

Dwindling Catholic schools see future in Latino students

by [Aaron Schrank](#)

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LOS ANGELES (RNS) Martha Rodriguez always thought Catholic school was expensive and out of reach -- not a place for her kids. But when the time came to send her daughter to the same public middle school she'd struggled at decades earlier, Rodriguez decided to check out what the church had to offer.

"I was intimidated, I thought everyone there would be rich," said Rodriguez, the daughter of first-generation Mexican immigrants. "But when I went, I was surprised -- and kicking myself for not sending my kids sooner."

Rodriguez now spends \$800 a month to send two of her children to Catholic schools in Los Angeles. Her husband works as a paralegal, and she's out of work, so tuition cuts into the family budget. But Rodriguez says it's worth it to give her kids opportunities she never had.

In a survey by the conservative think tank Lexington Institute, the majority of Spanish-speaking churchgoers with children believed Catholic school was "elite" and unaffordable. For many, including the 28 percent of U.S. Latinos who live in poverty, it is.

But the Catholic school system is working to change those perceptions -- and it could be part of turning the troubled school system around.

As the country's fastest-growing population, Latinos now make up nearly 40 percent of all U.S. Catholics, but represent less than 14 percent of students at Catholic schools, according to the National Catholic Educational Association.

In the past decade, 16 percent of U.S. Catholic schools have closed, dropping from 8,114 to 6,841. Enrollment nationwide has declined 23 percent-driven by

competition from charter schools, fallout from the church's sex abuse scandals and changing demographics.

Catholic leaders now tout Latino outreach as one answer to the system's problems. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops called on its schools to increase Latino outreach in a 2005 statement. Since then, dioceses around the country -- including Boston, Cincinnati and Phoenix -- have launched initiatives.

At the forefront of this effort is the Catholic School Advantage campaign, organized by the University of Notre Dame. It aims to double the number of Latinos in Catholic schools nationwide. The campaign works closely with parish schools in cities with large Latino populations, including New York, San Antonio and Los Angeles.

"We've just taken it for granted that people will come," said Sylvia Armas-Abad, the program's Los Angeles field correspondent. "And at one point in our history, they did -- they ran to our doors. That's no longer how it is."

In some parts of the country, efforts to bring Latinos into Catholic classrooms involve making traditionally Anglo-Catholic schools more culturally accessible. In Los Angeles -- where the majority of Catholic schoolteachers and students are Latino and the Virgin of Guadalupe adorns most classrooms -- efforts are focused on persuading low-income parents that Catholic education is a worthwhile investment.

"Many in the immigrant population are just worried about the day-to-day," Armas-Abad said. "We don't have the luxury to explore anything beyond what our government offers us for free. We come in thinking that Catholic schools are elite and exclusive, because that's how they are in Latin America."

Armas-Abad's grass-roots outreach efforts include canvassing neighborhoods surrounding parish schools and forming parent volunteer groups -- called "madrinas" (Spanish for "godmothers") -- at schools around the city.

Rodriguez, the Los Angeles mother, shares her own experiences getting past the private school stigma with prospective parents as one of the leaders of Armas-Abad's "madrinas" at St. Teresa of Avila Catholic School in Los Angeles' Silver Lake neighborhood.

On a recent Sunday afternoon she stood outside Cristo Rey Catholic Church in Atwater Village, handing out fliers to parishioners -- mostly immigrants from northern Mexico. Most of the questions she fields are about money, she said. The average yearly cost of a Catholic elementary school education is \$3,673, according to the NCEA.

"They all ask, 'Can we really afford it?'" said Rodriguez. "'We're just making ends meet, what can we do?'"

Catholic schools boast smaller class sizes and higher graduation rates than their public school counterparts. While these advantages are appealing, the fact remains that many low-income Latinos can't afford to pay for them.

Catholic schools' Latino outreach is coupled with need-based scholarship assistance or grants from groups like the local Catholic Education Foundation, which gives \$1,000 tuition awards to Catholic elementary school students and \$2,000 to high school students. This school year, 83 percent of the scholarships offered by the foundation go to Latinos living within the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

Despite these efforts, Catholic schools are still struggling with enrollment. St. Teresa of Avila has 159 students, down from 290 a decade ago. This year, the school will receive a \$40,000 subsidy from the archdiocese -- largely from funds collected from the offering plates in wealthier churches.

"We're here to work with families that want to come to our school and want what we can offer them," said St. Teresa principal Christina Fernandez-Caso. "And what that is is a foundation, a step up."

Attracting low-income students isn't a quick fix for cash-strapped schools like St. Teresa, but might be a long-term solution for a school system that seeks to serve a new wave of immigrant Catholics whose financial power is increasing in the U.S.

Armas-Abad, who grew up in East Los Angeles and credits Catholic education with improving her life and those of her family members, says enrolling more Latinos in Catholic schools is a win-win.

"Catholic schools need the Latino community just as much as the Latino community needs Catholic schools," she said.