

School challenges lead to difficult times and hard decisions

The times are changing. Decades ago, Catholic families had a half-dozen kids or more, and Catholic schools were routinely staffed, for the most part, by a convent-full of religious sisters. High schools for boys often had religious brothers teaching. Tuition was often less than \$100 a year.

Back in the Chicago suburbs where I grew up, our family of 10 all went through eight years at Our Lady of Loretto grade school – for 23 years there was at least one Gunty at OLL – and four years of Catholic high schools. The grade school closed recently. The high school the boys attended closed 20 years ago.

This pattern is typical around the country. The demographics of families have changed, so that schools built to accommodate large families must now serve fewer students from more families just to remain full. Buildings themselves are aging, needing a lot more care to remain functional.

“This problem is not singular to Baltimore and is affecting Catholic schools throughout the country,” Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien told The Catholic Review before he announced the consolidations of 13 schools. He noted that in just the last two years, enrollment had declined by 1,200 students, enough to fill four whole schools. About a third of the desks at all the schools sit empty.

Archbishop O’Brien took bold steps this week when he announced the schools consolidations, along with a new model for school governance and proposals for new programs in Catholic schools. He knows that not everyone will immediately appreciate the results, but he is confident that the plan is a good one, a solid one, and that it takes into account the best information available. He also believes it will secure a strong future so that a Catholic school education will continue to be available for those who want it.

This plan will require a lot of support – from Catholics, certainly, but from the larger community as well. Catholic schools help secure a stronger future for the church by

grounding Catholic students in their faith.

“We have to have this corps, this cadre of committed Catholics, which very often, hopefully, is the rule throughout our Catholic school system,” Archbishop O’Brien said. But he also noted that “Catholic schools are a community asset, not just a Catholic one.”

It’s almost scandalous how little support comes for Catholic and other non-public schools from state government. While Archdiocese of Baltimore schools alone save the state and local governments more than \$350 million, Maryland provided just \$4.4 million in funds to non-public schools for non-religious textbooks last year. That’s shameful. Our state needs to do better, and one way is to pass Building Opportunities for All Students and Teachers in Maryland (BOAST), which would allow businesses to claim a state income tax credit (rather than a charitable deduction) for donations to organizations that support Maryland’s K-12 nonpublic and public school students and teachers.

Acknowledging that the state is strapped for cash, the bill as introduced this session would authorize a mechanism without funding, so that when money is available, the tax credit is already in place.

We need BOAST and other innovative ideas to help revitalize our schools. The plan announced this week can help the Catholic school system in the archdiocese not just survive but thrive for many years to come. It is time for us to renew our commitment to Catholic education, so that, as Archbishop O’Brien said, we can “be our brother’s keeper” and spread the faith to the next generation.

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