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TUESDAY, MARCH 22, 2011

The Greenville News

GreenvilleOnline.com

A GANNETT COMPANY



Greenville,
South Carolina

FINAL EDITION

Old school dreams of new home



BART BOATWRIGHT / Staff

The Rev. Patrick Tuttle shows students at St. Anthony of Padua Catholic School in Greenville a model of the new school that is expected to begin construction in August.

St. Anthony of Padua has a building plan

School for low-income children excels in academics

By Ron Barnett

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Although they were both public school educators, Rogerice Thompson's parents wanted the best for their daughter, so they sent her to a newly built Catholic school on Gower Street.

That was back in the late 1950s, and even then, St. Anthony of Padua Catholic School had a reputation for high academic achievement.

"It was the stepping stone for allowing me to go on to the next level and achieve — a very important stepping stone," Thompson said.

More than a half-century later, Thompson is a federal judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals' First Circuit — and the cinderblock school building that she knew is crumbling.

Although it's still helping children from low-income families live up to their potential — at least 94 percent of the graduates of its

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■ Watch the video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=V53hcb3pub8&feature=player_embedded

■ Want to help? Go to <http://st-anthonycatholic.org/>

pre-K through sixth-grade program go on to graduate from high school, and more than half of those go on to college — the school is being held together on a

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shoestring and a prayer. "The walls are literally dissolving. The windows are broken. The roof has over 26 leaks in it," said the Rev. Patrick Tuttle, a Franciscan friar and pastor of the church and school a block off Academy Street on Greenville's Westside.

With costs of repairs outweighing the long-term benefit, the best solution,

he said, was a new vision for St. Anthony's.

The parish launched a campaign to raise money to build a new school and already has put together more than \$3.4 million, which will cover the cost of the construction, Tuttle said.

"This makes more sense for us to build a building that now meets code and to have a gymnasium for the first time in 70 years," he said.

But the school needs another \$1.6 million for operating costs to make the

transition over three years and is reaching out to the larger community for help.

St. Anthony's School and Church grew naturally out of St. Francis Hospital in 1939, when friars began holding prayer services with hospital workers in the downtown hospital's basement.

The first school was in a remodeled farmhouse on the same block where the school is now located. Before long, two Quonset huts were brought in from Donaldson Air Force Base and converted into class-

rooms.

The current school was built in 1956.

Over the years, conditions of the buildings deteriorated.

Installing a sprinkler system to bring the building up to fire codes would cost \$800,000 alone, Tuttle said.

"We have electrical systems that have been patched by volunteers, because the amount we charge for tuition to accommodate the poor and give them a quality education is very low," he said.

Annual tuition is \$2,400,

"but nobody ends up paying that," Tuttle said. "They pay what they can."

The new two-story school, which will include a gym and a state-of-the-art library, will be built on the same block with the current school, which will be used for parish meetings.

Although affiliated with the Catholic church, only 4 percent of St. Anthony's 100 students are Catholic. It's clear from seeing their eyes and hearing their voices as they gather around the friar in his brown habit, though, that they're get-

ting something more than academics here.

Thompson, who was appointed by President Obama and confirmed a year ago as the first black and the second female judge in her position, said the school shaped her in ways that prepared her for the kinds of decisions she now has to make.

"The nuns who were our instructors gave us a good educational background," she said. "But they also taught us discipline, independence, compassion and ethical values."