



Artist's rendering of planned building at Old St. Mary's School, 1500 S. Michigan Ave. It will be built north of the existing church building. Image provided

Old St. Mary's getting new school building in Loop

More families moving in wanting Catholic education for children

By Daniel P. Smith
CONTRIBUTOR

Old is about to get new. Chicago's original parish, Old St. Mary's, 1500 S. Michigan Ave., will soon welcome a new school building capable of

hosting approximately 350 students.

Construction on the 33,000-square foot elementary school is slated to begin in June with hopes for a fall 2011 opening. The \$6 million project, designed by Naperville's Newman Architecture, will include 18 classrooms as well as a number of special purpose rooms, including science labs and dedicated spaces for the fine arts.

"We couldn't be more thrilled," Old St. Mary's pastor Father Michael Kallock said. "The need is present and the response to these plans has been incredible."

The new schoolhouse will be a welcome departure from the school's current space, a revamped, century-old 12,000-square foot former warehouse. Perhaps more importantly, the new school building will allow Old St. Mary's to serve a swelling need for Catholic education arriving from local residents. Presently, applications for the school far outpace available spots.

"Any parishioner who wants Catholic education for their child should have access to it and our current small school just doesn't allow for this," Old St. Mary's principal Mary Lee Calihan said.

Demand increases

Opened in 1833 as St. Mary of the Assumption near the intersection of State and Lake Streets, Old St. Mary's moved to its South Loop location, its sixth home, in 2002. The revitalization of the South Loop area and an influx of new residents spurred unanticipated plans.

When the parish began its operations on South Michigan Avenue, a school was not part of its effort. Kallock credited Cardinal George with having the foresight to recognize the South Loop's growth, which prompted the archdiocese and the parish to pursue the school's formation.

"I think we saw growth coming, but I don't know if anybody realized just how great that growth would be," Kallock said. "The challenge was to get up and running and then keep up."

In 2004, Old St. Mary's welcomed its first students, 18 preschoolers. Each year, the school has added a grade and today serves about 170 students in pre-kindergarten to fourth grade, most of whom live

within walking distance of the school. Enrollment next year is expected to near 215, a number that will necessitate leasing of classroom space in an adjacent building.

"We've seen many families committed to raising families in the city, which has created a need for Catholic education that we've tried to respond to," Calihan said.

The parish's recent evolution foretold of the school's potential and prompted action. In Old St. Mary's final year on Wabash, the parish's previous Loop-based home, the church handled seven infant baptisms; today, Kallock and his staff handle well over 100 annually. Church attendance has nearly tripled in the last seven years.

"Every week we're getting newly registered households," Kallock said. "Even though the economy has slowed some of the growth, the need for the parish and the school continues to grow."

Good news

In an era of dwindling Catholic school enrollment and shuttering schools, the Old St. Mary's project is a beacon of good news and promise for the archdiocese and its school superintendent, Dominican Sister M. Paul McCaughey. Witnessing Old St. Mary's success, the archdiocese purchased property for the school in 2008, while the parish started a capital campaign with the goal of raising \$10 million. To date, \$3 million has been collected.

"The Old St. Mary's plan was one of the first things I saw on my desk when I came into office [in early 2008] and it was a wonderful and ambitious plan," Sister Paul said, adding that the plan was officially approved in late 2009 after various revisions.



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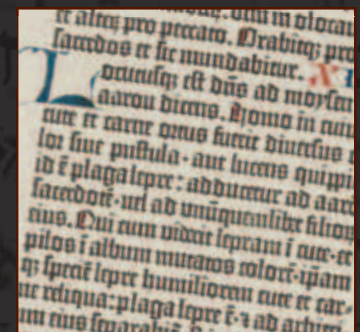
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