

My name is Fran Critzman, and I am the Chairperson of the Archdiocesan Board of Advisors to the Superintendent. Thank you for inviting me to come and speak with you today and share some of the ideas and concerns of the Advisory Board. The Advisory Board was formed at the request of Dr. Ronald Valenti and the members were appointed by the Archbishop. We provide advice and counsel to the office the Superintendent. The Advisory Board members come from all types of backgrounds. There are educators, administrators, community leaders, attorneys, marketing and development professionals, business people and religious. Our diverse backgrounds allow us to bring new and different perspectives. However, the one thing that we have in common is our commitment to Catholic education.

Personally, I am a product of Catholic education in this Archdiocese. I attended grade school at St. Michael the Archangel in Overlea and Mercy High School. I am now an attorney at Miles & Stockbridge in Baltimore, and I attribute much of my success to my Catholic education. I am also the parent of two daughters who graduated from St. Ursula School and who currently attend Mercy High School. I feel very lucky to be able to send them to Catholic school. I also serve on the school boards of St. Ursula School and Mercy High school.

One of the issues that most concerns the Advisory Board is whether Catholic education is available to Middle Class Catholic families. We believe that affordability is the main issue that keeps middle class families from attending Catholic schools. It seems that in the past, Archdiocesan fundraising efforts have been geared toward making Catholic education available to the poor. We believe that this is a noble cause, and one that should not be totally abandoned; however over the years we have not been sensitive to the needs of our own Catholic families and have allowed them to slip away. We believe that part of the Mission should be to serve the families of our parishes and provide them with an affordable Catholic education. One way to assist in this effort would be to hold an Archdiocesan capital campaign for tuition assistance for Catholic families. Such assistance could either be awarded to Catholic schools or directly to families and could provide an additional resource of funds.

The second issue is the use of the Factors of Viability and viability assessments. As you know, the Viability Assessments consists of a self assessment done by a school based upon written Factors of Viability provided by the Division of Catholic Schools. It is then followed up by a visit from an Assessment Team and a written report summarizing the results. There are ten factors of viability: Catholic Identity, Development and Planning, Diversity, Educational Programs, Facilities, Family Involvement, Finances, Governance, Leadership and Technology. These are ten areas that are necessary for a successful Catholic school, and it is no accident that Catholic Identity is the first factor to consider. Within each factor there are various issues to consider, including why a particular area is important and what might happen if a school is not viable in that area. Sometimes Boards and other governing bodies get so caught up in finances and facilities that they forget that there are other areas that need attention in order to be a viable CATHOLIC school.

The Advisory Board spent a great deal of time learning about how the Factors of Viability were developed and how they were intended to be used. We commend the Blue Ribbon Committee for changing a previous decision and deciding to go forward with the Viability Assessments and to push the time frame for completion. Many members of the Advisory Board are currently serving on assessment teams.

I was part of the team at St. Ursula that just completed our self-assessment. I will admit that at first we were reluctant participants because this added a lot of work in a year in which we are also dealing with lower enrollment, decreased fundraising dollars, increased costs and other challenges, including the update of our strategic plan. However, the experience turned out to be a good one. It helped us look at areas upon which we previously had not spent a lot of time, such as Diversity and Development and add items to our strategic plan. We also were able to confirm and pat ourselves on the back for our strong Finances, Catholic Identity and Family Involvement.

Overall, the Advisory Board believes that the use of the Factors of Viability and Viability assessments will prove to be an invaluable tool in gathering information and for helping all schools, even strong schools, to continue to improve. We encourage the Blue Ribbon Committee to use the current information gathered through the viability assessments and to include the Factors of Viability in the future plans for all Catholic schools.

The third issue is the need for a clear Mission Statement for Catholic Schools. It should clearly articulate the purposes and goals to which all schools should adhere. A Mission Statement will unite us and help us to better use our resources and talents for the good of all of our students and families and the Church.

The last issue the Advisory Board would like to bring to your attention is the perception that there is not enough support among the clergy for Catholic education. I realize that is a strong statement. The Advisory Board understands that the clergy have a lot on their plate – ministering to the people, dealing with many church organizations, administering parish finances and building upkeep, but there is a feeling that the schools have not received the support that they need, especially in these trying times. To be fair, pastors have been asked to run organizations with multi-million dollars budgets. Most of them are not MBAs or accountants. Although they do not do this alone, many times they mainly rely on a group of volunteers who may or may not have the requisite knowledge necessary to make many complex decisions. We are willing to acknowledge that some of the perceived complacency toward the schools by the clergy could be a result of the fact that they have their hands full and some of it could be frustration with the amount of work it takes to run a school. Regardless, the perception of the lack of support is an issue. It makes it more difficult for the schools to raise money and to just run on a day to day basis without full support from the church community. These issues have led the Advisory Board into discussions about how the schools are governed and what group might have the best knowledge base to make the large decisions and what group might have the best knowledge base to make the day to day decisions. Therefore, the issue of clergy support and governance of the schools are two areas that we hope the Blue Ribbon committee will review.

The last thing I would like to explore with you today is what role the Advisory Board might play in assisting the Blue Ribbon committee. We are an able-bodied, enthusiastic board, and we believe that we share the same goal of keeping Catholic education not only viable but vibrant for the future. I hope that you will consider allowing us to assist you. Thank you for your time.