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Bishop of Gary

October 14, 2011

Reverend David W. Kime
St. Joseph Parish
109 "C" Street
LaPorte, Indiana 46350

Dear Father Kime:

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today to discuss the future of St. Joseph School in LaPorte. During the meeting you explained how St. Joseph School, the Strategic Planning Committee, members of the parish, and members of the LaPorte community have been working very hard to address the economic challenges caused by the declining enrollment and increased operational costs at the school. It is my understanding that the school enrollment has seen a serious decline over the last ten years resulting in a drop of over 60 percent of the student population. The reasons for this drop are many. Families have opted to not send their children to the Catholic school because of finances, because of a choice to home school, and due to other personal factors, not the least of which is a strong public school system in LaPorte.

Several years ago this declining enrollment precipitated the closure of the seventh and eighth grades and then the sixth grade the following year. It has also caused the loss of several staff members over the last few years due to budget constraints. Most recently these cuts have meant the loss of a classroom teacher when the first and second grades were combined into one classroom.

In response to the reduction of students, the parish has tried for several years to boost enrollment through a recruitment campaign, which involved invitations to all students of religious education and home-schooling parents as well as announcements and panel discussions. This campaign to save the school and increase enrollment took on an even more fervent and aggressive character in the last year. Your own efforts involved preaching at Sunday Mass at the two neighboring parishes. The parish developed a Strategic Planning Committee, which according to your report did heroic work to assist the school. Through their tireless work, they engaged the issues facing the school on three fronts: Communication, Finance, and Enrollment. They dedicated numerous hours to producing a document which outlined a strategic plan for the parish school.

Nevertheless, their noble efforts did not bear the anticipated fruit for which you and the parishioners had hoped. After such extraordinary efforts, the enrollment for this academic year continued its trajectory of former decline. Despite the offers of a "Semester Free Guarantee" for all new students and the Government Voucher Program, the student enrollment fell once again this year.

In today's meeting, you also explained that the parish established a benchmark for determining viability for the school to continue beyond this year. These requirements were published at a Tri-Parish Town Hall meeting at the beginning of 2011. The three conditions that the pastor, the Strategic Planning Committee, and the Parish Pastoral Council agreed to were: to maintain a budget at 45 percent of the parish's ordinary income; to reach an enrollment of 18 students per teacher in accordance with the diocesan standard of viability; and to increase the kindergarten to 18 students in order to show the potential for future sustainability. The most unfortunate data indicates that none of these three criteria was achieved.

During our meeting you also indicated that the parish subsidy has consistently exceeded the diocesan approved maximum subsidy of 40 percent of ordinary income. The difficulty with these large subsidies of 50, 55 or even 60 percent is that it reduces the effectiveness of the parish ministry in other areas. It is a question of stewardship and justice when 52 percent of the budget is allocated to a small number of students while the other ministries in the parish operate without an adequate budget.

The pastors of the other LaPorte parishes have expressed their concern about the school's viability and the difficulty that they have had in shouldering the financial burdens of a school with so few students. In addition, you have also sought the wisdom of other pastors with schools, the School Superintendent and myself, during this period of discernment. During our conference it was clear that each of these groups and persons recommended that your school should not continue beyond this year because of the very small student enrollment necessitating a very large parish subsidy.

In light of all the preceding data, the parish entered upon a serious evaluation of the long-term viability of the school. On September 6, 2011, you met with the members of the Strategic Planning Committee so that they could present their efforts of the last several months and its effectiveness. On September 27, 2011, you invited Dr. Barbara O'Block so that the members of the Strategic Planning Committee could present their work and its fruitfulness to the Parish Pastoral Council and to herself. Finally, you met with the Parish Pastoral Council in order to ask them for a recommendation after they had been fully informed of the details of the situation facing your school. Given all the facts and details, the majority of the Parish Pastoral Council recommended to you that the school should be closed at the end of this academic year of 2011-2012. After prayerful consideration and concern for the well-being of our students and families, I have accepted the recommendation of the Parish Pastoral Council, Dr. Barbara O'Block, neighboring pastors and yourself to close St. Joseph School at the end of this academic year.

Although we have been aware for a number of years of the challenges facing St. Joseph School, this does not lessen the sadness and disappointment it engenders in all of us. St. Joseph School has benefited from a deep commitment and profound sacrifices on the part of parishioners for many years. The present decision should not diminish the pride the community has felt for the school and its academic and Catholic excellence. I would like to personally thank you, the parents, as well as present and former teachers, staff, and pastors of St. Joseph for your labors and zeal to foster faith at St. Joseph Parish and School.

I recognize that this has been a very difficult process for you and for the members of your parish. It is my earnest wish that you use the remainder of this year to celebrate the great effectiveness of St. Joseph School for the last 152 years.

My prayers are with you and with your parishioners during this difficult transition. With God's guidance, may each of you discover more fully His plan and His will for your lives.

Asking God's blessings upon you and the people of St. Joseph Parish, I am

Fraternally yours in the Lord Jesus,



Most Reverend Dale J. Melczek
Bishop of Gary