

High school goes on-line with Channel One

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

IRONDEQUOIT — "Good morning, Bishop Kearney."

That's the message students at the Irondequoit high school hear each weekday at 8:20 a.m. as they settle into homeroom.

But the greeting doesn't come from a teacher, a coach, or even the school principal. It comes from Student Council President Matt Cox, who transmits a five-minute Bishop Kearney news update live from a studio in the Kearney library. The "broadcast" is fed to 31 homerooms every morning, thanks to the Whittle Educational Network.

The network is operated by Whittle Communications — a Knoxville, Tenn.-based corporation owned by Christopher Whittle — and is the producer of Channel One, a commercially sponsored news program for students. The 12-minute news-and-information program consists of a 10-minute newscast and two minutes of commercials.

Channel One is offered to secondary schools at no cost. In fact, the schools receive about \$50,000 worth of equipment from Whittle — including monitors, cameras, cables and a satellite dish — to run the daily broadcasts.

Bishop Kearney is the only school in Rochester and one of only three schools in upstate New York to join the educational network. But according to Marilyn Harrison, a member of Whittle's Corporate Communications Department, more than 6,000 U.S. schools are currently on-line with Channel One.

According to William J. Halligan, director of Public Broadcasting Programs for the New York State Education Department, Channel One is not allowed in New York State public schools. The Board of Regents will refuse support to any school that disobeys the mandate, said Halligan, a former McQuaid Jesuit teacher.

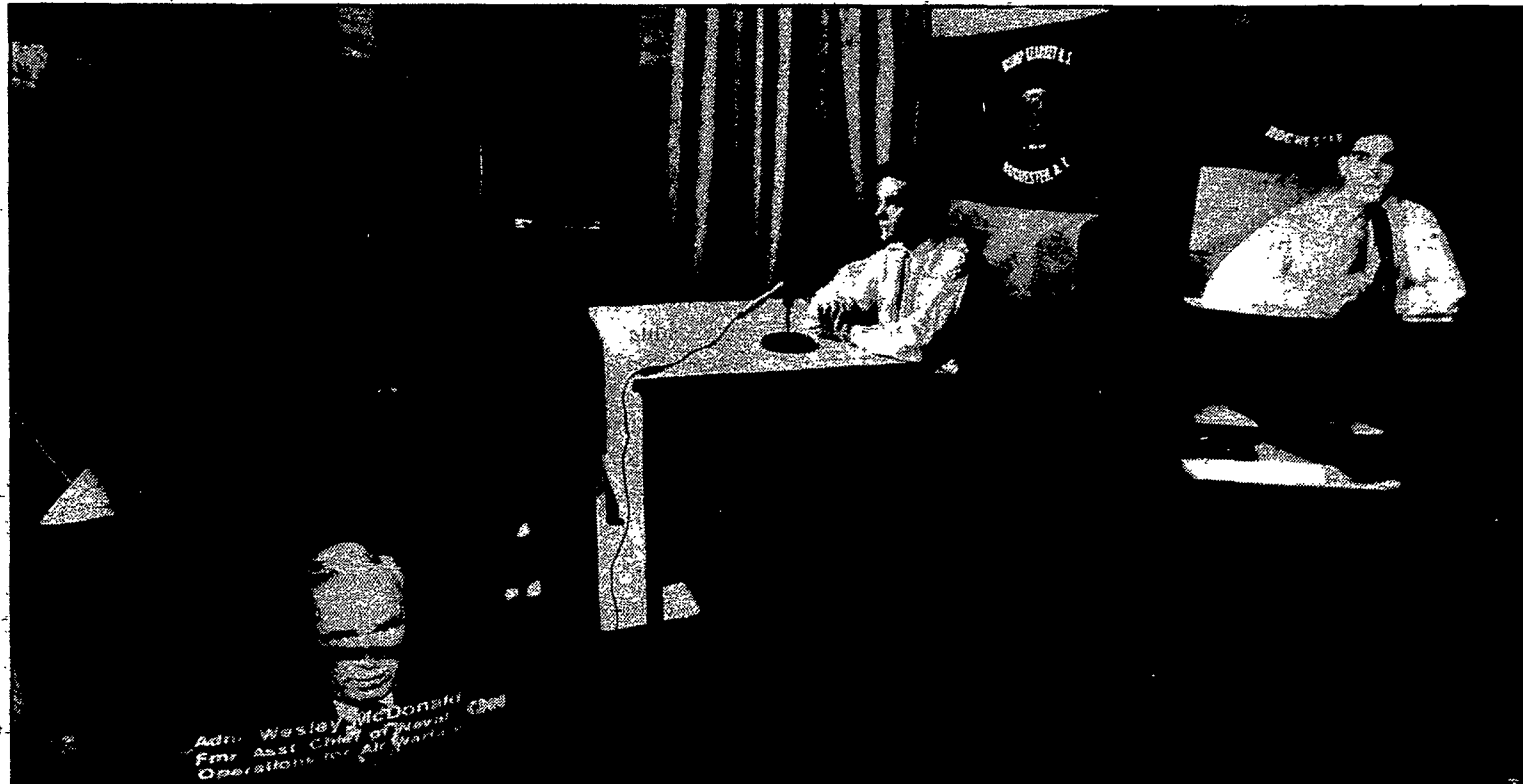
But Kearney's Assistant Vice Principal Brother Paul Hannon said he sees a crisis in American education.

