

Proposal may benefit academic programs

EDITOR'S NOTE — This is the second installment in a series of articles examining Catholic Community Schools: A System Framework Plan for Monroe County, the proposed plan for the reorganization of Monroe County's Catholic schools. This week's installment focuses on possible changes in academic program development.

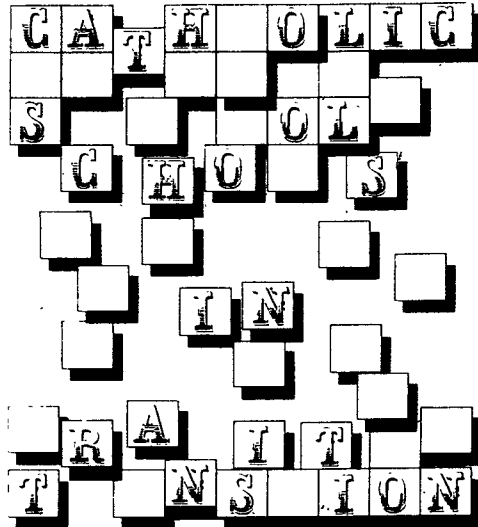
By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — For many Catholics in Monroe County, a consolidation and reorganization of the Catholic school system may mean only the closing of a cherished parish school, engendering feelings of gloom and doom. But according to education officials throughout the diocese, consolidation can also mean expanded academic programs, most notably in the areas of science, math and technology, and an improvement in the quality of instruction students receive.

The plan envisioned by the nine-member Commission on Reorganization of Catholic Schools — informally referred to as the Pickett Commission after its chairman, William Pickett — calls for the enhancement of science, math and technology programs in Monroe County's Catholic schools. These schools are already doing an adequate job of educating students in these areas, but there's always room for improvement, according to Evelyn J. Kirst, diocesan assistant superintendent for curriculum.

In particular, Kirst noted that students' education would benefit from the proposed establishment of a separate junior high for each quadrant and the proposed creation of regional elementary schools drawing a large number of students from different parishes. Currently, many Catholic schools enroll small numbers of students, a fact that bodes ill for certain types of programs, Kirst said.

For example, she explained, in a parish school with 25 students in each grade, two students in each grade may need remedial



help in certain areas but won't get it or will receive the assistance on a minimal basis because the school can't afford to hire a full-time remedial instructor. It's easier to justify hiring special-education teachers at a school with a large enrollment, Kirst said, because it is likely that the school will have a larger number of students needing special education.

