

Aid is increased to help keep struggling families from removing students

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Braced for decreased enrollment because of the deteriorating economy, the Washington region's struggling Catholic schools are boosting financial aid and offering other help to keep financially strapped parents from pulling their children out of the parochial education system.

The recession couldn't come at a worse time for Catholic schools, which are under deepening financial duress.

Enrollment has been declining for years because Catholic couples have been having fewer children, urban Catholics have been moving to the suburbs and Catholic families' attachment to a religious education has been weakening. Costs have soared as poor non-Catholic children requiring financial aid have poured into the schools to escape low-quality public schools and as the Catholic schools' traditional teachers -- members of religious orders -- have been replaced by higher-paid lay educators.

But the recession is exacerbating the forces straining the schools, which educate about 50,000 students in the Washington area.

"Any kind of issues that we had before have just been intensified by the concern over the economy," said Karen Ristau, president of the National Catholic Educational Association.

Baltimore Archbishop Edwin O'Brien blames the economy for a sudden 5 percent drop in enrollment this academic year -- twice the average decline of the previous five years for the archdiocese, which includes Anne Arundel and Howard counties.

"I don't know what else to tag it to," O'Brien said. "That extra [decline] had to be people just pulling the reins on their budgets."

The enrollment picture could worsen during the next academic year, O'Brien said. "People are going to be strained economically -- losing their job or worried that they might lose their job next year -- and are going to look for some places to cut."

To retain students whose parents have hit rocky financial times, dioceses are increasing financial aid for next year, extending financial aid deadlines and offering emergency aid for this year for families facing sudden setbacks who are unable to pay tuition, which runs between \$4,000 and \$18,000 a year.

The Arlington Diocese, which has about 18,000 students, has increased its financial aid from \$1.7 million to \$2 million for next year. It is also offering \$250,000 this year for people in immediate need, said Sister Bernadette McManigal, interim schools superintendent.

She expects the money to run out quickly. "I probably could use a half-million just for immediate need," she said.

The Archdiocese of Washington, which has 98 schools and 30,000 students, has doubled its financial aid for the 2009-10 academic year to \$4 million.

For families facing sudden financial crises this year, the archdiocese has set aside \$100,000 more. But officials were surprised when they received requests for tuition assistance nearly triple that amount -- \$291,000, said Superintendent Patricia Weitzel-O'Neill. She said the school system hopes to increase the emergency tuition assistance.

"The people we are most concerned about -- which is where we want our tuition dollars to focus -- are the families with the greatest need," Weitzel-O'Neill said. "We've always had those families, but there are more of them today, and the number, we think, will grow."

At St. Matthias School in Lanham, 10 percent of the school population -- the families of about 20 children -- have sought emergency assistance this year because of job losses and reduced income, Principal Pat Wilson said.

To cover their tuition, the school has tapped into the archdiocese fund and gotten help from the Catholic Business Network of Prince George's County. In addition, Jeffrey Defayette, pastor of St. Matthias the Apostle Church, has made appeals from the pulpit for help for the families, she said.

Wilson said she has reassured families that they will not be turned out of the school if they can't pay tuition.

"We feel very strongly that is our mission," she said, even though "it's not the easiest thing to do."

Barbara McGraw Edmondson, principal of the School of the Incarnation in Gambrills, said her school's leadership has decided that it will waive tuition, if need be, to keep children in school. Several families have come to the school seeking assistance because of unemployment or decreased income.

"If a family is in that situation, we certainly would have the child remain in school even if they can't pay the tuition," Edmondson said. "That is the reality now."

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