Leading Voices on Schools

The Catholic Review

In my column two weeks ago, I provided the text of the address I delivered last month at two separate meetings with parish and school leaders concerning the critical challenges facing our schools. In those remarks I presented an overview of the current state of our schools and an outline of the steps we are taking to address the immediate and long-term stability of Catholic education in our Archdiocese. I also articulated the following overarching goal of our efforts: “To make Catholic education as affordable and accessible to as many Catholic youngsters as possible as well as to non-Catholics in some of our more impoverished communities.”

The true benefit to my calling these leaders together, though, would come from the valuable insight and guidance they would lend to the urgent process we are undertaking for current and future generations of Catholics. Assigned to tables of eight, the individuals present were asked to discuss the issues as framed by three questions posed by a facilitator, Sr. Connie Gilder, SSJ, who ably serves as our Delegate for Religious. Each table’s representative would then share that group’s response to these questions before having an opportunity to share their own thoughts and ideas in an “open mic” period.

Before the table discussions began, though, I thought it best to offer some guidelines to help keep the conversations productive and focused. Important as they are, I think it appropriate to reiterate them:

1. While nearly every possible scenario is on the table, one scenario is not. And that is a future that does not include Catholic schools.
2. The system of schools that was initially created by immigrants and for immigrant Catholic students…must emerge from this effort a school system.
3. All of our parishes – including those with no attachment to a school – must be active supporters of Catholic schools.
4. Our next effort will be to focus on religious education students to whom we are obliged to pass along the fullness of our Catholic faith.

5. We must make it a priority to broaden the base of financial support for students in our Catholic schools—including the entire Catholic community, philanthropic organizations, and government entities.
6. Consistent with maintaining a strong Christ-centered identity, our schools must uphold a commitment to provide children and youth an affordable, values-based, academically-excellent education in a safe environment, and rooted in the sacred traditions of our faith.
7. The focus of this committee is to plan over the next 18 months for the long-term sustainability of Catholic education. Meanwhile, we will continue to meet our ongoing responsibility of addressing the real and serious enrollment and financial challenges that pose an immediate threat to some of our schools.

Not surprisingly, the discussions yielded a range of ideas and suggestions—all of which I was grateful to receive and which will prove inordinately helpful to the Blue Ribbon Committee tasked with studying our schools and charting a course for the future of Catholic education in our Archdiocese. The Committee will likewise seek to hear from others who are equally important to Catholic education and on whom we will rely heavily for ideas and guidance, including parents, students, teachers, consecrate religious, donors, community leaders, etc.; anyone and everyone with a desire to see Catholic schools emerge from this process better and stronger will have a place at our ever-growing table.

We received a number of similar, if not identical, ideas from both groups of leaders. For example, in response to the question, "What should never be overlooked or disregarded," both parish and school leaders cited the critical importance of Catholic identity and called for increased awareness by our schools of the role of Catholic education in fulfilling the Church's missions of both service to the poor and of evangelization.

Responding to a request for recommendations, both groups suggested that we seek new and creative sources for funding (including from every parish, not just those with schools), and that we look at new leadership structures and consider other models of delivery, such as charter schools.

Asked for their "best advice," each leadership group stated that our Catholic schools

must clearly articulate the mission of Catholic education and remain true to their Catholic identity. They further advised us to examine what other dioceses have done/are doing under similar circumstances and why people are not choosing Catholic schools. Finally, they all agreed that once a plan has been agreed upon, it should be implemented and the path adhered to, regardless of the bumps along the way.

Not all of the feedback we received from those two meetings was the same. We heard from our pastors the need to also focus on the education of our Catholic children not enrolled in Catholic schools, as well as the need for a realistic approach to dealing with schools "in crisis" today. They also stressed the benefits of Catholic education in the Church's ongoing effort to increase vocations, as well as the potential impact of the growing Hispanic Catholic community.

Our educators urged us to be creative and resourceful dreamers in charting a course for the future of Catholic education and to seek the "support and wisdom" of parents, clergy, and graduates—good advice, indeed. They reminded us to embrace the role of our religious communities in laying the foundation for Catholic education in our local and national Church, and called for the development of aggressive marketing strategies. "Do not overlook the good done in each school," they wisely counseled.

There were plenty more good ideas shared. The entirety of their responses will be given to the Blue Ribbon Committee for discussion. The first meeting of the Committee has been scheduled for March 18. These responses can also be found on our website, archbalt.org, under "strengthening our schools, nurturing the divine within." We will use this website as a means of communicating our progress and to notify you, the faithful, about public hearings and other opportunities for participation in this important step in our effort to secure Catholic education in our local Church for our children of today and those of tomorrow.

I am grateful to our pastors, pastoral life directors and parish administrators, as well as our fine Catholic school presidents and principals for their time and enthusiastic approach to this effort. To those who assisted in the planning and execution of last month's consultations, I also offer my sincere thanks. I hope that as we take every

step of this important journey together, I can count on your prayers and good counsel for our schools, those who seek to strengthen them, and for the children we are blessed to educate in the sacred traditions of our faith.