



St. Bernard Elementary Middle School to close

The Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, bishop of Erie, announced today that he has accepted the request of Father Ray Gramata to close St. Bernard Elementary Middle School at the end of the 2018-2019 school year. The school serves the needs of two partnered parishes in Bradford — St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Francis of Assisi, which includes the mission church of Our Mother of Perpetual Help in Lewis Run. All of the parishioners are under the pastoral care of Father Gramata. The decision was based on the recommendation of the parish finance council as well as an ad-hoc committee Father Gramata convened to explore the school's future.

"Father Gramata and the people he brought together to review the situation did everything possible to avoid this outcome," Bishop Persico said. "I know it was a particularly difficult decision, given that there are no other options for Catholic education in the Bradford area. But I agree that it was wise not to continue adding to the financial burden of the parishes, putting them at risk as well."

Late last spring, the ad-hoc committee consisting of St. Bernard Principal Linda Cecchetti, Father Gramata, and three parishioners from St. Bernard Parish began studying the situation in earnest. The committee then

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expanded to include one parent of a student and parishioners from St. Francis and their mission church, Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

“We all would have much preferred coming to a different decision,” Father Gramata said. “I know this will be very disappointing for many. But in considering the needs of the broader parish community, we gained clarity on the steps that needed to be taken.”

School enrollment stands at 52 students; a look at the area’s demographics revealed that number is likely to decline. St Bernard parishioners are currently using about 65 percent of their weekly offering to support the school; projections are that it could easily rise to 73 percent this year. According to best practices, no more than 40 percent of a parish’s offering should be used to support a school.

Last year, the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford considered purchasing the school building; funds from the sale might have allowed St. Bernard Parish to upgrade the East Corydon Church office and social hall facility to be used as a school. However, it was not likely that all grades could have been accommodated, which would have further reduced enrollment to 38 students.

Cecchetti, who has served as principal for the last two years, acknowledged that faculty, staff, families and students will go through a grieving process upon learning about the decision.

“I’m very sad about it. In 30 years of teaching, I’ve never met such dedicated people. We have fantastic teachers and a really supportive staff,” she said, noting that even though the school is closing, they still have the rest of the year to be together. “I know we will all make the most of every day.”

Cecchetti said faculty will ensure students continue receiving a strong education, and will be well prepared to go onto the next grade, no matter what school they attend.

“We’re going to make wonderful memories this year, and the memories we make will be with us for the rest of our lives,” she said.

Father Gramata also underscored his commitment to renewing faith formation for people of every age in the parish.

“We are going to be in a good position to take advantage of the new faith formation initiatives that are being introduced across the diocese,” he said. “We need to grow in our faith and understanding from the cradle to the grave. It’s time to rethink our approach, and I have every confidence that the people of our parishes will find ways to make this happen.”

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