



February 9, 2024

Venango Catholic High School to close at the end of the school year; Preschool through grade 8 to remain open

The members of the Venango Region Catholic School (VRCS) Association have announced that Venango Catholic High School in Oil City will close at the end of the 2023-2024 academic year.

“I share in the pain of all who are affected by the decision,” said the Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, bishop of Erie. “Closing a Catholic school is the last thing anyone wants to see happen. But despite the significant efforts of the community, we could not ignore the realities. Enrollment and budget goals can no longer be met for the high school.” Bishop Persico, who has consistently advocated for maintaining Catholic education in the Oil City region, noted that St. Stephen School will still be available in the Oil City region for students in pre-K through grade 8.

In June, in response to the challenges VCRS was facing, the Catholic Schools Office of the Diocese of Erie outlined several goals that needed to be met in order to secure the future of a Catholic high school in Oil City:

- An increase of students enrolled at the high school level to reach a minimum of 10 students per grade and a minimum of 40 students in grades 9-12.
- The selection of an interim school president by July 2023, with the expectation of a permanent replacement this year.
- A goal of \$600,000 in hand by the end of 2023 to ensure the school could meet its ongoing financial obligations.

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The goals were shared with board members in June of 2023. Communications to families and stakeholders providing updates and progress for the system were sent in June, October and December of 2023. Additionally, the *Oil City Derrick* reported the strategic indicators that were required to continue with the current configuration of VRCS on January 6, 2024.

The board reported to the members on January 24, 2024, that enrollment for both the high school and middle school had dropped since last June. Total high school enrollment stands at 32; enrollment for grades 7 and 8 stands at a total of 15. While the goal for an interim president was met and long-term candidates did come forward, the selection of a permanent president was hampered by the lack of progress in the other two areas.

Despite significant efforts made by the school board, administration, school families, volunteers and donors, the financial goals also fell short. The board reported it had reached a high of \$462,003 prior to work that needed to be done on the roof. The reserve now stands at \$348,642.

“We cannot emphasize enough that we recognize the heroic efforts the community has made in order to keep a Catholic high school in Oil City. We also acknowledge the dedication and generosity of administrators, faculty and staff at Venango Catholic High School,” the members of the VRCS Association wrote in a letter to school families and staff in January, indicating a final decision was imminent. “We also are aware of many sacrifices that have been made by families and other stakeholders in the community. Dr. (Ray) Feroz has done a stellar job as interim president; Board Chair Bob Puleo also has gone above and beyond, leaving no stone unturned with the help of the board.”

A timeline and process of next steps will be shared with the community in the coming days and weeks. Plans also will be shared with faculty and staff regarding their benefits as well as transitioning to other employment. In addition, Dr. Feroz has said the immediate and longer-term concerns of students will be addressed throughout the spring.

“Students have always been our priority at VCRS, and this decision does not change that fact,” said Dr. Feroz. “As we look to a future that differs from what we had hoped for, it is very important that we allow them to work through their emotions. I also am committed to making sure students, faculty, staff and families honor the 62-year legacy of Venango Catholic High School and bring this final year to a conclusion that we all can cherish.”

The Diocese of Erie, which owns the facility and its property, plans to explore the possibility of selling it, using a portion of the sale to create a fund to help support the elementary school. The association has authorized the board to begin immediate remediation regarding a leak in the roof at St. Stephen School, water issues on its ground floor and updates to its kitchen. In addition, they have secured a \$40,000 grant to build a playground which will be installed at St. Stephen School in preparation for the 2024-2025 academic year.