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Philadelphia archdiocese announces major school closings

by Brian Roewe



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Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput spoke at a press conference Jan. 6 on the drastic realignment of its school system. [Screen Capture]

Updated 5:45 p.m. central

Dramatic realignment to the Philadelphia Catholic school system is coming. Today, the archdiocese announced that it will close four high schools, and 44 elementary schools will either close or merge with other schools.

News of which schools were affected spread after a closed-door meeting this morning between the archdiocese and priests and school administrators at Neumann University. At a press conference this afternoon, Archbishop Charles Chaput spoke with optimism for the school system's future.

"I'm convinced, if we take this report to heart, we can renew Catholic education across the archdiocese," he said.

Other key recommendations from the commission were the establishment of a foundation dedicated exclusively to raising money to support schools; a new governance model consisting of an executive education board chaired by the auxiliary bishop overseeing Catholic education and four additional boards representing each area of education; and advocacy for government support to allow parents free choice in schools.

But the most impactful recommendation remains school realignment. Commission member Edward Hanway acknowledged that it was the most challenging and most controversial, but most necessary and long overdue.

He added it "will fundamentally reposition our schools, making them academically stronger as well as financially more stable, better able to compete and grow " yes grow " in the years ahead."

Superintendent Mary Rochford estimated 20,000 students, 1,500 teachers and 85 administrators will be affected by realignment. She said her hopes were that most of the displaced teachers would be hired at the new regional schools.

The announced closings come as the archbishop-appointed Blue Ribbon commission announced its recommendations for Philadelphia's schools after its yearlong study of the education system in the archdiocese. The final 44-page report is available online.

The decision impacts schools across five counties " Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia.

Montgomery County and South Philadelphia were most affected by the closings, with 22 elementary schools facing mergers in Montgomery and 15 schools merging in South Philadelphia with another elementary school closed, as well as West Catholic High School.

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For the majority of schools, the mergers pair a closing school with a nearby school. Rochford said that, in order to avoid one school's identity continuing over another, schools partnering will form a new regional school, with a new name.

Complete list of school closings and mergers

Work on implementing changes will begin immediately, with March 25 set as the target date for open houses at the newly named schools, with registration set to open thereafter.

Before today's announced closings and mergers, the archdiocese had 156 elementary schools, 17 high schools and four special education programs. Of the elementary schools, the report labeled 40-45 of them as "truly challenged," meaning a combination of declining enrollments, serious operating deficits and lacking elements critical to educating today's students.

Currently, 68,000 students are enrolled in archdiocese schools " the same number enrolled in 1911. In 1959-60, enrollment peaked at 271,088 students. The commission linked the cause for the steep decline to a number of factors " declining population, lower birth rates, a 46 percent decrease in baptisms over the last 20 years, more educational options and higher tuition costs.

The news comes at the end of a yearlong study by the Blue Ribbon commission appointed by former Archbishop Justin Rigali. On Dec. 10, 2010, Rigali named Jack Quindlen, former senior vice president and chief financial officer of Dupont Co. the chair of the 16-member committee.

"Archdiocesan schools face challenges " changing demographics, lower enrollments in some schools and the continued struggle to keep Catholic education affordable for the many families who wish to make this

investment for their children's future," Rigali said at the time.

"We are not alone in this struggle. In fact, it is very much a national trend. Across the country, many dioceses are finding themselves at a crossroads, carefully seeking what path is best for the future of Catholic education."

The commission spent 2011 gathering information on the state of Catholic education in the archdiocese and formulated a multi-year strategic plan to adapt to the challenges of declining enrollment, changing demographics and affordability, and overall strengthen Catholic education across the region.

Dwindling enrollment has been evident in the area for years. A 2011 Pew study examining Philadelphia alone found 27,694 Catholic school students in the city, a drop of 41 percent since 2001.

Chaput used a December pastoral letter to warn Catholics in the archdiocese that significant changes were coming soon.

"Complacency is the enemy of faith. To whatever degree complacency and pride once had a home in our local Church, events in the coming year will burn them out," Chaput's December letter warned.

In a web column Thursday at CatholicPhilly.com, Chaput again braced parishioners for today's announcement, saying "the substance of the Commission report will be much more comprehensive and much more positive than the closing of specific schools. It will create the foundation for a new and stronger future for Catholic education in the Archdiocese."

The school realignment is the latest in sweeping changes for the archdiocese. On Sept. 8, Chaput replaced Rigali, whose resignation was not a surprise, as he had reached the mandatory retirement age, but his July 19 departure was not auspicious. Since March the archdiocese has been embroiled in priest sex abuse scandals. Jury selection for a combined trial for four accused priests is set to begin in late February.

The new year began with diocesan officials announcing it would be selling the 10,000-sq. ft. archbishop's mansion, used by every archbishop since 1935.

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