

WESTERN NEW YORK CATHOLIC

Catholic schools can help state out of budget mess

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There is a great deal of teeth gnashing these days as public school districts across New York attempt to come up with plans to deal with a \$1.25 billion cut in state aid. Governor Andrew M. Cuomo initially proposed \$1.5 billion in funding reductions to schools as he worked to close the state's \$10 billion budget deficit without increasing taxes or borrowing in the state budget that was approved March 31.

Reaction to the proposal has been predictable and understandable. Terms like devastating, drastic and dire are coming from superintendents, school boards and teachers.

Public school district leaders are talking about closing schools, laying off teachers, offering early retirement incentives to employees, increasing class sizes, eliminating summer school, athletics and co-curricular activities. That's just a partial list.

In the coming weeks, school budgets will be decided on by voters, and based on the rejection of a proposal to spend \$130 million on schools in Niagara Falls in February, it appears taxpayers are in no mood to vote to increase taxes and school spending.

New York provides Catholic schools with partial reimbursement for state-mandated services such as standardized testing, teacher training, mentoring and more, but the governor is reducing those payments by 8 percent. That's on top of the \$260 million in reimbursements the state already owes private schools, mostly Catholic. So when the bishops of New York met with Cuomo at the Executive Mansion on March 8, there were no expectations that the state would be able to provide any kind of significant funding to help Catholic schools (www.wnycatholic.org) pay for mandated programs.

After the meeting, Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York said, "Our political leaders here are understandably preoccupied with budget issues. Right now the state has to get its financial house in order and I can appreciate that."

The governor asked the bishops how there could be greater cooperation on education issues between New York and the Church. Archbishop Dolan had a ready answer: "You all tell us in the government that you want quality education, you need to save money and you need more room. We can help you in all three. We do the best job around, we'll do it at half the price and we've got room. It's a no brainer."

Catholic schools save New York taxpayers about \$8 billion a year. Imagine what would happen if the 200,000 students in Catholic and private schools were suddenly thrust upon the public school system. It would collapse.

In the Diocese of Buffalo, our schools consistently outperform public schools, and we offer what public schools cannot: a Christ-centered curriculum that meets state standards. Throughout Western New York, our schools foster personal pride in the commitment to the Catholic faith.

Consider the situation in our high schools: 73 percent of graduates from Williamsville Central School District high schools go on to college. That's the highest rate among public school districts in the eight counties of the region and it's fairly impressive, until you compare it to our Catholic high schools where 98 percent of the graduates are college-bound. There are no better places than our Catholic high schools to prepare young men and women for college, and beyond.

Catholic school students also excel on the state Math and English Language Arts tests, a reflection of the rigorous academic standards that are set in our schools, led by certified, highly-qualified, caring faculty.

Our schools are investing in technology, and class sizes have excellent student-to-teacher ratios, a burgeoning problem in public schools where teacher cutbacks and retirements will result in larger classes, many in excess of 30 students.

We need strong public schools in New York, there's no question about it. At the same time, our Catholic schools are in position to increase enrollment by marketing themselves to parents who are concerned about the impact upcoming cuts to public schools will have on their children's education.

Priests need to be speaking about the value of Catholic schools from the pulpit. Principals need to be reaching out to the community at large to make sure our message is out there: our schools are available, affordable and accessible. Parents of our students need to talk with their friends and neighbors, and encourage them to consider Catholic schools.

The diocese is doing its part. Extensive planning for the future of Catholic elementary schools will culminate in the coming months with the release of a master plan that will strengthen and position Catholic schools for the future.

Hard choices have been made over the past several years as we have reduced the number of Catholic elementary schools in the diocese in order to respond to changing times. Public schools are now faced with that same challenge.

In 2006, the Vatican released the document, "The Holy See's Teaching on Catholic Schools," which pointed out the uniqueness of a Catholic school. "It is Catholic because it undertakes to educate the whole person ... it provides an education in the intellectual and moral virtues, because it prepares for a fully human life at the service of others."

Is the state listening? Are we?

This column originally appeared in the April Western New York Catholic. Kevin A. Keenan serves as editor-in-chief of the paper and Director of Communications for the Diocese of Buffalo. For more information on Catholic schools in the diocese, visit www.wnycatholicschools.org.

