

February 1, 2012 by [O'Meara Ferguson](#)



Revitalizing Catholic Schools

Next week (February 8-10), O'Meara, Ferguson, Whelan, and Conway, Inc. will host a symposium in San Antonio, Texas, on the topic, "Determining Actionable Solutions for Catholic Education." At the O'Meara Ferguson symposium, participants will discuss how integrating finance, development, planning, and operations can help revitalize Catholic schools.

The phrase "actionable solutions" reflects a growing awareness that it is no longer helpful simply to identify what the challenges are. Solutions must be found—and implemented!

This same sentiment was expressed in research conducted by three Catholic University of America scholars who studied "critical factors that face Catholic schools today." The foreword to the publication, *Weathering the Storm: Moving Catholic Schools Forward* by Leonard DeFiore, John J. Convey, and Merylann J. Schuttloffel says it all: *There will be no more prizes for predicting rain; only for building arks.*

Weathering the Storm offers practical suggestions for "ark building." After calling attention to significant research dating from the 1960s and 70s through the present day, the authors summarize the evidence this way: "In sum, Catholic schools appear to produce a unique set of important outcomes that neither other Church programs nor secular institutions can duplicate. Thus, the praise heaped upon Catholic schools, as well as the value attached to them, is well-merited." This is the low-key, scholarly way of saying Catholic schools are incredibly unique and invaluable resources for our Church and for society!

The challenges are clear also. The decline in Catholic school enrollment, which began in the 1960s, continues unabated. The total number of Catholic schools has also declined steadily since the 1970s. "The data are disheartening," the authors say. Since 1970, more than 4000 Catholic schools have closed; more than 1400 since 2000. According to *Weathering the Storm*, "The dioceses with the largest number of closings are: Chicago, Detroit, Newark and Brooklyn each with over 40 school closings, and Boston, Philadelphia, Buffalo, St. Louis and Cleveland, each with over 30 school closings."

The decline in enrollment is exacerbated by the economic recessions of the past decade, which the authors say "have had powerful effects on the ability of families to afford rising tuitions and the ability of dioceses and parishes to provide adequate support." Competition provided by the rapidly growing number of charter schools is also a growing challenge, the authors say.

According to *Weathering the Storm*, the primary challenges facing Catholic schools today are: 1) the increasing number of Catholic school closings and the negative, downward momentum this creates, 2) the continuing decline in enrollment, and 3) the growing gap between parents' desire to send their children to Catholic schools and these schools' affordability and availability.

St. Louis Archbishop Robert J. Carlson has announced a multi-year initiative called *Alive in Christ* that is designed to address these challenges head-on. Noting that Catholic schools in St. Louis, like most other dioceses throughout the United States, have experienced a 40-year decline, Archbishop Carlson says that he does not believe further decline is inevitable. “Growth is possible,” the Archbishop says. “It won’t be easy and it won’t happen overnight, but with the help of God’s grace we can grow our schools in three key areas: Catholic identity, enrollment and finances.”

O’Meara Ferguson is committed to “ark building”—to helping the Catholic Church identify actionable solutions that will offer lasting, systematic temporal health to enable her to more fully focus on her Apostolic mission. The five solutions proposed by O’Meara Ferguson are: 1) stewardship—an awareness of our giftedness and a commitment to sharing, 2) subsidiarity—the principle that what is best done locally should remain there, 3) mission—a deep and abiding sense of the Church’s educational and evangelical mission, 4) instrumentality—the commitment to observing “best practices” while remaining open to the Holy Spirit, and 5) engagement—the active involvement of all—pastors, school personnel, parents and laity.

Once a school’s leaders are confident in the expression of their school’s mission, and once they have developed an ambitious but achievable vision for the future, then they can begin to address the school’s enrollment and financial concerns. In fact, basic financial issues like spending priorities, revenue enhancement, and tuition assistance can only be adequately addressed in light of the school’s Catholic identity as it is integrated into all aspects of the school’s life.

The Church in the United States has been blessed with the gift of Catholic education. Let’s be good stewards of this gift. Let’s make sure that our schools truly are *Alive in Christ* so that we can effectively hand-on our Catholic faith to future generations.