



Archdiocese of Chicago Board of Catholic Schools

Strategic Plan for Catholic Schools

2013-2016

Executive Summary

The Catholic school system of the Archdiocese of Chicago educates over 85,00 elementary and high school students in 250 schools in Cook and Lake counties and is overseen by the Office of Catholic Schools (OCS). Catholic schools give these young people a firm foundation for life by providing them with both strong academics and the fundamentals of their faith. Pastors, principals, and teachers are free to create a God-centered environment in the schools that demonstrates faith in action. Catholic schools, as Cardinal Francis George recently explained, also provide “a safe place for people to learn because of what we believe about love and respect.” Catholic schools also perform a profoundly important civic function by grounding students, both Catholic and those from other faith traditions, in the virtues that produce responsible members of society. By forming future adults who respect themselves and others, the Catholic schools provide an invaluable service to the community as a whole.

Catholic schools also offer strong academic preparation across the board, including in neighborhoods where public schools are underperforming. High school graduation rates in urban areas are dramatically higher for students in Catholic schools. Recently, a blue-ribbon task force identified inadequate public education as such a grave problem that it presents a national security crisis. Keeping Catholic schools available to children, therefore, has become a civic and moral imperative.

In the Chicago Archdiocese the overall report card is excellent with regard to student outcomes. Test scores and graduation rates are high throughout the system. Dedicated principals and teachers produce these results at a cost per student that is considerably below that of the public schools. Moreover, educating these children in Catholic schools instead of public schools saves Cook and Lake counties an estimated \$1.15 billion annually. However, today's environment presents many challenges for Catholic schools compared to the past. Creating a vibrant school today requires a broader and deeper set of skills than some principals, trained in a different era, are prepared for. In the past, parent demand was virtually “automatic” because of stronger religious practice, greater parental experience with

Catholic schools and fewer school options from which to choose. Today, a successful school requires strong marketing efforts, particularly since many parents are not familiar with Catholic schools themselves. (Parents are less likely to have attended Catholic schools as children; many Latinos are from cultures where only the very wealthy attended Catholic schools). In the past, academic requirements were simpler, and focused on the three R's. Today, schools need to demonstrate the ability to teach 21st century skills such as technology and foreign languages, and to assist with unique learning needs. In the past, when schools were staffed primarily by dedicated and low cost teachers who were members of religious orders, tuition could be charged at a rate that many could afford. Today, a flat tuition rate sufficient to cover costs puts some schools out of range for many. Today's schools need much more sophisticated tuition strategies, such as variable rate tuition and flexible financial aid policies, as well as more emphasis on local fundraising and advancement.

Overall, today's financial picture presents significant challenges. Traditionally, the parish-based elementary school relied on tuition and parish subsidies — typically up to 20% of the school budget — to cover the cost of educating students. However, the financial stresses from declining enrollment and increased expenses have made many schools more dependent on limited Archdiocesan subsidies. This trend is unsustainable. Consequently, five schools have been closed effective July 1, 2013. Action may have to be taken on other schools in the next few years.

However, the Archdiocesan School Board has conducted an in-depth study of the financial condition of all elementary schools in the system and believes that a substantial number of schools should be able to overcome much of their financial difficulty. The Board study suggests several reasons for hope for these schools. First, the large majority of schools are not “structurally disadvantaged”—i.e., adequate numbers of children live in their communities and the school buildings generally are not in an unsatisfactory condition.

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Second, many success stories exist, even in lower-income communities, where implementation of best practices in leadership recruitment, marketing, tuition-setting and financial aid, and fiscal management have led to financial turnaround. Third, we know that there is currently a low implementation rate of these best practices at the local level, based on principal self-reporting. Local principals may often lack the broader set of skills required to create a flourishing school today such as enrollment, marketing and financial expertise, community relations, and fundraising experience.

