

# School plan ignores 'little miracles'

By Anthony and Joyce Montanaro  
Guest contributors

As parents of four children attending Catholic schools, we have reflected on Bishop Matthew H. Clark's school reorganization plan.

As products of Catholic education — locally, St. Anthony's, Aquinas Institute, and St. John Fisher, and in Pennsylvania, Immaculate Conception, St. Joseph's and Marywood — we have selected the Catholic/Christian values and academic standards of Catholic schools for our children. As professional educators for a combined, 30 years in local public schools, we expect excellence.

Excellence, it would seem, is equated with money, and with few exceptions, money seems to be the bottom line for diocesan reorganization. Lack of funds closed St. Anne's, Immaculate Conception, and Cardinal Mooney, while sufficient money has allowed Holy Family, St. Ambrose and Nazareth Academy to stay open.

Enrollment also seems to be a vital criterion for which schools will endure, but enrollment is really just per capita income. With this focus on finances, what financial solutions have been enacted or explored?

Certainly, closing and consolidating schools must head the list, although both are negative approaches. It reminds us of "preventative cancer surgery" — whatever limb or organ is removed will never develop cancer!

What is being done on the positive side? We do not see Bishop Clark or the Pickett Commission using the resources available to them to implement innovative programs such as politically organizing with other private schools or a comprehensive recruitment campaign on a diocesan level.

Last February, Peter Spinelli, chairman of the Diocesan Board of Education, promised a plan that would recruit students for Catholic schools as a whole system, not just on a parish basis. Where is it?

Making Catholic education available to a generation of youngsters should be the priority of the Commission on Reorganization, and the financial responsibility of each parish in Monroe County. If public schools relied on the financial support of only those with children in school, the public school system would not exist.

This concept was part of the commission's original school plan, but in barely one year, they buckled to opposition from the more affluent suburban parishes — parishes with no schools of their own. We question why the desires of these pastors should outweigh the pleas from city parishes.

Why should St. Theodore's in Gates be torn apart and St. Louis in Pittsford left un-

touched? Money is the bottom line.

The proposal for shared, equitable financing was a sound one. If it was also part of a comprehensive plan with the goal of providing Catholic education to all who desire it, then the proposal could have resulted in a common, lower tuition rate, affordable in both suburban and urban parishes. However, this is not the way the reorganization plan unfolds. It does not have the power to mandate structure within the quadrant, let alone the county. The plan is as powerless to stand up to well-heeled parishes as it is to keep open a high school for only 450 students.

Reorganization is a necessary process to deal with change. It can and should be a good process. At its best, reorganizing could unify parishes, pooling their resources for strong growth toward the common goal of quality Catholic education in the city as well as the towns. Adam Urbanski, president of the Rochester Teachers' Association, said, "Change is inevitable, but growth is optional."

Unfortunately, it seems to us that this option has not been picked up by the Commission on Reorganization of Catholic Schools. The bishop and the commission have lost sight of who we are: a Catholic/Christian community driven by the Holy Spirit, whose members have historically chosen to educate our children — initially the poor, and ultimately, everyone — in value-based, high quality schools.

Without this Spirit-focus, the diocese has reacted defensively to change — followed when we need them to lead in innovative restructuring. Catholic schools are not being made better; rather the commission is being whirled into the problems of individual schools.

The reorganization plan itself is creating bigger problems, with the end result of alienating Catholics in each quadrant, indelibly marking young Catholics, and creating general turmoil.

In May, 1979, Bishop-elect Matthew Clark was described as a man of "vision and hope." A priest quoted in the *Times-Union* said, "We hope he is a hope-filled person, full of life and enthusiasm who can communicate profoundly the message of the gospel."

