

Bath school faces hard choices in make-or-break year

By Teresa A. Parsons
Catholic education in Bath is at a crossroads.

A combination of declining enrollment, rising costs, and a changing parish base indicate that 1986 will be a make-or-break year for St. Mary's School there.

Numbers tell the story. Twenty years ago, more than 250 students passed through the building's doors on the opening day of school. For the 1986/87 academic year, only 63 children have been enrolled for kindergarten through grade six. That means St. Mary's cost per pupil this year will be \$2,100 — a figure the pastor, Father Albert Ryan, describes as "far, far above Monroe County costs."

"Catholic education for Bath is reaching a point where it is no longer affordable, unless God intervenes with some unforeseen means," Father Ryan said.

St. Mary's barely survived a parish finance committee vote last January that favored closing the school.

Diocesan officials intervened and suggested several alternatives. But parents and parishioners alike are left wondering if the school is worth the price.

"It's a hardship if you look at it in the terms that we're not providing similar services for others — the older youth, adults and senior citizens," explained George Vogel, a finance committee member. "When you ignore the senior citizens who built and paid for that school for 25 years, it's a gross inequity."

One believer is Gayle Bryson, an alumna of St. Mary's and a public school teacher. Bryson, a Bath native, sent her son to the school for a value-centered education she believes is lacking in the public school system.

"I feel there is no moral structure in our society anymore. Teachers in the public schools can't teach values. There's a major falling away from basic rights and wrongs," she said. "A Catholic school provides a certain way of life and values. That teaching will always be with him."

Although she has been a member of St. Mary's school board for the past year, Bryson said she was surprised and taken aback at the notion of closing the school. "I really did not realize what dire straits the school was in. I go to Mass every Sunday, listen to the sermons, read the bulletin. But until the bomb was dropped last year, I didn't realize what was going on."

Vogel believes that if parents were unaware of the school's predicament, they ignored obvious signs.

"They had to know the teacher's salaries needed to be paid," he said. "They didn't even bother to have a Home/School Association meeting last year until the whole thing of closing the school came up. I think they were totally disinterested."



Parents at St. Mary's in Bath are battling to save the school despite rising costs, declining enrollment and a changing parish base.

In addition to the Bath area, St. Mary's students are drawn from four surrounding school districts — Avoca, Hammondsport, Prattsburg and Savona. In theory, other Catholic parishes whose students attend St. Mary's provide financial support. But in practice, Father Ryan does not believe all the other parishes shoulder a fair share of the burden.

"Some parishes send tuition subsidies in, and we're still waiting for others from last year," he said.

Part of its problem is that St. Mary's opened only 25 years ago. "Adult natives never benefited from its opportunities. People moving in from outside appreciate a Catholic education," Father Ryan said.

"Our parish has a heavy load of older people living on fixed incomes. They don't see an advantage to Catholic education with so small an enrollment."

"My people here are very generous. They will respond to a need. But I think in Bath, they legitimately question the need," he added.

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Father Albert Ryan

Bryson agreed that the school's enrollment is a "sore point."

"Father Ryan feels the elderly are being left out in the cold. I can see his point . . . We have been told that many parishioners don't want to support the school anymore," she said. "But the parish's future lies in the hands of youth and young adults who are served by the school."

For most of its students, St. Mary's is the only alternative to the public schools. The nearest Catholic school to the Brysons is in Corning — a 20-minute drive away. Without public school district busing, however, the distance would be prohibitive.

"You close an option if you close it. We're cut off," Bryson said. "It seems to be one more way to lose the children. It's a high price to pay, but it is 60 more children we're reaching."

Parents are attempting to meet rising costs with a number of measures. Tuition was raised by \$100 to \$700 per student. To provide greater financial stability, the school has asked parents to sign a detailed payment plan.

For the first time, the school board has formed a budget committee. The Home/School Association, meanwhile, has committed to meeting 33 percent of the school's budget with fund raisers. "We're trying to come up with ideas that are big money makers but that require a minimum of money and time," Bryson said.

