

Schools seek tools to boost Hispanic enrollment

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



By 2020, Latinos will make up the majority in the Catholic Church. In 2043, they will make up the majority in the United States.

The statistics, pulled from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the U.S. Census, are just one of the many truths learned by three Arkansas principals and staff who attended the Latino Enrollment Institute (LEI) at the University of Notre Dame June 26-29 to establish the institute's plan at their schools for recruitment and retention of Latino students.

"My concern is that there are other denominations that might be trying to get the Latino population to join" their church, despite many having a Catholic upbringing, said Kristy Dunn, principal at St. Theresa School in Little Rock. When that happens, "We lose Catholics. We lose a vibrant faith."

"If Catholic education is just for the rich, white kids, it's not Catholic education." Kristy Dunn, principal of St. Theresa School in Little Rock

The Latino Enrollment Institute began in 2012 through the Catholic School Advantage Campaign at Notre Dame in response to the fast-growing Latino population in the United States. LEI program director Manuel Fernandez said some schools over five years of the program have an average of 29 percent growth for Latino students, with many quadrupling enrollment.

This year, two institute sessions were held in June with 63 schools across 40 dioceses

participating. Schools with seats to fill and a large Latino population typically were chosen first, he said. Transportation, lodging, meals and materials were all provided. A \$500 total registration fee was required for the two to three participants from each school.

“The Catholic Church has been changing for decades, but Catholic schools have not been changing with it. Fifty-seven out of 100 Catholic children from ages zero to 10 are Latino and yet, Catholic schools have basically been ignoring that demographic for decades,” Fernandez said. “And so, many Catholic schools have been closing despite an emerging demographic ripe for recruitment to Catholic schools.”

The four-day program taught principals like Sharon Blentlinger, at Immaculate Conception School in Fort Smith, to reach out more to Latino families in the church and community.

“Catholic schools are for the elite where they came from in Latin America. That for me is a starting point,” she said of educating families on affordability. “I’m going to have a more direct approach to them, one on one. If they have a Hispanic cultural night, I need to go to the Hispanic cultural night.”

Mariella Araujo, director of Hispanic ministry for Immaculate Conception Church, attended LEI with Blentlinger and will help write and implement a plan for the school, which is 35 percent Hispanic.

Fernandez said Latinos who attend Catholic schools are 42 percent more likely to graduate from high school and are two and a half times more likely to graduate from college.

Dunn said St. Theresa has 150 students, with 70 percent Latino. In the 1990s, Dunn said the school had about 200 or more students and she hopes to get back to 180 or 200.

“If Catholic education is just for the rich, white kids, it’s not Catholic education,” she said.

Second-grade St. Theresa School teacher Amanda Williams said she learned not to expect students from another culture to immediately understand “advanced academic language.”

“I’ve had kids that come to us from a public school ... who got by just by being present. Our kids are not going to thrive and be successful unless they have that interaction. Kids who speak English build compassion for students coming in,” Williams said. “Just because they don’t speak English, doesn’t mean they don’t have anything to give.”

St. Vincent de Paul School in Rogers has a 10-percent Latino population, a vast difference from the church office’s estimation of 65 percent Latino parishioners, said principal Karla Thielemier, who attended LEI with the school’s Hispanic liaison Mariztella Salinas and pastor Msgr. David LeSieur. However, the school is “a melting pot” with eight languages.

“I came away with an understanding of what a madrina is in their culture,” translated as “godmother,” but also a respected leader in a local Latino community, Thielemier said. “If you make them feel comfortable, then they go out and reach out to their community to say, ‘hey this is an option to you.’”

Welcoming decorations, from signage in other languages to religious statues beyond Anglo traditions — like Our Lady of Guadalupe or Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception — are important.

“We want to create a tapestry of small flags to hang in our foyer to represent all our countries that are in our school,” Thielemier said.

LEI Design Team mentor principals will be in regular contact with the school principals and in February, participants will go to the Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale, Ariz., in preparation for the 2017-18 school year.

Salinas, originally from Nicaragua whose daughter attended St. Vincent de Paul, said multi-cultural visuals and celebrations will allow other nationalities to think, “this place is for me and my kids.”

“People think it’s going to be way too expensive to send their kids to a private Catholic school. Some have the resources but they feel they won’t fit in,” Salinas said. “... They’re not different than others. We’re all here for one purpose — a good education.”