

Chemung County's 'model school system' faces new test

By Teresa A. Parsons

Catholic educators throughout the diocese have been watching Chemung County since 1971. That's when the Catholic elementary schools there began their consolidation into a countywide system under a single school board — a first for the Diocese of Rochester.

Since 1971, parents, pastors, teachers and children have weathered the pain and controversy of closing three school buildings. They have also benefitted from stronger, more stable Catholic schools.

"It was difficult on the people, there's no question about it," said Sister Ann Carapella, a former principal at Our Lady of Lourdes and now a teacher at St. Patrick's. "For the first time, their children were going to different areas. Even though nothing is really that far in Elmira, when you have a little home school a couple of blocks away, it seems like a major move."

School officials believe consolidation was sold to people in Elmira because it promised to raise the quality of education they could expect for their children. Additional and improved programs have been offered, joint planning has given the schools more stability, and the resources of each school are now shared throughout the county. The countywide system also means that teachers are less isolated from other faculty at the same grade levels. Teachers appreciate the diversity of ethnic and economic backgrounds among students that has added to the richness of classroom life.

"Without consolidation, we knew that only the parishes who could financially support schools would have a school and any other smaller parish would have lost," added Sister Patricia Carroll, St. Patrick's principal. "A slow death was starting to take place."

Now a number of external factors are again putting stress on the schools. James Miranda, president of the Chemung County General Education Board, believes that the system faces a "make-or-break situation" during the coming year.

Chemung County's population is declining. Since 1977, the public schools have recorded a continuous drop in enrollment and expect that phenomenon to continue.

For the past five years at least, Elmira's economic condition has deteriorated. Since 1980, six of 10 major industries have left the area, and the unemployment rate is consistently one of the highest in the state. Unemployment hurts parochial education both directly and indirectly.

"Unemployed parents can't pay tuition," Miranda pointed out. And when parishioners are unemployed, churches face rising educational and parish costs with a drop in revenue.

With these hard times comes the question of who really owns the system and where additional support can be found?

For the past nine months, the school board's long-range planning subcommittee has been working on a five-year plan for the system that will deal with the issues of enrollment, curriculum, staffing, finances and buildings. Miranda declined to discuss the details of the proposal until it is approved by diocesan education officials. Local hearings on the preliminary plan are tentatively scheduled for September.

Consolidation began in Elmira as far back as 1967 when St. Cecilia's and Ss. Peter and Paul combined. Countywide planning didn't become a reality until the 1971-72 school year, when five schools — St. Patrick's, St. Casimir's, Ss. Peter and Paul, St. Mary's,

Southside, and Our Lady of Lourdes — were consolidated into four grammar schools and one regional junior high.

Dr. Thomas Curren, former president of the school board, recalled that the model for consolidation in Chemung County came from the Ogdensburg diocese and centered around the idea of making a Catholic system function on a business footing. "We looked at the entire region's resources and tried to decide how best to make the system work," he said.

St. Patrick's School in downtown Elmira was chosen as the junior high for Chemung County, with the exception of students from Horseheads. St. Mary Our Mother School continued its own junior high program. The Horseheads parish pulled out of the entire system after the first year, citing cost as the reason. "They realized immediately that it wasn't going to work," said Sister Pat Carroll, principal of St. Patrick's since 1980. "Their junior high kids couldn't fit in this building."

The first system had a school board made up of parishioners, school principals, and pastors from each church. "It was a very large board (more than 30 members), and it took a long time to get a consensus," recalled Sister Julia Clare, former principal of St. Mary's, who now teaches at St. Patrick's.

Since then, the board has been reduced to nine members — one voting member from each parish, a voting principal representative and a voting pastor representative. Alternates may be present to speak, but do not vote.

In the 1974-75 school year, the Chemung County Catholic School System was incorporated under the new board, renamed the Chemung County General Education Board. An assessment plan was also adopted that year. The plan called for each parish's share of support to be determined equally by income and enrollment. Parish income and the number of students from each parish were to be averaged over five years to arrive at a dollar amount.

In June 1976, the board voted to close Ss. Peter and Paul School, one of the oldest schools in the diocese and the only one on the east side of the city. Board members listed declining enrollment (97 students) and rising costs as the reasons.

