



School closings difficult, yet necessary
By Most Reverend Richard J. Malone

January's announcement that 10 Catholic elementary schools in Erie County would close has caused a great deal of consternation, and in some quarters, anger. I certainly understand the response, and I am sorry that it has disrupted the lives of some of our school families.

This decision was the culmination of several years of objective, painstaking, collaborative work, done mostly by the laity, and was clearly articulated among the goals with the June 2011 launch of "Faith in Tomorrow," the strategic plan for Catholic elementary schools in the Diocese of Buffalo: "By 2013-14, in a collaborative effort, school, parish and diocesan leadership will right-size the number and location of elementary school buildings to address the demographic realities, attain defined enrollment per building and achieve financial stability."

The groundwork was laid in 2006, when the Catholic School Development Program and Catholic Alumni Partnership worked to train and assist schools in development of enrollment management plans, realistic budgets, marketing campaigns, advisory councils, alumni relations and community partnerships. In 2008, Meitler, a Milwaukee-based consulting firm that has advised dioceses across the nation, studied Catholic schools in Western New York and found too many school buildings operating well below capacity.

That finding was validated in 2010 and 2013 when Verdi & Associates of Buffalo studied the demographics of the region and reached the same conclusion. Coupled with a 25 percent decline in baptisms over the past seven years, it became painfully evident that in order to strengthen our schools while maintaining and upgrading facilities to 21st century standards, closings were necessary.

Is the plan perfect? Of course not, but plans of this sort rarely achieve acclamation.

But as bishop, Canon Law requires me to have vigilance over all Catholic education. It was my obligation as chief shepherd to consider the entire diocese when making this decision, in order to keep the most students in our Catholic schools. The closing of 10 schools will impact about 1,000 students. To date, 639 have already registered at neighboring Catholic schools, and we fully expect that number to continue to increase right up to the opening of the school year in September.

What the diocese is doing is no different than what is happening in public school districts across the region and the state. Recognizing smaller family size, demographic and financial projections, we had to look to a more regional approach. To do nothing would have been irresponsible.

Decisions, which were arrived at with input from pastors and principals, were also based, in part, on geography. The address of every student was plotted on maps; market overlap is significant with two, and sometimes three or four schools were competing for students in the same neighborhood. Based on that data, the most strategic school locations with appropriate capacity were selected to remain open. While seven of the schools that will be closing are located in the Southtowns, since 2002, only three Southtowns schools closed, while dozens were shuttered in Buffalo, the Northtowns and Niagara Falls.

What's next? The Department of Catholic Schools is implementing STREAM, (Science, Technology, Religion, Engineering, Art, Math), which will become the focal point of our curriculum. STREAM will engage students at an early age in the study of robotics, architecture, space exploration, technical design and other subjects, all encompassed by a foundation based on Catholic faith and values.

The 20th century model of one parish, one school is becoming increasingly less feasible to provide a high quality Catholic education affordable to families. Regional boards comprised of community members with expertise in Catholic identity, academics, finances, marketing, human resources, technology and more are being developed and trained to assist pastors in operating 21st century schools.

We are empowering school parents through the newly-formed Buffalo Diocesan Federation of Home-School Associations, which is coordinating fundraising, providing direction for effective HSA's and engaging in grassroots advocacy.

In the end, we are creating a scenario where the remaining Catholic schools will be stronger and more stable, with increased enrollment, even stronger academics, while maintaining our primary focus of educating children to reach their full potential in an atmosphere rooted in Catholic tradition and Gospel values.

The April *Western New York Catholic* will feature the answers to a series of Frequently Asked Questions that the Department of Catholic Schools has received since the Jan. 15 announcement.

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