



Bolstering
Inner-City
Catholic
Schools

Reaching back to its earliest Jesuit roots in education, the University of San Francisco is expanding its efforts to shore up Catholic education in San Francisco’s Mission district.

By Edward Carpenter

Faculty and students at the University of San Francisco are engaged in a growing effort to bolster Catholic schools in the city’s Mission district, where the rising cost of tuition has strained the pocketbooks of many low-income families and led to declining student enrollment that threatens to close some schools.

For the past year, faculty from USF’s Institute for Catholic Educational Leadership (ICEL) have taken on the role of teacher educators, holding professional development seminars for teachers of schools that are part of the Alliance of Mission District Catholic Schools—a confederation of Catholic schools in San Francisco’s Mission district dedicated to improving learning and reducing costs. The monthly seminars have focused on creating “learning communities” and sharing educational best practices, according to ICEL Director Ray Vercruyse, C.F.C.

The seminars bring together teachers who work in the same grade level in the Mission, San Francisco’s most predominant Catholic neighborhood, and beyond, encouraging them to collaborate on common standards and assessment tools to improve learning, said Br. Vercruyse.

Such strategies have been key to improving educational standards in San Francisco’s inner-city



Photos by Barbara Ries

Catholic schools, according to Maureen Huntington, San Francisco Archdiocese superintendent of schools. “Now, we’re looking to implement best practices in all the Alliance schools across the board,” she said.

USF’s collaboration with the Alliance, which operates under the San Francisco Archdiocese, is part of a broader partnership begun more than two years ago by archdiocese Catholic schools in the Mission, Huntington said. Since forming in 2005, the Alliance has welcomed Catholic schools outside the Mission eager to benefit from teacher training, as well as the economic savings from sharing staff and tapping into bulk supply and equipment prices.

Joining forces with the Alliance was a natural step for ICEL since many Catholic schools, especially those in the Mission, have limited resources and less funding than public schools, Br. Vercruyse said. “Collaboration with the Alliance fits with USF’s mission of outreach and getting involved with those on the margins,” he said.

Plus, improving teacher training and student education is one obvious way for the Mission’s struggling Catholic schools to attract and retain students and parents, some of whom have begun opting for free public school in the face of rising tuition costs, he said.

“The goal is to sustain the presence of Catholic schools in the Mission district and provide quality academic programs that families choose,” Br. Vercruyse said.

Declining enrollment has raised concerns that some Mission district schools could be forced to close, something no one wants to see, Br. Vercruyse said. “USF and the San Francisco Archdiocese worry that the closure of Catholic schools in the Mission would send the wrong message to poor Catholic families,” he said.

Since the collaboration with ICEL began, St. Philip School teacher Ellen Bucchianeri-Duane has met and shared ideas and solutions with a number of her fellow second-grade teachers throughout the Alliance. In one instance, Bucchianeri-Duane drew on past experience when advising a fellow teacher on classroom strategies for handling students diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

“The focus (of the ICEL seminars) has really been to figure out what the best practices are and put them to use, because the Catholic schools have fewer resources than public schools,” said Bucchianeri-Duane, who is working on a master’s degree in Catholic school leadership at USF.

The School of Education, which oversees USF’s

Strengthening Schools:


Students at St. Philip School in San Francisco (opposite) and teachers like Ellen Bucchianeri-Duane (above) are benefiting from a partnership between USF and the Alliance of Mission District Catholic Schools.

collaboration with the Alliance, has also enlisted other departments and colleges to work in Alliance schools, said Brian Gerrard, associate professor of education and director of the Center for Child and Family Development. Currently, 15 of the center's family counseling students staff San Francisco schools twice a week during the school year, some in Alliance schools.

The pioneering program, under the supervision of licensed family counselors, helps many poor and underserved families resolve problems, while putting a premium on improving students' success in school, Gerrard said. "Without our counselors, many of these schools wouldn't have a counselor at all," he said.

The program also benefits USF students hired for such intern counseling jobs, providing them with the opportunity to complete some of the 3,000 hours of training required to become licensed counselors, Gerrard said.

In the latest coordinated effort, which began this spring, USF School of Nursing students started part-time jobs as school nurses and health instructors at eight Alliance schools. The students, registered nurses working toward a master's degree in nursing, conduct health screenings and provide nutritional education and disaster preparedness training.



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San Francisco's inner-city Catholic schools have gone without nursing and health care services for years, but USF hopes to end that drought by taking up the call to minister to those most in need. As is the case with many school districts, budgetary constraints have put the hiring of health care professionals out of reach for most area Catholic schools, according to Sr. Maureen Hilliard, Alliance executive director. "The only health education that is currently done at the schools is done by the teachers in the classroom, unless one of the teachers brings in a guest," Sr. Hilliard said.

She described the alliance between the School of Nursing, the Catholic Archdiocese of San Francisco, and the Alliance as "cutting edge." "Providing this service to underserved students in inner-city

Catholic schools responds to the Catholic mission to reach out to our brothers and sisters in need and to do justice," Sr. Hilliard said.

As part of the School of Nursing's Registered Nurse-to-Master of Science in Nursing (RN-to-MSN) program, USF nursing students worked part-time in Alliance schools during the spring semester, with a different set of nurses taking over in the fall.

Nursing students will work all day on Wednesdays, treating headaches, upset stomachs, and other common ailments, but primarily focus on overall health and nutrition, said Kimberleigh Cox, one of the USF nursing instructors involved in the program.

Alliance school principals determine what services are most needed at each school, but USF nursing students typically provide preliminary vision examinations, spinal screenings, asthma and diabetes care, as well as nutritional education, Cox said.

USF nursing students will also work with families to develop care plans for students with chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, and to refer those without a primary care physician to low-cost resources, said Judith Karshmer, dean of the School of Nursing.

Not only will students and parents of Alliance schools benefit through improved health, but much like the family counseling students, USF nursing students will receive credit toward the 135 hours of clinical community service required of all RN-to-MSN students to graduate.

"This is great for USF students, as they will be able to bring their nursing background and skills, and make a real world impact while they advance their knowledge about health promotion, disease prevention, risk reduction, and keeping people healthy," Karshmer said.

Beyond completing the 135 hours of required community service, RN-to-MSN students will study statistics, community health theory, and other courses during the two-year program. "For us, it's about building community and building a workforce that has a working knowledge in school health," said Dina Silverthorne, USF nursing instructor.

An additional benefit of exposing young students to nurses and the nursing profession is that some may consider joining the growing health care profession, Karshmer said.

"This is the start of what I hope will become an important part of the School of Nursing's outreach to all the Catholic schools in San Francisco," she said. 