

# 'Padrinos' encourage more Hispanic families to enroll their children in Catholic schools

By Julio Rangel  
CATOLICO

For years, the vast majority of Hispanic Catholics sent their children to local public schools while seats in nearby Catholic schools went unfilled, but a program that encourages Hispanic parents who do have their children in Catholic schools to share their experiences with others is starting to bear fruit.

The Catholic School Advantage program, a collaboration between the Archdiocese of Chicago and the University of Notre Dame, trains parents — called “padrinos” (godfathers) and “madrinas” (godmothers) — to spread the word about the differences between public, private and parochial schools, and why they think parochial schools are a good choice.

The program's goal is to promote Catholic schools within the Hispanic community and increase enrollment of this group within the system.

The most frequent obstacle is a fear that Catholic schools are too expensive, said Juana Sanchez, a consultant with Catholic School Advantage.

“The parents who have children in Catholic schools are our best allies by sharing their personal experiences with other parents who think they can't because it's too expensive,” Sanchez said. “The schools in many cases offer scholarships.”

## Started in 15 schools

The Archdiocese of Chicago started the program in 15 schools last year, but saw results across the archdiocese. In the 2011-12 academic year the number of Hispanic students increased from 11,618, or 18.7 percent of the total student population, to 11,796, or 19.1 percent of the total student population, a net increase of 178 Hispanic students. The 15 schools in the program had a net increase of 37 Hispanic students.

Results for the 2012-13 academic school year, which incorporated an additional 13 schools into the program, will be released in October.

The CSA program emerged as a result of a January 2010 study published by Notre Dame that found: “Only 3 percent of Hispanic families enroll their children in Catholic schools. At the same time, there are almost 700,000 empty seats in Catholic schools throughout the country,



In January third-graders Jennifer Lopez and Hanna Mahmoud color in an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe they drew as part of a project on different ethnic “Marys” at St. Colette School in Rolling Meadows. St. Colette was one of 15 schools to participate in the Catholic Schools Advantage program, a collaboration between the archdiocese and the University of Notre Dame. Karen Callaway/Catholic New World

which represents an enormous opportunity to provide an educational alternative to the Hispanic community.”

This study also found that Hispanic students who were enrolled in Catholic schools were 42 percent more likely to graduate from high school and two and a half more times more likely to graduate from a college or university than other students enrolled in public schools.

## Influencing parents

The program includes a number of diverse strategies, based largely on direct contact.

“We know that our greatest asset is to have a parent who knows the value of a Catholic school education and it can influence other parents to recognize that value,” said Sanchez. “It's precisely in that aspect where we have had our best outcome, where those same parents take the initiative to say ‘I am happy with the Catholic school, my child is doing extremely well, and I want to share this advantage with other parents.’”

Based on this sentiment, it is those same parents who share their experiences during or after all the Masses or at the park, throughout the community.

The parents who actively campaign for the success of this program receive training to help them talk to other parents in their communities. Such initiatives have generated an increased enrollment of Hispanic children.

“Some parents don't know the difference between a public school, a private school and a Catholic school,” said Sanchez, who added that the “padrinos” and “madrinas” share with parents who then share what they learned with other parents. “This is how it goes all the way down the line,” she said. “The key message is: Don't miss your opportunity to ask questions to know more about what a Catholic school education is all about.”

The CSA program has been implemented in 250 Catholic schools, from the Diocese of Brooklyn as well as the Archdioceses of Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and San Antonio.

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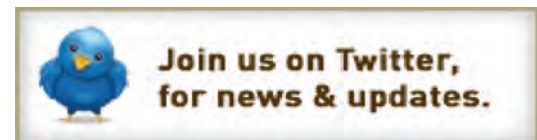
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