

Enrollment numbers continue dip at schools

Catholic elementary and high schools had a combined decline of 1,789 students this fall from the previous year.

The total number of students fell from 33,096 in the 2008-09 school year to 31,307 in the 2009-10 school year, according to Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent of Catholic schools for the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Even though the number was steep, Dr. Valenti said he was expecting worse given the current economic climate in the region and based on anecdotal evidence from principals and administrators.

"Although these numbers are stark, they're not as bad as I thought they would be," Dr. Valenti said. "I was really thinking 2,000 to 2,100"

Dr. Valenti said he was "not surprised" at a significant decline.

Elementary schools lost 1,379 students, which is down 6.91 percent from the last year. Elementary schools had a decline of 1,031 students in 2008-2009.

He said the total number of elementary school students stands at 18,575

High schools also experienced a decline, losing 439 students after 224 left schools last year. Three elementary schools closed at the end of last year- including St. Michael in Frostburg, St. Mary of the Assumption in Govans and Catholic Community School of South Baltimore.

Towson Catholic High School, operated and supported by Immaculate Conception parish, closed in July.

Schools in the archdiocese are expected to see major changes in the next few years as a strategic plan developed by a blue-ribbon committee of education, business and political leaders will be unveiled in June 2010.

Families have left Catholic schools as tuition prices have escalated across the board.

Dr. Valenti said the archdiocese must market schools as a worthwhile investment for the future of children. One of the difficult tasks for his staff, and the blue ribbon committee, is to provide an education that is not financially out of reach of parents and families.

“You want to recruit people,” he said. “You want to get that positive image out there. It still comes down to affordability. We’re in a perfect storm kind of economy.”