

The Hispanic Recruitment Initiative: What It Means for Catholic Schools' Newest Immigrants

Michelle Burganza, who is 14 and has wavy black hair and a quick laugh, is surprised at how quickly she has come to feel at home at Elizabeth Seton Academy in Dorchester. "I had my doubts because I had never gone to a private, Catholic, all-girls school," says the ninth grader and daughter of Guatemalan immigrants. "But I feel very happy and comfortable here."

Michelle likes that she can be herself and grow spiritually at Elizabeth Seton Academy. Not only does she not have to worry about impressing boys, she says, but she also gets to take Theology. "We pray a lot and study the Bible, and that helps me strengthen my faith." And the school's small size and emphasis on treating each other with respect mean much to her. "Everyone here is very respectful," says Michelle. "It's like a family."

Most of all, Michelle relishes Elizabeth Seton Academy's focus on higher education. "One hundred percent of students go to college here and that makes me very excited," she says. Her goal is to become a surgeon, midwife or pediatrician.



Thanks to the Hispanic Recruitment Initiative of the Catholic Schools Foundation and the Birmingham Foundation, Michelle is one of 102 new Hispanic students to enroll in Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Boston for the 2009-2010 academic year. The Initiative, which provides an average of \$2,000 per student to Catholic schools that enroll them, reflects a new effort: To more closely represent in Boston Catholic schools the growing Hispanic population in the United States as a whole. The Initiative is also about something else – a return to the roots of what Catholic education is about.

"Catholic schools were founded to serve the children of immigrants, and in Boston in the early days those immigrants were Irish and Italian," says Mike Reardon, Executive Director of the Catholic Schools Foundation. "Today we need to serve the large influx of Hispanic immigrants – and to meet these immigrants where they are at in their lives. Many work two and three jobs, and automatically assume that they are priced out of Catholic education. The goal of the Initiative is to let Hispanics know that Catholic schools are an affordable option for their children."

The response "has been overwhelming," continues Reardon. "We had planned for 60 new students and have 102 instead. The demand is there, and we could accept even more students if we had more resources."

Paul Birmingham, whose father founded the Birmingham Foundation, has supported the Catholic Schools Foundation since its beginning nearly a quarter century ago. He saw the need for the Initiative upon discovering that, in comparison to their percentage of the population, few Hispanic school-age children in the Boston area attended Catholic schools. The reasons for this lack of Hispanic enrollment were both financial and cultural, he says. “We needed to have a formal way to fund a Catholic education for Hispanic children, many of whom are very poor,” says Birmingham. “We also needed to find a way to deal with the fact that most of our Catholic schools don’t have someone in their administration that is bilingual.”

The Catholic Schools Foundation hired Erika Banwarth as its Coordinator of Hispanic Outreach. An enthusiastic and energetic young woman, Banwarth had become fluent in Spanish while working for a year and several summers at an orphanage in Mexico. Before coming to the Catholic Schools Foundation, she had served as Director of Admissions at North Cambridge Catholic High School, where many students are Latino and where Banwarth increased applications by 300 percent.

Banwarth did much of her recruiting for the Initiative in parishes with sizable Hispanic populations. “I would speak at the end of Mass at the same parish for several weeks in a row and explain how the Initiative worked, how the financial aid it provided was need-based and renewable each year,” she says. “I also offered to help people fill out the financial aid application and I gave them my cell phone number.”

People began calling Banwarth, and sometimes they called late at night or early in the morning before or after a work shift. “Because of people’s great excitement over the Initiative, I’ve never minded those phone calls,” says Banwarth with a laugh.

Roslindale’s Sacred Heart Parish and School embraced Banwarth and the Hispanic Initiative from the beginning. Monsignor Francis Kelly, Sacred Heart’s pastor, notes that he and Father John Mendicoa, a priest from the Basque region of Spain who celebrates the parish’s popular 12:30 Sunday liturgy in Spanish, have been very excited about the Initiative. The duo worked closely with Banwarth and Monica Haldiman, Sacred Heart School’s principal, to make the concept of Catholic education comfortable to Hispanic parishioners. “We gave tours of the

Schools involved in the Hispanic Recruitment Initiative:

- Boston College High School
- Cathedral Grammar Elementary School
- Cathedral High School
- Catholic Memorial School
- East Boston Central Catholic High School
- Elizabeth Seton Academy
- Fontbonne Academy
- Mission Grammar Elementary School
- North Cambridge Catholic High School
- Pope John Paul II Catholic Academy
- Pope John Paul High School
- Sacred Heart School
- St. Catherine of Genoa
- St. Columbkille Elementary School
- St. Patrick Elementary School
- St. Rose Elementary School

school, which is four blocks away from the church,” says Monsignor Kelly. “We also walked families through the application process.”



The pastor wasn't surprised when Sacred Heart School increased its enrollment by 32 new Hispanic students – the most of any school involved in the Initiative. “Our school is now 30 percent Hispanic,” says Monsignor Kelly. “We have many different cultures in the school and so could welcome the new Hispanic children without any issues.”

St. Catherine of Genoa School in Somerville also has a diverse student body. Ten percent of its population is Hispanic, and includes children from families enrolled through the Hispanic Initiative. Marian Burns, St. Catherine's principal, says: “I recently had a grandfather who came in with his daughter and granddaughter, and he commented that it was wonderful that the Catholic Church was making it possible for his grandchildren to attend a Catholic school.”

Burns credits Banwarth for making the Initiative known in the Somerville and Cambridge communities. “She is doing a wonderful job in providing one-on-one personal attention to people and letting them know of the resources available,” says Burns. “Families tell me that their children would not be at St. Catherine's if it wasn't for Erika, and some people call the school looking for information on the ‘Erika scholarships.’”

Pointing out that the school's pastor, Father Brian J. McHugh, speaks fluent Spanish, as do two aides and the school custodian, Burns says St. Catherine's does everything it can to support its



new Hispanic students. “A couple of the kids are getting extra tutoring support with English and we have an after-school program that is free,” she says. “Our students know that the teachers are here for them.”

Mission Grammar Elementary School in Roxbury has a number of students from the Hispanic Initiative, including Edwin Caban, a fifth grader and his little sister Jalyn Caban, a kindergartner. Edwin, whose family hails from Puerto Rico, says his mother wanted him to go to a Catholic school “because she wanted to get more church into me and have me learn more about God.” Edwin's favorite subjects are math and art, and he has “learned already to be a better writer.” Three words he uses to describe

Mission Grammar are “caring, fun, and friendly.” As for Jalyn, her experience so far at Mission Grammar can be summed up simply: “My favorite thing here is learning.”

The Archdiocese of Boston has recently experienced an increase in the Hispanic population of Catholic schools. Hispanic students currently make up 7 percent of the Catholic school community. Ensuring that Hispanic children are able to attend Catholic schools now and in the years ahead is critical, says Mary Grassa O’Neill, Secretary for Education and Superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Archdiocese of Boston. “The Catholic church has always been profoundly committed to educating new immigrants and their children,” she said. “As the fastest growing immigrant group in the United States and in Massachusetts, Hispanics deserve nothing less than the very best Catholic education that our schools can offer to them.”

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By Catherine Walsh