

Archdiocese affiliates with new accreditation association

Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, the Archdiocese of Baltimore's superintendent for Catholic schools, announced April 17 that the Division of Schools and all archdiocesan Catholic schools have been awarded accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI).

The archdiocese was previously affiliated with the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

In total, 44 elementary schools and eight high schools are accredited through the SACS CASI. Dr. Valenti said.

Dr. Valenti, who will retire to pursue other opportunities in June, said the move has been developing for two years.

"There has been a lot of thought, deliberation and discernment going through it," Dr. Valenti told *The Catholic Review*.

A news release by the archdiocese said that there will be several benefits to the change, including a unified accreditation process with a scalable and sustainable evaluation of education quality; research that shapes educational policy and improves learning practices; product innovations, knowledge management and educational technologies.

SACS CASI is an accreditation division of AdvancED, the world's largest accrediting and school improvement organization.

“AdvancED is a protocol that focuses on systematic or system accreditation,” Dr. Valenti said.

Dr. Valenti said the AdvancED component was particularly attractive for district accreditation. Middle States was going to remain the accrediting agency, but the group’s partnership with SACS CASI dissolved recently, “I had to come to a decision about where we wanted to land,” Dr. Valenti said.

He met with a council of principals and a committee, and they decided that district accreditation was the best way to proceed.

“This approach is much more inclusive in its protocol because it not only involves individual schools, but the entire archdiocese, which includes the superintendent’s office,” Dr. Valenti said.

He said a visiting team will look at the mission of the superintendent’s office, its philosophy, goals and objectives and how they are implemented in the schools.

AdvancED, Dr. Valenti said, will have more “cross pollination” in visitation teams.

He added that members of the AdvancED, through SACS, will have Catholic education professionals from around the country.

Schools evaluated could be picked at random or be told in advance of incoming teams.

“That randomness says everybody has to be prepared because you don’t know who will be on that visitation cycle,” Dr. Valenti said.

Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien created a schools planning office in 2009 with the intent of creating a school system. The archdiocese is currently searching for a successor to Dr. Valenti.

Dr. Valenti said he consulted with Monsignor Robert L. Hartnett, executive director of schools planning, and Monsignor Richard W. Woy, vicar general, before making the decision.

The archdiocesan news release said AdvancED serves more than 27,000 public and private schools and school systems across the U.S. and in 65 countries, educating nearly 15 million students around the world.

Dr. Valenti said that when he told school administrators of the transition, “it was well-received.”

The archdiocese believes the change will be key “in promoting accountability and quality as it continues the process of strengthening its entire school system.”

The archdiocese announced the closings of 13 Baltimore City and Baltimore County schools in early March. The archbishop’s Blue Ribbon Committee of experts is currently developing a strategic plan for the future of schools. It is expected to be delivered to the archbishop in June.

Dr. Valenti said AdvancED has seven standards, including Catholic identity. Catholic identity is expected to be a major focus of the archdiocesan school system in the future.

The superintendent said the plans for district accreditation fit nicely with the Blue Ribbon Committee’s work.

“It just naturally and beautifully converged,” Dr. Valenti said. “The Blue Ribbon Committee’s plan, once it’s unveiled, is going to help us centralize our directions so there’s much more unanimity of how we operate and function. It certainly elevates and increases the accountability factor for all concerned.”