

Committee ready to tackle schools issues

When Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien asked local businessman Frank Bramble to chair a blue-ribbon committee to save Catholic schools, he told him to find the keenest minds to make up the panel.

Schools lost 1,000 students last fall, double the average drop of each of the last five years, a decline that created a sense of urgency for the archdiocese and a need for fresh voices to address the problem.

Mr. Bramble finalized the committee earlier this month, tapping people from the public and private education sectors, as well as the business world.

"We want to make sure that we have as many experts as possible feeding into this," Archbishop O'Brien told The Catholic Review. "Our people and priests know that all of the answers are not just with Catholics. We want to assure all of our people that this is an objective approach. It's a good mix that Mr. Bramble has come up with for us."

The committee features three public school officials, including Dr. Nancy Grasmick, the superintendent of the Maryland State Department of Education.

The state's public school system was recently named the best in the nation by two independent organizations. Maryland seniors also rank No. 1 in passing advance placement exams.

In an interview with The Catholic Review, Dr. Grasmick said she is concerned with preserving academic choice for parents.

"One of the things I admire about Catholic schools is their dedication to good education," she said, "and also the values that are placed in the students, whether you are part of the religious community or not."

Dr. Grasmick said she has enjoyed a strong relationship with the archdiocese in the

past and looks forward to helping schools remain open. Other public schools leaders on the committee are Dr. Joseph Hairston, Baltimore County public schools superintendent, and Dr. Andres Alonso, chief executive officer for Baltimore City public schools.

Mr. Bramble said Catholic schools can learn from their public counterparts' restructuring efforts.

"That's where Nancy Grasmick and Dr. Alonso will be incredibly helpful," said Mr. Bramble, a St. Pius X, Rodgers Forge, parishioner. "Once we understand these (Catholic school) environments, then it becomes about what we need and that gets into how we're going to fund this thing. Where's the funding going to come from? How many structures are we going to build? Where are we going to find the capital to build them? Where are they going to be?"

Rabbi Lawrence Ziffer, director of the Center for Jewish Education of Baltimore, was an important addition, according to Mr. Bramble, because he "is dealing with a lot of the same problems we're dealing with."

Conventual Franciscan Father Michael T. Martin, president of Archbishop Curley High School in Baltimore, was one of the few Catholic schools administrators chosen to the committee.

"I want to do whatever I can to make sure Catholic schools are around for a long time," Father Martin said. "I feel very good about what we're doing."

The other members of the committee include Monsignor Robert L. Hartnett, the committee's executive director and pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Essex; James Davis, co-chairman and director of the Allegis Group; Owen M. Knott, vice president of The Marion I. and Henry J. Knott Foundation; and Father Joseph L. Muth, pastor, St. Matthew, Northwood.

Also, Pamela Sanders, the principal of St. Ambrose Catholic School in Park Heights; Dr. Mary Pat Seurkamp, the president of College of Notre Dame of Maryland, Baltimore; James Stojak, retired director, Citicorp Credit Service, Inc. in Hagerstown; Casper R. Taylor Jr., former speaker, Maryland House of Delegates;

and Thomas Wilcox, president and CEO, Baltimore Community Foundation.