

Master planning process seeks to improve school facilities

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The archdiocesan schools office launched an ambitious planning project March 18, to ensure that Catholic schools in the city and perimeter areas will continue to be affordable and accessible.

In a session with area pastors, Catholic school principals and administrators, James B. Sellinger, chancellor for education for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, promised cooperation on the effort.

"The work we're going to do together," he said, "and I mean together - will ensure not only its (Catholic education's) survival but also maintain our competitive advantage."

Archbishop William E. Lori announced the Vision and Master Plan for East Side and West Side Schools in a packed dining hall at Archbishop Curley High School.

Sellinger pointed out that schools in the archdiocese face challenges, including aging facilities in need of modernization. A Catholic education is highly valued, he said, but with the schools at about 77 percent of capacity, "We have room for more students."

As chancellor for education, Sellinger focuses on enrollment management and recruitment, marketing, facilities and public policy, among other responsibilities, while Superintendent Dr. Barbara McGraw Edmondson emphasizes Catholic identity, leadership development and supervision and all areas related to curriculum and instruction.

The visioning effort will be coordinated by experts in school architecture and design, economic analysis and educational facilities.

The study will include fine-grain demographic analysis of current population and future growth; competition from other public, private and charter schools; assessment of the physical facilities and capacity; and recommendation of options for each campus. Construction of new schools is a possibility.

An important part of the effort is a study of the effectiveness of each educational

facility by Fielding Nair International. Its Educational Facility Effectiveness Instrument will measure subjective qualities that improve and enhance educational environment, such as effective lighting and acoustics, appropriate learning spaces and open space.

"One of the key questions," said FNI Senior Planning Consultant Isaac Williams, "is how to leverage any expenditures to effect greater educational outcomes."

Initial visits of each school campus are expected to be complete before the end of school in June so that the consultants can see the school in day-to-day use. Recommendations will be compiled over the summer, and refined with the input of those at the schools and parishes.

The study will be done in three phases: east-side perimeter schools, east-side city, and west-side city and perimeter. In addition to site visits, the process will include conversations with area pastors of parishes that do not have a school. After the initial phase, the process will eventually encompass the whole archdiocese.

"I can't emphasize enough: This is bottoms up with your input," Sellinger told the audience at Curley.

Archbishop Lori, meanwhile, recalled the words of the school's namesake, Archbishop Michael J. Curley, in November 1921: "The battles of the future will be fought on the fields of education."

Archbishop Lori noted his predecessor said such a task required organization so that in unity would come strength. "(Archbishop Curley's) words, his example, and his commitment to Catholic education - some nine decades later - remain just as true and just as valuable to us today," Archbishop Lori said.

Noting that Catholic schools remain rooted in goodness and truth, the archbishop said the intangibles that make our schools Catholic are what compel parents to make the sacrifice to send their children there.

"We graduated 99 percent of our (eligible) students last year," he said. "I am enormously proud of that statistic. The only statistic that would make me prouder is if 100 percent of our students learned these lessons that only Catholic schools can impart."

Members of the community - school leadership, parents and others - will be able to review information and comment on the planning process through a website, mysidewalk.com (search for Archdiocese of Baltimore). Information from the March 18 session is already available online.

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