

# U.S. Catholic high schools fight for survival

By Cindy Wooden  
NC News

WASHINGTON — De La Salle Institute, a Christian Brothers' high school in Chicago, is doing what many Catholic secondary schools are struggling to do — stay open, stabilize enrollment and maintain a student body that is racially, economically and academically diverse.

Other schools have not been so fortunate. Because of increasing costs and declining enrollment, at least 19 schools in 13 U.S. dioceses will not open their doors next fall. And several single-sex schools will go coed in hopes of boosting enrollment.

Eleven years ago, De La Salle was struggling financially, and the Christian Brothers considered moving the school from the urban address it has had since its founding in 1889, said Brother Michael Quirk, the school's president.

But the situation has improved "dramatically," he said. A \$1 million endowment for scholarships, grants to maintain the

building and alumni donations have helped. Perhaps the biggest change has been one of attitude, Brother Quirk told National Catholic News Service in Washington. "We have decided we are going to survive, and the whole morale has improved," he said.

The De La Salle staff isn't afraid to "let people know who we are, why we are here and why we are important," Brother Quirk added.

Enrollment for 1988-89 is 875 young men, 15 percent of whom receive financial aid to help with the \$2,200 annual tuition. More than half of the students' families pay the tuition in monthly installments. Twenty percent of the students are not Catholic, and 50 percent are black, Hispanic or Asian.

While 88 percent of the students plan to attend college, the school also has a remedial academic program and an industrial arts program. "We are racially diverse, academically diverse and financially diverse," Brother Quirk said.

Other Catholic schools are having a harder time surviving. In the Archdiocese of Washington, two private all-girls' schools will close and the four archdiocesan high schools will consolidate into one.

The Diocese of Ogdensburg, N.Y., the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and the Diocese of Pittsburgh each have two schools that will merge.

Two schools will close in the Archdiocese of Dubuque, Iowa, and at least two will close in the Diocese of Pittsburgh where a final decision on a third closing has not been reached.

In the Diocese of Rochester, the Holy Cross Brothers have announced that Cardinal Mooney High School will close this spring under the weight of a \$700,000 operating deficit.

One high school closure has been announced in each of the following dioceses: Phoenix, Ariz.; Erie, Pa.; San Antonio, Texas; Chicago; Burlington, Vt.; Omaha, Neb.; Belleville, Ill.; and Nashville, Tenn.

The Omaha school, St. Joseph High School, is scheduled to reopen in the fall of 1993 in another location, a part of the city experiencing a growth in the number of school-age children.

With 1,391 Catholic high schools — including seven new schools — serving 681,000 students at the beginning of the 1987-88 academic year, the closures and mergers are not a "convulsive shift," according to Michael J. Guerra, executive director of the secondary school department of the National Catholic Educational Association in Washington.

All but one of the 25 high schools closed or merged after the 1986-87 school year had fewer than 150 students, according to NCEA statistics. The number of closures-mergers after the 1985-86 school year also was 25. Four new high schools opened in the fall of 1986.

In the fall of 1983, 1,463 Catholic secondary schools were operating in the United States; 1,449 in 1984; 1,430 in 1985; and 1,409 in 1986, the NCEA said. The numbers are nowhere near their 1964 peak — more than 1 million high school students enrolled in more than 2,400 schools. But declines in the five following years averaged 7 percent to 10 percent annually. By 1975 the declines had stabilized to just over 1 percent annually.

Some reversal of the trend is expected in the late 1990s when children in a "baby boomlet" will reach high school age, Guerra said.

While public high schools also have experienced declining enrollment, it is more pronounced in Catholic schools because they are "tuition-sensitive," he said.

In order to survive and to avoid becoming schools for only upper-income families, Guerra said Catholic schools must find ways to increase financial aid. They

must "retain families that have made the commitment" to Catholic education, but whose budgets already are stretched by the costs.

The schools that are financially secure "are serving different constituencies" than those that are in trouble. "We will eliminate the schools that serve people of low and modest income ... if we think each school has to stand on its own," he said.

