Lessons Learned from Consolidations and Closures of Elementary Schools:
2006

The Catholic School Office asked a number of pastors and principals that were involved in the consolidation or closures of elementary schools to reflect back upon their experience and share their “learnings” with elementary principals at a principal’s meeting in March. From their notes and discussions at the meeting are “learnings” in no particular order. These may be helpful for future reference.

General

- It is important to plan out of strength and not weakness. Don’t wait to start talking until the bottom has fallen out or you have one foot in the grave.
- It makes a difference what choices you make, what model you choose – it has an impact on your parish community.
- Give yourself enough time to talk about the multiple and complex issues such as governance, name changes, hiring, timing, communications, etc.
- Written documents are essential. Written minutes of meetings, written agreements are essential so all are reading the same thing. Word of mouth or verbal agreements cause more problems than they solve.
- The central need that keeps people trying to make progress is the necessity that we collaborate. Most participants seem to agree that “something must be done” and “we do not believe in the survival of the fittest as the principal determinant to our future.” There are some things that we can do better together than alone. We want less competition, more partnership.
- To do nothing is to decide that several of our schools will close. We must find a plan for our future.
- We need new, collaborative structures, built on more comprehensive, less parochial vision for Catholic education.
- Catholic schools cannot have as their goal “survival or financial savings.” We need a vision that is bigger and stronger.
- A dialectic that has added energy to our discussion: On the one hand, this is an urgent task because some of our schools are on the edge of closing. If we do nothing, or if we move too slowly, we will lose some of these schools. On the other hand, we must proceed with care. If we act before we have a well-considered plan, and embrace an ill-conceived plan, we will do more harm than good.
- We learned that two fears have been frequently articulated: that this process will never reach a conclusion (all talk no action), and that we will develop a strong plan only to have parishes pull out at the last minute.
- Recognize the mission of Catholic schools and realize that the mission might need to be slightly different for schools in the urban city and suburban areas.
- We learned that we need to focus on students and their needs.
- We have learned that the Church (the people of God) is changing. The Church needs to look at alternative structures and governance models not only for
schools, but also for parishes. There is a need to free up the priests for pastoral ministry and delegating the administrative tasks to qualified laity.

Facilitation

- The issue of school closings and consolidations is very complex, too emotionally charged not to have someone to guide us through it.
- There needs to be much consultation – Consultations with pastors, with principals and with the parish community.
- Good facilitation and hard data is necessary if the plan is to receive broad ownership. Archdiocesan leadership will also be needed.

Communications

- Quality communications on all levels is essential and critical. Good communications between the school office and parishes and pastors; between pastors, parish leaders and parents and parishioners; between pastors and pastors.
- There needs to be honest communication between pastor and pastor and principal and principal.
- Be prepared to deal with the media. Be prepared to deal with rumors. Good communications is essential.
- It is essential to communicate with one voice.

Archdiocesan

- The current process in the Archdiocese needs to be reviewed to see if it really works.
- No vision, no overall plan from the top seems to be a detriment.
- There should be a staff person in the School Office who is the “expert” on school closing and consolidations – someone who knows the rules and regulations, the mountains and pit falls.
- When decisions to close or merge are left up to each individual parish, everyone has good intention and good will; but it seems at times that we are working at odds with one another. It would be great to have some vision or direction from the Archdiocese when it comes to the school situation.
- The conversation in this process has led to the possibility that we desire a major change in the culture and structure of Catholic schools. Perhaps the plan will have to provide for several phases, so that it can be made manageable. Perhaps it will assign certain kinds of collaboration to neighboring elementary schools, certain kinds to the elementary schools and their high schools, and certain kinds to the entire deanery. There has been some expressed desire that the entire archdiocese be engaged in some of the effort, but most do not see the willingness for this on the part of archdiocesan leadership.
- We learned that the services of the School Office have been indispensable.
- There is a need for more leadership from the Archdiocese.
- We are learning that perhaps we do need a system of schools rather than a network as we have now.
• We learned that LT3 (*Linking Tradition, Transition and Transformation: Planning for Catholic Education*) could be a helpful resource, not reading it from page one, but to review what it has to offer and use those sections that are helpful.

Collaboration
• Parishes must work together.
• We began by emphasizing subsidiarity – each parish must decide for itself what future it wishes to embrace. On the other hand, the greatness of the Catholic ethos is communion – we need each other. As the process has evolved, ever greater emphasis has been placed upon the need for all parishes to participate.
• We learned that perhaps the deanery would be able to embrace shared tasks such as a major stewardship drive, marketing, economy of scale strategies.
• Many who have read “*Renewing our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium,*” a statement of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, see the need for increased participation by the laity; an archdiocesan plan to instill the spirituality of stewardship in all parishes; the need to convene gatherings of educational, business and community leaders to address the critical issues of Catholic identity, cultural diversity, finances, just wages and benefits, academic quality, alternative governance models and marketing of Catholic schools.

Because of school closings and mergers over the past few years, the School Office has also put together a check list for those principals and pastors who are involved in closings or consolidations.

**School Mergers and/or Closures**

**The following must be kept at the parish rectory**
- Permanent record cards of all students who have ever attended the school
- Record of names and years of employment of faculty
- Performance evaluations of educators must be kept for 7 years
- Student health records for 1 year
- Classroom attendance registers are to be kept for 5 years

**If a student transfers and a school requests info the following is to be sent**
- Student files together with a COPY of permanent record card and health records

**The following are to be destroyed**
- Terra Nova scoring results for classroom and entire school
- ITBS scores of individual students and classes
- Writing samples scores of students
- All OCSAA materials

**Return to individual teachers/administrators**
- Ohio certification/licenses, catechetical certificates, and IPDP’s
Return to pastor
   All school keys, well marked and identified
   Checking account and petty cash
   Current inventory of school equipment/materials (not State or Federal)

Confer with Archdiocesan Director of State/Federal funding regarding disposal of
   State/Federal materials/equipment (modular included)
   ACR monies will be worked out by the Director of Archdiocesan State funding

Principal informs DASite of school closure. School may be billed for unused
   contracted services

Archdiocesan Office informs CCO in April of school closures. CCO informs ODE

Archdiocesan Office informs State Department of Ed of school closures with a July 1
date so as not to jeopardize funding

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