Having identified these opportunities for improvement, the Board feels that it and the Archdiocese have a moral obligation to assist struggling schools to achieve them. Moreover, there are other grounds for optimism about the future of the Chicago Catholic school system. The dynamic growth in the Hispanic population in the Archdiocese means that the Catholic school-age population is on the rise. The Archdiocese and OCS are working to better serve the Hispanic population and inform Latino families about the advantages to their children of choosing Catholic schools. The Board also believes that there is untapped potential financial support for Catholic schools. For example, the Big Shoulders Fund, which has been an enormous help in supporting inner-city Catholic schools, has raised nearly \$250 million from Chicagoans of all faiths and backgrounds since its founding in 1986. Recent surveys conducted by the Archdiocese show significant receptivity to a major fundraising effort to benefit the schools. The Board therefore recommends that the Archdiocese undertake an aggressive funding campaign among its parishioners, with the essential support of its pastors, and also among the broader civic community to secure the future of the Catholic school system.

The Board also is committed to persuading Chicago and Illinois elected officials to enact legislation to allow families to choose Catholic schools with the help of vouchers or tax credits for individuals and corporations that support scholarship programs. Many other states have already recognized the immense public service provided by Catholic schools and have created a variety of vehicles for supporting school choice. These legislative solutions have allowed Catholic and other non-government schools to remain viable options for parents and their children and consequently benefit the entire civic community. Nationwide, the school choice movement provides hope that sometime in the future Illinois families may be empowered

by publicly funded vouchers or tax credits that would enable them to choose Catholic schools. School choice funding would help build enrollment and enhance the long-term viability of the Catholic school system, an indispensable civic institution.

This Plan addresses six core goals for the Catholic school system: Catholicity, Academics, Leadership, Operations, OCS Reorganization, and Funding. The Board is confident that focused, proactive attention to all six areas will not only avert the dire consequences to schoolchildren that will result if the current financial crisis is left unaddressed, but also will increase the number of students benefitting from an excellent Catholic education. The Plan's action steps to achieve the six goals include measures to (1) insure the continuing strength of the schools' Catholic identity; (2) make sure that academics stay strong and in pace with the highest norms; and (3) find, foster and reward excellent principals among the broader civic community to secure the future of the Catholic school system. and teachers. Implementation of the plan also requires (4) an immediate hands-on assistance program, which has already begun to stabilize struggling schools by helping them institute best practices. (5) In addition, the OCS management structure will be reorganized and staffed to make sure these efforts are effective. (6) Finally, the Plan proposes a substantial fundraising campaign to create a sufficient endowment going forward. In the next few months the School Board will also produce a more detailed list of specific tasks tied to a timeline to implement the Plan.

The Board believes that targeted funding and strategic use of both old and new infrastructure will help ensure our overall goal: to provide a great Catholic education to every child who wants to enter our school doors.





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Action Items

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Catholicity

1. **Enhance the religion curriculum to foster students' faith formation and grounding in Catholic virtues.** The new Archdiocesan religion curriculum will be fully implemented and assessed in all schools. Liturgical practices and Catholic culture will be reinforced throughout the school day.
2. **Ensure strong faith formation for teachers.** All religion teachers will be certified in the new Archdiocesan religion curriculum, and every school will have a certified director or coordinator of religious education to oversee the religion program. A critical mass of every school's teaching staff will be made up of practicing Catholics who can model the faith in daily life.
3. **Engage in outreach to school families.** Each school, with the help of OCS, will identify ways to better engage Catholic parents to understand the new religion curriculum, the importance of the sacraments, and the need to reinforce the faith in the family's home life. At the same time, each parish and school will identify ways to strengthen their interconnection, including ensuring that the pastor is actively involved in the faith life of school families.

Academics

1. **Enhance the core curriculum.** At a minimum, all schools will align their curricula with the new national Common Core standards, including rigorous middle and high school curriculum models. All schools will fully implement a data-driven model to increase student achievement by tracking and publishing student data. Schools will also provide high-quality early childhood programs to ensure a strong foundation for every child, with a special focus on literacy in the primary grades. Finally, schools will participate in partnerships with Catholic and other universities to keep pace with new developments in optimal curriculum design.
2. **Extend and enhance academic services to meet student and community needs.** Every school will train teachers to understand students' unique learning needs and position the school to obtain state support for special needs. Where feasible, schools will create or expand programs to accommodate students with different learning styles. Schools will also explore options such as extended day, summer school, or year round school to maximize the use of school time to support student achievement.

