. While the cross-age program described in this handbook distantly resembles Big Brothers/Big Sisters, it is unapologetically Catholic. Cross-age mentoring is designed for

students from collaborating Catholic elementary and high schools. It prizes Christian formation. Service learning is an important objective. The program may have uses beyond Catholic schools. It may be appropriate for parish ministry settings. Cross-age learning objectives are academic, spiritual, and moral (i.e., service).

The benefits of cross-age mentoring come from the education research literature. High school mentors develop new social and emotional competencies, particularly as servant leaders. Elementary mentees learn boundaries and expectations associated with a mature, safe, and fun relationship. Together, mentors and mentees grow in self-understanding and faith. Cross-age mentoring supports five benchmarks for social and emotional learning (SEL), including *self-awareness*, *social awareness*, *self-management*, *relationship skills*, and *responsible decision-making*. Cross-age mentoring may be useful in terms of SEL accreditation compliance in Catholic schools.

Cross-age mentoring is a big commitment. The stakes are high. The quality of a cross-age program is commensurate with prayerful preparation, effective training, fundraising, and formative assessment. Cross-age mentoring is intended to become a signature initiative for schools, not a footnote or afterthought. It is essential that administrators at participating schools are committed to program success. Through its implementation, the program should model those same principles of collaboration, trust, and growth that are expected for mentor pairs.

Cross-age mentoring is designed as a year-long initiative. It assumes that mentors and mentees need time to form a trusting relationship. Learning objectives and emphases are structured to follow the development of trust in the mentoring relationship.

Cross-age mentoring learning objectives:

1. Objective #1: **Building relationships.** Mentors will provide academic support for mentees, a non-threatening way to build trust and support classroom learning. This objective will be emphasized in fall.
2. Objective #2: **Christian formation.** Cross-age mentor pairs will learn about their spiritual gifts and why God provides charisms to followers of Jesus Christ. This objective will be emphasized in winter.

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3. Objective #3: **Service learning.** Cross-age pairs will apply spiritual gifts through service learning. Service learning may be a curated opportunity through program leadership, or an idea from the mentor pair. This objective will be emphasized in spring.



The first goal of this handbook is to provide administrators with an overview of cross-age mentoring to make an informed decision on whether the program fits with mission and resources. A second goal is to provide an implementation roadmap for schools that have committed to cross-age mentoring. This handbook is informed by a pilot involving Bishop Ludden Junior/Senior High and Most Holy Rosary Elementary in Syracuse, New York. The pilot brought together same gender high school juniors and seniors (mentors) with fifth graders (mentees). In the interest of supporting the enrollment transition between neighboring schools, the pilot was named *Big Knights/Little Knights* after the Bishop Ludden mascot.

Preparing for Cross-Age Mentoring

Program Ownership & Collaboration. The pilot began with a May 2024 meeting involving principals and stakeholders from Bishop Ludden and Most Holy Rosary. The meeting considered findings from a cross-age mentoring experiment in a California public school (Reimer & Reimer, 2017). Revisions were made to align the proposed pilot with Catholic educational mission and ethos. Discussion focused on the developmental aspect of mentoring, whereby learning objectives could be sequenced to follow the growth of trust between mentors and mentees. Principals offered insights and experiences which were consolidated into three program learning objectives detailed above. The meeting concluded with a request that, should principals commit to the program, they would identify school staff to run the program.

