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St. Anthony's moves forward with fresh vision

BY CINDY LANDRUM | STAFF

IT'S NOT enough for St. Anthony's of Padua to provide an educational foundation that allows 94 percent of students – most from poor African-American families – who go through its pre-kindergarten through sixth-grade program to earn high school diplomas.

The church has started an outreach program that works with public middle school students so more of them graduate, too.

"We can't just be parallel to the public schools," said Fr. Patrick Tuttle, a Franciscan friar and St. Anthony's pastor. "We have to work with them."

So while the church is in the midst of a \$5 million capital campaign to build a new school to replace a crumbling schoolhouse on Gower Street that was built a half century ago, nearly a dozen parishioners are working in the church's year-old group mentoring program, PROPEL, or Promoting Respect, Opportunity and Purpose in Education and in Life.

The program identifies middle school students at risk of not graduating. Adult mentors from the church, ranging from 20-somethings to grandparents, will work with the students in a group through high school.

There are seven Hughes Middle students in the program. Another student started in the program last spring, but no longer participates because his family moved.

Students pledged to stay in school, study hard and work to earn their diplomas, said Pat Burns

Dillard, former Greenville County Schools deputy superintendent.

The program meets once a week, working on academics, character development and community service.

"We can't start at the high school level because it's too late," Dillard said. "The middle school years are so critical in terms of academic, social and personal development. If students are going to be successful in high school and that critical ninth grade year, their achievement in middle school matters a great deal."

Researchers have called the ninth grade a minefield for the most vulnerable students.

Failing the ninth grade increases the chances of a student dropping out of school exponentially.

African-American boys typically fare the worst of any demographic group.

In 2010, South Carolina's graduation rate was 72 percent. Sixty-eight percent of African-Americans graduated, while 65 percent of the state's poor children and 62 percent of its Hispanic children earned high school diplomas.

"Ninth grade is the year that so many children run into that wall," Dillard said.

Dillard said students in the program have already shown improved grades and decreased behavioral problems.

"I'm not saying it's where we need to be, but we are seeing progress. We're seeing them grow up a little bit. They're more mature and confident."

Dillard said the program is looking for adult mentors, who must undergo training.

"It's all about relationships," she said.



Greg Beckner / Staff

Father Patrick Tuttle, pastor of Saint Anthony's of Padua Catholic School, left talks with three year-old Martin Hellman in the hallway of the school while teacher Nakisha McKinney looks on.

"We're trying to build trust with the students and their families."

None of the students in the PROPEL program are former St. Anthony's students.

Tuttle said the school needs a new building because it will cost less than it would take to fix the current facility and bring it up to code.

The roof leaks in 26 places.

The plumbing and electrical systems have been patched together by volunteers.

The cinder block walls are dissolving. Installing a sprinkler system to bring the building up to current fire codes would cost \$800,000.

"It makes no sense to continue to pour that much money into this building," he said.

The administration building is an old trailer sitting on the front lawn of the school. Some classes are conducted in two portables from Donaldson Air Force base.

There's no room for the 100-student school to grow.

The two-story new school would give the school a gymnasium for the first time in 70 years, said Sister Catherine Noecker, principal.

It would also include a library and computer lab.

So far the church has raised \$3.4 million in cash and pledges.

"The parish alone can't provide a new school," Noecker said. "The new school will be built on the shoulders of a lot of people."

While the school is affiliated with the Catholic Church, just 4 percent of its 100 students are Catholic.

Tuition is \$2,400 a year, but Tuttle said most of the parents can't afford that and pay what little they can. The church has to come up with the balance and the rest of the \$3,200 it takes to educate each child.

"Our children surprise people," he said. "They have a strong sense of self and beauty."

Noecker said that while the building doesn't make the school, a new facility has been her dream since 1992.

"These children are worth a new school," she said.

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