

# Schools try boosting enrollment with creative recruiting tactics

## Diocesan committee developing long-term marketing strategy

By Teresa A. Parsons

Two Catholic elementary schools were recruiting at the University of Rochester last week.

They were not looking for teachers, but for students.

Representatives from St. Anne and St. Thomas More Schools visited the university's day-care center last Thursday evening to offer a pitch for next year's class of preschoolers.

They found themselves going head-to-head with admissions officers from several other Rochester-area elementary schools. Some school representatives had admission forms that would have challenged the average college student. Others merely offered a slide show or brochure.

New recruiting efforts are only one sign of the aggressive competition that has developed at the elementary levels as both public and private schools struggle to maintain adequate enrollments.

Not very long ago, most Catholic elementary schools had waiting lists of students, and spring registration was little more than a formality.

Nowadays, registration time has become perhaps the single most critical time of the year for school communities trying to balance enrollment with projected tuition and budgets for the following year.

Most diocesan schools register students in February and March. Long before that, parent volunteers and administrators comb parish baptismal records and census data, seeking the names of prospective students.

For at least three years, St. Thomas More School in Pittsford has been sending birthday cards to potential students, beginning on their first birthday. When the children turn three, the school invites their parents to visit and consider St. Thomas preschool.

"These are relatively new measures, especially for (the east) side of the city," said Sister Kathleen Lurz, SSJ, principal at St. Thomas. "It is in response to declining enrollments, but we're also trying to add a caring touch that says this school cares about their child."

Parents from both St. Thomas More and St. Anne's, which is located on the city's southeast side, also distribute school brochures and posters in hospitals, doctor's offices, personnel offices and even stores.

"We're leaving them anywhere we think there might be a concentration of people who

are interested in a school for their children," explained Robert J. Edelman Jr., the principal at St. Anne's.

Thanks in part to such creative efforts, overall enrollment in the diocesan elementary-school system declined only 4 percent last year, a figure which diocesan school superintendent Brother Brian Walsh, CFC, termed "a manageable number."

He declined to name a specific goal for enrollment this year, but noted that very few schools could lose a significant number of families and not be affected.

Low enrollment is one of the factors that claimed St. Anthony of Padua School. Parish officials announced in January that they will not reopen the school next fall.

Brother Walsh doesn't anticipate any additional school closings in the coming year. But he noted that the implementation committee established by last year's Catholic elementary school plan for Rochester and Monroe County is likely to recommend further junior-high level consolidations to Bishop Matthew H. Clark later this month.

In the meantime, a freeze on school transfers within Monroe County remains in effect until March 1. Brother Walsh reinstated the freeze originally imposed last year by his predecessor, Sister M. Edwardine Weaver, to discourage parents from transferring their children in anticipation of the implementation committee's recommendations.

Variations in school tuition will remain a factor in school registration this year. Standardized tuition is one of the issues that eventually will be studied by the Financial Reform Task Force, which was established by last year's elementary school plan.

"Their task has turned out to be so huge that they have really not dealt with the issue yet," Brother Walsh said.

He noted that junior-high grades are one of the areas in which Catholic school enrollments have been hardest hit in recent years. Parents who are concerned about the new requirements of the New York State Regents' Action Plan are taking their children out of the Catholic school system after sixth grade.

In response, the diocesan education division is continuing to support regional junior-high school programs in Rochester, Brighton and Elmira.

The diocesan system also loses significant numbers of primary-level students from urban areas when young families purchase homes in the suburbs, where public school districts are often more highly regarded.

Several diocesan schools — including St. Monica's in Rochester, St. Helen's in Gates, and St. Mary Our Mother in Horseheads — last year recorded enrollment increases of 10

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Bishop Matthew H. Clark

# Along the Way

Thank you.

These are the words I want and need most to write first as I resume this column after my long retreat at Guelph.

I thank God for faithful and patient love during all of my years, for the continuing call God gives me to draw closer to Jesus in the power of the Spirit, for my ministry so precious to me because I live it among you, for the realization that God has loved me — and you — every moment we have existed and will never stop loving us.

Those thanks are not full unless they also include a word of gratitude to the many people in and through whom God has invited me to and supported me in this quest for deeper, freer life.

I cannot name everyone here, but please let me thank you from the bottom of my heart, not only for your prayers and sacrifices during my 40 days at Loyola House at Guelph, but for your strong support and encouragement of this venture for the many months you have known about it. There were many occasions during the retreat when the memory of all that kindness brought you deeply to my heart in prayer.

I thank the staff at Loyola House and the 31 retreatants with whom I shared the experience. Paul Dungan, SJ, walked with me through the retreat, and did so with skill, humor, and gracious kindness. The men and women to whom I grew so close in the silence of prayer were the Church for me there as you are for me here. We came closer to one another because we came closer to

Christ.

Finally, I want to thank Bishop Dennis Hickey and the many other women and men who so generously and ably did my work so that I could take the time to enjoy those wonderful days. That kindness reminds me of how much they do each day and how I need to thank them for that, too.

Beyond those words of thanks, dear friends, I find myself struggling with what to say to you about the experience of those 40 days. One reason is that the experience is quite powerful and deep, and I have trouble expressing it in interior words even for myself. A second reason is that much is still unfolding within me. I have a deep sense that God still has my heart on retreat, even though my body is back in the daily routine.

It may well be that I will write again about the fruits of the retreat itself, but I hope that the good things the Lord did for me through those days will emerge in many ways in what I write, in what I say, and in how I live that continuing grace.

If there is one central gift I carry in my heart from those days, it is a strong sense of how much God loves us. There is no more beautiful expression of that trusting love for us than the realization that he dwells within us and among us and calls us to be vessels of his mercy to one another every day.

Thanks again for your prayers. It's good to be back.  
Peace to all.

### Registration opens Monday for Most Precious Blood

Students may register for pre-kindergarten through grade 8 at Most Precious Blood School on Monday, March 2, from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Parents may also register their children during the week of February 23-27, between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. at the school office, 179 Stenson Street.

Parents will need a birth certificate, baptismal certificate and immunization papers for each child, as well as a copy of the

child's most recent report card (when possible).

Pre-kindergarten sessions are offered two mornings each week. An afternoon session may be added if enough students register.

Most Precious Blood School is located between the towns of Greece and Gates, both of which provide bus transportation.

For more information, contact the school office at (716)254-8160.

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