

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

Multiple Central-City Catholic Schools Set to Close

Catholic school leaders in four large dioceses announced last month the closings of 61 schools—most of them urban—including 23 in New York City, 18 in Chicago, and four in St. Louis. The schools, which will all shut down in June, currently enroll thousands of Catholic and non-Catholic students from working-class families in the Archdioceses of Chicago, New York, and St. Louis, and the Diocese of Brooklyn. Officials cited downward enrollments and upward costs as causes of the closings.

But regardless of the cause, the effect—on students, families, neighborhoods, public school systems, and cities—will be dramatic. The *New York Times* called the shutdowns in the Diocese of Brooklyn “the biggest round of school closings in the history of the city’s Catholic education system.” It said the schools “have been neighborhood cornerstones for decades, some for more than a century, and have provided a critical harbor and steppingstone for children—Catholic and otherwise—in some of the city’s poorest neighborhoods.”

“I was devastated.” That is how Hyacinth Campbell, the mother of a student at St. Thomas Aquinas School in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn, described to a *Times* reporter her reaction to news of the closing. “But what hurt me most to my heart is that my children started to cry. Where do you find children in any school anywhere crying about a school closing?”

The most recent figures from the National Center for Education Statistics show that the number of urban private schools has plummeted. In 2001 there were 708 fewer central-city private schools than in 1999. Moreover, the enrollment in such schools dropped by more than 263,000 students during that two-year period, from 2,540,516 to 2,276,808.

But the numbers tell only part of the story. Such schools have been a stabilizing

force in many neighborhoods, have produced productive citizens, and have offered a future full of hope to countless children. It is impossible to capture the value of their contribution and the meaning of their loss with a statistic or price tag.

Chicago

The Archdiocese of Chicago, which runs the largest Catholic school system in the country, said it will have to close 23 schools this June, including 18 in the city itself. A total of 4,157 students and 2,941 families will be affected.

“No one wants to close a Catholic school,” said Cardinal Francis George, who heads the archdiocese. His remarks during a news conference were reported in the local press. “Closing a school is closing a child’s world. It’s a painful, tragic thing, and no one wants to do it—not me, not anyone in this building, not anyone in parishes.” One school he has to close is a school his parents once attended.

From 1984 to 2004, the archdiocese shut down 130 elementary schools and 18 high schools. The additional 23 schools that will cease to operate in June would bring total closings since 1984 to 171. Next year there will be 250 Catholic schools in the archdiocese, including 210 elementary schools and 40 high schools. Archdiocesan officials estimate that the more than 106,000 students in Catholic schools represent an annual savings to taxpayers of over \$978 million.

According to an archdiocesan news release, a combination of factors account for

the shrinking school base. Among them are escalating costs, deteriorating facilities, actual and looming deficits, rising tuition, and declining enrollment. Dr. Nicholas

Wolsonovich, superintendent of Catholic schools in the archdiocese, also noted shifting demographics, with some regions seeing fewer Catholics. “It is important that archdiocesan schools respond to these realities of demographic shifts and economic problems if we are to protect the long-term viability of our remaining schools and ensure that Catholic education continues to be available,” he said.

At his news conference, Cardinal George said that while the archdiocese has a strong commitment to Catholic schools, it has limited resources. He urged voters to urge legislators to support school choice initiatives. “It would be very good if the parents would look to their representatives and ask why is it not possible for them to come up with a plan where parents could be supported in sending their children to the schools of their choice.”

Another diocese in the Midwest, the Archdiocese of St. Louis, said it will close 10 elementary schools, including four in the city of St. Louis. The closings are part of parish and school reorganization plans affecting two deaneries.

