

Enrollment picking up at schools in Gulf Coast

WASHINGTON - Two years after Hurricane Katrina, Catholic schools and colleges in the Gulf Coast region are recovering, but enrollment figures have still not been restored to what they were prior to the storm.

At Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, which was severely damaged by floodwaters from the breached levees following Katrina, school officials anticipate for the 2007-08 school year an overall enrollment of 3,100 students, including students in the College of Pharmacy and graduate students.

Enrollment is still about 75 percent of the pre-Katrina total of 4,100 students.

Warren Bell Jr., Xavier's associate vice president for university and media relations, said he was encouraged by the 650 incoming freshman - 200 more students than last year's freshman class - but said the number was still short of the campus's record-setting 1,100 freshmen who arrived in August 2005 just two weeks before the hurricane.

Nearly all physical repairs have been completed on the campus. The university, which is run by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, also has locked in aid for future renovation and construction projects from a pledge in July of \$165 million in federal low-interest loans from the U.S. Department of Education.

Jesuit-run Loyola University in New Orleans, which was not physically damaged by the hurricane but was forced to close for the fall 2005 semester, did not have figures available for the 2007-08 school year, but has seen an overall loss in students since the hurricane.

Last year, the school's overall enrollment of 4,874 students was down almost 1,000 from the year before Katrina when the school had 5,748 students.

Kristine Lelong, director of public affairs for Loyola, said she expects enrollment to remain steady at the school and added that "the school has reached a level of stability in our overall enrollment and budget."

In the Archdiocese of New Orleans, the total Catholic school student population for the 2006-07 school year was 40,955. Pre-Katrina enrollment was approximately 49,000. The schools will not have an accurate student count for this school year until October.

For the last school year, 83 Catholic schools were functioning on 81 sites. This year 84 schools are opening on 82 sites. Prior to Katrina, there were 107 Catholic schools in the archdiocese.

In the Diocese of Biloxi, Miss., school enrollment figures have fluctuated since Hurricane Katrina. Prior to the storm, there were 4,117 students in the five high schools and 14 elementary schools in the diocese. At the end of the 2005-06 school year, the number of students was 3,862.

During the 2006-07 school year students initially numbered 3,938 and the figure jumped to 3,963 in January. Enrollment decreased slightly, to 3,948, at the end of May. After Katrina, the diocese closed and merged schools, bringing the total elementary school number to 10.

On Aug. 13, St. Patrick High School opened in Biloxi, merging two schools - Mercy Cross and St. John. Both Mercy Cross and St. John were aging schools in need of costly, extensive renovations prior to Katrina. During the hurricane, Mercy Cross was flooded with 15 feet of water.

When he announced construction of the new school, Biloxi Bishop Thomas J. Rodi said Biloxi Catholics are "determined to rebuild our churches, parish halls and schools ... and with the help of God we will rebuild."

For the 2007-08 school year, Mike Ladner, diocesan education superintendent, has projected an enrollment of 3,956 students.

Shirley Henderson, editor of the Biloxi Diocese's Gulf Pine Catholic and diocesan communications director, pointed out that the figures hardly tell the whole story of a diocese still in transition after the hurricane.

She said the numbers do not indicate schools destroyed by the storm nor do they show the perseverance of Catholic school officials, students and parents who kept Catholic schools going in tents, parish halls and a former skating rink immediately after Katrina.