

# Diocesan school system takes on new look

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"I see a marvelous history of good parents who believe in Catholic education. They've worked very hard," said Dunn, who has been principal at Holy Family — formerly St. Mary's — since 1983. She began teaching in Elmira Catholic schools in 1971.

O'Connor, who currently serves as a kindergarten teacher at Holy Family Elementary, also pointed to parents' increased involvement as a key component of the consolidations.

"Years ago you didn't have to go through so much. You didn't have to have meetings. You'd just send your kids to school and that was it," she said.

"(With consolidation), the parents have to think that Catholic education is worth it. And we've had very supportive parents," O'Connor added.

Dunn pointed out, however, that some parents were unwilling to ride out the storm after reorganization. In 1986, "we probably lost 30 families because of the change," she said. "Change is not easy."

O'Connor recalled that "for each consolidation, children were lost. A lot of people didn't want their children being bused. That was a little bit of the problem. Parents also didn't like the idea of having their children in different schools. They liked the older ones to look after the younger ones (in a K-8 setting)."

But, "I don't hear people talk about that anymore," Dunn remarked. "After the first year we found that the children had no problem; it was the parents."

Dunn also noted that the pattern of declining enrollment has affected all schools in Elmira — not just the Catholic ones.

"When we did long-range planning we looked at the public schools, and what was going on there was comparable," she said.

Dunn noted that enrollment in the Catholic school system has stabilized recently. She estimated that enrollment fell from 700 to 610 immediately after the 1986 consolidation, followed by drops to 580, 540, 525, 500 and 490 for each subsequent year. The projected 1992-93 enrollment will be somewhere in the 490s, she said.

Sister Mary Ann Binsack, RSM, likewise noted that for the first time since 1959, the diocese's overall K-8 enrollment will rise slightly in 1992-93.

"That must say something about stabilization and where we're going," said Sister Binsack, director of diocesan Faith Development Ministry. She also

## Auburn's Blessed Trinity thrives as school nears its second decade

Consolidation of Auburn's Catholic schools came quick on the heels of Elmira's Holy Family Catholic School System.

Blessed Trinity School became the diocese's second consolidated school system in 1973.

Located in the former St. Alphonsus School building, 101 E. Genesee St., Blessed Trinity was established after Sacred Heart, Holy Family and St. Alphonsus schools consolidated.

The sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grades from St. Mary's School were consolidated with Blessed Trinity in 1987, and St. Hyacinth School followed in 1990.

Although St. Mary's (pre-K through 5) and Blessed Trinity schools will continue to operate separately, they did combine some administrative functions this year

under the name Cayuga County Catholic Schools, noted Sister Walter Anne O'Malley, SSJ, Blessed Trinity's principal.

The two schools will maintain separate facilities and principals, Sister O'Malley said, and have no plans to consolidate. In addition to helping both schools save money, the new arrangement will continue the cooperation that has developed over the years, she added.

In the years since its inception, Blessed Trinity has added a pre-kindergarten program and now offers Spanish 1 and 2, English 9, and first-year high school Regents mathematics.

The projected enrollment for the 1992/93 school year is 273, up from 265 last year.

—Lee Strong

served as the diocese's interim superintendent of schools during the past year.

Although an upward turn in enrollment may speak well for recent changes, Sister Binsack's projected 1992-93 total enrollment of 12,243 students is less than one-fourth of the 55,000 students who attended diocesan elementary schools in 1959.

Given such enrollment statistics, it's hardly a surprise that consolidation has spread from the Southern Tier to other parts of the diocese.

And never has change occurred more rapidly than during the last three years.

Thus far, schools in northeastern Monroe County have experienced the most significant change under the diocesan system, which grouped the county's Catholic elementary and junior high schools into four quadrants. Eight Northeast Quadrant elementary schools, and one junior high, have closed since 1989.

Citing a cumulative deficit in the quadrant of nearly \$400,000 by the end of the 1991-92 school year, along with the need to keep tuition costs at a reasonable rate, Bishop Matthew H. Clark announced the closing of three elementary schools last January. St. Cecilia's, St. Stanislaus and St. Thomas the Apostle all shut down in June, 1992.

The only elementary schools remaining in that quadrant are Christ the King, St. Ambrose, St. Andrew's and St. Margaret Mary. A new junior high, Northeastern Catholic, was established

on the premises of Bishop Kearney High School in 1990.

Despite bitter protests from parents in the aftermath of the 1992 Northeast Quadrant closings, Sister Binsack maintained that budgetary and enrollment figures dictated the changes.

"Sometimes I'm amazed that people don't realize the situation in the Northeast," Sister Binsack commented. "There were seven buildings at only 58-percent capacity. I don't know if all the people had the facts in front of them."

Ensuring that the public stays informed on Northeast Quadrant developments is a primary concern for Mark Greisberger, who took over on Aug. 1 as chairman of the quadrant's governance board.

"In the past, people were not aware of the process that was evolving or decisions that were being made. The perception of the public is that all these decisions were being made in private. That is a perception that I'm trying to change," said Greisberger, who serves on the governance board as a representative of St. Ambrose Parish, 25 Empire Blvd.

Greisberger has begun writing a monthly newsletter to keep parents notified. The first two newsletters have focused on fundraising activities and budgetary projections.

"We need to address the whole issue of affordability," he said. "What is a reasonable tuition?"

"Northeast has been the guinea pig of the quadrant system. We were the first to consolidate, and then re-consolidate," Greisberger observed.

"So in many ways, the other quadrants are watching us."

With only four remaining elementary schools, the Northeast Quadrant has far fewer schools in operation than Monroe County's other three quadrants. Eleven elementary schools still operate in the Southeast Quadrant; nine in the Northwest; and seven in the Southwest. Each quadrant except for the Northwest also operates one junior high school.

Sister Binsack indicated that restructuring in the quadrants will be an ongoing process.

"The system calls for annual evaluation for school sites to ensure quality education in our clusters. If we need further consolidation, that will happen," she said. "We're not done reconfiguring this year."

Greisberger emphasized that developing long-range strategies is the best way to make the consolidation process a smooth one.

"We need to change our focus from surviving to thriving," he said.

That approach appeals to Timothy Dwyer, who became the diocese's new superintendent of schools on Aug. 1.

"I don't know if I'm in a position to say right now what will happen in the other quadrants," Dwyer acknowledged. "I'd rather focus on how happy I am that there is some planning for the future."

In addition to consolidating, the diocese is implementing other changes in its elementary schools to de-emphasize individuality.

On July 1, all schools outside Monroe County became part of a diocesan — rather than a parish-based — system. Along with Monroe County's four quadrants, the system consists of three "clusters" comprising the remaining schools: the four-school Valley Cluster (Livingston and Steuben counties); the seven-school Southern Tier cluster; and the eight-school Finger Lakes cluster.

Clusters are broken down into smaller regional divisions. Elmira's Holy Family schools, for example, are now grouped with St. Mary Our Mother School in Horseheads.


Each quadrant and cluster group will have its own lay governance board.

Finances are the primary reason for transferring responsibility for school operations from parishes to the diocese. In fact, financial operations for three Monroe County quadrants are now administered through the Pastoral Center, 1150 Buffalo Road.

Although consolidation is bound to create emotional upheaval, Greisberger pointed out that situations will never improve unless people maintain an optimistic outlook.

"It's well known that I thought the last (Northeast Quadrant) consolidation went too far," he said. "But I still believe strongly in Catholic education, and I have to communicate that. People need to believe that Catholic schools are going to be here awhile."

"We've got to be more positive," Sister Binsack concurred. "If our enrollment has increased, then I want to see a big banner saying so."



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