

## **Catholic School Listening Sessions**

As part of its effort to develop a strategic plan for Catholic schools by June 2010, the Blue Ribbon Committee and its staff held listening sessions at 10 school locations throughout the Archdiocese between September 29 and October 21, 2009. Catholic school parents, teachers, staff, and all those having an interest in the future of Catholic education in the Archdiocese were invited and encouraged to participate. Attendance for the 10 sessions totaled 634, and a number of committee members were present at various locations.

The sessions, conducted by the Office of Schools Planning, began with prayer and a brief presentation on the activities of the Blue Ribbon Committee. Participants were then asked to hold discussions in small groups and report their ideas about Catholic schools, particularly concerning the areas of **Catholic Identity, Academic Excellence, Governance and Stewardship**. Each session ended with an opportunity for additional commentary in an open mike format.

Below is a summary of the prevalent responses to the questions posed for discussion.

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### **Discussion #1**

*1) Why do you send your children to, support, or teach at, a Catholic school?*

**Catholic Identity** and **Academic Excellence** were by far the areas most frequently cited in response to this question. Parents and teachers value above all the opportunity to provide children with a faith-based education, in which faith is integrated into all areas of the curriculum and Christian morals and values are taught (reinforcing values taught at home). They appreciate that Catholic identity is developed and fostered through exposure to Mass, prayer, sacraments and other Catholic traditions, and that the students develop a sense of social justice through involvement in outreach and service projects. Teachers particularly are thankful for the opportunity to share their faith with their students and to discuss God freely in the classroom. Parents and teachers both expressed appreciation repeatedly for the safe environment, level of discipline, and behavioral expectations in our schools, as well as the sense of community found there, providing both students and faculty with a nurturing, stable, family-like atmosphere.

Participants expressed appreciation for the high academic goals and standards and the solid foundation in core subjects found in Catholic schools. Parents value the individual attention their children receive, thanks to the smaller class sizes and a consistently dedicated faculty and staff. The K-8 model was also commended as allowing greater faculty awareness of individual students challenges, and a fruitful interaction between age groups.

## *2) What are your expectations of Catholic schools?*

**Catholic Identity**—Echoing the responses given above, Catholic school parents expect their children to learn to know and live their faith in a Christian atmosphere, and to learn in school the same values and morals they learn at home. They expect our schools to offer frequent opportunities for Mass attendance and prayer, and to pass on the legacy of Catholic education. They expect to find a strong sense of community alongside an atmosphere of tolerance and respect for others. They also expect our schools to have a missionary role, serving the community and reaching out to both Catholics and non-Catholics.

**Academic Excellence**—Parents also expect our schools to maintain high academic standards and goals, not only teaching to the test, but also teaching students life skills and a love of learning, and preparing them for higher education at the high school and collegiate levels. They expect the current degree of attention to individual students and different learning styles to be maintained. They also expect that the communication lines between parents and teachers will remain open to foster further the success of each child.

Listening session attendees' expectations for **Stewardship** centered on affordability—advocating for lower tuition rates to make Catholic education accessible to more families. There was disagreement as to where the priority for assistance should lie, but a number agreed that they expect more assistance to come from the parishes. Faculty members expect to receive fair compensation, as well as opportunities for professional development. Families expect to be treated as customers, with heightened attention to their needs from schools and the Archdiocese.

Participants would like to see open and efficient communication at all levels of **Governance**, both during and beyond the process of developing and implementing the strategic plan.

## *3) Do you have any recommendations?*

Recommendations were concentrated largely on **Stewardship**. Besides looking for alternative sources of funding and additional ways to improve affordability, many participants said that they would like to see more support from parishes, including those without schools. Some attendees urged that we strive against elitism in our admissions and assistance processes. The importance of attracting and retaining quality teachers, by offering improved salaries, benefits, and opportunities for professional development and evaluation, was also stressed. Participants also advocated for centralization for the purpose

of sharing resources, services, and facilities. Much emphasis was placed on the importance of improving our marketing and development strategies, including promoting our successes internally and externally in order to boost enrollment and retention of students.

