

Positive Signs for Schools

The Catholic Review

As reported in last week's Catholic Review, we are moving full speed ahead with a process for parish planning in the Archdiocese. Though it will be vastly different from the process undertaken for the reorganization of Catholic schools, it may have many asking where we are with the implementation of the schools plan and, most importantly, "is it working?"

With nearly 50 percent of the Implementation Plan's 714 action items completed and encouraging new enrollment data in hand, early indicators suggest the answer is "yes!"

Last week, our Archdiocesan School Board – itself an outgrowth of the Strategic Plan for Catholic Schools – received an update from Dr. Barbara McGraw Edmondson, Superintendent of Catholic Schools. She reported that while the long-standing trend of enrollment decline has continued, the decrease (approximately four percent) was the smallest in four years and was 50 percent of last year's drop.

While this news is good and a hopeful sign that the painful and careful steps we took to get here are working, we are not satisfied. We can do better and we must do better. But we knew from the outset that we could not turn the schools ship around overnight and, at the halfway point of implementation, the Strategic Plan appears to be on the money.

Other updates to emerge at last week's Board meeting include:

- Accountability: the new, more thorough process of accreditation of our schools and central offices was to take place over three days this week. A report will be issued in mid-November.
- Test scores: updated test scores from last year's standardized tests – Stanford 10 and ACRE (religion) – are posted on each school's page on our website (archbalt.org).
- Professional development for school leaders: an audit is under way for all

teachers and administrators in the Archdiocese, who must meet prescribed certification requirements. The Department of Catholic Schools has contracted with Notre Dame of Maryland University and Loyola University Maryland to enroll teachers and administrators in the courses needed for certification renewal and completion.

- Community partners: The Department of Catholic Schools and Loyola University Maryland have also established an Urban Community School partnership with five of our city schools to focus on professional development, teacher and student mentoring, and a variety of programs aimed at engaging Loyola graduate and undergraduate students in our schools.
- New religion curriculum: The Archdiocese's Department of Evangelization has developed a new religion curriculum that will be implemented in the 2012-13 school year. More than 1,200 teachers from across the Archdiocese recently participated in the first of a two-session course as part of our faith formation program, "Equipped for Ministry."

Monsignor Robert Hartnett, Director of the Office of School Planning and Implementation, also issued a detailed update on the implementation of the Strategic Plan's recommendations in four key areas: Catholic Identity, Academic Excellence, Governance and Stewardship. The action items associated with these recommendations range from marketing and development to technology and tuition management. They address HR and facilities issues, as well as matters of academics, faith formation and parish involvement. It is a comprehensive and precise plan that, when all is said and done, will ensure our schools are operating as efficiently and effectively as possible in serving the children of our community.

One such area of focus in the Plan – the disposition of Catholic properties – was also discussed at our meeting. Previously, the Board had issued a resolution calling for the development of a process for considering the sale or lease of former Catholic school buildings. The resolution acknowledges the Board's concern for the impact that the disposition of buildings formerly used as Catholic schools may have on the viability and availability of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese.

The need for such a policy was foreseen by the Blue Ribbon Committee, which

wisely predicted an impact to our schools due to the dramatic increase in the number of charter schools, especially in Baltimore City. (One school lost 40 students over one year due to the arrival of a nearby free charter school). Moreover, studies show that parents perceive charter schools as providing a similar environment as Catholic schools.

Making our properties available for use as school buildings is a complex issue, given our commitment to education, the fact that the sale or lease of such a property would provide much-needed income for sponsoring parishes and, unfortunately, that it also poses a real threat to nearby Catholic schools.

To be clear, we are not opposed to charter schools. In fact, we have many charter schools in former Catholic school properties (St. Thomas More, St. Rose of Lima, Corpus Christi, St. Elizabeth of Hungary in Highlandtown, St. Mary's in Govans, and Shrine of the Little Flower, to name a few). We also have Montessori, Head Start, private and even public (Shrine of the Sacred Heart, Mount Washington) schools in our former school buildings. We are supportive of any opportunity to advance the education of children, for we know its impact and its power to transform lives. This collaborative spirit was demonstrated again over the past summer when Father Michael DeAscanis, pastor of Baltimore's St. William of York Parish, donated 100 school desks and chairs to Lombard Academy, a public school in Baltimore City.

While clearly we are supportive of the presence of charter schools in our communities, we must be more strategic in how we make decisions about our available properties so as not to undercut the enrollment in our own schools which still serve an important and necessary role for the children in our community.

The policy, adopted by the Board, will now be used whenever the Archdiocese and/or parishes are approached about the use of a property as an educational institution.

Finally, though much of the news is hopeful and positive, we must pay attention to the reality that while our schools are desirable to many families, Catholic and non-Catholic, financial concerns remain the biggest barrier to enrollment. Having provided more than \$6 million in financial support to our schools and to families, the Archdiocese is working on many levels (fundraising, lobbying for passage of a tax credit and funding for non-religious text books, and creating greater accountability

for schools among parishes) to make our schools more affordable. We know the sacrifices our current families are making and we are doing everything we can to operate our schools more efficiently to hold down costs while also providing increased financial assistance to families.

Former Los Angeles mayor Richard Riordan, in a recent op-ed for the Wall Street Journal, expertly summed up why our schools remain relevant and why parents sacrifice as mightily as they do: “Each of us, no matter what career we have followed, has an obligation to educate the next generation. The education needed for success in our world necessarily includes the basics of reading, writing and math. It must also include the ability to reason, to make good judgments, and to be responsible to our planet and all its peoples. These have been the fundamentals of our Catholic schools for over a century. We must guarantee they are here for generations to come.”