

NIAGARA CATHOLIC
DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD



427 Rice Rd., Welland ON

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www.niagaracatholic.ca

Danny Di Lorenzo
Chair of the Board

Camillo Cipriano
Director of Education

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CHRIST-CENTERED
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that **celebrates diversity**
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NIAGARA CATHOLIC ANNOUNCES 2025 AWARD OF DISTINCTION RECIPIENTS

Niagara Catholic District School Board Director of Education Camillo Cipriano is pleased to announce the 2025 recipients of the Niagara Catholic Education Award of Distinction.

Retired trustees and board chairs Kathy Burtnik and Frank Fera, and retired director of education John Crocco were chosen as this year's recipients for the Award of Distinction by the selection committee earlier this month. The decision was shared with trustees at the Committee of the Whole Meeting on February 11.

Public nominations for the Niagara Catholic Education Award of Distinction opened last fall, with an invitation to nominate a person or group for the award. To be considered, recipients must have made a notable, significant, and positive contribution to Catholic education.

Together, Mrs. Burtnik, Mr. Crocco, and Mr. Fera brought nearly a century of service to Catholic education in Niagara, supporting several generations of Catholic students and their families as they learned and grew in faith.

Director Cipriano offered his congratulations to Mrs. Burtnik, Mr. Crocco, and Mr. Fera.

"I am extremely happy to share the news that Kathy Burtnik, John Crocco, and Frank Fera will join a long list of exceptional contributors to Niagara Catholic and Catholic education in Ontario and in Canada on Niagara Catholic's Wall of Distinction," he said. "The Niagara Catholic Education Award of Distinction is Niagara Catholic's pinnacle of recognition for individuals who have committed their lives to the service of Catholic education, whether as priests, nuns, brothers, or lay-people; or as volunteers, builders, and leaders in our system, and to groups that have made significant contributions to Catholic education. This year's recipients have shown outstanding leadership throughout decades of service, and I am grateful for their commitment to strengthening the foundation of Niagara Catholic. I wholeheartedly offer my congratulations to Mrs. Burtnik, Mr. Crocco, and Mr. Fera for being selected as recipients, and I look forward to celebrating this recognition with them at the Niagara Foundation for Catholic Education Annual Benefit Gala in March."

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Danny Di Lorenzo, Chair of the Board, offered his congratulations and thanks to this year's recipients.

"On behalf of the Niagara Catholic Board of Trustees, it is my privilege to congratulate Kathy Burtnik, John Crocco, and Frank Fera for being selected as the 2025 recipients of the Niagara Catholic Education Award of Distinction," he said. "Each was a mainstay at Niagara Catholic for decades, and together they are an indelible part of the fabric of Niagara Catholic, dedicating countless hours of their lives in the interest of enriching the lives of generations of Catholic students. As a trustee and board chair, I am grateful for their many years of commitment to Catholic education locally, provincially, and nationally."

Tickets are still available for the Niagara Foundation for Catholic Education's Annual Benefit Gala, which will take place at Club Roma on Thursday, March 27. They are available through the Gala link on the Foundation Gala banner on niagaracatholic.ca.

Biographies of the 2025 Niagara Catholic Education Award of Distinction recipients follow. Photos are attached.

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KATHY BURTNIK

Kathy Burtnik has been committed to Catholic education for her entire life.

She attended Catholic elementary and secondary schools in Niagara, as did her children and grandchildren.

Kathy was an avid volunteer in her children's schools, and became involved in the Parent Council, now known as Catholic School Council. She was a familiar face at school events, supporting them in any way possible, with the goal of enriching each student's experience. It was through this school connection that Kathy decided to run as a Catholic school board trustee.

She was first elected to the Lincoln County Roman Catholic Separate School Board's Board of Trustees in 1994. Kathy served multiple terms as a trustee, vice-chair, and chair of that board, and then, following the amalgamation of school boards in 1998, the Niagara Catholic District School Board, until her retirement from public service in 2022.

For 28 years, Kathy's singular focus was on ensuring that Catholic students in Niagara and in Ontario, achieved not only their diplomas, but a deep and enduring love and understanding of our faith.

