# Gearing Up for the Future

## The Catholic Review

Last Thursday, the committee formed to create a strategic plan for the future of Catholic schools, the Blue Ribbon Committee on Catholic Schools, issued to me its 56 recommendations for assuring the long-term sustainability and growth of our Catholic school system.

Their thoughtful approach and insightful ideas represent 16 months and countless hours of research, consultation and discussion—all from 17 individuals from diverse professions but who share a belief in the power of education in the life of our children.

I attended their first meeting in March 2009 to thank them for their service and to give them some guidelines within which to work. The goal I set before them was to make Catholic education more affordable and accessible. I didn't share a room with them again until last Thursday when they handed me the report with their recommendations.

Father Joe Muth, a fine pastor of St. Matthew's Church in Baltimore City and a member of the Committee, summed up well his view of the system at the conclusion of the study: "This isn't your father's Catholic school anymore," he said.

Perhaps a simplistic outlook, it speaks to the heart of our challenge: in attempting to fix what's broken in our system we can't do so with an eye toward making them what they once were. Times are different, our schools are different, the children we serve are different and those serving in our schools are different, the needs and desires of our parents are different and the community around us is different. We need to move our schools forward if they are to succeed in the long-term and we need bold ideas and initiatives if we are to get there.

The Committee recognized this in many of its recommendations. For example, the creation of an Archdiocesan School Board, of a shared governance model that allows educators to support and hire educators and priests and religious to foster the

school's Catholic identity, and the creation of structures for greater consistency and accountability in achieving ongoing academic excellence.

Implementing measures that improve academic performance was one of four key areas of focus for the Committee, which discerned these factors as critical to the overall success of our schools. Two others–Catholic identity and governance were thoroughly addressed in their report. Embracing more tightly the bonds between Church and school and putting people in positions that "play to their strengths" and where they have the best chance of positively impacting our students, are the intended outcomes of these measures.

The recommendations in the fourth key area, stewardship, which includes the critical issue of affordability, will perhaps have the most direct impact on our enrollment. Like the Archdiocese, the Committee's report recognizes that many students, whether from suburban Catholic families or non-Catholic families living in the inner city, are unable to benefit from a Catholic education due to the cost. Several recommendations attempt to address this, including the financial support for Catholic schools by all parishes, whether or not they are attached to a school, the institution of an Archdiocesan-wide capital campaign, and the continued push for government support for taxpaying families.

I continue to study the report and, while I am committed to the changes they recommend, I want the opportunity to consult with priests, educators and others to better understand their impact. An example is the recommendation calling for the elimination of multi-student family discounts. Understandably, the Committee wants to ensure that the cost of educating students is covered by the tuition charged. If families have financial need, the Committee believes this should be addressed through tuition assistance. It follows that there needs to be fairness and consistency in the application of tuition assistance or discounts. In addition, the Committee recognized that many schools no longer offer this type of automatic assistance because the cost to do so became prohibitive. The result has been an unhealthy competition among some schools with negative impact on enrollment. Since this benefit has come to be relied upon by many of our families, I want to study the recommendation's impact before adopting it.

Clearly, we'll study the impact of this and all 56 recommendations and I've called for the creation of an office in Central Services to create an implementation plan, including a timetable, by November 1. Where possible and prudent, we'll implement some recommendations before then where there is a critical need to move forward. (Note: This plan will be submitted by November 1; the full implementation will undoubtedly take several years.)

In addition, we have begun circulating this Strategic Plan widely, including through our website (www.archbalt.org), and look forward to hearing the comments of those who have viewed it.

My profound thanks, on behalf of our entire Archdiocese, to the members of the Blue Ribbon Committee, including Mr. Frank Bramble, its Chair, to the Office of Schools Planning for their tireless support of the Committee's research and deliberations, and to Msgr. Rich Bozzelli for moderating the many Committee meetings that produced this road map that will guide our schools to a new era in the history of Catholic education in our Archdiocese.