

Strategic plan taking shape

About two months ago, I wrote a column entitled, “Advisory: Sacrifices Ahead.” The intent of the column was to remind you, our good Catholic people, that the work of addressing the challenges facing Catholic schools in our Archdiocese is moving forward and that changes are on the horizon.

My “advisory” wasn’t meant to scare, so much as prepare our mindsets when thinking about our schools. It is easy, especially in a diocese as old as Baltimore, to expect that no school will ever close, that the schools of our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and so on will continue to be open for our children, our children’s children, etc.

While such a nostalgic view is understandable, it is not realistic given the many changes that have occurred through the years in the communities of our Archdiocese, most especially in Baltimore City. Nor is that view reflective of the realities of our Catholic schools today, which have many similarities to their “predecessors” but also many differences.

Whatever changes lie ahead, be assured our schools remain steadfast in their commitment to educating children in the Catholic faith and in an academically-rigorous, disciplined and nurturing environment. Further, this Archdiocese is wholly committed to serving non-Catholic children, including those from impoverished neighborhoods, because every child deserves a quality education.

However, the economic realities we face compel us to deal in a forthright manner with the challenges before us, illustrated most clearly by the fact that we simply have too many schools. In fact, we have an excess of 831,100 square feet in our schools (almost a quarter of our total capacity), the equivalent of 10,250 empty seats.

The process of watching schools succumb one by one, year after year to population shifts and other external forces can no longer continue. A strategic plan based on a comprehensive review is needed to not only stem that negative tide where it’s occurring, but also to meet the increasing demands for Catholic education that exist

elsewhere, and to strengthen the presence and academic offerings of Catholic schools throughout the Archdiocese. Further, we want to increase the competitive advantage we feel our schools offer and in doing so affirm the choice of current parents, while giving prospective parents another reason to consider Catholic schools for their child's education.

Because the scope of this review is unprecedented in the history of our Archdiocese, we knew we needed a dynamic team to lead it. After watching them work for the past nine months, I have no doubt we have the right team in place. Comprised of gifted and generous professionals from the fields of education, business, philanthropy and clergy/religious life, our Blue Ribbon Committee on Catholic Schools has left no stone unturned in analyzing not only every aspect of our own schools but also that of other systems throughout the country.

Another aspect of this planning process we determined was critical to its success was transparency. Learning from the past, we realize how necessary and important it is for such a process to be inclusive and open. We want anyone and everyone with a "stake" in the future of Catholic schools in this Archdiocese to have an opportunity to play a part in its re-birth.

To that end, the Blue Ribbon Committee and its staff have been engaging stakeholders from throughout the Archdiocese over the past year. These stakeholders include Catholic school parents, teachers, staff, priests, principals and parishioners – anyone having an interest in the future of Catholic education in the Archdiocese.

Four consultations were conducted with priests and school principals in February and October, and 10 public listening sessions – attended by more than 600 people – were held in every region of the Archdiocese in September and October. Further, a public comment period took place over a six-month period in which more than 600 comments were submitted through various channels, including e-mail and the Internet.

In the consultations and listening sessions, participants were briefed on the activities of the Blue Ribbon Committee thus far, and were then asked to hold discussions in small groups and report their ideas about Catholic schools. In

particular, they were asked to comment on what has been identified as the four most important factors critical to the success of our schools: Catholic identity, academic excellence, governance, and stewardship. Each session ended with an opportunity for additional commentary in an open-floor format.

At a special meeting of our Presbyteral Council earlier this week, priests learned about the discussions currently taking place among the Blue Ribbon Committee concerning the governance of our schools. They were asked both to share their thoughts about the various models of governance – which includes those who make critical decisions affecting schools such as hiring of key staff and the role of the school board – and to make recommendations about the composition of a new school system.

This feedback will ultimately guide the Committee and its staff in formulating its recommendations to me, which are due in two parts: suggested consolidations in March and the full strategic plan in June. My promise to you is that we will continue to be transparent throughout this entire planning process.

I extend my thanks to Mr. Frank Bramble and the entire Blue Ribbon Committee, as well as to Monsignor Bob Hartnett and his staff for their exhaustive labors.

The next several months will bring many exciting changes for our Catholic schools and the children they serve. I urge you to embrace these changes, which will allow Catholic schools to continue serving the children of our Archdiocese today as well as future generations of children to come.