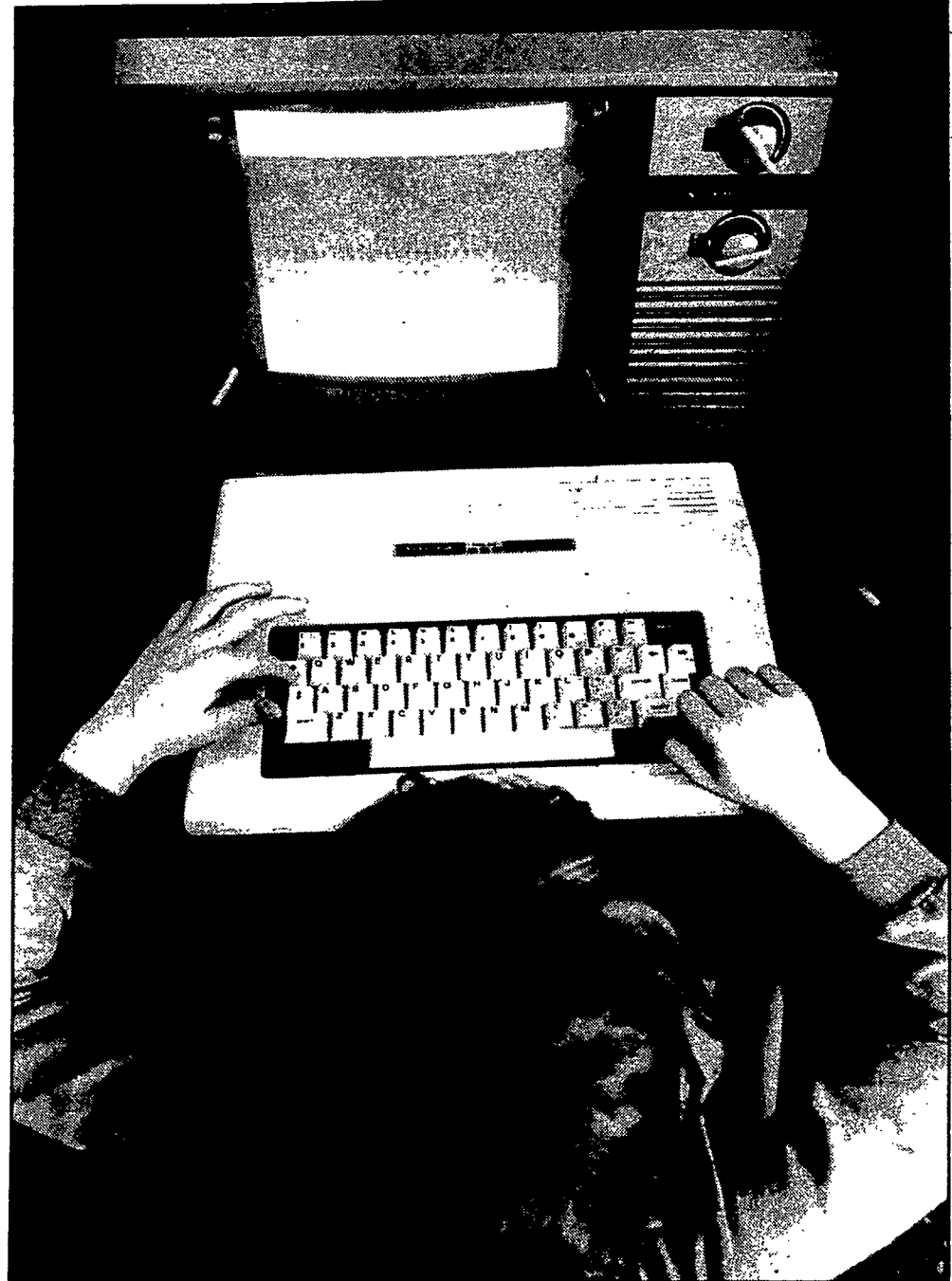
A similar scenario can be envisioned in the case of regular academic programs. To enhance their science programs, for example, individual schools would need to hire specialized teachers and purchase extra equipment. "Right now, I'd put our programs against any in the state in science, math and technology," Kirst said, noting, however, that "globally, I don't think we can put our programs against Japan's."

Kirst also remarked that Catholic junior high students who transfer to public high schools have the theoretical background for conducting laboratory experiments, but often lack the practical lab experience that their public-school counterparts have enjoyed.

One program that could serve as a model for others is the science program at Blessed Sacrament Junior High, Kirst said. Joseph Holleran, a science teacher at the school, also serves as science mentor for the diocesan school system. One of a number of educators designated as mentors by the New York State Department of Education, Holleran travels throughout the diocese conducting teacher workshops on science education.

Holleran has implemented an innovative approach to science learning at Blessed Sacrament. One of his strategies matches a student who does well in science with a peer who doesn't. Together, they work as a team on various assignments to help the slower student improve his skills.

Schools targeted for closing can also work as a team to improve science education throughout the diocese. "I've picked up a lot of equipment from schools



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

In a recent survey, a large number of diocesan teachers stated they would be interested in computer-education workshops. This second-grader at St. Ambrose learns how to use a computer while playing Vowel Maze.

that have closed," Holleran said, noting that consolidation of Catholic schools also leads to a consolidation of their resources.

But that equipment's value is somewhat reduced in a building that contains no permanent space for its use, Holleran commented, noting that only a fraction of diocesan schools have separate rooms for science instruction. The establishment of regional junior highs could alleviate that problem, he remarked, noting the Northeast Quadrant Planning Board's proposal to create a junior high program on the premises of Bishop Kearney High School could aid his program if it were relocated at Kearney under the proposal.

