

# Catholic schools spread the word

Catholic elementary schools aren't letting the bad economy prevent them from pulling out all the stops to recruit and retain students. Whether it's posting roadside billboards, hosting open houses or giving personalized tours, school leaders are doing what they can to spread the word about the value of Catholic education.

"I would say the most important thing is to start marketing on the inside first," said Sherry Mobley, director of advancement at St. Augustine School in Elkridge. "We really try to promote to our current school families."

Hosting monthly family dinners has been one of St. Augustine's most successful efforts at internal promotion, Mobley said. The dinners are fundraisers for the school, but their main purpose is to encourage a strong sense of community. Each of the all-you-can-eat buffets attracts at least 200 people.

"We try to hold events that show our families we appreciate them and value them," said Mobley, adding that when outsiders call and express interest in the school, they are invited to be guests at the dinners.

New this year, St. Augustine is giving \$500 referral fees to any current school families that refer a new family that enrolls a student for at least one year.

The school, which has an enrollment of 245 in grades pre-K-8, has also secured free billboard advertising through Clear Channel Media. Three billboards will be posted in Glen Burnie, Fort Meade and Elkridge.

Located in Howard County, where the public schools enjoy a strong reputation, Mobley said it's important for St. Augustine to highlight what makes it different. She noted that in addition to academic excellence, St. Augustine offers a strong Catholic identity and a character education program.

Maggie Dates, principal of St. Clare School in Essex, said her school is working hard to let more people know more about what it has to offer.

"We want to make sure people in the larger community are aware of the wonderful

community that is St. Clare's – both the school and the parish," Dates said.

The school has already revamped its Web site this summer and has begun sending brochures to non-Catholic churches. In the fall, it plans to reach out to alumni, daycare centers and people moving into the area.

"We want to increase enrollment, but we want to do it purposefully," said Dates, noting that there are 175 students in the pre-K-8 school. "We want to continue offering the quality programs we have and serve the students who are already invested here as well."

When Father Lou Martin, pastor, was recently appointed to lead St. Clare, he encouraged parishioners to do what they can to promote the school.

"I called upon them to help fill the seats," he said.

Like other schools, Immaculate Conception School in Towson hosts open houses and advertises in local newspapers. But Madeline Meaney, principal, said its best means of advertising is word of mouth. The school has 567 students – just short of its 575-student capacity.

"We have fabulous parents and they spread the word," she said.

When potential families call requesting a tour of the school, the principal or another administrator gives personal tours.

"I think that is critical," Meaney said. "Parents have to know we are there for them."