

Blue Ribbon Committee considered affordability primary issue

The Archdiocese of Baltimore believes families want a Catholic education for their children.

Many just can't afford it.

As tuition rates have skyrocketed throughout the years, thousands of children have been pulled from schools. The archdiocese is hoping they come back in a reconfigured school system thanks to a strategic plan delivered by the Blue Ribbon Committee on Catholic Schools delivered to Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien June 10.

Among the 56 recommendations offered by the 17-member committee were three proposals to address the tuition concerns. Thirty-one schools have closed since 2002, 40 percent of the size of the school system 10 years ago, according to Bramble. Thirteen shuttered in the last month.

"Pictures speak a thousand words, and it's clear why the archbishop decided that he needed to put together an effort to provide a future for the school system," the committee's chairman, Frank Bramble said. "Clearly we don't want to go through the next 10 years with what we have been dealing with as an archdiocese and as a school system the last 10 years."

An executive summary of the plan said the committee recommends that a Policy on Catholic School Tuition and Tuition Assistance be established, which will be phased in during the next three years and will be "fully effective by the 2013/2014 school year."

The recommendations would eliminate differences in in-parish and out-of-parish tuition rates, Catholic and non-Catholic rates and ending family discounts in tuition for multiple children.

Many schools have stopped multi-child discounts because it became cost prohibitive.

In his Catholic Review column this week, Archbishop O'Brien said he would consult with priests, educators and others about the plan. The multi-child discount recommendation caught the archbishop's eye.

"Since this benefit has come to be relied upon by many of our families, I want to study the recommendation's impact before adopting it," the archbishop wrote.

According to the executive summary, "a review of 31 schools that have a difference between in-parish and out-of-parish tuition shows that, for one student, the tuition difference ranges from \$599 up to \$3,551, with an average difference of \$1,273 and a median difference of \$1,100."

It went on to state, "currently, 11 schools do not differentiate between in-and-out-of-parish students and have a single tuition rate."

All mandatory fees, except for application and registration, would be combined with tuition for a single rate. It would require all applicants of any archdiocesan tuition assistance to use the archdiocesan application process.

The committee, the executive summary said, is not recommending a single uniform tuition rate. Each school would determine its own rate to reflect the cost of educating students.

The committee also recommended a study be conducted to evaluate whether preferences should be given in the awarding of unrestricted tuition assistance to financially eligible Catholic applicants and/or children of employees of archdiocesan institutions.

Also, the committee recommended the archdiocese "explore the potential advantages of ... negotiating a single provider agreement, on behalf of the schools in the archdiocese. According to the summary, more than \$3 million (or three percent) of tuition is attributed to "bad debt."

Bramble said there is a "great demand" for Catholic schools. He was hopeful the plan would help reverse the tide and get children back in classrooms.

"The overwhelming crisis in our schools is not a lack of demand, it's a lack of

financial resources,” Bramble said.