

Refund guaranteed if students aren't reading

DETROIT – Our Lady of La Salette Catholic School in the Detroit suburb of Berkley is making a guarantee: First-graders will be reading at a second-grade level by the end of the year. If not, parents can ask for a full tuition refund.

It's an idea that came to principal Carol Smith while she was brainstorming for the coming school year.

Her first-grade class was looking a little small for the upcoming year, a bit of an oddity for a school with an enrollment of nearly 200 students in preschool through eighth grade. She believes her teachers are top-notch, and thought it would be a shame if more students weren't getting the benefit of a La Salette education.

"I thought, I had to get people's attention," Smith told The Michigan Catholic, Detroit's archdiocesan newspaper. Yearly tuition for a student who is not a parishioner is \$5,080.

There's no catch, but there is a commitment required. Parents must sign a contract promising to spend at least 15 minutes – a time recommended by most educators – reading with their child every day.

The first-grader must be new to the school, and he or she will take a test to make sure he or she is ready to learn and has no learning disabilities. At the end of the school year, the child will be given a standardized third-party test to be sure he or she is at a second-grade reading level. If not, parents may request a refund.

Smith, who said she hasn't heard of anyone else offering such a guarantee, said she was motivated partly by getting students learning to read early in their education – which sets the stage for the rest of their school years. "If they don't read, it impacts their whole education," she said.

The federal No Child Left Behind initiative mandates that each child is reading by the third grade.

Smith said there was concern about the guarantee from first-grade teacher Ann Kolley, other teachers and even parents, but she said no one will be held responsible if a child isn't reading by the end of the year.

She has confidence in all her teachers and in Kolley's method, which includes constant communication with parents. She said she considers the guarantee an

effort of the entire school.

"We have incredible teachers here," she said. "We have to keep teachers out of the school (during the summer) so we can wax the floors."

Smith said she had not gotten any takers as of early August, after sending out a letter to families in the school's ZIP code with young children. However, in the meantime, first-grade enrollment had nearly doubled from six - which caused her initial concern - to 11 students. To date, parents of the newly enrolled students have not asked for the guarantee.

"I want parents to feel they're secure in that investment," Smith said. "I'm very confident. I hope we do have some people take us up on it."