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# Facing the future with clarity of insight

## A local process helps area parishes, educators and the laity determine the viability of their schools

By Lenore Christopher

ARCHDIOCESE — The caller is understandably upset. She's just received a letter from her parish stating that the Catholic grade school her children attend will be closing at the end of this school year. Why has the archdiocese decided this? she asks the person who's answered the phone in the archbishop's office or the Catholic schools office.

Unfortunately, her phone call may be the first anyone in those offices has heard about this school particular closing.

When archdioceses such as Boston and Chicago announced large numbers of school closings last year, these decisions may indeed have been made by a bishop, archbishop or cardinal in consultation with his financial advisers. But in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, decisions about closing Catholic schools don't come from the "top down" — they come from the bottom up. The process begins at the grassroots level and then proceeds through the archdiocesan offices and governing bodies. Pastors, principals, teachers and parishioners determine when a school is no longer economically viable and devise a plan for its closure or consolidation.

In Dayton, the Catholic Urban Process (CUP) and Father John Krumm, pastor of St. Mary and Holy Family parishes, have proposed to close five inner-city schools located in two regions of the deanery — Queen of Martyrs, Corpus Christi, Dayton



CNS PHOTOS

**Tears well up** as Kemani Phillips, 10, attends the closing Mass for St. James School in Chicago. St. James was among 18 elementary schools closed by the Archdiocese of Chicago last year.

Catholic, St. Benedict the Moor's Resurrection and Holy Family schools — and to open one school for the 2006-2007 school year under a new name on two campuses. This follows three years of discussion on the plan, as well as on earlier proposals that included a possibility of combining parishes. According to Father Krumm, the CUP plan will be presented to the Dayton Area Commission on Education in February and then will go to the Catholic Schools office before being given to Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk for his approval.

In Springfield, Catholic schools began the current academic year under a new governance mode, following years of talks and final approval from the archbishop. The parish schools of St. Bernard, St. Teresa, St. Raphael and St. Joseph were consolidated in Springfield, and St. Mary School in Urbana as closed. One school, kindergarten through sixth-grade, opened on three campuses, at the former building sites of St. Bernard, St. Teresa and St. Mary schools; and a junior high was created on the Catholic Central High School campus.

In recent weeks, Our Lady of the Rosary School in Green Hills, with about 150 students, and St. Clare School in College Hill, with about 70 students, announced to parishioners they are considering a merge with St. Bartholomew Consolidated School on Winton Road, which is already serving students from Corpus Christi and St. John Neumann parishes in addition to its own parish.

Parishioners at St. Margaret Mary Parish in North College Hill also received a letter earlier this month indicating that the parish is grappling with the possibility of closing the school next year due to decreasing enrollment.

But long before these proposals reach the desk of the superintendent of Catholic schools or the archbishop, there is a process in place to assist a parish and its people in determining the future of its school.

Marianist Brother Joe Kamis, superintendent of archdiocesan Catholic schools, credits much of the work for the formal process created last year to Anne Battes, deputy superintendent, and Pat Armstrong, assistant superintendent.

"They looked at a lot of information from school districts and put it all together," he said.

What pleases Brother Joe is that CSO anticipated the need pastors and principals are facing in dealing with highly sensitive issues.

The process — called "Linking Tradition Transition and Transformation (LT3)" — is now posted on the archdiocesan Website, ready for use. To access the full document, go to [www.catholiccincinnati.org/schools/LT3.htm](http://www.catholiccincinnati.org/schools/LT3.htm).

Brother Joe said there is no way to determine how many people have accessed the site, but, from the comments he has received, he knows it has been helpful.

"The response is very good and it has fulfilled some of their needs," said Brother Joe, who has shared the document with other Ohio archdiocesan superintendents.

"Archdiocesan policies require a school that is experiencing financial problems, dropping enrollments and/or other serious concerns to engage in a long-range planning process," the LT3 documents state. "This process should begin before there is a crisis; however, circumstances do not always allow for such planning." When a parish is considering such possible outcomes, the deputy superintendent of schools in that area should be consulted before any planning process begins so that he or she may assist the parish and insure that archdiocesan procedure is adhered to.

LT3, which was three years in the making, offers a step-by-step plan for bringing together a team of at least 12-15 persons that represents the school and parish community and can gather input from the broader school and parish community to take the plan truly representative of the will of the parish. For the process to succeed, the pastoral and administrative teams in parishes and schools must be "committed to involving the parish laity and honoring this process of study which will guide them," the manual states. Seven "planning links" assist in the process: Group decision-making; gathering data; analyzing the data; analyzing its implications; developing implementation plans; preparing for the future; and making a written recommendation.

With the information in hand, a Leaders Study team can then examine scenarios, challenges and opportunities. As data is collected and reviewed, using a spreadsheet format, strengths and weaknesses of the school and region can be addressed, resulting in a set of viable strategies.

If the planning process undertaken by a parish and school community determines that a merger or closure is in order, the recommendation must then go to the Catholic Schools office and the Area Commission on Education. The Area Commissions on Education are the educational policy-making bodies for each educational area – Cincinnati, Dayton, and North – of the archdiocese. Each commission meets four times a year.



**Colleen Curry**, a fifth-grader at Our Lady of the Presentation School, was consoled by sixth-grader Megan Sanchez following the graduation ceremony held for the students June 10 at Boston's Faneuil Hall. The archdiocese closed their school earlier than expected to prevent a rumored occupation of the building last June.

A final recommendation is then presented to Brother Joe and to the archbishop, who makes the decision.

The LT3 process also works for parishes and deaneries with a different scenario — that of significant growth. As some Hamilton County parishes have seen a decrease in population, there are parishes in Butler and Warren counties that are looking to meet the needs of increasing numbers of Catholics in their areas. The document includes information on schools wishing to become Catholic schools in the archdiocese or to expand grades.

The process also includes information on dealing with the media as the need or situation arises, communicating with the project's stakeholders — parishioners and parents, as well as alumni — and the actual process for writing a formal recommendation.

The document also contains a facilitator's guide containing a glossary, potential facilitators, prayers and instructions and materials needed to plan and execute each step of the planning process.

Brother Joe stresses the importance of "dialogue and involvement by the people involved in the process, as the new church that is being created calls for the laity to be fully involved in decisions and recommendations made to the schools office and the archbishop."

He added that he has been "very pleased with the amount of involvement taking place, especially in the CUP process and in the St. Margaret Mary deanery, and I hope that collaboration continues for the betterment of Catholic education."

For more information, contact the Catholic Schools Office at 513-421-3131 or 937-223-5151.