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OFFICE OF  
THE ARCHBISHOP

October 17/18, 2015

Dear Friends in Christ,

Schools are the focus of this, my third letter to you on the subject of pastoral planning for our Archdiocese. I hope you have had a pleasant summer, and with the beginning of a new academic year I know you join me in wanting to ensure a bright future—spiritually, morally and materially—for all of our young people.

Many people are simply unaware of today's realities as they relate to the continuing viability and stability of our Catholic schools, not only in the Archdiocese of Hartford but in many other dioceses as well. Once again, I need to share with you information that is sobering, but that can also serve as a "reality-check" to help us position ourselves for a spiritually rich, vibrant and sustainable future.

In 2014-15 Catholic schools in our Archdiocese educated over 14,222 students in 53 elementary schools and 9 secondary schools. Fifty years ago, in 1965, there were over twice as many parish elementary schools and secondary schools, and almost 4 times more students—54,018. This means that there has been a 74% decrease in Catholic school enrollment in the Archdiocese since 1965. It is important to note, however, that a decline in the number of school-aged children is also reflected in Connecticut public schools as a result of an overall declining birth rate.

Our Catholic high schools, for the most part, are stable and continue to do well, but a number of our elementary schools are struggling with enrollment and finances. Catholic schools are particularly hard hit not only because of changing demographics, but also by the economics of parish support, aging buildings, the lack of aid from the state and federal governments, and fewer Catholic parents interested in, able or willing to sacrifice for Catholic education for their children. Not surprisingly, studies show that economics remain the single greatest challenge to the desire that many parents have to send their children to a Catholic school. The fact that there are far fewer Catholics in the pews on Sunday also has a significant impact on enrollment and parish funding for schools.

At the present time a number of parish schools are facing serious difficulties, despite significant financial assistance from the Archdiocese for extraordinary expenses and for tuition assistance from the Archbishop's Annual Appeal. There are several parishes that have already exhausted their savings in an effort to keep their schools open. If enrollments were high or could realistically be increased, a strong case could be made

to garner additional support. But when enrollment is dwindling for lack of children in the community coupled with fewer Catholic parents willing or able to send their children to the parish school, then closure becomes almost inevitable, unless alternative solutions can be developed and embraced.

As Connecticut public schools look at ways to consolidate and reorganize, so too must we, if we expect our schools to continue, and to do so with a high standard of excellence. Hence the need for thoughtful pastoral planning not just for parishes, but for schools as well. Effective planning respects the rich history of Catholic education, imagines new possibilities, and ensures future sustainability.

I have directed our Office of Catholic Schools and the Archdiocesan Office of Pastoral Planning to work together to assist parish pastors and school leaders who are facing possible closure for lack of students and resources. The goal is to produce strategic action plans that are realistic and sustainable, and that take into account the whole educational outlook for a given area. We also need to look at new school models and funding mechanisms.

There will no doubt be some closures, but hopefully consolidations as well. New cooperative ventures can be envisioned that uphold our Catholic educational mission while offering models that are transformative and inclusive. A good example can be found in Southington, where St. Thomas Parish and St. Dominic Parish, each with its own school, came together to create one new school, Southington Catholic.

I am proud of our Catholic schools and the excellent academics and strong faith formation they provide to young people. Whether for schools or parishes, our vision for the future should not be one of mere survival, on life-support, as it were, or of nostalgia for the past. My vision is for all of us coming together not to say “this is mine and that is yours,” but rather, that all the parishes and schools are “ours.” We are heirs together of a long history of Catholic institutions and apostolates in the Archdiocese. How are we going to hand this on so that our cherished legacy thrives in the future? That is the question and our present challenge. Together we can accomplish this, not out of fear, but with confidence and creativity.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leonard P. Blair". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Leonard P. Blair  
Archbishop of Hartford