

Catholic school advocates encourage problem-solving

By **KIM LOVEJOY-VOSS**

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ROMEDEVILLE—Dwindling enrollment numbers and a shortage of funds are affecting Catholic schools around the country, but there are ways to successfully increase enrollment and revenue, according to three speakers who presented at a workshop titled “Securing the Future of our Catholic Schools” March 12.

Held at St. Charles Borromeo Pastoral Center in Romeoville for Catholic school principals, school board members and parish pastors, the workshop topics included long-range school planning, recruitment and retention of students and financial stability—a school board’s responsibility.

“A joint effort by the Joliet diocesan Board of Education and Catholic Schools Office, we have the workshop every other year,” said Mary Ann McLean, president of the Joliet diocesan Board of Education. “The topics are an outgrowth of suggestions from feedback we received at the Partners in Education Conference in November. After the presentations a great deal of discussion was generated which was very beneficial.”

Planning for the future was a major point encouraged during the sessions.

“We encourage school boards to plan beyond next year,” said John Moran, a member of the diocesan board of education and presenter of the long-range planning session. “Every school has wishes and dreams, but if no one does anything those wishes and dreams will never happen. Now is the time to plan for the future. I encourage boards to plan so they will make things happen and communicate to the school community at large about what is going on.

“Some people think the idea of putting all the plans on paper can be daunting or else they think ‘We already have plans but they are gathering dust.’ But if you want something done, you need to plan for it and just do it. Just dig in and work on the plans,” Moran said.

Every parish and Catholic school is different in its wants and needs, Moran noted, but planning two to five years into the future is a good idea. It is also necessary to start working on raising money now that probably will be needed in the future.

“Selling wrapping paper and chocolate bars is good, but it is usually not enough money to pay for larger items,” Moran explained. “The parent community also can be strapped financially with the cost of tuition, so you want to find another financial source. You need to reach out to other people who can help support the school—like alumni or parents of alumni. There are schools that do annual appeals or alumni appeals.”

Financing Catholic schools is a problem and one addressed by Steve Remy, a managing partner of Remy, Vitale Maines, an accounting firm in Oak Brook. Remy agreed with the other two speakers when he said that planning for the future is something Catholic schools must do.

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“You need to figure out how to survive until you figure out the problem of recruitment, which should be a five-year plan,” Remy said. “Catholic schools need to make a forecast.

“School boards also need to keep an eye on the financial board and the school board should help the school administrators keep an eye on enrollment. Don’t wait two, three or four years watching enrollment drop. Get moving on it right away. You need to look at the issues of why people are leaving. You need to look at leadership. It takes a while to do something. The mistake we all make is waiting too long to acknowledge that we have a problem.”

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Recruitment and retention of students was a topic discussed by John Cooper, a management consultant with the Institute of School and Parish Development, who consults to over 150 Catholic elementary and high schools, according to McLean.

“We teach development and Catholic school enrollment strategies you can use every day,” Cooper said. “Development is more than just raising money. Development of people is key to long-term successes.

"I try to get schools to shift the weight slowly away from marketing to enrollment management. The No. 1 priority for schools should be enrollment management," Cooper said. "Marketing is good evangelization. Word of mouth is the greatest reason why people choose to purchase anything from a can of soup to a Catholic education. What the teachers do in the classroom is what brings people in, retains them and keeps them."

Cooper said he performs a little white lie every so often by calling a Catholic school and pretending his child is a prospective student. He said in almost every case he receives very little information from the school.

"Hit me with something convincing like what the alumni, parents, faculty and students are saying about the school. Talk about the benefits. What am I going to get for the money I am paying you?" he told the workshop participants.

He also said it is important to retain the students once they have signed up to attend the school.

"Don't assume the parents are interested and don't assume that if they show up on the first day of school the student will stay for the whole year," Cooper explained. "Get a mini-retention campaign started. Look at your school. Is there a big influx in preschool and/or kindergarten but they have a hard time moving to first grade or sometimes there is an exodus in sixth grade when children leave for the public schools and better athletics.

"You need to have the parents or students who have stayed with the school and are successful to speak to or write a letter to the younger students and families. Have them say why it was worth it for them to stay in a Catholic school. 'I am who I am because I stayed with this school' or 'This is what I learned here.' We need to discuss how choosing a Catholic school will benefit our children or what the spiritual development will do for children. How will attending a weekly Mass benefit my child?

"This is a ministry for me," Cooper said. "I fully believe in Catholic schools. I believe they do things other schools can't do and we need to get this message out to the people through effective Web sites, welcoming and speaking to prospective students and having alumni discuss why their Catholic education was important to them."

Catholic schools are important to many people and the presenters and McClean admit that is because of the hard work from parish families, board members and principals.

"The school board members work so hard for their schools," McClean said. "I want to send the message that the Catholic schools are thriving and viable and we have all these wonderful people who are taking their time to learn new ways and who are planning ahead to keep them successful."