On a mission for Catholic schools

Overseeing 47 diocesan schools, Chris Pastura focuses on enrollment growth and expansion.

BY COLLEEN WRIGHT
Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — Right next to the bingo tent, with the rumble of carnival rides in the background, the bearded guy wearing glasses was grilling burgers and chatting it up with revelers at the annual St. Paul’s Catholic Church spring festival.

It was early March, and most of those milling around the food stand regarded Chris Pastura — still new to the area — as just another parishioner and volunteer. In time, they may get to know him for his higher-profile day job.

As the new superintendent of schools for the Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg, Pastura, 45, is busy setting a course for the mission he was hired to undertake: keep enrollment going up.

With one school year behind him, he is gearing up for a summer of crunching data to find which areas of the sprawling, five-county diocese are in need of an enrollment boost and where the diocese could expand.

Compared to Pinellas County schools’ 1 percent enrollment decrease over the past five years

» See CATHOLIC, 4A

and a simultaneous 2 percent drop in Catholic school enrollment nationwide, the St. Petersburg diocese has seen a growth rate of 0.3 percent since 2011. Much of that has been attributed to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program, a fast-growing voucherlike initiative that gives low-income families money to send their kids to private schools. The similarly designed McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities has contributed to the growth, as well.

“We’re bucking the national...”

» CONTINUED »
trend,” said Pastura, whose goal is to build on the recent years’ numbers.

The St. Petersburg diocese is the 53rd largest in the country in terms of enrollment at 126 dioceses with Catholic schools.

In September, the diocese hired Pastura away from the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, which has a network of Catholic schools in terms of enrollment. His charge was to strengthen enrollment and tighten fiscal responsibility and oversights.

Back in Cincinnati, his hometown, Pastura was an assistant superintendent and director of school strategic planning who was credited with saving a dozen schools on the verge of closing.

Since moving to St. Petersburg with his wife and two children, he has settled into a home within walking distance to diocesan headquarters on Ninth Avenue N near 66th Street. In August, his son will start his freshman year at St. Petri, his Catholic school, his daughter will enter third grade at St. Paul Catholic Church.

His office is fairly barren, save for a map of the diocese, his framed degrees from Xavier University and Notre Dame, and a nearly life-size statue of the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus that his cousin, a monsignor, left to him when he died.

Pastura says he has tried his best to visit all 47 schools under his jurisdiction, even making it up to Sarasota County’s Saint John Paul II Catholic School in Lecanto to celebrate the school’s 30th anniversary. But sometimes a school day is interrupted by crises.

“It’s really been a whirlwind,” he said. “Parent concerns, teacher concerns. ... You’re trying to address current issues while trying to do long-term planning.”

His predecessor, Alberto Vazquez, who left the diocese last year to become chief of staff for Hillsborough County public schools, can sympathize.

“As a superintendent, I would imagine Chris is facing challenges,” said Vazquez, who remembers doing what felt like the work of three or four people. “And at the same time trying to be visible at all the schools and travel around the diocese. It was easy to put 50,000 miles on a car all year because you were required to be present at as many sites as possible.”

Pastura is dealing with aging school infrastructure and has dreams of partnering with Catholic universities to help prolong students’ Catholic education through college. He wants to maintain educational quality by focusing on the standards of what kids really need to know rather than simply following trends, and by retaining teachers who spread the Gospel through word and deed.

“People will come if you’re doing some really good things,” he said. “If that’s marketing, then so be it.”

While enrollment is fairly healthy, demand for financial aid is on the rise.

As tuition rose almost 3 percent on average for Catholic schools across the diocese this past school year, 1,600 families applied for financial assistance. Help is available in the form of financial aid from the diocese or the parish connected to the school, or by applying for a state scholarship through a nonprofit organization such as Step Up for Students.

Step Up has two scholarships available: one with a sliding-scale family income threshold and another for students with special needs. For example, a household of four must make less than $4,050 a month to qualify for a full scholarship or less than $6,162 a month to qualify for a 50 percent scholarship.

For the coming school year, the income-based scholarships will pay up to $5,850 for tuition, books, transportation and other expenses. The money comes from corporations that donate to scholarship organizations like Step Up and receive state tax credits in return—a controversial setup that is being challenged in court.

One of every seven students with a Step Up scholarship was enrolled in a Catholic school this past school year, said Renee Stockelee, who oversees Catholic school initiatives for the program. And 18 percent of all students in Florida Catholic schools are enrolled in Step Up scholarships.

“That’s pretty huge,” she said. “There’s no other state that has that high of a percentage of students in Catholic schools on scholarship.”

In the Diocese of St. Petersburg, 11 to 12 percent of students use Step Up.

“And my guess is that’s going to keep growing,” Pastura said. “I think our schools have had to adjust.”

He added: “It’s definitely a game changer. It was in Ohio (which has a similar program), and it is here.”

Pastura said every school has a screening process with a parent interview, and parents whose children are eligible scholarships are still required to follow that school’s enrollment requirements such as volunteering.

“The one thing we don’t want to do is to accept a child that we feel we can’t take care of to the greatest degree possible,” he said. “And doing it anyway ‘would be a lie.’”

“Step Up has to serve our mission,” Pastura added. “And if it doesn’t, we have to step away from that.”

He said the scholarship program helps the diocese return to its mission of serving those in need, calling it “transformational for some families.”

Linda Hoagland and her sons are in that group.

Her son Tyler, who has played football since he was 4, was spotted by a coach at Clearwater Central Catholic High School who wanted to see him play in red and gold.

But as Tyler fell in love with the school and was accepted, McDonald didn’t want to know how she could afford the five-figure tuition for him and her younger son, Preston. She had quit her nursing job years ago to care for her mother, who lives in a nursing home, and worked on the support staff at Dunedin Highland Middle. Then an administrator at CCC told her the diocese could help with tuition, and a woman at the nursing home mentioned Step Up.

McDonald’s sons are now 17 and 15 and will start their senior and junior years at CCC in the fall with help from the diocese and the state scholarship program.

“They’re not just a place where underprivileged kids can go,” she said, raving about her son’s school. “They’re a place for a lot of families like me who have encountered a lot of difficulties in their lives where they accept you with open arms.”

That observation fits in neatly with the new superintendent’s plans.

Whether its providing an affordable, quality education or a charbroiled burger, “I always remember that my job is to be the servant of the servants,” Pastura said. “It’s a hard job, but a wonderful job.”