More than a school

Pastor Michael Saah-Buckman visits with students including Malachi Holmes, 5, left, and Kirsten Carroll, 6, in their classroom at St. Francis Xavier Catholic School. Saah-Buckman is the priest at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church and regularly holds Friday morning Mass for students of the school.

St. Francis Xavier Catholic School remains important link to history of south Baton Rouge's black community

By CHANTE DIONNE WARREN

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there was a time when discipline meant more than firm words. Sometimes it meant a good paddling — and St. Francis Xavier Catholic School nuns had no problem dispensing the cure, a former student recalls.

“They'd give you a paddling with the golden stick,” said Joe Delpit, who attended the predominantly black Roman Catholic school in the 1940s and '50s. “I had a couple of them.”

Cheryl Domino, a former student who now teaches at St. Francis Xavier, remembers similar occasions.

“The sisters brought a godly presence. There were certain things you wouldn't pull because sister was watching,” Domino said.

Before integration, St. Francis Xavier, at 1150 S. 12th St., was among the cornerstones of the south Baton Rouge black community. It was the Catholic school for black children who were not allowed to attend white Catholic schools. For many alumni of the school, St. Francis Xavier is a reminder of the

This photo was taken in the early 1890s, when Catholic nuns taught academic classes and catechism to 80 black children. Here some of the students pose with a priest and two nuns. The modern St. Francis Xavier Catholic School is a product of these early efforts made by nuns and priests to educate black children.
impact a school can have on a child.

It's a great institution right outside our community. It's one of the driving forces in the area..." said Dejean, owner of Dejean's Auto Sales.

School board member, Pat Smith, who attended the school from 1950 through 1960, said students regularly competed with other schools in contests, music, math, and science.

"You can see that success stories to basically every family that came through this school," said Smith. "They've taught me so much to survive. Many today are educators, contractors, business owners, and community leaders."

The school's history stretches back to 1868 when the Sisters of St. Joseph and St. Francis Xavier High School opened its doors. The school celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2015, and for a few years, educated children in grades first through 12th. But an addition to Interstate 10 resulted in the school being torn down in 1960. A new school was built in 1963, but the high school was never rebuilt.

However, the interstate construction and the closing of the high school, coupled with integration, resulted in a move by families to other Catholic parishes. Financial problems and declining school enrollment soon followed.

In 1964, St. Francis Xavier and St. Agnes Xavier Catholic School paired up in an effort to increase desegregation within the Catholic Diocese. Kindergartners through fourth graders attended St. Francis Xavier and grades five through eight attended St. Agnes.

"There was an attempt to integrate the schools, but they never succeeded in doing that," said Alvie Decuir, principal. St. Francis Xavier remained predominantly black as white parents chose instead to send their children in other Catholic schools in other parishes, said Decuir, who graduated from St. Francis in the 1980s.

St. Agnes Catholic School eventually closed, but St. Francis survived the changes.

"St. Francis Xavier was more of a neighborhood school and that's probably why it stayed around," Decuir said. Community support and volunteer services from the community all contributed to its survival, he said.

The school survives today with a smaller enrollment. There is a pre-kindergarten through eighth-grade program for its predominantly black 188-member student body who come from all over the parish, Decuir said.

Through the years, many of St. Francis Xavier's students are alumni of the school or have taught there for many years. The school's strong spiritual presence remains much the same. A priest lives on campus and holds Mass every Friday morning. School prayer and religious lessons are held throughout the week.

There are no more paddling sticks, but teachers are quick to discipline and correct students in class, at recess and along the hallways.

"Where are your manners? And say good morning," Decuir told a child who walked past him in the hallway one afternoon.

But the school is facing a money crunch, said Decuir: "We're not generating the funds," he said.

"I don't think the community realized how much they're needed here," said Decuir. "We need more people to come in to do more to the school to enhance the budget."

Decuir said he has been addressing some of the school's problems since becoming principal two years ago. He wants to increase enrollment and add new textbooks and expand the school's technology program and computerize the library.

St. Francis Xavier is also planning to build a playground area for children, expand its parking lot and build an activity center.

Decuir also wants to raise salaries to meet that of other teachers in the Catholic Diocese, and he wants to provide more school staffing.

He wants to raise enrollment to 250 students, he said. Recently, the school held an open house and has advertised at radio stations.

There is perhaps no better place than the classroom to discover why teachers want St. Francis Xavier to survive and continue educating children as it has for the past 80 years, he said.

Children are getting a well-rounded education, said Rosa Hollins, a first grade teacher for 19 years at St. Francis Xavier.

"You can do more with teaching the whole child because religion is involved. You get a more well-rounded child because of religion in the school. We don't have the kind of behavior problems that we have in the public schools," Hollins said.

Students are held to a conduct law. Breaking these laws can mean bad marks on their report cards and a note to their parents.

When Domino started teaching at St. Francis Xavier 16 years ago, she employed the same discipline measures with her students as she followed as a student there in the 1960s, she said.

"I let them know where I'm coming from. I demand and give respect," said Domino, who teaches math and science in grades six through eight.

Domino said the school is a close-knit community. "That's probably why I haven't gone anywhere. I work two jobs to supplement my income because I like what I do.

"I could leave and work in public schools for more, but I plan to stay here as long as I can," she said. Parents, students, and teacher organization, said Angela Bell, the Home and School president. She sends her 7-year-old daugh-

ter to St. Francis Xavier for a couple of reasons. "I like the size of the school. When I walk through the halls, every child knows me. It's affordable and the school is religion-based," Bell said.

Another defining link to the school is its pastor, Michael Sash-Buckman.

All the children at the school know "Father Michael" as they call him when he passes through the hallways and visits their classrooms.

"My purpose is the preventative, proactive. We have planned the spiritual seed, I tell them, 'you are a good child' and they begin to believe that and that establishes the base," he said.

Decuir said the school will break one of its major traditions in order to grow.

"We can't say we're going to stay the way we are. Times are changing," Decuir said. "In this society, we can't remain all black. We have to open it up."

He wants to place innovative programs at the school that will attract students of all races including a performing arts program and an enhanced computer technology center, he said. Partnerships between St. Joseph's Academy and Catholic High School are making strides, Decuir said.

St. Joseph's and Catholic High students regularly tutor students, and St. Joseph's recently installed a computer lab with 20 on-line com-
puters at the school.

Sash-Buckman said it's important that St. Francis Xavier regain its sense of importance to the community.

"We want to recapture that," he said. "This was the place to be. It has that rich history and we want it to get back the place to nurture and educate your child," he said.