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Strategic plan for Chicago's Catholic schools stresses new funding

by Michelle Martin by Catholic News Service

Chicago — The archdiocese of Chicago's strategic plan to keep its Catholic schools vital and viable emphasizes new management strategies, the need to find new funding and a strong focus on Catholic identity and excellent academics.

The plan highlights an issue facing Catholic schools nationwide: funding.

It calls for a capital campaign to establish a scholarship fund and raise money for capital needs and to maintain efforts to secure some public funding for Catholic education. It also stresses the need for increased partnerships with organizations that have supported Catholic schools, such as the Big Shoulders Fund, a Chicago foundation whose mission is to help Catholic schools in the neediest areas of Chicago.

The plan also reorganizes the Office of Catholic Schools by creating new senior management positions in the areas of Catholic identity, academics, operations and finance.

Released March 21, the plan was issued weeks after the archdiocese announced plans to close St. Gregory the Great High School and four elementary schools this year because it was unable to continue supporting them at the level needed to keep them open.

Savings from closing those schools helped the Office for Catholic Schools reduce its budget gap by \$10 million for fiscal year 2013, said Dominican Sr. Mary Paul McCaughey, superintendent of Chicago Catholic schools. Other savings came from the schools' efforts to reduce loans, a pilot scholarship program funded by a donor, and increased scholarships from the Big Shoulders Fund.

Scholarships can be an effective way to bring more money into the system since students almost never

receive a full scholarship, McCaughey said. That means every scholarship dollar brings increased tuition funding with it.

The strategic plan was already being developed when the Office for Catholic Schools learned that it would need to make significant cuts this year, she said, but the planned changes follow the direction the office had already set of increased marketing efforts and financial management along with upholding high standards for school programs.

Those changes had started to bear fruit with increased Catholic elementary school enrollment in the city of Chicago for two straight years.

"We were already going in the right direction," McCaughey said. "Now we're taking what we were doing and putting it on steroids."

Under the new plan, schools that have required archdiocesan funding will be required to participate in the Financial Advancement with Strategic Teamwork initiative, which started last year. The initiative includes more hands-on participation from the Office of Catholic Schools in everything from the selection of a principal to setting tuition prices.

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The plan also envisions expanding the Archdiocesan Initiative Model, where the Office of Catholic Schools takes over full operating authority of a school with the pastor's consent. The model started as a pilot program with 20 schools in 2010.

Schools that do not succeed in their turnaround efforts could be closed, according to the plan.

Not all schools will see such dramatic changes; schools that are self-sufficient will be monitored to make sure they meet Catholic identity and academic standards and remain financially stable.

Most Catholic high schools in the archdiocese are sponsored by religious congregations that work with the Office of Catholic Schools but are not under its jurisdiction in the same way archdiocesan schools are. The Office for Catholic Schools wants to create "associations of the Christian faithful" to take over sponsorship and governance of the seven high schools under its jurisdiction. That model has worked well for Notre Dame College Prep, which was left without sponsorship when the Congregation of the Holy Cross withdrew in 2007.

As a rule, the Catholic schools continue to be academically excellent, with standardized test scores well above the national norm in all subject areas at the third, fifth and seventh grades in 2011, according to a draft of the plan.

Most Chicago Catholic schools outperform public schools in their neighborhoods, including charter schools, although some do not. The Office of Catholic Schools will continue to work with those schools to bring their academic levels up, while maintaining the high level of instruction at the other schools.

In the area of Catholic identity, all schools are in the process of adopting a new religion curriculum and are working to strengthen the faith formation of teachers and principals. Pastors are encouraged to work to strengthen the bonds between parishes and schools.

Catholic identity is the reason for the school's existence, Chicago Cardinal Francis George wrote in his

introduction to the plan.

"The Catholic schools of the Archdiocese of Chicago are centers of learning in a community of love," he said. "They are excellent educational institutions, as the following plan makes clear; but the most important lesson any of us learns is that God loves us."

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