

Open Letter

The Catholic Review

As reported in The Catholic Review last week, St. Michael School in Frostburg—the last parish elementary school in far Western Maryland—will close its doors for good at the end of the current school year after over 110 years of educating the children of Allegany County in the Catholic faith. Years of declining enrollment (there are just 85 students enrolled this year, down from a high of 345 in 1968) and a corresponding affordability gap (tuition has risen by 500 percent over the past 20 years), required that the inevitable and sad decision to close the school be made.

The factors that led to the decision to close St. Michael's are the same that have prompted this decision-of-last-resort when other schools in our Archdiocese have been forced to close in recent years. Downward trends in enrollment, escalating tuition, rising salary and benefit costs are not new; we have been struggling to address these challenges for some time in an effort to keep Catholic education affordable for all who seek it. This has and continues to be a priority of this Archdiocese.

Though we have taken steps to respond to these challenges, the recent downturn in our national economy has collided with these pre-existing factors to create a perfect storm that poses an immediate threat to the sustainability of many of our Catholic schools.

This issue dominated the discussion at last week's meeting of the Presbyteral Council, as the following data for the current school year was shared:

- Enrollment is down five percent, or approximately 1,200 students, the equivalent of four full schools. The average rate of decline over the previous five years was 2.5 percent. Forty-six of our 64 Archdiocesan elementary and high schools lost 10 or more students. Of the forty-six Archdiocesan elementary schools whose enrollment declined in the past year, each could experience an estimated average loss of \$87,000 in lost revenue.

- It is expected that by year's end, our schools will owe the insurance program an estimated \$9.3 million for insurance premiums they are unable to pay, impacting the parishes, schools and other institutions throughout the Archdiocese.
- Salaries and benefits currently account for approximately 80 percent of total elementary school expenses and next year, schools will likely be facing a double-digit increase in benefit costs.

In sum, in spite of an estimated \$3.8 million which Central Services will have extended to our schools by the end of the current school year, well more than half our schools will still be in serious financial trouble.

Catholic schools in other dioceses are facing similar financial problems as a result of a sharp decline in enrollment. Last week, the Archdiocese of New York announced that enrollment at its elementary and high schools dropped by nearly 6,000 students in the past year. And enrollment at elementary schools in the Diocese of Brooklyn is similarly down by five percent. The same is true in dioceses throughout the country, especially those connected to large cities.

The years have witnessed a radical change in the role our Catholic schools have served. A system of schools that developed over the course of two hundred years and grew along with the immigrant population explosion of the 19th and early 20th centuries, no longer reflects the reality of the city and state in which we live today. The once-well-oiled Catholic education machine that was powered by the charitable presence of consecrated religious women and men continues to struggle with the balancing act of keeping tuition affordable while also providing our fine educators with the just salaries and benefits they deserve.

Thus we find ourselves at a critical juncture in the history of Catholic schools, one that offers us the exciting opportunity of dynamic innovation: to provide the same quality Catholic education of yesterday while responding to the changing challenges of today and tomorrow. I plan to meet with all the priests of the Archdiocese at a Catholic education summit in January to inform them of the situation and to seek their counsel. I would hope that there would be an opportunity for parents and other supporters of Catholic schools to participate in the process. We continue to review

enrollment and financial figures for each school and by the end of December hope to be in contact with schools facing special challenges.

While no decisions have been made at this time, the process will likely involve difficult choices, such as increased tuitions and even a reconfiguration of schools. Though the changes may cause some sadness and pain, we might find comfort and strength in this anniversary year in the sacrifices of Mothers Elizabeth Ann Seton and Mary Elizabeth Lange, whose heroic efforts right here in Baltimore laid the strong foundation for Catholic education in our country.

The sharing of these efforts, while serving as a transparent communication of the state of our schools, is also intended to convey the depth of our commitment to the strong and sustained presence of Catholic education in every corner of our Archdiocese and to our fundamental mission of helping the poor. As an Archdiocese and a community of faith, our commitment to Catholic education is the responsibility of all of God's people.

I ask for your ideas, your patience, and your prayers. Please pray especially that our collective efforts will be guided by the Holy Spirit and will enable Catholic education to continue in this Archdiocese for the next two hundred years and beyond.

In the Lord,
+Edwin F. O'Brien
Archbishop of Baltimore