During her tenure as a Catholic school trustee, Kathy served as a trustee representative on Niagara Catholic's Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) and Niagara Catholic Parent Involvement Committee (NCPIC), ensuring their voices were heard at the trustee table. She supported their initiatives at events and activities and was consistently an advocate for their support of students.

Kathy shared her passion for Catholic education in Niagara across Ontario and Canada. She served as a regional director on the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association's (OCSTA) Board of Trustees from 2008-2012, serving as vice-president from 2012-2014, president from 2014-2016, past president from 2016-2018, and then as a board member from 2019-2021.

Kathy was a director with the Canadian Catholic School Trustees' Association (CCSTA) from 2016-2018.

She proudly and actively supported Toonies for Tuition, and the annual Niagara Catholic Pilgrimage, among other social justice initiatives, and the Niagara Foundation for Catholic Education. A rowing enthusiast and coxswain, Kathy coached generations of rowing crews at Saint Francis Catholic Secondary School, volunteering countless hours of her time on the water, dry land, and at regattas.

Everything Kathy did during her time as a trustee, she did with grace. She led by example, following the Catholic Social Teachings. She had an easy rapport with everyone she encountered and made it her mission to put those around her at ease. She exemplified the Catholic Social Teachings in all she did. Even during difficult negotiations or challenging times, Kathy remained optimistic and treated everyone she encountered with dignity.

In her role as trustee, vice-chair, and chair of the board, Kathy exemplified the motto of service before self. She was a presence at countless events and awards celebration as an outspoken cheerleader for generations of Niagara Catholic students and for the vocation and gift of Catholic education.

For these very tangible reasons, and for the countless other examples of Kathy's commitment and dedication to Catholic education and Niagara Catholic, we are proud to present Kathy Burtnik, a long-time friend and advocate for Catholic education, with a Niagara Catholic Education Award of Distinction.

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JOHN CROCCO

John Crocco's journey with Catholic education in Niagara began in 1986, when he joined the preceding Welland County Roman Catholic Separate School Board as a secondary classroom teacher. He concluded his illustrious, 37-year career in Catholic education with his retirement in 2020.

Throughout his years of service to Niagara Catholic, John held many roles: a teacher, guidance counsellor, department head, program supervisor, vice-principal, principal, superintendent of education, and, in 2008, became the first staff member in Niagara Catholic to begin as a classroom teacher and become director of education.

He was passionate about discerning the difference Catholic education made in the lives of students, and the importance of nurturing souls and building minds. As Director, John led a year-long design of the Board's first multi-year strategic plan, *Vision 2020*, which added to the foundation of Niagara Catholic. John championed the addition of elementary chaplaincy leaders in the board, making Niagara Catholic unique among Catholic school boards in Ontario. He also established chapels in elementary schools to serve as dedicated spaces for school Masses and liturgies, prayer services, and reflection. Furthering his widespread support of Catholic education in Niagara and across Ontario, he initiated the creation of the Niagara Catholic Athletic Association to promote the ministry of sport in Catholic schools, and the establishment of the Niagara Catholic Education Alliance Committee. Together with Bishop Bergie, the chair of the board and other stakeholders in Catholic education, this 30-plus member committee promoted Catholic education in many different ways, including community activities and engagement, resources, and events.

John was an avid supporter of Niagara Catholic's Annual Pilgrimage and other faith-based social justice events, celebrations and activities, helping students understand the importance of the Catholic Social Teachings, specifically the importance of the dignity of the human person. John also supported faith development for staff, consistent with his commitment to shaping an effective, inspirational Catholic experience where all are safe and welcome.

He was steadfast in his belief that all children are equal in the eyes of God and that education is the ultimate equalizer. To promote a sense of equality and community among elementary students, John was the driving force in establishing Niagara Catholic's elementary standardized dress code. He also believed in the importance of student voice. Under his leadership, Niagara Catholic created the Elementary Student Senate, another program unique to Niagara Catholic, which continues to give elementary students a voice in decision making today. Provincially, he created with students and staff a biennial Catholic Leadership Conference with student representatives attending from all Catholic secondary schools in Ontario. Nationally, John was part of the team that partnered with Team Canada '72 players, Brock University, and Hockey Canada, in creating a student leadership program based on the '72 Summit Series.

