

Archd. Education Conference Yields More Questions

The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America's recent conference on education is newsworthy because it signals concern over the future of Greek parochial schools – the first such display in years. It's been over two decades since then Archbishop Spyridon formed a commission led by the late Prof. John Rassias to report on the state of Greek Education in America and propose an action plan.

A lot has changed – mostly for the worst – since 1999, when the Commission published its report. For example, about half the Greek-American day schools in New York have shut down, with the most recent closure coming this past September in a thriving neighborhood with a large Greek population.

Aside from the display of good intentions, however, this first conference organized by newly elected Archbishop Elpidophoros leaves many questions unanswered. For starters, in contrast to the Rassias Commission, which was composed of renowned academicians, there was not one representative of higher education on the conference committee. Half its members are priests, two-thirds do not possess an evident specialization in the area of education, while at least one-third are not adequately academically proficient in the Greek language!

Similarly, the new director of the Archdiocesan Office of Education (formerly Greek Education) – handpicked by the Archbishop – possesses many years of administrative experience leading a successful Greek-American day school, however, his level of proficiency in Greek is wanting, raising valid questions about his ability to func-

tionally oversee the essential design and evaluation of a modern Greek language curriculum. Hence, either the new Archbishop is planning on changing the existing administrative structure of the office responsible for the Archdiocese's day and afternoon schools or he made a rather flippant choice regarding the strengthening of Hellenic Paideia in the United States.

Aside from a plethora of photos, lip service regarding the virtues of the Greek language, and hazy pledges about the better days that lie ahead, the essential problems that sparked the current crisis facing Hellenic Paideia were not examined.

The Archbishop promised that no more day schools would

shut down (not that there are many left anyway), but he already allowed one to close under his watch. He then appointed as presiding priest of the community operating this school a clergyman who was already involved in another school closure at the previous parish in which he served. Meanwhile, the Greek-American Community is still awaiting the announcement of plans for the restructuring and reopening of this aforementioned day school.

One direct action that the Archdiocese can take without



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having to overhaul the administrative hierarchy of existing parochial schools is to lower the annual contributions (taxes) owed by the parish communities that operate day schools or free afternoon schools, and redistribute the enormous profits being collected from the leasing of buildings that once housed

Greek schools and are now being rented out for unrelated purposes. These funds can be directed to help grossly underfunded community educational institutions and subsidize the cost of tuition, which is becoming prohibitive for middle-class families (especially those with more than one child).

In terms of teaching models, Greek-American parochial

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schools are limited by an outdated vision and obsolete instructional method. The failure of community schools to develop a true bilingual/dual-language program represents perhaps the greatest threat facing Greek education in the United States. The mere instruction of Greek as a foreign/second language for one period a day is not enough to produce fluent speakers – especially in younger generations, where parents' Greek language proficiency is often limited. The advantages of the bilingual or dual-lan-

guage model, where at least half the subjects are taught in the target language, have been proven over recurring studies for decades.

In North America, there are seminal studies dating back to the 1970s in Canada (see Wallace Lambert and Fred Genesee), while in the United States, which has traditionally lagged behind in the area of foreign/second language instruction, the bilingual or dual-language model is being adopted by an ever-increasing number of schools (public, charter, and private). Unfortunately, Greek-American schools (with the exception of certain Greek charter schools in Florida) have been ignoring this data until now, with the consequences of this major oversight becoming ever more noticeable.

The conference on Greek education represents a first step in discussing stakeholders' concerns and engaging in a wider dialogue (although there are already complaints from invited guests and non-invitees that they were marginalized), so long as this effort is not limited to frivolous public relations.

Questions abound regarding the intentions of the Archdiocese and its new helmsman, and only actions can provide the answers. If the Archdiocese and parish communities do not display the necessary decisiveness and skill to proceed with reforms and modernization, other bodies and new institutions that desire to contribute with new ideas and a fresh outlook must be sought.

In any event, the time for action is at hand.

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