

# **SCHOOLS TASK FORCE REPORT**

## **DIOCESE OF JOLIET**

February, 2019

### **INTRODUCTION**

Teaching has always been one of the central responsibilities that Christ entrusted to his Church. Forming young members of the Church in the ways of faith and discipleship is a sacred duty. However, the future of how we, his people in the Diocese of Joliet, undertake that duty is at a crossroads.

The elementary schools operated by the parishes of the Diocese of Joliet are struggling. Enrollment is declining overall. Several schools have closed in recent years. Finances put a huge strain on many of the parishes, and tuition is beyond the capacity of many parents. Employees are not paid competitive wages. Some schools are unable to maintain standards that allow them to measure up to their public school neighbors. Some pastors responsible for schools are less than enthusiastic about their task. It is sometimes difficult to retain principals and teachers. In some people's minds there is uncertainty about the role of local school boards and the diocesan Catholic Schools Office (CSO) and board. Some people even question the viability of the parish-based structure of schools.

Nor can the general situation in the Church be ignored. Fewer people believe these days and go to church, particularly among the ranks of parents with school-age children. Not only does this result in enrollment challenges but also a financial contribution decline. The child abuse scandal continues to have a significant impact on the Church and reflects a wider disappointment among many lay people in the institutional Church's responsiveness, accountability and transparency.

In light of this situation (which is certainly not unique to our diocese), Bishop Conlon established a task force comprised of educators, pastors and other professionals with a commitment to Catholic education. The task force reviewed numerous reports and publications and sought input from principals, pastors, the diocesan Catholic Schools Office, the diocese's Chief Financial Officer and representatives from other dioceses. What follows is a report of its conclusions. The conclusions represent the majority views of the task force members, although some members, for different reasons, did not support adoption of the report.

## **I. Basic Principles to Guide Decisions for the Future of Catholic Education**

1. Catholic parochial education is not merely private education. It is a ministry of the Church that fundamentally prepares young Catholics to live out their faith throughout the course of their lives. Thus, the Catholic identity of our schools must be clear.
2. As such, wherever possible, all Catholic children should be able to benefit from Catholic education. The Diocese of Joliet should strive to make its schools the best education option for Catholic families.
3. All parishes and all pastors should be committed to Catholic education.
4. Parishes and schools should cooperate to attract the largest possible number of students and to share resources, rather than competing for students and unnecessarily duplicating resources.
5. Allowance should be made for local options for the structure and management of schools.
6. The Catholic Schools Office, in collaboration with other relevant diocesan offices, needs to take a more active role in providing leadership, guidance and support to our schools. At the same time, parish and school officials must be open to the role of the CSO and other diocesan offices.
7. School finances must be strengthened by making the schools more affordable to more families. Financial support to individual students should be provided as scholarships and/or capital assistance, not as a subsidy. New sources of revenue should be investigated.

## **II. Specific Strategies**

1. Schools and parishes should engage in conversations about Catholic identity as outlined in the “National Standards and Benchmarks for Catholic Schools” to ensure encounters with Christ in sacrament, community, teaching and service.
2. Opportunities should be sought for sharing programs, personnel and facilities. Planning needs to be done for the best utilization, repair and upgrading of school facilities under the supervision of the diocesan Buildings and Properties Office.
3. Marketing needs to be improved and might be done better at the diocesan level. All schools must give evidence of clearly articulating their value to the communities they serve.

