

St. Andrew's parents volunteer as 'partners'

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Several years ago, Shelly Knapp, a parishioner at Greece's Holy Name of Jesus Church, volunteered to help at a spaghetti dinner for her oldest son's elementary school, St. Philip Neri, which closed in 1989.

Working at the dinner with longtime veterans of such affairs, Knapp felt a bit lost as to what role she should play.

"Everyone knew exactly what to do and how to do it," she recalled.

Everyone, that is, except Knapp.

She then realized that the Catholic school — like so many others — regularly depended on a small core of the same parent volunteers year after year to carry out various activities the ministerial staff could not undertake by itself.

Currently the mother of two sons at St. Andrew's School, 901 Portland Ave., Knapp garnered some ideas about recruiting and retaining parents for volunteer tasks at an all-day workshop last year for Tiger Cubs, a scouting group in which her family has been active. She also reflected on her experience recruiting workers as manager of employment and benefits at Rochester's MDT Corporation.

Knapp combined her knowledge of employment and volunteerism in a plan that departed from a Catholic school's traditional reliance on such volunteers as full-time homemakers, a group making up far less of the Catholic school parent population today than in previous decades.

Known as the "Parent Partnership Program," the plan was implemented in December, 1992, after the school had



JoAnne Pagan reads to St. Andrew's School students during her turn as library assistant Jan. 15. Pagan, whose two sons attend the urban Catholic school, is among 60 volunteers comprising the Parent Partnership Program.

introduced parents to the program during several meetings last spring and fall, Knapp recalled.

"Too often the opportunity to be actively involved in school activities is primarily available to specific segments of the parent/guardian/sponsor population," reads the group's descriptive booklet, authored by Knapp and the school's parent leadership committee.

"As busy parents-guardians-sponsors," the description continues, "how many times have we had to turn down our child's request to drive classmates to the zoo for the homeroom field trip or to help out at the school Book Fair or participate in N(orth) E(ast) Quadrant events?"

Rather than rely on a small number of regular volunteers to perform the dozens of non-paying jobs necessary to keep a Catholic school going, the Par-

ent Partnership Program breaks down the traditional duties of classroom aides into several categories and assigns parents to a task they can fulfill in the time they can spare.

"I surveyed the teachers and asked 'If you had an extra set of hands, what would you do with them?'" Knapp said.

For example, *homeroom partners* plan and arrange key homeroom classroom activities, and may occasionally be asked to work at school and quadrant events. Their position entails 30-35 hours per school year.

A *classroom telephoner* spends 10-15 minutes per week contacting parents to advise them of class trips, events and other information.

The *classroom project assistant* assists teachers when students are completing such special projects as cooking, crafts and fundraisers. Partners must be

available during the morning and/or afternoon school hours.

Other partner categories include secretaries, drivers, chaperones, bingo aides, child-care providers, a librarian's assistant and aide, and one paying position — a lunchroom assistant.

In addition to these categories, the program's informational booklet lists a number of school events and activities for which parents can volunteer one or more times. The program also encourages parents to work for the Northeast Quadrant Governance Board.

Since it officially began in December, the partnership program has recruited about 60 parents to perform various jobs at the school, Knapp said.

Sister Mary Alice O'Brien, RSM, St. Andrew's principal, had nothing but praise for the fledgling program.

"They're not just working for us," she said, "they're working for the quadrant."

She noted that the program gives parents an organized way of working to keep St. Andrew's flourishing in a quadrant that saw a number of schools close in the late 1980s.

"I think this came as a result of (the closings)," she said. "It finally clicked in parents' heads that unless 'I'm' a part of this, it's going to happen."

Ross Talarico, whose two sons attend St. Andrew's, caters some of the school's dinners. He said the partnership concept has caught on among many parents who otherwise might not have thought of volunteering to work at the school.

"These people really know what the school's about, and they haven't hesitated to come forward," he said.

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