

# Challenges confronting Catholic schools demand h

By Teresa A. Parsons

Two years ago when diocesan education officials introduced the urban school study, they faced parents, teachers and principals who were convinced that the study was a smokescreen intended to disguise a predetermined master plan to reorganize Catholic elementary schools.

This year, many of the same people began to decry a lack of diocesan leadership, as they realized to their dismay that there was indeed no such plan.

What happened to change attitudes during the past two years was the closing of four Catholic elementary schools and the elimination or consolidation of junior high grades at more than half-a-dozen other schools. Several more secondary and elementary schools face make-or-break situations during the next several years.

The closings and consolidations heralded what is being widely termed a crisis in Catholic education. Optimists prefer to call it a crossroads. Yet regardless of the terminology they use, many educators believe that the beginning of the end is approaching for parish-based schools.

Parents are starting to accept what educators in both public and Catholic school systems have long been predicting — that neighborhood schools would become a luxury few could afford.

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Unfortunately, the people who seem most fully aware of that distinction are those whose schools have closed. Jane Lustyk was principal of St. Jerome's in East Rochester — one of three Monroe County Catholic schools that closed this past spring. She is convinced of the need for systemic change. "We have to have centralized schools," she said. "We've got a lot to offer, but we can't do it on our own any more. We can't remain parochial!"

As long as some school communities remain healthy, however, their leaders naturally resist the prospect of tampering with success. Collaboration — particularly with a school that's struggling — is seen by many as the kiss of death, or as a sign

of instability.

What they haven't realized, according to Brother Brian Walsh, diocesan school superintendent, is that Catholic schools "are all in this together."

"A poke in the system anywhere sends ripples all the way through," he said. "If you read about a school in Bath closing, and you live in Greece, you're worried about what might happen at St. Lawrence."

Recognizing a need for cooperative planning, diocesan education officials two years ago convened representatives from Catholic schools in the City of Rochester. What they originally termed "urban school planning" has since expanded to incorporate all Catholic schools in Monroe County.

Those involved in the process have issued two major school-planning documents, which in turn have spawned almost a dozen committees. In April, 1987, the diocesan Financial Planning Task Force Report called for yet another committee to study and implement school consolidations within the next five years.

In the meantime, schools have continued to close, and committee members, school officials and parish leaders have grown frustrated by the lack of direct action. "I think it's very good that they've given us the ball to run with," said Montanaro, a member of one of the planning subcommittees. "What we need from the leadership of the diocese is some kind of direction."

Sister Roberta Tierney, director of the diocesan Education Division, believes that the planning efforts are making a difference, but on several different levels.

Long-range planning efforts, for instance, are focusing in part on what kinds of Catholic-school models work in other dioceses. But relevant models are difficult to locate since, unlike schools in many dioceses, those in the Diocese of Rochester remain affiliated with parishes that are independent entities.

For that reason, hopes for any system-wide school changes depend on whether any one proposal can win a broad consensus from among parishes and schools. Some committee members doubt that consensus is possible. "I don't believe there is a total commitment to Catholic education on everybody's part," Montanaro said. "There isn't a great acceptance of commitment by parishes without schools. There are parishes not feeling the crunch that are just not willing to see that what's happening to other parishes will eventually happen to them."

Without a clear indication of what diocesan leaders expect from them, some committee members also fear that their time and efforts may not be useful. And even if their recommendations win diocesan approval, committee members are afraid their ideas may still be rejected by parishes and schools. "If we can't enforce what's best for the diocese, then we are no further ahead than we were before," Montanaro said.

Such areas as financial reform and school certification are also the subject of long-range planning. By developing standardized budgeting,



## Corpus Christi marks first decade of independence

By Teresa A. Parsons

When the leaders of Corpus Christi Parish announced in 1977 that they could no longer support a school, parents and staff refused to let their school close, no matter what effort would be required of them.

Fortunately, they had no idea how great that effort would be. Year after year, the school has hovered on the edge of solvency without a parish subsidy, without large enrollment, without hefty tuition hikes. Yet Corpus Christi has survived, one year and one payroll at a time, to celebrate its 10th anniversary as the only independent, parent-run elementary school in the Diocese of Rochester.

Observers usually attribute the school's success to one or two of many factors — among them the dedication of teachers and volunteers; the ownership by parents; the leadership of the principal, Sister Eileen Daly; good timing; and the grace of God.

Ask the teachers, volunteers, parents or principal how Corpus Christi has managed and they'll say it's not what they offer, but what they receive from the school that keeps it going.

"There's some sense that what's happening here is good, and (people) want to join it, whatever it is," Sister Daly said. "This place just creeps into a corner of your heart, and you can't get it out."

Corpus Christi School's first six or seven years of independence were a truly desperate



struggle. The proceeds from tuition and fundraising efforts were pitted against the decline of a 100-year-old building that couldn't even serve as collateral for school loans because it was still owned by the parish.

But the struggle didn't end with money. Corpus Christi suffered from the stereotype that virtually all urban schools face — a persistent belief that the quality of education at inner-city schools is poor and that their students are undisciplined. "I make no apologies for what happens educationally here," Sister Daly said. "That kind of pigeon-holing happens because of where we are. (People assume) we must be all of the above."

As Corpus Christi attracted an increasingly

majority of their students are not Catholics, but Baptists, Pentecostals and even Hindus. "There are no pullouts from religion class," Sister Daly explained. "If (students) are committing themselves here, then they're committing themselves to that."

"It's not a conversion thing, but a sharing thing," she added. "Parents find the combination of religions healthy for their kids. Instead of weakening their faiths, it has tended to strengthen them."

Although Corpus Christi's school and parish parted company in an atmosphere of crisis, the move has prompted growth on both sides. The parish was freed to develop its multitude of social-outreach programs, and school administrators were freed to do what was best for the school without trying to accommodate parish interests and expectations.

"I'd say we've traveled parallel lines," Sister Daly said. "The people in the area have expressed their needs, and both the parish and the school have listened . . . Hopefully what we're doing here will avoid the need for outreach programs there (at the parish) somewhere in the future."

Sister Daly believes that by offering students a solid foundation in basic educational skills and a caring, supportive atmosphere, Corpus Christi School can begin to break the cycle of low expectations and low achievement that

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