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New York Archdiocese to close two high schools, 22 grade schools

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In June, the New York Archdiocese will close two high schools and 22 out of 26 elementary schools labeled "at risk."

In November, the archdiocese announced that 26 of its Catholic elementary schools might close, but officials have since determined that four of the schools -- that submitted proposals with viable long-term plans -- will remain open.

The archdiocese is postponing decisions about two additional schools on Staten Island so it can evaluate the impact of Hurricane Sandy on the region.

Local boards and ad hoc reconfiguration committees conducted in-depth discussions with local pastors, principals, administrators and elected officials. The groups, in consultation with archdiocesan officials, recommended the school closings.

The decision follows several months of reviewing enrollment, finances and local demographics. Throughout the review process, pastors and principals of the at-risk schools were invited to meet with members of the local board or reconfiguration committee to discuss factors that led to the decision to list a school as "at-risk," and offered an opportunity to submit an alternative proposal to remain viable.

The emphasis placed on the local decision-making process was outlined in "Pathways to Excellence," the strategic plan for Catholic schools published in 2010 and developed to assure a vibrant future for Catholic education in the archdiocese. Under that plan, most parish elementary schools will align into geographic regions governed by boards.

In announcing the school closings Tuesday, the archdiocese said affected families would be welcomed in neighboring Catholic schools and every effort would be made to assist those facing financial challenges through the transition. Student placement counselors will work with regional superintendents to help families transition into another Catholic school for the upcoming school year.

The number of students affected by the closing elementary schools is 4,341, which represents almost 9 percent of students in archdiocesan Catholic elementary schools. The review also determined that St. Agnes Boys High School in Manhattan and Blessed Sacrament/St. Gabriel High School in New Rochelle would close. The number of affected secondary-school students is 424, out of 24,830 currently enrolled in Catholic high schools in the archdiocese.

"The archdiocese is not alone in facing financial challenges in education. We share these issues with public, private and other faith-based schools across the country," said New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan.

"This reconfiguration process will help ensure that our schools will be financially stable, sustainable and, more

importantly, open to all students," he added.

The cardinal reiterated that the archdiocese is dedicated to providing pastoral support and educational guidance to every family personally affected by reconfiguration "to ensure all children attending closing schools will be warmly welcomed into a neighboring Catholic school where they will continue to learn and thrive."

Timothy McNiff, archdiocesan superintendent of schools, called for legislative action to add opportunities for children to attend Catholic schools. "As we move forward, we urge Governor (Andrew) Cuomo and the Legislature to enact the Education Investment Incentives Act," he said.

"This initiative, similar to those already enacted into law in 11 other states, would spur additional corporate and individual donations into education, generating $150 million in additional scholarships for families to enroll their children in Catholic and other religious and independent schools," McNiff added.

"Moreover, the legislation would generate an equal level of additional contributions to public schools."

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