

135-year-old St. Mary of the Assumption School to close

Facing “insurmountable financial difficulties,” St. Mary of the Assumption School in the Govans neighborhood of Baltimore City will not re-open in the fall after 135 years of operation.

The Archdiocese of Baltimore notified the school and parish of the closing May 15.

“It’s just very painful for me to have to make such a decision,” Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien told The Catholic Review. “We tried every alternative. We think it will be better for those students in the long run ... and we’ll do our very best to make sure they are placed and do our best to help teachers and staff to find employment as well.”

Principal Elizabeth F. Phelan notified families of the closing via a letter, saying the school was projecting an operating deficit of \$900,000 for the end of the school year. Enrollment currently stands at 165 students for the school, which has tuition of \$4,400, plus other fees.

“Everyone is sad, but understands the financial issues,” Ms. Phelan told The Catholic Review. “It was the perfect storm.”

Bills have been escalating at the school as institutions that have been generous in the past, like Partners in Excellence and the archdiocese, have suffered the sting of the nation’s economic struggles, making it more difficult to provide assistance. Groups like the Knott Foundation have also been key contributors over the years.

St. Mary’s is now the third school in the archdiocese to announce its closure this school year, joining St. Michael School in Frostburg and Catholic Community School of South Baltimore. When those schools close, it will bring the total number shuttered since 2002 to 18.

There were five closings in 2002, the most in the last seven years. Three schools closed in both 2004 and 2005. There were no closures in 2008.

St. Mary's closing is personal for Ms. Phelan, who also attended the school where she is now principal. She said generations of Baltimoreans have been formed there.

"There are graduates of St. Mary's everywhere," Ms. Phelan said. "They are politicians, doctors and lawyers. They are all over the place."

She remembered a time when the school had so many students that it caused other schools to open.

Dr. Ronald Valenti, superintendent for Catholic schools, spoke with the school's faculty and staff May 15 to notify them of the closing. He said facing people "who have put so much energy and sacrifice" into the school was difficult.

"It never gets easy," he said. "They try not to take it personal, but it's tough."

Ms. Phelan said her staff and faculty were "looking for the positives" and thinking about the children of the school.

Many of them, along with families of students, will be at St. Mary's on May 26 for an open house. Representatives from other Catholic schools will be in attendance to provide information about tuition, academic programs and financial aid at their institutions.

Many in the school's population are not Catholic, but Father P. Edward Kenny Jr., St. Mary's pastor, said it "primarily served the most vulnerable young people in our community."

Ms. Phelan said the school was changing lives.

"The greatest possible impact you have on the children in a Christian-value environment is that they are learning and seeing there's another way to do things," she said. "We need to provide these kinds of programs."

Loyola College in Maryland saw potential in their York Road neighbor when it built a partnership with the elementary school in 2006. Loyola students worked as classroom aides. The college opened its campus for St. Mary of the Assumption students to work in science and photography laboratories.

Just last year, St. Mary's became a professional development school for Loyola.

Jesuit Father Brian F. Linnane had worked with Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden in recent weeks to stave off a potential closure.

"While Loyola deeply regrets the closing of St. Mary's School, we also understand the immense economic challenges influencing this decision," Father Linnane said in a statement to The Catholic Review. "We are grateful for all that our community has gained as a result of our partnership with St. Mary's, and look forward to identifying new ways to build our relationship with our neighbors along the York Road corridor."

Bishop Madden said: "It is never easy when a school has to close. We, as the archdiocese, stretched ourselves as far as we could go."

Father Kenny praised Bishop Madden and Father Linnane, saying they did "everything they possibly could," to save the school.

Although she is unsure about her own future, Ms. Phelan said she is trying to be supportive for students, families and teachers.

"God closes one door," Ms. Phelan said, "and opens windows."