For Guerra, the issue isn't so much the viability of an individual school as it is the collective service of Catholic schools to their communities, the church and the nation. The secure schools "are serving a significant number of families that have the means to meet the real costs of education," he said.

In the 1987-88 school year, the latest year for which NCEA statistics are available, the average Catholic high school tuition was \$2,000, Guerra said. The average yearly cost of educating a high school student at a Catholic school was \$2,600. And the average annual cost of educating a student at a public school, grades kindergarten through 12, was \$4,000. "Catholic schools are charging about half of what the public schools pay to educate each student," he said.

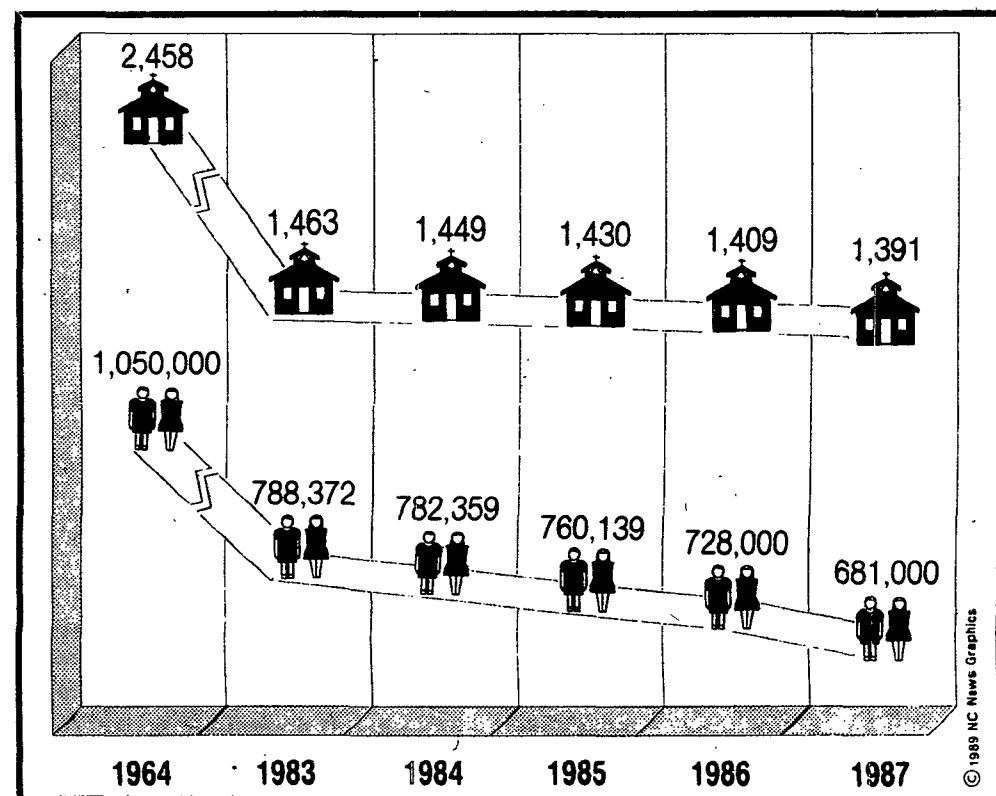
"It's a great bargain," Guerra said, especially in light of studies which show Catholic school students performing better on standardized tests than their public school counterparts and adopting religious and moral values.

"There is evidence that Catholic schools are trying to make themselves accessible" to the poor, he said. In 1986, tuition grants averaging \$500 each were awarded to 10 percent of the students. This year, 16 percent of Catholic students received grants averaging \$750.

Another factor contributing to enrollment decline and school closures is a shift in where Catholics live, Guerra said. As Catholics in the United States have become more affluent, they have moved to the suburbs where there are fewer Catholic schools. With the consolidation of urban schools and the move of Catholics to the suburbs, the sense of community found in Catholic educational institutions is at risk, he said. Without a sense of community "you sacrifice the source of effectiveness."

