Catholic school enrollment grows

BY LOIS K. SOLOMON
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After five years of decline, enrollment in Diocese of Palm Beach Catholic schools is slowly rebounding, with steady growth recorded at many schools over the past two years.

Officials credit the improving economy, expanded scholarship opportunities and new technology that impresses parents.

"The economy hit and parents had to re-prioritize," said Vikki Delgado, principal of St. Vincent Ferrer Catholic School in Delray Beach. "It gave us the opportunity to revamp our program."

St. Vincent Ferrer's enrollment was 389 in 2007, but fell steadily throughout the recession, to a low of 245 in 2010, Delgado said. This year, enrollment surged to 329, forcing the school to add two portable classrooms.

Parent Lily Pantoja of Boynton Beach moved her daughter, Briana, 11, from public school to St. Vincent Ferrer last year. Step Up For Students, a state scholarship program, pays about $5,000 of the $6,400 tuition.

"It's been even better than I expected," Pantoja said. "I found the public schools were not teaching about God or ethics or morals."

Enrollment is also swelling at St. Jude Catholic School in Boca Raton. The school has 370 students this year, up from 355 last year and 329 the previous year, Principal

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Debbie Armstrong said.

Not all the diocese's 19 schools have experienced similar growth. But across the five-county diocese, which includes Palm Beach, Martin, St. Lucie, Indian River and Okeechobee counties, enrollment has grown modestly, to 6,914 this year, down from 8,000 in 2005 but up from about 6,000 in 2003, according to the diocese.

Gary Gelo, schools superintendent, said state scholarship programs such as Step Up For Students and Voluntary Prekindergarten, which subsidize private school education, have helped enrollment grow. He said 227 students got these scholarships last year, up from about 100 the previous year.

Across the country, dioceses closed schools during the recession. The Diocese of Palm Beach merged two schools, St. Juliana and Holy Name of Jesus in West Palm Beach, in spring 2012. Last May, the diocese announced the closing of St. Mark Catholic School in Boynton Beach, where enrollment had fallen from 225 to 126.

Some of those students helped boost numbers at schools this year. Pope John Paul II High School in Boca Raton has taken in 18 St. Mark's eighth-graders this year in a one-year program to help them transition to high school.

Pope John Paul has its largest ninth-grade class in seven years this year, 82 students, helping to bolster its numbers to 524, up from 488 last year, said Brother Dan Aubin, school president.

Aubin said parents have been impressed by the iPads given to all eighth- and ninth-graders this year; almost all textbooks are on the computer, he said. Bishop Gerald Barbarito offered $500,000 in matching grants to the schools last year to upgrade their technology. Each school met its goal, spokeswoman Diane Laubert said.

At Pope John Paul, $500,000 in financial aid and scholarships was offered this year, the highest in the past four years, Aubin said.

Still, tuition went up. Students whose families are Catholic church members paid $10,200 a $400 increase from last year.

"You do have to look at finances, but it was so important we made it a priority," said Christine Liggieri of Boca Raton, whose son, Joseph, the eldest of five, is a freshman at Pope John Paul. "We saw that it had the spiritual and academic qualities we were looking for, the great values and principles."