

Tribune photos by José M. Osorio

Johnnie Mack (center), 12, and Tremaine Funches (right), 14, watch two pigeons perched on a ledge up high in the auditorium of the building where their school, the Chicago Jesuit Academy, will move in three months.

School is teaching hope

Jesuit Academy helps poor kids find their gifts

By Kristen Kridel
Tribune staff reporter

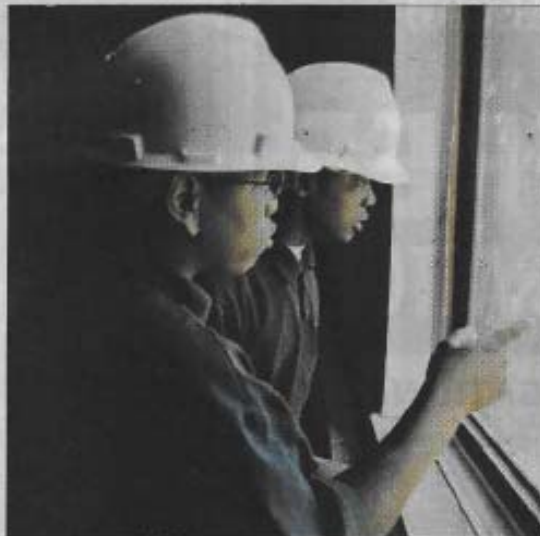
While attending a public school, 13-year-old Bryan Johnson was told he would never be able to read or grasp mathematics.

School officials told the boy that he would have made a good farmer in the early 1900s, said his mother, Vanessa Johnson.

"They turned their backs against my son," said Johnson, who lives in the South Side neighborhood of Ashburn. "I want him to be able to be whatever God wants him to be."

Since he started at Chicago Jesuit Academy middle school when it opened in 2005, Bryan has become a better reader, Johnson said. Teachers at the West Side school brought out gifts in him even she didn't know he had, his mother said.

This year marks the first time in 45 years that the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of



Charles Jones and Damarcus Lacy, both 12, look out the window of the new home of Chicago Jesuit Academy.

Chicago is not closing a single elementary school. In fact, there is expansion at Chicago Jesuit Academy, one of three independent Catholic schools operating in the archdiocese that offer tuition-free private education to pupils in minority neighborhoods.

The academy, which has been temporarily located at the Marillac Social Center, 212 S. Francisco Ave., is spending \$4.2 million to renovate the former St. Martin de Porres Grade School on the West Side.

This expansion runs counter to the trend of decline in

recent decades. About 366,000 students attended 500 schools in the archdiocese in 1964. The numbers have dropped to fewer than 100,000 students and 257 schools, officials said.

St. Martin de Porres, 5058 W. Jackson Blvd., was among 18 schools that closed in 2005 because of falling enrollment and rising costs, officials said.

Yet the Chicago Jesuit Academy has continued to grow by adopting an approach proven successful in other cities, said Matthew Lynch, the academy's president. The school, modeled after Nativity Mission Center in New York, recruits pupils from low-income families regardless of religious background and gives them full scholarships to attend the school, which has longer-than-average school days and years.

The Chicago Jesuit Academy, which will move to its new site in three months, operates on the belief that all pupils deserve a quality education, Lynch said. The mission is to provide scholarships to boys who have no

PLEASE SEE ACADEMY, PAGE 4



Chris Lodygowski works on the plumbing at the former home of St. Martin de Porres Grade School, the future home of Chicago Jesuit Academy. The Jesuit middle school has shown great progress in helping pupils from poor neighborhoods.

Tribune photo by José M. Osorio

ACADEMY: Good news for areas with little cheer

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

place else to go.

"Too often, I fear that people wrongly speak of neighborhoods like Austin or North Lawndale or Garfield Park as though they are places bereft of hope and promise," Lynch said. "People read stories about failing schools, faltering test scores and dire graduation rates, and they conclude that there is little good news to be found here.

"Today, we stand together among so many friends and know that nothing could be far-

ther from the truth.

The academy's inaugural class made more than two years of progress in both math and reading during the pupils' first year of study, Lynch said.

The San Miguel Schools of Chicago, two private middle schools run by the Christian Brothers religious order, use a similar philosophy to reach out to the children of low-income families. The schools, which started with one campus and 18 pupils in 1995, now maintain a steady enrollment of about 200, spokeswoman Jennifer Clapp said.

During the church's heyday, a Catholic school was built for almost every parish, said Rev. John Manz, an auxiliary bishop for the archdiocese. Nuns entered the church in much greater numbers and taught at many of the schools. And Chicago was densely populated by Catholic immigrants, who have since migrated from their historic

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neighborhoods.

For example, the West Side used to be home to predominantly Irish Catholics, Manz said. Now, mostly blacks live there, and only about 5 percent of them are Catholic, he said.

Manz said he has seen many

Catholic schools close. "Every time it is very painful," he said.

The archdiocese has had to close some of its schools in order to keep others open and to make a Catholic education available, he said.

Many parishes can no longer afford to subsidize their schools.

But the Chicago Jesuit Academy, along with St. Ignatius College Prep and Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, is backed by a large network of Jesuit school alumni. The Chicago Jesuit Academy has an annual \$1.2 million operating budget, most of it raised from donations, Lynch said.

"We've been able to fund the school because people who have had education be a critical turning point in their lives want to give others that opportunity," Lynch said.

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