It was widely agreed that Catholic schools could grow in **Academic Excellence** by moving beyond merely 'teaching to the middle' to focus more on meeting the needs of students at either end of the learning spectrum. Parents would like to see an improved and expanded offering of courses, programs, extracurricular activities, and resources for special needs students. Parents and teachers also felt that our schools would benefit from a general assessment of curriculums and grading systems for greater consistency across the system, without overlooking individual needs.

Listening session attendees stressed the need for consistent transparency and open communication at all levels of **Governance** in our schools, with fair representation for all parties.

Participants felt that we should hold high standards for **Catholic Identity** in our schools just as we do for academics, maintaining and increasing as needed the opportunities for Mass, prayer, and participation in the sacraments. More active involvement of priests and Religious in our schools, in an effort to continue traditions and promote vocations in the young, was strongly supported throughout the listening sessions. Participants also suggested strengthening our community service efforts to help the underprivileged.

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## **Discussion #2**

### *1) What do we need to be most attentive to in our planning?*

There was widespread support for **Stewardship** planning for our schools that includes high standards for fiscal responsibility and accountability. Parents again stressed the importance of working to improve affordability with lower, more uniform tuition rates across schools. Some participants felt strongly that we should work to avoid pricing out middle-class families, whereas others were more concerned that we show a preferential option for the poor in providing tuition assistance. Concern also centered on how to increase and retain our enrollment numbers, which many felt would benefit from the support of more centralized marketing and development efforts to promote our school product and raise funds to support it. At many of the listening sessions, shared financial responsibility for Catholic schools by all parishes was advocated.

Communication was again an area of focus for **Governance**, with particular concern that there be a mechanism in place to give parents and faculty ample opportunity for input. Attendees also asked that the committee and Archdiocese be especially transparent with

and sensitive to those affected by any changes involved as part of the strategic plan. Needs assessment also featured prominently in the discussion, with participants asking that we consider the various needs of different regions and communities for effective short- and long-term planning.

In striving to maintain our **Catholic Identity**, recommendations centered on fostering the Catholic community primarily through strengthening parish-school relationships. Involving students in outreach projects that serve those in need was urged as a complementary aspect of faith formation.

Parents and teachers asked that standards and goals for **Academic Excellence** in our schools not only be maintained but also expanded and improved. They urged that additional ways to recruit and retain quality teachers and administration, including providing more opportunities for professional development, be explored.

*2) What do we not want to lose in our planning process? What should we not overlook or disregard?*

Many participants were concerned that care be taken in planning not to jeopardize the **Catholic Identity** of our schools, maintaining adequate opportunities for Mass and prayer, and continuing to teach the whole child through a faith-integrated curriculum. Attendees urged that a dollar-driven mentality not be allowed to override the faith-based nature of this initiative. The opportunity for a renewal of faith in the Catholic community at large through service initiatives by students should not be disregarded. Finally, participants urged that the importance of building strong parish-school relationships, encouraging more involvement in both directions, not be overlooked.

As a model of **Governance is developed**, listening session attendees emphasized that the Archdiocese have a clear mission statement for Catholic schools that presents a positive image and a strong vision. There should be a fair process in place for school consolidations, with open communication about the process, timely notification, and a clear plan with adequate resources for smooth transitions. Participants urged that the value of the intimate environment found in our smaller schools be recognized, and that individual school identities, as well as their treasured customs and traditions, be preserved.

Discussions on **Stewardship** again focused on working towards improving affordability along with economizing by sharing resources, services and facilities between our schools. The welfare of our teachers was a repeated concern, with participants stressing fair salaries, benefits, professional development opportunities, and adequate classroom resources. Recommendations also centered on exploring additional sources of funding, such as, alumni support, endowments, business partnerships, foundation and non-profit support, as well as lobbying for efforts like the BOAST (Building Opportunities for All

Students and Teachers) Maryland tax credit legislation. Planning also should be careful to avoid undermining the stability of currently viable schools.

The plan for **Academic Excellence**, while setting high standards, should not lose sight of the varied abilities and talents of students, and work to meet the needs of students across the learning spectrum.