



NEWS RELEASE

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**St. Patrick School, St. Stephen School  
and Venango Catholic High School form association**

After several months of study and work, Catholic schools in the Venango region signed an agreement Sept. 14 to form an association called the Venango Region Catholic School. The agreement was signed by Monsignor John J. Herbein, pastor of St. Patrick Parish; Rev. John Miller III, pastor of St. Stephen Parish; and the Most Reverend Lawrence Persico, bishop of the Diocese of Erie.

“What this means is that the leadership of St. Patrick School in Franklin, St. Stephen School in Oil City, and Venango Catholic High School (VCHS) are formalizing their commitment to work and plan together in order to strengthen Catholic education in the Oil City/Franklin area,” said Jim Gallagher, superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Erie.

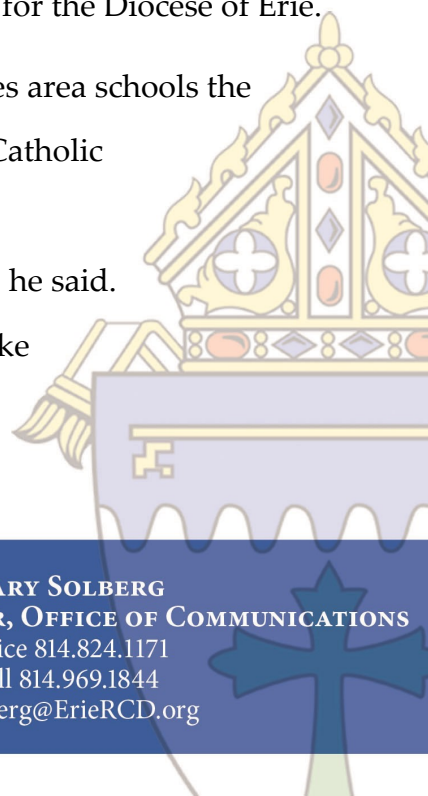
Greg Merkel, chair of the VCHS board, said the agreement gives area schools the legal and governance support necessary to make decisions about Catholic education in the region in a more cohesive manner.

“This is an important step in an ongoing, significant effort,” he said. “We now have the appropriate framework from which we can make cohesive, collaborative decisions about the future.”

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Very soon, the association expects to establish a two-tiered board of directors, which will then begin the search for a president of the system. The two pastors and the existing Venango Catholic High School Board have submitted names to Bishop Persico for review.

The initiative to explore this option was undertaken at the request of pastors and school leaders in Venango County, all of whom are in favor of the association. It also had the full support of the Catholic Schools Office, which helped facilitate the effort with a grant from the Religious Education Endowment Fund. Those funds were used to engage the Meitler organization to conduct a comprehensive study capturing socio/economic, geographic, cultural, attitudinal, historical information and more.

The results of the study were shared in May, when a meeting was held to engage in dialogue among stakeholders including pastors, principals, board members, parish leaders, teachers and parents, who were then invited to participate in a period of feedback. At the request of the pastors and school leaders, a steering committee was formed to begin the work regionalizing the schools. The steering committee, made up of representatives from each of the three school communities and the two parishes, worked over the past several months to lay the foundation for the newly created association.

“I am very pleased with the progress that has been made and with dedication of those on the steering committee,” Gallagher said. “It’s an excellent example of how the Catholic Schools Office can partner with local communities. They initiated the process and provided the substance. We were able to bring the resources and connections to help them make their plans a reality.”

**Members of the steering committee include:**

Dr. Joe Grunenwald – Venango Catholic High School board representative

Marge Hajduk – St. Stephen School principal

Carol Long – St. Patrick School principal

Greg Merkel – Venango Catholic High School board chair

Mike Morrison –St. Stephen Parish and school councils finance chair

Deacon Dick O’Polka – St. Patrick Parish and school councils finance chair

Brian Slider – Venango Catholic High School headmaster (Acting)

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