

In the Heartland With Bishop Pates

Keeping Our Catholic Schools Alive

March 21st was a difficult and sad day for the parish and school community of Assumption Parish in Granger. For 87 years, through thick and thin, the parish had operated a school of which they were justifiably proud. Not only did it measure up academically but it kept pace with Catholic identity and gave birth to lifelong friendships that cemented the community.

Over the years enrollment had declined. This year there were 62 students pre-k through 8th. A dedicated school board committee invested enormous time, and developed some creative programs to forestall closure. Nonetheless, the combination of an extraordinarily generous parish subsidy and significant tuition and fundraising on the part of the school still eventuated in approximately a \$100,000 school operation deficit this fiscal year.

Peering into the future, the financial picture was bleak. With so much investment of heart and spirit, it was wrenching to have to make a decision to close. No one, including myself and all the diocesan representatives wanted to do so. But sober long term financials seemed to dictate the course.

In the case of Assumption School, they were blessed with a strong school board, guided by the competent leadership of its Pastor, Father Dominic Assim and Principal, Cindy Pezzetti, gifted teachers and loyal students. In the end, it was chiefly the financial mountain that was insurmountable.

This was the first school to close in the Diocese of Des Moines in the course of the past eight years. Over this time the aggregate enrollment system-wide has remained stable. There is even upbeat news: St. Luke of Ankeny, which just opened this past fall has a kindergarten registration with a maximum 25 enrolled and 10 on the waiting list.

Two tv stations interviewed me in covering the closing of Assumption School. In each case, it was asked, “What is being done to address this issue and prevent future closings?”

While our parishes are remarkably supportive financially, tuition charges continue to rise and fundraising activities are a regular feature of school operations, the question of future financial stability remains a critical question that must be squarely faced.

The State of Iowa has responded creatively to this situation. It has introduced a feature which in this diocese is called “The Catholic Tuition Organization.” Through this program individuals make donations to this organization and receive a 65% tax credit from the state. The donated funds, in turn, serve as the source of scholarships which are distributed to economically qualifying students. This past year \$3 million dollars in scholarships were distributed to 1,501 students.

Since its inception 10 years ago some 100 million dollars have been distributed statewide by the various “tuition organizations.”

Presently, one particular category of our population, the proverbial “middle class” is under the most stress in trying to meet tuition charges and retain their children in Catholic schools. The squeeze on finances is palpable and the sacrifices made are laudable. But in facing reality, a prominent politician confided in me “I don’t want Catholic schools to be only for the elite.” Currently parents with fewer resources can take advantage of the tuition organizations and scholarships and those with significant financial resources can afford the cost. That leaves the others in between “out in the cold.”

What to do? In the Iowa State Legislature, proposals are currently being considered which is titled “Education Savings Account.” According to this scheme, the state would place in a parent account, the State’s portion of student support at a public school, presently about \$5854 per individual. The parents would use these funds to support the educational expenses Catholic or

other non-public schools or home school their children. Whatever funds ultimately remained would be used for higher education.

This method would respond to several considerations:

- It would recognize that education is primarily the responsibility of the parents;
- It would honor the state's responsibility to educate all children;
- It would provide "competition" in education – a healthy by-product of having more than one system of education;
- It would enable faith-based schools to retain their identity while contributing academic excellence.

The Education Savings Account proposal is gaining momentum in the state legislature as a logical way to honor parental choice, strengthen primary and secondary education, and to ensure the possibility of choice broadly and not only for "the elite." I encourage its support.