

THE BOSTON GLOBE

High marks

Amid closures, parochial school a triumph in Brockton

By Tania deLuzuriaga, Globe Staff | November 30, 2007

BROCKTON - When students walked through the doors of the new Trinity Catholic Academy this fall, they found science labs and music rooms. Lunch was eaten in a cafeteria, not a classroom, and recess was on a playground, not in a parking lot. There was more of everything than at the three parochial schools it replaced: computers, paper, even homework.

"We have music class and we play instruments," said Madjany Lamour, a seventh-grader at Trinity. "Before, we just sang."

Eleven months ago, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston said it would close Brockton's three long-struggling parish schools in June. Trinity opened in their place in September, infused with an unprecedented \$12 million in private donations that paid for the renovation of two buildings that now house the school for prekindergarteners through eighth-graders.

"Without this, there would have been a fading away of Catholic education," said the Rev. David O'Donnell, who oversaw one of the closed schools, Sacred Heart, as pastor of Christ the King Parish. "We decided to be proactive."

Church leaders have declared Brockton's effort a success and say they will use it as a model as they move ahead with plans to close two of the eight parish schools in Dorchester and Mattapan and turn five of the remaining into a regional system.

But the journey from floundering to flourishing in Brockton was at times painful as families faced losing schools that had stood for generations, and they struggled to come to terms with a new kind of Catholic education - one no longer run by clergy but that has brought enrollment increases, academic rigor, and more resources for extras such as art and music.

"We've got the bumps and bruises of any new thing," said Susan Holm, upper school principal, who formerly oversaw St. Casimir.

Brockton's Catholic grammar schools - St. Edward, Sacred Heart and St. Casimir, - had been around for more than half a century. Once havens for the city's working-class European immigrants, the schools more recently served immigrant families from Cape Verde and Haiti. The schools have struggled with dwindling enrollments and constant shortages of money.

Still, Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley's announcement in January that the archdiocese planned to close the schools and replace them with a new one run by professional educators instead of priests was met with apprehension.

Some parents worried that a school led by professional educators couldn't build their children's Catholic identity the way a school led by a priest would. Others questioned how the Lithuanian traditions at St. Casimir would meld with the French traditions at Sacred Heart. Teachers wondered whether they'd still have jobs.

"I was horrified, brought to tears," said Carla Silva, whose son Lucas attended St. Edward for six years.

Principals and priests urged parents not to dwell on the loss, but to focus on the future. With enrollment declining and bills mounting, Brockton's three Catholic schools faced dim futures, they said. St. Casimir wasn't likely to survive another year. St. Edward might have struggled on to June 2008.

"None of us were strong enough to survive on our own," said Pauline Labouliere, who was principal of St. Edward and now oversees prekindergarten through third grade. "We were in financial straits last year."

The archdiocese launched a fund-raising drive to pay for renovations at the new school, along with new textbooks, computers, new staff positions, and raises. The effort, spearheaded by businessman Jack Connors Jr., raised \$12 million from local families and businesses and ended the nearly continuous candy bar sales and bingo nights the schools had long relied on to scrape by.

In June, work started on the new school, housed in separate buildings a few miles apart. At one of the buildings, formerly St. Edward, what was once the balcony of the auditorium was turned into a cafeteria. An art room was added along with a computer lab. Religious statues, crucifixes, plaques, and other prized artifacts from each of the old schools were reinstalled at the new one so that "the children can see part of their past in their future," Holm said.

To revamp the school's academic program, the school's board hired former Brockton deputy superintendent Anthony Luizzi as the school's regional director and brought in education specialists from Stonehill College. The school day was reorganized to spend more time on math and English. A new science curriculum was developed. Parents have largely embraced the changes, seeing better educational opportunities for their children. Clergy have also praised it.

"From my side, it's much better that professional educators are running the school," said the Rev. James Flavin, pastor at St. Edith Stein, who was responsible for everything from fund-raising to fixing toilets as the head of St. Edward.

"Everything was under my auspices just because I was made pastor, not because I have any expertise running a school . . . This has allowed me to be a priest again." The changes have also rounded out a school system that has traditionally offered discipline and religion but has typically lagged in other areas.

"There was always a trade-off," O'Donnell said. "We didn't have a gym. We didn't have this or that. Now we can provide all that programming and at the same time provide a good, structured Catholic education."

Success has already shown in enrollments that rose after years of decline. The three schools had a combined enrollment of 466 at the end of last year. Trinity Catholic opened with 482 pupils, and some predict the school, with a maximum enrollment of 515, will have a waiting list next year. ■