



Students from Sacred Heart School in Washington participate at a May 6 rally to support the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, a voucher program that provides grants for private school tuition.

“There is No Magic Wand”

The struggle to preserve Catholic education in the nation’s capital.

by **RiShawn Biddle**

In 2007, the Archdiocese of Washington, facing mounting education debts, announced that it would convert seven of its 11 inner-city District of Columbia schools into public charter schools, the first time an archdiocese has ever taken such a step. The move raised fears that other dioceses might follow suit, and raised questions about the Archdiocese of Washington’s commitment to educating poor families in the nation’s capital.

But it is now trying to revive that commitment by revamping its system for school financing. It has required parishes that don’t currently operate schools to contribute more offertory funds to diocesan schools, and it is developing sources of long-term support as part of a two-year-old capital cam-

paign. This includes \$20 million raised so far toward an endowment for archdiocesan elementary schools.

Like other dioceses around the nation, the Archdiocese of Washington faces an array of systemic challenges. The growth of charter schools in the District of Columbia has exacerbated an eight-year-long decline in enrollment. So has the lack of diocesan schools in fast-growing parishes in suburban Maryland. The high costs of maintaining aging school buildings and the competition with traditional public schools for teachers have also increased the costs of providing education.

Even after handing off most of its inner-city DC schools, the archdiocese still has schools in urban Prince George’s County, Maryland and other rural sections of the state, whose families earn less than \$20,000 a year. The schools in those areas often run annu-

al deficits as much as \$500,000 a year. “[The fiscal problems] are starting to spread,” says Andy Smarick, a former US Department of Education official who wrote a report about the charter school conversion of diocesan schools.

Still, \$4 million in tuition assistance was provided to students from low-income families, according to Archdiocesan Director of Communications Susan Gibbs. This is a six-fold increase from the \$690,500 in tuition assistance provided by the archdiocese during the 2006-2007 school year.

The four remaining schools in inner-city DC—now operated under a funding group called the Consortium of Catholic Academies—will continue to get direct support to ease their debts. The archdiocese, along with outside benefactors, will provide another \$3 million in donations this year. One of

the schools, Holy Redeemer—near the US Capitol Building—will gain additional support through a five-year partnership with the University of Notre Dame. The university will provide technical assistance and professional development for the school's teaching staff.

Another step toward increasing funding will come in July 2010, with a three-fold increase in school assessment fees charged to parishes that do not directly support a Catholic elementary school. Currently, those parishes contribute just 3 percent of their offertory, the same level of support as that provided by parishes that do operate schools. The fee increases may encourage those parishes to start their own schools, partner with other parishes on existing schools, or even encourage families within the parishes to enroll their children in those Catholic schools.

The role that the archdiocese plays in helping schools deal with their operating budgets and capital expenditures is fundamentally changing. For years the archdiocese would devote as much as \$7 million a year to cover operating deficits for just 17 of its schools. This ignored a more fundamental problem—that the schools needed to increase enrollment—and it meant that the archdiocese couldn't help other schools.

Last year, the archdiocese ended the practice of deficit financing and launched a pilot program that provided partial scholarships to needy students across the school system. Last year, the program provided \$965,000 in scholarships to 562 families, and the program is yielding positive results: every dollar in partial scholarships generated two dollars in tuition from families, according to Gibbs.

The archdiocese has had to adopt new strategies after two decades of efforts that have done little to maintain the presence of Catholic schools within the nation's capital. Many trace the beginning of the school system's financial problems to 1987, when Cardinal James Hickey authorized construction of four new Catholic schools in suburban Maryland and a series of salary increases for teaching staffs.

Ten years later, to ease growing debts, he transferred financing of 12 schools within inner-city DC, whose enrollments and academic performance were on the decline, to a group of outside donors called the Center City Consortium. In 2001, the archdiocese received more

outside support when it successfully worked with then-DC Mayor Anthony Williams to gain congressional backing for the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. Early on, more than half the students who received scholarships from the program attended the archdiocese's elementary and high schools.

By 2007, the archdiocese and outside donors had poured \$60 million into the Center City Consortium, which had succeeded in improving student performance. But the schools failed to increase enrollment or stabilize funding; each school generated operating deficits of \$500,000 a year.

The expansion of charter schools within the District also lured away the kind of families that would have chosen Catholic schools over the traditional public schools district a decade ago. Two of the archdiocesan schools were ultimately shut down.

Then, in November 2007, the archdiocese announced that it would spin off seven of its inner-city schools into a charter school operator, Center City Public Charter Schools, whose leadership had presided over the original Center City Consortium. The archdiocese's decision raised ire among DC's inner-city Catholics. Declared S. Kathryn Allen, a spokeswoman for Black Catholics United, a local church activist group: "The archdiocese is turning its back on the parents who want a Catholic education for their children."

But for the archdiocese, the conversion brought \$2 million a year in new income through lease arrangements with the charter schools. A portion of that income is being used to support its four remaining inner-city DC schools.

Yet the problem of long-term solvency remains. Gibbs says, "There's no magic wand and we have schools that are going to struggle."

Meanwhile, the archdiocese is also trying to foster a stronger Catholic identity at its schools through improvements to the quality of religious education. Such efforts to bolster Catholic identity have defined the success enjoyed by the Diocese of Wichita in Kansas, whose 39 schools have seen enrollment thrive despite serving one of the nation's smallest Catholic populations.

Starting in 2007, the Archdiocese of Washington began a thorough evaluation of religious education in its schools. A year later, the archdiocese laid out "Four Pillars" for the Catholic schools, which emphasized the importance of Catholic identity to the curriculum.

Earlier this year, the archdiocese established new policies for school governance, requiring that religious instruction be based on *The National Directory for Catechesis* and the *Doctrinal Elements of a Curriculum Framework for the Development of Catechetical Materials for Young People of High School Age*, issued by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. The policies state that school days should begin and end with prayers and there should be a cross in every classroom.

The policies also address the growth of Catholic schools started and operated either by lay Catholics or consortiums. The archdiocese is already home to a Cristo Rey school and a lay-run school, Mother of God in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Two more lay-run schools are being evaluated by the archdiocese this year.

But new funding and new initiatives may not offset future school closings. As the DC suburbs become more urban, the flight of middle-class families to newer suburbs outside of the archdiocese will likely mean more schools with declining populations. Two schools in suburban Maryland were closed this year. At the same time, the current recession complicates fundraising and school finances. Last year, requests for partial scholarships were three times greater than the amount funded by the archdiocese, according to Gibbs.

This dismal outlook reflects the long-term decline throughout the rest of the nation: the number of Catholic schools overall decreased by 12 percent between 1998-1999 and 2008-2009, according to the National Catholic Educational Association.

A new hurdle is the decision by congressional Democrats earlier this year to shut down the DC Opportunity Scholarships. The archdiocese is teaming up with city leaders such as former mayors Williams and Marion Barry (now a city councilman) to lobby President Barack Obama and congressional leaders to renew the program.

But its schools have already suffered damage from the shutdown. The program refused to fund vouchers for some 200 kids who had successfully applied for the vouchers for the 2009-2010 school year. Many of those children would have attended Catholic schools. ■

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