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Catholic schools face more closings

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A shrinking pool of students in Western Pennsylvania could mean more school closings in the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh, officials warn.

The number of public and private school students in Allegheny County is expected to decrease from 160,000 to 142,000 over the next 10 years, said diocesan schools Superintendent Robert L. Paserba at a news conference Wednesday.

That could mean a loss of 3,000 or 4,000 students in diocesan and parish schools, said the Rev. Kris D. Stubna, diocesan secretary for education.

"Are all of our schools going to be able to continue with a 3,000- or 4,000-student decline? I don't think so," Stubna said. "That presents a significant challenge for all of us in the region."

Catholic schools have about 29,000 students this year -- about the same as last year. High school enrollments grew by about 100 students over last year,

while the number of elementary students dipped slightly, although officials didn't provide a number. In the mid-1960s, Stubna said, enrollment in Catholic schools peaked at about 120,000.

The declining enrollment is caused by an exodus of families from the region and because some families are unable to afford Catholic school tuition.

Even Butler County, which is growing, is expected to see Catholic school enrollment decline by the end of the decade. "There isn't one county in the region that's going to have an increase," Stubna said.

Paserba said Catholic schools are trying to maintain enrollment by offering kindergarten through eighth grade programs and by keeping tuition hikes moderate.

Tuition for families with only one child enrolled in kindergarten through the eighth grade rose from an average of \$2,350 last year to \$2,550 this year. High school tuition rose from \$6,300 to \$6,400.

Stubna said it's necessary to aggressively market the academic success of local Catholic schools.

Five of them were ranked among the top 50 Catholic high schools in America by the Catholic High School Honor Roll, a project of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, a faith-based educational think tank in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Making the top 50 were Oakland Catholic, Seton LaSalle in Mt. Lebanon, Quigley Catholic in Baden, Beaver County, Aquinas Academy in Hampton and Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in Moon.

The diocese has 12 high schools and 104 elementary schools. Of those, four high schools and 18 elementary schools are in Pittsburgh.

The diocese of Pittsburgh covers Allegheny, Beaver, Butler, Greene, Lawrence and Washington counties. There are no Catholic schools in Greene County.

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