"Community is not a geographic turf issue," he said. Shared values, concerns and educational ideals can create community, "but there have to be authentic bonds."

When a school does close, he said, "it's like a death in the family." Along with the mourning, people question the "faith and commitment" of those making the decisions. Guerra believes that some school closings could have been prevented, "but some have experienced a peaceful and natural closing."



**FEWER SCHOOLS, FEWER STUDENTS** — From all-time highs in 1964, the number of U.S. Catholic high schools and secondary students dropped dramatically to plateaus in the 1980s, when figures stabilized somewhat.

## Hartford parents raise \$300,000 to prevent high school closing

WASHINGTON (NC) — Parents in the Archdiocese of Hartford, Conn., have come up with a plan to keep open a local Catholic high school slated for closure, and parents in the Diocese of Pittsburgh have until June 30 to develop a plan to keep their children's school open.

The parents' organization of St. Paul High School in Bristol, Conn., has received \$300,000 in pledges for the school and 73 enrollment commitments for the 1989-90 freshman class.

When Archbishop John F. Whealon of Hartford announced April 19 that the school would close, only 43 students were registered for the freshman class, and the school had a deficit of almost \$1 million.

Calling results of the parents' three-week effort "remarkable and commendable," Archbishop Whealon said, "How true it is that often we do not appreciate the good things we have, specifically Catholic education, until there is a danger of losing them."

In his May 9 announcement that the school would open next fall, Archbishop Whealon said he would not have reversed his earlier decision if he thought the school would survive only another year.

Part of keeping the school open involves the establishment of formal procedures for the archdiocese to inform parents about the financial situation of St. Paul's.

William Accousti, spokesman for the

parents' group, said the parents will continue to raise money for St. Paul's as part of their long-term financial commitment to the school.

An offer by faculty members to postpone for two years collecting salary raises was declined, the archbishop said, because during those years the budget would be unrealistic and would pose a burden when the raises begin.

Barbara Kaczmarczyk, a science teacher at St. Paul's, said the teachers made the offer because their commitment to the school always has been more than financial.

"We were near death and now we're back to life," said Gregory J. O'Connor, St. Paul's principal.

The Diocese of Pittsburgh announced the closing of two Washington County Catholic high schools — Immaculate Conception in Washington and Monongahela Valley Catholic in Monongahela.

Benedictine Father Douglas R. Nowicki, diocesan secretary of education, said the decision to discontinue diocesan operation of the schools is "final and irreversible."

But parents of Monongahela Valley students are trying to convince the diocese to lease the building to them and allow them to run a private Catholic school there.

"If they can put together a proposal, we would consider it," Father Nowicki said.

## 750 enroll at merged Washington school

WASHINGTON (NC) — Fall enrollment at the Archdiocese of Washington's Archbishop Carroll High School will be about 300 more than it was this year, with young women constituting almost 40 percent of the student body.

The archdiocese announced in February that because of rising costs and declining enrollments, it would consolidate the four archdiocesan high schools — two all-girls and two all-boys.

Daniel F. Curtin, president of the new Carroll high school and former archdiocesan secretary for Catholic education, said parents and students answering a survey last fall wanted the option of coeducational Catholic high schools.

Response to the change has been positive, he said. Forty to 50 of the students enrolled for next fall currently attend public schools.

Based on the number of applications

received by mid-April, the school expects a student body of 750, just short of capacity at the Carroll campus, Curtin said. The freshman class is expected to comprise 70 young men and 70 young women.

In addition to the four archdiocesan schools, two private all-girls' schools in the area are closing. All six schools have representatives on a transition team and curriculum committee.

Enrollment at the six schools for the 1988-89 school year totaled 1,169 with 443 at Carroll, 107 at All Saints, 110 at Holy Spirit, 194 at Mackin, 127 at Regina and 188 at Notre Dame.

Next fall's students at Carroll will use the Carroll campus as well as facilities at nearby All Saints.

The new school will offer some 80 classes and 72 sports or activities, far more than any of the six schools can now provide.

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