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## Sister-Teachers View

# OUR SCHOOL CRISIS

Articles and opinions about the parochial school crisis and the survival of the elementary school system have been printed extensively in this paper. The specific viewpoint of the Sister-teachers has received scant notice.

The following article from **DIALOGUE**, published by the Sisters of St. Joseph this month, reveals some strong feelings of Sisters in elementary school work.

By **SISTER MARY JOHN, SSIJ**, Editor, **DIALOGUE**

"Do you think that the Catholic elementary schools in our diocese should survive?"

"Do they justify the large percentage of money, personnel and creative energy put into them?"

These were the questions asked of several Sisters of St. Joseph who are now and have been involved in elementary education over the past few years when declining enrollments; increasing costs, and upheavals in educational philosophy on all fronts have brought such questions to the fore more and more often.

In every case the answer was a qualified "yes," and the qualifications indicate the visions and the hopes these Sisters have for such education in the future.

"Yes, if they are good schools."

What do they mean by a "good school"? Answers here varied, but in substance were, that a school is good if it provides — through creative teachers, effective methodology, and adequate working materials — the atmosphere in which each child can develop to the fullest his individual potential as a human person.

Several added that a religiously-oriented school is able to do this most adequately because it can stress the values and principles essential to "full humanness" in a way that public schools are not free to do.

Another qualification specified by many of these Sisters was that the elementary schools must not be seen as complete ends in themselves; they should be centers for other parish and community activities.

The building; its facilities; its faculty and school board with their experience and training, their interest and contacts; these should be all available to the people in the area; GED, early childhood and adult education, of course; but also for the tackling of other vital problems — housing, pollution, drug abuse, crime.

Still another qualification stipulated by most of the Sisters was that our schools should continue if they can get sufficient financial aid so that they will not be serving only the financially able.

At present the schools where these Sisters were interviewed do not turn away any child whose parents desire him to come even if the required amount of tuition or school donation to the parish cannot be paid.

They cannot predict, however, how much longer these schools can operate if state financial assistance to the parents is not forthcoming; the strange thing is, they add, that not enough people yet seem to realize that a few dollars now will save literally thousands of taxpayer dollars in the future.

Of the Sisters interviewed, three are working in suburban Rochester schools, one in Rochester's inner-city, one in Ithaca, where it is the only Catholic

school within a radius of 30 miles, and one in Elmira.

The last, SS. Peter and Paul in Elmira, is in its third year of an experimental merger with another parish school, St. Cecilia's, formerly staffed by Sisters of Mercy. The two religious communities together now staff — with four lay teachers — both schools, grades 1-4 at St. Cecilia's and grades 5-6 at SS. Peter and Paul; the children are bused, as necessary, to the school where their classes are.

The inner-city school in our study, Immaculate Conception in Rochester, has also experimented this year with 4-to-6-year-olds at nearby St. Lucy's and grades 2-8 at Immaculate.

These experiments are particularly interesting in view of the recommendations toward "consolidation" made by the Diocesan Education Task Force in its recent report to Bishop Hogan. Such consolidation and merging would cross parish boundaries and give new identities to many schools if it is put into effect.

Questioned about this our Sisters interviewed said, "Fine, wherever that will make for better schools, providing better education for the children."

When asked about the declining enrollment in the Catholic elementary schools over the past few years, the Sisters offered several reasons. One is the fear of the schools' closing which is experienced by many parents and their subsequent reluctance to start their children off in a "dying system."

A second is the wave of con-

cern on the part of many over the past five or ten years that Catholic education was poor, inadequate, too strict and repressive, and so on.

These Sisters believe that much of this concern is our own fault; our schools were changing with the times — as the public schools were, but we neglected to inform our public adequately about this.

A third dissenting group of parents, of course, consists of those who believe that Catholic education is divisive and perpetuates a "ghetto mentality." The Sisters interviewed do not agree this is so, but think it well to be aware of this as a potential danger.

A final question asked concerned the decrease in the numbers of Sisters who are interested in teaching in the Catholic elementary school these days. This brought many comments.

All of the Sisters interviewed are very committed to their work, seeing it not only as a most satisfying apostolate in itself but also as an "open door" into many other areas of service — home visiting, communal prayer experiences, social action, and so on. They think that some Sisters will always view it in this way and that their choice of this apostolate according to their abilities and preferences will render them most effective in it.

One principal added, however, that she felt that a school could be a splendid Christian learning environment with very few or no Sisters when and if this has to be.

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