Leadership

1. **Systematically recruit superior principals.** OCS will establish a leadership center to conduct nationwide searches to aggressively recruit and train outstanding principal candidates. The Superintendent will formally approve all new principals before they are placed on the payroll.
2. **Enhance training and professional development for principals and teachers.** OCS will coordinate and encourage training and development opportunities for principals and teachers that include strategies for teaching core curriculum for 21st century learning skills. In particular, partnerships with local colleges and universities will continue to be developed to ensure state of the art training. OCS will also provide focused training to promising principal candidates to develop the range of skills necessary for effective leadership.
3. **Design merit-based evaluation and compensation systems for principals and teachers.** The evaluation process for principals will be upgraded and centralized in OCS and will measure their broad range of responsibilities and their performance against contractually defined benchmarks. A compensation plan for principals will allow for bonuses and incentives that reward outstanding performance. For teachers, the plan will also allow for financial rewards for measurably effective teaching. Retention policies for teachers will reward merit rather than strict seniority.

Operations

1. **Fully implement the FAST program.** OCS will require all schools receiving Archdiocesan grants to comply with the FAST protocols and will facilitate that compliance. These protocols include hiring stronger principals and strengthening programs where necessary, designating a marketing staff member to increase enrollment, setting realistic tuition rates and instituting variable rates, and instituting financial best practices. OCS will set concrete benchmarks to assess schools' compliance with FAST over time and make case by case decisions about the future of schools that do not comply. OCS will also move from a grant model of assistance to these schools to a need-based scholarship model.
2. **Continue the AIM program of centralized OCS management of certain schools.** OCS will continue the AIM pilot program under which OCS has assumed direct operating authority over certain schools. While pastors and Vicars may continue to voluntarily request AIM status, some FAST schools will be encouraged or required to move to the AIM program if they fall behind on compliance with FAST protocols.
3. **Transition high schools to newly formed associations of the Christian faithful.** OCS will also encourage the creation of lay boards to take over governing authority and financial responsibility for the seven high schools currently under OCS jurisdiction.
4. **Create a long-term budget and investment plan for pragmatic use of physical infrastructure.** OCS will help schools identify immediate health and safety issues in school buildings so that they can be addressed. OCS will estimate the deferred and ongoing maintenance and capital repair needs of school buildings and make realistic recommendations about the best use of buildings going forward.

OCS Reorganization

1. **Establish senior leadership support for the superintendent.** OCS will implement the new organization chart by appointing highly qualified Senior Managers whose responsibilities track the priorities of this plan (Catholic Identity, Academics, Operations and Finance). OCS will hire highly qualified personnel as necessary to fill these positions.
2. **Upgrade field leadership and support.** OCS will appoint highly qualified Regional Directors, who have both education and business skills, with responsibility for the success of an assigned group of schools. OCS will create targeted teams for each FAST school consisting of the assigned Regional Director, a marketing advisor, and a financial advisor, and will hire additional highly qualified personnel as necessary to fill these positions.
3. **Further develop the partnership between OCS and the Big Shoulders Fund.** OCS will plan cooperatively with the Big Shoulders Fund for strategies to ensure the long-term viability of the schools supported by the Fund.

Funding

1. **Conduct an aggressive fundraising campaign to cover projected deficits.** A high-profile fundraising campaign will be conducted among major donors, parishes, and the broader civic community. An endowment for needs-based scholarships will be created from campaign proceeds to assist families with tuition. This fund will be segregated and administered transparently by OCS, which will also change its direct funding model from a grant-based program to a needs based scholarship program. Other proceeds of the campaign will be used for additional OCS personnel to implement this Plan and for prudently identified capital repairs and improvements.
2. **Continue to promote legislative action and public policies that would make public financial support available to Catholic school families.** The School Board and OCS will continue to mobilize support for school choice legislation in Illinois (e.g., a statewide scholarship program funded by corporate and individual tax credits, a voucher or credit program for families earning less than \$50,000 a year).
3. **Foster more equitable support for schools across the Archdiocesan system.** OCS will urge the consideration of new ways to shape policies within the Archdiocese so that new sources of funds to support the schools are identified within the parish system that reflect the benefits of Catholic education to the entire Church.



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