

Catholic Review Column
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Suggested Title: S.O.S.

For the third time this school year we have had the frustrating and sad task of announcing that the doors of a Catholic school will not reopen next fall. St. Mary of the Assumption School in Govans is the latest such casualty and joins Catholic Community School (Federal Hill) and St. Michael School (Frostburg) in succumbing to the economic and demographic forces that threaten the livelihood of our entire Catholic educational system. The closings of these venerable Catholic educational institutions—each a stabilizing presence in its respective community—should serve as an “S.O.S.,” a wake-up call to anyone and everyone who recognizes the importance of Catholic schools—most especially our legislators and our own Catholic people. The message: Save Our Schools.

We know from national studies that the key factors in the closings of Catholic schools are demographics and economics. We also know that to make Catholic education affordable for Catholic children, as well as for non-Catholic children of low-income families, greater government financial assistance is a must.

I touched on these issues last month in my column looking at the recently-ended legislative session. The failure to pass the BOAST Maryland education tax credit, which would increase scholarships for Catholic and other nonpublic school students, provide grants to Catholic and other nonpublic school teachers for continuing education and benefit students in public schools through increased support for enrichment programs, represents just the latest failure on the part of our elected officials in state government to support the rights of taxpaying parents to choose how and where their children are educated. Catholics and other supporters of Catholic schools in this state should note that Maryland has fallen woefully behind most other states in this regard.

In New York, for instance, the state has provided \$150 million for the 495,000 nonpublic students there, including \$2.3 million in technology grants, \$1 million in academic intervention and a whopping \$142 million in reimbursement for mandated services. The State of New Jersey provides its 200,000 nonpublic school students with \$160 million in annual aid, including support for capital projects and special education. Pennsylvania, after whose education tax credit our own version was modeled, allocates \$200 million in annual financial support including some \$26.6 million in tax credits for scholarships and \$74 million for transportation. In fact, the State of Pennsylvania actually buses children across the state line into Maryland to attend Catholic school!

In sad contrast, the State of Maryland’s aid to all 131,000 nonpublic school students this school year: \$3.6 million. This is compared to the nearly \$5 billion in aid the state provided to public schools. This is unacceptable. In the Archdiocese of Baltimore alone, our schools save the state over \$380 million in per-pupil expenses each year. While we will work to place those students enrolled in the three schools set to close at year’s end in another Catholic school, the

forced closings would otherwise place a potential burden on the state of more than \$4.7 million. If any other industry that provides such great economic, educational, and social contributions to the state faced similar challenges, we can be sure the legislature would be scrambling to help ensure its survival.

We are grateful to our governor, the senate president and other legislators—most especially Senator Ed DeGrange and Delegate James Proctor, who have worked to preserve the funding we do receive (especially in a lean budget year) and who have indicated their support for BOAST in particular and increased state aid to Maryland nonpublic schools. Now, it is important for us as Catholics to turn the frustration and sadness we feel every time a Catholic school is forced to close, into action. Speak with your school principal about how you can support BOAST. Contact the Maryland Catholic Conference (www.mdcathcon.org) to become active in Lobby Night, BOAST rallies, and other important lobbying activities. Spread the word about the BOAST tax credit to your business colleagues, and encourage them to join the BOAST coalition at www.boastmaryland.org. Join forces with other parishioners, pastoral councils and school boards in your area to approach your elected officials on this crucial issue and demand that they act now to move Maryland—where the foundation for Catholic education was laid some two hundred years ago with Mother Seton’s school on Paca Street in Baltimore—in line with other states in recognizing the value of Catholic schools and respecting the rights of parents to choose a nonpublic school for their children.

With average elementary school tuition at \$4,800 compared to the average per-pupil cost of \$11,500 for public schools, our Catholic schools are a great value, especially given the performance of our students: Ninety-seven percent graduate from high school and 95% of graduating students attend post-secondary schools. Even still, \$4,800/child (and approximately twice that for our Archdiocesan high schools) is a struggle for many of our Catholic families and a virtual impossibility for those needy students whom we educate as part of our Catholic mission.

We have already closed three schools this year and there are many others fighting to stay alive. State aid alone will not fix all of the challenges facing our schools. The blue ribbon committee that is working today on a strategic plan for Catholic schools in our Archdiocese knows this and the plan they will provide me next year will undoubtedly address many of the other factors contributing to these challenges. However, no plan for a sustained Catholic educational system stands a chance of succeeding without increasing revenue streams into these schools. This is something other states have realized and something we must help our elected officials in Maryland to realize. Let’s not wait until we lose another series of schools before we do so.