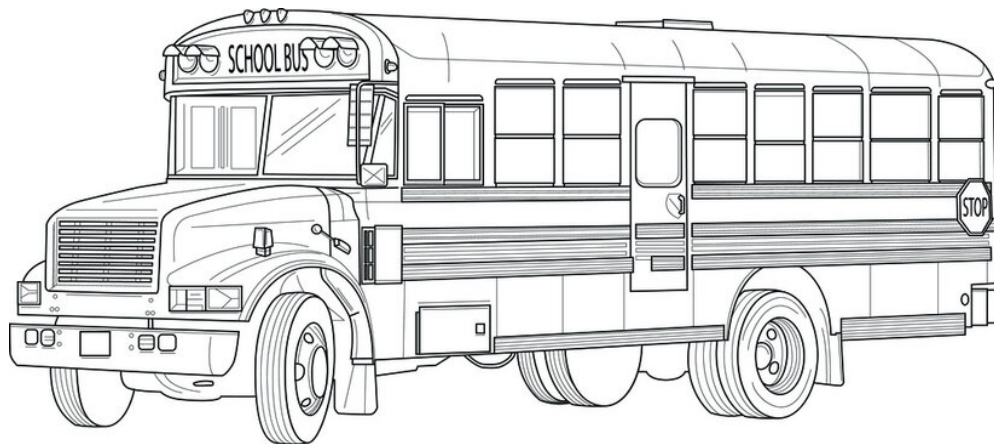
The meeting ended with a commitment between the Bishop Ludden and Most Holy Rosary principals to launch cross-age mentoring. Because training and implementation needs would be much greater at the high school level, it was decided that leadership for the cross-age mentoring program would be hosted by the Bishop Ludden Campus Ministry department. Day-to-day leadership would be shared between the Bishop Ludden campus minister, the International Baccalaureate coordinator, and a developmental psychologist from the Catholic Schools Office.

Scheduling, Space, & Costs. A follow-up meeting was organized to consider scheduling, space, and costs for cross-age mentoring. It was determined that cross-age mentoring would be offered as a “special enrichment” opportunity in the fifth grade class at Most Holy Rosary. Program leadership and administrators identified a slot whereby Bishop Ludden mentors could be released for the cross-age program without undermining student learning. The slot combined part of lunch with a study hall on Thursdays (12:13 PM-1:20 PM). The slot aligned with the fifth grade transition from lunch to afternoon instruction. Accounting for travel time between campuses (2.5 miles), the cross-age mentoring “special” was scheduled from 12:20 PM-1:10 PM every Thursday.

The incoming fifth grade class at Most Holy Rosary numbered twenty students, thirteen of which were boys. It was determined that, when mentors were physically present for the cross-age special, a standard elementary classroom would be crowded to the point where

it would become difficult for students to hear one another. In response, the Most Holy Rosary principal relocated fifth grade to a classroom adjacent to an unused classroom. The two classrooms were connected by an internal door. The second classroom was configured for paired (mentors and mentee) seating.

Program leadership and school administrators determined the primary cost for cross-age mentoring would be busing. For insurance reasons Bishop Ludden mentors were not able to use their own cars for transportation. The Bishop Ludden principal solicited quotes from transportation vendors. The best transportation pricing was obtained through the local public school district. The busing cost for the school year was approximately \$4,000. Additional costs were identified for mentor training at Bishop Ludden, mostly to cover materials and lunch for the students (\$150). Costs related to the cross-age pilot were covered by a grant to the Catholic Schools Office, with ongoing costs to be equitably shared between the participating schools in subsequent school years.



Mentor Recruitment & Consent. The Syracuse cross-age mentoring pilot was fortunate that Bishop Ludden had a mature cohort of high school students entering their senior year. A majority of these students were involved in the Campus Ministry program as “peer ministers.” Many were also candidates for the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma. The cross-age leadership team targeted this group as mentors. Recruitment emphasized service hours. Involved mentors could apply cross-age mentoring hours to (a) the International Baccalaureate CAS (creativity, activity, service) requirement, and/or (b) the Bishop Ludden service requirement for graduation. Potential mentors were alerted to the cross-age pilot in September via presentation by the campus minister. Recruitment posters

were distributed throughout the school. The campus minister screened prospective mentors on maturity, faith commitment, and ability to manage schoolwork with athletic and co-curricular interests. Recruitment was aligned with the needs of the fifth grade class at Most Holy Rosary. As the cross-age pilot would match boys with boys and girls with girls, care was taken to ensure mentor recruitment would strike the needed gender balance.

This process yielded thirteen male mentor candidates and seven female mentor candidates from Bishop Ludden. Prospective mentors and their parents received a letter and consent form from the principal. At the same time, the Most Holy Rosary principal sent a letter and consent form to fifth grade parents. High school and elementary school consent forms can be found in the appendix.

