

**Archbishop O'Brien's Consultation on Catholic Schools  
with Priests, Pastoral Life Directors, School Presidents, and Principals  
October 27 and 28, 2009**

As part of the Archdiocese's effort to develop a strategic plan for Catholic schools by June 2010, Archbishop O'Brien convened two consultation sessions to hear from Priests, Pastoral Life Directors, School Presidents and Principals. These sessions, held on October 27 and 28, 2009 at the St. John's Columbia Interfaith Center, were intended to provide the Blue Ribbon Committee on Catholic Schools and the Office of School Planning with specific recommendations from parish and school leaders. Attendance for the two sessions totaled 154, with Archbishop O'Brien and a number of Blue Ribbon Committee members present at both meetings.

The meetings, conducted by the Office of Schools Planning, opened with a prayer and remarks from the Archbishop, which were followed by a brief presentation on school enrollment, finances and testing, as well as the activities of the Blue Ribbon Committee, given by the Executive Director, Monsignor Robert Hartnett. Participants were then asked to hold discussions in small groups and report back their specific recommendations for Catholic schools, focusing on the areas of **Catholic Identity, Governance, Academic Excellence** and **Stewardship**.

Below is a summary of the recommendations offered by Priests, Pastoral Life Directors, School Presidents and Principals.

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The participants strongly communicated that **Catholic Identity** should be central to the mission of Catholic schools. Student involvement in community service and outreach was emphasized, including system-wide service initiatives. The evangelization role of Catholic schools (with both non-Catholics and non-practicing Catholics) was also underscored.

Strong support for the continuation of Catholic school traditions, particularly through consistent and frequent opportunities for Mass, sacraments, prayer and devotions, was also expressed. Several groups stressed the importance of working to preserve the individual charism and legacy of each school and incorporating these traditions into new schools in the consolidation process.

Another recurring recommendation was the continuation of school and parish relationships and the need to improve and expand such interactions by encouraging increased involvement and support in both directions. Connected with this was the idea of extending faith formation to parents and the whole family.

Groups also felt that the Catholicity of schools should be clearly reflected in their leaders, board members, administration and faculty. System-wide faith formation programs were

recommended for these groups to ensure a solid foundation for faith-based decision-making, consistent with an Archdiocese Catholic schools mission statement.

Regarding the issue of **Governance**, participants commonly stressed the need to clarify levels of authority and responsibility (e.g. the degree of autonomy maintained by the principal) and to find a healthy balance between site-based and centralized management. All levels should be held accountable for both implementation of the strategic plan and adherence to Archdiocesan policies.

A significant amount of discussion focused on school boards, the levels at which they should be established (Archdiocesan, Regional, Local), and their function at these levels (deliberative or advisory). A number of attendees advocated board representation for all stakeholder groups. Participants were in agreement on the importance of having qualified leaders: board members, pastors and administrators who bring both expertise and a strong commitment to Catholic education. Opportunities for professional development should be made available for this purpose.

Discussion in the area of **Academic Excellence** focused on establishing a clear set of standards and goals, including assessing benchmarks (potential as well as those currently used) and keeping sight of measures of success beyond test scores. Maintaining the current level of achievement, and continuing to focus on core subjects in order to compete with other schools (county and charter) will be important.

Another significant point of discussion involved Catholic schools doing more to address learning differences and special needs students at both ends of the spectrum. Recommendations included maintaining small student/teacher ratios, incorporating special programs (e.g. PRIDE, IB, AP, distance learning), and ensuring equal access to academic resources and services. Participants also expressed interest in the idea of pursuing partnerships with Catholic colleges and universities, as well as exploring the possibility of career-track programs and magnet schools.

Attracting and retaining quality teachers and administration, with fair salaries and benefits, was also emphasized. Professional development should be encouraged and evaluation procedures established in order to ensure that our administration and faculty are excellent academic leaders.

The most widespread recommendation for **Stewardship** concerned the pooling of resources and centralized purchasing and services, such as human resources, billing and collection, facility maintenance, marketing, and development. The Archdiocese's marketing of Catholic schools received significant attention. Participants support the promotion of a consistent message both internally and externally in order to build confidence in what our schools offer. Participants recommended measures to support the idea of a unified school system, for instance by developing a common Archdiocese of Baltimore school logo and slogan. A related concern was that facilities present a positive image for our schools. The plan, therefore, should include a careful review of facilities, with provisions to build or perform upgrades as needed and a plan for the disposal of unnecessary buildings.

Participants also supported increased uniformity in tuition across the Archdiocese. There was discussion about where the priority for tuition assistance should lie (Catholics vs. non-Catholics, parishioners vs. non-parishioners). Nonetheless, the prevailing thought was that Catholic education should be accessible to as many families as possible. There was strong endorsement of the idea that support for Catholic schools should come from all parishes (not only those associated with schools) through collections and fundraising campaigns at the parish and Archdiocesan levels.

Finally, recognizing that school consolidations may be announced in March, participants offered recommendations concerning this process. It was widely felt that schools should meet the needs of the families and communities they serve. Thus, it is important in developing a consolidation plan to assess the needs of each community by carefully considering logistical information like demographics and parent traveling patterns, as well as prospective changes in these areas for more effective long-term planning.

Many participants expressed their hope that the process for consolidations be handled responsibly and pastorally, giving ample notification for school consolidations, communicating openly about the process with everyone concerned, and providing a clear plan of action along with resources to support a smooth transition.