Brother Hannon, who frequently visits other schools on behalf of the Kearney sports program, first learned of Channel One at schools in New York City and Boston.

The assistant principal said he began researching the system in May of 1990, and school administrators decided last fall to commit to the program. Bishop Kearney went on-line with the system on Jan. 14 — just two days before the outbreak of war in the Persian Gulf.

Brother Hannon and Kearney's Public Relations Director Barbara Jablonski noted that the timing of the installation was perfect.

"I think the students saw why we hooked up Channel One once the war broke out,"



Senior Tony Floreano sits in the newly completed video control room at Bishop Kearney. Although the Whittle Educational Network supplies the school with the equipment to run Channel One, the school can use the hardware to produce its own announcements, personal ads, sports highlights and more.

Jablonski remarked.

Students have been avidly following Channel One's golf coverage, said Jablonski, who added that seeing history in the making is an asset for the students.

"I like Channel One because I like to hear about the Persian Gulf Crisis at school, even though I also watch the news at home," noted freshman Stacey Thomas.

Although the programming is designed for teenagers — even the newscasters are between the ages of 18 and 24 — Brother Hannon said he reviews the broadcasts before school every day and can decide not to air a certain segment of the broadcast.

"If it (the broadcast) is against what we are teaching in the school, it won't be shown," said Brother Hannon.

Although Channel One can help students learn more about their world, the project has attracted national controversy because of its revenue source — paid ads.

Although Kearney students said they don't mind the commercials — perhaps because they are so used to them on television — some people question whether advertising belongs in the classroom. Critics charge that by airing commercials, schools can appear to support advertisers and to encourage students to buy their products.

Yet without the financial support of Channel One's advertisers, schools could not afford to install the educational network in their classrooms, said Brother Hannon.

Major advertisers are Proctor and Gamble, Nike, M&M Mars, Gillette Co.,

Levi Strauss Co. and Burger King. Although some of the ads are the same ones broadcast on network television, many of the commercials are corporate-sponsored public service announcements, such as one sponsored by Burger King that encourages students to stay in school.

Harrison said Whittle will not accept advertisements for alcohol, tobacco, feminine-hygiene products or contraceptives. When asked whether Whittle would carry public-service announcements about the AIDS virus — ads that might promote "safe sex" and the use of contraceptives — Harrison said such commercials are not being aired yet and would have to meet strict guidelines in order to be accepted.

Aware of the network's controversial nature, Brother Hannon said he addressed faculty and parents in September before adopting the system. He said both groups overwhelmingly supported the project.

Maureen Gunerra — mother of senior Alyssa and sophomore Chad — said her children are enthusiastic about the programming.

"They come home and tell me everything that is happening," she said. "The commercials don't bother them because they pay more attention to the news."

Joan Maring — mother of senior Beth — said she sees the broadcasts as an educational experience for her daughter.

"The kids don't have to wait to get home or read a newspaper to hear the news," she said.

Maring added that she doesn't think the commercials are harmful to the children. "Two minutes of commercials isn't going to matter compared to the hundreds of them they see at home."

Although the Whittle Educational Network supplies the schools with the equipment to run Channel One, the school can use the hardware for other purposes, too.

For example, Cox's morning school news update — which runs prior to the Whittle programming — are produced with equipment provided by Whittle. In addition to the morning show, Brother Hannon said plans are in the making for a 1:35 p.m. show that would allow students to see Bishop Kearney highlights.

Sophomore crew members Pete Dellapietra and Steve Geier said they also hope to use the equipment to produce announcements, personal ads, sports and club highlights and player of the week and faculty interviews.

According to Jablonski, the social studies department plans to integrate the broadcasts into their classes, too.

About eight students — mostly video club members — are currently manning the studio, which is a former storage room that has been converted into a control room.

Continued on page 20

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