Mentor Training & Support

Mentor Retreat. The cross-age leadership team decided to start cross-age mentoring in early October, making time for recruitment and training. Mentor training was scheduled as a brief retreat at the Bishop Ludden convent. *Imago Dei* (image of God) was selected as the cross-age pilot theme. A powerful motif in Catholic theology, *imago Dei* became a frame for the mentoring relationship, whereby mentor and mentee would jointly discover their uniqueness as people created by God for Kingdom purposes. The retreat was scheduled after a Bishop Ludden tradition known as *Mass on the Grass*. A training agenda included (a) safe environment training for mentors, (b) overview of active listening in mentoring relationships, (c) a primer on academic support to mentees, and (d) reflections on Christian formation, service, and leadership in the mentor dyad. The training retreat followed the below format:

-11:00 AM-12:00 PM (Safe Environment for Mentors) ~ Presented by the Diocesan Office of Safe Environment

-12:00 PM-1:00 PM (Lunch, Active Listening) ~ Presented by Dr. Kevin Reimer, Catholic Schools Office

-1:00 PM-2:00 PM (Academic Support) ~ Presented by Dr. Lynn Reimer, International Baccalaureate Coordinator, Bishop Ludden

-2:00 PM-3:00 PM (Formation, Service, and Leadership) ~ Presented by Monica Hanson, Campus Minister, Bishop Ludden

The mentor training retreat ended with an exercise emphasizing *imago Dei* through first names. Cross-age mentors were “introduced” to fifth grade mentees with a slide that described the meaning of each Little Knight’s name, without providing the student’s actual name. Big Knights were invited to select a mentee based on the meaning of her/his name as someone uniquely made in the image of God. After the choice was made, mentors were provided with the actual first name of their mentee. Mentors wrote postcards to their mentees. Postcard prompts are included in the mentor training retreat slide deck below. Postcards were delivered to fifth grade mentees prior to the first cross-age mentor meeting.

[Mentor Training Retreat Slide Deck](#)

Program Management. The cross-age leadership team kept a weekly (Monday) meeting for the purpose of problem-solving, planning, and curriculum development. This meeting was invaluable in terms of formative assessment. Teething problems were identified and readily addressed. Principals occasionally attended these meetings. Through the campus minister, the leadership team kept up a conversation with the Bishop Ludden cross-age mentors, checking on their experiences and responding to concerns.

Building Relationships (October-December)

Introductions & Icebreakers. Big Knights/Little Knights were introduced to each other in mid-October. The first sessions involved icebreakers and get-to-know-you conversation prompts. Curriculum links are provided below for these sessions:

[Instructional Notes](#)

[Conversation Prompts](#)

[Pictionary](#)

It happened that Halloween fell on a cross-age mentoring Thursday. This provided an opportunity for Big Knights to participate in the annual Most Holy Rosary Halloween

costume parade. Mentors arrived early to help mentees with their costumes. Mentors and mentees marched together in the parade.

The cross-age mentoring meetings established a routine, typically beginning with a check-in activity for Big Knights and Little Knights. This was followed by academic tutoring. Within a few weeks, mentoring relationships began to mature, making possible deeper questions requiring self-reflection. Each meeting began with prayer, with an invitation for mentors and mentees to share prayer intentions. The Advent season was anchored by a booklet of reflections and activities to be completed by Big Knights along with Little Knights.

[Advent Booklet](#)



Christian Formation (January-March)

Background & Rationale. As people created in the *imago Dei*, each follower of Christ is endowed with special charisms (gifts) designed to help further God's Kingdom on earth. These are sometimes called *spiritual gifts*. St. Paul spends considerable time discussing spiritual gifts in his letters to the Corinthians and Ephesians. The Apostle's famous chapter on love (I Corinthians 13) is about the use of spiritual gifts, following their introduction in I Corinthians 12. Spiritual gifts are not ranked in terms of importance or divine favor. Rather,

spiritual gifts are a special grace bestowed upon each follower of Christ. Spiritual gifts are to be exercised through the Holy Spirit for works of service, ministry, and outreach.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, as part of its catechesis for missionary discipleship, has developed an adult inventory of spiritual gifts. The inventory emphasizes concrete, applicable gifts from the letters of St. Paul. The Cleveland curriculum establishes that, while every follower of Christ is given some spiritual gifts, no believer is endowed with all spiritual gifts. The formative challenge is to discern those gifts we have been given, and to begin using those gifts for God's purposes. This challenge is relevant to young and old believers alike.

