

Mission stressed at convention for Catholic educators

Carol Zimmermann Catholic News Service | Apr. 24, 2012

BOSTON -- Catholic educators who gathered April 11-13 in Boston did not shy away from tough issues they face, such as declining enrollments, school closures and competition from charter schools.

During multiple workshops at the National Catholic Educational Association's annual convention, educators were advised to do more lobbying, strengthen their boards and school leaders, and put strategic plans in place. Above all, they were urged to be true to the mission of their Catholic school.

In one workshop, Catholic educators heard about similar patterns found in 35 Catholic schools that have recently closed.

Patricia Weitzel-O'Neill, executive director of the Barbara and Patrick Roche Center for Catholic Education at Boston College, shared some of the center's findings in interviews conducted with leaders from closed schools.

Researchers spent an hour with leaders from each school and came away with similar findings. Most of the schools had little or no communication with staff or parents or strategic planning. They did not look at indicators around them such as changing demographics in their area. The schools typically had ineffective boards and many of them had poor facilities and maintenance.

Weitzel-O'Neill urged educators at the April 12 workshop to take a close look at their own schools and determine if they shared any characteristics of these closed schools and if so, to make some changes.

Christian Br. Raymond Vercruyse, former director of the Catholic Education Program at the University of San Francisco, similarly urged Catholic school teachers, principals and presidents to pay attention to what makes a school effective and strive to keep their schools in line with those practices.

For example, a recent study about successful independent schools also has plenty to say to Catholic schools, he said. Many measurements of success were echoed in other workshops. The indicators included strong leadership, strategic plans and cash reserves not just for school operations but for student scholarships and financial aid.

Vercruyse also highlighted a key element that Catholic schools must have in place: "maintaining and continually strengthening their Catholic identity."

He sees survival as linked to how well Catholic schools are tied into their mission -- which he said must be discussed when faculty members are interviewed for a job and reinforced during professional development programs throughout the year.