

Geneva schools create new tradition from best of the old

By Teresa A. Parsons

When school opens this fall in Geneva, it truly will be one "school." In the final step of a four-year consolidation process, St. Francis DeSales/St. Stephen's schools will combine their 100-year-old traditions and more than 300 students under one roof.

Geneva's version of consolidation is remarkable because most people have accepted it as unremarkable by now. Somehow, most of the emotional conflict of closing a school building has cooled to nostalgia.

"I have to admit, I was against it at the beginning," said Linda Balsley, a parent of two daughters who attended St. Francis, and wife of an alumnus. "I loved our building dearly. I remember what struck me the first time I went in there was the atmosphere — this air of quiet discipline."

Her husband, Ed, also felt an immediate negative reaction, but looking back, he calls it the purely emotional response of a life-long parishioner and graduate of the school. "I believe personally that its the best thing for the kids," he said.

Declining enrollment in both elementary schools and rising costs prompted school officials to consider actions that would keep Catholic elementary schools a competitive alternative in Geneva. Until 1981, St. Francis DeSales was home to pre-school through grade eight, and St. Stephen's offered kindergarten through grade eight.

In September 1981, the first phase of consolidation began when pre-school to fifth grade moved to St. Francis, and St. Stephen's buildings were devoted to grades six through eight. Although the school boards then combined, for the next three years the schools were administered separately by two principals.

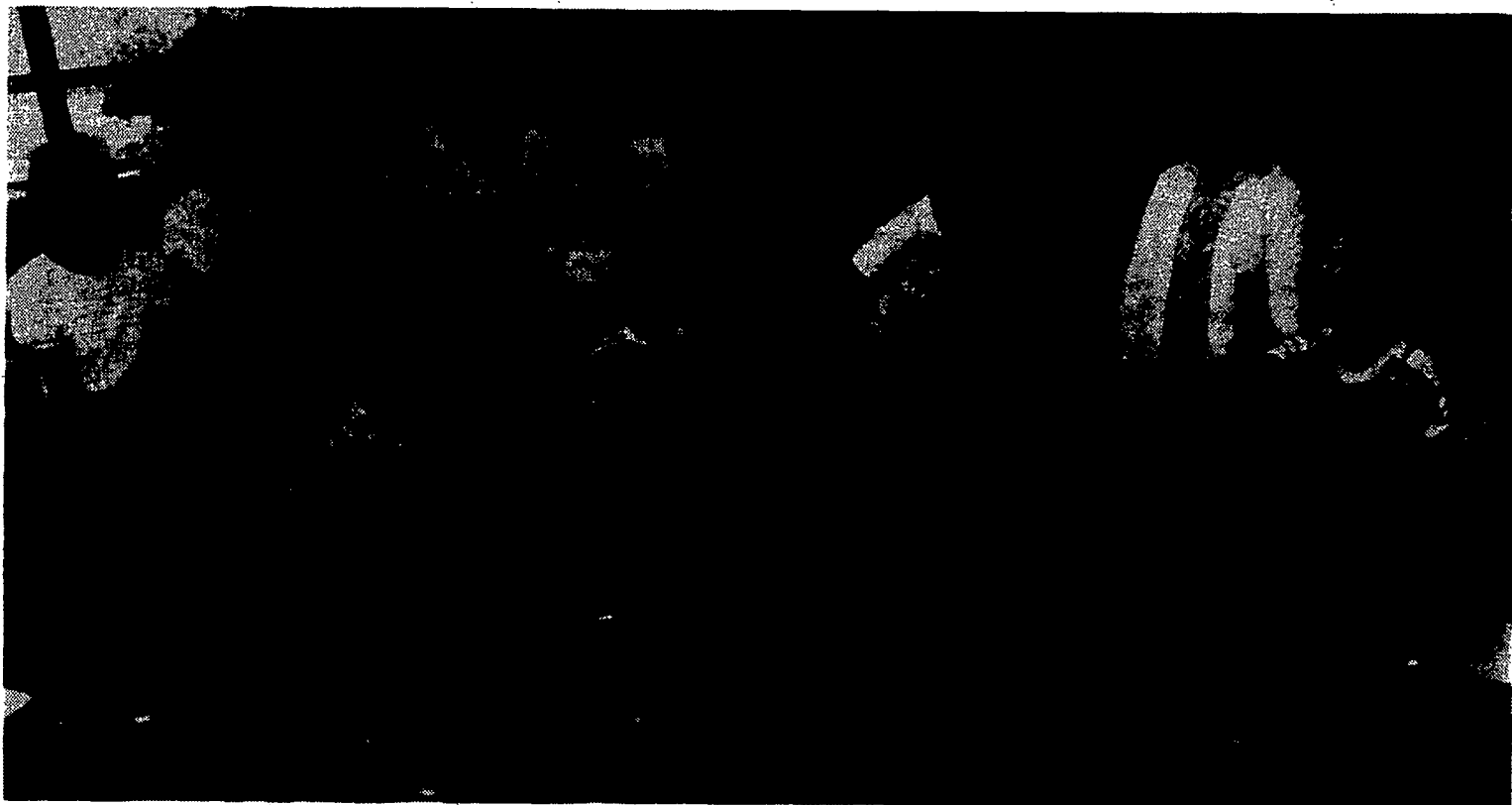
Phase II involved the moving of grades four and five to St. Stephen's in 1984 and the unification of both schools under one principal, Sister Kathleen Klier. Even then, the possibility of moving the entire program into one building was being considered.