The cross-age leadership team decided to adapt the Cleveland catechesis into a spiritual gifts inventory and curriculum written at a fifth grade level. In the context of trusting mentor relationships, Big Knights and Little Knights would discover their spiritual gifts. With this knowledge, students would be challenged to prayerfully seek out ways to apply their spiritual gifts for works of service through the Holy Spirit.

The leadership team used cross-age meetings in January to help students think more deeply about how everyone is uniquely created in God's image. Personality was identified as a compelling way to (a) introduce students to the concept of inventory rating, and (b) discover their unique traits with a trusted mentor or mentee. [Know and Love](#) is a free, online inventory for children based on eight personality profiles from the well-known Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The eight personality profiles are categorized by extraversion and introversion. Know and Love uses animal avatars to make personality profiles concrete and accessible for students.

On the day of the personality inventory, Big Knights and Little Knights were given copies of their portrait as a mentor pair. Working together on Chromebooks, students were invited to complete the online Know and Love questionnaire. Mentors and mentees were given time to discuss their God-given personality traits. While these discussions were happening, lithographed pictures of the eight animal avatars were posted around the classrooms. The campus minister gave a brief overview of each animal avatar with its characteristic personality traits. Mentor pairs were invited to tack their pictures onto their lithographed animals. The meeting concluded with an exercise inviting mentor pairs to know and celebrate the *imago Dei* in the other.

Spiritual Gifts. The cross-age leadership team adapted nineteen spiritual gifts from the Cleveland Diocese catechesis into an age-appropriate inventory for fifth-grade children. Because fifth graders are concrete thinkers, each spiritual gift was presented with a photograph. Photos were selected to show or demonstrate the gift in the most everyday, concrete, and relevant terms possible. Emojis were arranged as a rating scale with “that’s me” at the top and “not me” at the bottom along the photo margin:

Giving



That's
me!



Sort of
me.



NOT Me!

Alphabetized spiritual gifts are provided below with definitions:

Administration: A gift to organize and plan in order to carry out God's purpose.

Artistry: A gift to make art that helps others grow closer to God.

Discernment: A gift to discover and respond to God's will.

Evangelism: A gift to help others know and follow Christ.

Exhortation: A gift to encourage others when it's hard to trust God.

Faith: A gift to trust and believe God, even when things are hard.

Giving: A gift to give to others in need.

Hospitality: A gift to invite and welcome others made in God's image.

Intercession: A gift of prayer, believing God will hear.

Knowledge: A gift to learn about God through catechesis and scripture.

Leadership: A gift to help others become the people God created them to be.

Mercy: A gift to care for or forgive others who are hurting.

Music (vocal or instrumental): A gift of voice or instrument that glorifies God.

Pastoring: A gift of spiritual care for God's people.

Service: A gift to help others, especially the poor.

Skilled Craft: A gift to build and repair.

Teaching: A gift to share information so others can learn and grow closer to God.

Wisdom: A gift of judgment and self-control to make choices that honor God.

Writing: A gift to write stories and ideas that bless the reader with God's truth.

The cross-age leadership team anticipated that some gifts, such as giving, would be commonly identified by students in the cross-age mentoring pilot. Other gifts, such as teaching, might be less common. It was understood this wasn't because fewer students were endowed with the gift of teaching. Rather, this was an artifact of human development. As students move through childhood and adolescence into adulthood, they acquire more experiences of self-in-action. By the fifth grade, most students have experienced a considerable number of opportunities to give. It's less likely the same fifth graders have experienced nearly as many opportunities to formally teach.

