



St. Francis of Assisi School in Greenwood Closing its Doors Permanently at the End of the Academic Year

Press Release – Franciscan Friars of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Province

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For Immediate Release

Greenwood, Mississippi – May 13, 2022 – The doors to St. Francis of Assisi School will be closed permanently when the academic year concludes next Friday, May 20, bringing an end to an institution that has been part of the Greenwood community for nearly three-quarters of a century. The announcement was made today by the Franklin, Wisconsin-based Franciscan Friars of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Province. The Franciscan friars will continue serving St. Francis Parish in Greenwood, an association that began some 70 years ago when Assumption Province was invited by the bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Jackson to begin pastoral ministry among the African American community. The school was opened in 1951.

Assumption Province officials cited a combination of factors that led to the decision, including years of:

- **Steadily declining student enrollment** – which plummeted to its current level of 50 total students and was projected to drop even further in the 2022/23 academic year, with only 41 students registered to date. Three of the six grade levels have single-digit student populations – the 1st grade the lowest with two students. The 3rd grade class has the most with 13 students.
- **Increasing operating budget deficits** – whose gap has widened from a \$35,000 shortfall in 2016/17, to the current school year deficit that’s approaching \$100,000. The 2022/23 deficit was projected to be \$173,950.
- **Diminishing funding and financial resources** – which has steadily tumbled, from \$168,000 in combined donations in 2017/18 to cover tuition assistance, building operations, and educational-related costs, to \$30,000 in 2021/22. Despite the support of generous donors to St. Francis of Assisi Mission, the school’s fundraising arm, donations have decreased dramatically due to death and other life-changing events among donors, predominantly an elder population.
- **Deteriorating building infrastructure** – which a recent independent site survey recommended addressing before the new school session with capital project upgrades, renovations and replacement to outdated electrical, plumbing, windows, parking lot, and other major systems at an estimated cost of nearly a half-million dollars.

Under the Province’s fair ability to pay program, financial assistance for tuition has always been available to families. Depending on their financial situation, families pay on a sliding scale the \$3,500 annual tuition cost, which is far less than the actual \$6,500 that it costs the school to educate each student.

A drop in student enrollment in 2017 – when the projection of 105 students plunged to a “crisis level” of 89, the first time in more than 50 years that its enrollment fell below 100 – prompted Assumption Province to begin a series of emergency meetings with faculty, parents, the school’s advisory board, parish leadership – including the pastoral council and finance council – diocesan officials, and the Franciscan Sisters. During these meetings, which continued into 2018, the Province presented the alarming trends of declining enrollment, increasing budget deficits, and other mounting financial issues – and engaged with all stakeholders in brainstorming about the school’s future. Enrollment has plummeted 60% since 2015/16, when the school had 123 students, compared to 50 today.

“We had been grappling with this decision for several years, during which we had to plan each new academic year without knowing if we would have the financial resources to actually open the school at the start of each fall semester,” said Fr. James Gannon, OFM, Provincial Minister of Assumption Province. “We friars are saddened and disappointed to close down an institution that has been vital to the education and faith development of thousands of students in our Greenwood community. But steadily declining enrollment and diminishing resources – coupled with growing budget deficits and deteriorating conditions of an aging physical plant – have made it abundantly clear that the long-term operational viability of St. Francis of Assisi School is no longer a sustainable reality. Our assessment to close the school was a painfully difficult, yet necessary decision.”

He added, “The support of our parent community, and the dedication and perseverance of the administration, faculty, staff, Franciscan Sisters, and friars have been nothing short of amazing during these very challenging years. Our students must also be commended for their numerous achievements during this time. It’s human nature to lay blame, but no one is at fault. This decision is the result of conditions beyond everyone’s control.”

While the school received what is considered extraordinary funding that temporarily kept the doors open – for example, monies from the pandemic-related federal Paycheck Protection Program, which mitigated a fraction of the operating deficit for a short period – Province officials likened this one-time funding assistance, although a blessing, to covering a gaping wound with a bandaid. Projected budget deficits had also been mitigated through the years by funding from the Mission, the parish, and Assumption Province.

Fr. Gannon noted that it was important to announce this decision well in advance of the fall semester of the 2022/23 academic year because it provides parents with adequate time to enroll their children in other schools, and it gives faculty and staff the ability to pursue employment opportunities.

“We are grateful for the prayers and support of our school and parish families, and to those who have provided financial support through the years,” said Fr. Joachim Studwell, OFM, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Parish. #