

Families decide to learn at home

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Pat and Kathy Donohue knew how they would educate their children even before the first of their four sons was born.

"We became interested in home schooling when I was pregnant with my first child," observed Kathy Donohue, a parishioner at Greece's Holy Name Parish.

"We believe that the Lord wants parents to instruct their children," she added. "We believe that children must be educated to know God's word and to know and love the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior."

Yvonne Rosedale also wanted her children to have a strong religious education. But her decision to teach her children at home was also a practical one: cost.

The single parent of nine children, Rosedale has nothing but praise for Catholic schools. She simply can not afford the tuition.

"It has become a private education primarily for those who can afford it," declared Rosedale, a parishioner at Fairport's St. John of Rochester Parish and a professor of speech pathology at Nazareth College.

The Norton family, which also attends St. John of Rochester Church, became involved in home schooling when the older daughter, Judith, had back surgery and stayed home for a year.

When it came time for her to return to high school, Judith requested that she continue to study at home. She graduated in 1991 and plans to enter college this fall.

And her sister Susan has followed suit.

"I didn't feel like there was anybody watching me, like there was a teacher looking over my shoulder," said Susan Norton, who eventually plans to attend college before entering the convent.

Families decide to home school for a variety of reasons — religious, economic or convenience — but the fact remains that the number of families home schooling is growing.

And Catholics are a large part of that trend.

According to figures from the United States Department of Education, the number of children being home schooled has grown rapidly in recent years — from an estimated 125,000 students in 1983 to 350,000 during the 1990/91 school year.

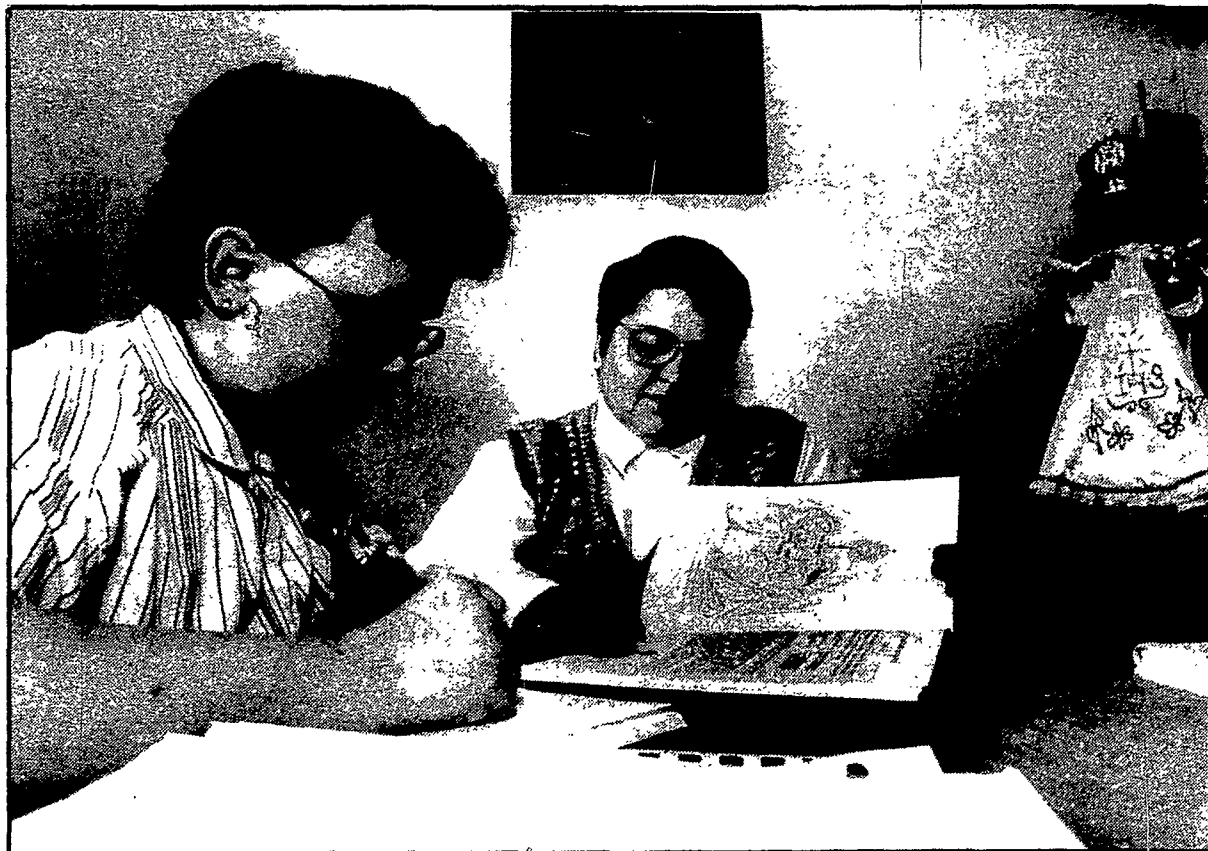
In New York state, the number of home-schooled students outside of New York City during the 1991/92 school year was 6,300 — with more than 1,900 of those students located in the 12-county Diocese of Rochester.