For this reason, the leadership team decided to introduce gifts in clusters, selected to balance the developmental concern regarding experiences of self-in-action. To the extent possible, the leadership team wanted to avoid a scenario whereby a student might not identify with any spiritual gifts on a given mentoring day. In this scenario, a student

(particularly fifth grade mentees) might falsely conclude that because she or he didn't identify with a spiritual gift on that day, they were somehow deficient or overlooked by God.

Spiritual gift clusters were organized for a five-week curriculum sequence (February/March). The format followed the January personality exercises. Lithographed pictures of spiritual gifts were arranged on the classroom walls. Big Knights and Little Knights were given handout versions of the same spiritual gifts. Handout versions involve several prompts designed to (a) provide gifts definition, (b) get mentor pairs talking, and (c) solicit a rating.

Cluster #1: Service, Exhortation, Writing, Leadership

Cluster #2: Wisdom, Knowledge, Intercession, Artistry

Cluster #3: Music, Discernment, Administration, Faith

Cluster #4: Giving, Teaching, Evangelism, Skilled Craft

Cluster #5: Hospitality, Pastoring, Mercy

The cross-age spiritual gifts curriculum was organized into two slide decks. The first deck was meant to be printed and lithographed for use in the classroom. This deck contained the spiritual gift, a picture, and the emoji ratings along the margin.

[Spiritual Gifts \(slides only\)](#)

The second deck was a handout version of the first deck. The handout version included the definition, prompts, and ratings for each cross-age mentor pair.

[Spiritual Gifts \(handout version\)](#)



Service Learning (April-May)

Background & Implementation. Spiritual gifts are for ministry. The final cross-age mentoring objective encouraged students to prayerfully explore how they might apply spiritual gifts for works of charity through the Holy Spirit.

The early vision for cross-age service learning focused on opportunity. A famous study of impoverished youth in Camden, New Jersey found significant gains in moral character and self-efficacy where students had available opportunities to serve. The cross-age leadership team sought community partnerships in the interest of assembling a palette of service opportunities for cross-age mentor pairs. Partnerships would need to be parent consentable and age appropriate. This proved challenging. For liability reasons, it was difficult to find soup kitchens and homeless outreach ministries willing to have children on the premises, much less involved with clients. An inner city homeless outreach program was found that was willing to host mentor pairs, but logistical concerns made it necessary for students to spend a minimum of four hours on the premises. To avoid undermining classroom learning at cross-age schools, the homeless outreach service option would be restricted to a Saturday. This created complications in terms of transportation. Busing quotes became significantly more expensive on a weekend timeframe.

A well-regarded hospice was willing to host mentor pairs. Students would have the opportunity to work in the hospice bakery, interacting with residents over tea and cookies. Because of space restrictions, however, only two mentor pairs would be present for a baking session. Again, this service option would be restricted to a Saturday.

The additional transportation expense proved too much for the pilot budget. The cross-age leadership team stepped back from the community partnership approach to service learning. Efforts were redirected toward bringing service learning to the cross-age mentor meetings. Connections were made with [Francis Corps Volunteers](#), a Franciscan ministry. FCV maintains chapters in metropolitan areas with significant poverty. Volunteers are recent college graduates. Volunteers make a year-long commitment to live in community and serve across a range of ministries including homeless outreach, hospice, and food insecurity. FCV volunteers were invited to come and present to a cross-age meeting in April, to inspire Big Knights and Little Knights with stories illustrating the creative power of the Holy Spirit.

A second presentation was added. This involved a clinical social worker with hospice experience who specialized in childhood grief and loss. The social worker had experience working in hospice with children and family members experiencing loss. This presentation was framed in terms of Jesus' beatitude teachings. Mentor pairs would learn about poverty through Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Big Knights and Little Knights were introduced to a broad service discussion, coming to understand that needs may be physical (i.e., food), but also emotional or spiritual.

Finally, efforts were made to connect cross-age mentor pairs with service opportunities at Most Holy Rosary school. This emphasized a "clothes swap" ministry where items could be acquired for the price of an unwanted, donated item. Big Knights and Little Knights became involved at two levels. First, the mentor pairs brainstormed ways to find and acquire clothing items which could be donated to the swap. In some cases, Big Knights helped facilitate a miniature clothing drive with relatives, friends, and neighborhood contacts. Second, mentor pairs got involved in preparing clothes for the Saturday swap events. This involved inventory and sorting. In this manner, service learning was focused on existing Thursday cross-age meetings, eliminating the complexity of trips into the community.

