

Thanks Giving Appeal '86

For some diocesan families subsidies 'make the difference'

By Teresa A. Parsons

All over the diocese, there are people who can't afford the rising cost of Catholic education. They may be migrant families in Brockport or single parents in Auburn, large suburban families in Gates or unemployed parents in Rochester.

But many still send their children to Catholic schools, thanks to the diocesan tuition-subsidy program.

Introduced in the early 1970s along with the urban subsidy program, tuition subsidies were meant to help compensate for the closing of some inner-city Catholic schools by supporting the schools that survived.

From a low of \$15,000 in 1974, the amount budgeted for the program has increased more than 10 times to in excess of \$160,000. Nevertheless, it has not kept pace with the demand.

Once limited to Monroe County, tuition subsidies were this year spread among more than 50 of the 71 diocesan elementary schools and seven of the eight Catholic high schools, according to Sister Virginia Steinwachs, SSJ, diocesan assistant superintendent for urban education and administrator of the program. In the past five years alone, the number of applicants for subsidies has grown from 600 to nearly 900.

Meanwhile, sources of funding for the subsidy program have fluctuated from year to year. In 1984-85 and 1985-86, the Joseph and Marie C. Wilson Foundation granted almost \$90,000 to the subsidy program.

The Wilson grants, however, were intended as a temporary boost to attract funding from other sources. "They really wanted to make an impact for middle-income families," Sister Virginia said. "We're really not reaching them, and they are struggling."

Aside from an occasional urban subsidy grant, tuition subsidies remain the only Thanks Giving Appeal dollars directly channeled to parish schools. While tuition subsidy dollars were not reduced by last year's shortfall and subsequent budget cuts, they were not increased either.

Average tuition this year at diocesan elementary schools was \$730 per student in Rochester and Monroe County, and \$550 in Finger Lakes and Southern Tier-area schools. High school tuition averaged \$1,730 in Rochester and \$1,200 in other areas of the diocese.

Of this year's 889 applicants, more than 500 received subsidies which totaled \$165,520.

"That seems like a lot, but when you divide it among 71 schools... it really doesn't impact much," Sister Virginia said. "Every year we have schools added that did not take part before. If we had \$200,000 more, we could really make an impact."

In the absence of such a windfall, Sister Virginia has tried to make what money there is stretch as far as possible. Prior to 1984, for instance, tuition subsidies to inner city schools were as high as 80 percent of tuition, since urban school costs were among the highest and city families among the least able to meet them.

But because the subsidy funds "went very fast that way," Sister Virginia changed the policy, limiting the maximum subsidy to 50 percent of average tuition.

She has adjusted percentages in a given year to ensure that all eligible families receive subsidies. Last year, for example, elementary school families in Rochester and Monroe County rated "A" received \$300, or approximately 41 percent of average tuition. High school families with the same rating received \$600, or slightly more than 34 percent.

In other parts of the diocese, where tuitions are lower, A-rated families received \$450 or 37 percent of average high school tuition and \$250 or 45 percent for elementary school subsidies.

Applications for tuition subsidies are sent to schools in early March — the period in which most schools are registering students for the following year. Notices of the tuition subsidy program are also printed in local newspapers, bulletins and newsletters. "We do try to reach the population not attending Catholic churches," Sister Virginia said.

Principals are the first to screen applicants since, as Sister Virginia noted, "they know their families better than we do." They also help families collect the required documentation and complete the forms, which are due back to the diocesan office in early April.

Two committees — one for high schools and one for elementary schools — then meet weekly throughout April and May to review and grade the applications. A total of six volunteers judged to be impartial are appointed to the committees. Usually, these volunteers include principals, public school educators, and representatives of the business and minority communities.

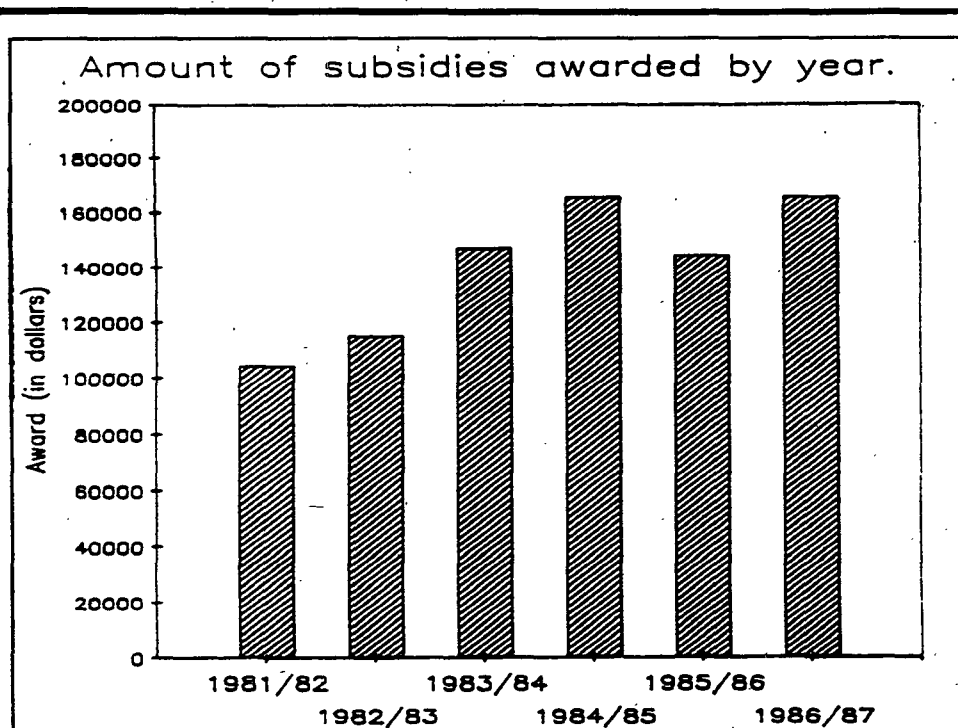
One criterion they consider is income. Rather than evaluating the overall family income, however, the committee looks at the total family income divided by the number of family members, including children under 18 and parents or guardians.

