

Community helped turn tide at schools

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said, any decision regarding the school's future must be approved by that group.

Hoping that the planning group will choose to keep the Tier school open, Immaculate Conception supporters have embarked on an aggressive marketing campaign that will culminate during Catholic Schools Week — Jan. 26 to Feb. 1 — according to Richard Marisa, a member of the school board and chairman of its enrollment committee.

Among the school's marketing plans is the operation of a promotional booth at an area shopping mall during the week, Marisa said. He added that his committee also is writing personalized recruitment letters to parents of children attending religious-education programs at Immaculate Conception Parish, 113 N. Geneva St., Ithaca.

Marisa has also overseen publication of three editions of *The Blue Knight*, a quarterly newsletter highlighting school programs, Catholic school issues and alumni remembrances of Immaculate. In addition, Marisa has written two essays on Catholic schools — and Immaculate in particular — for *The Herald Examiner*, a Tompkins County newspaper that explores various social issues.

"Without wanting to badger people, we definitely want to leave no stone unturned," Marisa explained.

Few promotional stones were left in place by St. Boniface School, 15 Whalen St., Rochester, when it was targeted for closing in 1990 by the diocesan Commission on Reorganization of Catholic Schools.

Told by the commission that the school's low enrollment was the main reason for the proposed closing, supporters of the Southeast Quadrant school responded by writing a 250-page report detailing the negative impact closing St. Boniface would have on the neighborhood.

Having no Catholic school in Rochester's South Wedge area would cause families to leave, disrupt the area's business life, and leave a ministerial vacuum in the city, the report argued.

"That was the document that saved our school," said Father Matthew A. Kawiak, the parish's parochial vicar and co-author of the 1990 report.

Faced with militant opposition in the southeast, the commission later tabled its recommendations — although future reorganization of the quadrant's

schools remains possible.

Until that happens, St. Boniface will continue to lead the way in terms of Catholic-school marketing in the Rochester diocese. Since 1990, the school has employed many of the same public-relations methods currently being adopted by Ithaca's Immaculate Conception School — and then some.

Father Kawiak noted that the school continually accentuates the positive by inviting dozens of print, radio and television journalists from throughout the city and outlying areas to cover school activities and events. For example, all of the Rochester television stations covered the school's announcement last year that it was a "drug-free" zone, an important selling point in an era in which parents worry about their children's exposure to illegal drugs.

The school's halls sport numerous informational posters, meaning that even casual visitors can't escape learning about St. Boniface's multi-racial student body, its academic prowess and the Christian philosophy that guides it.

"One of the efforts and strategies in our marketing is making people aware of the pluses in Catholic education," Father Kawiak said.

The effort to raise awareness seems to have paid off. Enrollment at St. Boniface has increased from 123 students in 1989-90 to more than 200 students in 1991-92.

Much of that success can be attributed to the work and talent of lay Catholic-school supporters, the priest emphasized. He and other school officials noted that anyone — from retired Catholic lay people with entire days to spare to single mothers with a lone hour each month to volunteer — can help a school keep its costs down and enrollment up.

Volunteers helped save DeSales High School, 90 Pulteney St., Geneva in 1975. Parents, alumni and area business owners rallied to raise funds to save the school after its board voted to close. The board reversed its decision two months later when supporters, who formed a group known as "Save Our School," raised more than \$80,000 in six weeks.

Edward Smaldone, a 1943 graduate of DeSales High School, was one member of DeSales' S.O.S. group. He recalled that his group created a number of committees, including one that solicited DeSales alumni for contributions to the drive.

Smaldone also recalled that S.O.S. used the computer facilities of a local construction firm to compile data for use in the campaign. The wife of the firm's owner volunteered her time as a data processor for the cause, he said.

Such dedication paid off in the end, Smaldone concluded, adding that the community's response to Save Our School's campaign was overwhelming.

"We even had \$500 donations from the Syrian (Catholic) church," he said.

In 1977, parents at Rochester's Corpus Christi School went one step farther than their counterparts in Geneva. That year, Corpus Christi Parish announced it could no longer afford to operate the school and would be forced to close it. But when parents offered to run it as a private school incorporated within the diocese, Monsignor George Cocuzzi — then serving as diocesan vicar of urban ministry — accepted the plan.

