

The Rebirth of Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Baltimore

Following are excerpts of the Consolidation Plan and Report of the archdiocese. Some headings and passages were condensed. To read the report in its entirety, go to www.catholicreview.org/schools.

Vision

From the earliest days of Catholic education in Baltimore, the first American diocese, Catholic school leaders, such as St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and Mother Mary Lange, had to overcome many obstacles to fulfill their dreams of classrooms where the Catholic faith is practiced and taught. Catholic educators and parishes have faced difficult decisions such as how to repopulate a work force of teachers depleted by the declining vocations of religious sisters and brothers.

Faced with dwindling enrollment and a number of school closures, Archbishop O'Brien could either passively manage the attrition, or stake out a new route, developing a new path to stability, growth and excellence for Catholic schools.

The Archbishop called for transforming the status quo and establishing a school system, rather than a system of schools. The Archbishop also established the directive that all parishes – including those with no attachment to a school – be active supporters of Catholic schools.

In sum, the Archbishop established the following goal for all planning efforts: *To make Catholic education as affordable and accessible to as many Catholic youngsters as possible as well as to non-Catholics in some of our more impoverished communities.*

Background

When the state's population swelled with immigrants from European, Catholic countries in the early part of the last century, so too did the number of Catholic schools. Administered by religious sisters and brothers, these parish schools had

little overhead and could charge extremely low tuition.

This paradigm changed dramatically after enrollment peaked in 1965. A decrease in religious vocations required schools to hire lay professionals. To pay these professionals salaries and benefits they deserve, operating expenses and tuition began to dramatically increase. The affordability gap widened, requiring schools, parishes, donors, and the Archdiocese to provide funds.

Over the past 16 years, many generous supporters have stepped forward to help the Archdiocese by contributing approximately \$21.5 million to fund scholarships for some 21,000 of our neediest students.

Since the economic crisis struck over two years ago, annual enrollment declines have doubled, from an average loss of 600 students to more than 1,200 in each of the past two years - *the equivalent of four full schools*. With double-digit unemployment in Baltimore City, it is our city Catholic schools that have been hardest hit.

Many parents have been forced to withdraw their children, contributing to excess capacity and reduced revenue throughout the Archdiocese. Like our families, many school administrators find *themselves* having to choose which bills to pay.

As of December 2009, Catholic schools owed the Archdiocese \$11.7 million for unpaid insurance, pension contributions, payroll advances and other subsidies. They are on track to add an additional \$2.2 million to that debt this fiscal year. Schools across the Archdiocese are expected to have budget deficits, cumulatively totaling \$7.4 million for the current fiscal year. Over the past two school years, the Archdiocese will have provided nearly \$10 million in scholarship aid and other direct financial assistance to students and schools.

This approach is unsustainable and threatens the foundation of Catholic education in Baltimore.

Consider that 10,000 of the 32,500 seats in Archdiocesan Catholic schools are unoccupied and that enrollment over the past 10 years has declined by 14 percent. The aging infrastructure of school buildings further compounds the challenges, as

approximately \$20 million of deferred maintenance requires attention.

New Direction

With this backdrop, the Archbishop appointed (and charged) the Blue Ribbon Committee on Catholic Schools with developing a comprehensive strategic plan. Frank Bramble, an executive with experience with financial institutions and a deep commitment to Catholic schools, was selected to chair the Committee, which is examining the areas of Catholic identity, academic excellence, governance, and stewardship. The Committee will continue to work and provide final recommendations in June.

The Archbishop authorized an Office of Schools Planning and named Monsignor Robert Hartnett, also a member of the Committee, as Executive Director. Because the Committee's strategic planning process would not address enrollment and financial challenges faced by some schools, the Archbishop recognized that he would be compelled to act now to consolidate schools.

The Archbishop instructed the Office of Schools Planning to conduct an exhaustive assessment of every school in the Archdiocese.

Assessment, Consultation

School-level Assessments

All Archdiocesan schools benefitted from a self-assessment, external review, and a market-based trend analysis.

Self-Assessment: Each school, with feedback from its key stakeholders, conducted a Viability Profile, which examined 10 key factors:

Catholic identity, Development and planning, Diversity, Educational programs, Facilities, Family involvement, Finances, Governance, Leadership, Technology.

