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'Blended technology' curriculum holds hope for inner-city parish schools

Dan Morris-Young | May. 16, 2012 NCR Today

Seattle's St. Therese Catholic School will hug cutting-edge technology, alter its name and open its 2012-2013 academic year with a mission of reversing a half-dozen years of decline and becoming a financial and educational model for other parish-affiliated inner-city schools across the country.

The venture is being underwritten by half a million dollars in donations -- including $300,000 from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation -- and guidance from Seton Education Partners, according to a recent story in *The Catholic Northwest Progress*, the Seattle archdiocese's newspaper.

When it opens as St. Therese Catholic Academy in the fall, the school will become the second West Coast Catholic elementary school to adopt a "blended technology" educational model and partner with Seton, "an organization dedicated to supporting inner-city Catholic schools," wrote *The Progress*' Kevin Birnbaum.

The first was Mission Dolores Academy in San Francisco, which adopted the new model last year and has reported significant success.

"In blended technology schools, students spend part of the school day on laptops receiving online instruction," Birnbaum explained, adding: "St. Therese applied for the opportunity with the support of the Fulcrum Foundation and was selected from among schools around the country."

Other elements of the upcoming educational venture include:

- Extending the school year by several days;
- Adding half an hour to the school day;
- Providing every student in grades five through eight with a laptop computer, and a laptop for every two students in lower grades.

An estimated 30 to 50 percent of student instruction will take place online, allowing teachers more time with individual students and small groups, St. Therese Principal Theresa Hagemann told Birnbaum.

"For instance, a teacher might divide the class into thirds and teach one small group while the other two groups

work online or on independent projects," Birnbaum reported.

"This is a really exciting opportunity for the school," which was founded in 1927 in Seattle's Madrona neighborhood, Hagemann told *NCR*. "The kids, the parents and the teachers are very excited."

One of the reasons for St. Therese's selection, she said, was that it is parish-based -- moreso than Mission Dolores Academy in San Francisco, which emerged from the closing of Mission Dolores School and a merger with Megan Furth Academy.

The San Francisco Archdiocese administers the new school. Its creation involved the displacement of many faculty and a rupture with a venerated history, something not anticipated for St. Therese Academy.

Seton officials "wanted to come up with a model of education in inner-city Catholic schools -- with so many Catholic inner-city schools having closed across the country -- that can serve as a model that can be duplicated across the country," Hagemann said.

There will be challenges, she added, including a goal of reducing operating costs by 25 percent.

This will be partially helped by "being able to increase classroom size and not impact student learning," Hagemann said.

Enrollment has already shown a significant jump. When Hagemann assumed leadership of the school last July, there were 91 students. The school "had gone through a series of events" over recent years that contributed to a "steady decline" in student numbers, she said.

However, 158 are fully registered for next fall, and two dozen more are in the process, *The Progress* reported.

"Word is just spreading that there's new and exciting things happening at our school," Hagemann told Birnbaum. "This school is predominantly an African-American school, and although we'll see probably some shift in demographics, we're very committed to remaining accessible and maintaining our identity that has been here."

An open house is scheduled for noon to 3 p.m. May 20 on campus, 900 35th Ave., Seattle, for "current and interested families and the larger community," according to the school website [1].

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[1] http://www.saintthereseseа.org