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Educators' panel discusses funding Catholic schools

Maria Wiering Catholic News Service | Apr. 8, 2010

MINNEAPOLIS -- Tax credits, parish assessments and community partnerships were among the ideas presented at a gathering of more than 50 Catholic school superintendents, education leaders and supporting organizations from 28 U.S. dioceses April 5.

The gathering featured eight panelists who shared their dioceses' or organizations' approaches to helping Catholic schools not only survive, but grow.

The gathering was held the day before the start of the National Catholic Educational Association convention and expo in Minneapolis April 6-8. The convention is an annual nationwide meeting of Catholic educators.

Although their home locations spanned the country from Washington, D.C., to Washington state, the panelists shared similar concerns for the financial future of Catholics schools and agreed that traditional models of funding are not sufficient to sustain them.

Frank Butler, president of Washington-based Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, attested to philanthropy's important but changing role in funding Catholic education.

Fundraising looks different today than it did 10 or 20 years ago, Butler said. "It's really an interactive sport. The fact is, you've got to get engagement," he said. Traditionally, Catholic education fundraising has been "insular," and not open to ideas from donors, he said.

"That is a formula for disaster in today's fundraising environment," he said. Instead, Catholic schools should take advantage of Catholic networks and actively engage their donors in their mission, Butler said.

Despite the difficult economy, the climate for raising funds "could not be better," Butler said.

"Catholic schools are the hottest issue in Catholic philanthropy right now. ... We've never seen the level of donor interest as high as it is today," he said.

At a time when many American Catholic schools are consolidating or closing, Catholic schools are growing in the Diocese of Raleigh, N.C., said its superintendent of Catholic education and formation, Michael Fedewa. The diocese's Catholic population has grown more than 25 percent in the past 10 years, although only 4 percent of North Carolina's population is Catholic.

"That has caused us to really struggle in some places, but the challenges have yielded really neat benefits," he said.

Nine new Catholic elementary schools have opened since 1994, and a new facility for the only high school was built. The diocese expects to open two new high schools in the next two years, Fedewa added.

Schools in the Raleigh Diocese use four different types of funding; the typical parish-funded model, a deanery-

supported model, a parish assessment-based model, and a cost-based model, Fedewa said.

In cost-based tuition models, schools calculate the true cost of education per pupil, establishing that cost as tuition. Previous subsidies and fundraising dollars then go to financial assistance to help families meet that tuition.

In the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, $11 million was raised in the mid-1990s to implement cost-based/needs-based tuition, said Anne Battes, president of the Catholic Education Collaborative in the archdiocese.

The research and resulting campaign gave the archdiocese an opportunity to learn and share more about their schools with the community, although the funds are expected to be depleted by the end of 2012, she said.

"There must be affordability for all, especially the middle class, because they tend to be moved, or pushed out, of the affordability issue," she added.

In 2004, the archdiocese started a think tank to examine the future of Catholic education, and three years later it developed the Catholic Education Collaborative, which centralizes services offered to Catholic schools, including stewardship, marketing and enrollment support. The collaborative also negotiates with vendors to save the schools money.

Parishes and schools pay a fee to become a partner of the collaborative.

In Seattle, the Fulcrum Foundation collaborates closely with the Archdiocese of Seattle to support Catholic schools through endowments. Although it is a separate nonprofit, its offices are next to those of the archdiocesan Catholic schools office, and the two share a marketing director.

Since 2002, the foundation has raised more than $50 million for Catholic schools, said executive director Joe Womac. In fiscal 2009, the Fulcrum Foundation gave more than $1 million in tuition assistance to Catholic schools.

Womac urged Catholic education leaders to look to business partners and donors beyond the Catholic community.

"Our largest donor is a Buddhist who never went to Catholic school, never sent his kids to Catholic school," he said. "But he has, over the years, become so passionate about Catholic education (because) he learned, through research, the success that Catholic schools have with kids from under-resourced backgrounds."

Although Fedewa worries that Catholic tuition is rising beyond what an average family can afford, he recounted a conversation he had with a parent who said he would pay twice the current tuition because he felt so strongly about Catholic education's value.

"What we've got to do in our diocese, in every single school, is to communicate (that) the value-added education that children receive is worth every single penny. That it's so good, and so powerful, that families cannot afford not to send their kids to our schools," Fedewa said.

The panel discussion was organized by the Catholic Schools Office of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis and co-sponsored by Tuition Aid Data Services, a Minneapolis-based organization better known as TADS, which offers service and tools for admissions, enrollment, financial aid and agreement and tuition management to nonpublic schools.

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