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Big Shoulders Fund lifts up hurting Catholic schools 11 in Chicago get help to stay open for year

By Margaret Ramirez
Tribune religion reporter

Private donors have pledged \$1.4 million to help 11 struggling Roman Catholic schools in poor Chicago neighborhoods survive another year.

The money comes from the Big Shoulders Fund, a non-profit organization that supports Catholic schools with private contributions.

Fund officials noted Tuesday that for the first time in 10 years, no Catholic school in Chicago is being closed or consolidated at the end of the school year. In 2005 the Chicago archdiocese shut 18 elementary schools, most in working-class black and Latino neighborhoods.

Archdiocese officials announced last month that they planned to shutter just one elementary school--St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr in suburban Posen--and credited the Big Shoulders Fund with helping to prevent more closures.

A year with no school closings is a victory for city families looking for a Catholic education, said Big Shoulders executive director Joshua Hale.

"Working in conjunction with the archdiocese, we are holding the line to ensure that inner-city youth have access to a tier-one, Catholic school experience, especially for those who otherwise would not have such an opportunity," he said.

The Big Shoulders Fund, formed by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in 1986, assists Catholic schools in the city with scholarships, capital improvements and operating support.

Michael Hughes, principal of Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic School in South Chicago, said a \$200,000 pledge from Big Shoulders saved the school from closing. "The fact that an outside organization believes so much in the opportunity for a quality education for all is very empowering," Hughes said.

Of the 136 Catholic schools operating in the city, 93 receive financial support from the Big Shoulders Fund. More than 25,000 children are enrolled in schools supported by the fund.