

# Directions in Catholic Education

## Back-to-school thoughts on courage, change

By Father Joseph M. Jankowiak  
Guest contributor

A back-to-school edition (see supplement) is a wonderful opportunity to wish our students well at all levels, to ask God's blessing upon the school year ahead. I was asked to write this article as a Southern Tier pastor. Readers should understand that this is one voice among many. Other pastors, parents and educators might well have different views of our local picture.

Our Southern Tier boasts a fine Catholic high school at Notre Dame in Elmira. Holy Family is a consolidated school system serving the parishes in Elmira. All Saints is a consolidated system covering the parishes of Corning. Here in Horseheads at St. Mary Our Mother, we have maintained a pre-school through eighth-grade grammar school. Catholic-school education remains a high priority across the Southern Tier, valued by pastors, parents, educators and students.

Bishop Clark's call for diocesan school consolidation has been heard clearly here in the Southern Tier. With all the other members of the Diocese of Rochester, we have watched with keen interest as the Rochester quadrants are proposed and some schools are closed. Recent situations in Waverly and Bath, where schools were closed, echo the hurt and anger felt by many. The questions surfacing in the Southern Tier are: What will happen to us? Will our school be changed or closed? How soon will the Pickett Commission make proposals public suggesting a regional system? Will Southern Tier leaders have a voice in the future of our Catholic schools? Will parents have a say in their children's future? Will our local school maintain a pre-school through grade-eight structure?

One factor in Bishop Clark's policy decision on school consolidation was the Five-Year Financial Planning Task Force. I served on that task force and listened at length to in-depth reports on the status of our schools. Having heard all these reports, I agree with the conclusion: "... survival is dependent upon an effective consolidation program. The Catholic elementary and Catholic high schools as they exist are doomed if major structural modifications are not made. The Task Force recommends that such a program be applied to Catholic high schools as well as Catholic elementary schools" (Executive Summary, p.5).

There is an interesting word in German, *anknüpfungspunkt*. It means the point at which the hammer strikes a nail into a board. "... schools ... doomed if major structural changes are not made" is our *anknüpfungspunkt*. Obviously, Bishop Clark has accepted this analysis and has called for consolidation as normative diocesan policy everywhere. But parochialism dies hard, and we are much more accustomed as Americans to cite individual rights than to rally around the common good. The questions of parents mentioned above are clear. Allow me to add the questions of a pastor: How many more schools need to close before we realize that none of us can go it alone? How many more parishes must continue to feel terrible financial strain with the present outmoded school structures of isolation and duplication? Why do we need to choose between one time-tested beautiful ministry (Catholic schools) and a host of other present and future ministries doomed to mediocrity because of inadequate funding? Why do we continue to drag our feet when heart-rending school closings, massive research and common sense demand action on a creative and broad-based scale?

Diocesan officials have approached the school crisis from two perspectives — one centralized, the other local. Bishop Clark has asked Dr. William Pickett, the president of St. John Fisher College, to chair the Commission on Reorganization of Catholic Schools. This commission is charged with designing "System Framework Plans," one for Monroe County, three others for cluster areas in the Finger Lakes/Auburn, Southern Tier and Valley areas. To provide local input in the three cluster areas, 11 groups have been meeting for planning purposes, so that the System Framework Plan for the areas outside Monroe County will combine both centralized and local efforts. At this writing, the time table for the formulation and implementation of the Southern Tier framework plan is in process, but specific dates are uncertain. Clearly it is underway, and implementation is intended for the very near future.

How does all this information help us prepare for the start of school this fall? What should parents think of the future of Catholic schools? Are future directions better for our children and our parishes? What conclusions might we draw in these days before the school year starts again?

1) Living in the past on childhood memories does not help. I grew up in a wonderful Catholic school surrounded by priests and sisters. Almost all of us



went on to Aquinas Institute or Nazareth Academy, and we were expected to be the future of our parish. I believe that Catholic schools do make an important difference in faith and values. In most instances, our Catholic school populations are now a small minority within the larger parish. The teachers are lay teachers to a very large extent and are expected to compete with the public-school system for about half the salary. What are the facts in your parish? How do we prepare for the 1990s?

2) Planned, coordinated efforts are being taken by Bishop Clark and diocesan leadership to ensure quality Catholic schools into the 1990s. I welcome that leadership because I believe that the status quo is impossible for the future and that we must begin to act now.

3) The Southern Tier sometimes reacts negatively to initiatives "from Rochester." I applaud the sensitivity of including local leadership in the process of decision making and hope that we choose quality leaders to voice our concerns for our children.

4) I pray that each of us gets beyond emotions, scapegoating and guesswork to disciplined study, prayerful cooperation and a corporate search for wisdom. Power struggles must give way to doing what is best for our children and what is best for our church.

5) In my opinion, we should use existing structures to make as much information openly known as possible. Regional assemblies are one possibility. Collective meetings of parish staffs, parish councils, school boards and finance committees are another possibility. Public meetings inviting all interested parents are a third. Pastors and principals have been kept informed of the process. Parents and responsible lay leadership need to know the extent of work already done in order to have ownership of final decisions.

6) "Decision" comes from a Latin verb: *de-cidere*, which means to cut from, to cut away. Cutting is always painful, and we need to expect pain in cutting parts of our individual parishes to attain a stronger, newer and better whole. Jobs may be lost, positions may be changed, buildings may be left vacant or substantially altered. The final result, though, should be hope and collective viability — a goal far preferable to the moral cowardice of indecision and self-centered complacency.

My prayer for our children and our youths, our school personnel and parents is for a year filled with the excitement of growth. My wish for our bishop, our pastors, our parents, our parish councils and our school boards is for courage and wisdom, that we may face our responsibilities for the future with the same faith that our forebears passed on to us.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Father Jankowiak is pastor of Church of St. Mary Our Mother, Horseheads.