Applicants are rated as follows: A — families whose total income divides out to \$2,500 or less per family member receive a maximum of 40 percent of average tuition for high school or 50 percent for elementary school; B — families whose incomes equal \$2,500 to \$3,000 per family member receive 25 percent of average tuition for both high school and elementary schools; C — families whose income equals \$3,000 to \$3,500 per family member are placed on a waiting list pending availability of funds; D — subsidies are not granted, usually because either the families do not fit income guidelines or because their application was not complete.

Aside from income, committee members also consider factors such as parents' employment status or outstanding medical costs not covered by insurance.

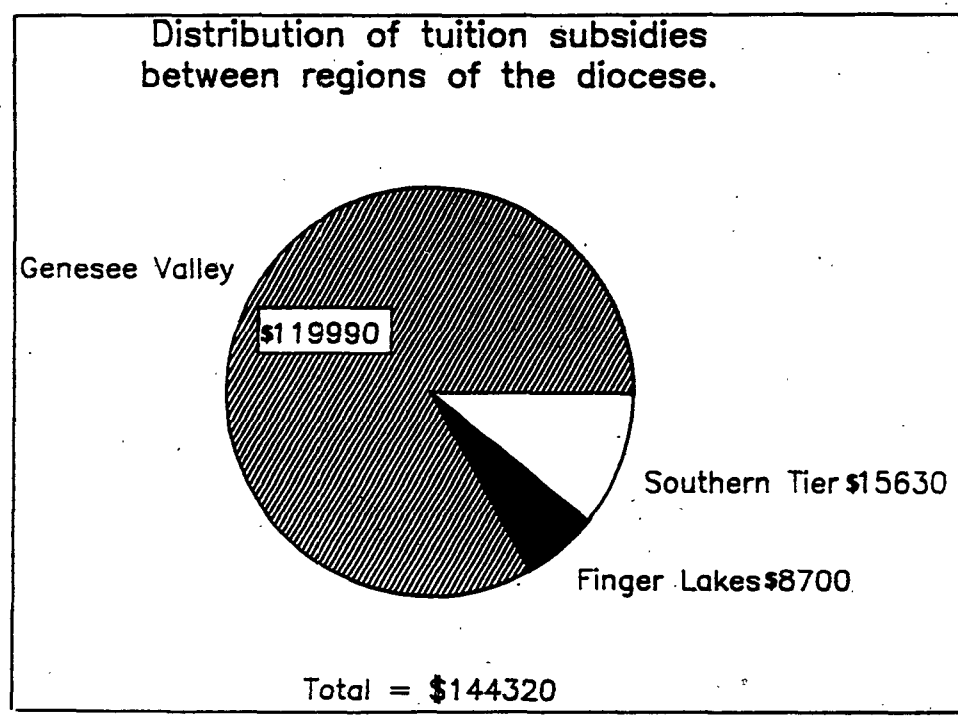
"We also look at what year the student is in. If, for instance, the youngster would need it (the subsidy) to finish high school, we take that into consideration," said Sister Mary Louis, who has been a member of the high school committee for the past five years.

One criterion that no longer counts is the student's academic performance. "We don't



ABOVE: The graph depicts dollar amounts allocated to the diocesan tuition subsidy program over the past six years. BELOW: The chart illustrates the distribution of subsidies to schools throughout the diocese during the 1985/86 school year.

Sarah Parsons



use that because the principal supposedly checks the application," Sister Mary Louis explained. "If the principal's signature is on that application, we take that as meaning the family is deserving of help."

Committee members rate each application individually, then compare their results and discuss cases in which their ratings vary. "In the main, we're pretty agreeable," Sister Mary Louis said. "You have to stick pretty closely to the criteria because that's all the money there is."

Some of the more than 300 families who don't qualify for diocesan help receive parish subsidies, which often pick up where diocesan subsidies leave off.

High schools have also traditionally matched diocesan subsidies with their own funds, distributing them among students who don't qualify for diocesan help.

But in other parishes, such as St. Mary's in Auburn, diocesan tuition subsidies are the only assistance consistently available to parents. "Some generous parishioners may walk in and say they want to donate either full or partial tuition, but that's something extra," said Sister Dorothy Meisenzahl, principal. "There is no other means for families other than the subsidy."

Even though the maximum subsidy is less than half of total tuition, Sister Margaret Mancuso, principal of Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary School in Brockport, called it

"definitely meaningful." "It is a big help even though it isn't even half," she said. "We have migrant children at school whose families received the subsidy, and they were very grateful."

Perhaps equally as important as the amount is the message of support the tuition subsidy sends. "I think it shows parents that as far as possible, the diocese is willing to help to the greatest extent it can, that it is interested in their welfare and that they (diocesan representatives) understand what people are going through for the sake of a Catholic education," Sister Mary Louis said.

Yet, every year Sister Virginia receives calls from principals and parents she cannot help — those whose circumstances changed dramatically after subsidies were awarded, who didn't know about the program, or who have simply fallen behind on tuition payments.

To meet such needs, Sister Virginia has applied to the diocesan urban subsidy program for money to create an emergency fund. In the long term, she hopes that the diocesan Catholic Foundation as well as corporations and private foundations will also provide more help.

"Our economy is changing drastically. I can't imagine that the demand for subsidies won't increase," she said. "I know we are going to have to find different ways of funding it for the future."

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