

Consolidation plan criticized by Chemung County parents

By Teresa A. Parsons

Although they remain committed to the Chemung County Catholic School System, some parents are "gravely concerned" over a proposed five-year plan that would reorganize Elmira-area schools and close one school building. Reactions to the plan were described by representatives of each Elmira parish at a meeting of the Chemung County General Education Board, Thursday evening, Nov. 14, at St. Patrick's School.

Speaking for Our Lady of Lourdes' parish council, Dennis Fagan said: "Our position is to reaffirm our total commitment to the continuation, to the greatest possible extent, of the consolidated school system in Chemung County. However, with that commitment, we have grave concerns in regard to the successful implementation of the proposed consolidation plan. We feel that successful implementation of any plan requires significantly more parental input to the alternatives before final selection."

The five-year plan, developed by a long-range planning committee of the school board, suggests that the system's regional junior high program be moved to St. Casimir's School from St. Patrick's building, which would be closed. All primary students, pre-kindergarten through grade 3, would attend St. Mary's School and grades 4-6 would be relocated at Our Lady of Lourdes School. Currently, St. Casimir's, Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Mary's each include kindergarten or pre-kindergarten through grade six.

Although the board was scheduled to vote on the plan at its November meeting, that vote was postponed to December, pending further consideration by parish councils. When first officially presented to parents in September, the plan was received cautiously but favorably, school officials believed. Opposition eventually did emerge, however, coming to a head at October's school board meeting.

Although they recognize the need for changes in the system and agree that the plan should strengthen academic programs, representatives of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, including the pastor, Father Paul McCabe, termed parents' reaction to the plan "inconclusive." They are concerned that parents' opinions were not gauged carefully enough or soon enough. Too many parents were left out of the process of developing options and were given only one choice — the final plan, they say. As a result, Lourdes' representatives fear that those parents will withdraw their children. In the face of a large

unanticipated drop in enrollment, they claim, the plan would lose its validity since it is based on projected enrollment.

Last week a survey was taken of parents of children attending Our Lady of Lourdes School. Of the approximately 125 families, 88 families — or 70 percent — responded. When asked if they favored, opposed or were indifferent to the plan, 25 percent of respondents were in favor, 57 percent were opposed and 13 percent were indifferent. The remaining five percent gave no direct answer.

Of respondents who opposed the plan, 18 percent said they would not send their children to the school system if the new plan were implemented.

Although he conceded that the survey results were "hazy," Father McCabe said they revealed a "big blank" where parental reactions are concerned. "I think the board should give serious consideration (to the results) in terms of the red flags that are going up from it. Listen to what is being said," he urged.

Reaction from the other six parish representatives ranged from cautious optimism to resignation. St. Casimir's representative, Margaret Kroouze, reported concerns about busing, safety and finances, and said that no vote had yet been taken by the parish council. But she noted that her own children are bused to school without any problem. "I believe they are more sheltered on the bus than when they walked," she said.

Mary Lou Tangorre, St. Patrick's school board representative, reported that parish council members had contacted most parishioners by phone. Despite the plan's intent to close their building, Tangorre said that the general consensus was "it's OK if it's for the good of Catholic education in general in Elmira."

"The things I hear tonight I heard many years ago when I was on the board and fought the cause," said J. William O'Brien, the representative of St. Cecilia's Parish and a "pioneer" of consolidation in Elmira. St. Cecilia's was one of the first schools to be closed by consolidation.

