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New president of Kennedy Catholic High School settles in

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SOMERS - John F. Kennedy Catholic High School's new president hails from Hawthorne, graduated from Pawling High School and once worked as a nuclear engineer for the Navy.

The Rev. Mark Vaillancourt, who served the past four years as chaplain of St. Joseph by-the-Sea High School on Staten Island, succeeded the Rev. Stephen Norton at Kennedy on July 1.

"I know there's mixed emotions," he said in his virtually empty office yesterday. "Father Norton did a great job here as president, and they were very sad to see him go. And I can understand that for me it's just basically take the good work that he's done and build on that."

Norton, one of 47 priests in the New York Archdiocese to be reassigned in May by Cardinal Edward Egan, wrapped up a five-year stint as school president with a June 30 reception, then transferred to a parish in Hopewell Junction, N.Y.

Kennedy spokesman Alex Malecki said last week that Vaillancourt made a positive first impression.

"With any leadership transition, there are always questions," he said. "But there's no doubt in my mind that he's the person to lead this school at this point in time."

Vaillancourt, 49, grew up in Hawthorne, where he attended Holy Rosary School until he was about 12. The other unpopular decision made by the archdiocese in the spring was to close six Catholic elementary schools, Holy Rosary among them.

Vaillancourt graduated from Pawling High School in 1977. His brother lives in Hastings, and his sister is a Yonkers resident. He taught Latin and physics at St. Joseph - a school of about 1,400 students - and will teach a theology course in the fall at Kennedy, which enrolls about 650. At St. Joseph, he also served as assistant academic dean, science department chairman and chaplain, and he implemented classics and college-level physics courses.

Vaillancourt worked for the Navy from 1981 to 1987 as a nuclear engineer, which in part required him to refuel submarine cores. He was a member of the Naval Reserve from 1993 to 2002. He was ordained in 1994 and became a chaplain, ascending to lieutenant before finding a new calling.

"The big change was not a change in faith; it was the vocation," he said. "It wasn't a case of job dissatisfaction, it was: 'This is who I'm called to be.' "

He received a bachelor's degree from State University of New York-Maritime College and a master's from Manhattan College, both for engineering. After collecting master's degrees in divinity from St. Joseph's Seminary and philosophy from Fordham University, he received his doctorate in theology from Fordham.

He has served as an assistant professor of theology at St. John's University since 2007 and a professor at the Institute of Religious Studies at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers since 2005.

Vaillancourt said he would spend upcoming months working with Norton, the principal and department heads to reinforce the school's Catholic identity, academics and athletics.

"The goal of the school is to bring the message of faith to their learning experience," he said.