Kearney has several classrooms currently not in use and a science lab that also could be available for junior-high students, Holleran said, noting that a junior-high science program at Kearney "would be equal if not better," than Blessed Sacrament's program.

While a shortage of proper equipment and space can hamper a good science program, the lack of adequately trained teachers can create obstacles in all subjects. Many Catholic elementary schools now house only one section per grade, forcing faculty members to teach subjects that are outside their fields of expertise.

Sister Helen Lynch, principal at Good Shepherd, notes that teacher expertise in a select field becomes more important in the higher grades. "You can get away with that in the first and second grade, but not in the junior high," she remarked.

A large, regional junior high could better serve the needs of its students, she said, noting that to adequately serve students, a junior high must have at least two sections per grade. "Otherwise, you're getting one teacher teaching seventh grade who might be a math teacher, but not a language teacher," she said.

Creating a balance of teachers from different fields would be easier under consolidation, Kirst remarked, noting that schools with larger student populations could hire two teachers per grade: one who is strong in humanities, another who is

strong in math and sciences.

Students would also be the indirect beneficiaries of another proposal put forth in the Pickett Commission's plan — the creation of a consortium of academic curriculum leaders to develop and implement programs focusing on the language arts, mathematics and science. The proposal states that the programs would be created by "work teams made up of lead teachers, college professors and other experts and practitioners."

Kirst said that by fall, the diocese will form a task force to study the proposed consortium, although she noted that no area Catholic colleges have been contacted yet regarding the idea. If established, the consortium's main aim would be to create a working link between the Catholic colleges and diocesan school teachers.

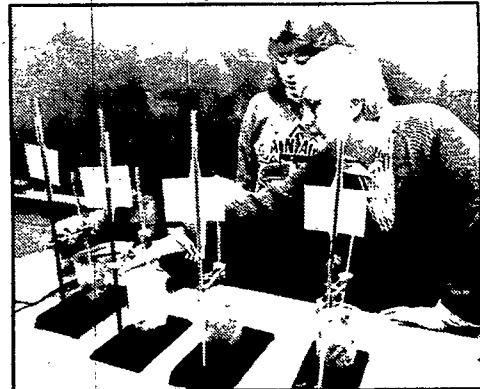
This link would bind the two academic spheres through teacher workshops Kirst said. Currently, teachers seeking to update their professional knowledge or attain additional degrees generally foot the bill for any classes or workshops they take, she said. The consortium would call on the colleges to finance some of the teacher workshops, most notably in science, math and technology.

In addition, teacher workshops are currently designed for any professional educator, whereas in a consortium, colleges could design workshops specifically for diocesan teachers' needs.

If the consortium is established, it might get some ideas for teacher workshops from a recently conducted survey of diocesan school teachers. The survey was commissioned by the diocesan Committee on the Development of Ministers/Employees, which is assessing the needs of employees throughout the diocese. It was sent out in November, 1988, and its results reflect the concerns of the Pickett Commission's proposal, while raising some additional ones.

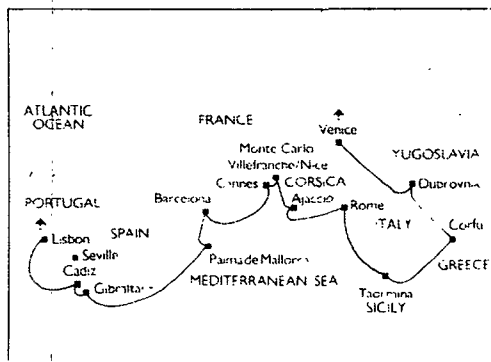
Out of the 234 respondents, 174 expressed interest in workshops in art for primary, intermediate and junior high classes; 168 were interested in word processing and 124 were interested in science workshops.

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Patricia Clemens' eighth-grade science class works on an experiment.

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