

EDUCATION

See inside Notre Dame School's new West Milwaukee campus for middle school boys



Rory Linnane

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Published 6:03 a.m. CT Oct. 17, 2023 | Updated 6:03 a.m. CT Oct. 17, 2023

Notre Dame School of Milwaukee, a longstanding southside Catholic elementary and middle school, opened a third campus this fall in West Milwaukee for its boys middle school students.

With the students using only the first floor of one of three buildings on the new campus, the purchase is part of a larger plan to keep expanding — a plan made more tenable thanks to recent action by state lawmakers to expand tax-funded vouchers, which pay private schools to educate students from lower-income families in lieu of tuition.

The school paid about \$3 million for the former Cristo Rey campus, Notre Dame School President Patrick Landry said. The location, at 1215 S. 45th St., is just south of American Family Field.

The property had been owned by St. Florian Parish, which operated a K-8 Catholic school there until 2003. The school building was then leased to Cristo Rey Jesuit High School from 2015 until 2020, when Cristo Rey moved into its newly constructed building on National Avenue in the Clarke Square neighborhood.

St. Florian Parish announced plans this summer to sell the campus, which includes the school building, church and one other building. The Discalced Carmelites, a Roman Catholic order that ran the parish, wasn't able to recruit enough friars to staff it.

Now, about 105 Notre Dame boys in grades five through eight are attending school at the campus.

Previously, those students shared a building with elementary students about a mile east, on the corner of Greenfield Avenue and Layton Boulevard. The elementary students are still there. Notre Dame started the coed elementary school in 2012 and added boys middle school students in 2018.

The girls middle school, which was Notre Dame's first school in 1996, is about another mile east, at 1420 W. Scott St.

The total enrollment of all three campuses is about 680 students, Landry said. With the new campus, it has space for up to 900. The school has waitlisted about 100 students in the past few years, he said.

Landry said the school might eventually shift students around.

"For example, does one of the facilities become an early childhood center, and do the boys and girls eventually go to one middle school? It gives us the opportunity to dream and to vision as to what we want to be not just next year but into the future," Landry said.

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Northwestern Mutual Foundation helped Notre Dame purchase campus

The school was able to purchase the campus a year earlier than expected because of a \$2 million loan from Northwestern Mutual Foundation.

Landry said school officials had been talking with St. Florian about purchasing the campus for a few months and fundraised about \$1 million before the Northwestern Mutual loan. The school plans to continue fundraising to pay back the loan.

The loan allowed the school to buy the property July 26 in time to move students in Aug. 24 and pull 50 students off its waitlist. Landry said it helped that Cristo Rey had recently used the building as a school and St. Florian had "taken great care of the facilities," so Notre Dame only spent about \$100,000 on additional work.

Northwestern Mutual Foundation President Steve Radke didn't disclose the terms of the loan but said it offers a "lower interest rate."

The assistance is part of a larger project by the Northwestern Mutual Foundation to invest in what it calls "high quality" schools. Most of the beneficiaries are private and charter schools. Former Milwaukee School Board President Larry Miller criticized the approach as "trickle-down" education: "help the top and hope that will somehow benefit the rest."

Notre Dame more confident in expansion after Wisconsin lawmakers boosted voucher funding

The financial model that sustained Notre Dame when it opened in 1996 is long gone. Like many Catholic schools, which once relied heavily on nuns to teach and raise money, the school has had to find other teachers and funding sources.

That doesn't come from tuition. The school is now largely funded by tax-funded vouchers, which have kept many Catholic schools afloat in Wisconsin.

"As the school has grown, the voucher program has grown with it," Landry said.

As of five years ago, about 99% of the school's students were in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, meaning the school receives vouchers instead of tuition for those students, who come from lower-income families.

That number has actually fallen recently, Landry said, with about 89% of students now qualifying for vouchers and others paying tuition.

"There's kind of a rising middle class that are interested in sending their children to Notre Dame," he said.

The tuition is less than the voucher, Landry said, making the school rely more on philanthropy. Landry said about 75% of the school's budget comes from vouchers, and about 25% from philanthropy.

A recent decision from the state Capitol is making the future look easier.

In June, lawmakers increased voucher amounts by over 20% starting this school year, providing about \$12,800 for each older student and \$10,300 for each younger student.

Landry said the move makes him more confident in the school's plans to expand. The school has been adding about 50 students each year since 2015, he said, and now has space for another couple hundred.

"The voucher change this past year really made the growth prospects much more attainable in being able to serve more children with that significant increase," he said.

Other private school leaders have also said that the funding boost makes it more possible to expand.

Augustin Ramirez, whose Ramirez Family Foundation funds Christian schools, said the voucher boost prompted him to finalize a deal to buy the former Cardinal Stritch University campus, where he plans to open a K-12 Christian school as an extension of St. Augustine Preparatory Academy.

Gov. Tony Evers approved the voucher increase, which many Democrats opposed, as part of a multi-pronged deal with Republican lawmakers that included more funding for local governments.

Contact Rory Linnane at rory.linnane@jrn.com. Follow her on Twitter at [@RoryLinnane](https://twitter.com/RoryLinnane).