

Schools win confidence with promise of quality education

Believing in the dream: St. Anthony of Padua

If not for the promise of Our Lady of Good Counsel's new regional junior high program, the doors of St. Anthony of Padua School might be closed for good this week. That's what principal Frank Vaccaro believes.

"I don't know what we'd be doing without the opportunity at Good Counsel," he said. "It's really given us some hope."

For the past two years, St. Anthony's seventh and eighth grades have been combined because of low enrollment. Although Vaccaro noted certain advantages to that arrangement, combined grades did not allow for such options as foreign-language teachers and individual tracking of students with advanced placement and remedial programs.

"It's something we had to do," he said of relocating the seventh and eighth grades to Good Counsel. "Their program is 10 times better than what we could offer them here," he said.

At least for the first year, St. Anthony's



Frank Vaccaro

Parish will pay a relatively heavy price for participating in the regional junior high — more than supporting the extra grades has cost in past years.

"We're spending more, but we believe in the dream. So we're taking a risk to make it come true," Vaccaro explained. "There's more involved here than just these few schools. It's the whole thrust of Catholic education."

His faith in the new program has caught on among parents and students. Of St. Anthony's 26 sixth and seventh graders, 20 have so far registered at Good Counsel next year.

He even managed to recruit parents to recruit students. During registration, groups went door-to-door one day each week, handing out school brochures in English and Spanish. "We picked up three or four families that way," Vaccaro said.

Meanwhile, as this school year drew to a close last week, next year's junior high students were hovering between anticipation, nostalgia and apprehension.

"It's going to be a lot different," said Maria Gugliotta, a sixth grader. "It's big." Pablo Astudillo, a seventh grader, anticipates meeting new people and taking more interesting courses. "I like Catholic school," he said. "You do more things as a group to help other people. "But I've never been on a bus before," he added.

Busing was the objection that Gugliotta's parents cited when she discussed Good Counsel with them. "They said 'Don't you think it's a little far?'" she recalled. "I said 'It doesn't matter. I'll have to do it sooner or later.'"

To further reassure parents about the bus trip, Vaccaro rented a small bus and drove them along the route a city school bus would most likely travel. There, parents as well as students met with students, teachers and the principal at Good Counsel.

Sally Seaver, for one, was convinced. "Those of us who decided to send our children there are enthused," she said. "I don't figure it's that far away. I really think it's going to work out well!"

Vaccaro emphasizes that the leave taking will not be final. "I don't really feel like we're losing the junior high," he said. "They're being brought there, not sent."

He has taken an active part in organizing the new junior high program, from curriculum planning to recruitment. Next year, he plans to continue that involvement by serving as a liaison between parent groups and administrators at Good Counsel.

Because St. Anthony's School only has nine classrooms, the space left by the seventh and eighth grades opens the way for several new programs.

Vaccaro plans to begin an afterschool program next year as well as a preschool story hour. The following fall he hopes to introduce a preschool. "This way, we can meet increasing needs in the neighborhood," he said.

Keeping spirits high at St. Anthony's has also concerned Vaccaro. "The question of whether we were staying open or not eroded morale somewhat among the teachers, especially when they saw me spending so much time at Good Counsel," he said.

He hopes that the school's new initiatives, along with plans to choose a new uniform, will serve as a sign that "we're investing here — we're not shutting down, little by little."



St. Philip Neri trusts 'tried, true' program

Boxes of books and instructional materials were scattered throughout the halls of St. Philip Neri School last week. Many — marked to be sent to Blessed Sacrament Regional Junior High School — will precede sixth and seventh graders, who will make the same move next fall.

Because they're entering what she terms "a tried and true" program, Sister Mary Smith, SSND, St. Philip's principal, has few reservations.

"I'm very excited for our youngsters," she said. "A school our size doesn't give them enough other youngsters to interact with. The program there will be more specialized. . . I am very impressed with the teachers, and Sister Elizabeth (Snyder) is really marvelous with that age group."

While not in desperate straits, St. Philip's was faced with a sixth grade in which only 12 students were enrolled for next year. At the same time, the school has a waiting list of

students for kindergarten and some of the primary grades.

That's because, like many other city neighborhoods, the Clifford Avenue area is one in which families typically purchase "starter homes." By the time children reach the fifth- or sixth-grade level, families are often ready to move to larger homes in the suburbs.

Over the years, the school has also become increasingly neighborhood-oriented and less parish-oriented as the number of parish children has dwindled.

Together, these trends indicated a change. According to the diocesan urban elementary-school plan, part of the answer was to send seventh and eighth grades to a regional junior high school.

"Eight or 10 years ago, we would've had a battle," Sister Mary said. "But we've been talking about merging grades for some time now. . . We've had very little negative response."

Initially, Sister Mary recalled, some of the students were upset at the prospect of not graduating from the school they have attended since kindergarten. Some parents were also apprehensive about their children being bused outside the neighborhood.

But to date, 28 of 32 students eligible to attend Blessed Sacrament have opted to do so. For many, the deciding factor was a visit to the school.