External Review: Visiting teams of three to five individuals, including representatives from the Department of Catholic Education Ministries, Catholic school principals and other educators, conducted an external evaluation. The Team

Leader conducted a post visit consultation with the school's administration and, where appropriate, with the Pastor and/or School Board Chair, to provide an report of the team's findings, measured with the school's self assessment. This level of transparency was critical for both sharing insights and allowing the school to address areas where they disagreed with the team's findings.

The outcome was the development of a Continuous Improvement Plan that identified areas of immediate and long-term improvement. Every school in the system underwent this scrutiny and development of a Continuous Improvement Plan.

Market-based Trends: The Office of Schools Planning gathered data, including but not limited to: Demographics and Future Trends of Children in Areas Served by the Archdiocese (through 2017), Enrollment Projections for Public Schools, Standardized Testing, Academic Challenges, Pre-K Programs, Homeschooling, Cost per Student Comparison of State Public Schools and Schools in the Archdiocese, Similar Student/Teacher Ratio Comparison, Similar Comparison of Teacher Salary, Average Class Size, Distance Traveled to School, Religious Education Enrollment of K-8 Students, Teacher and Principal certifications, Planning in Nine Other Dioceses.

Stakeholder Input

To ensure that anyone with a vested interest had an opportunity to participate in the planning process, several forums were available to submit comments, express views, and dialogue with Archbishop O'Brien, the Committee, or the Office of Schools Planning.

CONSOLIDATED SCHOOLS

Based upon this review, the Archbishop determined that 12 elementary schools and one high school will be consolidated as of June 30, 2010.

In all, nine schools in Baltimore City and four schools in Baltimore County will be consolidated, affecting a total of 2,152 students.

While consolidations are extremely difficult for students and their families, as well as for teachers and staff, alumni and the surrounding community, the Archdiocese must take this step to assure the continued viability of the school system. The

consolidation will allow the Archdiocese to maximize its resources, stabilize its finances, and plan better. It will continue a presence in certain neighborhoods, particularly in the city where a Catholic school is a stabilizing force. Without this step, there is a risk of our schools dying off one by one until virtually none are left. This consolidation, in concert with new academic programs and the Committee's strategic plan, will enable our schools not only to survive but to thrive.

A Seat for Every Child

In making consolidation recommendations, the Office of Schools Planning fulfilled the Archbishop's goal of a seat in a Catholic school for every student affected. Schools were identified that could receive students from schools consolidated.

The consolidation of Father Charles Hall Catholic Elementary and Middle Schools, St. Bernardine Catholic School, and St. William of York School will result in the formation of a new Catholic school, initially housed in available space at The Seton Keough High School. If sufficient funds are raised and there is enrollment demand to support a two-track elementary, a new Westside Catholic School would be built on the campus of Seton Keough.

Consultation with area Catholic high schools will take place to identify receiving schools for Cardinal Gibbons School students.

A Time of Transition

The Archdiocese will have a support team in place at every consolidated school for as long as necessary for both students and staff. Regional meetings and individual school-based meetings will be held for parents/guardians to answer questions regarding the consolidations and to introduce them to representatives from receiving schools. Other events to assist families in finding the right new school will also be offered.

Each consolidated school will be encouraged to acknowledge its history and thank its students and teachers in end-of-school-year events. All schools matriculating new students will be encouraged to hold welcoming events. The Archdiocese stands ready offering assistance through its toll free phone number (1-800-5-CATHOLIC; or

1-800-522-8465 and its school website, www.archbalt.org/aplacetogrow.

The Division of Human Resources will do everything possible to assist principals, teachers and other personnel whose jobs are eliminated as a result of consolidation. All consolidated school employees interested in continued service with the Archdiocese will be given the opportunity to apply for open positions. Every effort will be made to fill openings with teachers and other staff from consolidated schools prior to any open recruitment. While the Archdiocese would like to retain these employees in its school system, it is facilitating relationships with local public school systems for teachers who do not have an opportunity to remain in the Archdiocese.

Transforming the Future

Editor's note: More details on the following will be included in the Committee's Strategic Plan, to be delivered in June.

The Office of Schools Planning received many requests and suggestions concerning how the Archdiocese can make Catholic schools more accessible and better compete. Comments are reflected in the following recommendations:

Tuition Assistance

The Committee recommends that the tuition assistance program be available to students across the Archdiocese.

