

# White House report aims to keep inner-city Catholic schools open

WASHINGTON - In the waning days of the Bush administration, the White House is sounding the alarm on a six-year loss of about 1,200 faith-based schools in the U.S. and has issued a report it believes will help stop the closures.

The report - "Preserving a Critical National Asset: America's Disadvantaged Students and the Crisis in Faith-Based Urban Schools" - shows about half of the faith-based schools that have closed since 2002 have been Catholic institutions and most are located in poor urban neighborhoods.

"The president is very concerned and upset that these institutions are closing," said Karl Zinsmeister, assistant to President George W. Bush and domestic policy adviser. "Statistics show that students from poor urban neighborhoods who attend faith-based schools perform better academically than those who attend the public schools. We can't afford to lose any more of these schools."

Inner-city Catholic high schools such as St. Frances Academy in Baltimore with a mostly black enrollment have proven to be very successful in educating minority students. About 90 percent of St. Frances' graduates pursue a college degree.

Statistics also show that minority students in U.S. urban Catholic high schools are 42 percent more likely to graduate than minority students who attend neighborhood public schools, and 2.5 times more likely to earn a college degree, Mr. Zinsmeister told Catholic News Service.

Released in September, the report is a product of last April's White House Summit on Inner-City Children and Faith-Based Schools - which gathered educators, school lobbyists and business and government representatives to examine ways to reverse the trend of faith-based schools shutting down in U.S. cities.

The report proposes a multipronged approach to help inner-city faith-based schools continue to educate poor and minority students, from encouraging businesses to invest time, money and resources in the school systems, to partnering colleges with

these institutions.

Mr. Zinsmeister said the report has not been forwarded to the U.S. presidential candidates - Democratic Sen. Barack Obama and Republican Sen. John McCain - but he hopes they will become aware of it and support the plan, which calls for a minimum of \$300 million in federal spending.

The report also recommends federal and state support in the form of scholarships and grants, and expansion of an experimental program in the District of Columbia that provides government funding to allow underprivileged students to attend faith-based and private schools.

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program began in 2004, when Bush signed into law the federal D.C. School Choice Incentive Act, but it will only continue if it is reauthorized by Congress this year.

Washington Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl praised the program, as well as a proposed tax-credit plan in Maryland known as BOAST - Building Opportunities for All Students and Teachers - approved by the Maryland Senate last March.

Based on a similar program in Pennsylvania, it would provide tax credits to businesses that donate money to scholarship organizations for nonpublic school students or to innovative educational organizations for public school students.

The report also recommends the federal government establish a program called "Pell Grants for Kids," which is similar to the Pell grants offered to needy college students to defray tuition expenses at the college of their choice. "Pell Grants for Kids" would allow elementary and high school students to use similar grant money for the school of their choice.

"The Pell grant basically gives a college student a voucher to attend the college of their choice," Zinsmeister said. "Now we want to see if we can't do the same thing for poor kids to attend the private or parochial school of their choice. The idea would be to pick out the worst of the worst schools in the country that have been failing and give students in those schools a Pell grant."

There would be no church-state conflict, since the funding would be directed to the

student and not the school, he said.

Archbishop Wuerl told a group of religion writers in September that most of the public is “aware of the contributions” Catholic schools make and are “very, very aware of the struggle of the church in maintaining these schools.” He said challenges to keep schools open stem from population shifts and rising costs.

Universities also can partner with struggling schools, train teachers specifically for the faith-based institutions, help with fundraising, and offer professional development and curriculum support, Mr. Zinsmeister said.