

## **Planning for Structural Change in Catholic Schools**

**Policy No. 2006-03**

### **Policy Statement**

The Archdiocesan Education Commission (AEC) acknowledges the responsibility of each parish or interparochial elementary commission/board or interparochial high school board to make prudent recommendations regarding the following institutional changes to the structure of Catholic school(s):

1. Opening or closing a parochial or interparochial school;
2. Consolidation of a parochial or interparochial school(s);
3. Relocating or replacing school facilities;
4. Addition or elimination of any grades from preschool through grade 12 in a parish or interparochial school.

Any such institutional change may have serious implications within the parish community as well as for surrounding parishes and schools, the local community, the deanery and the total archdiocesan community. The AEC also recognizes the significant ownership responsibilities of the archdiocese in such decisions.

Therefore, any such change may only be considered in the context of formal strategic planning and consultation processes approved by the archdiocese. The archdiocesan Office of Catholic Education (OCE) may initiate and direct these processes when circumstances indicate. The archdiocese must be notified and the required processes must begin well in advance of possible implementation to ensure that the best possible decisions are made for all affected parishes, schools, the deanery and the archdiocese to protect parish, family, student and archdiocesan interests.

The final recommendations on structural change in a Catholic school are to be made to the Archbishop. As part of his responsibility for overall ownership, only the Archbishop can give final approval for structural change of a Catholic school.

*Recommended: 01/10/2005 by the Archdiocesan Education Commission*

*Ratified: 01/12/06 by Most Rev. Daniel M. Buechlein, OSB, Archbishop of Indianapolis*

**Administrative Rules**

1. The formal strategic planning and consultation processes leading to structural change in a Catholic school may be initiated by the pastor/administrator at the local level or by the Office of Catholic Education (OCE) using an approved process. Written notice must be made to the OCE that the planning process is beginning.
2. The planning and consultation processes preferably should take place in the context of regular parish and school planning over a longer period (2-5 years), but must be initiated on or before October 1, of the year preceding the possible structural change.
3. The Executive Director of Catholic Education and Faith Formation (executive director) shall notify the Archbishop and the AEC about planning and consultation processes for possible structural change in a timely manner at the initiation of the processes.
4. The formal strategic planning process recommended by the OCE may include some or all of the following steps:
  - a. Technical assistance and/or consultative guidance to parishes/schools to help them deal with the challenges facing the school (finances, marketing, leadership, etc.).
  - b. Gathering and statistical analysis of demographic data, enrollment and other trend data against norms that can help guide sound decision-making.
  - c. Gathering and statistical analysis of financial facts and figures as one important aspect, but not the only reason to consider school structural changes.
  - d. Gathering and analysis of survey and/or focus group data including required parent satisfaction surveys.
  - e. School marketing and enrollment management plans and programs required to be in place and implemented to help maximize enrollment each year.
  - f. A required process of facilitated discernment by the parish, to inform people about the status of the school, to help them deal with the need for change as well as demographic and financial realities, to help them consider possible alternatives and to solicit input and build understanding and ownership for the necessary final decisions on structural change.
  - g. Facilitated consensus-building, planning and decision-making by parish and school governance and leadership groups, in the context of total parish planning, that allows the change to occur in an orderly manner.
  - h. Facilitated planning and decision-making with other area parishes, schools, the area interparochial high school, and other entities, as indicated and appropriate.
  - i. Facilitated final recommendations and a formal report and request for permission to the Archbishop to allow the structural change to occur (see 7, 8, and 9).
  - j. Discreet advance notification of the possible structural changes to surrounding schools, parishes and the local interparochial Catholic high school, etc.

5. The formal planning and consultation process should involve representatives from the Office of Catholic Education and other archdiocesan agencies and/or a third party consultant/facilitator depending on the local situation.
6. The planning process should begin as soon as possible after October 1 and should conclude no later than March 1, preceding the school year of proposed implementation of the structural change.
7. The planning process concludes with a formal report and recommendations to the executive director and the Archbishop from the local pastor(s), commission/board and pastoral council with a clear recommendation for or against the proposed structural change or with alternative recommendations. In its final report and recommendation, the local parish/school leadership shall respond in writing to the following questions:
  - a. What is the rationale to support the structural change (summarize the data collected and the analysis)?
  - b. How has the local parish/school community been consulted and involved in the proposed change?
  - c. How have the surrounding Catholic parishes, schools and Catholic high schools been consulted on/notified of the proposed change?
  - d. How will the local public schools be informed of the proposed change?
  - e. In the event of a closing of grades or a school, how will the parish/deanery continue to provide for families who desire Catholic schooling for their children?
  - f. In the event of a closing of grades or a school, how will the parish/deanery provide for the continuing faith formation of the affected students?
8. The executive director (or designee) shall also make a professional recommendation (final report) to the Archbishop concerning the proposed structural change based on the results of the foregoing planning and consultation processes.
9. The Archbishop may accept all recommendation, veto them, change them or take alternative actions by April 1, so that appropriate arrangements may be made for ending the current school year and implementing the necessary actions for the upcoming school year.

*Promulgation Date: 01/19/06 by Annette M. Lentz,  
Executive Director, Catholic Education and Faith Formation*

### **Application**

Applies to Elementary and Secondary Catholic Schools.

## History/Rationale

The first version of this policy was adopted in 1981 to apply some order to the process of structural change in Catholic schools (ABE Policy 2470). Prior to the promulgation of the first policy, the archdiocese had been many times placed in the position of approving or acknowledging structural changes after the changes had, in fact, already taken place.

