

# Parish reps charged with turning plans to action

By Teresa A. Parsons

Richard Troiano can see the neighborhood public school from the window of his East Rochester home. Yet he chooses to pay tuition and send his children on a 45-to-50-minute bus ride each day so they can attend St. Joseph's in Penfield.

"I want religion to be part of my children's education ... I feel strongly enough about it to put my kids on a bus," Troiano explained. "To me, an hour at Mass on Sunday just isn't enough."

Dennis McMullen chose to send his children to Most Precious Blood School because of the youths he sees hanging out and fighting in front of his neighborhood public school.

But Most Precious Blood School has provided McMullen with more than he bargained for — education for the whole family. "Peoples' attitude needs to change toward their commitment to their kids," he explained. "You sit in front of the TV all weekend and never do anything together. Catholic school has (changed) that for us — we spent a lot of time at the school in activities with the kids this past year."

Sheila Dingman believes her children are "getting a tremendous education as well as a more Christian atmosphere, an atmosphere of control" at a bargain price in Rush Henrietta's consolidated Catholic school system. "We as Americans are losing choices all the time," Dingman said. "Having a Christian school means a person has a choice to make."

Preserving the choices of school parents and parish communities is at the heart of efforts to keep Catholic education alive in spite of rising costs and declining enrollment, aging students and diminishing incomes. During the past five years, most observers have lost track of the number of diocesan committees and task forces debating and deliberating ways to ensure that the choice of a Catholic education remains available to the McMullens, Troianos and Dingmans — as well as hundreds of other families throughout Monroe County and the Diocese of Rochester.

Most of the groups that have studied school planning — from the Urban School Study task force to the Five Year Financial Planning Process Task Force — have concluded that to survive as quality institutions, diocesan schools in Monroe County must be reconfigured.

Now, many people seem to agree, it is high time for a reorganization plan to emerge from the maze of committees and task forces. Responsibility for such plans rests in large part on the shoulders of 78 men and women serving on four quadrant planning boards established earlier this year.

Despite the multiplication of school-planning initiatives in recent years, quadrant planning boards mark the first time parishes with schools, parishes without schools, pastors, principals and religious education administrators have all worked together on the issue.

Each of the four quadrant planning boards,

whose regions are roughly delineated by the Genesee River and Main Street, has by now met several times — often enough for members to begin identifying the key issues and resources in their particular quadrants.

The Northeast Quadrant, for instance, has inherited the benefits and burdens of several years of prior planning by the Northeast Cluster Task Force. The Northwest Quadrant can claim the strongest overall 1987/88 enrollment in pre-kindergarten through grade 8. The Southeast Quadrant encompasses parish and school communities stretching all the way from Webster to Rush, while several recent school closings in the Southwest Quadrant have fostered among member parishes a sense of ur-

regarding their role in supporting Catholic education.

"Many of the parishes that don't have schools in our region were told that they could not have a school, and so they have built their religious education programs by telling their people for the last 25 years that 'This is the way to go,'" Father Wheeland said. "Now to have to go back and tell people they need to support Catholic schools — there's a difficulty in that."

Another planning board representative echoed Father Wheeland's point, noting that her parish, which spends a major portion of its budget on religious education, might willingly help support an inner-city Catholic

communities before the end of 1988 is daunting. Yet many quadrant representatives agree that a longer timeline would almost certainly force more schools to sacrifice choice for necessity.

"Some schools have been relying on the planning board to come up with something (by September, 1989)," said Ninetta DiBella, a representative from Annunciation Parish to the Northeast Quadrant. "I'd like to see us stick to that so we don't lose any of them."

"Some parishes don't see the need to reconfigure right now, but I think the leadership does see that," she added.

Because quadrant planning board members must lead as well as represent their parish communities, they will need to communicate details of proposed reconfiguration plans to parents and parishioners while remaining open to suggestions.

"That's the awkward position we're in — we're reluctant to go to our parents in a general forum until we have something to present. Otherwise there are going to be a lot of unanswered questions," observed Chesterton, St. Ambrose's representative. The task faced by quadrant planning boards is further complicated by their as-yet undetermined relationship with the Bishop's Commission on Catholic Education, established by the Oversight Task Force, which was charged with implementing recommendations of the Five Year Financial Planning report.

Oversight Task Force subcommittee members who drafted the recommendation on education have declined to comment on their intent in establishing the commission. Their recommendation stipulated that the commission "be established and empowered to develop and facilitate the consolidation plan." Commission decisions would then be "carried out by" the Division of Education. "The Commission's direction, authority and accountability will be directed from and to the Bishop," the recommendation concluded.

The Oversight Task Force's funding recommendations were clearer — and more clearly welcomed by quadrant planning board representatives and diocesan staff members. The task force report urged that the diocese allocate \$1.6 million over the next five years for the services of consultants, increased tuition subsidies, and a marketing plan.

Once a school reconfiguration plan has been identified and a marketing plan developed, the Oversight Task Force recommended establish-

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**'We see around us that there are schools that need help. If each of us does what we need to do separately, some parishes are going to fail ... We don't want to see that happen.'**

**Kathleen Dougherty**

gency about the need to cooperate.

In contrast to their differences, members of each quadrant planning group are seeking the same goal: preserving Catholic education. In statements last fall to Catholic-school and religious educators, Bishop Matthew H. Clark stressed that as the means to such an end, parochial or parish-based schools must give way to Catholic schools which have the support of the entire diocesan community, and which form one facet of an overall catechetical plan.

"What it may come down to is where we're going to have a few good schools," predicted Sheila Dingman, who represents Guardian Angels School to the Southeast Quadrant. "I really feel that's what we're trying to find — what's best for the many?"

What's "best for the many" won't be easy for quadrant representatives to agree upon, or for parishioners and school parents to accept. Some parishes will face the closing of their school buildings; others will be asked to support schools with their children don't attend.

Parishes with schools must be willing to sacrifice some of the autonomy to which they are accustomed in return for the support of a wider community. "One of the big issues in our (Northwest) region will be the governance authority of the quadrant (board) in relation to the local school board," explained Father Thomas Wheeland, pastor of Holy Cross Church. "As we try to look at (our schools) as regional schools, there will be questions as to who's going to be calling the shots as to hiring principals and teachers and so on?"

Meanwhile, representatives of parishes without schools pose what Father Wheeland described as "serious and valid" questions

school. However, she believes fellow parishioners would "laugh in my face" should she propose offering the same assistance to a well-funded neighboring Catholic school, which she says duplicates in many respects what suburban public schools provide. "I think that our original proposal should be rethought," she asserted. "Are Catholic schools a viable prospect in the future?"

Faced with such fundamental differences, some quadrant representatives wonder whether they can ever agree on a course of action. "Everybody is going to have to be willing to give a little to get a little in this process," said Peter Chesterton, a Northeast Quadrant representative from St. Ambrose Parish. "I think we'd like to see us reach consensus (on a reconfiguration plan). But if there's not a clear consensus in the planning group, I think we have to ask if it is appropriate for Bishop Clark and/or the education office to step in, and if so, when?"

Diocesan education officials have targeted December, 1988, as a preliminary deadline for quadrants to submit recommendations for reconfiguration to Bishop Clark. Implementation of those changes the bishop approves could then begin as early as September, 1989.

The prospect of compiling reorganization proposals and winning the support of parish



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