

Towson Catholic families look for new schools

Cynthia Jones wanted a sense of direction July 14.

The Abingdon resident learned only a week before that her daughter's high school, Towson Catholic, was closing.

She joined hundreds of school family members, students and alumni for a meeting and open house at the school. The night was equal parts venting and informational, as people sought answers for Towson Catholic's abrupt end while also looking for a new school for the rapidly-approaching 2009-10 year.

Fourteen Archdiocese of Baltimore high schools had representatives providing information about their institutions in Immaculate Conception's parish hall. All had come with the understanding they would take on the displaced students at Towson Catholic's tuition rate for at least one year.

"I'm just here," an exasperated Jones said. "I don't know what to do."

Her feelings of bewilderment were commonplace after Towson Catholic announced its closing July 7. School leaders cited a decline in enrollment of more than 80 students and a budget deficit of \$650,000 as the reason.

Jones, the mother of Brittany, a rising senior, listened to a talk by Mount Carmel principal Kathleen Sipes in Towson Catholic's cafeteria.

During the main meeting, in the auditorium, it was announced that Mount Carmel was ready to accept all of Towson Catholic's 38 upcoming seniors.

"I'm just trying to find her a school," Jones said. "It's hard going somewhere else for your senior year and trying to fit in."

The 230-student Mount Carmel is now the only co-ed high school in Baltimore County. Like Towson Catholic, Mount Carmel in Essex is run by a parish.

"We invited them to campus so they can gather as much information as possible," Sipes said. "We look at it like they can all stay together as one for their senior year at Mount Carmel."

Also represented were: Archbishop Curley, Archbishop Spalding, Cardinal Gibbons, Cristo Rey Jesuit, Institute of Notre Dame, Loyola Blakefield, Mercy, Maryvale Preparatory, Mount St. Joseph, Seton Keough, John Carroll, Catholic High of Baltimore and St. Frances Academy.

Representatives said they needed to provide a welcoming presence.

"I think all of us want the kids to know two things," said Barry J. Fitzpatrick, Mount St. Joseph's principal. "They are good people and how much we love them."

Many Towson Catholic students signed up for visits to those schools during the open house, while others had already registered at various schools.

Although his all-boys school has more than 1,000 students, Fitzpatrick said Mount St. Joseph was ready for more.

"We have some room in all grades," Fitzpatrick said.

Emotions ran high during the introductory meeting in the school auditorium. Those in attendance included Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden and Monsignor F. Dennis Tinder, pastor of Immaculate Conception, which ran Towson Catholic.

Many expressed outrage over the closing's timing. A lawsuit was filed July 14 in Baltimore County by two parents in an attempt to keep the school from closing.

After the open house, Towson Catholic supporters held a candlelight vigil wearing yellow and blue shirts, the colors of Towson Catholic. Chants of "Save T.C." rang out.

"It takes a long time to get over the pain," said Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent of Catholic schools, "but then the attention turns to finding the children a new school."