

CATHOLIC COURIER

DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER, NY

Vol. 105 No. 31

Thursday, August 15, 1991

75¢

32 pages/2 sections

BACK TO SCHOOL

The *Catholic Courier's* annual education supplement begins after page 8.

Embracing diversity:

Task force suggesting changes in curricula

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Last year, students at St. Lawrence School in Greece learned how to play the Italian game of bocci ball, consumed various exotic foreign dishes, and had a hairstylist arrange their hair in "cornrow" patterns — a style popular among African-Americans.

The school didn't plan these activities as diversions from serious study, but as parts of serious study about the rich heritages embodied by the many groups that make up the United States.

"I think any way that we teach our youngsters to have respect or appreciation for each other is great," observed school principal Sister Diane Dennie, SSJ, who helped faculty committees plan the activities.

As part of a program started last fall, the principal dedicated three weeks out of every year to focus on various ethnic and religious groups that live in this country or that have influenced students' faith.

In ensuing school years, for example, St. Lawrence plans to bring in speakers from the local Jewish community to make students aware of Christianity's roots in the Jewish faith, she said.

Sister Dennie and her staff established the weeklong programs out of a desire to enliven students' sense of life in a "multicultural" world — a world inhabited by myriad groups boasting a variety of customs and creeds.

Sister Dennie pointed out that the student body at St. Lawrence comprises a number of Asians, one African-American, and first- and second-generation Italian-Americans.

"It seemed like it was necessary to let everybody be proud of what they were," she said of her school's emphasis on multiculturalism.

"Multiculturalism" has become something of a media buzzword during the past year. The word defines an attempt by educators and scholars to enlarge students' understanding of history and culture by noting the stories and contributions of ethnic and minority groups to the nation, stories that multiculturalism's advocates assert have remain unexamined.

Multiculturalism can also encompass a revision of history to take into account the roles that such groups as handicapped people have played, or the mark that women have made in the nation's progress.

At the same time, skeptics of multiculturalism assert that emphasizing the diverse ethnicity of American citizens and the oppression experienced by certain groups could widen divisions among the numerous and varied peoples that claim allegiance to the United States.

Public interest in the topic was renewed earlier this year when the New York Board of Regents ordered the rewriting of the state's history curriculum. A committee appointed by Education Commissioner Thomas Sobol concluded that New York students are indoctrinated with a European white-male view of history. The committee recommended revising the curriculum to incorporate the contributions made by other ethnic and racial groups.

The Diocese of Rochester also has decided in favor of a multicultural approach to education. Irene Rivera de Royston, co-chairwoman of the diocesan Task Force on Multicultural Education, said the task force plans to release the first draft of its recommendations on multiculturalism to school principals at the end of this month.

The task force, which is made up of Catholic and public-school officials as well as clergy and lay people, formed last year at the urging of the Commission on Reorganization of Catholic Schools. Since July, 1990, the multicultural task force has been working on its draft report, including the input of several diocesan schools that implemented their own

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