

Group hopes to make Catholic high school attainable for more students

WASHINGTON – When Father Peter Stravinskias went to Catholic high school back in the 1960s, tuition was initially \$150 a year. By the time he graduated it had doubled. Now the school’s annual tuition of about \$8,000 not only gives him pause but also keeps him extremely busy.

The priest, a noted scholar, author and apologist, is also the executive director of the Catholic Education Foundation, a group based in Rochester, N.Y., that provides scholarships nationwide to Catholic high-school students.

Several groups with the same name provide Catholic school scholarships to students within their own diocese or archdiocese. For example, there is a Catholic Education Foundation in Los Angeles, Kansas City, Kan., Joliet, Ill., Lansing, Mich., and Louisville, Ky. – to name a few. But the Rochester group is the only one that provides scholarships across the country. It also only focuses on high schools, something Father Stravinskias said is unique.

“High schools tend to get lost in the shuffle,” he told Catholic News Service, noting that Catholic elementary schools tend to have more “things in place for financial aid.” Annual tuitions for Catholic high schools, according to the group, range from \$4,000 to \$15,000.

Father Stravinskias became involved four years ago with the Catholic Education Foundation, founded in 2001 by A. Joseph Indelicato, CEO of Caritas Consulting of Rochester. Indelicato’s concern, according to the priest, was that Catholic high schools were “pricing themselves out of existence.” Since it began, the group has provided 64 scholarships nationwide.

Initially, Father Stravinskias served as the group’s national chaplain, but his role expanded from “whatever spare time he had” to nearly a full-time job.

One of his initial tasks was to establish an episcopal advisory board, which currently includes 12 bishops. He said the support of bishops from across the country tells

schools and donors that “this isn’t a maverick organization.”

He also has initiated programs to help Catholic schools such as workshops to promote Catholic identity and to involve priests in the daily life of schools. Promoting Catholic identity is key, the priest said, because schools “have to look carefully at who they are” and see that as “a big selling point.”

Although seminars on the role of priests in Catholic schools might seem unnecessary, Father Stravinskis said the advice is urgently needed.

In a letter he wrote to members of the episcopal advisory board, Father Stravinskis said he frequently hears complaints from parents and teachers about the “near-total absence of priests” in Catholic schools. Conversely, he said he has heard from many priests, most of whom did not attend Catholic school, who have said they were either not welcomed at schools or didn’t know what their roles should be there.

As Father Stravinskis sees it, priests are not the only Catholics who need to reconnect with Catholic high schools. Catholics overall need to recognize what it is that these schools provide, he said, calling them the “big link in the chain” connecting what Catholic youths learn in elementary school and what they bring with them to college and their adult lives.

These schools are not meant to keep students “in hibernation” from the outside world, either, he said. Ideally, they should equip students to “take a critical stance toward culture” and prepare them to “confront secularism,” he said.

But that can’t happen if parents can’t afford to send them there.

And he doesn’t see an end in sight in the work to help this happen, especially for middle-class families.

The priest doesn’t have to look further than some of his own friends to see the financial burden of Catholic high-school tuition. He said he knows couples who spend “35 (percent) to 40 percent of their combined income on high-school tuition.”