

More Catholic schools closing Could add pressure to public districts

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Seven more Catholic schools in Bergen and Passaic counties will close for good by the end of this month, likely bumping up enrollment at some public schools already strained by state aid cuts.

"The timing is problematic," said John Richardson, superintendent of schools in Ridgefield Park, where the closing of St. Francis of Assisi School could send dozens more students to the borough's four public schools.

Ridgefield Park schools are grappling with a reduction of \$1.5 million in state aid for the next school year and just eliminated two elementary school teachers. Richardson said he expects that the majority of the 91 borough students who go to St. Francis will attend district schools in September.

The school is one of five slated for closure by the Archdiocese of Newark this month. Three are in Bergen County — St. Francis of Assisi, Our Lady of the Assumption School in Wood-Ridge and St. Joseph School in East Rutherford.

The Paterson Diocese is closing four schools in Passaic County. They include three elementary schools: St. Therese in Paterson, Our Lady Queen of Peace in West Milford and Our Lady of Mount Carmel/St. Nicholas in Passaic, which itself was a consolidation of two schools. Paterson Catholic High School also is closing.

In all, about 1,300 students will be affected in the two counties.

The school closings are the latest wave in a decades-old trend that has been hastened by a poor economy.

"Parishes are in the same economic situation that households are," said Jim Goodness, a spokesman for the Newark Archdiocese. "They can't afford [Catholic] schools. ... It's not just the diocese, it's the country."

Catholic school enrollment is down by 60 percent since its heyday in the early 1960s, according to the National Catholic Educational Association. In the past decade alone, more than 1,600 Catholic schools have closed and enrollment nationwide now stands at 2.1 million.

The Paterson Diocese, which covers Passaic, Morris and Sussex counties, has closed 16 elementary schools and two high schools in the past decade, said spokesman Richard Sokerka. In the Newark Archdiocese, covering Bergen, Essex, Hudson and Union counties, the number of schools has decreased from 176 to 120 in that time period, said Goodness.

When Assumption in Wood-Ridge closes, a kindergarten teacher will be losing her job for the third time, said Heather Muller, the school's principal. The teacher worked at two other schools in the archdiocese that also closed.

And parents suspect that more closings may be coming. "Like many other parents, you worry about the next school you're going to be closing also," said Marilyn Giancaspro, whose four children attend Assumption.

Next year, three of her children will enroll in Wood-Ridge public schools. Only her eldest, who is in seventh grade, will finish out elementary school in a nearby Catholic school.

“Most people can’t afford it to begin with, you have to budget, sacrifice, give up a lot,” said Giancaspro. “With four children, it’s just unaffordable, unfortunately.”

Tuition at Assumption is \$3,475, Muller said. Assumption’s enrollment has declined by 80 students in the past decade. The school now has 185 students in Grades pre-K to 8. Muller, who has been on the job for two years, had hoped to turn that around.

Giancaspro said her younger children will go from classes with 13 students or fewer to classes with perhaps double that number in public school.

Class sizes are expected to creep up in most districts in September due to the effects of the budget cuts. Even without private schools closing, the economy has led more families to opt out of private school in recent years. In Clifton last year, officials estimated that nearly 300 kids transferred into the district from private, mostly parochial, schools.

There may be continued instability for elementary enrollment at Catholic schools, but diocesan spokesmen say the remaining high schools appear in good shape. Paramus Catholic, the state’s largest private school, has more than 1,500 students and is expecting its largest freshman class next year, with 442 enrolled, said James Vail, the school’s president. The students come from 125 towns in five counties, with the most — nearly 140 — coming from Clifton.

The annual tuition is \$7,725. “It’s a great sacrifice that people make,” Vail said. “For most parents, tuition money is not discretionary.”

At De Paul Catholic High School in Wayne, tuition now tops \$9,800. The Rev. Mike Donovan, the school’s president, said scholarship money from the diocese will be available to aid the transition for 30 to 40 students who will be transferring from Paterson Catholic.

Enrollment is around 800 and the school is also starting an eighth grade to better prepare students coming from public schools, he said.

He and others are optimistic that Catholic schools can hang on through the latest economic downturn.

“We’ve got hope on a lot of fronts,” said Goodness. He cited pending legislation that would provide tax credits to companies that provide scholarships for students in districts with failing public schools who want to go to private school.

The measure is supported by Governor Christie’s administration and could channel hundreds of thousands of dollars to parochial schools. “People are beginning to understand that school choice is a very valid request of people in the state,” Goodness said. “And legislators see it’s going to cost the public more if Catholic schools continue to close.”

By the numbers

Catholic schools nationwide rely on subsidies from parishes and dioceses and fund raising to bridge the gap between tuition and costs.

Elementary school

Average tuition: \$3,383 Per-pupil cost: \$5,436

High school

Average tuition: \$8,182 Per-pupil cost: \$10,228

Public school per-pupil cost

New Jersey: \$13,835 United States: \$9,683

Note: Figures are averages from the 2009-10 school year.

Sources: National Association of Catholic Education, New Jersey Department of Education