

Parents' passion reflects commitment to schools

Dedrah Richards has sent her son, Torian, a seventh-grader, to three Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Now, she has registered him in a fourth.

Richards is among the parents, students and employees with a strong attachment to Catholic schools. Their passion was evident March 8, when the archdiocese conducted three meetings, where officials heard strong reaction to a reorganization that will consolidate 13 schools, testimony as to why those closings are so painful.

Richards was among the several dozen who had their say at Mount St. Joseph High School.

Her son began his education at Father Charles Hall Elementary School, in Baltimore City. When she moved to Dundalk, he transferred to the parish school at St. Rita. It closed, and a move to Catonsville meant a seat at St. William of York School, on the city's west side.

Like Father Charles Hall, it is among the schools that will close their doors for good come June.

"The secretary is his aunt, and the teacher is his grandmother," Richards said of the support her son receives at St. William of York, remarks that elicited applause.

Later, Richards described the profound personal impact that grew out of her association with Catholic schools.

“I converted to Catholicism because of my son’s attending Father Charles Hall,” Richards said. “I became Catholic because I fell in love with the religion.”

“My son has great confidence,” she continued, “because of the support he gets at school. My son can’t understand, not praying before school, and lunch.

“The combination of faith and education ... I’m going to the car now, to get his science book, so he can do his homework.”

The meeting at Mount St. Joseph was moderated by Father Patrick M. Carrion, the pastor of the Catholic Community of South Baltimore, which a year ago announced the closing of its school.

An archdiocesan team that included Monsignors Robert L. Hartnett, head of the Office of Schools Planning, and Richard W. Woy, vicar general, heard from other parents objecting to the closing of their schools and frustration over where they will land.

Parents from the Ascension School in Halethorpe were incredulous that it will close, despite enrollment dropping to 146, significantly under its capacity of 237. Spouses of teachers voiced concerns about future employment, as did parents worried about the men and women who teach their children.

When a Seton Keough parent objected to the elementary school that will be housed there next fall, Monsignor Hartnett explained that a physical wall will be built to separate elementary classrooms from the high school classrooms.

At The Catholic High School of Baltimore, parents were visibly frustrated, with some moved to tears, as they confronted archdiocesan officials about the school closings affecting their children.

Parents of children enrolled in the PRIDE program at Sacred Heart of Mary in Graceland Park wanted to know where their children were going to attend school and why those options weren't already in place at the time the closings were announced.

Mary Ellen Fise, program director for the Blue Ribbon Committee on Catholic Schools, said the archdiocese "fully intends to continue those programs."

"We hope to have principals in place in the next two weeks or so," she said.

PRIDE is an archdiocesan program that has been in existence for 16 years and was designed to meet the special needs of students with minimal learning disabilities in grades K-8.

Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, Monsignor Richard J. Bozzelli, pastor of Corpus Christi in Baltimore and Mary Jo Hutson, associate superintendent of schools, joined Fise in responding to concerns.

Kristen Glessner, a mother of three Mother Mary Lange students, spoke highly of the school and said that at 5 years old, Mother Mary Lange "hasn't had time to grow."

"You set us up to fail," said another parent when pointing out that the archdiocese knew when the school opened five years ago that it was in need of substantial repairs.

Others questioned why the term consolidation was used, instead of closing.

Many also expressed concern as to whether there would absolutely be a spot for their child in a Catholic school and questioned the viability of the receiving schools.

Bishop Rozanski spoke to parents and reminded them that Archbishop Edwin F.

O'Brien asked people to look at schools in the long term.

"We had to come to some critical decisions," he said. "We did the best plan we could for the long term future."

Hutson acknowledged the painfulness of the decision, but reminded those gathered, including principals and pastors, that a proclamation hangs in every school.

"Let it be known to all who enter here that Christ is the reason for this school, the unseen but ever present teacher in its classes the model of its faculty, the inspiration of its students."