

CHICAGO – August 8, 2007 – In a few short weeks students around the city will be heading back to school as the summer winds down. But many families also have an important decision to make before their child even sets foot on a bus: where to send their children to school. For the parents of nearly 98,225 Chicago students, that decision is to send their child to a Catholic school.

Who considers sending their child to a Catholic school?

- Parents looking for a viable alternative to their neighborhood public school
- Parents with students on a long waiting list for a charter school
- Working parents who are looking for schools that also may offer before and after school programming.

Still, many see barriers to sending their students to a non-public school, including financial concerns. “There is a wealth of information about scholarships for students looking to attend a Catholic school who perhaps cannot afford the cost of tuition,” said Josh Hale, Executive Director of the Big Shoulders Fund. “Our organization alone provides approximately \$3.1 million to fund over 3,500 in scholarships annually to Catholic school in Chicago. Many schools also have scholarship programs.”

Another common barrier is uncertainty about religious requirements. Big Shoulders Fund, who supports 93 of Chicago’s inner-city Catholic schools, reports that some thirty percent of students who attend Catholic schools aren’t themselves Catholic. In some schools, as many as 85 percent of students are on non-Catholic faiths. Hale said, “It may surprise people to know that you don’t need to be Catholic to attend Catholic school, but these schools are there to support the diverse group of students within their communities. For over 25,000 in the Big Shoulders Fund supported schools, a values-based, high quality education is the right answer.”

Across the country, however, Catholic schools are having to shutter their doors due to declining enrollment and support. A report by the National Catholic Education Association in April found that enrollment figures for Catholic schools in the 2006-2007 academic year declined significantly, especially in large urban areas. In addition, 36 new schools opened whereas 212 consolidated or closed. But in Chicago, Catholic schools can be found in every Chicago neighborhood. For the first time in 45 years, all 217 Catholic elementary schools in Cook and Lake counties will remain open for the 2007-2008 school year, with no closings or consolidations. Hale’s organization provided a special grant of \$2 million to help keep the 93 schools it supports open.

“I know many parents who would move out of this neighborhood if this school wasn’t here,” said Michael Hughes, Principal of Our Lady of Guadalupe. “The education these students receive, combined with the safe and caring environment in which they receive that education, makes for a productive and bright future for these children.”

St. Ann, a Catholic school in Chicago’s Pilsen community for more than a century, today serves nearly 200 students, 94 percent of whom qualify for the federal free or reduced price lunch program. In recent years, St. Ann has taken on important partnerships to foster a bright future for its students.

“We develop very personal relationships with the generous people who help support inner-city Catholic schools,” said Benny Morten, principal at St. Ann. “They are committed to the mission of the school, providing the support and resources we need to

move forward in education and letting our students grow in a safe, secure, Catholic learning environment.”

For more information about Catholic education or to register for the 2007-2008 school year, contact your local Catholic school, visit www.bigshouldersfund.org, or call (312) 203-7013.