

Schools: An Update

The Catholic Review

It has been nearly two months since I last wrote about the urgent problems facing Catholic schools in our Archdiocese. In my November 27 The Catholic Review column, I shared some of the critical challenges that now threaten the sustainability of many of our schools, including:

Enrollment - For the current school year, enrollment is down five percent—twice as much as in recent years, with 46 of our 64 Archdiocesan elementary and high schools losing 10 or more students.

Finances — Of the 46 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 by year's end that our schools will owe the insurance program an estimated \$9.3 million for insurance premiums they are unable to pay, with a serious and negative impact on premiums which our parishes, schools and other institutions throughout the Archdiocese will have to pay. Next year, schools are facing a double-digit increase in costs for medical and retirement benefits for its employees.

In sum, in spite of an estimated \$3.8 million which Central Services will have extended to our schools in the form of tuition assistance and other direct financial aid by the end of the current school year, well more than half our schools will be in serious financial trouble. A note of profound thanks to our many friends in the business community for their support of tuition assistance efforts, including the Partners in Excellence program which makes it possible for the Church to educate children who otherwise would not have access to a quality, values-based education. We look forward to their continued support of Catholic schools.

As parents, pastors, teachers, staff, students and other supporters of Catholic education come together to celebrate Catholic education during Catholic Schools Week—the time of year when many of our schools are also accepting registrations

for the following school year—I thought it a good time to provide an update on our efforts to address these weighty issues.

After receiving the news about this year's decline in enrollment and its accompanying financial impact, I called for a Pastors Advisory Council to assist in organizing our planning efforts and charged our Division of Schools with developing a comprehensive review of our entire school system.

As I mentioned in my earlier column on this subject, I plan to meet with the priests of the Archdiocese for a pastoral consultation on the challenges facing our schools. This will take place on February 10. Two days later, I will meet with Catholic school principals and presidents for the same purpose. At each meeting I will share my vision for Catholic schools. We will also provide an extensive overview of our present and future challenges. I will seek their counsel on how best to achieve our overarching goal of making Catholic education affordable for families throughout the Archdiocese. All of this will be covered by The Catholic Review in order to be as transparent as possible with all concerned.

Their input and the advice of other key supporters, such as our dedicated parents, teachers, students, donors, and community, government and business leaders—Catholic and non-Catholic alike—will form the heart of the strategic plan that will be developed by a blue ribbon committee I have charged to guide this most important effort. Tasked with charting the course for Catholic education into the next decade and beyond, this committee will be comprised of some of the best and brightest minds in our communities and from a variety of fields, to include education, business, philanthropy, and government.

Mr. Frank P. Bramble, Sr., former vice chair of MBNA and current member of the board of directors at Bank of America Corporation who is a native Baltimorean and a product of the Catholic school system, has agreed to chair this committee. Frank's well-documented success as a high-level business executive, as well as his equally-impressive commitment to philanthropic causes, including Catholic education, make him an ideal candidate to lead this effort.

Assisting Frank will be Msgr. Robert Hartnett, pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish in Essex. Msgr. Hartnett, will serve as Executive Director of School Planning.

Msgr. Hartnett, who will continue to fulfill the duties attached to his pastorate, is one of only three pastors assigned to a parish with both an elementary and high school. Well-known for his support of Catholic schools, Msgr. Hartnett exhibited that commitment when he and Father Jason Worley, Pastor of Our Lady Queen of Peace, implemented a creative solution to the challenges facing their neighboring schools. Confronted with enrollment declines due to changing demographics and a new state-of-the-art public school, the two pastors agreed that OLMC would serve as the K-8 school, while OLQP would serve as an early childhood development school for the area's pre-school children, to include for the first time infants and toddlers. The result has been a stronger presence for Catholic education in this area.

While it may be necessary to make decisions about the future of some schools in untenable financial situations at the end of the current school year, it is our plan, and indeed our hope, that this committee's strategic plan, to be developed over the next 18 months, will provide us with a blue-print for sustaining Catholic education in this Archdiocese for years to come.

For the sake of context, it is important to bear in mind that ours is one of countless dioceses nationwide grappling with this issue. In fact, a series of major studies have recently been undertaken by the likes of the University of Notre Dame and the White House Domestic Policy Council. We will be availing ourselves of their conclusions and those of any others studying this issue that we might benefit from their experiences as we seek to develop a plan that specifically addresses the needs of our Archdiocese.

As the work of this committee progresses over the months ahead, I will update you on their progress and, in the meantime, seek your prayers for all who labor for the benefit of Catholic education and the children they serve.