New York

In New York City, the Diocese of Brooklyn said that 22 schools, enrolling some 3,000 students, will have to shut



Continued on page 2

CAPE member organizations:

- American Montessori Society
- Association Montessori International—USA
- Association of Christian Schools International
- Association of Waldorf Schools of N.A.
- Christian Schools International
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- Friends Council on Education
- Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
- National Association of Episcopal Schools
- National Association of Independent Schools
- National Catholic Educational Association
- National Christian School Association
- Oral Roberts University Educational Fellowship
- Seventh-day Adventist Board of Education
- Solomon Schechter Day School Association
- Southern Baptist Association of Christian Schools
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
- 28 Affiliated State Organizations

a coalition of national associations serving private schools K-12
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Outlook is published monthly (September to June) by CAPE using an Apple Power Mac G4. An annual subscription is \$15. ISSN 0271-1451

13017 Wisteria Drive #457
Germantown, MD 20874
(tel) 301-916-8460
(fax) 301-916-8485
(email) cape@capenet.org

www.capenet.org

Continued from page 1

down in June. The diocese covers two of the city's five boroughs. The other three fall within the Archdiocese of New York, which said it will close one other New York City school along with five schools in surrounding counties.

Msgr. Michael J. Hardiman, vicar for education in the Diocese of Brooklyn, pointed to the same factors affecting other dioceses—declining enrollment, shifting demographics, and rising costs—to explain the closings. In the past five years, the diocese has seen enrollment in its schools plunge by 11,000 students while it has provided some \$7 million in direct assistance to schools that could not raise enough money to pay bills.

The diocese went through a lengthy process of study and consultation with pastors, principals, and parents before reaching its painful decision to close schools that lacked enough students to survive.

"It is regrettable that to date no relief has been available to parents, especially in low-income areas, in the form of tuition tax credits, a fair and equitable plan that would benefit students and their parents," Hardiman said.

At a news conference on March 7, Brooklyn Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio

called on citizens throughout the state to support S. 1939, a bill in the New York State Senate that would provide tax credits of up to \$1,500 per dependent to help parents of children in private or public schools meet educational expenses. "It is a noble cause," said the bishop, "striking at the heart of what so many parents seek: assistance so that they can have greater choice when determining where their children will receive their education." The bill, introduced by State Senator Marty Golden, would also provide teachers a tax credit of up to \$250 against the purchase of classroom supplies and materials. The bishop invited teachers to join the campaign for legislative relief.

Ravitch Weighs In

Writing in the New York Daily News shortly after the Brooklyn announcement, education historian Diane Ravitch said the school closings would be a loss for New York City. "The Catholic schools in this city have provided genuine choice for children from low-income and working-class families for more than 150 years.

What is more, they have established a solid reputation for safety, academic standards, and moral values. All of this has been supplied at a nominal cost to families and at no cost to taxpayers."

Ravitch said the loss of even one good school in the city is "cause for sadness," but to lose so many at one time is "catastrophic." She called on city leaders and major foundations to step forward and "rescue schools that have successfully served the children of hardworking families for generations." Her solution involves "a massive injection of private philanthropy."

Closing Catholic schools would "deprive thousands of children of a meaningful choice in their education and diminish the supply of good schools in the city," said Ravitch. "A government monopoly of all education is undesirable. A healthy democracy should encourage both public and nonpublic schools. Where there is a choice of schools, both public and private sectors benefit."

Ravitch noted the well-documented "academic success of Catholic schools, especially for poor and minority children." She said many families who "have worked double jobs to keep their children in the safe haven" of such schools will soon

Central-City Private Schools 1999-2000 to 2001-2002		
	Schools	Students
1999-2000	10,825	2,540,516
2001-2002	10,117	2,276,808
# Decrease	708	263,708
% Decrease	6.5%	10.4%

Source: Private School Universe Survey, NCES

face the grim reality of having no say as to which school their children attend.

"These schools are part of the fabric of our city," said Ravitch. "For the sake of the children who attend them, for the sake of the families who rely upon them, for the sake of our city, we must not let them die."

