

Saving Catholic schools



A commission to heal broken trust

By Evelyn J. Kirst
Guest contributor

There seems to be a dichotomy in my life these days. I believe in the continuance of Catholic schools for the children in the Diocese of Rochester, and I find it difficult to help people adjust to change.

Almost five years ago, I was hired by the Catholic school office to be the assistant superintendent for curriculum. Today, under the already reorganized Catholic school office, my job is to serve the 17 schools in Monroe County West as their district superintendent, and to continue in my original role as curriculum coordinator for all of the schools in the diocese. The key word has been and continues to be "serve." I am not a decision maker. I am asked to assist with the decisions through research, experience and, most of all, through prayer.

Service to the schools also includes providing data and advice to the Southwest and Northwest Quadrant Planning Boards. It is also my responsibility to make sure that the boards are following the process of communication to their parish communities. Some days it seems as though no one is satisfied with the process — or maybe it is the message that people are not satisfied with.

This communication is critical because the presence and the future of Catholic school education is being decided by this reorganization. The questions at the heart of the process seem to be: 1) Will Catholic schools be available for all families who desire them?; 2) Will they become a choice for only the upper and lower classes?; and 3) Will the alternative system to the public schools be eliminated altogether?

I believe in the bishop's plan for reorganization adopted in August, 1989. The plan, which took almost five years of study to develop, is enabling us to face the challenges of Catholic schools for today and for the future. That is one reason I stay with my job during these challenging days.

My job in the Catholic school office makes me a bridge builder — that is, a builder of trust where trust has broken down. The people in the pews must trust the leadership just as the leadership has trusted the people to become planners for the system.

One of the challenges of my job has been to see, to hear, and to feel the fears and anger of parishioners and parents. When these emotions take over people's reasoning powers, their acceptance of change becomes difficult.

A number of years ago, I heard Elizabeth Kübler-Ross speak about the stages of accepting death. I can't help but liken the fear and the denial of the need to change inspired by this plan to the feelings experienced when dealing with a death.

The issue of Catholic schools and how they affect our precious children are areas that we need to care about deeply. The people who call me at the Catholic school office or who write their concerns and frustrations do care deeply about their schools. To them, the closing of a school may seem like the loss of or a change in a close relationship.

Two schools in which I was principal — one in the Diocese of Buffalo and one in the

Diocese of Rochester — have now closed. Their memories go on in consolidated schools where Catholic faith, traditions and quality education continue to be shared with children.

The initial announcements of closings were not easy for me to hear because of the hours of time I had spent in the schools. I know that the buildings were not the important issue; what was important was that the Catholic values I shared with the children, teachers and the community in those buildings would live on.

I wish that I could help people see that point of view — that memories are within the minds and hearts of children, not within a building.

As curriculum coordinator, I know our schools provide an outstanding program. The Stanford Achievement Tests are given each year to evaluate student and program progress in all academic areas. Year after year, the results indicate that many of our students start out within the average range nationally, but after one or two years in our schools, they are achieving far above national averages.

On the national religion inventories, our students continue to prove that our religion programs are strong in Catholic doctrine, Scripture, sacraments, worship and Christian values. On the values section of the tests, more than 85 percent of our students felt we should have "rich countries help poor countries" and more than 91 percent agreed that the Bible provided them with the guiding words of Jesus. These numbers tell me that the Catholic schools are helping children become good citizens and loving people.

Beyond testing tools, I am privileged to help develop the curriculums that incorporate social justice themes into all subject areas. I also provide directives that include daily prayers before and after classes, at meal-times, and in times of need and thanksgiving. Prayer in our schools includes not only traditional prayers, but also informal and spontaneous forms that give students a basis for their faith development.

Religion in the Catholic schools is more than a 30-minute class each day; the history of the church, its traditions, social conscience, and life-giving sacraments are taught and shared throughout the school day. Students are taught to analyze problems, to make educated decisions and to help one another in light of Catholic values.

I stay with the Catholic schools because I have seen the good they do for students as children and throughout their adult lives.

During the last few weeks, there have been three areas of frustration that have brought me some low points. First, some people perceive a lack of sensitivity on the part of diocesan leaders to the needs and concerns of certain individuals.

From my perspective, I see a bishop who cares about his people and a superintendent who wants a future for Catholic schools in this diocese. Criticism of both these men is difficult for me to listen to. I see my role as trying to communicate the facts. It would be easy enough to walk away from controversy,

but I do believe that in the wake of unrest, the reorganization is being guided by the Spirit. In the end, all people will not be satisfied, but I hope that all will be able to support the system — for the sake of the children.

Secondly, if we look at the enrollment histories and projections and then stay the same, more schools will close and more children will be turned away from some of the overcrowded buildings.

My third frustration is the confidence some people have lost in Catholic schools. No matter how outstanding the program and atmosphere in our schools, the number of students continues to drop faster than decreasing birth rates.

National studies by Father Andrew Greeley and James Coleman continue to show that Catholic schools provide children with excellent academic programs, and that people who spend at least eight years in Catholic schools are more likely to be weekly communicants when they grow up than are those who attend Catholic school for fewer than eight years.

Last spring, I attended a presentation on the Northeast Quadrant's reorganization plan at a school that had been involved in planning for at least two years. When I reminded people that, as part of the process, a parent survey had been done the year before, their response was that they did not take it seriously at the time. They thought nothing would come of it. Human nature, it appears, doesn't allow us to get emotionally involved unless we are affected by the results immediately.

People have long assumed that Catholic schools would be around if and when they chose to use them. In reality, we have to work for the continuance of Catholic schools.

I believe that when change seems imminent, people often feel backed into a corner and react out of fear. There is a myopic vision of what is, and not of what can be: the growth and continuance of Catholic schools in this diocese. The reorganization plan calls for building up, not tearing down the system. This message should not get lost in the emotion of change.

For three years, I was staff representative to the Northeast Quadrant during that area's early days of planning. There, the problem of declining enrollments and large deficits forced people to take steps to ensure that Catholic schools would be available to their children in the future. The reality of not having a school on every corner became the way to survive. I saw that the fear and pain of losing one's school could be overcome when the welfare of the children became the focus of their efforts. Twelve buildings became eight. The children became united into a system, and are now enjoying broader-based communities. The Northeast Quadrant is a success story.

I know that I am not going to change a lot of the misconceptions some people have about the diocesan office, but I do hope I can be a "change agent" in building trust toward the plan among people in the pews. Catholic schools are an essential element of the future of the church in this diocese, and they are a wonderful place for children to learn.

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