News



San Antonio Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller talks with children as President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden attend Mass at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, as they try to offer comfort to a city gripped by grief and anger after a school shooting May 29 in Uvalde, Texas. (AP/Evan Vucci)

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Catholic Extension, a grant-giving nonprofit that finances impoverished parishes, announced it has endowed 30 full scholarships for students wounded in the Robb Elementary School mass shooting. These funds will allow students to attend Sacred Heart Catholic School for multiple years, according to a statement from the Chicago-based organization.

The announcement Aug. 15 comes as the school year begins for SHCS and three months after the shooting at Robb Elementary on May 24 killed 19 children and two adults.

Uvalde, a town of approximately 15,000, is in the Texas Hill Country about 50 miles east of the border separating Mexico and the United States. The town, which is 78% Hispanic, has a close-knit Catholic community, according to Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller, whose San Antonio Diocese includes Uvalde. García-Siller was "delighted" to learn of the monetary gift to students, he told Religion News Service in an email.

"I know that this financial commitment will help provide a top-notch education, along with accompanying these children and their families pastorally as we move forward in hope," García-Siller said. "We are offering our students love and hope for the future."

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Catholic Extension said about 80 Robb Elementary families are attempting to transfer their children to Sacred Heart Catholic School. The number would represent a significant exodus of Robb Elementary's 538 student enrollment. The nonprofit said that it is seeking assistance via donations to meet the demand and that scholarships are determined by financial need and extenuating injuries due to the shooting. At SHCS, annual tuition costs around $4,000 per student, and total tuition

through sixth grade, including book costs and technology fees, is $33,590.

"The tuition assistance means everything to my son and our family," said Oscar Orona, the father of a Robb Elementary shooting survivor, in a statement. "My son has gone through a lot and still has a long road to recovery ahead. At the very least, he deserves to go to a school where he feels safe."

More than a century ago, Uvalde was one of the first communities Catholic Extension supported, helping build Sacred Heart Church in 1906 and Sacred Heart Catholic School in 1912. Today, Catholic Extension supports 1,400 church communities in rural Texas.

The Catholic Church's response in Uvalde has been key to starting the healing process in Uvalde, said Joe Boland, vice president of missions at Catholic Extension.

Boland visited SHCS on Aug. 15, its first day back in session. There, he witnessed an "icebreaker" exercise in which the Robb Elementary transfers, now fifth graders, introduced themselves, including one student who was shot when his teacher was trying to shield him. The teacher was killed.

"Everybody was a bit nervous but so happy to be taking that first step back into school," Boland told RNS.



Flowers are piled around crosses with the names of the victims killed in a school shooting as people visit a memorial at Robb Elementary School to pay their respects May 31 in Uvalde, Texas. (AP/Jae C. Hong)

Read this next: Catholic Extension launches program for Uvalde children in wake of shooting

Beyond granting scholarships for Uvalde families, Catholic Extension will support six sisters so they can provide onsite emotional assistance during the first week of school at SHCS. Throughout the next 18 months, 100 Catholic Extension volunteers will serve the Catholic community in Uvalde, according to the organization.

In years past, the private school enrolled approximately 100 students. To provide a sense of security for the new influx of SHCS students, principal Joseph Olan published a planned outline for the 2022-2023 year. The new measures listed include a full-time emotional support guidance campus counselor. The school also installed 8-foot steel fences and ballistic grade windows and doors.

The coming school year may evoke intense emotions for Uvalde Catholics but has the potential to transform the community into a "new identity," said García-Siller.

"My hope and prayer for Uvalde as the school year begins is that we move forward in faith and hope, trusting in God and experiencing the joy of welcoming," said García-Siller.