THE BOSTON GLOBE
BROCKTON
In regrouping, a Catholic academy rises A regional model for elementary schools
By Milton J. Valencia, Globe Staff | August 19, 2007

The Rev. James Flavin no longer has to replace lightbulbs or fix toilets at St. Edward's School in Brockton, or scramble to raise funds to keep the school going. The small school building behind St. Edith Stein Church is now part of a regional school -- Trinity Catholic Academy -- which is heralding a new approach to Catholic elementary education in the Archdiocese of Boston.

The academy is benefiting from a $12 million renovation and expansion project this summer. From now on, work crews will handle building maintenance and education professionals will manage school budgets.

Schoolchildren will have computers and lab rooms, and they can eat lunch in a cafeteria rather than at their desks.

"We've never had such a thing," said Flavin, pastor of St. Edith Stein parish, who ran St. Edward's School. "For a Catholic school, that's amazing."

Three Catholic schools in Brockton -- St. Edward's, Sacred Heart, and St. Casimir, all of which were struggling financially and badly in need of repairs -- have been reorganized into the larger regional school with two campuses that will serve students from throughout the area. The school will have the resources of a public school, with the discipline of the Catholic community, officials say.

"It's Catholic education on steroids," said the Rev. David O'Donnell, pastor of Christ the King Church, who oversaw Sacred Heart School. "This is going to be a top-notch entity for people on all angles."

Trinity Catholic Academy is set to open Sept. 10, and its slogan, "A New Catholic School, A New Vision," explains the regional school's mission in remodeling Catholic education.
The reorganization is the first to occur under the Archdiocese of Boston's 2010 Initiative -- a strategy to reshape Catholic elementary schools into regional schools with more resources and new curriculum. Community leaders in Dorchester are studying ways to incorporate the model there, and other communities have expressed interest.

A task force of area religious, business, and education leaders and led by Jack Connors Jr., chairman emeritus of the advertising firm Hill, Holliday, has called on all Catholic communities to reexamine the old system of schools attached to churches.

Church officials said that the days have passed when parish communities can provide students and resources for their own schools. Parishioners have moved to the suburbs where their children often attend public schools. Local churches and families can't keep up with the rising costs of education or afford repairs to school buildings.

The numbers of students attending Catholic schools tell the tale. In the 1960s, the archdiocese had some 150,000 students in its school system. Now there are just 50,000. The archdiocese oversaw 127 elementary schools in 2002; this fall it will have 100 schools.

In some ways, the push to close and consolidate Catholic schools is reminiscent of the archdiocesan campaign several years ago that shuttered dozens of churches due to a lack of priests and a drop in the number of church-going Catholics and parish revenue. The reconfiguration effort caused bitterness in several quarters.

But the 2010 Initiative is seen by those involved as a positive move -- one that would strengthen education, rather than take anything away.

People felt like they lost something when reconfiguration occurred, said Terrence Donilon, spokesman for the archdiocese. But, the new school initiative "is about building something," he said.

Trinity Catholic Academy will have more than 500 students. It will be based at two campuses: Grades K-3 will be at the former St. Edward's School building, the Lower Campus; and Grades 4-8 will be at the former St. Colman's School building, or the Upper Campus. St. Colman's closed decades ago. The Lower Campus will also offer a prekindergarten program.

The tuition will be $3,000 each year, and $4,000 for the prekindergarten program.

Teachers based at St. Edward's, Sacred Heart, and St. Casimir, which closed at the end of the school year, will be transferred to Trinity Catholic Academy, and will find a school with new resources, church officials said. The schools will have labs and art rooms. Stonehill College, a Catholic college in Easton, will assist with professional development and curriculum.

The St. Edward's and St. Colman's school buildings have been renovated; a new wing was built at St. Edward's.

None of the money that was used for the school project came from local parishes. In accordance with the 2010 Initiative, local community and business leaders brainstormed for ways to fund the reorganization through grants, donations, and in-kind services, such as Stonehill College's contributions.

Suffolk Construction of Boston managed the construction work, which began when the schools let out in June and is to be completed by Friday.

"Brockton was a location that really invited us in to help them," said John Fish, president and CEO of Suffolk Construction. Fish said that he has teamed with the task force being run by Connors to find ways to help communities incorporate the 2010 Initiative, and that the Brockton schools wanted, and needed, help with their own reorganization.

"This is a community where kids are underprivileged, and a lot are underserved," Fish said. "Everybody wants to give to something that can make a difference."

The closing of longtime schools attached to churches brings to an end a cherished tradition of Catholic education in which families knew one another through a neighborhood church and school.

The shuttering of Sacred Heart School comes three years after Sacred Heart Church closed. And now, the four nuns from the Sisters of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin who helped staff the school are headed off to work in different cities. The land on which the school and church are located is up for sale.

"You do have a loss of identity," said O'Donnell. "There are traditions, but it's traded off with a new identity at Trinity Catholic."

Students will still wear uniforms, but new uniforms, he said. Students will still attend Friday Mass, just in new buildings, and students will still say prayers.

For Sean Noonan, whose 7-year-old daughter, Claire, will attend the new school, the location of the building is just bricks and mortar.

Claire Noonan went to St. Edward's before it became part of the new school. Her father was a St. Edward's student when he was a boy.

Sean Noonan said Catholic education is important for the values it teaches.

But he has realized that Catholic schools lacked programs for students with special needs or above-average students. The reorganization will help strengthen the curriculum, he said.

"On top of that, you get a Catholic education, which is unparalleled," he said. "We didn't care where the Catholic school was, what building they picked; we wanted our daughter to go to Catholic school."