Sister Eileen Daly, SSJ, Corpus Christi school principal since 1977, noted that some school supporters at that time wondered if the low-income status of many of the school parents would further jeopardize the institution's future.

"I don't think anyone believed it could be done because you're not talking wealthy people, you're talking center-city from a variety of backgrounds," she said. "I think if any of them had looked at the work that this would entail, they might have shrunk from it."

Although the school still hangs by what Sister Daly called its financial "thumbnails" from year to year, Corpus Christi has managed to stay open since the late 1970s by tapping into a variety of resources.

The school has relied heavily on volunteers to do everything from preparing the school's budget to staffing its rooms, she said.

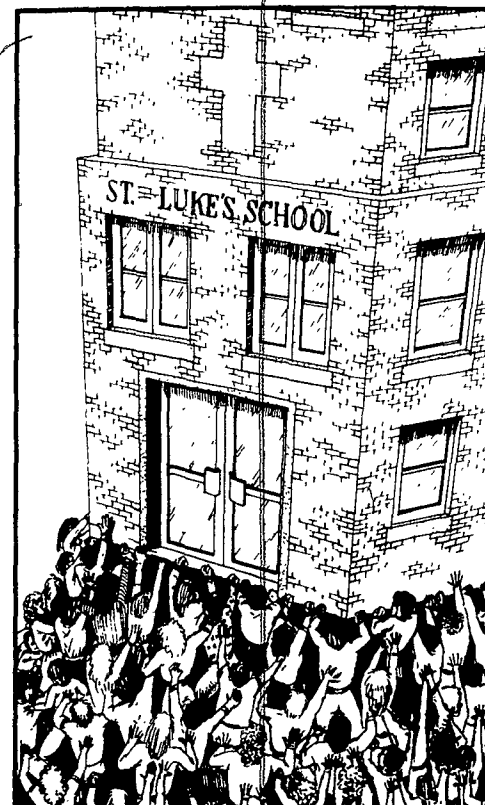
One such volunteer is Leona Hickey, the school's fundraising coordinator, who raises about \$10,000 a year through such projects as candy and garage sales.

But she and Sister Daly both noted that the school lost a major source of fundraising when it moved in 1990 from Corpus Christi Church to Blessed Sacrament Church, 546 Oxford St., Rochester. In its current location, the school is not allowed to operate bingo games, which used to pull in \$80,000 to \$100,000 yearly. To make up for the lost revenue source, the school has been forced to turn to the diocese for a subsidy.

According to Sister Binsack, the diocese subsidizes Corpus Christi — as well as St. Monica's School, another inner-city Rochester school — to fulfill its stated mission of keeping Catholic schools open for the poor.

The stories of these surviving schools raise a significant question: Would they be able to repeat their successes if they were lumped together with other schools under a quadrant or cluster system?

Sister Binsack has observed that those planning the future of quadrant



and cluster schools must use objective criteria to determine which schools will remain open and which will close.

As recently as two weeks ago, she noted, Bishop Matthew H. Clark approved the Christian Formation and Education Council's recommendation to close Irondequoit's St. Thomas the Apostle School, which enjoys parent and financial support much like that relied upon by St. Boniface, DeSales and Corpus Christi.

Doubts about the quadrant system and the wisdom of consolidation have plagued the current effort to reorganize diocesan schools. But consolidation also has been a path to success for Catholic schools in the diocese.

The year 1986, for example, saw two Catholic schools in Corning successfully consolidate into All Saints' Academy, 158 State St. Located at St. Mary's Parish, the school draws students from three area parishes.

"When at first the school consolidated, people thought, 'This is the last straw,'" commented Vincent Moschetti, principal. "Now I think that the community has begun to realize that consolidation makes you stronger, not weaker."

Moschetti recalled that school parents' loyalties to their individual parishes sometimes clouded their commitment to All Saint's in its early years.

"It's difficult for (parents) to let go at first," he said. "Time is the cure for it. We are proving that."

Getting a large number of parents involved in school fundraising efforts can unite parents at a consolidated school, noted Daniel C. Bower, chairman of All Saints' fundraising committee. Bower said he attempts to get as many as 60 school parents together for one event, splitting up duties to "get everyone feeling like it was their project."

Noting that his committee sponsors dinners, lotteries and raffles, Bower advised, "Take what you choose as your events and put a lot of effort into making them as good as they possibly can be, and you'll draw a lot of dollars."



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