

# Grade school program aims to master educational deficits

By Karen M. Franz

The Regents' Action Plan has had marked effects on secondary education in New York State. High schools from Long Island to Buffalo are busily modifying existing programs and adding courses to prepare students for rigorous new competency exams imposed by the state Board of Regents.

Obviously, these changes are just down the road for today's elementary-school students. But some of these children — a group somewhat ambiguously defined as slow learners — are already feeling the ramifications of the plan.

Each day, these children fall further behind their peers. By the time they reach high school, some will be so far behind that four years won't be enough time for them to catch up.

"We're going to start to see five years of high school, six years of high school," laments Sister Diana Dolce.

"The high schools are starting to ask, 'What are we going to do if the grammar schools don't do something?'" Sister Jeanne Marie Day adds.

A partial solution is provided by the Fundamental Learning Skills Program the two Sisters of St. Joseph initiated at Nazareth Academy in 1977. The FLS program is based on the "mastery learning" technique. Coursework is divided into small learning tasks, and students are tested after each new unit of material is presented. They do not move on to new material until they achieve 85 percent mastery of the initial task.

Nazareth's FLS students have made remarkable progress, and the program has received national recognition. But as course requirements increase at the high school level, teachers have less and less time to go back and help students master material they missed years ago.

And for boys, the situation is even more grave. No coeducational or all-boys high school in this area — public or private — has a program specifically geared to slow learners.

For some time, Sister Ann Collins, principal

of Irondequoit's St. Ambrose School, has been frustrated by the inability of traditional Catholic grammar schools to help these children. "Mostly these are kids who have fallen between the cracks," she explains. "They find it difficult to function here, but their parents want to keep them in a Catholic school."

"If everyone takes the Regents' Action Plan to heart and the state stays with it ... it's going to be very difficult," she says.

After exploring a variety of different avenues — remedial classes and "pull-out" work in resource rooms — Sister Ann turned to Sisters Diana and Jeanne Marie. The result is the establishment this fall of a mastery learning program for St. Ambrose students in grades five through eight.

Sister Ann says these four grade levels were selected for the program because of curriculum changes that occur at this level. In the early grades, when course content is light, slow learners manage to keep up. But, "suddenly, in fourth or fifth grade, when the content becomes heavier, we have to put more on paper and require more writing skills. Departmentalization comes in, and it becomes harder for them to keep up," she observes.

Competency exams at the academy confirm this level as the point at which the educational gap begins. "The testing at Nazareth shows that the (FLS students') learning broke down at the fourth grade," Sister Jeanne Marie says.

The St. Ambrose program will be basically the same as Nazareth's nine-year-old FLS program. And — through a bit of schedule juggling at the academy — Sisters Diana and Jeanne Marie will be teaching the history and science classes, respectively. Two St. Ambrose teachers have been trained in the mastery technique to complete the curriculum.

"A lot of the bugs are already worked out," Sister Diana notes, "and two people (herself and Sister Jeanne Marie) are already well-trained."

Participants will attend mastery learning classes only in the morning, while other students are also changing classes. They will



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal  
Sister Jeanne Marie Day looks on as Daniel Walters of St. Ambrose Parish (front) and Kim Larsen of St. James work on math problems. The two students will be participants in St. Ambrose's Mastery Learning program this fall.

return to regular classes for homeroom, religion and other subjects.

The three sisters believe this schedule will make the special classes less noticeable and minimize any stigma that might be attached to them. Success in the program will also make its participants less sensitive to whatever ridicule might occur.

"As soon as our kids (at Nazareth) start succeeding, they don't care" about ridicule, Sister Jeanne Marie explains. "Success compounds itself."

When the program was approved by the St.

Ambrose School Board and the parish Finance Committee, Sister Ann contacted the parents of likely participants and invited both parents and children to a meeting with Sisters Diana and Jeanne Marie. All three sisters agree that the children and their parents were very enthusiastic about the program.

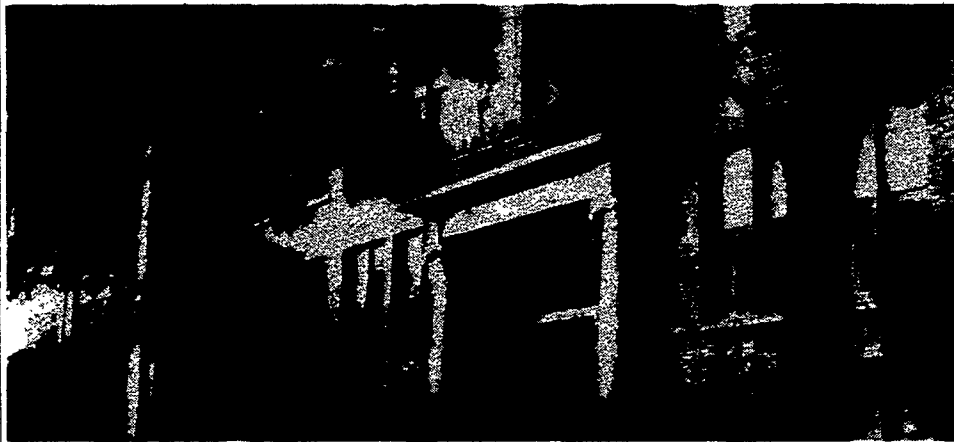
The sisters observe that slow learners often fail to understand why they are different from their peers and begin to blame themselves. They flounder in traditional classes, eventually tiring of the struggle to keep up. Frequent-

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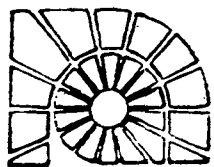
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