During the 1984-85 school year, studies were conducted on the options available for building use, including the physical layout, enrollment, finances and educational plans. Ed Balsley, a member of the subcommittee that carried out the study, said that the location of 60 percent of the student population in the St. Stephen's area was one factor in its favor, allowing possibly two bus routes to be eliminated. Despite a conviction that St. Francis' building is structurally better, he observed that St. Stephen's offers access to DeSales High School's gym, the pool at a nearby public intermediate school, and a playground. "It was really a very close decision ... It was the peripheral things that tipped the scales," Balsley said.

The decision to move the entire enrollment — pre-school to eighth grade — to the St. Stephen's building was then approved by both parish councils.

Some of the advantages are obvious, but parents agreed that the reason they found consolidation acceptable was their involvement in the process. Through a series of open school board meetings, bulletin updates, parish polls and orientation meetings, their views were solicited and heard.

Linda Balsley remembers clearly that her doubts about the process were erased during an information meeting for parents held at the school. "We met Sister Kathleen and saw the building, were introduced to the teachers, got to inspect the building, the textbooks, the whole program ... It was just beautiful.



Parents and students who will attend St. Francis DeSales/St. Stephen's consolidated school in Geneva this fall inspect a classroom with Sister Kathleen Klier, right. Parents, from left, are: Sandy Schading, Mary DeVaney, Coleen Sonntag, Linda Fischer. Children are: Katie and Michael DeVaney, Tom and Dan Sonntag, Joey Schading, and Winnie, Phillip and David Fischer.

"That's when I realized that we were really pooling all our assets, taking the best of both schools and putting that into one," she added. "I've been impressed by the very positive academic experience here, but it isn't just books. The children learn discipline and respect for one another ... it's that Christian atmosphere that makes a well-rounded, a whole person."

Financially, maintenance of one building should save money, especially since alternate uses have developed for the St. Francis building — the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry has moved to the second floor and Happiness House, a therapy and education program for children disabled by cerebral palsy, will occupy several rooms.

But if parishioners expect a windfall, they will be disappointed. The goal of school consolidation is not so much to spend less money as to spend it more effectively.

Both parents and the staff agree that daily interaction between age and grade levels will be good for all the children. Not only will children from the same families come and go to school together, but Sister Kathleen observed that older students are spurred on, especially in liturgies and prayer, by the unabashed enthusiasm of their younger counterparts. Helping teachers with younger classes gives the older children a sense of responsibility and at the same time gives the younger ones role models to look up to.

Coleen Sonntag and other parents were concerned that class size and teacher-student ratio would go higher. Sister Kathleen was especially aware of the need for individual attention in the primary grades and said that consequently the school will include two kindergarten and two first-grade classes. Enrollment in each of the higher grades is held to 30.

