

'Building One School System': Catholic Secondary Leaders Come Together



Round-table discussions bore fruit during the second half of the meeting.

Catholic secondary school leaders must help create a network of schools in the Archdiocese of Boston, said Secretary of Education/Catholic Schools Superintendent Mary Grassa O'Neill at a gathering of the leaders on Thursday. "As Cardinal Seán O'Malley has told us, we cannot afford for our schools to be silos," she said. "We need a network that enables schools to draw on each other's strengths in these challenging times and work together for the success of our students."

The meeting of secondary school leaders focused on both lofty visions and practical realities. Organized by Ed Hardiman of St. John's Prep, the two-hour session began with a prayer and a National Geographic short film titled "Celebrate What's Right in the World." Hardiman said: "I chose this film because it focuses on the need for a positive vision that leads to passion and creativity. Our work as Catholic secondary school leaders demands more than ever that we are visionaries moved by God's Word and high academic expectations for our students."

The film's key message – that challenging circumstances can be turned into opportunities – was emphasized repeatedly by Grassa O'Neill. In a question-and-answer session with Hardiman, she reviewed "the three overriding goals" of Catholic school education in the Archdiocese: bringing students closer to God through teaching the Catholic faith, ensuring strong academic achievement across the board, and building the school's vitality and financial viability.



Ed Hardiman, St. John's Prep

"Parents pay twice to send their children to Catholic schools – through their taxes and tuition – because they care about giving their kids moral Catholic values and the best education possible," said Grassa O'Neill. She noted that the Catholic high school graduation rate in the Archdiocese is 98 percent, while that for the Boston Public Schools is about 60 percent.

When Catholic schools close, it is not for academic reasons but for financial reasons, continued Grassa O'Neill, noting that Catholic high school students score about 100 points higher on the SAT college entrance exam than their public school peers. Grassa O'Neill was also hopeful about new partnerships between local Catholic colleges and Archdiocesan high schools.

If Catholic high schools in the Archdiocese can build better ties with Archdiocesan elementary schools, both sets of schools will be the stronger for it, said Grassa O'Neill. She pointed out that Xaverian and Archbishop Williams high schools have established alliances with "feeder elementary schools," and that other Catholic high schools are building similar relationships.

Carmen Mariano, president of Archbishop Williams, noted that 9th graders at his school came from 37 cities and towns. "We have created the Archbishop Williams Educational Alliance to bring 7th and 8th grade teachers from our feeder schools together with our teachers and ensure continuity in the curriculum," said Mariano. "The week-long summer enrichment courses Archbishop Williams now offers for 6th, 7th and 8th grade students have also been a big success."

According to a Notre Dame study, there will be a 7 to 13 percent annual decrease in Catholic high schools nationally in the coming year. This reality means that Catholic high schools in the



Rose Marie Redman, Mary Ellen DeMarco, Kelly Surapaneni

brainstormed about how to bring together teachers and departments from various schools and other ways to more effectively pool resources. Rose Marie Redman, principal of Presentation of Mary High School in Methuen, suggested designing professional development days that focus on particular subject areas – like physics or A.P. English.

"It's good that Mary has brought us all together," said Brother Dan Skala, C.F.X., who is the headmaster of Xaverian Brothers High School, before the group adjourned. "Working together as a school system is much better than being on your own."

By Catherine Walsh

Boston Archdiocese "must work harder than ever and must work together," Grassa O'Neill said.

But Grassa O'Neill was also optimistic, even ebullient. "We are doing God's work," she proclaimed. "If we can bring together our collective wisdom and collective effort, we can build a Catholic school system that is a shining example to others."

Principals and presidents met for round-table discussions during the second half of the program. They