John brought French Immersion to Niagara Catholic, recognizing the desire many parents had to provide their children with a bilingual education. As a visionary, John recognized that not all students are destined for post-secondary academic studies after graduation. He also understood the urgent need for students to work in the skilled trades. To support this, he was integral in the creation of the Niagara Launch Centre, which was also ahead of its time in Ontario, providing a cutting-edge makerspace and technology learning hub to explore future pathways. The community relationships and strength of Niagara Catholic's technology programs today are a direct result of John's innovative approach to student engagement.

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He placed a premium on experiential learning, and supported programs such as travel-for-credit, student and staff exchanges and welcoming international students to Niagara Catholic, which was expanded under his leadership. This global perspective fosters greater understanding for and about different cultures and enriches the lives of everyone.

John always credited and recognized the talented staff who provided the unique programs and supports for students and colleagues. Celebrating excellence was a priority, and he added to the annual student *Catch the Spirit Awards* with the creation of the *Distinguished Alumni Award* for alumni and the *Director's Inspirational Award* for staff.

John was recognized by organizations at home, such as the Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association (OCSOA), and was the 2015 Canadian recipient of the National EXL Award, naming him Canadian Director/Superintendent of the Year by the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA). He continues to support students and staff today through his involvement in education and serves as a member of the Board of Directors on the Niagara Foundation for Catholic Education.

For these very tangible reasons, and for the countless other examples of John's commitment and dedication to Catholic education and Niagara Catholic, we are proud to present John Crocco, a long-time friend and advocate for Catholic education, with a Niagara Catholic Education Award of Distinction.

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FRANK FERA

Frank Fera dedicated more than five decades of his life to Catholic education in Niagara.

As a deeply committed educator, Frank exemplified Catholic principles and values, driven by fairness, respect, and empathy for everyone he encountered. His primary focus was the faith-based growth of all partners in Catholic education.

Historically, Frank made a significant impact on the Italian community. While living in a predominantly Italian section of Niagara Falls, Frank invested hours of his time building a rapport with newcomers, making them feel comfortable and at ease with their new language. He continued his advocacy by helping to instill confidence in the Catholic school system in parents, and through his support of English-language learning so students could thrive. The trusting relationship he established with this community encouraged a strong dynamic between home, school, parish, and community.

Frank is described as having an “impactful, trustworthy leadership style,” which embodied the Catholic Social Teachings. He was never too busy to meet with parents, teachers, trustees, or clergy to discuss new practices and policies, and viewed everything through a gospel lens.

As a principal, Frank promoted faith formation for teachers as well as students, believing this strengthened the Catholic school culture. In his role as a trustee, Frank expanded that to play a vital role in fostering a faith-based culture across Niagara Catholic and its preceding board, the Welland County Roman Catholic Separate School Board. He was a regular participant in these faith-based activities, confident in his belief that a faith-filled system builds faith-filled students.

Frank was a sympathetic educator, who strived to bring out the best in his school communities, inspiring students to work toward bright futures, and always ready to support students in need. He played a key role in the creation of the Spiritually Centered Outdoor Education Program (SCOEP) later known as Journey Retreat, a program for Grade 8 students as they prepared for their transition to Catholic high school. He advocated for all students, ensuring that everyone would be able to attend, free from barriers due to cost or other issues.

Frank lives his own faith with passion and integrity, dedicated to his parish, giving freely of his time to fundraise for the construction and maintenance of Our Lady of the Scapular Church.

In the community, Frank’s living faith was integral in the creation of the Serra Club through the Diocese of St. Catharines. As president, he volunteered and collaborated with laity, clergy, and colleagues, promoting vocations as a career option for youth for many years, and financially supported a young nun and seminarian during their religious training.

In his 24 years of service as a trustee, including two terms as chair of the board, Frank demonstrated a steadfast commitment to Catholic education locally and beyond. He was involved in many board committees, setting an example of leadership across Niagara Catholic. He believed that happy staff made happy, successful students, and worked to maintain relationships with senior leaders and his fellow trustees.

Frank was an impactful educator, and many current and retired Niagara Catholic teachers and principals dedicated themselves to the vocation of Catholic education because of his influence.

For these very tangible reasons, and for the countless other examples of Frank’s commitment and dedication to Catholic education and Niagara Catholic, we are proud to present Frank Fera, a long-time friend and advocate for Catholic education, with a Niagara Catholic Education Award of Distinction.