Elsewhere in the same article was the observation, "But the power of the bishop doesn't lie in running a church bureaucracy." Ten years later, this holds true. We look to our bishop to be a man of vision who can see the "little miracles" happening daily throughout the diocese: The unanticipated revival of DeSales High School in Geneva; St. Monica's, which on a pragmatic level should have closed 14 years ago, and 10 years ago, and six years ago, but which con-

tinues to live on faith; and St. Bridget's, formerly a throw-away parish, now a vital part of the inner-city Catholic community.

We need our bishop to be open to "little miracles" coming from the people — God's people — which may not follow the guidelines of a prudent business venture, but nonetheless are Spirit-born.

Catholic schools cannot be based solely on the budget, enrollment, profit, cut-back concepts of a public school. We believe that "Catholic schools are different where it counts," and should continue to be so.

Is Bishop Clark saying by his actions that this school reorganization issue is too crucial, too practical, too big to simply hand over to God in prayer for solution and not just for guidance?

Has he, for example, thought of inviting the people to fill the War Memorial to pray for a solution to the critical and sensitive issue of Catholic schools? Who can determine the limits of the Holy Spirit, or attempt to outdo God? According to Jesus' parable, the shepherd leaves the 99 that are safe and seeks out the one that is lost, and brings it back, rejoicing.

Catholic schools' life force is spirit and commitment. Parents commit their most valuable gifts — their children, their time, their money — for the benefits of a quality, Christian/Catholic education.

We now observe that this life force is being drained from our schools by an inequitable reorganization plan that is flexible for some areas and uncompromising in others. Parent voices are heard, but not listened to. Family financial stresses are acknowledged, but the tuition is raised. Prices going up and enrollment going down are simple economics; creative alternatives from principals, faculty, and parents are derided and ignored.

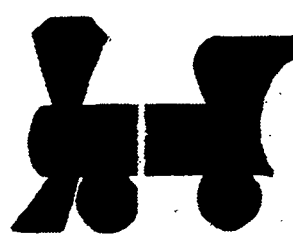
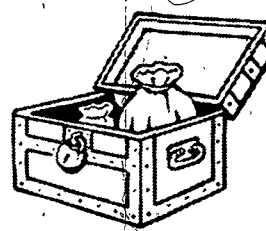
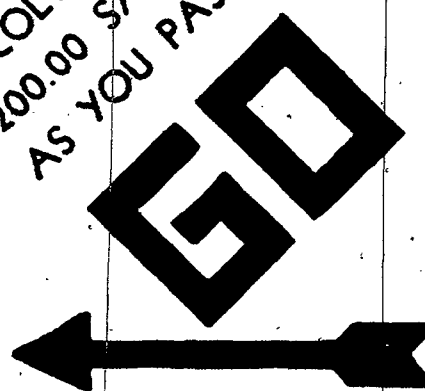
When the people most invested in Catholic schools, the parents, see no results, or only negativity from "fighting city hall," they will ultimately give up and get out.

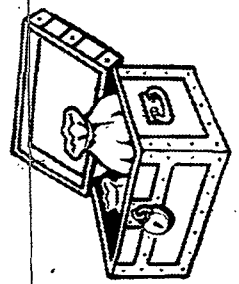
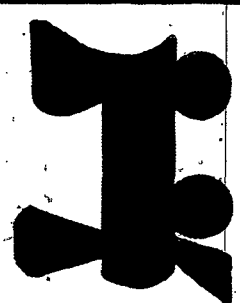

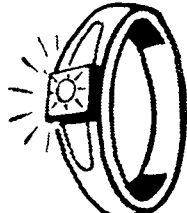
As parents, we can only be wary of the intent of Catholic school reorganization when the vicar general, representing the bishop, has publicly stated that the diocese has no commitment to secondary Catholic education. How soon will this posture affect junior high and elementary schools? Why are our bishop and our commission not supporting Catholic secondary education? The people do.

We, as Catholic parents and teachers, will continue to choose the excellence of Catholic schools for our children. We will advocate a Catholic school system that strives for equal accessibility for children from all socio-economic backgrounds, on the elementary and secondary levels.

## Insight

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