

AN UPDATE FROM THE BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION

August 2011

The Blue Ribbon Commission was formed in December 2010 by Cardinal Justin Rigali to serve as a strategic advisory group.¹ We were charged with providing recommendations to ensure that Catholic education in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia is of excellent quality, affordable, accessible and sustainable far into the future.

We are most grateful to all for the sacrifices made to provide children with a Catholic education and write at this time to offer you an update on our progress.

THE CHALLENGES FACING CATHOLIC EDUCATION TODAY

Since our formation, we focused on several basic realities:

- Since the introduction of parochial education by Saint John Neumann in the mid-19th century our schools have distinguished themselves as models of excellence in education and faith formation.
- Our schools are integral to the fabric of our communities and have made invaluable contributions to the educational and spiritual welfare of the region since their inception. As such, we are stewards of a critical component of our shared Catholic identity and tradition.
- The long-term sustainability of Catholic education is threatened in its current form by naturally occurring shifts in social, economic, and demographic patterns. We must address these trends if Catholic education is to be available for future generations. Doing so will require difficult, but necessary decisions and now is the time to make them.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THOSE INVESTING IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

As we began our work earlier this year we established a set of guiding principles as a framework. These begin with the overarching recommendation that the Archdiocese make all reasonable efforts to ensure that the opportunity for a high quality, affordable, and accessible Catholic education be available to all those who desire it.

Our efforts envision a priority for Catholic children while maintaining a commitment to all others who seek the benefits of Catholic education, especially those in urban and under-served communities. Specific principles of our framework are:

- The structure, location, and density of Catholic high schools and elementary schools should reflect the desire to ensure quality, affordability, and accessibility for those who seek Catholic school education for their children.
- Various alternatives to the traditional parish elementary school must be considered in order to meet this goal. Alternatives include, but are not limited to, regional schools, multi-parish schools, and independent schools.
- The commitment to those in urban and under-served communities must reflect a need-based approach featuring various educational alternatives funded by diverse sources.
- Archdiocesan education strategies must always recognize that its schools play a critical role in faith formation and provide an opportunity for evangelization.

¹ For information about the members of the Blue Ribbon Commission, please visit www.catholicschools-phl.org.

The structure, location, and density of Parish Religious Education Programs (PREP) is essential to providing Catholic faith and life education and formation for those children attending non-Catholic schools. We also recognize that our children with special needs deserve adequate support for both their academic needs and their social development.

DATA AND FEEDBACK

We recognize that obtaining data about our schools and listening to those most heavily invested in Catholic education—parents, guardians, teachers, and administrators—is essential to our work. It enables us to make informed and substantive recommendations. To date, we have gathered data and information from various sources. The major initiatives undertaken in this regard are outlined here:

- An online survey launched in the spring resulted in responses from over 3,500 parents and guardians as well as approximately 700 teachers and administrators.
- Analysis of student demographics and attendance data, both actual and forecast, for all regions served by the Archdiocese.
- Interviews were conducted with the Connelly Foundation and Business Leadership Organized for Catholic Schools (BLOCS). We also met with Regional Vicars and with the Vicar for Cultural Ministry.
- Presentations for those responsible for Parish Religious Education Programs (PREP) focused on the increase in enrollment in these programs.
- Archdiocesan Special Education programs for children with special needs were also examined.
- During the fall of 2010, data was gathered from six regional meetings where parents and guardians expressed their desire for quality schools.

We are currently using this information to define various strategies that will meet our goal of excellent, affordable, accessible, and sustainable Catholic education.

THE FUTURE OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN THE ARCHDIOCESE

As indicated earlier, the Commission is engaged in a comprehensive and critical review of the key elements of model Catholic schools and religious education programs for the future. While adhering to the critical components of our shared Catholic identity, Catholic tradition and faith formation, our schools will continue to offer outstanding academic programs for which they have become distinguished. They will also include the disciplines necessary to prepare the students for success in the 21st century.

We are committed to providing those elements in the most academically excellent, affordable, accessible and sustainable manner possible. We must make decisions regarding the composition and density of our schools that are reflective of maintaining that commitment while providing for the needs and expectations of parents, guardians, students, teachers and administrators. These decisions will be difficult, but they are essential to the continuation of quality Catholic education in the Archdiocese.

We wish we were in a position to be more specific, but much has yet to be done. We will provide further updates as our work progresses. Thank you once again for your commitment to Catholic education.

Sincerely,
The Blue Ribbon Commission

CONTACT THE BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION

We want to hear from you. To provide additional feedback and information, contact us by visiting <http://bit.ly/AOPContactBRC> or by writing: The Blue Ribbon Commission | c/o The Office of Catholic Education | 222 North 17th Street | Philadelphia, PA 19103