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## 'The Rule' review - A school blooms in Newark



"They've spent \$12 billion on education in Newark," a frustrated educator says early on in the new documentary "The Rule." "Does it *seem* like they've spent \$12 billion on education in Newark?"

That the public schools in our state's largest city — in many of our cities — are failing is inarguable, but everything else, it seems, is up for debate. Who's to blame? What are the solutions?

The fights go on and on.

So "The Rule" sidesteps the arguments to look at a singular success: **St. Benedict's Prep**, a private Catholic school that's been part of the city since the 19th-century — even though the police sirens on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard now regularly interrupt vespers.

It is an excellent school, obviously, but not an elitist one. Its students often come from broken homes. Most families receive financial aid; more than a third pay less than half the annual \$9000 tuition. And yet 98% of the school's students go on to college.

How does St. Benedict's do it?

That's the question the film tries to answer, by not only talking to its faculty but by placing the school in the context of its place. No one is better suited to that than director **Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno**, who with her husband Jerome Bongiorno has made a number of Newark-oriented films, including "Revolution '67."

They point out here that the bloody chaos of that year not only changed Newark, but also St. Benedict's Prep, until then a school largely serving working-class Catholics. And that it was the final decision of some of its monks to stay on after the riots that turned it into a lifeline for many poor students.

How does it succeed where others fail?

Well, to be fair, it doesn't operate under the same conditions. It doesn't have to accept every student who applies (although it's far more interested in the applicant's character than his test scores). It can also expel students, in extreme circumstances. And monks don't cost a lot (although the school has a large lay faculty).

But according to "The Rule" — a hit at the Montclair film festival, scheduled for an eventual PBS broadcast and soon available on DVD from the filmmakers' own [site](#) — St. Benedict's also does some things that other institutions might replicate.

It operates a small boarding school within the school, so students don't have to return to the streets they're trying to escape. It holds classes pretty much year-round. It builds leadership by giving kids a say in the school's day-to-day affairs, including disciplinary issues.

And it has teachers who actually live in the city where they work, and among the people they serve.

Of course the school has its failures (one teacher remembers a suicide; another, tearfully, the case of a brilliant boy who went on to Yale, only to graduate, return home, turn to drug dealing and get killed).

The film has its failings, too.

For example, there's an over-reliance on simplistic animation (when someone describes a breakthrough as a light bulb going off, we cut to a cartoon of, yes, a light bulb going off). And some of the narration is given to a computer-synthesized voice — a bizarre

choice that suddenly makes it seem as if Stephen Hawking has joined us.

Yet this is still a moving film about an inspiring place, whose simplest strongest insight into education, diversity and success comes, not from a pedagogic textbook, but the sixth-century advice of St. Benedict himself: "The strong must have something to strive for — and the weak, nothing to run from."

Ratings note: The film contains nothing to offend.

***'The Rule' (Unrated) Bongiorno Productions (90 min.)***  
*Directed by Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno. Now playing at the Quad Cinema in New York.*

