

Tucson diocese rescues schools in partnership with new Notre Dame program

By MEGAN SWEAS

Omar Pro Montañó looked into sending his daughter to Catholic school years ago, but he couldn't afford the then \$5,200 tuition at St. John the Evangelist Catholic School in Tucson.

"If I was financially set, it would have been a no-brainer," Pro Montañó said. "I would have gone with a little less to make sure she went."

But at that time, Pro Montañó was in school so that he could take care of his family. He is a barber and his wife is a prep cook, and money has always been tight for the family of five. Pro Montañó wants better for his kids. Amirah and her little brother, Omar, earned good grades in the public school. He and his wife keep them busy and out of trouble through sports and activities.

When Pro Montañó took his now sixth- and second-graders to catechism class last fall, he met a representative from St. John the Evangelist. The school, now a Notre Dame ACE Academy, had scholarships, Pro Montañó learned. The family could pay just \$100 a month to send their two school-age children to St. John. By December, Amirah and Omar had transferred

schools. In Catholic school, Pro Montañó said, "they actually get a good spiritual and educational background."

The Pro Montañós are not the only family to have gained access to Catholic schools in Tucson. St. John and two other schools are the first Notre Dame ACE Academies in the country. Launched in 2010 by the University of Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE), the experiment in Catholic education reform aims to sustain such education for low-income families.

In 2012, the program added two elementary schools in the St. Petersburg, Fla., diocese, and ACE is talking with other dioceses interested in replicating the initiative.

The beginning of Notre Dame ACE Academies in Tucson was providential, says Christian Dallavis, senior director of leadership programs at ACE. In the 2009-2010 school year, the Tucson diocese was on the verge of closing St. John the Evangelist and Santa Cruz Catholic School, both in South Tucson, a low-income neighborhood filled with Hispanic Catholics. St. John had fallen to 130 students. Classes had been consolidated, and teachers had taken a 10 percent pay cut to keep the schools open

for the rest of the year.

Sr. Rosa Maria Ruiz, a member of the Minim Daughters of Mary Immaculate and superintendent of Tucson Catholic schools, remembers Bishop Gerald Kicanas coming into her office and asking her who they could go to for help. She answered, "Why don't you call Fr. Scully?" — Holy Cross Fr. Timothy Scully, who oversees the Alliance for Catholic Education at Notre Dame. The diocese had been happy with the teachers that ACE sends to schools as a part of its two-year teacher-training program. ACE Consulting also helped Tucson develop a diocesan-wide curriculum.

'My philosophy with kids has always been never to underestimate what they can do.'

—Angelina Schmidt

Kicanas picked up the phone and called right from Ruiz's office.

In South Bend, Ind., meanwhile, Scully and the ACE staff were ready to launch a new comprehensive school reform program, inspired by a 2005 bishops' statement asking Catholic universities to do more for Catholic K-12 education. "We've been preparing teachers and principals for some time, but at the diocesan level and the school level, there were many more needs that weren't being adequately served," Dallavis explained. In other words, it was not enough for ACE to train teachers if the education system was falling

down around them.

For the new ACE Academies, they wanted to take over a cluster of grammar schools in a low-income neighborhood in a state with a school choice program. Just a week before Scully answered Kicanas' call, they had made a short list of potential dioceses — including Tucson. ACE, the diocese and the parishes decided they would launch the project at St. John, Santa Cruz and St. Ambrose schools.

Arizona's school choice program is crucial for the ACE schools. The primary challenge of Catholic schools serving low-income students is financial. Even when states have school choice programs, low-income parents may not know about them. With five types of scholarships and many student tuition organizations that funnel tax credit money to the schools, the Arizona system is difficult to navigate.

A key element of the ACE Academies model is helping schools and families access these funds. Pro Montañó was amazed how easy it was to get scholarship money. Dené Rankin, director of scholarships and development at St. John the Evangelist, walked him through the process.

Five years ago, St. John couldn't afford to hire someone like Rankin to help parents with scholarships. Today, they can't afford not to. The three ACE Academies in Tucson brought in \$2.9 million in tax credit scholarships for the 2013-14 school year. At 270 students, St. John's enrollment is near capacity.

A grant from the Walton Family Foundation

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Signs of hope for Catholic schools

With the help of philanthropists, educational leaders seek sustainable models

By MICHAEL SEAN WINTERS

It seems like not a month goes by that the Catholic community in the U.S. is not faced with headlines about another set of Catholic school closings. Ten school closings in Buffalo, N.Y., were announced in January and at least six schools in Chicago are slated to close. Last year, the New York archdiocese announced it would be closing 24 schools. The year before, 49 Catholic schools in Philadelphia were either closed or consolidated.

