

and hard choices, collaboration, leadership



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

accounting and reporting procedures for schools, diocesan and parish officials should be better able to foresee and deal with potential problems before they become crises.

The diocesan response to schools already in crisis has been to help identify marketing and recruiting plans, as well as to suggest ways of cutting costs, options for consolidation, and strategies for drawing a consensus from the entire parish and school community.

Ideally, if planning were effective, crises could be averted. In some cases, they have been. As evidence, Brother Walsh pointed to relatively healthy schools that chose this year to consolidate at the junior-high level — among them Blessed Trinity and St. Mary's in Auburn, and St. Andrew's at Blessed Sacrament Regional Junior High in Rochester. A diocesan management team has also helped to initiate a new outreach program to Hispanic students at Our Lady of Perpetual Help School.

But diocesan officials don't believe they can circumvent every school crisis or closing, because their function is primarily consultative rather than regulatory.

There was a time when a diocesan bishop simply would close a school if enrollment fell below a prescribed point or expenses rose too high. The end of that era may well have come in 1968, during Bishop Fulton J. Sheen's tenure, when parishioners at Most Precious Blood successfully fought his decision to close their school.

Although schools still cannot be closed without the bishop's permission, the bishop does not initiate a school's closing. Nowadays, when schools experience relatively sudden and significant demographic changes, diocesan officials react by trying to determine whether school or parish leaders have considered all the possible options and whether their decision represents a broad consensus or an isolated opinion.

"An unexpected shift in any direction can change a whole community," Sister Tierney observed. "We're hoping to tighten the guidelines on when structural changes can happen, so we can encourage schools to at least commit to another year and take the time they need to talk about it."

What becomes increasingly clear from examining the contributions of each committee and task force, from observing each school closing and consolidation, is that there is no single set of answers for ailing Catholic schools. Some schools consolidate and survive, while others consolidate and later close, anyway.

Every school faces a diminishing pool of school-age children, as well as rising educational costs. The "terrible twosome" creates a self-perpetuating cycle. Higher tuition may drive some students out of Catholic school. The resulting decline in enrollment may, in turn, force another hike in tuition.

Not everyone accepts the argument that Catholic education has become a greater sacrifice for parents now than ever before. Some say the change has occurred in parents' priorities.

Brother Walsh describes the changing priorities of many Catholic parents as "society under siege." "Unfortunately, if your options are a mid-winter

vacation in Florida or Catholic school tuition, society says choose the former," he explained. "People say Catholic school tuition is too high, but they have no problem spending \$400 on a week of hockey camp."

Others believe that parents will seek Catholic education only as long as they believe it is also quality education. "More people are shopping for schools," observed Jo Anne Mueller, a Henrietta Catholic-school teacher and parent. "I don't think this happened years ago. Parents sent their kids to the parochial schools because it was their obligation. Now they make that choice based on programs."

Test scores and studies, such as the one updated in 1986 by independent academic researcher James Coleman, assert that private education in general continue to offer a superior education to public schools. But the new Regents' Action Plan, as well as the need to attract and keep qualified teachers with equitable salaries, will continue to challenge Catholics schools to improve.

One way in which Catholic schools have responded to the increasingly competitive educational market is by strengthening and emphasizing what they alone offer — Catholic values.

Anthony Montanaro doubts whether that factor alone can maintain enrollment. "With the changes in New York state, Catholic education could fall below the level of public schools. Given that fact, morals become less important. Parents can have both if they send their children to CCD," he said. "Catholic schools are going to fall

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

Brother Brian M. Walsh

behind unless they reorganize"

When and if that process begins, Rosemarie Muscolino can tell you that it will be painful. She taught at St. Anthony of Padua School for 20 years. For more than a year, she used her breaks and lunch hours to canvass the school's northeast Rochester neighborhood, looking for new students.

Brother Walsh prefers to regard what happened at St. Anthony's this year not as a closing, but as a "transfer of the school apostolate."

For Muscolino, it was more like a death in the family. "It was horrible for us, but we tried to make it good for the kids," she said. You never think it's really going to happen until the kids are walking out the door."

Schools in Henrietta consolidated without crisis

By Teresa A. Parsons

Who would have guessed 10 years ago that a suburban Catholic school would ever lack for enrollment? It was a few years after the tail end of the baby boom. Families had moved in droves to the suburbs, and parents had grown accustomed to class sizes of 40 or more students.

