

On Tuesday, August 27<sup>th</sup>, Fr. Joel Wilson, Pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Parish, and Mrs. Cynthia Smith, Principal, met with members of the Department of Catholic Schools and twelve stakeholders including parents, alumni, and parishioners. The topic of the discussion was the future and sustainability of Catholic Schools in Burlington County. Additionally, on Wednesday, August 28<sup>th</sup>, Fr. Daniel Kirk, Pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Parish, and Mrs. Kathy Chestnut, Principal, met with a similar group of thirteen selected school stakeholders and the members of the Department of Catholic Schools for the same purpose.

Both meetings began with a prayer. The Superintendent of Catholic Schools, JoAnn Tier, presented information and data on the state of Catholic school enrollment across the country. She proceeded to share information concerning the Catholic schools in the state of New Jersey and then, schools specific to the Diocese of Trenton. After concluding, the pastors of both parishes then spoke briefly about each school's enrollment and the recent and current state of each of the schools.

Once the pastors shared their thoughts, the stakeholders broke into small focus groups facilitated by Dr. Margaret Boland, Associate Superintendent, Daniel O'Connell, Associate Director, and Judy Nicastro, Associate Director, to discuss three topics. These topics as well as responses are listed below.

**1. Share the benefits of a Catholic school education. What do you value about your Catholic school? Describe your vision for a Catholic school that will prepare your child for the future.**

**Faith-Based Environment**

- A focus on Jesus Christ underscores the reason for a Catholic school; spirituality, morality, and respect are part of each day.
- Students learn faith, discipline, and structure.
- Catholic education has formed children into adults with faith-filled lives.
- Catholic schools are value-driven.
- Catholic education has a great history and record of service and achievement.
- A Catholic school fosters and promotes unity of spirit and unity of purpose.
- Catholic schools enable students to view life through the eyes of faith.

**Community of Families**

- There is a definite community feeling in the school.
- Right-sized classrooms provide focused attention and a homey atmosphere.
- Parents feel that Catholic schools provide a safe environment for students, which fosters the feeling of being in a family atmosphere.
- Parents don't necessarily send kids to Catholic schools because of logistics but rather because of what they are and what they offer.

**Future Visioning**

- Marketing, fundraising, and positive involvement of alumni continue to be essential.
- Catholic schools need to provide opportunities for creativity and innovation.
- Catholic schools must continue to provide a "well-rounded" program.

- It is important to build momentum, take action, and not wait until it's too late.
- While a Catholic school must be built on faith and values, academic excellence must also be a priority as well as school sustainability.
- Collaboration with other Catholic schools in the county must be fostered.
- Focus on what sets Catholic schools apart and do not be afraid to capitalize on that. We have to be willing to "toot our own horn."

**2. How will Catholic schools thrive in the future? Given trends from the introduction, what do you see as sound for Catholic schooling... merger... closure... new model? What could work in Burlington County? Discuss the challenges and benefits.**

**Benefits**

- Specialization could take place with a focus on the sciences or the arts.
- Schools may benefit from a merger or consolidation.
- Relationships between schools will be deepened and improved.
- A consolidation or merger could enhance programs that will be offered.

**Challenges**

- Parking lot gossip is the worst enemy of progress and encourages negative talk.
- Church numbers are declining as well as school numbers. Where is everyone?
- If there is a merger, then where are we headed?
- Strategic partnerships (with business, industry, and higher education) may need to be developed.
- Marketing must become intentional and effective.
- Services may have to be shared.
- It is essential to maximize and utilize government funding.
- Schools must be realistic in their approach while not losing positivity.

**Questions**

- If there is to be a merger with another school, that would be difficult in terms of loyalty and support. Do we support our parish but also a school in another parish?
- Can a merger work with different demographics?
- Is it a matter of one or the other surviving: church or school? It would be a tragedy for both to go.
- If there is a new model, what does it look like?
- Are parishioners actually aware of what is happening financially?
- Will alumni be willing to support the school if there is a name change?
- Is there a possibility of a Pre-K to 12 school in Burlington County?
- Can there be a merger of schools to form one primary school, one elementary school, and one middle school?
- Do we need to form a joint committee of Burlington County Catholic schools?
- What can we do to offer more scholarships?

**3. What next steps are recommended for future deliberation to continue the conversation?**

- We need to bring schools together.
- We see now that it is a broader problem than just our school.
- Invite more alumni participation.
- Keep the lines of communication open.

A review and summary of the small group discussions as well as a period for questions and answers followed the small group discussions. The pastors then concluded the evenings with a prayer.