

## **THE NEW YORK TIMES**

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### **A New Model for Schools in the Boston Archdiocese**

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BROCKTON, Mass., Feb. 21 - To the Rev. James Flavin, pastor of St. Edith Stein Roman Catholic Church here, the notion of giving up control of his parish's elementary school is one of the best ideas he has heard in a long time.

St. Edith Stein and two other churches in this city of 94,000 about 25 miles south of Boston, are consolidating their schools, which together serve 500 children in kindergarten through eighth grade, and ceding control to a board of directors.

The arrangement, which starts in September, will result in two newly renovated schools, one for lower grades and another for upper grades, at two different churches.

The move is the first in the Archdiocese of Boston's 2010 Initiative, a plan to revitalize its schools, particularly the elementary schools, which have been suffering from falling enrollment and finances. The goal, officials said, is to offer the resources of a public education with the morals and faith of a Roman Catholic one.

"It's like Catholic education on steroids. It's going to be great," said the Rev. David O'Donnell of Christ the King Parish, which is also part of the consolidation plan.

The change represents a major shift in the way schools are managed in the Boston Archdiocese. For the last century, schools here and elsewhere have generally operated from the top down, with the diocese overseeing schools that are aligned with one parish, whose priest deals with day-to-day administrative issues.

The Brockton schools will still fall under the umbrella of the archdiocese, but the board and its supervisor will act as their administrator. Stonehill College, a Roman Catholic institution in Easton, Mass., will provide curriculum support and training for teachers. For the first time the schools will have a working cafeteria and gymnasium.

"Our students always had to settle for having no gym or computer lab," Father O'Donnell said. "Now this takes all of the values we have plus the quality education."

Not surprisingly, the plan to consolidate raised some concerns among parents.

"Some parents wondered why they weren't let into the process sooner; others had concerns about transportation," Father Flavin said, noting that parents were notified about the changes last month.

Still others were concerned about start times, which led to the creation of a staggered schedule.

Most parishes in the archdiocese's cities - Boston, Brockton, Lawrence and Lowell - once had large, vibrant elementary schools.

Enrollment started dwindling in the 1970s and '80s as many Roman Catholics moved to the suburbs, leaving the schools starved for money. A shortage of priests and nuns has also hurt, leading to more lay employees and, therefore, salaries.

In 1965, about 150,000 students attended archdiocesan schools; today about 50,000 do. No archdiocesan schools have been built since 1953.

"This is what we as a church need to do for our schools to endure," said Jack Connors Jr., chairman emeritus of the advertising firm Hill, Holliday, who helps lead the 2010 plan and has secured pledges of at least \$15 million toward the program. "We want to build schools, fix schools, re-energize our mission. And we have to say that a bake sale can't be the only source to do that."

The archdiocese is focusing its efforts on city schools, and plans to take the Brockton model to Boston and Lowell. City parishes are growing thanks to an influx of Catholic immigrants - here Cape Verdean and Haitian - and making a Catholic education available and affordable is a priority. Tuition in Brockton is being capped at about \$3,000 a student.

"We want to help the poor get ahead," Father Flavin said. "We want college to be a no-brainer, the next step in their lives."

Last year the archdiocese partnered with Boston College to run a Boston elementary school, becoming the first diocese in the country to hand over educational responsibility to a university, said Sister Dale McDonald, director of public policy and education research for the National Catholic Education Association.

Sister McDonald said that about 14 percent of Roman Catholic elementary schools nationwide were consolidated from different parishes, but said that all but a few followed the old top-down governance model. Many are also bringing in Catholic colleges and universities to help with such things as student assessments and curriculum development.

The plan is familiar to the president of Stonehill, the Rev. Mark Cregan, who ran a Catholic school in the South Bronx in the 1990s that received help from Fordham University. The difference in Brockton, Father Cregan said, is that Stonehill will have more of a hand in how the school runs, rather than simply providing extra support.

"The genius of Catholic education throughout history is its ability to work with limited resources and help immigrant children come into the mainstream," Father Cregan said.

"I've been on the receiving end, and I know how appreciative we were by the effort a university made when we were under-resourced."

The archdiocese chose to begin the program in Brockton after Father O'Donnell, Father Flavin and the Rev. Richard Clancy of St. Casimir asked that they be first. Father O'Donnell said his school would probably close if it were not merged.

The priests look forward to September and being able to preach, not teach.

"I'm the head of my school, you're the head of your school. We weren't trained to run a school," Father Flavin said to Father O'Donnell. "Now we have experts involved to run the school. We don't have to rely on Father's talent, or lack thereof, to run the school."