

Catholic schools still a draw

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A faith-based education is still a draw for families despite a grim economy and changing cultural values, the administrators of Stayton's two private Catholic schools say. The schools report consistent enrollment data despite those challenges.

The local trend reflects steady enrollment for Catholic schools in the West, according to the 2008-09 annual data report from the National Catholic Educational Association. But nationally, Catholic school enrollment is on the decline.

In 2003-04, there were 453,821 students enrolled in schools in the West/Far West region, compared to 434,176 students in 2008-09. Nationally, there were 2,484,252 students enrolled in Catholic schools in 2003-04; in 2008-09, 2,192,531.

At St. Mary Catholic School this year, total enrollment is 226. Last year, 220 students were enrolled at the K-8 school.

This year, total enrollment for Regis High School is 112 students. Last year that number was 157.

"Other than this dip in the cycle, we've been fairly consistent in the last five to seven years, with a little fluctuation," Regis principal Doug Ierardi said.

This year's freshman class is small at 17. Last year's numbered 30.

But Ierardi said smaller class sizes can be another selling point at a time when public schools nationwide are cutting staff and programs. Both schools have kept a full complement of staff, he said.

"We've taken kids on more field trips. We're able to offer more programs," Ierardi said.

This year's kindergarten class is 32, compared to last year's 20 students at St. Mary Catholic School, Principal Rick Schindler said.

At Regis High School parish-subsidized tuition this year is \$5,275 per student, a 2 percent increase from last year, Ierardi said.

"The year before that we froze tuition," Ierardi said. "Part of it is just an assessment of the economic climate of the community for the families. Obviously it's a source of revenue for the

school. Regis has a foundation that also supplies revenue for the high school, so that's just another income source that can help us control costs."

For St. Mary, tuition this year is \$3,225 per child.

"St. Mary has been lower than average with a 3 to 4 percent increase this year," Schindler said. "It's been pretty gradual since all the years I've been here."

There is also need-based financial assistance available for both schools, funded through donations.

A large part of income for the schools comes from tuition, at least 60 percent of the budget for each. Other revenue sources are fundraising, donations from individuals and churches and a Santiam Vicariate parish subsidy.

"We're always trying to find ways to watch costs and find alternate income streams such as grants," Ierardi said.

The economy has not influenced strategies to attract new students, administrators said.

"Certainly people in this area know the schools are here. Certainly it's a sacrifice financially for people and it's a really tough decision to make," Schindler said.

Many new St. Mary parents have been through the schools themselves, Schindler said. The school stays within the Santiam Vicariate for recruiting efforts.

Regis High School visits Catholic grade schools in Woodburn, Albany, Gervais and Stayton, Ierardi said. Last year high school representatives spoke at parishes in Mt. Angel, Silverton, Gervais, Woodburn and Albany.

"I think it's a constant effort of taking our message about the good things we're doing at these schools and how we try to help families raise their kids in the faith and help them prepare for college and the rest of their lives," Ierardi said.

Both administrators said families have been making things work, despite pressures on several fronts.

"If the family itself is in a good relationship, suddenly they find a way of making school a priority and making ends meet," Schindler said. "People will put their money to what's important."

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