

# How to Keep Ireland's Promise

BY DAVID JACOBSON



Archbishop  
John Ireland

The Ireland's Promise program, which harkens to the origin of Saint Thomas Academy, recently completed its second year of closing the educational opportunity gap that exists along socioeconomic lines. Open to rising sixth- through ninth-graders, the program named for Archbishop John Ireland promises to deliver on his vision for equality.

"After serving as a chaplain in the Union army during the Civil War, Archbishop Ireland became interested in boys' education," explained **John Buethe '05**, the Academy's Vice President, who oversees the program. "He wanted a school that could draw on the discipline aspect of the military, and when he founded Saint Thomas Military Academy, his focus was on Irish and German immigrant kids. He wanted to provide a rugged experience to build character and prepare them for the professions while their parents were working in the trades."

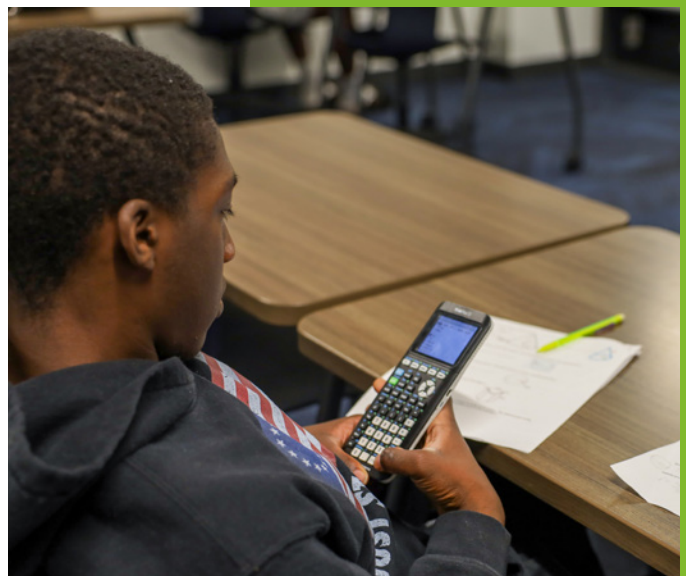
In keeping with Ireland's vision, Buethe said, "We want to be a place to serve *all* boys. Ireland's Promise offers middle-school boys from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity—free of charge—to take real Saint Thomas Academy classes and have those go onto their transcripts."

Started with a donor's \$50,000 seed-funding gift, the six-week program comprises three hours daily in academic classrooms (math for the first three weeks and English Composition for the next three weeks). Students earn two semesters of coursework on their transcripts.

One program participant, Ashton Cook, eighth grader at the Twin Cities German Immersion School, explained how all those program components impacted him. "The other students were nice. They are smart and good learners. After the summer, going back to school, what I learned in the program made my regular school feel easier, and I think it will make high school feel easier. I would 100% recommend Ireland's Promise to others."



Some of the students who participated in the program in the summer of 2025.



Such impact and the students' enthusiasm appeal to Academy teachers who work in the program, Buethe said. "Our faculty love teaching these classes. They find it rewarding and enjoy seeing the Academy live out its mission. These students have to apply for the program, and they're high aptitude students, but their families just don't have the resources to afford Saint Thomas Academy, and they see it as out of reach."

The program requires minimal commitment from families to enroll their boys in the Academy. "We don't want to poach students from our middle-school partners," Buethe said. "But we do want to provide students with pathways into our high school, and we want to ameliorate learning loss from the pandemic and other factors. We're fine with these boys going elsewhere. We still will have lived out Archbishop Ireland's mission."

One challenge in making the program as robust as possible is recruitment from non-traditional feeder communities for the Academy. To help solve for that, Buethe brought in Jenny Honan Abarquez.

Recently retired from the Marine Corps after 17 years, Honan Abarquez's credentials include a Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Studies from Penn State University as well as current work in social services focused on youth development and access with Roots Wellness Center and Canopy Roots.



Her main charge over 18 months as Ireland's Promise Program Coordinator is identifying feeder schools and youth organizations that are home to likely recruitment candidates. Honan Abarquez estimated that she has worked closely with 25 schools and organizations, including many Catholic schools, The Sanneh Foundation, Beacons, and Denden Youth Development Association of Minnesota, an Eritrean community group.

"I love how accessible this program is to families," Honan Abarquez said. "Ironically, one of the main obstacles is that some parents are worried that it is too good to be true."

Of course, funding is also an issue, one that Buethe hopes alumni can help solve. "This doesn't run if we don't have the dollars," he said. "I would love to see us serving 20 students per year. It's critically important to our mission and what we were put on this Earth to do, and I beseech the community to support it."



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