



The Georgia

# BULLETIN

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## Local News

### Print Issue: January 2, 2003 - **Solidarity School Seeks Sponsors For Hispanic Children's Tuition**

By Priscilla Greear, Staff Writer

SANDY SPRINGS - The Solidarity School, which is trying an innovative model to strengthen the education of Hispanic children in Atlanta, is asking Catholics to consider sponsoring a student, as it seeks to broaden its base of philanthropic funding.

In an 11-month school year, the independent Catholic school just off Roswell Road serves 55 children in kindergarten through fourth grade from immigrant families, who pay only what they can afford. Ninety percent of the families live in a high-density apartment complex across the street, many with two or three generations of families sharing apartment space.

Solidarity development director Steve Holton hopes that families will consider participating in the school's mission.

"We need to broaden. This has been a tough year for everybody in the nonprofit sector with the economic downturn we've experienced," he said. "While we are positive in our outlook, we do have a lot of work to do in raising funds. We hope this sponsor project will be a way families who have more than those at Solidarity can help those children from families not as fortunate to have an opportunity to achieve and succeed."

The school, managed by Independent School Counsel, begins the Sponsor-a-Student program as it awaits word in late January from the Georgia Department of Transportation on a proposed expansion project of I-285 at Roswell Road. The project would force the demolition of the roughly 45,000-square-foot strip mall in which the remodeled school and Hispanic mission of Holy Spirit Church are housed.

Negotiations have been going on about a year. Gareth Genner, ISC chairman, said school officials are waiting for Gov.-elect Sonny Perdue to take office to see whether or not he will authorize the project.

Former Georgia attorney general Mike Bowers has been retained by the school to seek a resolution with the DOT and to ensure that if forced to relocate Solidarity will be adequately compensated. If relocation occurs, which would be in one to three years, they hope to do so within a quarter mile of the current site, known as Solidarity Mission Village, but must first reach a resolution with the DOT.



Archbishop John F. Donoghue blesses a girl during a visit to the Solidarity School to celebrate Mass on Dec. 13. The independent Catholic school opened in the fall of 2000 in a strip mall off Roswell Road and now has 55 children in kindergarten through fourth grade. The school serves low-income Hispanic immigrant families and is asking Catholics to consider sponsoring a student's tuition.

"There absolutely will be a school, no matter what," Genner said.

As educational reports reveal alarming statistics on underachievement by Hispanics, the nation's largest minority, Genner noted the vital role the school plays in this neighborhood. The President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, co-chaired by Catholic school backer Frank Hanna, held a town hall meeting at Solidarity last June. Members applauded it as a model for making the school an integral part of the community and parents an integral part of the educational process. New efforts to serve Hispanics are desperately needed, as the White House reports that more than 30 percent of Hispanic students drop out. On the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress, 40 percent of white fourth-graders scored at or above proficient in reading while just 16 percent of Hispanics scored as proficient. Just 10 percent of Hispanics get a college education.

Founded in the fall of 2000 in a trailer in the Mission Village parking lot, the school now has a waiting list and plans next year to add fifth grade, the school's final grade, and take 80 students. It partners with the mission, which offers spiritual care and services like English and computer classes and counseling. The village has served over 3,000 families.

"We provide an education which is tailored to the very specific needs of the Hispanic students," said Genner. One need is for an extended school day, as parents work long hours and often don't speak English, leaving them unable to provide needed homework support.

Very few students have left the school, Genner continued, which reflects how Solidarity and the Holy Spirit mission have stabilized the community and made it less transient. Since the school and mission opened, businesses like a massage parlor have moved out, reducing crime, and new community-oriented businesses are coming in. Parents value the Catholic environment, he said.

"Many of the neighborhood families place immense value on Catholic formation because even in the public schools able to serve their needs, many Hispanic children from immigrant communities are falling under the influence of negative concepts such as gang influence at a very early age."

Genner added that several parishes with large Hispanic communities have approached ISC about opening another school at their churches or helping them to open them, which is a long-term goal.

Solidarity receives support from the Hanna Family Foundations, the Catholic Foundation of North Georgia, the Marbill Foundation, the Mary Ryan and Henry G. Kuhrt Foundation, a large anonymous donor, and Compucredit. But Holton said that it is critically important for the school to expand its donor base. While parents pay what they can afford, which can be as little as \$1 a day, it costs \$6,000 to educate one student there and Solidarity raises funds to pay the difference. Holton noted that \$6,000 is actually substantially less than the cost per child in public schools, as Solidarity is a low-cost model with a small staff and heavy reliance on volunteer support.

"We're a private Catholic school so we don't receive money from the government to operate and we depend on the financial support of individuals and grant-making organizations to be successful, in order to offer the programs we do," he said. "We are eager to get the word out about what Solidarity is doing in Atlanta."

Sponsoring a child would involve a suggested donation of \$300-\$1,000 per year toward the tuition through monthly payments, praying for the child and getting to know the school by volunteering.

"There are still people in the diocese and the city who do not know about Solidarity and that it's there as a service and as a volunteer opportunity and it needs their support and prayers," Holton said.

He expressed gratitude for the support of donors and for volunteers, who come from places including Pinecrest Academy, the Donnellan School, Marist School, St. Pius X High School, the Lovett School, Atlanta International School and Westminster Schools. Mex Taco Loco restaurant and Whole Foods donate lunches and La Cazuela Mexican restaurants give financial support. The Legionaries of Christ provide a volunteer chaplain. The school added a camp this past summer and a playground, funded by Compucredit.

"Tutoring, mentoring, reading are all critical areas we rely on our volunteers for," Holton said. "With the kind of instruction and even remediation that our program requires, that often requires small group and one-on-one attention as well as just classroom work."

The curriculum is based on the Core Knowledge Program. The school has immersion-based instruction in English, with assistance in Spanish as needed, and gives attention to Mexican culture and history. They have started an assessment program this year and plan to apply for accreditation with the Southern Association of Independent Schools.

"It's too important for the families and the students in that area, far too significant to go away," reiterated Holton. "Whatever happens, the school's supporters are committed to the school's success, so while we may have to rebuild, Solidarity School will continue."

To sponsor a student, donate or volunteer, contact Holton at (678) 259-8477 or [scholton@mission-holdings.com](mailto:scholton@mission-holdings.com). Supporters are encouraged to write the DOT in support of the school not relocating and to send a copy to Solidarity School, 120 Northwood Drive, Suite 106, Atlanta, GA 30342.