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### Diocese unveils preliminary plan for Catholic schools

The Diocese of Erie today unveils the long-awaited preliminary plan for Catholic schools throughout the 13-county Diocese of Erie. The preliminary plan—a top-to-bottom rethinking of Catholic education in the region—is part of a larger pastoral planning effort of the diocese, *Prayer, Planning, Possibilities*, that will ultimately include new initiatives for parishes and diocesan ministries as well.

“What we are presenting is nothing less than a rebirth of Catholic education in the Diocese of Erie,” said The Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, bishop of Erie. “Students in northwest Pennsylvania deserve the best education and higher-education preparedness possible. We’ve explored everything from technology and teacher recruitment to Catholic mission, advancement and enrollment management, always with an eye toward affordability and value.”

Bishop Persico said the comprehensive plan is developed on a solid foundation of both data and significant insights from school leadership around the diocese. It provides observations, goals and strategies for **Mission and Catholic Identity; Governance and Leadership; Academic Excellence; and Operational Vitality**. The plan includes recommendations for significant changes at the majority of schools, most notably in the Erie area. (See School-by-School List.)

Until now, many schools in the diocese, particularly in the Erie area, have operated independently. The plan calls for the creation of a single school system in the Greater Erie Area with multiple PreK-5 campuses and two middle schools for students in

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grades 6 through 8. As with other school systems within the diocese, a board will be established to oversee it. In addition, all Catholic schools in the diocese will now be guided by the leadership of the newly created position of superintendent of schools. The eleven schools across the diocese currently not connected to a school system will form a consortium to enjoy improvements in academic quality and operational efficiency similar to system-affiliated schools. The hope is to implement most of the changes by the beginning of the 2018-19 academic year; some could occur earlier depending on fundraising.

The system will mean more collaboration and less competition among the schools, ensuring consistency in everything from tuition rates to academic offerings. Sharing resources will create an economy of scale that will significantly improve the educational value.

The plan, presented to clergy, principals and diocesan administrators Oct. 27, was subsequently shared with faculty members, school families and diocesan employees. It is the result of more than a year of work under the leadership of the Catholic Education Task Force of the Pastoral Planning Committee in concert with the Catholic Schools Office and Meitler consultants. Schools now have until December 1 to review details of the plan and offer feedback. Bishop Persico will approve a final plan in early 2016.

The plan draws significantly on the inspiration of a 2005 document from the U.S. Bishops titled, *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium*. It states, "Young people are a valued treasure and the future leaders of our Church. It is the responsibility of the entire Catholic community...to strive toward the goal of making our Catholic elementary and secondary schools available, accessible and affordable to all Catholic parents and their children, including those who are poor and middle class."

The plan is a culmination of an effort that included statistical analysis, visits to every school and the help of professional consultants. While Bishop Persico expressed his confidence in the plan, he acknowledged change always presents challenges.

"People have great pride in their schools and rightly so. Once they have a chance to absorb the emotion of the news, I believe they will see the wisdom in the recommendations," he said.

Bishop Persico noted he is proud of the leadership evident throughout the plan.

“As we unveil this first significant initiative, I believe people will understand its importance,” he said. “We are taking full advantage of this moment, allowing for inspiration and innovation.” The bishop expects planning to be an ongoing commitment for Catholic schools and parishes, and recognizes that recommendations will take time to implement. But with today’s announcement, Bishop Persico said the Diocese of Erie has taken a vital step in the right direction.

“The goal from the very beginning was to raise the standard for education across the region, ensuring generations of children will have access to quality academics in a faith-based environment,” Bishop Persico said. “I feel a great responsibility to the sisters and priests and families who came before us—they poured their lives into our Catholic schools. We’re doing our best to honor that legacy and to make sure that future generations will have the same opportunities we have enjoyed for more than 150 years.”

An overview of each of the four key components of the Preliminary Strategic Plan for Catholic Schools as well as details of the plan in a school-by-school listing accompany today’s release.

Discussion about the need for a pastoral plan began less than a year after the arrival of Bishop Persico, who was installed as bishop in October 2012. In August 2014, the diocese engaged the nationally recognized consulting firm of Meitler. Based in Milwaukee, Meitler has worked with more than 120 dioceses and 2,000 Catholic and religious schools since 1971, with an emphasis on strategic planning, demographic and market research and enrollment management. The firm has been working with Catholic school leaders throughout the diocese to form a new vision and practical plan that will move schools toward a desired future.

As part of the process, the diocese developed a listing of *Key Indicators for a Healthy School*, based on National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools promulgated by the National Catholic Education Association. Parish and school leaders had a number of opportunities to contribute to an understanding of the current state of Catholic education and offer ideas to shape the plan. They are now being asked to respond to proposed goals and strategies.

To guide the development of the plan, a Catholic Education Task Force was established. Members reviewed data gathered by the Catholic Schools Office and Meitler.

Every school in the diocese was visited, engaging administrators who provided vital information. In addition, community demographics were collected and relevant parish data was compiled in order to create a complete picture of those trends affecting Catholic schools.

This information was shared in multiple forums, and used by the task force to form a draft. Working subcommittees of the task force included Catholic identity, academic excellence and school finances.

The plan is being unveiled in preliminary form. Officials at the Diocese of Erie said that while plan is a collaborative effort integrating the work of the groups already enumerated, they want the people who will implement the plan and those affected by its recommendations to have an opportunity to provide feedback. School administrators have access to a confidential online form developed for this purpose; individuals who would like to submit feedback will find a similar form developed for this purpose at [www.ErieRCD.org/planning.asp](http://www.ErieRCD.org/planning.asp).

The final plan will be approved by Bishop Persico after consulting with the Priests Council, the College of Deans and the Administrative Cabinet in early 2016.