Concerned parents have also mounted a drive to recruit more students. But although several new families have enrolled, several others have left, either for financial reasons or because they have moved.

"In a consultative capacity, diocesan officials have been very helpful," Father Ryan said. "For one thing, they tempered the upheaval we were going through at the idea of closing."

Diocesan officials also encouraged the parish to establish a parish council and sent diocesan building manager Jim Magee to Bath to investigate energy-saving measures for the school.

But Father Ryan doesn't believe the diocese should be responsible for paying the price for maintaining the school. Instead, he adheres to the old-fashioned principle that "you can't

have what you can't afford.

"I was brought up in a family that was poor. If we couldn't pay for something, then we couldn't have it," he said.

"It's something we just have to live with. You have to recognize the fact that parents of students today are part of that sociological revolution in the U.S. when values went out the window in many cases. Many of them are of the 'gimmee generation' that doesn't want to pay their way," he said.

Some parents of students at St. Mary's are "cultural" rather than active Catholics, he explained. "This is not a blanket statement, but it certainly applies to some . . . They are sending their children to Catholic school, not for reasons of faith, but because it is a private school with smaller classes and better educational quality."

Rather than continuing to pour money into the school, Father Ryan would like to build other parish programs. "The need today is not for parochial schools, but for total family education programs and a strong religious education program," he said. "I'm not saying that parochial schools should not exist anymore. I spent 20 years as a student in Catholic schools. I know the value of a good Catholic education and I would like everyone to have the same opportunity I had, but with the changes in society, it may be impossible."

"To change with the times, I think that we need to look more carefully at the advantages of adult education and strong youth ministry, in addition to or in lieu of a parochial school," he added.

Father Ryan sees few prospects for additional funding, short of government tuition subsidies. "I hope that the parents can come through with adequate means and keep the school going," he said.

But Vogel termed the prospects for small-town Catholic education in general as "not terribly promising."

"I'm not saying it can't be done. These people have come a long way since last year . . . But if they don't all get behind it, I don't think a few of them can do it, as much as they try," he said.

St. Monica's schedules festival to benefit scholarship fund

Local personalities, bargains, food and live music will be featured at St. Monica's School "Sponsor-A-Child" festival Saturday, August 23, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

WDXR-Radio will broadcast live from the school, 831 Genesee St. The day-long event will also include a garage sale and barbecue dinners and hot dogs, courtesy of Eddie's Chick-

en Coop.

Anyone interested in renting a table for the garage sale should contact the school office, (716) 235-4140.

Proceeds will go to a scholarship fund for St. Monica's students. Chairmen of the event are Howie Meath and John Mitchell.

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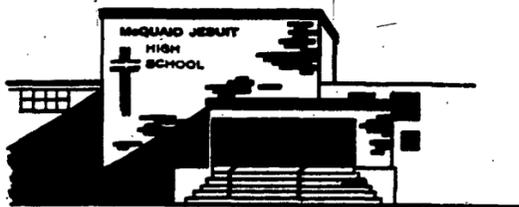
McQuaid is a college preparatory school, grades 8 to 12, with extensive programs in academics, athletics, and activities. Boys of all faiths are admitted. Requirements for acceptance include a "C" average or better and a satisfactory performance on the diocesan entrance test.

From a student... "McQuaid's strength lies in a staff, faculty and administration that takes an interest in individual students, in their classroom education, and beyond that in helping us discover something about people and how to deal with them, and to discover something for ourselves about God."

From an alumnus... "I feel that my training was a much greater influence in the formation of my values than was my college education. McQuaid made me think for myself and enabled me to see God in myself and others."

From a parent... "We very much appreciate that you know where your students are and the progress they are or are not making. Also, we like the fact that certain things are expected of them which they must do. My son has developed excellent study habits, an interest in learning, but more importantly, he is developing a good set of Christian values."

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