

Schools increase marketing techniques to combat enrollment drop

SACRAMENTO, Calif. - In dioceses throughout the nation, parents' unemployment is high and student enrollment in Catholic schools is down. But at St. Philomene School in Sacramento, people aren't wringing their hands. They're too busy making their Catholic school work.

Principal Debra Mosbrucker has committed her school to be the flagship for the Sacramento Diocese's public relations and marketing plan, an ambitious three-year program designed to attract and retain families in Catholic schools in the current economic climate.

"I could do all the things that I know how to do to increase enrollment, like host open houses for our school and parish community, pay for ads in newspapers, put up a big banner on the school," said Mosbrucker, who has 30 years of experience in Catholic education. "I needed new ideas to help us move beyond what we already knew," she told the Catholic Herald, diocesan newspaper.

St. Philomene is a commuter school with many of its families living outside parish boundaries and dropping off their kids at school on their way to work.

Many school parents have state jobs, she added, and those families are hard hit by furloughs that decrease their incomes by 15 percent, or by nearly one-third if both parents work for the state. Other school parents work in service industries such as plumbing or construction, or own their own businesses. Their family incomes have sharply diminished.

The circumstances that face St. Philomene School - declining enrollment and ongoing financial problems - face all 42 of the Catholic elementary schools in the Sacramento Diocese, both urban and rural, according to Dom Puglisi, superintendent of schools.

“We’ve had close to a 6 percent drop in enrollment in the diocese from last year to this, which about matches data from other dioceses in the country,” he said, “and the primary reason is economic.”

He confirmed that job loss and state furloughs have affected school enrollment. In the northern part of the diocese, charter schools also are having a major impact.

At St. Philomene School, Mosbrucker continues to do everything she can to help families, stretching her tuition assistance funds to cover an increasing number of requests and raising funds for more tuition assistance.

And she’s also turning to experts.

The diocesan school board this year created the Catholic schools marketing plan with the help of board members who are professional marketers and public relations experts in the community.

The school board’s marketing plan recommends specific foundational marketing activities, provides step-by-step instructions in reaching specific, targeted segments of the population rather than making blanket appeals, and offers “stepped-up attention to economic worries of parents, tackling how schools might try new ways to respond when tuition poses a significant barrier.”

“What I love about the plan is that people with expertise are advising us,” said Mosbrucker, who has already put the plan into motion.

She has identified all of the preschools, day care and child care centers in the ZIP code areas that her school serves, and is mobilizing a group of parent volunteers to hand-deliver fliers to those businesses, inviting parents to the school's open house and information night.

She has convened a school marketing committee, made up of parents from each grade, to help implement the school board's marketing plan. St. Philomene also has an inviting Web presence, with a completely redesigned Web site, courtesy of a current parent, as well as a Facebook fan page that is attracting recent alumni.