Unity under one roof will be a real boon to school staff and the quality of programs. Sister Kathleen and teachers of Spanish, art and music in particular have lived a nomad's existence between buildings in past years. So

far, Sister Kathleen said that only one teacher's position has been eliminated because of smaller class size.

Although the designing and moving stages of consolidation are finished, the joining of schools will continue to present challenges to the Catholic community in Geneva.

Monsignor Gerald Krieg, St. Stephen's pastor, pointed out that keeping both parishes actively involved in the life of the school will test pastoral leadership. Children will still take part in sacramental programs at their home parishes. But beyond that, he said, parishes must give all their members a feeling of ownership of the school to keep the system healthy.

"I have no apprehensions," Monsignor Krieg said. "People have continued to be generous. It's up to all of us to promote a sense of unity among the Catholic community in Geneva."

Characterizing the differences between parishes, the monsignor described St. Stephen's parishioners as primarily suburban and rural upper-middle class, and St. Francis' as a more urban and minority population. Their roots are different as well — St. Stephen's from Irish and German stock and St. Francis from Italian.

Probably the most biggest division between the communities lies in their long tradition of being friendly rivals. Many of the parents and even grandparents of children who will be classmates this fall grew up playing against one another on athletic teams.

"We used to have fun with that strong rivalry," recalled Linda Fischer, a St. Stephen's graduate, and now a parent of three. "But we all went to DeSales (High School) and eventually mingled."

"It's hardest on the senior citizens," Linda Balsley pointed out. "They've spent their whole lives working to keep their school and support it."

Only with time will St. Stephen/St. Francis School develop its own sense of school spirit

and unity. As that happens, members of both parishes hope that Geneva's Catholic community will become more unified and less parochial.

Efforts to ease the adjustment of consolidation have already begun that process at the parish and school levels. Parents got acquainted at meetings about consolidation. Liturgies, school programs, Catholic School Week celebrations and open houses began several years ago to draw together families of both parishes in Geneva and from surrounding towns.

Children, too, have had chances to get acquainted. At the end of last school year, children from St. Francis visited St. Stephen's for an ice cream social.

"It made my boys feel more comfortable about coming up after that," said Coleen Sonntag, a parent whose sons will enter first and fourth grades this year. "Now they're very excited."

Committee allocates tuition subsidy grants

Each year since 1974, the Diocese of Rochester has allocated funds to be given to families who are in need of help in paying Catholic school tuition.

The diocesan Tuition Subsidy Screening Committee has completed its work for the 1985-86 school year. It reviewed 861 applicants, giving 660 subsidy grants ranging from \$100 to \$600 to help pay tuition expenses. The committee received and distributed \$207,000 from the bishop's Thanks Giving Appeal and a challenge grant from the Marie C. and Joseph C. Wilson Foundation. The challenge grant was met by the Diocesan Foundation at \$15,000.

Committee members this year were: Sister Mary Louis Whalen, Jose Cruz, Mary Walker, Andrew Boone, Sister Nancy Kelly and Rose Boice. The chairwoman for both the high school and elementary school review committees is Sister Virginia Steinwachs.

NAZARETH HALL

100 Years of Tradition
A Caring Place

Private, Co-Educational Pre-School to Grade 8

Founded in 1884 by
the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester

For Information, Call
254-1925

180 Raines Park, Rochester, N.Y. 14613

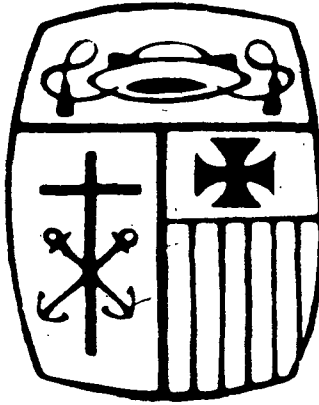
CARDINAL MOONEY HIGH SCHOOL

Quality Education —
Strong Faith Community

OPEN HOUSE

Thursday, Oct. 24 7:30

CATCH THE MOONEY SPIRIT!



800 Maiden Lane

865-1000