

Mayoral candidate might be on to something with voucher proposal



Otis Rolley unveils an education voucher proposal June 13 in Baltimore. (CR/George P. Matysek Jr.)

Otis Rolley is trying to shake things up in his bid to succeed Stephanie Rawlings-Blake as the next mayor of Baltimore.

During a June 13 press conference outside public school headquarters on North Avenue, Rolley said he wanted to close the city's five worst-performing middle schools and give \$10,000 education vouchers to the affected students. The vouchers could be used at Catholic and other nonpublic middle schools in Baltimore. (See The Catholic Review story [here](#)).

During the news conference, I asked Rolley what he thought about the contributions made by Catholic schools in the city. I was impressed that the former Baltimore City director of planning viewed Catholic schools as allies – not enemies – in the common goal of educating children.

“When I think of city kids in city schools, it’s public, parochial and independent schools,” he said. “All of these kids are our kids. All of these schools are our schools.”

That’s a sentiment that’s not always popular in some education circles – although Dr. Andres Alonso, current Baltimore public schools CEO, has gained kudos from Catholic school leaders for keeping lines of communication open between the systems and for serving on Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Catholic education.

Rolley’s plan isn’t perfect, and there are still a lot of unanswered questions.

Pamela Sanders, principal of St. Ambrose School in Park Heights, pointed out that it

will face stiff opposition from teachers unions and others. Rolley will also have legal issues to overcome in appropriating \$25 million from the city schools' budget for the voucher program.

Ellen Robertson, associate director for education with the Maryland Catholic Conference, said there might be some challenges with the candidate's requirement that enrolled children maintain a consistent level of achievement to be eligible for vouchers.

"These students are coming from underperforming schools to start with," said Robertson, who was eager to see more specifics in the Rolley plan. "It might be putting a lot of pressure on them."

Yet, as both Sanders and Robertson pointed out, it's a step in the right direction for a candidate to put vouchers squarely on the line for public debate.

"At least people are talking about it," Sanders said. "Putting the question out there raises awareness."

Catholic schools in the city have consistently produced students who go on to earn college degrees and become productive citizens. Yet, because of increased expenses and declining enrollment, they have struggled to stay open in recent years. Vouchers could be a way of bolstering Catholic schools, while also improving educational opportunities for kids stuck in underperforming public schools.

It will be interesting to see whether Rolley's proposal gains any traction. In the coming months, The Catholic Review will followup on the plan and explore where the other candidates stand.

Rolley deserves credit for including Catholic and nonpublic schools in his vision for making Baltimore a better place.

"I know defenders of the status quo will attack me and my ideas," Rolley said. "My plan provides hope to parents of current students."