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Campaign aims to increase number of Hispanics in Catholic schools

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Children attend first Communion class at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Nashville, Tenn. On Dec. 12, Bishop David Choby dedicated Our Lady of Guadalupe as the 52nd parish in the Nashville diocese. (CNS/Tennessee Register/Theresa Laurence)

SOUTH BEND, IND. -- A campaign launched last month to enroll 1 million Hispanic students in Catholic schools by 2020 is ?a challenge to the church to get the word out and spread the good news in the Hispanic community,? said the chairman of the U.S. bishops? education committee.

?As in the past, Catholic schools are a gift to the Catholic immigrants to America. We rejoice in and celebrate that fact,? Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. Curry of Los Angeles, head of the Committee on Catholic Education, said in a Dec. 15 statement.

The Catholic School Advantage campaign comes out of a 65-page report released Dec. 12 by a task force commissioned by the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. The report is titled ?To Nurture the Soul of a Nation: Latino Families, Catholic Schools and Educational Opportunity.?

The day of its release also was the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of the Americas, to whom Hispanics have a special devotion.

?The message of Our Lady of Guadalupe, that culture is enlivened by faith, challenges us to open for Latino children the rich opportunity of a Catholic school education,? said Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, Calif., chairman of U.S. bishops? Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church.

Soto and Jesuit Fr. Allan Figueroa Deck, executive director of the bishops? Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church, also issued statements Dec. 15. Deck, a member of the task force, said the Catholic school initiative posed an important challenge to Catholic education in the United States.

A key finding of the report showed that while more than 75 percent of Latinos in the United States are Catholic, only 3 percent of Latino children currently attend Catholic schools while public schools across the country have seen a rapid growth in the number of Hispanics.

The report also said public schools have not served Latino students well, saying they are behind their peers on most measures of educational achievement. According to the report, Latino students fare much better at Catholic schools, where they are 42 percent more likely to graduate from high school and two and a half times more likely to graduate from college than peers who attend public schools.

?Much is at stake. No less than the future generation of leaders for our country,? task force co-chair Juliet Garcia, president of the University of Texas at Brownsville, said in a statement. ?Catholic schools must remain a steady and strong conduit for the many new generations of Latinos at their doorstep.?

To improve education outcomes for more Latino children, the task force seeks to double that 3 percent in Catholic schools to 6 percent -- from 290,000 to 1 million -- in the next decade.

The task force was established one year ago by Holy Cross Fr. John I. Jenkins, president of Notre Dame. It is co-chaired by Holy Cross Fr. Joseph Corpora, director of university-school partnerships for Notre Dame?s Alliance for Catholic Education.

The task force includes more than 50 national leaders representing the Latino community, the Catholic church, academia, government, business, philanthropy, and elementary and secondary education.

For some members of the task force, the connection to Catholic education is deeply personal. Former Undersecretary of Education Sara Martinez Tucker said her years at Catholic school ?changed the trajectory? of her life and she wants ?all Hispanic children to have that chance.?

?The Latino presence, more than any other factor, offers Catholic education the opportunity to renew itself and face the vexing challenges of the 21st century. We are being presented with a fundamental choice that we ignore at our peril,? said Deck.
Two programs at Notre Dame will support the campaign: the university?s Latino Institute for Studies and the Alliance for Catholic Education, known as ACE, which places college graduates as volunteer teachers in Catholic schools.

University officials said Notre Dame hopes to forge partnerships with dioceses to implement recommendations to boost enrollment in Catholic schools.

According to the announcement on the campaign, the Chicago archdiocese has agreed to join the campaign and discussions are under way with five other dioceses that serve large Hispanic populations. The campaign will be led by Corpora, a former pastor with nearly 20 years? experience in parishes and schools serving Latino communities.

The task force spent the past year conducting research and developing recommendations for schools, dioceses, church leaders, the philanthropic community, civic organizations, policymakers and institutions of higher education. The research ultimately provides a road map for getting more Latino students in Catholic schools.

Financial obstacles are just one barrier, the report said. Other barriers include a lack of information about Catholic schools and a lack of a cultural or leadership connection between the Latino community and schools that lack Latino teachers, principals and board members.

The task force recommended several steps to reduce barriers, starting with stepped-up recruitment efforts through, for example, school functions that reach out to Latino families. It also recommends renewed efforts to make schools more affordable through scholarships or voucher initiatives.

It also urged universities, schools and dioceses to prepare principals to transform their schools to better serve Latino children and create culturally responsive school environments.

The report concluded by noting that addressing what keeps Latino students from attending Catholic schools will ?eliminate the achievement gap for millions of children and families, while addressing the enrollment gap that plagues urban Catholic schools. Latino families will benefit from improved educational opportunities and the Catholic school system will be revitalized,? it said.

On the Web
A copy of the report is available at catholicschooladvantage.nd.edu [1].

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[1] http://catholicschooladvantage.nd.edu