

Catholic Community School of South Baltimore to close in June

Mounting debt and dwindling enrollment have led to the decision to close the 37-year-old Catholic Community School of South Baltimore in June.

Sister Vicki Staub, the school's principal and a Sister of St. Joseph, disclosed the decision in an April 3 letter to families in which she said the school could no longer survive its financial burdens.

"We realize that this announcement comes as a painful shock to you, to our teachers, our staff and most of all our students," Sister Vicki wrote. "I ask you to please tell your children about this announcement. I also ask you to explain to your children that CCS closing is not their fault, and that you will find them another school that will be a good school for them."

The 165-student school draws from parishes in the Catholic Community of South Baltimore – St. Mary, Star of the Sea, where it is housed; Holy Cross; and Our Lady of Good Counsel.

Founded in 1972, the school was the first urban cluster education institution in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Some of the parishes in the cluster started educating in the 1800s.

Sister Vicki's letter detailed the financial struggles of Catholic Community School, which had a projected decrease in enrollment for the 2009-2010 school year as well.

The school had a budget deficit for more three years and projected a \$330,000 deficit for the 2009-2010 school year. Last school year saw the school "absorb a debt of \$130,000 in outstanding tuition," according to the letter.

The school is still owed \$250,000 in tuition, according to the letter. The Archdiocese of Baltimore provided \$500,000 over the last five years to help cover expenses. According to the letter, the school anticipates needing further assistance to make payroll for the 2008-09 school year.

Even with that aid and the anonymous donation of \$500,000 from a benefactor over the last six years, Sister Vicki wrote, the school could not survive.

Father Patrick Carrion, pastor of the Catholic Community of South Baltimore, met with Sister Vicki, parish and school staff members and archdiocesan officials over the last three months. Together, the decision was made to close the school.

"It's very difficult," Father Carrion said, "knowing that it impacts lot of families and the parish."

Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent of Catholic schools, said the school had reached "a conundrum," of continuing to raise tuition beyond the means of its family base in order to meet costs.

"It's a reflection of the tough economic times we're in," Dr. Valenti said. "It's an extremely emotional time for a school when it is closing because you've built a community, a faith community and there's kind of a family tie. It comes with a grieving process."

Staff are being advised of other work possibilities. St. Casimir, St. Rose of Lima and St. Philip Neri schools will visit Catholic Community School April 20, to talk to families about their institutions.

St. Michael School of Frostburg also announced in November it would close in June. With the two new closings, 17 schools in the archdiocese have shuttered since 2002.

More than 1,000 students left the system in the last year. Nearly 5,000 have been lost since the 2001-02 school year.

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, concerned about those statistics and the financial difficulty facing schools, created a schools planning office that has enlisted a blue-ribbon panel of experts to create a school system for the future.

Twenty-three elementary schools reported an operating loss during the 2008 fiscal year, 11 of which were repeats from the previous year. Four high schools reported an operating loss in the 2008 fiscal year, three of which were repeats from the previous year.

The closure of Catholic Community School is sure to bring awareness of the dwindling number of Catholic schools within Baltimore City.

The city public school system recently announced a planned re-organization that could affect more than 30 schools.

“How do we not lose sight of our mission and provide educational opportunities for those who desire while maintaining good stewardship?” Dr. Valenti said. “These are troubling times, but they are times we can get through and times we will conquer.”