More Closings Looming

Although last month's round of school terminations were largely confined to a few cities in the Midwest and Northeast, the scene of students and parents sobbing at the news of closings could easily extend elsewhere, without some intervention. The fiscal cycle for many private schools serving the poor appears unrelenting. Modest tuition does not cover costs. But when tuition goes up, additional families, already struggling to make ends meet, are priced out of the market. In turn, a school with fewer students is forced to consider further hikes in tuition. And so the cycle continues to spiral downward—absent some infusion of meaningful assistance.

Spellings Asks Schools to Provide Supplemental Services

Less than a month after taking on her new job, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings met with Catholic school officials and seemed to say all the right things. She promoted school choice, promised equitable services for private school students in federal education programs, praised Catholic schools, and encouraged them to reach out to children in public schools by providing supplemental educational services.

Speaking February 28 at the Congressional Advocacy Days meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Spellings, whose oldest daughter attends a Catholic high school and youngest daughter

attends a public middle school, said, "School choice is more than just a catch phrase in my family; it is a way of life." She said the two schools her daughters attend represent the "right fit" for each one. "In both cases, I made decisions to best serve the individual needs of my daughters." Spellings said she and President Bush "want more Americans—regardless of their economic circumstances—to have these same choices, especially when public schools fall short of their responsibilities." As evidence of the administration's commitment to choice, she pointed to the D.C. scholarship initiative and the president's \$50 million budget proposal for a new Choice Incentive Fund to expand choice to other willing districts and states. "We want parents across the country to have a choice in their child's education," she said.

Spellings said the Department is committed to doing its part "for the less fortunate students who attend your schools." She noted the participation of students in Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). (The president's 2006 budget calls for \$13.3 billion in Title I grants, up 52 percent since 2001, and \$11.1 billion in IDEA grants, up 75 percent since 2001.) "And we will continue to work with you to keep our promise to provide equitable services for private school students and teachers who participate in federal programs like Title I," she said.

Turning to supplemental educational services, Secretary Spellings made a strong plea. "I want to ask you to offer your services for this

important cause. The president and I hope you will consider becoming providers of supplemental educational services." She added, "Thousands of students in your communities could benefit from the knowledge and skill of your

teachers. We will provide federal funds. We just need you to open your doors...just as you have always done for children in need. And you can do it in a program that protects your religious freedom because the Department has issued a faith-based regulation with strong language to protect religious organizations providing supplemental services."

Federally funded supplemental services, such as summer-school

programs and after-school tutoring, are available to students from low-income families who attend public schools that have been in need of improvement for two or more years. Parents select the provider of services from a list of providers approved by the state. For-profit corporations have been quick to win state approval as providers of supplemental services, but private schools so far have not been as enterprising.

Secretary Spellings told the group that under the supplemental education services program, Xavier University in New Orleans is currently providing "over 40 eight- and nine-year-olds with valuable one-on-one reading instruction." She said she hopes more schools follow suit. "We need your help."

Schools Have Helped Shape Nation

Recognizing the "long contribution Catholic schools have made to educating students across this country," Spellings said such schools have been "part of the story of our founding and have helped shape the nation we have become." She cited some modern-day evidence of Catholic school success, saying 99 percent of their students graduate from high school and 80 percent of graduates go to four-year colleges.

Spellings closed with these remarks: "Both as the secretary of education and as a parent, I know what an important role Catholic schools play in the landscape of American education. I want to thank all of you for your hard work on behalf of my daughter and the 2.4 million other children in Catholic schools."



Secretary Spellings speaks at USCCB's Congressional Advocacy Days meeting. (USDE Photo)

Survey on Fed Ed Programs

President Bush last month proposed a budget for fiscal year 2006 that would terminate several key programs serving children in public and private schools, including state grants for the Safe and Drug-Free Schools program and Educational Technology (Ed Tech). The budget would also deal a dramatic blow to Part B of Title V, which provides grants for Innovative Programs, by cutting funding in half from \$200 million to \$100 million.

