

Dioceses form Mid-Atlantic Catholic Schools Consortium

ANNAPOLIS – When Dr. Mary Ellen Hrutka attended a Catholic elementary school in Yonkers, N.Y., there were 86 students in her class and the faculty was made up almost entirely of Franciscan Sisters of Baltimore.

Some five decades later, Catholic education has changed dramatically. Religious sisters, priests and brothers now make up a small minority of faculty in Catholic schools across the country. Class sizes have shrunk and costs have increased significantly as school leaders struggle to pay for lay teacher salaries, modern technology and enhanced curriculum – all while maintaining their buildings and trying to keep tuition from spiraling out of reach.

To meet the challenges of a changing educational environment, Dr. Hrutka has been named executive director of the newly formed Mid-Atlantic Catholic Schools Consortium. The Annapolis-based venture is a first-of-its kind effort to develop regional strategies for addressing common challenges in the areas of funding, leadership and governance.

The consortium is made up of six dioceses and archdioceses: Arlington, Va.; Baltimore; Richmond, Va.; Washington; Wheeling-Charleston, W.Va.' and Wilmington, Del. It serves a student population of more than 120,000.

The former vice provost and dean of the School of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Maryland University College, Dr. Hrutka said her initial goals will be focused on increasing the visibility and awareness of Catholic schools. The consortium will also sponsor a regional summit on the future of Catholic education and develop a leadership institute for superintendents, pastors and principals.

A major focus of the consortium will be identifying outside resources to make Catholic education affordable and accessible, Dr. Hrutka said. That will involve maximizing the size of the consortium to leverage better rates on energy, supplies and other resources.

There are many federal benefits that Catholic schools do not currently take advantage of that Dr. Hrutka would also like to maximize, and there are political fights to be won so Catholic school families have access to textbooks, transportation, teacher benefits and more.

"I think the law is very clear about benefits that our children and their families are entitled to receive," said Dr. Hrutka, noting that federal programs offer support for instruction, services for children with developmental needs and professional development support for teachers.

"At the same time, it's a complicated and changing process," she said. "Our principals have many jobs to do, and so to expect them to become federal program specialists as well as academic leaders is perhaps not realistic."

That's where the consortium can help, she said. The organization can also begin to explore new governance models for schools that will make better use of resources, she said.

Catholic education makes a significant contribution to the mid-Atlantic region, Dr. Hrutka said. Not only does it produce good citizens who contribute to society, it has an economic impact of at least \$1.14 billion annually. In Maryland alone, non-public schools save state taxpayers \$1.3 billion annually in per-pupil expenditures, she said.

Catholic schools in the mid-Atlantic region are diverse places of learning open to everyone in the community, she said. Minority students currently represent about 26 percent and non-Catholic students about a fifth of the student body in mid-Atlantic Catholic schools.

"In Maryland, we have a strong public school system and a strong set of nonpublic schools," she said. "Our state is better off because of the strength of both systems."

Catholic schools provide families with the "opportunity to choose the education system that they think is best and most appropriate for their children and their families," she added.

The consortium is governed by a 13-member board of directors and supported by a leadership council of business, educational and community leaders. It is funded by

participating dioceses as well as through grants and private contributions. The director reports to the board of directors.

Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, said Catholic schools must work collectively to meet common challenges and the consortium is a practical way of doing that.

“We can no longer be working in a vacuum,” he said. “With Mary Ellen coming on board, with her education insights, she certainly will help us achieve our goals.”

Cardinal William H. Keeler said the consortium will “provide the organizational framework through which all interested parties can work together to be part of the schools’ continued success.”

Dr. Hrutka received her doctorate in higher education administration from the University of Miami. She has a master’s degree in counseling and college student personnel from the University of Maryland, College Park; a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Southern Connecticut State College and an associate’s degree in liberal arts from Westchester Community College in New York.

The executive director is a member of the board of trustees at St. John’s College High School in Washington, D.C., and the board of the Catholic schools of the Archdiocese of Washington. She is a parishioner of St. John the Baptist in Silver Spring.