Conclusion

The pilot version of cross-age mentoring had a positive impact on participants and schools. Fifth graders with behavior problems were calmer and more engaged, showing incremental gains in self-reflection and capacity to take personal responsibility. These observations

were persistent through the school year. Bishop Ludden mentors made self-relevant discoveries and grew in their faith.

Concern for program sustainability motivated cross-age leadership to seek external funding. During the pilot year, separate presentations were made to corporate philanthropic foundations associated with National Grid and M & T Bank. The foundations had recently overhauled their funding priorities. In both cases, the foundations were de-emphasizing scholarships and events in favor of community-based programs with local impact. Cross-age mentoring was very positively received by foundation representatives. The service learning element was particularly attractive to the foundations. Service learning is perceived as value added in terms of maximizing impact in local neighborhoods and communities.

The roster of mentors and mentees was remarkably stable through the year. One Big Knight transferred to a public school in December, subsequently leaving the cross-age mentoring program. This meant another Big Knight was compelled to temporarily have two mentees until a new Big Knight could be recruited and trained. Because the program emphasized one-to-one relationships involving mentors and mentees, there was some disappointment among the fifth graders who “doubled up” with a single mentor. While one-to-one relationships are likely the best option for cross-age mentoring, it may be necessary for versions of the program to operate with two-to-one ratios. Such a scenario would have the best chance of success by launching with two-to-one ratios to avoid creating unrealistic expectations among mentees.

Appendix (Consent)

Elementary Parent Consent Form–Cross-Age Mentoring Program

Dear Parent/Guardian,

We are writing to invite your Bishop Ludden student to participate in a weekly cross-age mentoring program. The program will pair your trained student mentor with a fifth grade mentee at Most Holy Rosary School. The goal of this program is to provide your student with enhanced opportunities for leadership, academic growth, Christian character development, and service learning. The program is sponsored by a grant from the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse.

Program Details:

- **Frequency:** Weekly (Thursdays), October 10 through May 29.
- **Duration:** 12:15 PM–1:20 PM
- **Location:** Most Holy Rosary 5th grade classroom
- **Activities:** Tutoring, group projects, games, discussions, and community service.

Benefits for your Student:

- Enhanced academic motivation and engagement
- Improved social skills, self-understanding, and personal responsibility
- Development of positive relationships with younger mentees

Your student's participation is entirely voluntary. If you consent to your student's involvement, please sign and return this form to Principal Mary Beth Fierro by [Date].

Sincerely yours,

Mary Beth Fierro (Principal, Bishop Ludden Jr/Sr High School)

Kevin S. Reimer, PhD (Catholic Schools Office, Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse)

Student Name_____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

High School Parent Consent Form–Cross-Age Mentoring Program

Dear Parent/Guardian,

We are writing to invite your Most Holy Rosary fifth grader to participate in a weekly cross-age mentoring program. The program will pair your child with a trained high school mentor (grade 11 or 12) from Bishop Ludden Jr/Sr High School. The goal of this program is to provide your child with enhanced opportunities for academic growth, Christian character development, and service learning. The program is sponsored by a grant from the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse.

Program Details:

- **Frequency:** Weekly (Thursdays), October 10 through May 29.
- **Duration:** 12:15 PM–1:20 PM
- **Location:** Most Holy Rosary 5th grade classroom
- **Activities:** Tutoring, group projects, games, discussions, and community service.

Benefits for your Child:

- Enhanced academic motivation and engagement
- Improved social skills, self-understanding, and personal responsibility
- Development of positive relationships with trusted mentors

Your child's participation is entirely voluntary. If you consent to your child's involvement, please sign and return this form to Principal Sherri Stone by [Date].

Sincerely yours,

Sherri Stone (Principal, Most Holy Rosary School)

Kevin S. Reimer, PhD (Catholic Schools Office, Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse)

Child's Name _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ **Date:** _____