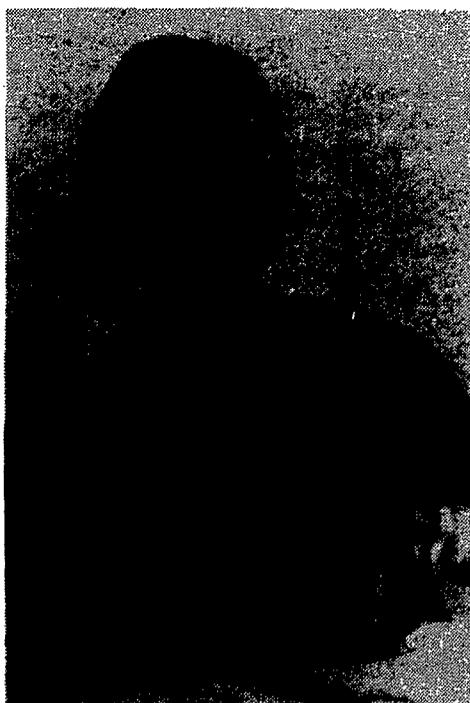
The system has been changed and refined continually. "Every year it was something — rewriting the constitution, reorganizing the board," recalled Sister Ann. "We were constantly trying to better ourselves and learn through our errors and mistakes."

"Right now every parent that wants a Catholic school education for their child can get the child into the Catholic school system regardless of their parish's ability to have a Catholic school," Sister Patricia said.

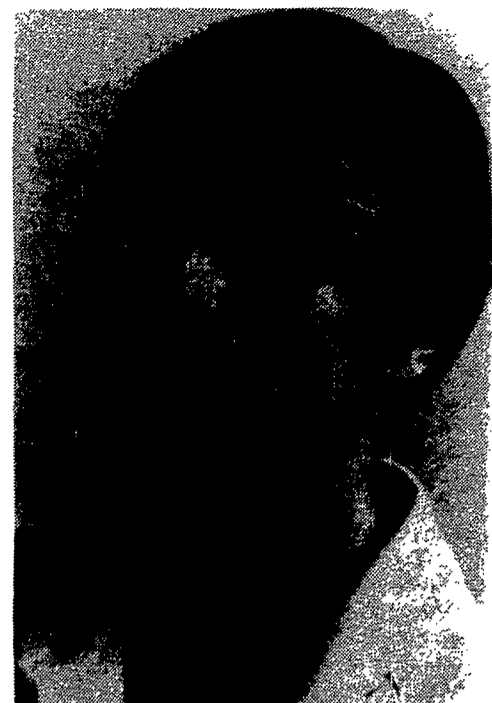
Currently, parishes support 60 percent of the budget, while the parents cover 40 percent through tuition. Whatever is not collected must be made up through fund-raising efforts, Miranda said.

Father Daniel Holland, pastor of St. Patrick's Church, would like to see an equal split between the parish and parent share of the cost per student. In comparison with the rest of the diocesan elementary schools, tuition for the Elmira system is in the lowest quarter.

Another question Father Holland wants the five-year plan to address is whether St. Mary Our Mother in Horseheads will rejoin the county system. That will also depend on their five-year educational outlook, he said.



Sister Patricia Carroll



Sister Ann Carapella

One change has already been approved by the board. In a 5-4 vote at their June meeting, members approved an amendment to switch to an enrollment-based parish assessment. If this plan is implemented, the parishes will pay for the number of students each has enrolled over a given year.

Father Holland labels the original system inequitable. "Parishes with less kids in the system and smaller parishes wind up paying for the bigger ones," he said, adding that St. Patrick's is medium-sized.

Parishes with low enrollments may breathe a sigh of relief with the new system, but Thomas Curren pointed out that an enrollment-based assessment can create an incentive for parish leaders to discourage parents from sending their children to Catholic schools. Faced with their own budget problems, pastors may be tempted to lower their parish's assessment by reducing the number of students. In fact, Curren claims that has already happened in the name of "clearing the dead wood from the system. It's blatantly unfair to the parents and to the whole system to have pastors undermining the work that's been done," Curren said.

"The Catholic Church should be the last institution that should tax people for the amount of children they have," he said of the new assessment plan.

One of the requirements for admission to the school system is a letter from the pastor of the parish to which a child's parents belong. Originally, this was included in the plan to prevent families from moving to parishes where the assessment was more favorable.

To qualify for the 60 percent parish subsidy, parents must be registered, contributing members of a parish. "That's a requirement that's been firmly supported by all the pastors," Father Holland said. Those families that do not meet this requirement can get their children into the system, but they must bear the full cost of tuition.

Some additional financial demands have recently come to light that the school board subcommittee must consider in its five-year plan. New York State requires that elementary public school graduates earn a passing grade in a language program. To be competitive, Miranda said, Catholic schools must consider broadening their own language program.

Likewise, the July 1 Supreme Court decision prohibiting public school employees from working at private school sites will affect the Chemung County system, which used three public school employees as part-time aides last year.

Despite its problems, most of the people involved with the Chemung County system believe consolidation has worked and will continue as a model program.

"I think it has saved the Catholic school system here and it's been an excellent educational setup," said Sister Ann. "I really don't think there's anything equal to it in the diocese."

"We're just at another milestone of change now," Sister Patricia added.

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