

Threatened school finds big-name support

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St. Joseph School is a quarter of the way of reaching a \$1 million goal with the inclusion of donations from Attorney General Bob McDonnell and others.

McDonnell toured the school yesterday morning after hearing about the school's plight, which is garnering national attention in the wake of Pope Benedict XVI's visit to America and the release of a study on fiscally-struggling Catholic schools.

Upon arrival at the school, McDonnell announced his donation of \$1,000 along with \$20,000 from Thomas F. Farrell II, chairman, president and chief executive officer of Dominion, and other donations from McDonnell's staff.

"I'm very supportive of Catholic education," McDonnell, who attended Catholic schools in his youth, said. "You've been here 133 years. I'd like to see 133 more."

The school traces its history back to 1876 when it was founded by the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent DePaul. It was the first Catholic school to be certified by the Virginia Board of Education and maintains certification today through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Renovation work to parts of the school that date to 1916, and the rising costs of health insurance and fuel have hurt the school. It costs about \$7,000 per student for a year of education, but the in-parish tuition for one student at St. Joseph is \$3,517; the out-of-parish tuition for one student is \$6,216.

Additionally, the school is under capacity with 149 students in a building that can accommodate about 250 students.

Several years ago, the parish forgave a \$108,000 loan for the school, but continued to operate in a deficit. Last year, its debt totaled \$188,000, which rose to an estimated \$300,000 this year. The school

reached the point that the parish was forbidden from taking on any more debt.

On April 3, Bishop Francis Xavier DiLorenzo of the Catholic Diocese of Richmond told the school it must raise \$1 million by April 21 to remain open.

Since that announcement, parents, faculty, staff and members of the community have worked to raise the money. Outside the school is a banner that reads, "Please Help Save our School \$1,000,000 Drive by April 21, 2008." Inside, T-shirts that say "S.O.S. Save Our School by April 21" are displayed.

Also involved in the effort to raise money for the school are the students, who rank from Pre-K-3 through eighth grade.

Joshua Coover, 7, in Jean Marie Engelking's first-grade class, raised \$400 over the weekend with his sister.

His reason for helping out is simple: "I want to go here till eighth grade," he said.

In the past four years, said Annette Z. Parsons, chief school administrator for the diocese, three schools in the diocese have closed and each decision had been tough.

"I am part of a diocesan staff and we manage 25 schools and all of them are like children," Parsons said.

Although the goal of raising \$1 million seems like a daunting task, the number was chosen to ensure that the school can continue to be sustainable.

"The bishop has asked that this not be kind of a Band-Aid," Parsons said.

St. Joseph isn't the only Catholic school struggling with funding and enrollment issues. A recently-released national report, "Who Will Save America's Catholic Schools," by the Thomas Fordham Institute, stated that Catholic schools across the country have struggled with economics and drooping enrollments.

About 1,300 schools have shut their doors since 1990, mostly those in urban areas. As a result, 300,000 students have entered other private

or public school systems, which has cost taxpayers \$20 billion.

Parsons said that there are similar problems in the urban areas of the diocese and the diocese hopes to be proactive in this situation.

"Our city schools tend to have the greatest challenges," Parsons said. "We understand unless we do something to sustain the schools, then other schools will run the risk."

As McDonnell toured the school, the mail arrived at St. Joseph. More donations came in the mail along with other pledges of in-kind services.

Recently, an alumnus of the school offered a complete painting of the school by his company, said Ella Dickinson, a parent who is working with the fund raising effort.

Overall, the attention their efforts have received has surprised them.

"The whole thing is amazing," Dickinson said. "This has been a huge day for us."

Later in the day, McDonnell sent out an e-mail about the fund raising goal to keep St. Joseph's doors open.

"I know the last thing you want is another Catholic school to close," he said.

St. Joseph is accepting donations as cash, checks, stocks or annuities or in-kind services to the school. Donations will be logged and kept in a safety-deposit box. Should the school miss the goal, all gifts will be returned.

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