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St. Peter Claver school remains viable

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Duke Brooks totes books into the classrooms; carries in a white chalkboard to see if it works better than the traditional slate blackboard; and tidies up the campus' grounds.

As a parent of a former student at the 126-year-old St. Peter Claver Catholic School, he still puts in volunteer hours because the school, and especially its principal, Sister Maria Babatunde, took such personal interest in his daughter, Donniya Brooks.

The 13-year-old has moved on to a new school but not her father. And, he has one more reason why he wants to lend a hand.

“People think the school is closed,” Brooks said. So, it matters, he said, keeping up appearances and showing that parents support the school.

In the past four years, the school's campus has been an outpost of a neighborhood temporarily displaced, hidden behind construction dust, chain link fences and trucks that rumble off Nebraska Avenue with building materials.

On a sprawling tract of land across from the school, the Encore project is taking shape where the out-dated Central Park Village public housing complex was razed in 2007. Its approximately 1,300 residents were relocated to make way for a

\$425-to-\$450 million mixed-use, mixed-income village of apartment buildings, shops and a black history museum.

The economy and a court-decision on spending special tax district funds nearly crippled the project. Two years ago it gained the wings of phoenix with a \$28 million federal stimulus grant.

Water and sewer lines are going underground; Ray Charles Boulevard weaves through the site; and soon the first apartment building for seniors – the Ella – will go vertical. The next building scheduled for construction is The Trio, an apartment building for families.

And that carries the hope of new and returning families and a rebuilt neighborhood that could bring St. Peter Claver a brighter future.

The school teaches pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Its curriculum this year will add a new academic tool: chess and a chess club.

Last week 14 teachers sat at tables learning chess strategies from Academy Prep teacher Ted McNair, who will be the chess club's advisor.

“It teaches concentration, ability to form plans, goal setting, social skills and etiquette,” McNair said. All of them, skills that students need in life, he said.

About 100 students are enrolled for 2011-2012. Babatunde would like more but for now the focus is on year-to-year budgets from donations,

grants and student scholarships.

"We will be the viable private, Catholic option for parents who want that," said Babatunde. Parents like the smaller class sizes where it is easier for teachers and students to form close relationships. Children are "not a student in a crowd," she said.

Founded by a Jesuit priest in 1894, the school is Florida's oldest black parochial school. A wood structure on Morgan Street was burned to the ground that same year by arsonists who left a note that a "negro school" was not wanted.

St. Peter Claver was rebuilt at Nebraska Avenue and Governor Street and replaced in 1929 with the existing red-brick building. An annex was added in 1953. At its height, nearly 300 students attended.

Several years ago the school was dealt a blow when the St. Petersburg Catholic Diocese ended a nearly \$250,000 annual contribution to the school's budget. It was part of an overall reduction in funding for inner-city schools.

Most recently the diocese has agreed to give \$5,000 in matching funds to aid students' tuition.

"They are coming around to keeping our school open, more than in the past," Babatunde said. "They are now believing in what we're doing."

Others also are keeping faith with the school.

The Derek Jeter Turn 2 Foundation annually donates funds to cover tuition for about 15 students. Last month the foundation and Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful joined with students to

plant flowers and shrubs, add benches, stain picnic tables and paint flower pots with motivational messages.

Recently two air conditioning units were donated by ZMG Construction, the company building Encore. Joe Capitano, the Allegheny Franciscan Foundation and K-Force also helped paint a computer lab and add 18 computers.

The school works with the Tampa Housing Authority in matching up low-income students from public housing with scholarship funds. Many qualify for the Step Up for Students scholarships provided by corporate donors that in return receive state tax credits.

But Babatunde said this year the scholarship fund ran dry in May as more and more families faced lay-offs and foreclosures. "A lot of families are losing their incomes," she said.

About 90 percent of St. Peter Claver's students are eligible for reduced fees. Last year about 70 students received Step Up scholarships, Babatunde said.

Normally the money is available into the middle of the school year, she said.

Some students come to school lacking the basic supplies. "They don't have a pencil," said fourth grade teacher Catherine Simons. "Last year I had to hand out pencils to my first-graders every day. We make do."

For more information or to make donations, contact Babatunde at (813) 224-0865. ksteele@tampatrib.com