Garrett Mandeville (center), associate director of University of Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education Advocates, greets students of St. James the Apostle Catholic School after arriving to celebrate the school’s involvement in the university’s program.

Notre Dame Alliance tour cheers for Catholic schools

By Abe Levy
STAFF WRITER

Students from a South Side parish school rattled maracas and waved welcome signs as a tour bus from arguably the nation’s most iconic Catholic university rolled to a stop in the campus parking lot Tuesday.

Representatives from Notre Dame University’s Alliance for Catholic Education stepped off the bus as if they were rock stars, high-fiving their way through cheers and applause to the gymnasium at St. James the Apostle Catholic School for a pep-rally-style celebration.

Arriving on the heels of top leadership changes in the archdiocese’s school department, the tour’s motto, “Fighting for Our Children’s Future,” resonated with local officials mindful of their ongoing struggles to keep Catholic schools viable in poorer neighborhoods.

San Antonio is the 32nd city on the alliance’s 50-city tour marking its 20th anniversary of supporting Catholic education and encouraging campuses like St. James to keep up their presence in underserved communities.

“The message of our bus tour and (alliance) is that, yes, schools do close at times and face challenges, but Catholic schools are good for America,” said Drew Clary, assistant director of the Institute for Educational Initiatives at Notre Dame.

The Archdiocese of San Antonio and its 43 schools celebrated the tour with a Mass and art show at San Fernando Cathedral on Tuesday evening. The final event is at 9:30 a.m. Wednesday at Blessed Sacrament Catholic School on Oblate Drive.

Earlier this month, the archdiocesan superintendent of schools, Pattie Davis, resigned, and the archdiocese announced the disbanding of its Good Shepherd Network, created in 2010 to support campuses with severe financial and enrollment problems, mostly on the South Side.

The idea was for the network to manage member schools in place of parishes but two years ago, the network closed two schools in a merger plan it has since discontinued. Leaders at one of them, St. Philip of Jesus, are in talks to open a state-funded charter school affiliated with Brooks Academy, an arrangement that would require spiritual instruction to become an after-school option.

At least three urban parishes — St. Joseph, South San, St. Ann and St. John the Evangelist — have closed their schools and now lease space to charter school systems.

Archdiocesan leaders plan to support the network’s eight remaining schools but believe that returning management to local parishes will help keep their doors open.

St. James, which was in the Good Shepherd Network, is regarded as a success story.

In the past three years, its student population went from 214 to 294, said its principal, Sister Ignacia Carrillo. Scholarship funds from the archdiocese have helped offset tuition, she said, but fervor for the Catholic faith, committed families and parish help have been the major factors.

“Catholic education is still the best option,” Carrillo said. “Catholic education has produced quality students and done so without the support of public school systems. We’ve been very blessed.”

Adding to the celebration Tuesday was a group of parents cheering on their student body.

The bond between parish and school is key, said Arthur Campos, a parent and parishioner with a 4-year-old enrolled there.

He praised the alliance for providing a teacher on staff. The alliance has a program to supply teachers to poorer Catholic schools across the nation and has placed 32 of them in San Antonio schools since 2003. Currently, there are eight such teachers at six Catholic schools here.

“I think it’s sustainable — through community,” Campos said. “So when you have a good, strong parish community and a strong, school community working together, the collaboration is what makes it work. We all have a shared interest not only in faith formation but the future of our community.”

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