The policy was revised in 2004 to take into consideration the changes in local governance structure and function that took place in the late 1990s. *Preparing Your Parish for the New Millennium*, a guide for parish councils, published in 1997, affirmed all parish level lay governance bodies as “consultative” to the pastor and also affirmed that all local parish governance bodies for education (commissions and boards), are subordinate to the pastor and the pastoral council. These clarifications were made very specific with the publication, in 1998, of the *Guide for Catholic School and Faith Formation Commissions*, and through subsequent annual training for parish commission members. Also in 1994-1997, the former deanery boards of total Catholic education ceased to have authority over the deanery interparochial high schools, and separate boards of trustees were formed for each of the high schools. These are now boards of “limited jurisdiction” that have been delegated authority in certain areas of governance not reserved to the archdiocese. These governance changes are reflected in the language of this policy and rules.

Institutional structural change in Catholic schools should ideally occur in the context of long-term planning processes. Permanent institutional (structural) change must not be based on short-term financial problems, lack of current leadership or vision, or the failure to plan for the future. Any such permanent change to the institution will have serious current and future implications for the students, parents, parishioners, alumni, donors, and employees as well as financial and property implications in the community surrounding the school. It also may have serious consequences as well for area parishes and schools, the local Catholic high school, the deanery and the total archdiocesan community. The “costs” of such changes are always more than just financial and must always be considered.

Therefore, the AEC has prescribed that planning and consultation for structural changes must take place over at least a one-year period of time prior to implementation and have recognized and reaffirmed the significant ownership responsibilities of the archdiocese in such decisions.

## Policy Guidance

Institutional structural change for Catholic schools should always be approached in the context of ongoing long-term planning processes. If it is not, the Office of Catholic Education will prescribe processes for considering proposals for such change over a period of at least one school year prior to implementation.

This time parameter allows time for a formal data-gathering, evaluation of existing school programs, and decision-making process involving the local parishioners, the school commission or board, and the representatives of the archdiocesan Office of Catholic Education. In certain circumstances, it may be prudent for the Office of Catholic Education to recommend a professional third party (neutral) facilitator to lead the processes and to facilitate the writing of the final recommendations and report.

Notification about potential structural changes to the archdiocese, surrounding schools, deanery interparochial high schools as well as the local parish community must be done with the utmost care and sensitivity and with professional confidentiality observed as necessary. This is because the news of possible impending structural changes (closing, consolidation, elimination of grades) can have the effect of a “self-fulfilling prophecy.” That is, parents who learn that the school might close or might close a grade, will generally assume the worst and make alternative educational arrangements for their children. They will not “gamble” with their children’s education. Loose talk among commission/board members, faculty, staff, or pronouncements from the pulpit about the dire state of the school finances can also have this effect.

Structural changes may take several possible forms with differing degrees of impact on the community. Opening a school can be a joyous occasion for a parish. But, if ill-planned and ill-considered, the new school may be unsuccessful and be forced to close after just a short term of operation. Or, it may be too small to be viable and always be a financial burden on the parish. Likewise, the addition or deletion of grades in an existing school must be done only after a careful study of potential enrollment, finances and other factors. The ill-advised addition of a grade or grades to an otherwise financially sound school may result in overall costs-per-pupil that are difficult to maintain. And, the permanent deletion of a grade because of a one-year enrollment dip may be very bad for the school in the long run.

If closing were considered every time a school had a short-term financial problem, every one of our schools would have closed at one time or another. The closing of a school is not to be considered at the end of a school year when there is a deficit. Contracts of teachers are not to be held. The deficit must be dealt with in conjunction with the archdiocese, and then, a formal planning and consultation process for the future must begin if it is not already ongoing.

The relocation, replacement or consolidation of a Catholic school is also to be considered only over the long-term. As Catholic schools are essentially neighborhood schools, a relocation can seriously affect the provision of Catholic education to a specific area. It may provide an alternative in the new area where the school is located while making it impossible for some families to attend from the old school attendance area. The replacement of a school facility can cost millions of dollars. Such changes should be considered only after careful demographic, growth and economic studies have been completed to ensure that there is a good long-term investment.

While school consolidations may be necessary in some cases; research has shown that the population of the new consolidated school is never the sum of its former parts. That is, for the reasons cited above concerning relocation of a school and others, a consolidated school will simply not attract many of the families who enrolled in the previous individual schools. Whereas, a consolidation may be necessary; the net effect is often a diminished presence of Catholic education in the total area.

Any planning for negative institutional structural change (closing, consolidation, elimination of grades, etc) in addition to considering enrollment and finances, must also consider parish, school and neighborhood culture and tradition, existing programs, the area Catholic high school, facilities, and staff; existing lay governance structures and their viability (or lack of viability); and the alternative education and faith formation to be provided. There are always costs of change that go beyond the mere financial, and these costs can include backlash and alienation of loyal parents, staff and parishioners that will need to be dealt with for years to come.

By March 1, of the planning year before the school year of implementation, the local parish/school community makes a formal final recommendation on structural change in a Catholic elementary school through the pastor with the involvement and advice of the school administrator, the local school commission or board, the pastoral council and the Office of Catholic Education. This is done in the form of a final report to the Archbishop.

In the case of an interparochial high school, the chief administrator makes a final report with involvement of the high school board, local pastors and other advisory bodies. The oversight of archdiocesan property (i.e., high school plants) is one of the powers reserved to the Archbishop.

In all cases the executive director of Catholic education also submits a final report on the case to the Archbishop from the professional education point-of-view. In his responsibilities for overall ownership, only the Archbishop can give final approval for structural change of a Catholic school.

NOTE: All promulgated AEC Policies are posted at [www.archindy.org/oce/](http://www.archindy.org/oce/) (Member Area).