Principals Leadership Institute

The Office of Schools Planning is exploring partnerships with College of Notre Dame, Loyola University, and Mount St. Mary's University to develop a Principals Leadership Institute.

Transportation

To better assess transportation needs, the Archdiocese will conduct a survey of parents and caregivers to determine interest in bus service. It will be important to determine if the provision of transportation can expand the accessibility of Catholic education.

Catholic School Facility Recommendations

Addressing the aging infrastructure of our school facilities and assuring that our buildings and technological resources support a first-rate education are important. Several projects have been identified to strengthen our inventory of schools. None will proceed unless there are ample funds, strong enrollment and demand, and fiscally sound school operation.

These projects include:

New Elementary School Building on the campus of Seton Keough High School

Editor's note: See a Seat for Every Child, in previous excerpt.

This would be the first new Archdiocesan Catholic elementary school built within the city of Baltimore since 1950.

Renovation and Expansion of Queen of Peace

The students of the two Queen of Peace cluster schools (St. Katharine and Ss. James and John) in East Baltimore will come together this fall at the Ss. James and John campus. This 163-year-old building is in need of upgrades as well as more space.

New Academic and Service Programs

The Archbishop approved the development or exploration of seven new academic and service programs.

Dual-Language School

A dual-language (English-Spanish) program will be initiated at one Catholic elementary school.

PRIDE Plus Program

The current PRIDE (Pupils Receiving Inclusive Diversified Education) program, for students with special needs, will be expanded from two elementary schools to four, and additional training will be offered for teachers across the system to help them

better address the needs of students with learning challenges.

STEM Program

A Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) Program will be instituted at four Catholic elementary schools.

Montessori Primary Program

A Montessori Primary Program, for children ages 3-6, will be introduced at one Catholic elementary school.

New American Academy Model

Elements of the New American Academy Model, an innovative educational model, will be implemented in one Catholic elementary school.

International Baccalaureate Program

A study to determine the feasibility of implementing the International Baccalaureate Program at one or more Catholic high schools will be conducted.

Community Schools

Four Catholic elementary schools will become Community Schools that provide additional opportunities and services for students and their families, as well as the local community.

A New Governance Model

As a preview to its June report, the Committee shared with the Archbishop two important recommendations.

Archdiocesan Collaborative Schools

The Committee on Catholic Schools strongly recommends a new Archdiocesan Collaborative School (ACS) model as the preferred model of governance for elementary schools. A hybrid structure, it combines the benefits of centralization and governance with local community involvement.

Centralized services such as accounting, tuition collection, payroll, advancement, marketing, and technology will be provided by the Archdiocese. The Head of School will be selected, mentored, evaluated and dismissed by the Superintendent, with advice and input from the local school board, which will be comprised of individuals with strong ties to the community. A Canonical Representative (e.g. local pastor), appointed by the Archbishop, will represent the interests of parish communities in the area, coordinate priests to provide worship services at the school, and serve on the local school board.

The Committee recommends that, beginning in July 2010, the ACS model be implemented for approximately 10 to 12 schools, in order to test and refine the model. The Committee strongly recommends that all elementary schools move to this model.

Archdiocesan Catholic School Board

The Committee recommends the formation of an Archdiocesan Catholic School Board, advisory to the Archbishop and charged with a strong oversight function to help assure the long-term viability of Catholic schools.

Funding Support

The Committee supports the Archbishop's desire that all parishes support Catholic schools and, to that end, will recommend a mechanism to achieve that goal.

The School Marketing Advisory Committee, driven by the results of market research conducted through focus groups, recommended a new branding initiative to promote the newly formed Catholic school system.

Economic Impact Study

The Archdiocese commissioned an economic impact study to quantify the value of Catholic schools.

Moving Forward

A New Superintendent

Last November, Archbishop O'Brien announced that Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, Superintendent of Schools, will retire June 30, after nearly 20 years in the Division of Catholic Schools. A Search Committee was appointed by the Archbishop and is expected to make a recommendation for a Superintendent by May.

Implementation Planning

The Office of Schools Planning will begin work on a detailed Implementation Plan to accompany both this report and the Strategic Plan recommendations.