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Closing 15 schools 'difficult' decision

*By Robert Delaney
Of The Michigan Catholic*

DETROIT — Cardinal Adam Maida expressed hope that a scaled-back Catholic school presence in Detroit and adjacent suburbs would be strong enough to provide a continuing Catholic witness to area children.

Approving the closing of 15 Catholic schools when the current school year ends in June was "probably the toughest decision I have had to make here in my life here as the archbishop," he said and compared the emotional impact of the decision to a death.

"But the only hope I have is that this is not a 'walking away,' but – just like the Lord raised Lazarus from the tomb – I pray that out of this experience will come a new life, a new way to minister to ... the people of the city who need all the help we can give them." Cardinal Maida made the comments during a taping of the CTND television program "Dialogue," which will air next week.

Announced Wednesday, the schools set to close, and their current enrollments, are:

- [Bishop Borgess High School & Academy](#), Redford Township, 103 students in high school, 66 in academy.
- [East Catholic High School](#), Detroit, 124.
- [Holy Redeemer High School](#), Detroit, 189.
- [Notre Dame High School](#), Harper Woods, 295.
- [Our Lady Queen of Angels Elementary](#) (Southwest Catholic School Alliance), Detroit, 87.
- [St. Alphonsus Elementary School](#), Dearborn, 106.
- [St. Benedict Elementary School](#), Highland Park, 135.

The Michigan Catholic

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Detroit, MI

11:00 AM EST
Mostly Sunny
38°F
W12

Based on last report from
Detroit City Airport



- [St. Casimir Elementary School](#), Detroit, 127.
- [St. Clement High School](#), Center Line, 134.
- [St. Florian Elementary School](#), Hamtramck, 113
- [St. Luke/St. Brigid Elementary School](#), Detroit, 143.
- [St. Martin de Porres High School](#), Detroit, 224.
- [St. Mel Elementary School](#), Dearborn Heights, 119.
- [Transfiguration Elementary School](#), Detroit, less than 100.
- [Trinity High School](#), Harper Woods, 163.

In addition, [East Catholic Elementary](#) in Detroit will close its McDougall campus on the near east side, but continue to operate its Seven Mile Road site.

Independent of the Schools Planning Committee process, [St. Mary Magdalen](#) Parish in Melvindale asked that it be allowed to close its school, and the request was granted in February.

Also Wednesday, a decision to close all-girls [Dominican High School](#) and [Academy](#) in northeast Detroit was announced by the Adrian Dominican Sisters. Enrollment had fallen to 97 in the high school and to 75 in the academy (as many schools call their middle school). The \$6,000 tuition was less than half the \$13,000 cost to educate a student, the school's president, Sr. Tarianne DeYonker, OP, said.

Cardinal Maida praised the many women religious who served at the closing schools through the years.

The committee that recommended the closings was established by Cardinal Maida Feb. 8. The move was in response to concern by several vicariates that it was difficult to complete parish inventories required by the Together in Faith process (to develop a strategic plan for the archdiocese) while the question of the schools remained unresolved.

The archdiocesan College of Consultors endorsed the committee's recommendations Tuesday, and Cardinal Maida approved them.

The committee was charged "to make recommendations about schools, while keeping in mind the Church's commitment to presence, mission and service to those who are poor."

That sense of mission will continue, said Servite Sr. Mary Gehringer, archdiocesan superintendent of Catholic schools.

"There will still be 12 schools remaining (in Detroit), and we will continue to meet with their administrators and faculty members about ways to meet the needs of those who attend those schools," she said.

Shrinking enrollments and financial problems were the most significant factors leading to the closings, she explained. "From 2001 through 2004, enrollment has declined 47 percent," she noted.

The nine elementary schools being closed have 1,001 students, or 3 percent of the archdiocesan total; the seven high schools have 1,240, or 11 percent of the secondary school population.

Finances were a key factor. Sr. Gehringer said parents' tight finances led to not only to lower enrollments but also reduced revenue from trying to keep tuition low.

"In an effort to make themselves affordable, the schools weren't charging enough tuition to cover their costs, and that was making the schools unaffordable for the parishes," Sr. Gehringer continued.

Currently, average elementary school tuition in the archdiocese is \$2,840 versus an average actual cost of \$4,000; for high schools, the average is \$5,600 versus an average actual cost of \$7,800 (not counting Academy of the Sacred Heart in Bloomfield Hills, at \$14,000).

Meanwhile, parents for whom a quality education and safe environment were the principal reasons for sending their children to Catholic schools now have more choices because of charter schools and schools of choice, Sr. Gehringer added.

The closings will save the archdiocese an estimated \$3.2 million in operating deficits sustained by the affected schools annually over the past 5 years. Over 15 years, the archdiocese has pumped more than \$90 million into schools throughout the archdiocese.

Over the past 15 years, the closing schools have received 46 percent of total grant awards made by the archdiocese – \$18.3 million out of \$39.7 million. In addition, they have an outstanding debt of \$16.7 million.

As it worked, the committee looked at five-year enrollment trends, projected financial shortfalls, loan balances with the archdiocese, pension contributions, as well as academic programs, student population make-up, and strategic

considerations.

Blake said the 12-person committee – comprised of priests, lay people and an auxiliary bishop – "took very seriously" the impact of the decisions, and "did it with a very heavy heart."

He added that, at the end, the decision to recommend the closings was unanimous.

Michigan Appeals Court Judge Michael Talbot, who chaired the committee, called its work a "very difficult job."

In keeping with the spiritual dimension of the [Together in Faith](#) process, Talbot said members began deliberations by attending Mass, and the work "was not a pleasant experience, but it was a spiritual experience."

"You just felt you were getting some help," he added.

No decisions have been made as to the eventual use of the closed buildings.

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