

Catholic schools consortium makes great strides

The newly formed Mid-Atlantic Catholic Schools Consortium has made significant strides strengthening Catholic education in the year since the Annapolis-based organization was launched, according to Dr. Mary Ellen Hrutka, executive director.

A big part of its success stems from an ability to leverage the size of the consortium to win benefits for schools while also encouraging greater cooperation and collaboration among educators, said Dr. Hrutka.

“One of our areas of focus has been strategic procurement,” said Dr. Hrutka, noting that the consortium is made up of the archdioceses of Baltimore and Washington, D.C., and the dioceses of Arlington, Va.; Richmond, Va.; Wheeling-Charleston, W.Va.; and Wilmington, Del.

“There’s real value in the six dioceses collaborating in the acquisition of goods and services,” she said.

Dr. Hrutka highlighted how the consortium has worked with the Washington archdiocese to establish an energy cooperative similar to one that already exists in the Baltimore archdiocese. The cooperative allows Washington-area Catholic schools and other archdiocesan entities to receive electricity and natural gas at affordable group rates.

More than 60 parishes, archdiocesan and independent schools and other Catholic locations in Prince George’s and Montgomery counties have joined the voluntary cooperative, with an anticipated savings for electricity in the first 12 months estimated at approximately \$370,000, according to the consortium.

The consortium has also worked to help schools take advantage of the federal e-rate program that allows non-profit private schools to receive discounted telecommunications services, Dr. Hrutka said. The Baltimore archdiocese and the Richmond diocese are participating in a program that provides training for principals to make sure they know how to use the e-rate program, she said.

“We expect that in Baltimore and Richmond, we will see considerable increases in the amount of money coming through the e-rate program,” she said.

The consortium is in the process of launching a partnership with a company called U.S. Communities that will allow participating dioceses to purchase playground equipment, office supplies, roofing and other supplies provided by 22 major providers at competitive rates.

On March 7, the consortium and the Diocese of Arlington will sponsor a daylong development workshop for more than 1,400 Catholic school teachers that will be led by Dr. Heidi Hayes Jacobs, a national expert on curriculum mapping.

The consortium has also completed a survey of principals to determine if their schools are taking full advantage of the federal benefits that are due to Catholic school children under the No Child Left Behind Law, Dr. Hrutka said. The results of the survey will be unveiled during a Feb. 20 conference that will feature a keynote address by Dr. Nancy Grasmick, state schools superintendent.

“We know there is a considerable gap from what they are entitled and what they actually receive,” said Dr. Hrutka.

The director said she is working with state Catholic conferences to make sure dioceses are advocating for inclusion in local education programs that provide textbooks, technology and other benefits. The consortium is also establishing a leadership development institute to better prepare future principals, teachers, pastors and other educational leaders, she said.

“I have to say, the consortium has received very good visibility in our first year,” said Dr. Hrutka, noting that the consortium held a Mid-Atlantic Catholic Schools Summit in September.

“The bishops and superintendents of the six dioceses have provided the consortium with wonderful cooperation and collaboration,” she said. “There’s a tremendous willingness to share. We are very optimistic about the future.”