

Regional junior highs respond to demands of action plan

By Teresa Parsons

On November 16, 1984, the New York State Board of Regents introduced its new action plan for junior high education.

Already, the plan has profoundly affected junior high programs throughout the diocese. The plan is not required by law for non-public schools. Yet competition, both in recruitment and in preparing students for high school, has prompted Catholic schools to respond quickly.

This fall, two new regional junior high schools will open in the Rochester area — Seion Junior High School in Brighton and Our Lady of Good Counsel on the city's west side.

Meanwhile, enrollment is higher than at any point in at least three years at Blessed Sacrament Regional Junior High School, established in 1973.

And in Elmira, Holy Family Junior High School, the first regional junior high program in the diocese, will continue to break ground with a new building and a number of innovative programs.

In line with the Regents' plan, all four regional junior highs plan to offer additional programs in foreign languages, computers and technology, library and research skills, as well as art and music.

As part of a new consolidation, the Chemung County Catholic School System renamed its schools "Holy Family" and relocated the junior high from St. Patrick's building in downtown Elmira to St. Casimir's school building on the city's north side.

The new Holy Family Junior High boasts an auditorium as well as a gym, cafeteria, science lab, art room, chapel and music area. Parents and volunteers are also building a library/resource/computer room.

"We'll probably be finishing up as the kids walk in the door," said Sister Patricia Carroll, principal. "But it will be very much a junior high."

In Elmira, seventh and eighth grades have been combined in a specialized program since 1971/72.

This year, Holy Family will also introduce "enrichment day." One day each week, classes will be separated into three divisions — honors, academic, and non-Regents or locals. Students will work in small groups, and teachers will experiment with team-teaching in such areas as language arts and math.

"It will be a homogeneous group during the regular week," Sister Patricia explained. "With this, we're hoping to better meet the needs of the talented and gifted student as well as those who need more intensive remedial work."

Sister Patricia has decided not to offer a foreign language to all Holy Family junior high students. Instead, she plans to schedule French five days a week for eighth grade honors students "who are very strong in their reading skills."

"We are still discussing it, but I feel that there are many students who still need that extra year of developmental reading before they go into an unstructured reading program in high school," she said.

As the school's first chaplain, Sister Deanna Gears will serve this year as counselor, resource person to religious education staff and as liaison between parents, pastors and school staff. "When you're trying to work with families and pastors from seven different parishes, sometimes that link can get lost," Sister Patricia said.



Bob Vanderpool, janitor at Holy Family Junior High, has been kept quite busy this summer with renovations to accommodate seventh and eighth graders. Here, he sweeps up the school's new computer room.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

For at least 10 years, seventh and eighth graders have been mixed together in homerooms. While the importance of homeroom assignments may not seem educationally significant, they comprise the social structure of the school at an age level when socialization is important.

"It has very much assisted in orientation," Sister Patricia pointed out. "There's not that adversary role that sometimes happens between the two classes."

As I see it, each teacher is sharing responsibility for the seventh and eighth grade," Sister Patricia said. "You eliminate that sort of caste outlook, that one class is better than the other. Both classes work together and, especially in the spring when there are so many activities, it helps to have the seventh grade involved."

The eighth grade also helps to plan and present orientation to the incoming seventh grade. "That way, what could be an eighth grade problem of harassing or picking on seventh graders is eliminated," she said. One of the big fears sixth graders express at the prospect of junior high is "that the older kids will pick on them. We have the eighth graders right there at orientation who can say that didn't happen," she said.

"It is an easier way to make discipline a

positive thing," she added, noting that groups of potential troublemakers can be separated when necessary.

Enrollment at Holy Family Junior High is currently 120, down 28 from last year. Sister Patricia attributes the drop to a lower-than-normal number of seventh grade students throughout the city. "Our percentage compared to the public school is the same, so the overall number of students is down," she explained. When the drop in enrollment became apparent, some staff members were cut. Because there are fewer students, "we still feel the program is very strong," she said.

Parts of Holy Family's program, along with proven ideas from Blessed Sacrament and other schools, are being incorporated into the new junior high at Our Lady of Good Counsel.

"Because of the importance of next year, that everybody will be watching to see what happens, we will stick to the diocesan curriculum and pull as much out of other people's programs as possible," said Thomas Bahr, principal.

Because Good Counsel is drawing students from St. Anthony of Padua and St. Augustine's, Bahr said he also will concentrate on building school spirit.

In addition to mixing seventh and eighth graders in homeroom, Good Counsel is the only regional junior high program that will continue to intermingle junior high and primary grades. "I've always been a believer in grade mixing," Bahr said. "When you put little kids with the older kids, their behavior and desire to help takes a giant leap. They love to be pretend mothers and fathers."

At Good Counsel, math and language arts classes will be offered at three levels — advanced, regular and locals. By the end of the year, Bahr said, students in all three groups will have covered the same amount of material. "There will be no difference in what they are going to learn, just in how fast they learn it," Bahr said.

Locals, for instance, will receive more individualized attention from teachers and will move at a more deliberate pace. Advanced students will do more individually oriented activities and study more practical applications to daily life.

Science lab activities will be increased this year. Both Spanish and French will be offered five days a week. Students will also have greater access to the school's computers. "All students will have computer time an average of once a day and a minimum of every other day," Bahr said.

Social justice activities have long been part of Good Counsel's religious education program. But this year, teachers and student council representatives are developing a formal social justice curriculum that will "permeate all subject areas," Bahr said.

Two of Good Counsel's teachers are planning a career-education curriculum for the eighth grade as well. In addition to speakers, the curriculum will offer such activities as setting up imaginary households and handling finances.

"This is an experimental program, but I can see it breaking down stereotypes," Bahr said. By bringing in people in non-traditional roles, such as female police officers or male nurses, the program would focus on social justice as well. "You're changing attitudes and prejudices," he said.

At Blessed Sacrament, this year's focus will be on incorporating new students into a well-established program.

"Our teachers are working together, planning strategy for breaking down barriers, crossing bridges — all those kinds of images that mean a lot to kids," said Sister Elizabeth Snyder, principal.

Seventh and eighth graders from St. Philip Neri and St. Boniface will attend Blessed Sacrament this fall, along with several students from St. Augustine's and transfers from the public schools. Enrollment is 129, which is close to what Sister Elizabeth expected.

Although the junior high program is well-established, Sister Elizabeth said the challenge is "not to become stagnant with the educational models we have."

"We are comfortable without being complacent. We have a fine faculty for this age level," she said. "We have no fear about whether it's going to work — we know it is."

During three days of orientation, Sister Elizabeth and the students will develop the school's basic rules for the year together. "We've found that if we involve students in the decision making, they have an investment in seeing that policies are kept," she explained.

Continued on Page 12A



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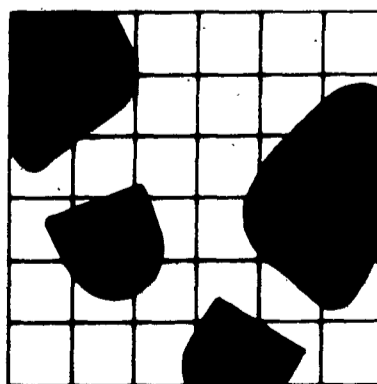
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