"I didn't really think I'd like it at first," recalled Veronica Perry, a seventh grader. "I thought I wouldn't mix in with the kids there. But they acted really nice — like they would be happy when we get there."

Perry was equally impressed with the teachers, the gym facilities and the opportunity to participate in student government. So she convinced her parents to send her there rather than to East High School as they had planned.

More freedom was the drawing card for Donna Bonnell, also a seventh grader. "With the little kids around, your privileges are limited," she observed.

"Like there (Blessed Sacrament), the teachers don't have to escort you in the halls," added Audrey White, a sixth grader. "You can be treated like you act."

Seventh grader Gina Favitta chose East High School instead, in part because of the school's honors program. "I know a lot of people there, and I like the size," she said.

Although she admits the older students will be missed next year, Sister Mary is enthusiastic about plans for St. Philip's next year. The library, which has been located in the basement, will be moved upstairs. The school will also begin a preschool.

No teachers will be lost, thanks to a vacancy in the third grade and the new preschool program.

Some questions still remain unanswered — among them what participation in the regional junior high will cost the parish as compared to past years; what busing arrangement the city school district will provide in August; and how steady enrollment will remain between now and the fall.

But so long as parents remain open to the possibilities of the new arrangement, Sister Mary is optimistic. "I keep reminding everyone it will be as good and maybe better next year, but it will not be the same," she said.



Sr. Mary Smith

School plan

Continued from Page 1

finance, marketing, school certification and Hispanic needs. Among their most pressing goals is designing a communication process to keep the wider Catholic community informed of their progress.

"What I see on the committee is a very good cross-section of people, all willing to work," Schramm said. "The groups that have met have identified the problems that need to be addressed."

"It's a good step in the right direction," she added.

To date, task forces on financial reform and

school certification have met. A third task force on multicultural programming is just being formed. At the local level, regional planning clusters in the east, west and northeast areas of the city have been meeting regularly.

Meanwhile, two regional junior high schools described in the plan are set to open their doors this fall. Blessed Sacrament has enrolled more than 130 students, including seventh and eighth graders from St. Boniface and St. Philip Neri schools. Our Lady of Good Counsel will welcome 63 junior high students next year, including seventh and eighth graders from St. Anthony of Padua.

Of immediate concern to East- and West-side clusters is participation in the regional junior high schools and related issues such as

busing and tuition.

Schools meeting in the Eastside planning cluster include Blessed Sacrament, St. John's, St. Philip Neri, Saint Boniface and Corpus Christi. On the Westside, representatives of Our Lady of Good Counsel, St. Monica's, St. Anthony's, Holy Apostle/Holy Family and St. Augustine's are participating.

Representatives from 12 urban and suburban schools are meeting in the Northeast planning cluster.

All three clusters are focusing on long-term planning to improve curriculum, and to cope with declining enrollment and rising costs.

For several of the urban schools, surviving through the next year is the most immediate concern.

"Some schools are at the critical point, while others have a year or two," said Sheila Miller, principal of Annunciation School and a member of the Northeast planning cluster.

Those counting on concrete results from the diocesan plan this year are likely to be disappointed. So far, the implementation committee has adhered closely to the plan released February 3 of this year. Neither the task forces nor the planning clusters are expected to issue formal recommendations before the end of 1986.

Cuts to the education division's budget will also slow down some aspects of the plan — marketing in particular. Diocesan officials abandoned plans to use outside consultants in developing an overall strategy for marketing Catholic schools. They have also dropped the contract with the Center for Governmental Research, which developed the Urban School Study.

"We're working independent of professional consultants, which gives the staff here more to do," said Sister Roberta Tierney, director of

th diocesan Division of Education. Some people have requested action sooner, but Sister Roberta has preferred to remain loyal to the plan and not to "shake the system."

Possibly, she said, recommendations from the committee on financial reform may begin to help some of the schools immediately.

"This will be a rough year for some schools," she said. "But they don't have a firm direction yet. I know they'll have to have one by the middle of next year."

Despite the slower pace and lack of specifics, Sister Roberta believes this is a productive period in the process.

"We are going on without some of the emotion of the introductory period. It's an opportunity for some creative thinking," she explained. "The document has life in it."

From its initiation last September, the Urban School Study was greeted with widespread suspicion and emotional responses. But as the study has developed into a plan and the plan has slowly been translated into actions, feelings have cooled. Meanwhile, the involvement prompted by those feelings has begun to bear fruit.

"It brought a lot of people out of the woodwork," Schramm explained. "Out of the anger and out of the hurt, I've seen a lot of growth on both sides — diocese and parish."

Schramm points to greater sensitivity on the part of diocesan officials as one sign of that growth. At the local level, she sees more awareness of diocesan limitations "to bail us out."

"We are doing things that never have been done before," Schramm said. "We have to accept that there are going to be mistakes."

"There's still life, and where there's life, there's hope. . . I believe we really and truly can have an alternative school system that is affordable and excellent," she said.

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