

# Catholic Education: A Right or a Luxury?

The toll our sluggish national economy has taken on the average American family is reported nearly every day by the news media and is evident in almost every aspect of our daily lives. It seems like everything costs more these days, from groceries to gasoline to the electric bill. For many people, the substantial increase in the cost of basic necessities has forced them to make very tough decisions about how they spend their money. For some families, even priorities such as tuition are no longer within their financial reach.

Though it is early and enrollment numbers are still being calculated, it appears that many parents – possibly twice as many as in recent years – have been forced to withdraw their students from Catholic schools as a result of the tightening economy throughout our Archdiocesan school system. Students whose parents could barely afford to pay tuition in previous years but who sacrificed and worked extra jobs and borrowed from grandparents and others to acquire just enough to make it through the school year, were “priced out” of their ability to continue their Catholic education this year. This is extremely troubling to me.

Declining enrollment, especially in our schools in Baltimore City, is certainly not a new challenge for us. We saw similar reductions in the early 1980s. Then, in the latter part of the decade and the early part of the 90s, enrollment began to steadily increase due, in part, to a highly successful marketing program generously funded by the Knott Foundation of Baltimore. In the mid-90s Cardinal Keeler established a new scholarship program, Partners in Excellence, a dynamic initiative which brought an infusion of much-needed funding for tuition assistance. As a result, the Archdiocese was able to attract both new students and new funding sources which gave our schools and the families they serve much-needed hope for the foreseeable future and beyond.

Now, recent data suggests that another trend of declining enrollment will continue again this year and, in fact, has become much more severe. Since 1999 through last June, the total population in our archdiocesan elementary schools has gone from

23,929 to 20,985, a decline of 12 percent. Though the recent downswing in the economy is certainly a factor and may explain the sharp decrease over the past year, it does not explain the significant downward spiral that has continued now for almost a decade. During that same period 14 schools either closed or merged. The problem is magnified in our inner-city schools where enrollment has decreased over the previous five years by nearly 2,000 students, resulting in the closure or merger of nine schools. The situation is serious and demands our attention.

The problems facing our schools are not singular to this Archdiocese. We know that Catholic schools in urban settings throughout the country are facing the exact same challenges that our schools are facing here in Baltimore. This was evidenced most clearly in a report released earlier this year by The Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The report, *Who Will Save America's Urban Catholic Schools?*, stated, "America's urban Catholic schools are in crisis ... over 1,300 schools have shut down since 1990, mostly in our cities. As a result, some 300,000 students have been displaced - forced to attend other public, private or parochial schools. The school closures have cost taxpayers more than \$20 billion to accommodate the additional students that public schools have to absorb." In the Archdiocese of Baltimore alone, it is estimated that Catholic schools save Maryland taxpayers an estimated \$378 million annually in per-pupil expenditures. On the matter of public funding, the report's authors concluded, "Given the increased costs that local, state and federal governments would incur if the remaining K-12 Catholic schools simply closed - as well as the country's increasing interest in diversity, choice and student achievement - it is time for policymakers to find ways to provide additional funding to Catholic schools, especially those serving families in poverty."

We know that the same challenges that have collided head-on to make Catholic schools unaffordable to so many in our Archdiocese, are the common factors threatening the future of Catholic schools throughout the country. These factors include aging buildings, diminished parish financial support, drastic population shifts from the city to the suburbs (Baltimore's population went from a post-war high of one million to 637,000 in 2007), and the sharp rise in operating costs which pay the growing number of teachers who have replaced the priests, nuns and brothers who served in our schools so generously and in such great numbers when our classrooms were bursting at the seams just a few short decades ago. To offset these

increased costs, schools are forced to raise tuitions, which in turn has forced low-income and minority families out of schools they can no longer afford. Now, even our middle-class families are struggling to meet the burden that tuition places on their budgets.

What is most discouraging is that these children will not receive the benefit of a quality, Catholic education – a benefit that can be life-altering for some if not most. People send their children to our schools because the schools work and because their children emerge from them better educated, better prepared and better human beings. In the last school year, nearly three out of every four Catholic elementary school students continued their education in a Catholic high school, 97 percent of our students graduated from high school, 95 percent continued on to college, and 100 percent participated in community outreach. According to the Fordham report, 88 percent of Catholics view Catholic schools favorably and 91 percent of Catholics associate the “development of moral values and discipline” with their parochial schools more than any other attribute.

One of our core missions as a Church is the education of children – all children – something affirmed by Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to the United States this past April. “Catholic education ... is an outstanding apostolate of hope ... these institutions’ long-term sustainability must be assured. Indeed, everything possible must be done, in cooperation with the wider community, to ensure that they are accessible to people of all social and economic strata.” I am most grateful to our parents, who sacrifice so much for their children’s education, to the larger Catholic community whose support makes a Catholic education possible for so many, and to our teachers, administrators and pastors who bear with dignity, humility and grace so much of the burden of the problems confronting our schools.

So, where do we go from here? Our Catholic schools are doing a superior job of educating our children and of preparing them for higher education, society and beyond. But fewer and fewer people – especially those in the inner city – can afford them. What can the Church and its leaders do to make Catholic education more affordable? What should be the role of parishioners, business leaders and Catholic school supporters? And, finally, what should we demand of our elected officials and policymakers to ensure the future of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of

Baltimore - the birthplace of Catholic education in our country? Any solution or strategy for preserving Catholic education will be dependent on the active involvement and support of not only the local Catholic community, but also the wider public - including those who represent all of us in local, state and federal government.

I hope to offer some hope with suggestions in next week's column.

To learn more about Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Baltimore or for information about upcoming Catholic high school fairs, visit [www.archbalt.org](http://www.archbalt.org).