

## Educational Symposium 2007 – “*Common Threads*”

### Position Paper: Catholic School Accessibility

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Strategic planning pertaining to the accessibility of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Hartford will have to examine a multitude of inter-related factors. There are three essential aspects that I will focus on: *availability, equity and affordability*.

The *availability* factor challenges us to examine the school facilities within the Archdiocese. Since 1990, 25 schools have closed, most of them in the urban/inner city areas. This would appear to mirror national demographic data that show the population migration from the Northeast. For the Archdiocese, the questions to ask are about where the buildings are, where the Catholic population is and how are both aligned. The adage, “if you built it they will come” does not necessarily hold true. Planners need to look at county/city projections and determine which buildings have potential for occupancy and which don’t, and then decide if and where new schools need to be built. In addition to questions of availability of the buildings, there are other related issues:

- Does the condition of the facilities allow for a quality 21<sup>st</sup> century education? While national data suggest that facilities and grounds rank below parental demands for religious values, quality academics and discipline, the levels of expectations about facilities vary in degrees, depending on location. This is especially true in the suburban areas where competition with public schools is a strong factor, particularly regarding technology, science labs, athletic fields, etc.
- Do the facilities allow access for physically challenged students and their parents and are physically handicapped persons able to be hired for staff positions?
- Are services available for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds? While underachievement is not de facto a characteristic of poverty, it is often correlated. Are the schools providing access to special programs, such as Title I, for students who are educationally disadvantaged? The ability of students to participate in subsidized nutrition programs at school is an important consideration for some families when selecting a school. The current data submitted by the Archdiocese to NCEA indicate that 484 students in 27 schools receive Title I services and that 27 schools offer the federal nutrition program. How reflective is that of the true needs of the students?
- Can students who wish to attend easily get to the schools? If not, what kinds of services are needed and is there the political will to lobby for public accommodations?

The *equity* factor challenges us to consider the deeper ramifications of the desire for promoting diversity as a core value. The planning document points to a welcoming environment for students from diverse backgrounds. The Archdiocesan enrollment census indicates a student population that is 22% minority and 18% non-Catholic. The national averages for Catholic schools are 27% and 14% respectively.

Sustaining educational opportunities for new immigrants, in ways that respect their cultural differences while preparing them to live in a diverse society, is an integral part of the social mission of the church. To that end, it is important to distinguish between concepts of equality and equity:

- Equality points to indices of fairness, usually measured quantitatively as parity of resources, inputs, etc. that are provided alike to all students.
- Equity is a much broader concept of fairness. Its objective is to provide each student with the resources he/she needs to succeed and may necessitate differing kinds and amounts of services.

Equity and equality are important considerations in light of the accessibility of culturally diverse students to our school programs. Academic performance is not only related to individual competences, but also to the cultural experiences of the students. Students from the dominant, mainstream culture of the school generally have experiences outside of the school that enhance their educational experience and provide easier access to the curriculum. In most cases, the cultural capital of the dominant group reflects that of the teachers and appears to be more valued. The questions to ask ourselves are some of these:

- Is tolerance enough?
- Do our teachers understand the role culture plays in learning styles?
- How can we widen the margins to serve (not just include) new immigrants, special needs students, gifted and talented as well as underachievers?

The *affordability* issue is an over-arching concern. Fiscal pressures have been the key factor in the declining number of schools as well as student enrollments. Viable sources of funding must be secured in order to sustain the Catholic schools.

Increased dependence on tuition has created a downward spiral of escalating tuition driving down enrollment which necessitates increased tuition. In addition to traditional tuition, some dioceses are experimenting with models that rely on a cost-based tuition that provides financial aid for those who cannot pay fully, or parish stewardship programs. These are in their early stages and point to the need for more creative ways of financing schools.

In addition to a tuition-driven revenue stream, there are three additional sources of fiscal support that need to be pursued more aggressively than in the past. These are pastoral support, private philanthropy and public policy initiatives.

- **Pastoral support** in the form of parish commitments to fostering Catholic education regardless of where the school is located must be vigorously promoted. National data indicate that support for Catholic schools as an integral part of parish life is not well understood or appreciated.
- **Private philanthropy** has been an indispensable sustaining force for Catholic schools. The advancement core of the symposium will deal with this topic in greater detail.
- **Public policy initiatives** that support parental rights in education require assertive and articulate leadership in shaping public policy debates. To secure economic justice for Catholic school parents, lawmakers need to be dissuaded from erroneous notions of elitism, divisiveness and selectivity and presented with good information about the service Catholic schools provide to the common good.
- Models of public support that exist elsewhere, through tax codes or tuition assistance to parents, need to be examined and the most suitable sought at the state and national levels for Catholic school parents in the Archdiocese.

As the Archdiocese of Hartford examines the core value of accessibility of its schools, the underlying and fundamental questions to be addressed are these: Whom do we wish to serve and what do we have to offer those who choose to come? The discussion of accessibility should answer those questions.