Against this grim backdrop, there are a few signs of hope, some of them in the unlikeliest of places. With the help of Catholic philanthropists who bring money and expertise to the table, some schools are becoming sustainable over the long term, even in the most challenging of socioeconomic circumstances.

Camden, N.J., is a city beset by urban poverty and all the social pathologies that follow in its wake: violence, malnutrition, crime and, of course, failing schools. When several Catholic schools appeared slated for the chopping block in 1997, Catholic businessman Robert Healey decided to do something about it. A successful entrepreneur, and a Catholic school alumnus, he established a public charity, the Healey Education Foundation.

Robert Healey brought more than cash to the table, his daughter Christine Healey told *NCR*. “When schools began closing, he wanted to find a sustainable model for them, a solution,” she said. “He was an entrepreneur.” The fruit did not fall far from the tree and Christine Healey now heads the foundation.

The foundation began funding scholarships but quickly realized that more was needed. “All schools were at risk, unsustainable on-scale, not just urban schools,” said Healey. “The thing to do was look at a diocesan approach. We needed a post-parochial model.” The immediate need, however, was to rescue the five inner-city schools, three of which were on the ropes.

The foundation met with Bishop



—Mariya Kalitina

First-graders pray at St. Anthony of Padua School, which belongs to Catholic Partnership Schools in Camden, N.J.

Joseph Galante, then head of the Camden diocese, and formed Catholic Partnership Schools, taking over the five inner-city schools: St. Anthony of Padua, Sacred Heart, St. Cecilia, St. Joseph Pro-Cathedral and Holy Name. The Healey Foundation held a meeting with 30 different foundations to discuss their experiences. Then they set about devising a new model.

“We needed quality education,” said Christine Healey. “Quality is the biggest driver for funding.”

Instead of being tied to a pastor’s preferences, all five schools now report to an executive director who is an educator, not a fundraiser. “We found Sr. Karen Dietrich, a Sister of St. Joseph,” Healey said. “She had a real heart for Catholic education and she is a rock star.”

Under Dietrich’s leadership, all five schools were fixed with wireless Internet access. A new testing model was introduced: The tests are adaptive and conducted three times a year. “The test allowed kids to see where they were and allowed us to measure growth,” Healey said. They profes-



—Kathryn Croskey

Christine Healey

sionalized the back office operations at the schools, saving money and improving record keeping, payroll, benefits and all the tasks lumped under the title “human resources.”

The management team for the Catholic Partnership Schools is funded by the Healey Education Foundation. The foundation also awards a \$25,000 matching grant to each school to hire its own development staffer, “to help teach the schools to fish. Instead of grants, we give them the capacity to raise money on their own,” Healey said.

She said that the faith component of Catholic education is vital in the minds of the community they are serving. Sixty-five percent of the student population is Latino and the church is a beacon of cultural familiarity in an otherwise new and strange environment. She notes that the bishop is on the board of the Catholic Partnership Schools, which functions as an arm of the diocese. All five inner-city schools are now outperforming the public and charter schools in the beleaguered city.

Healey also helped form a group “We Can Do Better New Jersey,” to continue to lobby for some kind of tuition tax credit assistance or other public help, without which urban schools will continue to face chal-

lenging times. “Only 18 percent of the budget comes from tuition,” Healey noted.

The model of success in Camden is replicable in other places, according to Healey. Recently, she met with Bishop John Barres of Allentown, Pa., and they are now working together to implement the model of school governance in that diocese. The diocese matched the money donated by the Healey Foundation: “Everybody has to have skin in the game,” Healey said. They crafted new bylaws and are seeking ways to empower the laity, developing methods of local control that nonetheless work closely with the bishop and the diocesan schools’ office.

Catholic education is, along with support for Catholic sisters, the largest affinity group among the Catholic philanthropists who belong to Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (FADICA). Healey co-chairs the affinity group on education. “The deep history of Catholic school as foundational to the church tugs on the heartstrings” of Catholic philanthropists, Healey said. “They now have the resources to help, not just the money, but the entrepreneurial experience.”

Wealthy Catholics are not the only ones stepping up to help save Catholic schools. The University of Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) represents a large institutional commitment to Catholic education on the part of the nation’s most iconic Catholic university. (See accompanying story on Page 4a.) “For over 20 years, ACE has been at the heart of the University of Notre Dame’s service to the church in the United States. By sustaining and strengthening Catholic schools, Notre Dame is investing in the future of the church and the nation,” said Holy Cross Fr. Bill Lies, vice president for mission engagement and church affairs at the school.

