

Families from Catholic Community School of South Baltimore look for new home

As she stood outside the gathering hall of the Catholic Community School of South Baltimore April 20, Anita Doda was feeling anxious.

It was time to find her children a new school. Inside the hall were representatives from 15 Catholic schools from around the Archdiocese of Baltimore standing at tables, armed with information packets. Some even brought the fundraising standard, World's Finest Chocolate bars.

The open house was held just two weeks after Catholic Community School leaders notified parents and staff that the school would close in June after 37 years of operation.

The goal of the evening was to offer Catholic school options to families.

Mrs. Doda, a mother of three Catholic Community School students, knew her challenge was large.

"To be honest, I'm not going to find a school like this," Mrs. Doda said. "I thought it was a community. Everybody knew everybody. It was loving and nurturing."

About 100 family members and students from the 165-student school attended the open house, hoping to find an educational setting for their children. The first urban cluster school in the archdiocese, Catholic Community School was the combined effort of St. Mary, Star of the Sea, Our Lady of Good Counsel and Holy Cross parishes.

Sister of St. Joseph Vicki Staub, the school's principal, addressed families inside the nearby St. Mary, Star of the Sea church before the open house, telling them "it's about the children."

Teachers at the Catholic Community School are using archdiocesan help to find employment for the fall as well.

One of the bittersweet beneficiaries of Catholic Community School's closing is St. Philip Neri in Linthicum. According to St. Philip Neri principal Shirley Wise, about 30 Catholic Community School students have already registered at her school.

St. Philip Neri currently has 389 students and anticipates being over 400 in the fall.

Catholic Community School and St. Philip campuses are 15 minutes apart. Despite the already-strong influx of new students, Ms. Wise had a table at the open house in the small hall.

"It's been a blessing to our school enrollment, but it's sad," Ms. Wise said. "A lot of those people are hurting."

Schools like Baltimore's Our Lady of Fatima, St. Augustine in Elkridge and Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Essex were among the 15 in attendance. Although each school was trying to attract new families, there was a common message among them.

"We're all here to help raise your children as good Catholic Christians for the future," Ms. Wise said.

Catholic Community School leaders anticipated less than 150 students in the fall.

Parents at the open house acknowledged that dwindling enrollment is a problem throughout the archdiocese. They wanted to find a sense of permanency for their children when choosing their next school.

"We're being prayerful that we make the right decision," Mrs. Doda said. "I think at all the Catholic schools you can get a quality education. I'm not worried about that at all. What I'm worried about is 'what is the best fit for our family?' "