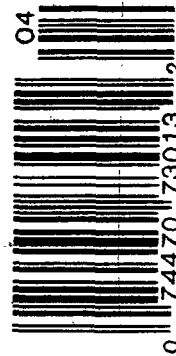


CATHOLIC COURIER

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Extolling education

A grandmother whose 11 children attended Catholic schools, and the head of the diocesan council charged with directing Catholic catechesis, offer reflections on Catholic education. Pages 10 and 11.



Curriculum aims to take students into the future

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Picture yourself at the age of three or four, placidly enjoying the innocence of youth. Suddenly your parents — with no apparent malicious intent — take you from the warmth and security of your home and place you among strangers, most of them your own size, but a few who look as big and all-knowing as your parents.

Welcome to the world of elementary education.

During the next 10 to 11 years — depending on how early you enter pre-kindergarten — your intellectual, moral, physical and social life will be shaped by the research, positions and philosophy input of hundreds of educators. Together, these educators — including state officials, diocesan administrators, principals and teachers — have determined what you will learn and how you will learn it.

If you ever wondered why these educators choose to teach what you are learning, the following may explain, in part, the thinking that lies behind the curricular climb designed to lead you to the summit of educational enlightenment.

"The personnel of the diocesan elementary schools ... agree to a goal of setting students well on the path toward becoming persons of character with a philosophy of life and a way of life which mark them as disciples of Jesus Christ," begins the philosophy statement of the Diocesan Curriculum Handbook.

The process of developing your character begins the day you enter any of the elementary schools' pre-kindergarten programs. According to diocesan educators, many pre-K activities focus on "socialization" — that is, teaching you how to get along with others. Your time in the pre-K program will be spent learning classmates' names, where they live, and how you can share your toys with them. Such activities will prepare you for the years of group interaction in classrooms that lie ahead.

As a pre-kindergartener, you will also spend hours hearing stories, singing songs, coloring, cutting and pasting paper — all in an attempt to improve such skills as listening, memorization and hand-eye coordination.

If all this sounds suspiciously like the kindergarten programs of the 1960s or '70s, then you've already developed some understanding of how education has changed in the last couple of decades.

Evelyn Kirst, curriculum coordinator for the diocesan Division of Education, pointed out that pre-K programs have proliferated in response to research showing that children can learn more at an earlier age than heretofore thought possible. Moreover, parents are now increasingly interested in placing their offspring in all-day pre-kindergartens because many mothers now work and many parents are raising their children without the help of a mate.

Gaynelle Wethers, principal of St. Monica's School in Rochester, also emphasized the importance of pre-K programs for minority students.

"The type of testing (they will encounter) is geared for children of the majority, not the minority," she said. For minority children, Wethers remarked, pre-

K programs perform a function similar to that of Project Head Start, initiated by the federal government in the 1960s. Head Start placed disadvantaged pre-school children in nursery-school-like centers where they could be prepared to handle the challenge of competing academically with their more affluent peers.

When you move from pre-kindergarten to the real thing, you will find a curriculum that resembles what you left behind but also offers some new twists. As in a pre-K setting, developing your socialization skills will be a large focus of your teacher's efforts. You will learn to recite the alphabet and count numbers, but you will encounter some new challenges as well.

If you're attending kindergarten at All Saints Academy in Corning, for example, you will take a weekly computer-literacy class. To help you use the keyboard, the teacher will paint your fingernails with different watercolors, according to Vincent Moschetti, principal.

"If letter A was in red," Moschetti said, the teacher will tell the student "to hit the letter A with the red fingernail."

Such a class wouldn't have existed in most schools five to 10 years ago, diocesan educators said, but in today's high technology world — a world children may first encounter in popular video games — computer literacy is becoming a must. Indeed, in some cases, computers have helped unlock some children's internal barriers to learning, Kirst commented.

"I've seen a second-grader who wasn't reading sit down at a computer and be able to read," she said. "Something that wasn't clicking in his brain clicked with the computer."

In the primary grades of one through three, getting you to "click" with the process of learning means emphasizing the relationship between school and your life. Courses in these three grades emphasize concrete material you can apply to your immediate environment. In math class, for example, you might measure the classroom size as part of your problem-solving exercises, while in science class, you might write an essay about your pet dog.

The social studies curriculum in grades one to three conveys the idea that you are part of a much larger community. In first grade, you will study yourself, your family and your school. Your instructor may ask you to draw a map of your neighborhood as an exercise, according to Sister Mary Louise Brien, SSND, principal of Holy Ghost School in Rochester.

Second grade social studies continues the process by taking you beyond your neighborhood to the community known as the United States. The cycle ends in third grade with a look at world communities, Sister Brien said.

In the primary grades, you will also begin to experience the fruits of "whole-language learning," which emphasizes content understanding through reading, writing, grammar exercises and oral presentations.

Thus in reading class, your teacher might ask you to help her tell a story by clapping or dancing at certain points, or by reading along. Such methods are designed to encourage class participation, according to Mary Pietropaolo of the Wright Group, a Seattle-based curriculum company that specializes in whole

Continued on page 18



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