



Group Promotes Catholic Schools, Addresses Their Challenges

By Mary C. Schneidau

(Word count: 996)

Annapolis, January 29, 2007 – Making Catholic schools the schools of choice for all Catholic families is the mission of a new group formed as a collaborative effort among the six Mid-Atlantic dioceses.

The Mid-Atlantic Catholic Schools Consortium (MACSC) was formally incorporated this fall to find solutions to common challenges shared by Catholic schools in the (arch)dioceses in Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Delaware and the District of Columbia.

The Consortium will develop efforts to make Catholic schools more attractive to Catholic families and ensure the schools' long-term success and sustainability.

“Catholic schools hold the future of the Church in their hands by providing affordable, high-quality education to our children and young people,” said Bishop Michael A. Saltarelli, the bishop of the Diocese of Wilmington. “The Mid-Atlantic Catholic Schools Consortium ensures that our future remains bright through its initiatives to secure viable financing, governance and leadership options for our schools.”

John Yelenic, the superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston said, “We’re getting the word out that our Catholic schools are making a significant difference for our kids and that they’re affordable.”

The six (arch)dioceses which compose the Consortium are the Archdioceses of Baltimore and Washington and the Dioceses of Arlington, Richmond, Wilmington and Wheeling-Charleston.

The Board of the MACSC appointed Dr. Mary Ellen Hrutka as its first executive director. Dr. Hrutka most recently served as the vice provost and dean of the School of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), which has one of the world's largest and most recognized distance-learning programs. UMUC is the second largest university in Maryland and for 60 years has been serving the U.S. military around the world.

“It is my privilege to serve as first Executive Director of the Mid-Atlantic Catholic Schools Consortium,” Dr. Hrutka said. “Working with the six superintendents, members of our Leadership Council and those who share our commitment to Catholic Schools, we will increase the awareness of the value of our Catholic schools and ensure their continued accessibility and affordability.”

Dr. Ronald Valenti, the superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, said, “The best way to address issues is collectively. We can no longer be working in a vacuum. With Mary Ellen coming on board, with her education insights, she certainly will help us achieve our goals.”

Cardinal William H. Keeler, the Archbishop of Baltimore, agreed.

“The Consortium will provide the organizational framework through which all interested parties can work together to be part of the schools’ continued success,” he said. “I am delighted that Mary Ellen Hrutka, who has served already Catholic schools so well as a member of the Archdiocese of Washington School Board, is taking the lead in directing this important project.”

The Consortium, which is governed by a 13-member Board of Directors and supported by a Leadership Council of business, educational, and community leaders, was developed in

response to the U.S. Bishops' call in 2005 for "the entire Catholic community" to take ownership of the enterprise of Catholic education.

In their statement *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium*, the bishops noted that young people deserve "an academically rigorous and doctrinally sound program of education and faith formation designed to strengthen their union with Christ and his Church."

That can only be achieved, the bishops said, if Catholic schools are "available, accessible and affordable to all Catholic parents and their children."

The Consortium, the first of its kind in the country, developed several goals to respond to the bishops' message. They include: articulating and supporting the vital role that Catholic schools play in faith formation; strengthening and improving the structure and governance of Catholic schools; and ensuring long-term and government financial support for Catholic schools.

The group's specific strategies are wide-ranging. They include making Catholic families more aware of the presence and benefit of Catholic schools, and creating leadership institutes to provide support to the pastors, administrators and teachers who lead Catholic schools.

The superintendents noted that what worked in the past in Catholic schools may not be as successful today.

"We're looking at new ways to prepare our kids to become 21st century learners. We're not be able to use the methods we used in the '60s, '70s or 80s," Yelenic said. "We need to be progressive."

The role of the laity is essential to the work of the Consortium, said the chairman of the group's Leadership Council.

"As lay faithful, we have a large role to play in the Catholic community supporting our Catholic schools," said businessman James McAndrews. "We are parents of our schools"

children, employers of our schools' graduates, investors in our schools' programs and millions of points of contact throughout our nation with non-Catholics in our communities whose children may attend our schools. The Leadership Council brings lay Catholic leaders in business and academia together with our clergy and Catholic school administrators to identify and develop new and better ways to educate all children in our schools, both Catholic and non-Catholic, into effective contributing citizens and leaders in our community."

As executive director, Dr. Hrutka will be the Consortium's strategic and operational leader. She will be responsible for implementing the mission, goals, objectives, and policy agenda of the Consortium.

Dr. Hrutka joined UMUC in 1992. She previously taught or served in student service and counseling departments at: The University of Maryland, Barry University, Emory University, Trinity College, and The Johns Hopkins School of Nursing.

Dr. Hrutka has served on the School Board for the Archdiocese of Washington since 2003, and is also on the Board of Trustees at St. John's College High School in Washington DC. She is a parishioner at St. John the Baptist Parish in Silver Spring, Md.

"I am a product of the Catholic schools as are my siblings and children. We have benefited from this our education in Catholic schools and my goal is to ensure that the mission of the Consortium is realized," Dr. Hrutka said. "Catholic schools educate children, support families, benefit parishes, and prepare Catholic leaders for the future."

Dr. Patricia Weitzel-O'Neill, the superintendent of schools in the Archdiocese of Washington, worked with Dr. Hrutka through her service on the School Board and said she has a deep devotion to Catholic schools.

“Mary Ellen is a very realistic person who always has a vision and always has a way to solve a problem,” Dr. Weitzel-O’Neill said.

The superintendents believe that the Consortium can be a national leader in Catholic education and the financing, structure and governance of Catholic schools.

“I have no doubt that if we do this correctly, it is going to be a model or template for others to emulate,” said Dr. Timothy McNiff, the superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Arlington.

For more information, visit www.midatlanticcsc.org.

-30-