

Special Education continued from page 13A

Cross will be implementing an internal program for all but the severely disabled, many of the inherent problems in communication and transportation that were incurred by busing will be happily consigned to the past.

At Sacred Heart School, Sister Robertina Finegan will initiate a remediation program for intermediate through eighth grade students. The one-to-one counseling and tutorial program will be based on a successful program Sister Robertina operated in Elmira for a total of 13 years.

Although she hesitates to use the term "learning-disabled" because of the stigma many parents attach to it, Sister Robertina concedes to its widespread usage, at least for purposes of discussion. "Learning disabilities are a hindrance to the learning process," she asserts. "The student can't keep up with the class, and can't pass exams. The child becomes very discouraged and begins to dislike school."

Sacred Heart's program will be open to students who score below the 5th percentile on SAT tests, or below the state-mandated cut-off point for remediation on PEP tests. Sister Robertina will include some of her own diagnostic testing to determine exactly what type of disability each student has. Pupils accepted into the program will schedule regular appointments with Sister Robertina for remediation during school hours.

Students have often come into Sister Robertina's remediation sessions with poor self-images. "As soon as I show them that they can learn, they begin to work for me," she says. "I work with the teacher, the parent, and the principal. We send a permission slip home to parents, and periodically send home papers and progress reports, so the parents can see the improvement."

Sister Robertina works with slow learners, emotionally disturbed children, hyperactive children, and even slightly mentally retarded children, and find that most learning-disabled children have good to normal IQs. Although she has worked with such students in a group setting, she finds it less satisfying, "because each has a different problem, and they don't always work at the same rate.

And, too, children don't like their peers to know they have a problem. When they come to me, they're very open and relaxed. The one-to-one relationship is a protection for the child's own integrity. He can work more comfortably if he knows it's just going to be himself and the teacher. If he raises his hand in class, he doesn't know what the other children are going to say. Children can be very cruel to each other sometimes."

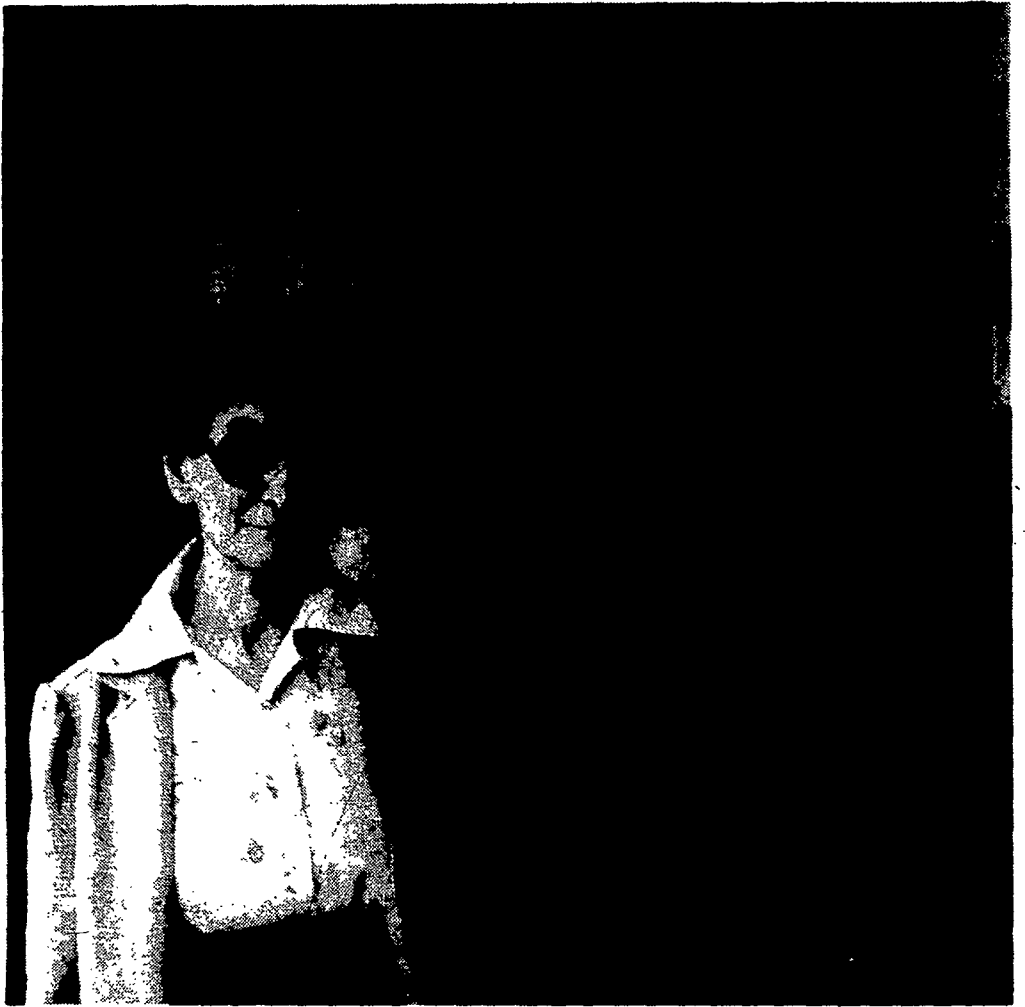
Professional opinions on such emotionally charged issues seem to diverge wildly at times. Such, however, is the nature of educating those with special learning needs. Neither Sister Diana Dolce nor Sister Caroline Knipper reports any difficulty in this sensitive area. At Nazareth Academy, according to Sister Diana, the kids are not being isolated or sent off by themselves, and they're all succeeding. At Holy Cross, says Sister Caroline, "we try to deal with each child as an individual, to build on his or her particular strengths, so teasing or ridicule by other children is not really a problem here."

Methods will always differ, but if the results add up to success, who is to say which strategy is best? Sister Robertina Finegan has developed what some might consider a rather unorthodox method for communicating with emotionally disturbed children, an exercise she will assure you she did not learn during her master's degree program at Fairfield University in Connecticut.

The secret of her success? "I play a game of checkers with them. It's a quiet game; I do it to calm them down. After we've played a game of checkers, I praise the child, and then try a worksheet. I've found it works very well. As he accomplishes this three times a week over a period of time, this gradually helps. It's the consistency that makes it work."

Occasionally, admits Sister Robertina, she lets the child win a game. "It seems to give them great confidence," she adds, with what you could almost swear was a surreptitious wink.

What more could a special education teacher ask than success?



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal
Sister Robertina Finegan hopes to have her elementary level special education program in operation at Sacred Heart School by the beginning of October.

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