Although figures don't exist about how many Catholics are home schooling, the two main "Catholic" home-school programs — Seton and Our Lady of the Rosary — claim to have combined enrollments of 7,500 students.

Officials of both organizations claim that Catholics are also using non-Catholic, home-school programs. Thus the number of Catholics opting to stay out of public and Catholic school systems could potentially be much more than 7,500.

Parents who choose to home school not only have to concern themselves with teaching — with the programs providing text books, detailed lesson plans and study guides, and resource people to call — but also the necessary paper work.

In New York state, for example, parents must first notify their local school district about their plans to home school, describe the curriculum they wish to use, and file quarterly progress reports. Home-school students are tested each year — or submit portfolios to certified teachers — to make



Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor
St. John of Rochester parishioner Susan Norton (left) prepares for her home-study program finals with her mother, Sharon. Like her sister Judith, who graduated from high school in 1991, Susan, a junior, uses the Our Lady of the Rosary home-study program.

certain they are learning at the proper grade level.

Considering the amount of time and work involved in home schooling, one might question why Catholics would opt to teach at home, rather than make use of the already existing Catholic school system.

"The reason why families like to do this is it strengthens family life," observed Mary Kay Clark, director of the Front Royal, Va.-based Seton Home Study School, in an interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

"It's actually a lifestyle that goes on all the time," Clark said, adding that part of that lifestyle is promoting Catholic teachings.

"As Catholics," Clark said, "we are interested in promoting Catholic values."

Janice Smyth, director of Our Lady of the Rosary School — which is based in Lexington, Ky. — told the *Courier* that many parents believe public schools promote a secular view of life. "Parents see that it will cause their children to lose their Catholic faith," she said.

Both officials noted that Catholic parents sometimes choose home schooling because of the diminishing number of Catholic schools, or because many Catholic schools use the same secular textbooks that public schools do.

Rosedale, for example, said she wants faith to be a part of every class — an approach she did not see in some Catholic schools.

"Religion is something taught like history or math or anything else," Rosedale said. "With home schooling, religion is part of everything we do."

Thus spelling lessons might include Scripture passages and history lessons put added emphasis on Catholic involvement.

Further, Catholic home school programs include Bible study, catechetics, memorization of Scriptures, and often incorporate daily prayer and Mass.

Beyond the religious underpinnings, home-school programs also help children academically, Clark observed.

"The children actually do very well," Clark said, "because their parents are like private tutors —

and any teacher will tell you that children do well when they have a private tutor."

Rachel Smith, program manager for home instruction for the State of New York Education Department, said studies tend to support Clark's assessment.

"Studies show that the children generally do as well as or better than students in regular schools," Smith said.

Oddly enough, even though Catholic home schooling is growing, the trend has apparently not yet captured church leaders' attention.

Officials at the National Catholic Educational Association and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Advisory Committee on Public Policy and Catholic Schools admitted little knowledge about Catholic home schooling when contacted by the *Courier*.

Likewise, officials in the Diocese of Rochester's Faith Development Ministry said they have had little contact with or knowledge of the programs used by area Catholic home schoolers.

But the local home school movement is likely to begin attracting more attention.

Home schoolers at Fairport's St. John of Rochester Parish organized a Mass for home-school families during Lent, drawing 57 people to the inaugural event.

As a result of that Mass, the group established a mailing list of 26 area home-schooling families. A second Mass is scheduled for Sept. 19, and Rosedale — one of the service's organizers — noted that a Catholic home school support group may be in the works.

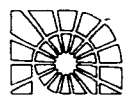
She acknowledged that home schooling is not for everyone. But, she added, "I think it's not as formidable a task as some people think."

In fact, she believes that the movement will continue to grow.

"I think home schooling is the future of the Catholic Church," Rosedale declared.

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