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Catholic schools launch PR blitz

Board wants to boost enrolment Telemarketing

in \$750,000 plan

LOUISE BROWN AND TESS KALINOWSKI
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The next telemarketer who calls could be your local Catholic school trying to drum up students.

In a bid to stem a worrisome drop in enrolment, the Toronto Catholic District School Board has decided to launch an ad campaign this month — complete with subway ads, signs, home mailings and telephone marketing — to ask parents to consider a Catholic education for their children.

The \$750,000 marketing drive, with the slogan "Put Faith In Your Child," was conceived after 3,200 fewer elementary school students enrolled with the board this year than two years ago, said board chair Oliver Carroll. Total enrolment stands at about 94,000 students.

"We're not sure why our enrolment is dropping, particularly in the downtown neighbourhoods, when the latest census shows one-third of new immigrants to Toronto are Catholic," he said.

"It could be that new immigrants from places like Latin America and the Philippines (who tend to be Catholic) don't appreciate the fact Catholic schools in Ontario are publicly funded, open to all and free. So we want to send out that message."

Carroll justified the cost of the unusual ad campaign, which was endorsed at a board meeting in November, as a sound investment out of an overall budget of more than \$780 million. With Queen's Park paying school boards \$7,000 for every student enrolled, the board will recoup its advertising outlay in future student grants, he said.

However, Trustee Maria Rizzo has slammed the expense as "a misadventure that will squander almost a million dollars while our schools are falling apart."

In an open letter sent recently to Carroll, Rizzo complained that "some school buildings are crumbling, new windows are needed and, believe it or not, kids are freezing while they try to learn."

"Old carpets, roofs and faulty wiring should be replaced. Libraries look like they belong in another century.

"The money committed to this project could have bought more than 52,000 textbooks or 5.3 million pencils," fumed the North York trustee.

The campaign, designed by Navigator Ltd., marks the first time the board has brought in an outside agency to try to help turn around its declining enrolment, said vice-chair Catherine LeBlanc-Miller.

Publicity will focus on parents living around 20 schools that represent a cross-section of the Catholic system, she said, adding that while most schools are in the inner city, not all have been hit the hardest by dropping enrolments.

The campaign will target schools from the Don Valley in the east to Dovercourt Rd. in the west, and from Lake Ontario north to Eglinton Ave.

Catholic schools in Ontario limit elementary enrolment to children from Catholic households and play a role in preparing students for such religious rites as Holy Communion. Catholic high schools, however, accept students from any faith.

The Toronto District School Board has also lost students in recent years, many to the 905 regions, where houses are larger and less expensive than in the former city of Toronto.

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