4. The role of the diocesan School Board needs to be redefined and strengthened. Likewise, the role of local school boards needs better definition, and board members need better training.
5. Collaboration with private Catholic schools in the diocese should be pursued.
6. Immediate attention needs to be given to those schools that are at a crisis point or seriously threatened or, generally, have fewer than 150 students, especially with regard to #7 below. Leadership in this regard, beyond the CSO, is required.
7. Parishes without schools will be joined with a parochial school, if the church is within 6 miles of a school in a densely populated area or 15 miles in a more rural area. Those parishes will share the financial obligations of what will then be considered *their* school and will work diligently to recruit students from among their parishioners. They might even assist with collective transportation. Open conversations about this arrangement and the commitments which it will entail should be conducted at the regional level as the planning is done. The CSO, utilizing professional counsel, will work out the details of the pairings and the financial obligations, with the assistance of the diocesan Finance Office. Cross-disciplinary and cross-departmental teams should be created, assigned and empowered to help lead with the planning and implementation of this process.
8. In these joint situations, all pastors will share responsibility for the administration of the school, but one of them will be appointed by the bishop as the “lead pastor” for a term and with a job description. Also, a school board will be chosen with representatives from all the parishes.
9. Some schools, because of their special demographic circumstances, might be designated as “mission” schools and qualify for financial support from the diocese.
10. A highly qualified consultant with proven experience in assessing diocesan schools should be engaged to assess all the elementary schools of the diocese in the areas of Catholic identity, academic excellence, facilities, marketing and finances. The consultant should report to the Secretary for Christian Formation and the Superintendent of Catholic Schools but be guided by the Schools Advisory Committee (see #11).

11. All of the strategies above should be guided and coordinated, but without the power to mandate, by a “Schools Advisory Committee” that would exist for one year. This committee, appointed by the bishop, should be comprised of representation from the CSO, the Board of Education, the Finance Office, the Finance Council, other appropriate curia agencies, the deaneries and the current Schools Task Force. This committee should include at least five subcommittees which will focus keenly on the broad areas of Viability, Governance, Funding, Marketing, and Facilities. Academic Excellence will remain a key priority for the CSO. The SAC should set targets and help lead local planning and intervention for all the specific strategies, as appropriate.
12. Local school boards and parish pastoral councils should be invited by the Schools Advisory Committee and its subcommittees to provide input on the support and maintenance of schools and should ultimately be charged with carrying out the initiatives approved by the bishop to support all Catholic schools throughout the diocese.
13. As determined by the Schools Advisory Committee and its Governance subcommittee, the diocesan Board of Education should adjust to focus on support of local governance models. This will include the systematization of local board by-laws, recruitment of members for these boards and their training.
14. Diocesan leadership should seek a commitment from pastors to consider all reasonable options for effecting positive change in our schools. Pastors should be provided regular information and feedback to be able to understand better the options being discussed and the concrete actions being taken. To ensure their cooperation, pastors should receive all important information directly and be part of all key decisions.
15. Steps need to be taken to strengthen school finances beyond #7 above, such as redoubling the efforts of the Catholic Education Foundation and directing more of the CMAA to schools. There should be dedicated support within the CSO for promoting the Illinois Invest in Kids Act to assist our school families and ultimately support our schools. Consideration should be given to engage external assistance to drive this effort, especially over the next twelve months.
16. The implementation of these strategies assumes the need for additional staff in the CSO as well as an outside consultant to coordinate planning and to assist with the renewal of a vibrant, sustainable Catholic school ministry within the Diocese of Joliet.

## **Task Force Members**

Bishop Conlon is very grateful to the members of the Schools Task Force for their diligence and concern. The members are: John Janicik, Chair; Reverend John Belmonte, SJ; Mike Cabrera; Very Reverend William Dewan; Brother James Gaffney, FSC; Terry Granger; Sr. Mary Paul McCaughey, OP; Reverend Don McLaughlin; Mary Ann McLean; John Narcissi; Claudia Molina; Dr. Sandy Renehan; John Vrdolyak.

## **Conclusion**

For generations, Catholic schools have been a hallmark of our parishes in the United States. Although we are largely beyond the immigrant circumstances that gave rise to them, they continue to be an invaluable means for preparing young followers of the Lord and members of his Church for a lifetime of commitment and fruitfulness. We owe it to them to do our best to maintain this wonderful resource.

Can it be done? Yes, but it will require a coordinated, diocesan-wide initiative with significant planning and implementation. Leadership from the bishop, pastors, Catholic Schools Office and local school officials will be essential. An openness to change among these leaders as well as among school parents and parishioners in general will also be needed. The effort and sacrifice are more than worthwhile.