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y dear friends,

## Catholic Schools

On Tuesday February 1, I celebrated, what has become an annual Catholic Schools Week Mass that brings together students, faculty and pastors from all our schools in the diocese. It was a wonderful celebration. I continue to visit our schools throughout the diocese. Again this year, I recorded radio messages in support of our schools and purchased billboard advertising to promote Catholic school education. Individual schools, as well, have undertaken initiatives to promote their local schools. I want to offer a few reflections on our schools.

Catholic schools, along with parish religious education programs, youth ministry and other means of lifelong faith formation and education, contribute directly to the health and vitality of the church of the Diocese of Grand Rapids. Our Catholic schools provide religious education classes, sacramental preparation, liturgical and prayer experiences and opportunities for Christian witness and service in an atmosphere of academic excellence.

I am sometimes asked to share my vision for Catholic schools. While it is an important question, I had assumed my vision about having vibrant schools was clear. In summary, vibrant schools must:

1. Have a strong, clear Catholic identity and provide academic excellence.
2. Be growing. Proactive recruitment and management strategies are a sign of life for vital Catholic schools.
3. Be financially healthy and, at the same time, provide assistance to those who otherwise could not attend a Catholic school. Financial viability and affordability are our greatest challenges.

There are three initiatives that we are undertaking this year on behalf of our Catholic schools that I would like to share with you.



>> During a Mass celebrating Catholic Schools Week on Feb. 2 at the Cathedral of Saint Andrew, Bishop Hurley receives the gifts from Immaculate Heart of Mary sixth grader Haley Lyons (left) and St. Thomas the Apostle eighth grader Monica Blanco.

## Bishop's Scholarship Dinner for Elementary Education:

On October 14, 2010 at the Wege Conference Center at Cathedral Square, we will host the first annual Bishops' Scholarship Dinner to raise additional funds for elementary students who might not normally be able to attend our schools because of finances. The diocesan Catholic Foundation of West Michigan is sponsoring the event. The funds which are raised will be in addition to the more than \$200,000 in scholarships granted each year through the Bishop's Fund for Catholic Education in the Foundation. The fund was established as an element of the "In the Name of the Lord" campaign held several years ago. The two Grand Rapids high schools do an annual appeal for scholarships to benefit their students. These appeals are in addition to scholarship money available through The Foundation for Catholic Secondary Education which was established for the Grand Rapids Catholic secondary schools (West and Catholic Central). The combined subsidy of our diocesan schools, which is provided by the diocese and parishes, is well over 17 million dollars. This amount is in addition to tuition that is collected.

## Reorganization of Schools Office:

**Diocesan Superintendent for Catholic Schools:** There has been a certain ambiguity about reporting and accountability relationships with our schools and the diocese. We are currently conducting a national search to seek a superintendent for diocesan Catholic schools, elementary and secondary, who will have overall responsibility for **all schools**. The position of superintendent will be accountable directly to the bishop. It is my expectation that this will enable us to work more creatively and provide leadership and direction for our schools. This will result in the restructuring of the Office for Catholic Schools. Our schools face a serious crisis as do Catholic schools throughout the country and there are not simple solutions or magic fixes.

As you may know we do not have a diocesan school system. There are plusses and minuses to that. What we have is a federation of schools that are parish operated with some oversight by the diocese. The position of superintendent is intended to help bring us closer to a system with greater oversight and accountability at all levels.

## Summit on Catholic School Education:

In the coming months, I will call together a group of community leaders, both Catholic and non Catholic, to hear and discuss more fully their views and recommendations on the contribution of our schools in our local church and community, and how we might help them grow.

I am under no illusion that these efforts will solve the major crises of education both Catholic and private that are faced locally and nationally. There is no doubt that there will be some consolidation and closings as we regroup. This will need to happen simply to better use the limited resources we have. There are 700 empty seats in our schools just in the southeast section of Grand Rapids. The capacity is greater than the demand. There are at least 3 schools with less than fifty students in the diocese. I believe *Our Faith, Our Future* effort that is underway will be helpful in making the necessary recommendations and decisions.

I am very much aware that many cultural influences are at work against maintaining a strong Catholic identity in our schools. We face demographic and other challenges in the growth of school enrollments. There are serious financial challenges in maintaining a Catholic education, especially for those struggling to afford Catholic school education for their children.

We know that the future will be different from the past, but unless we face the future with confidence and faith we will have failed in our responsibilities.

Bishop Walter A. Hurley