

► **To the point**

Reorganization of the Catholic schools in Monroe could be an important key to their survival and growth while also expanding their services.

Catholic schools' plan has pluses

The three Catholic schools in Monroe recently announced a reorganization plan that will see the schools become known as Monroe Catholic Elementary Schools.

The reorganization, which will take effect next fall, is meant to keep Catholic, faith-based education in Monroe a sustainable option for years to come, officials say.

Infant, toddler, pre-school, kindergarten and first grade will be housed at the current St. Michael's. Its name will change to St. Michael Early Elementary School. St. John will be home to students in second through fourth grade. At St. Mary, the new St. Mary Middle School, will serve students in fifth-through eighth-grades.

An executive director will oversee the collaboration along with each pastor of the three Monroe parishes. Each school still will be managed by a principal.

The schools, located within a six-block radius of one another, already have been sharing resources. This plan helps consolidate some of those resources, even while adding some services. For instance, students are provided transportation to take a variety of classes at each of the schools and at St. Mary Catholic Central High School. Under the new plan, the classes for, say, eighth-grade, will all be provided at the new middle school.

School officials said the reorganization will move the schools to the 21st century.

Although it could be tweaked over time, the plan appears to have been well thought out.

The Monroe Catholic Schools Commission formed in 2008 to work on the reorganization. The group studied demographics, finances and enrollment trends, and spoke with the community

about its findings.

Within the last two years, enrollment at the Monroe Catholic schools has seen an increase of 22 percent. Under the new collaboration, continued growth is expected, especially in the area of infant and toddler classes.

As with any change, this reorganization probably will be unpopular with many parents and it will inconvenience some to take their children to unfamiliar schools at different locations. But at a time when resources seem to be dwindling on all fronts, the reorganization plan should have many benefits. Combining the schools will keep class sizes near their current levels. Students still will be able to participate in Catholic Youth Organization sports.

In their new settings, students will be able to experience more stability because teachers and resources will be concentrated at each location. And, perhaps most important, it will have a strong early education component, offering infant/toddler classes for the first time. Most agree such early education provides an invaluable foundation for lifelong learning.

Schools throughout Monroe County have had to adapt in the last five to 10 years for various reasons, many of which are related to the economy. Monroe and Bedford Public Schools had to close schools because of declining enrollment. St. Anthony, which was one of two Catholic schools in southern Monroe County, was closed in 2010 due to dwindling enrollment and funding.

Tackling economic challenges can be difficult for schools, but proactive thinking and long-term planning are ways to help meet challenges head on, rather than hoping for the best from last-minute crisis management.