Nevertheless, in August, 1977, a group of parish leaders in Henrietta chose to begin studying school consolidation. Guardian Angels and Good Shepherd schools had suffered no crisis, no crash in enrollment or deficit spending. Despite their doubts, parishioners and parents listened to the discussion, and what they heard made sense.

Today, the people of Good Shepherd, Guardian Angels, and St. Joseph's Parish in Rush attribute the relative health of the Rush/Henrietta Catholic School System to the foresight of their predecessors. The day has arrived when competition from public schools, the challenge of the Regent's Action Plan and a diminishing pool of school-aged students are threatening even the stability of suburban Catholic schools.

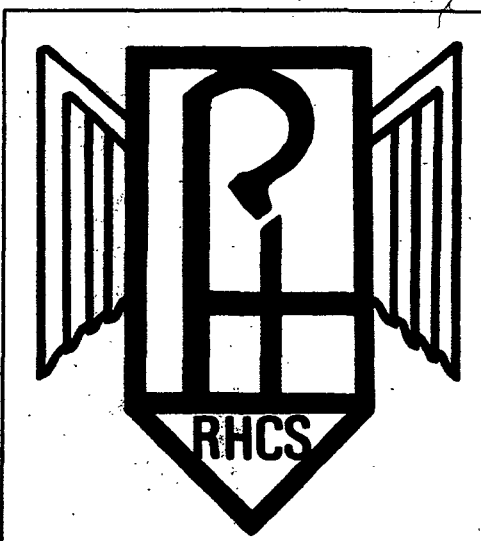
"Had not the three parishes gone in together when they did, we would be facing the same thing many of the other schools are," said Helen Lynch, principal at Rush/Henrietta's intermediate building. "As it is, we're very stable now, and we have a good primary base that

gives us hope for the future."

The need for a Catholic junior-high alternative was what initially prompted interest among Guardian Angels' school board members in 1976. The school had dropped its own junior-high grades in 1969. Students who wanted to continue in Catholic education beyond the sixth grade had usually been scattered among several nearby schools, depending on which was accepting new students.

Since some Guardian Angels students had already been attending Good Shepherd School, Father Richard A. Hart, pastor at Guardian Angels, raised the possibility of consolidating the two schools in some way.

Historical bonds between the two parishes helped make the idea attractive from the start. Guardian Angels parish has been founded as an offshoot from Good Shepherd Parish in 1960. Good Shepherd School had also been



something of a joint venture since it was founded during the 1950s with cooperation of parishioners from St. Joseph's in Rush, then a mission of Good Shepherd Parish.

In August, 1977, representatives from all three parishes formed the Committee on Interparish Cooperation to study what educational options were available to them. Their target date for action was September, 1978.

Although both Guardian Angels and Good Shepherd schools were still viable when the subject of consolidation was broached, enrollment had peaked during the 1960s. Good Shepherd's enrollment was down to 397 students in 1976/77 from 611 in 1969. During the same period, Guardian Angels' enrollment had dropped from 317 students to 199 — due at least in part to eliminating grades seven and eight.

"We weren't at a crisis point, as I recall. It was a visionary kind of thing," said Sister Caro-

lyn Knipper, who was principal at Good Shepherd between 1970 and 1977. "As I look back now, it seems that wherever (the idea) came from, it was certainly avant-garde."

Members of the Interparish Planning Committee believed that consolidation between Good Shepherd and Guardian Angels would decrease the cost per student in both schools initially by between \$30 and \$100. But saving money was not the primary goal of the plan's advocates, according to Father Robert J. Miller, then pastor at Good Shepherd.

"It was done to make both schools better, to guarantee that if a child started (in a Catholic) school in kindergarten, he or she could finish the eighth grade," he said. "We realized that if we were ever going to do it, we should do it while both schools were strong and viable."

In the course of the planning process, representatives from each school were asked to develop alternative visions of what their school might be like in 1981, with and without consolidation.

The presentations of those visions in May, 1977, clearly highlighted the status quo as safe, at least in the short-term. Consolidation offered a number of potential benefits — among them expanded programs, more efficient use of equipment and buildings, a broader community from which to draw students,

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