“Notre Dame has offered generous institutional support from the outset, most notably by offering dramatically reduced graduate tuition for our two degree programs but also through in-kind support of summer housing,” said John Staud, senior director of pastoral formation and administration at ACE. “Moreover, university leaders, faculty and administrators have always shown remarkable generosity to support the ACE mission in a variety of ways.” Staud notes that some donors to the university specifically give money to ACE because Catholic schools are so critical in forming the faith of the next generation.

“ACE’s focus on the underserved also appeals [to university donors] with its mission to follow Catholic social teaching and to advance the Gospel,” Staud said. Students at ACE studying for a master’s degree in education administration are taught how to work with the philanthropic community to develop a sustainable model for their schools.

[Michael Sean Winters writes the Distinctly Catholic blog at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic.]

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—Andrea Cisneros

Students at St. John the Evangelist in Tucson, Ariz., prepare for end-of-the-day prayer.

TUCSON: SUPPORT FROM SPECIALISTS

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dation supports the schools, but ACE aims to make them sustainable on their own. The grant covers the salaries of an advancement specialist and a teaching and learning specialist shared by the schools. After five years, tuition and tax credit scholarship revenue cover not only the schools' operations but also these additional supports.

Notre Dame ACE Academies also has

a governing board with ACE and diocesan officials, the pastors, and members of the community. The bishop and pastor technically lead a parish school, but the work of running the school generally falls to the principal. A board with experts in marketing, finance or education provides assistance to principals.

As principal of St. John, Keiran Roche says that the support that he receives from the specialists, the board and ACE are invaluable. A former ACE teacher in Mobile, Ala., Roche moved to Tucson to work at Santa Cruz Catholic School when it became an ACE Acad-

emy. He is now learning the ropes as principal through ACE's Mary Ann Remick Leadership Program.

In his first year as principal, Roche had to spend the majority of his time on finances. While that is still an essential part of his role, the stability brought by tax credit scholarships frees him to focus on being an instructional leader, he says.

The idea of ACE Academies is not just to help Catholic schools in low-income neighborhoods survive but also to help them become great schools. "It sometimes feels like money is the problem, but money alone is not the solution," Dallavis said. "It's really about leadership and school culture."

When Roche arrived in Tucson, he found that teachers were excited to be receiving the resources of a university like Notre Dame. ACE brought the teachers to South Bend for professional development that summer.

Still, some teachers were resentful: "They didn't want an outsider to come and tell them how to run the school," Ruiz said. Many were won over, and others decided to leave, but Dallavis emphasized that the school turnaround program is about giving teachers the tools and teaching strategies to be effective.

Teachers are regularly observed by their principal and Angelina Schmidt, the teaching and learning specialist. She travels between all three schools, plans professional development for 50 teachers, and works intensively with a smaller number of teachers. "Our teachers understand that our idea of constantly learning is for everyone.

It's not just for the kids," Schmidt said.

High expectations come naturally to students, she added. Last year, Schmidt's kindergarten class at St. Ambrose tested, on average, in the top 15 percent of the nation. "My philosophy with kids has always been never to underestimate what they can do," she said.

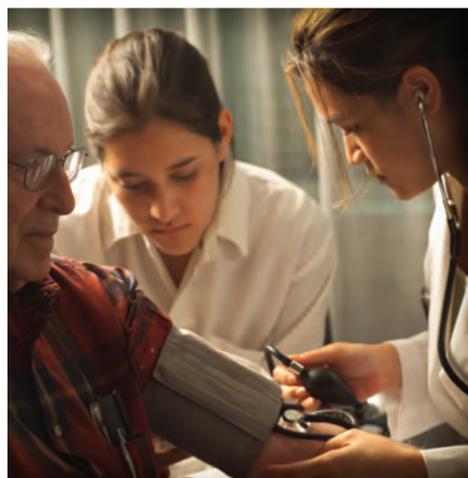
When the partnership began, third-graders at all three schools tested on average in the 34th percentile in reading and 20th percentile in math. By fifth grade, the same students scored in the 41st percentile in reading and the 47th percentile in math. Students who started at the ACE Academies — in kindergarten, first and second grade — test above national and diocesan averages. On average, they are reading in the 76th percentile and doing math in the 73rd percentile.

Pro Montaña appreciates his new school's academic programs. Teachers share with him how his children are doing and how he can help.

At public school, his son "thought he was the best, smartest student in the whole world," but now he has to work a lot harder for the same grades, Pro Montaña said. "I see much more improvement in them in these four months of schooling than I have in their whole school careers," he said of his kids.

St. John is "fun and hard at the same time," Amirah, his sixth-grade daughter, said. It's the hard parts that make school fun, she explained. "If it's challenging, I get to learn more."

[Megan Sweas is a freelance journalist based in Los Angeles.]



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