

Today's efforts foster hope for days to come

By Peter Spinelli
Guest contributor

I am a product of 16 years' worth of Catholic education — from St. Anastasia's School in Queens, N.Y., to Niagara University. Both of my children attended St. Louis School in Pittsford and received excellent educations.

Consequently, it should be no surprise to anyone that I have a keen interest in our diocesan schools. I was delighted, therefore, to be asked by Bishop Matthew H. Clark to serve on the then newly formed Board of Education in the early 1980s.

At first, our work was largely organizational as a new consultative body to the bishop. Soon, however, it became painfully evident that we would lose our Catholic schools unless some drastic action was undertaken.

What was happening? No money, low enrollment, outdated facilities, fewer women religious as teachers. Schools were being "picked off" one by one.

To my great surprise, I found out that a number of people in the diocese — lay and religious alike — were saying that Catholic schools are a thing of the past and that we should let them go.

This seemed incredible to me because it is plain even from a basic review of test scores that Catholic schools provide an excellent alternative to a public system — superior, in fact, in many cases — with only a fraction of the resources. More importantly, Catholic schools give our children an educational program with religious values.

But when I began to see the frustration of pastors trying to balance a budget with school expenses beginning to exceed 60 percent, I knew some major reorganization would be needed.

The first question was whether Bishop Clark would make a commitment to Catholic schools. Yes, he did. He issued a statement indicating that Catholic schools were a priority and would be kept available through the year 2,000 and beyond, especially to the poor and to those in urban areas.

Terrific. Like most other things, however, what he called for is easier said than done.

With a goal in mind — to save the schools by making them economically feasible to operate — we undertook to determine the best way to get this done. We had a lot of people willing to help in this process, but we went in too many different directions at once; committees, task forces and the like all studied different aspects of the problem.

Finally, Bishop Clark asked Bill Pickett, president of St. John Fisher College, to head up a commission on school reorganization. I was delighted to be asked to serve on this commission, but as soon as we began to meet, we weren't sure just where to start. We asked the Center for Governmental

Research to give us some ideas, which we later refined into a "system framework plan."

The plan drew a lot of fire. We expected this from the so-called "school bashers," but we were surprised when some strong school supporters questioned the plan. They did this because they feared a loss of local control within a diocesan system. But having a system — rather than independently operated parish schools — is the only way to avoid the eventual loss of most if not all of our schools.

Had the commission's plan stopped there — creating a school system with centralized financing — it would have been traumatic enough. But the commission's objective was also to review and recommend reorganization plans calling for the consolidation of schools within quadrants and the establishment of junior highs to provide middle-level education.

In the reorganization and consolidation process, we couldn't develop a one-size-fits-all program. The Northeast Quadrant had already been reorganized because of its financial crisis, and while that quadrant still has some major financial concerns, we are developing there a strong quadrant system with an excellent junior high at Northeastern Catholic. The Northwest Quadrant, on the other hand, is not yet ready for school consolidation due to a number of factors, including geographical diversity.

Between those two extremes are the southeast and southwest quadrants, where we have experienced quite a bit of controversy. Successful and financially stable schools are saying, "It ain't broke, so don't fix it."

That's a cute and enticing response, but in my opinion, it is dead wrong.

As Catholics, we must be in this together and support each other, rather than acting as island parishes taking care of only those within our own borders. In fact, Bishop Clark made it clear that Catholic schools must be available to all children, especially those in urban areas and those who are poor.

One of the frustrating parts of this process has been the misperception by some that a school system means a loss of local control.

Under the old parish-based system, there was no effective local control. The schools were really run by the pastor and principal, with some control and direction from the diocesan education division. OK, there were — and still are — school boards and parish councils involved, but real control involves finances, the appointment of teachers and principals, and the determination of educational policies. Under the system framework, there will be real control at a local level, by a quadrant board with real authority.

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Authors connect past with future

The authors of this month's Insight essays represent both the past and the future of Catholic education in the Diocese of Rochester.

Gail Welch is a 1947 graduate of St. Mary's School in Dansville — a school she proudly describes as the oldest Catholic school in the diocese.

Beginning in 1959, Welch and her husband Gerald have sent a continuous stream of pupils — 11 children and now five grandchildren — to St. Mary's.

Over those years, Welch has watched the school struggle to survive amid increasing expenses and declining enrollments.

Welch, who wrote her article with the help of her daughter, Lynn Welch Datson, shares some of her family's experiences at St. Mary's — especially concerning the support and help provided by teachers and staff. That kind of care and quality in education is still needed today, Welch said.

Peter Spinelli has also been part of Catholic school education, having graduated from Catholic elementary and high schools, and a Catholic college. With his wife, Patricia, he has put two children through St. Louis School in Pittsford.

Spinelli, a attorney with the Rochester firm of Harris Beach & Wilcox, has also been involved with preparing Catholic schools for the future. He served on the diocesan Board of Education for seven years, then joined the Bishop's Commission on School Reorganization, which developed the System Framework Plan for Catholic schools in Monroe County.

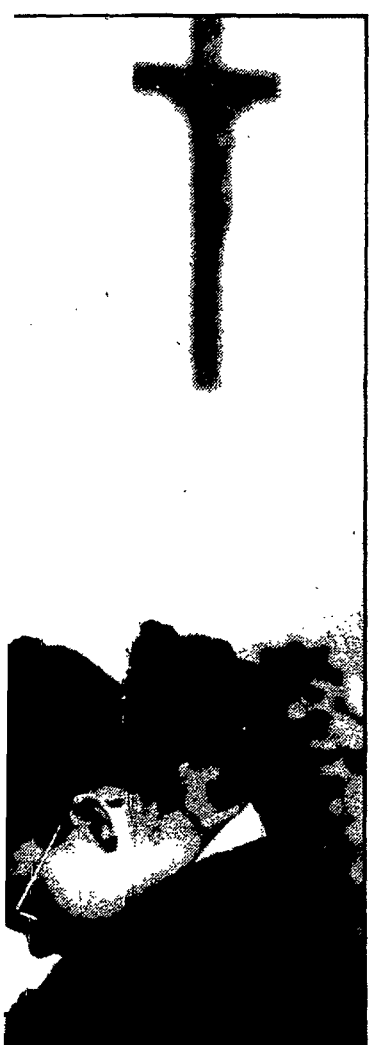
Spinelli is currently the chairman of the newly formed Christian Formation and Education Council, which — as the diocese implements its Well-integrated Catechetical Plan — will oversee not only schools, but also religious education, adult education and youth programs.



Teacher Mary Anne Young encourages Todd Rowan during a reading.



From left, third-graders Kelly Hayes, Stephanie Welch and Brandy Chapman sing along during vocal music class.



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