

A Report Card

The Catholic Review

Last June, I attended a press conference with Frank Bramble, Chairman of the Blue Ribbon Committee on Catholic Schools, to receive the Committee's recommendations for creating a vibrant and sustainable schools system in our Archdiocese.

Bramble, along with more than a dozen respected educational, business, philanthropic, community and religious leaders spent over a year analyzing our schools, as well as other Catholic school systems throughout the country. Their work was prompted by the same challenges that have led to the closing of 6,000 Catholic schools nationwide over the past 50 years: declining enrollment; fewer financial resources from parishes and dioceses; fewer clergy and religious working unpaid as school administrators and teachers; and tuition that, though far short of actual per-student costs and modest by comparison to other private schools, is too expensive for many working-poor and working-class families.

The Committee identified changes and improvements that would, in their estimation, allow us to continue providing a Catholic education to all who desire it - a core mission of our Church.

These recommendations, 56 in all, were included in the Committee's Strategic Plan and covered four major areas of focus: Catholic Identity, Academics, Governance and Stewardship. The recommendations would result in the assigning of 760 action items - the very "footsteps" we would need to take to overcome the significant obstacles that led to the painful consolidation of 13 schools last year and which pose threats to others if unchecked.

I am pleased to report that 253 of these, or approximately one-third, have been completed, and the work continues, overseen by an outstanding team made up of our Superintendent of Schools, the Office of School Planning and Implementation and the Archdiocesan Catholic School Board.

So, while the students receive their report cards at the completion of another successful school year, I thought it only fair to see if we are making the grades in our work to stabilize and grow our school system.

Catholic Identity

We are working with religious communities to develop a new professional development program for school boards and school leaders with emphasis on Catholic identity and mission effectiveness. The Department of Schools will release a new standards-based religion curriculum for our elementary schools in the fall of 2011. And we see early progress as our students' scores on the ACRE test (the standardized test for religion) are up this year.

Academic Excellence

Our Archdiocese continues to implement a new system-wide accreditation program that measures accountability and effectiveness not only in our schools, but also our central offices.

Additionally, we have developed several new programs which are being offered in select schools to help them meet specific needs in the communities they serve. A dual language program at Archbishop Borders School in the Highlandtown section of Baltimore just completed its first year and teacher professional development this summer will support the expansion of this program, in English and Spanish.

We designated STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) programs at seven Archdiocesan schools this year. Akin to public "magnet" schools, these schools infuse STEM into students' classes throughout the day to help prepare them for the advances and changes in the global marketplace of the 21st century.

St. Ambrose School in Northwest Baltimore just completed its first year offering a new educational model that uses team teaching and hands-on learning to address the specific needs of students and apply learning to "real world" systems. And St. Pius X School in the Rodgers Forge community in Baltimore County will host the first Montessori program in the Archdiocese, which is set to begin this fall.

Renovations are taking place this summer to convert parts of the school to meet the unique requirements of this innovative approach to learning.

Governance

We have enlisted the support and participation of several leaders in our Archdiocese and surrounding community to serve on our new Archdiocesan Catholic School Board. The Board has met twice over the past several months and I have appointed members to both Finance and Strategic Planning Committees.

Understanding the Blue Ribbon Committee's strong belief in a new model of governance and oversight for our schools, we have also begun the implementation of the new Archdiocesan Collaborative School model. Eleven of our schools have converted to this model, which combines a deliberative school board, priest involvement, and a close working relationship between the head of a school and the Superintendent.

Finally, our Superintendent has conducted a review and assessment of all Catholic school boards and planning is underway to support their further development.

Stewardship

With a high priority on generating new streams of revenue for our schools to help our parents who are understandably struggling to make the sacrifices necessary to afford a Catholic education, we are targeting a number of sources for such assistance, including: an Archdiocesan-wide capital campaign, a special assessment on every parish, and an Archdiocesan-wide second collection during the 2011-12 school year. And we continue to seek support from the State of Maryland through the proposed BOAST Tax Credit, which is on par with that provided to tax-paying families in other neighboring states.

A new Director of School Finance has been appointed to work exclusively with our schools to ensure they are operating with optimum financial efficiency.

Beyond finances, the Committee's Stewardship recommendations also focus on key

areas such as facilities and marketing.

- We are completing assessments of both school facilities and technology capabilities to determine future needs of our schools so they remain competitive and effective in meeting the changing academic landscape.
- The Archdiocese is also working closely with our schools to help them develop strategic marketing plans that capitalize on their unique strengths and opportunities and which promote the school to current families and to the wider community.

As the Committee conducted its review last year to provide us with a roadmap for long-term stability and growth, we also took steps to address immediate challenges in our system. Some of these steps were painful, such as the consolidation. With approximately 10,000 available seats system-wide, we were able to prune our school system so it could operate more efficiently while still being able to offer a seat to every student in a consolidated school. By doing this, we not only were able to redirect new resources to schools and students, but also stabilize several schools that had enrollment challenges.

In all, nearly two-thirds of students who attended a consolidated school remained in a Catholic school in our Archdiocese. Thirty elementary schools and several high schools received students from consolidated schools. Included among them were: St. Clement Mary Hofbauer School which welcomed 150 new students from consolidated schools; Cardinal Shehan, 90; Our Lady of Victory, 73; Our Lady of Hope/St. Luke, 69; St. Augustine, 62; Ss. James and John, 59; and St. Philip Neri, 57.

These students remained in our schools for a number of reasons, including the availability of a new bus transportation system and increased tuition assistance which included nearly \$180,000 in aid from the Archdiocese to students of the former Cardinal Gibbons School.

Had we not taken this difficult step, we project from trends of the past five years that the consolidated schools would have seen an enrollment decline of 16 percent had they reopened for the 2010-11 school year.

We have many priorities underway to help us fulfill our mission as a Church and

disciples of Jesus. Like the challenge of filling our Catholic schools, we are also faced with other formidable challenges as a Church, including declines in Mass attendance, an aging and dwindling population of priests, a growing Spanish-speaking Catholic community, increases in violence, poverty and secularism, not to mention threats to religious freedom and dignity of human life. And like with our schools, these other challenges test our limited resources - both human and financial. There is no limit, however, on our desire, our commitment and our faith. So long as these are abundant, we have the strength needed to continue our journey.