

# Pride and tradition sustain small-town schools

By Lee Strong

Small town life has frequently been romanticized in literature, on television and in movies. These romantic portrayals picture the towns as idyllic and peaceful — as good places to raise children.

Yet for many small towns, reality is far less pleasant. Shrinking populations, declining numbers of jobs, poverty and isolation all too often afflict small communities.

The same factors that affect the towns also affect the churches, and in the case of Catholic churches, the parish schools. This past year the Diocese of Rochester experienced the closing of yet another small town school — St. James in Waverly.

In such towns as Penn Yan, Owego, Dansville, Wayland and Avon, however, parishes continue the struggle to keep their schools open, their efforts fueled by a combination of pride, tradition and a strong belief in the value of Catholic education. Like so many other aspects of small-town life, the struggle often goes on unrecognized and unheard of in communities just a few miles down the road.

"Our greatest export from our county is our children," observed Father William Michatek, pastor of St. Michael's Parish in Penn Yan. "There are no job opportunities for the parents, so they move on."

St. Michael's School is the only Catholic school in Yates County. The number of students registered at St. Michael's for the 1988/89 school year is 115 — down from the 135 enrolled last year. This year, the parish will spend approximately \$188,000 to operate the school — \$90,000 of which will come from the parish itself. St. Michael's will face a \$50-60,000 deficit this year, Father Michatek predicted.

"We're coming to a point of crisis," the pastor acknowledged. "We've been raising tuition, but we've never faced a crisis of this magnitude."

That the school is still operating is a tribute to the parishioners, Father Michatek noted. "The people think it is valuable and they are

**'I think in a small town there's more of a feeling for the school, a sense that it brings the people together. Nobody else can do it. There's no other institution in town that has access to so many parents. It's a means to call people together and give them something substantial.'**

**Father Paul Schnacky  
Pastor, St. Joseph's, Wayland**

willing to stand up and fight for it"

Sister Catherine Gibbons, SSJ, St. Michael's principal, attributes some of the support of the 106-year-old school to tradition. "The people are proud of the school," she said. "We have a number of families that have attended the school for three or four generations."

In May, 1987, for example, the parish reenacted the laying of the cornerstone of the school by Bishop Bernard McQuaid in 1882. More than 300 people came for the ceremony, Sister Gibbons noted. A newly formed alumni association is attempting to capitalize on this continuing interest in the school and its history. In October, the association will sponsor a reception and Mass to commemorate the 1883 arrival of the Sisters of St. Joseph to teach in the school.

Sister Gibbons also attributed some of the parishioners' commitment to keeping the school open to the fact that it is the only Catholic school in the county.

"When you're in a place like Penn Yan, it's a whole different thing than in Rochester when you can just travel down the road to another school," the principal noted. "There's a proximity of schools there that we don't have here. It's a whole different thing than the distance

between Penn Yan and Geneva."

Like Yates County, Tioga County has only one Catholic school: St. Patrick's in Owego. And like St. Michael's, St. Patrick's will experience a decline in enrollment for kindergarten through fifth-grade this year, with 98 students registered — down from 115 last year.

The decline is not causing worry, however, according to Father William Darling, the parish's pastor, because it stems from the parish's decision to drop the school's sixth grade in an effort to parallel a new sixth- through eighth-grade configuration in the local public school district.

On the other hand, the pastor noted, St. Patrick's is opening a pre-kindergarten this fall, and if the enrollment for this class is added to the total, the school will have an enrollment of 118 — an increase.

In addition to the pre-kindergarten, the 119-year-old school will continue to offer programs before and after school. "What's important is that we're trying to make some moves to make the school more attractive," Father Darling said. "We hope to attract students through the pre-k and the two programs."

Parishioners have made great sacrifices to keep the school open, the priest noted. "I think

a lot of people in the parish take a great deal of pride in the school," he said. In fact, he noted, parishioners believe so strongly in Catholic education that in May the parish council voted to subsidize students from the parish who enroll in nearby Broome County Catholic schools for grades six through 12.

"We see it as a form of ministry to the people of Owego to offer a Christ-like environment," the pastor said, noting that several other religious denominations operate schools in the Owego area. "There's a great interest in religion in the area and in a religious context for education," he observed.

As part of this sense of ministry, tuition at St. Patrick's has been kept purposely low. The Home/School Association has been very active raising money to help keep the tuition down and the school solvent, he said.

The fact that the school is the only one in the county is also a plus, Father Darling said. "There's no way to cluster with other schools," he explained. "We either sink or swim on our own. And the people in Owego have chosen to swim."

One school that has enjoyed relatively stable enrollment over the last few years is St. Mary's in Dansville, the oldest school in the diocese, according to the pastor, Father Andrew W. Teuschel. The projected enrollment this year the same as last year: 225 students.

Father Teuschel pointed out that the school's junior-high school grades will actually experience an enrollment increase, and that the Home/School Association was able to raise so much money that the school is asking for \$12,000 less from the parish this coming year.

The support by parishioners has been strong, he speculated, because they believe the school is an important means to integrate secular with religious education.

"Life is life — you can't divide it," Father Teuschel remarked, adding that education must likewise be an integrated whole, combining regular course content with religious and

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