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Episcopal Commission studies Regis Catholic Schools

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EAU CLAIRE, Dec. 1, 2011 – In response to budget concerns and excess capacity in the elementary schools, Regis Catholic Schools forwarded a recommendation to Bishop William P. Callahan, the Bishop of La Crosse, in November 2010 to close one of its three elementary schools. Officials proposed the closing of either St. Mary's School in Altoona or St. James School in Eau Claire. Closing one of those schools was projected to save \$300,000 annually. The recommendation was based on research and reports done by the School Study Committee of the Eau Claire Deanery.

Bishop Callahan reviewed the reports along with other correspondence received from parishioners and students, and believed the proposal to close a grade school was due to costs involved to operate Regis High School. He was reluctant to sacrifice a grade school without further study concerned that, in the near future, another grade school would need to be closed to continue to financially maintain the high school.

In January 2011, Bishop Callahan convened an Episcopal Commission to study possible changes within the Regis Catholic School system.

The Episcopal Commission first met on March 31 and formed four committees: Catholic Identity, Growth and Statistics, Perception, and Finance and Financial Support. Each committee consists of three people from around the diocese with expertise in their area. There are priests and religious, lawyers, retired principals, current administrators from public and private schools, along with other professionals on the committees.

Based on goals set by Bishop Callahan, the committees have met over the past eight months and expect to present their findings to the bishop by the end of the year. The committees have been visiting the Catholic schools in the Regis system to interview teachers, administrators, pastors and students. Their fact finding questions are related to the focus of the various committees.

“Catholic identity is everything. This is what brought the Commission about,” Bishop Callahan said. “We look at things through the view and lens of Jesus Christ. That’s the value of Catholic education. It’s not that we just provide a school system. I can’t stress that enough. Catholic education teaches the importance of God’s presence in all areas of human endeavor. That’s the key – that’s what’s driving all this.”

Bishop Callahan believes Catholic education needs to be reviewed throughout the Diocese of La Crosse, and the perfect place to start was with Regis Catholic Schools. “If I’m a parent, I’d like to see my kids excel in track and everything else. But, if I’m a Catholic parent, I’d also like to see my kids excel in their faith. And I don’t see that as much as I’d like to,” he said.

According to Bishop Callahan, the work of the Episcopal Commission is significant. He’s expecting its members to come up with plans to revitalize and promote Catholic education by recommending changes to achieve financial stability and improve Catholic identity within its seven school systems and independent parish schools. While all the facts will be gathered from Regis Catholic Schools, it is anticipated each committee will be able to make generalizations to help the other school systems and schools in the diocese. The recommendations will be for the entire school system – from early childhood through high school. The Commission, formed to study Regis Catholic Schools, is a first for the Diocese of La Crosse.

Father Brian Konopa, Dean of the Eau Claire Deanery said, “Regis Catholic Schools has cooperated fully with the Episcopal Commission and we look forward to the results of their study and the bishop’s decision.”

Bishop Callahan understands how much energy and effort it takes his priests to continually ask parishioners for money to make ends meet. With the school system model “not working as well as it could” this also puts a financial strain on parents, principals and administrators. One of the bishop’s goals is to be confident money to operate the schools is being spent wisely.

The bishop expects priests to lead their people to better understand the importance of Catholic education. “It’s well known I care about my priests. They work hard and do a good job,” he said. With the priests responsibility to lead the people spiritually, he assumes they will find parishioners who excel at fundraising, marketing and other skills needed to support Catholic schools in their deanery; and those volunteers will use their gifts to promote and assist the schools however needed, based on the Commission’s report.

Whatever conclusions the Episcopal Commission determines will be brought back to the priests of the Eau Claire Deanery by the bishop. His decision on what, if any, grade school to close will be based on the Commission’s recommendation. “I’d like to think the three grade schools could be manageable – I’d like to keep all the schools open,” he said.

Bishop Callahan recognizes individuals in the Eau Claire Deanery want a sense of comfort with spring registration near. A decision will be announced prior to that time. “We want to provide that comfort. We will have something ready before the time comes for them to sign on the dotted line,” he confirmed.

The goal of Catholic schools is to provide the best education, so students can go out into the world and succeed and “bring their Catholic faith with them – because they don’t just learn how to count or put sentences together in a Catholic school,” Bishop Callahan said. “They learn the meaning, the value and the mystery of life because they understand the relationship of all things in God’s plan. Catholic education helps them understand this. When we talk about Catholic identity, this is what we’re talking about.”