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After wilting, Purcell Marian plots revival

Parents at East Walnut Hills school plan to boost enrollment

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Seniors Alaundra Brown (left) and Ali Green talk in the cafeteria on the first day of school at Purcell Marian, formed by merging a boys school and a girls school.

Purcell Marian High School is trying to make a comeback, just as its East Walnut Hills neighborhood is.

The 77-year old co-ed Catholic high school, alma mater (back in its Purcell days) to Roger Staubach and Mayor Charlie Luken, has seen enrollment and tuition revenue slide in recent years, even as it expanded facilities and added amenities.

Enrollment this year is 425, about 200 fewer students than two years ago.

School leaders say they plan to turn that around.

The school has a new principal and a new, high-profile board of trustees. The Cincinnati archdiocese's top school official vows he won't let the school die.

"We're taking a very special interest in Purcell Marian," said the Catholic schools superintendent, Brother Joe Kamis, "because it is an urban school located in an area that's changing. It's an institution that shows Cincinnati that the races can get along together, play together and struggle together."

On a recent afternoon, students in the lunchroom sat in clutches that were racially mixed as well as small groups of black or white students.

Brittany Pitts, 16, a junior from Bond Hill, explained how Purcell's diversity works. "Our school is flowing with different kinds of religions and races and people," she said, "you know, like the United States. It's a whole lot of mix in our bowl.

"We all get along pretty well."

In front of the school, a worker washed away sticky remains of a senior prank. Someone had spelled out 2005 in glued magazine pages on the sidewalk.

Purcell Marian is the marriage of two long-standing Catholic high schools, Purcell for boys and Marian for girls.

Purcell Marian has evolved into one of the region's most ethnically balanced high schools.

Nearly all Cincinnati-area Catholic high schools are 90 percent or more white, according to archdiocese statistics.

But at Purcell Marian, 55 percent of the students are white with the rest minorities.

"We have a broader spectrum of kids here," said Al Early, the new principal.

"We have kids in AP (Advanced Placement) and college prep classes and ... a group of kids who believe, maybe, college isn't right for them. We've also got kids with special needs."

The special needs programs draw students from all over the region, Kamis said.

Most Catholic high schools market themselves by listing prominent colleges their graduates attend.

Most Purcell Marian students also go to college, Early said. But the school's mission includes students not headed in that direction.

Diane Fisk, a parent and Purcell Marian trustee, calls it a survivor school. "Being an inner-city school, it's struggled with the competition (for) attendance and enrollment because of location and diversity," she said.

"People are going out to the suburbs or to schools like Moeller. ... But once a parent walks in the door, they love it. It's a strong school and a good school for kids. It teaches them what's out there for their future."

So why has enrollment declined? People who are close to the school point to several reasons.

Purcell Marian has fewer "feeder schools" than many other Catholic high schools. Although Catholic students may attend any high school, diocesan high schools can only recruit from grade schools in their assigned areas.

Several of Purcell Marian's assigned feeder schools have closed over the years, leaving it with only seven, Kamis said. That's less than half as many as several other Catholic high schools. There's a proposal to change the recruitment rule, but no decisions have been made, Kamis said.

Purcell Marian also has increased tuition by \$400, to \$6,600 this year, which may be chasing away some families.

Beyond tuition hikes, the school is battling what supporters call outdated long-term perceptions about the school and the surrounding neighborhood.

In years past, East Walnut Hills has struggled with shuttered businesses and other signs of decline. In the past five years, a turnaround has begun, especially in the business district along Woodburn Avenue and Madison Road.

Several new commercial buildings, businesses and at least 59 new condominiums are open or under development, said Mary Anne Lee, president of the East Walnut Hills Assembly, the neighborhood council.

Purcell Marian, which for years has hosted the neighborhood's annual festival and flea market, is an important part of that revitalization, she said.

If it were to close or relocate, Lee said, "it would suck the life out of our community.

"I feel very strongly about their presence in the community. We want them to stay active and thrive."

Early acknowledges the school itself also faces a "perception out there that things are not as good as they used to be."

But that's old news, he said.

"What I've heard and seen from parents, staff and alumni is there's an awful lot of strength here, a lot of good things happening," Early said. "Maybe ... we need to polish this image a little bit and replace the perception with reality."

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