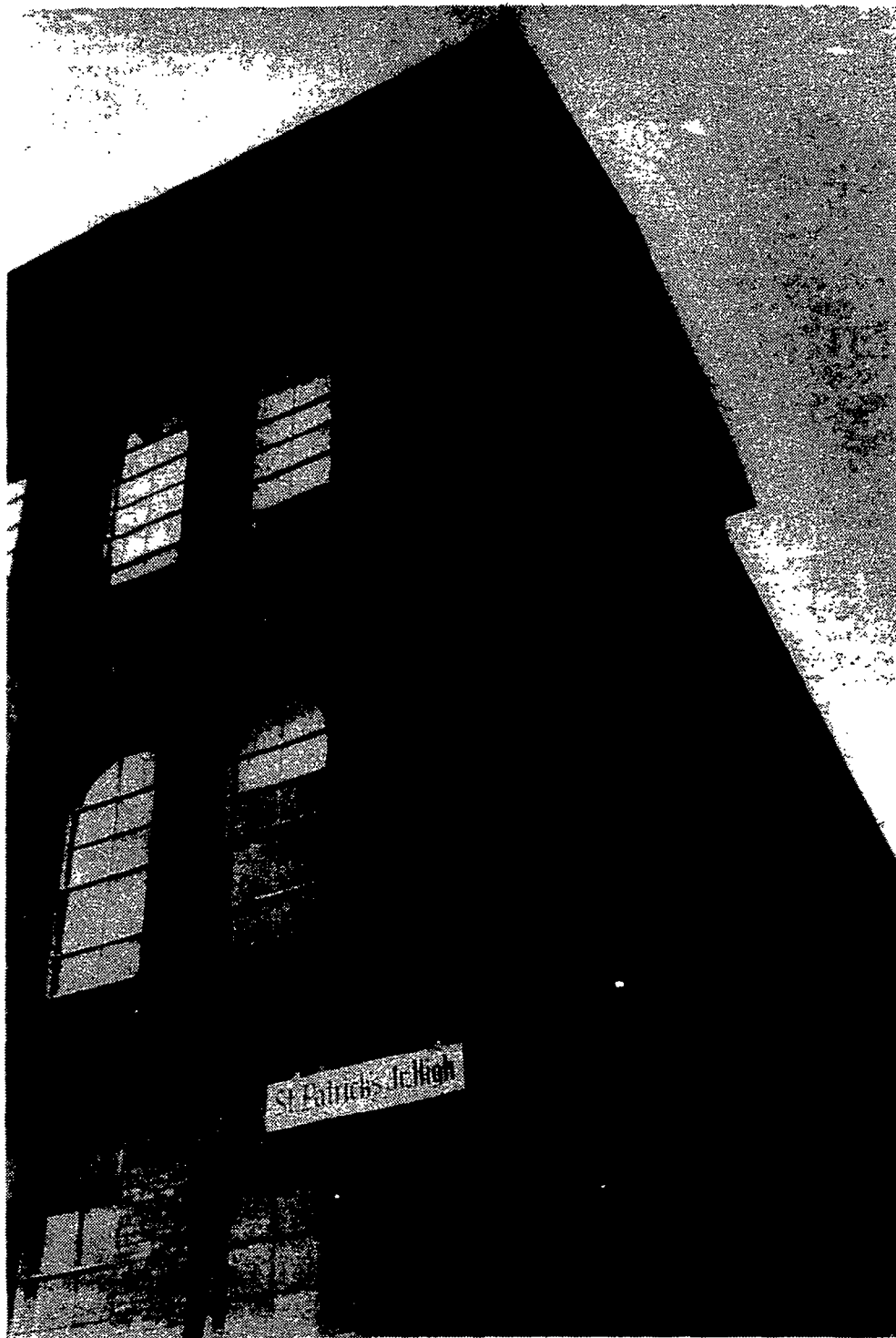
"We're interested in Catholic education and we have our differences, but we better settle down now and decide ... I think this is the best plan for our schools to survive," O'Brien added, receiving scattered applause from the crowd of about 30 people.

A resolution to one thorny question — that of parish assessments — was announced Thursday. The Elmira-area pastors have voted to accept the part of the five-year plan that calls for a 50:50 split between parish assessments and tuition/fund-raising efforts. The split would be implemented gradually, reaching the desired level by the 1989-90 school year. At present, parish assessments support 60 percent of the per pupil cost, while tuition and fund raising cover 40 percent.

The Lourdes' school board representative, Curran Sekella, moved that the long-range planning committee be required to present to the board all information on the options they considered. He then moved that a countywide survey of parents be undertaken. Neither of his motions was seconded.

Sister Patricia Carroll, principal of St. Patrick's Regional Junior High School, said that written surveys were taken at a parent information meeting on September 25 at Notre Dame High School. Any parent who wasn't at the meeting should have received a survey through the individual schools, she said.

Supporters of the five-year plan contend that consulting with, informing and reporting parents' reactions and suggestions was the job of each parish's school board representative. Jim Snyder, chairman of the long-range planning committee, also pointed



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

St. Patrick's School building would be closed if the Chemung County General Education Board approves a proposed five-year plan. The regional junior high program would continue at St. Casimir's School.

out that his committee was comprised of parents from each of the schools.

Some people are unaware of existing problems within the school system, including inconsistent class sizes and less than ideal use of resources, noted Sister Mary Maywalt, principal at Our Lady of Lourdes. While one school may have a very small class in a particular grade, another school may have too many children in the same grade. "That's just one example of the problems we face by being separate," she said.

Dennis Fagan, who has four children attending schools in the system, said that he is personally not opposed to the plan. But he recommends some further broadly based study of parents' reactions to the plan, whether by a survey or some other means. "Without conclusive evidence either way, you're taking a terrible gamble," he said. "I'd like to personally indicate that I will do everything for the plan's acceptance. With four children in the school system, with the high value I place on Catholic education, I will support any plan so that my children can experience a Catholic education."

Sister Roberta Tierney and Sister Anne Guerin from the diocesan Division of Educa-

tion attended Thursday's meeting, and Sister Roberta spoke briefly, urging those present to keep their common goals in mind — the continuity and stability of Catholic education.

Also present was Thomas Farstad, president of Elmira City School District Board of Education. The city school district is obliged to provide busing for primary students who live more than one mile from school and for older students living more than one and one-half miles from school. Children of all ages who must cross the Chemung River or the Clemens Center Parkway will also be bused, he said. The district will not begin to develop a specific busing plan until the Catholic school system has adopted a plan.

At the meeting's conclusion, the five-year plan was tabled for a vote at the board's next meeting, Thursday, December 12. A 6-3 margin is required for the measure to be approved; otherwise, it will be returned to the long-range planning committee.

If the plan is passed, it will then be submitted to the diocesan Division of Education and to Bishop Matthew H. Clark for approval. Officials still hope to implement the plan in the 1986-87 school year.

THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER



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