Enrollment strong in Lafayette private schools

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In Lafayette Parish, the number of students in private schools is growing.

According to Louisiana Department of Education data, compared to the 2013-14 school year, nine private schools added students this year — Ascension Episcopal, Cathedral Carmel, First Baptist Christian, John Paul the Great, Lafayette Christian Academy, St. Cecilia, Sts. Leo-Seton, Sts. Peter and Paul and Teurlings Catholic.

The other private schools in
Schools

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the parish either had enrollment numbers that were about the same, or changed by only a handful of students between 2013-14 and 2014-15.

More than 8,500 students are now attending private or parochial schools in Lafayette Parish, according to state data.

St. Thomas More Catholic High School has the highest private school enrollment this year, with 1,076 students. The smallest school is Gethsemane Christian Academy, with 68 students.

Several schools that serve elementary and/or middle school students boast especially high enrollment numbers. For example, 808 students attend Cathedral Carmel School, while 915 students are at Our Lady of Fatima and 728 attend St. Pius Elementary.

According to the state, about 14 percent of all Louisiana students are enrolled in private schools.

In Lafayette Parish, about 31,000 students attend public schools.

While enrollment figures are strong at many local private schools, that’s not always the case. The Diocese of Lafayette announced last month that it will close Trinity Catholic School in St. Martinville in May because of low enrollment. The school has about 172 students this year, but was only able to register about 125 students for 2014-15, which was not enough to keep the school’s doors open.

At First Baptist Christian, the school is expanding so much that it will open a high school this fall. A freshman class will be available starting in August, with plans to add one more grade each year through 12th grade.

“The expansion into high school will continue the program of student that is college prep, state-approved, offering a curriculum for grades to be TOPS-eligible and presenting a Christian worldview in all subjects,” church officials said in a February statement announcing the expansion.

In Louisiana, all private schools must be registered or approved by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. Private schools “must offer an education comparable to the quality of public schools,” according to the state. However, they are not required to follow the same standards and curriculum that is used in public schools, such as Common Core. Previously, officials at many private schools in the Lafayette area have said they create a curriculum using a combination of resources and materials.

Although many private schools share buses with public schools, that’s about the extent of their involvement with one another. Most local private schools have volunteer boards that oversee finances and administrative matters, with little relationship with the Lafayette Parish School System or the public school board.

Last summer, St. Thomas More Principal Richard Lavergne said the school’s enrollment has hovered at a little more than 1,000 students each year.

“Our area is such a strong Catholic area, and a lot of people who have come have a strong belief in Catholic education,” Lavergne said at the time.

Patrick Lofton, executive vice president of the National Catholic Educational Association, told The Daily Advertiser in July that while Catholic school enrollment is declining nationwide, the organization is seeing enrollment growth in Southern states. Lofton said many parents have told the NCEA that they choose Catholic schools because of their reputations for strong academics, high test scores and college preparation.

“ Along with that is certainly the desire to have their children in a faith-based school and a place where values and morals and Catholic teachings are integrated across the curriculum,” Lofton said last year. “Religion is not taught in isolation in a Catholic school. It is in every subject and it becomes a part of a young person’s daily life... I think a third reason is that they are safe and they are places where their children are treated with respect, where they are loved and where they are taught to be respectful.”