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New York Archdiocese to close 27 schools

by Mary Ann Poust by Catholic News Service

NEW YORK -- Twenty-seven Catholic schools in the New York Archdiocese -- victims of low enrollment and rising costs -- will close at the end of the school year in a move that archdiocesan education officials describe as part of a strategy to ensure long-term success of the overall system.

New York Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan and Timothy McNiff, superintendent of schools, announced the closings Jan. 11.

The schools -- 26 elementary schools and one parish high school -- were among 32 cited in November as "at risk" of losing their archdiocesan subsidies and likely to close.

However, four of the schools originally called at risk will remain open after presenting viable plans to continue operating, and a decision on a fifth school was deferred for a few weeks for further review, the announcement said.

The closings are in line with the strategies of "Pathways to Excellence," a wide-ranging strategic plan that focused on the "3 R's" of reconfiguration, regionalization and reinvestment over the next three years. The goal is a modernized school system that is academically excellent, fully enrolled and affordable.

"The reconfiguration committee has done its job well, with compassion for school families in transition and with concern for the future of Catholic education, which is at the heart and soul of this process," Archbishop Dolan said. "We can all be proud of the opportunities our Catholic schools have provided to so many children, rich or poor.

"Thanks to the parishes that now, painfully, must close their schools, for their understanding and commitment to Catholic education. Moving forward, we encourage local communities to join us as we build a bold future for Catholic schools for the 21st century," he said.

McNiff, architect of the strategic plan, described it in a recent interview as "the right strategy for the future of our schools, and it's going to work."

Over the years, there have been many school closings in the archdiocese, reflecting a national trend, but this group of closings will be the largest number at one time in the archdiocese.

The elementary school closings will affect 3,652 students, representing 7 percent of the elementary enrollment in the 10-county archdiocese. The number of affected high school students is 110, out of 26,501 secondary school students currently enrolled.

McNiff told Catholic New York, the archdiocesan newspaper, that the archdiocese, through the Inter-Parish Finance Office, has been providing school subsidies that have recently reached \$23 million. The archdiocese will continue to subsidize its schools, but without the closed schools in the mix the subsidies will be cut to about \$13 million, McNiff said.

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He said the recommendations to close specific schools were made after consultations with pastors, the archbishop and the local school community. "These were collective decisions," McNiff said.

Many of the schools that will close were underenrolled, McNiff said. And even though there are still schools that are not up to enrollment capacity, the hope is that students from the closed schools will enroll in other Catholic schools nearby.

"If we're successful in doing that, we will have accomplished another significant part of our strategy, which is taking the remaining underenrolled schools and bringing enrollments up," he said.

McNiff said part of the reason the school closings were announced so early is to allow for families to make transitions to new Catholic schools.

"We're going to bring more resources toward helping those families," he said, adding that the resources will include counseling and tuition assistance as needed.

The regionalization component of the Pathways to Excellence plan would change the governance of the schools from the parish-based system that's been in place since the first Catholic school in New York was founded more than 200 years ago.

Instead, the plan recommends that the schools be run by regional boards of pastors, parishioners and others who would oversee operations of all Catholic schools within the region's boundaries.

A committee has just begun meeting to work out the details, but it's expected there will be about a dozen such regions throughout the 10-county archdiocese.

McNiff said the idea is to have all parishes within a region contribute to the schools in a given region, even if the parish does not have a school on its own property.

"The regions will be large, and they'll have a critical mass of parishes and schools so they'll be able to sustain themselves," McNiff said.

"Every parish will contribute to the pot," he said. "That will be a big help."

He said he expects to be able to identify the regions by the end of 2011, with three of them able to "go live" as pilot programs in September 2012.

If the pilots are successful, the rest of the regions will begin operating in September 2013.

The third "R," reinvestment in Catholic education, is linked in part to the first two parts of the school reconfiguration plan. A percentage of the revenues from rents and sales of former school buildings -- whether they are schools that will close this year or schools that have closed in the past -- will be returned to the school system, probably in the form of tuition assistance, McNiff said.

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