

Pain and healing

In reflecting on the consolidation of schools announced last week and the factors that led to this painful but necessary step, I realized that this decision is not unlike surgery. Both are painful but necessary for the body (this local Church and its historic school system) to heal. And, like the healing period that ensues, there will be additional pain before the body can begin to restore itself and to strengthen.

Since the consolidations were announced, some people of very good will are seeking revisions or alternatives to the plan, which was exhaustively and painstakingly researched over the past year. We - I - must go forward. The future of a historic tradition of Catholic education is at stake and indecision or a lack of will to implement the plan would consign its fate to that of prior well-intentioned efforts.

The Church, similar to many other organizations, has been impacted by the economic downturn. In short, we have fewer resources to fulfill our mission. Therefore, we are examining every aspect of our Archdiocesan operations - from Central Services to Schools - to see how we can operate more efficiently and invest our resources in a way that allows us to continue our mission long into the future.

Sadly, this process involves difficult decisions. For our schools, it means finding a way to eliminate many of the vacant seats, of which there are 10,000, or one third of our schools' total seating capacity - so that our system can operate more efficiently and we can invest our resources to better serve our students. Fortunately, such available capacity means we have room enough in a nearby Catholic school for every child currently enrolled in a consolidating school.

Much has been written about the consolidations and it is likely difficult for most of our people - especially those who have been inundated with facts and figures, as well as their own emotional attachment to some of these schools - to recognize the detailed process and the relevant factors that led to this decision. Therefore, I offer a few responses to some of the most frequent questions or comments put forth in recent days.

The decision to consolidate schools was made without input from stakeholders.

The Archdiocese conducted a top-to-bottom, highly transparent evaluation of all of our schools, gathering input from parents, teachers, priests and parishioners. This included a six-month public comment period, 10 listening sessions and eight focus groups throughout the Archdiocese. In all, we heard from some 1,500 people.

The Archdiocese is turning its back on the poor of Baltimore City.

It is precisely because of our commitment to serving the poor that we have taken this painful step. By restructuring our schools, we will improve the quality of the educational experience for the children we will continue serving in Baltimore City and beyond. If funds and enrollment are sufficient, we have committed to building the first Catholic school in Baltimore City in 50 years and to a complete renovation of Ss. James and John School in East Baltimore. Further, we plan to create four community schools in Baltimore where educational and other services are provided, not just to students but also their families.

The Archdiocese's priorities are out of line.

The Archdiocese has five mission priorities: Evangelization, Liturgy, Education, Service and Stewardship. We do not choose one or the other, but are committed to fulfilling each, always mindful of our obligations to be responsible stewards of the gifts entrusted to us.

How has the Archdiocese tried to help save schools from consolidating?

The Archdiocese created the Partners in Excellence scholarship program which has distributed more than 21,000 scholarships worth more than \$21 million. Separately, the Archdiocese provides millions of dollars each year for tuition assistance, as well as direct financial support for both families and schools. Over the two most recent years, the Archdiocese has directed more than \$10 million in such support to Catholic schools.

The receiving schools are too far or too expensive.

The closest Catholic school to a consolidating elementary school is fewer than three miles away and the average tuition for receiving elementary schools is \$132 cheaper than consolidating schools. For The Cardinal Gibbons School, the Archdiocese has

identified 400 available seats in area Catholic schools – more than enough to accommodate every student – and will work with each family to determine financial and transportation needs before identifying solutions to these important obstacles.

The overall goal of this effort and the strategic plan being developed by our Blue Ribbon Committee on Catholic Schools is to make Catholic education more affordable and more accessible. For us to do that, our schools must remain competitive to attract families with many educational options, we must invest our limited resources in quality teachers and facilities to drive accountability and quality, and everyone who believes in Catholic education must play a role in financially supporting this core mission of our Church, which is a community asset.

The easy decision would have been to do nothing, thereby allowing the trend of Catholic school closings that has painfully and steadily occurred these last several years to continue. We chose the tougher decision and hope that everyone, including those too pained to do so now, will understand that it is in the long-term best interests of our Church, our education and social justice missions and those we serve.