

Investing in youth

Business executives raise millions to help revive Hub's Catholic school system.

By Michael Paulson
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Enrollment in the Dorchester Catholic schools, which had been falling for years, is now rising as a result of a decision by affluent Catholic business leaders to invest tens of millions of dollars refurbishing the schools, the Archdiocese of Boston said yesterday.

A group of businesspeople, led by retired adman Jack Connors Jr., has raised \$25 million toward the \$67 million they are pledging to spend to consolidate, renovate, upgrade, and, in one instance, rebuild aging parish school buildings in Dorchester and Mattapan.

Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley and Mayor Thomas M. Menino, both of whom were educated in Catholic schools, yesterday led a group of church and civic leaders, as well as several dozen schoolchildren, in a groundbreaking ceremony for Pope John Paul II Catholic Academy, which is the new name given by the archdiocese for a regionalized Catholic school, with five campuses, that will replace seven parish schools in Dorchester and Mattapan.

"Change can be hard it can make people nervous but I think we are moving in the right direction, continuing to strengthen the neighborhoods of Dorchester," Menino said. The mayor said he believes the public schools of Boston are providing "quality education," but added, "I understand and respect the fact that people want and deserve choice." He also said, "These Catholic parishes play an important role in the neighborhood lives of our city."

The archdiocese says it already has 1,370 applicants for the five campuses of the Catholic academy, an increase from 1,290 students at the seven parish schools in existence today. The archdiocese says that 250 of the students who have signed up are new to the Catholic schools.

The five campuses will be located at the parishes of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta on Columbia Road, St. Angela in Mattapan Square, St. Ann in Neponset, St. Gregory in Lower Mills, and St. Mark in central Dorchester. Four of those campuses are in the same buildings

as existing parish schools; the campus on Columbia Road is not currently used as a school. The archdiocese is shuttering three schools, at St. Peter parish in Meetinghouse Hill and at the former parishes of St. Kevin in Uphams Corner and St. William in Savin Hill.

“I’m thrilled, and just hoping they follow through,” said Julie Murphy, 39, of Dorchester, who has three children at St. William’s this year who will attend school at the Columbia campus next year, joined by a fourth sibling. Murphy said administrators have promised multiple physical plant improvements: for example, the St. William’s building does not have a cafeteria, so the children eat at their desks; the renovated building they will study in next year will have a cafeteria with a hotlunch program and will be wired for more technology, and will have uptodate science and art facilities.

“Catholic schools must be the best to be competitive,” O’Malley said. “Technology, curriculum, classroom environments, support for our teachers are all factors in how we plan for the future in attracting students to our schools.”

The archdiocese says it is planning to rebuild the school at St. Mark’s, which it says will be the first new Catholic school constructed in Boston in at least 40 years.

The Dorchester reconfiguration is the most ambitious component to date of the archdiocese’s 2010 initiative, which is an effort to shore up the struggling Catholic schools of the region. The archdiocese previously regionalized the parish schools of Brockton and has agreed to assist a parish school in Gloucester; enrollments are rising as a result.

Saving the Catholic schools has become a priority for O’Malley. There are now just 99 Catholic elementary schools in the archdiocese, down from 250 in 1965, and the archdiocese continues to close several failing schools each year.

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