

Tykes learn how to learn in programs

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

According to tradition, students go to school to learn the three R's — reading, writing and arithmetic.

But students in pre-kindergarten focus instead on the three S's — skills, sharing and, above all, socialization.

"We're not teaching academics at that level," explained Karen Van Scoyk, who teaches in the pre-kindergarten program at St. Mary's, Auburn. "We work on socialization, listening skills, sharing, cooperation, working with a group of children, working individually."

"Many of the children that come to us don't have siblings close to their own ages, or children their own ages to play with," observed Luellen Seider, one of the teachers in the pre-kindergarten program at St. Francis/St. Stephen's, Geneva. "They need to learn to interact with children their own age before they go to school."

Seider also pointed out that the educational system in the United States is changing, and that parents seem to feel "children need to be a little better prepared both socially and academically." On the other hand, she added, "I think some of it, too, is it's just the thing to do."

Pre-kindergarten programs currently exist in approximately 48 of the Catholic schools in the Diocese of Rochester, according to Evelyn Kirst, diocesan district superintendent for western Monroe County and, for the last four years, assistant superintendent for curriculum. In the Finger Lakes region alone, for example, seven of the nine Catholic schools offered programs for pre-schoolers last year.

Pre-kindergarten is a phenomenon that traces its roots back to the 1960s, when Project Head Start was created to help give children from underprivileged backgrounds a boost before they entered school. Kirst noted that studies showed Head Start helped the children, and that other studies indicate a similar pattern for pre-kindergarten programs.

In the 1970s, Catholic schools — along with some private child-care providers — began offering pre-kindergarten or preschool programs for 3- and 4-year-olds in response to requests from parents and a perceived need for such programs in the community, Kirst noted. Adding to the demand was the fact that public schools — except for a few experimental programs — did not and still do not offer programs for preschoolers. The Catholic pre-kindergartens have consistently enjoyed full enrollments — and lengthy waiting lists.

But why would parents want to enroll children so young in school?

"I believe most of the pre-school parents



J. KASTNER

look at pre-school as an advantage for their children later in school," speculated Jane Pini, a pre-kindergarten teacher at St. Mary's School, Canandaigua, whose own children went through the program. "I believe statistics show that children who went to pre-school start with a great advantage."

"I think it makes the adjustment easier," commented Van Scoyk, who has two children who went through St. Mary's pre-kindergarten. "They've been in a situation where they've been with other kids, not just neighborhood kids. They've had to walk into a new situation and make friends."

Kirst said the teachers in the pre-kindergarten programs make a conscious attempt to keep the program simple and geared to the abilities and ages of their students. "We want to keep children children as long as possible," she said.

The students attend half-day sessions two to five days a week. As in Head Start, class sizes are small, with a maximum teacher/student ratio of about 15 to 1. A typical day might include identifying colors and shapes, listening to stories and developing fine-motor skills through such activities as drawing and using scissors. Time is also set aside for play and snacks.

Although located in Catholic schools, the programs do not put a strong focus on teaching religion. Children at that age are not ready for Catholic doctrine, Kirst noted, so the emphasis is more on recognizing Jesus as a friend, appreciating the world about them and realizing that God made it. In a number of the schools, students also take part in religious activities centering on such holidays as Christmas and Easter.

Parents in the Finger Lakes region are so convinced of the effectiveness of the programs that they are willing to pay between \$350-950 to enroll their children in these classes. That cost, however, might prohibit some children from disadvantaged backgrounds — students who could benefit most from pre-kindergarten — from enrolling. "I think it's geared to the middle income," Pini acknowledged.

Currently, the Diocese of Rochester offers financial assistance to students in Catholic schools, but only for students in grades K-8. Seider pointed out, however, that aid in other forms is sometimes available.

"We have had circumstances in the past when we've had a child whose parent couldn't afford it but wanted them in the school, so we've appealed to the parish for

help," Seider said. "I think they make every effort to help. We don't want to make it an exclusive thing for the rich."

The children in pre-kindergarten classes are not the only ones to benefit from the programs, school officials note. The schools enjoy the added income the programs produce and, frequently, pre-K programs serve as feeders to the schools' other grades. Kirst estimated that the number of students continuing on in Catholic schools after pre-kindergarten ranges from 30 to 90 percent.

"(Parents) can see the parochial schools are alive and they are an option," Van Scoyk said. "I think it's good people know we are here and what we can offer."

As time goes on, however, Catholic pre-kindergarten programs may face competition. The state Department of Education is considering plans to begin pre-kindergarten programs in public schools. If those programs are created, parents will have a free alternative for preschool education, which is likely to hurt enrollment in the Catholic-school programs.

"I think initially it may decrease our numbers by a bit," Seider acknowledged. "But I think many of our families are committed to Catholic education."

Pope say Catholic education must promote vocations

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In a message marking World Day of Prayer for Vocations earlier this year, Pope John Paul II said Catholic schools should make a special effort to promote vocations to the priesthood and religious life among their students.

A truly Catholic education "cannot evade the problem of vocational choice," the pope said. "A school that educates must speak of vocation not only in general, but must also indicate the various ways in which the fundamental call to give of

oneself is concretized, including that of total dedication to the cause of the kingdom of God."

Lay and religious teachers should "know how to make the call of Christ and the church resound and be heard in an individual form," the pope said.

Making young people aware of their own vocations is necessary but in itself "is not sufficient," he said. In addition, teachers must furnish motivation and favor experiences leading to vocations and help "free the young from those pressures which make the reply to the call of Christ seem

foolish or impossible."

Above all, he added, the schools should try to provide a "climate of faith" for students, in contrast to the "multiple and contradictory cultural messages and lifestyles which permeate the environment in which young people live."

The pope said he wanted to "underline clearly" that Catholic schools are church institutions that should always keep in mind the church's needs and expectations, "among which and in first place are vocations to the priesthood and the religious life."



**Performance Plus
Dance Productions**

"Where quality shines through"
Ages 3 - Adult • Beginner - Advanced
Classical Ballet • Jazz • Tap
Acrobatics • Lyrical • Comedy
Pointe Prep • Pointe
Adult Jazz • Adult Ballet
Adult Tap

FAMILY DISCOUNTS
Class size limited
Call Today for Choice Times
621-3680
OR
227-3487
Patty Drake Bellucco - Director