CAPE now has on its Web site a survey, developed by representatives of member organizations, to collect data on the effectiveness and value of the three programs for children in private schools. We intend to communicate the data to members of Congress. The survey is based on the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART), used by the Education Department to determine program effectiveness and allocations.

If your students benefit from the Safe and Drug-Free Schools program (Title IV, Part A), the Educational Technology program (Title II, Part D), or Innovative Programs (Title V, Part A), we ask that the school's chief administrator or his/her designee complete the brief survey. It takes only a few minutes. And if your school is located in a district or state served by a member of the Senate or House Appropriations Committee, it is especially important that you complete the survey, since these members will have a significant say on funding. Committee members are listed on the survey site.

Please help us collect the data that may help persuade Congress to fully fund these programs by completing the online survey at the following site:

www.capenet.org/edsurvey.html

Return service requested

CAPE notes

★ **Fast Facts About Private Schools:** Private high school graduates are much more likely than their peers in public schools to have completed advanced-level courses in mathematics (70 percent vs. 39 percent) and science (81 percent vs. 60 percent). Advanced mathematics courses include trigonometry, precalculus, and calculus, while advanced science courses include chemistry, physics, and advanced biology. (Source: *Private Schools: A Brief Portrait*, National Center for Education Statistics.)

The above statistics are significant in that rigorous coursework in high school is strongly associated with success in college. “An Action Agenda for Improving America’s High Schools,” released last month in connection with the National Education Summit on High Schools, calls for restoring value to the high school diploma by requiring more demanding coursework. “Simply put, our standards have not kept pace with the world students are entering after high school,” states the report.

★ The United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit ruled in a unanimous decision on March 8 that allowing AmeriCorps grant recipients to teach in religious schools does not violate the First Amendment. The ruling reversed a lower court decision.

The University of Notre Dame sponsors an AmeriCorps program that, according to the appeals court, trains and places

participants “in needy Catholic schools, where they teach a variety of subjects, including science, mathematics, foreign languages, English, and religion.”

The American Jewish Congress (AJC) filed a suit charging that the program impermissibly advances religion because participating individuals, in addition to teaching secular subjects, may also teach religion. The AJC also objected to providing sponsoring institutions a \$400 allowance per participant to help cover training and administrative costs, claiming the allowance could be used for religious purposes.

But the court found that AmeriCorps participants are chosen “without regard to religion” and that those “who elect to teach religion in addition to secular subjects do so only as a result of ‘their own genuine and independent private choice.’” Moreover, participants “may count only the time they spend engaged in non-religious activities toward their service hours requirement.” Further, if they teach religious subjects, “they are prohibited from wearing the AmeriCorps logo when they are doing so.”

As for the \$400 reimbursement to sponsors, the court said the amount “is much less than the actual administrative costs grantees incur per participant” and noted that the government does not promote religion “when it reimburses all grantees, religious and secular alike, for a portion of the costs they incur in complying with the requirements of the

AmeriCorps program.”

Responding to the ruling, Jim Towe, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, called the ruling “a key victory” for the initiative, “but even better, it’s an extraordinary victory for the poor children who are served in these programs.”

★ Both houses of the Utah State Legislature passed the Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarship bill, which provides scholarships to allow students with disabilities to attend private schools. The scholarship amounts vary by the amount of special education services the child needs, with the maximum scholarship capped at 2.5 times the state per-pupil formula. For this year the maximum scholarship would be under \$5,800. Governor Jon Huntsman, Jr., is expected to sign the bill into law.

★ In his state of the state address on March 8, Florida Governor Jeb Bush proposed yet another school choice initiative for the state—this one to help children with chronically low scores on state reading tests. “Students who consistently struggle to master these skills in our schools should have other education options,” said the governor. “I’m asking the Legislature to create the Reading Compact Scholarship for students who read at Level 1 for three consecutive years, so their parents can find the best solution, whether public or private, for their success.”