

Junior highs

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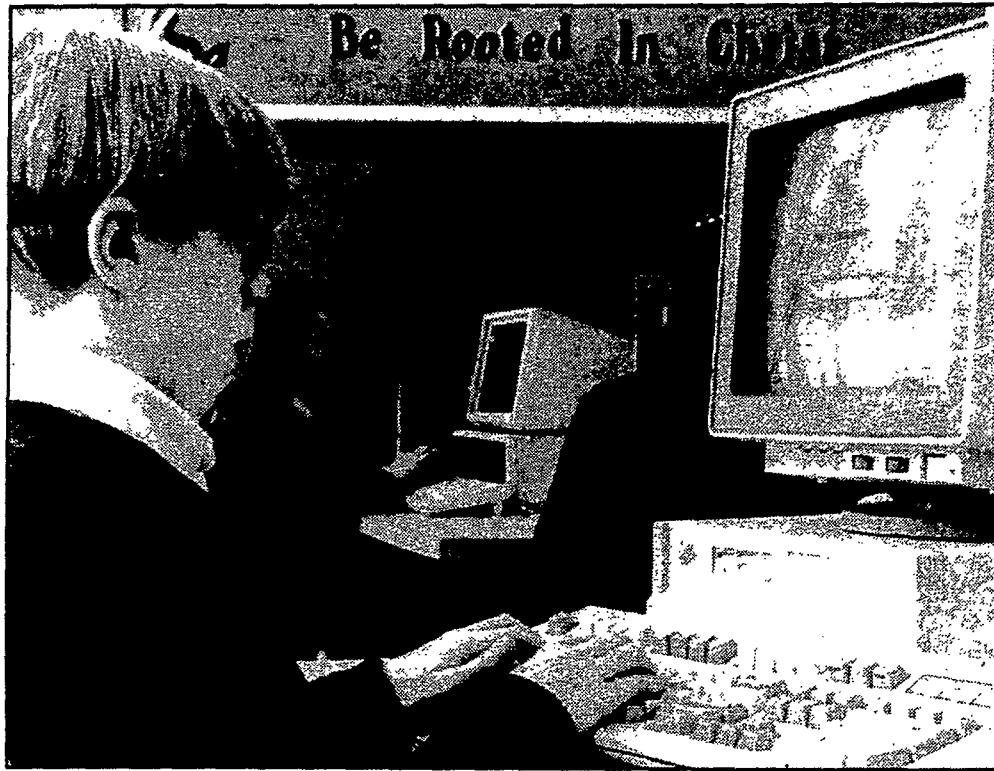
Elizabeth J. Berliner, Holy Family Junior High's principal, echoed Curtin's comments about how the junior-high years serve as a bridge between elementary school and high school.

"It's like a weaning process," Berliner said of how her school works with students. "A big part of it is taking individual responsibility."

At an elementary school, for example, students generally get used to having one or two teachers for all their subjects, Berliner and other principals observed. Junior high compels children to adapt to the different teaching styles offered by anywhere from six to eight instructors who normally only teach one to two subjects each, as opposed to the several often taught by elementary teachers.

At the same time, centralized junior highs retain some of the same demands students experienced during their elementary years, she said. For example, all students must carry an assignment pad to all classes — something few if any high schools would ever ask of students, Berliner said.

Established in the early 1970s, Holy Family has had more than two decades to refine its approach to junior-high education. In Monroe County, however, the three major diocesan junior highs have come into existence only over the last four years in response to the difficult



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Rob Whiting practices his typing skills on one of the IBM computers during his computer class at Siena Catholic Academy.

financial challenges faced by the county's Catholic schools.

Born in the wake of numerous school closings that occurred throughout Monroe County since the late 1980s, the junior highs concentrated parishes' limited financial resources into quadrant-based — rather than parish-based — seventh- and eighth-grade programs.

The relatively new junior highs have

consolidated seventh- and eighth-grade students formerly housed in kindergarten-through-eighth programs at the old parish-based schools. Some K-8 programs can still be found throughout the northwest quadrant and some other locations throughout the diocese.

As Mary Caffrey sees it, placing your child in a centralized Catholic middle school or junior high, as opposed to the traditional K-8 program, entails an inevitable trade-off of values and goals.

The principal of All Saints in Gates noted that the closing of seventh- and eighth-grade programs at the elementary schools entailed a loss of connection to the smaller communities those schools represent.

In fact, all observers agree that one of the best aspects of the K-8 programs is that they call on the seventh- and eighth-graders to serve as role models for the younger students.

At the same time, however, Caffrey pointed out that centralized junior highs allow students some breathing space to themselves during a time when life can be quite frustrating and filled with awkwardness.

"When you get to be an adolescent there are a lot of times when you want some anonymity," she said.

She added that a centralized junior high offers a larger pool of friends for students to draw on than does an elementary school.

"With more kids, there's a greater likelihood that there'll be more kids like you," she said.

Steve Schockow, Siena Catholic Academy's principal, noted also that designing a school to meet the specific needs of seventh- and eighth-graders is a much easier task than catering to the needs of students at several different age levels.

"Everyone is on the same wavelength," he said of his staff. "We're dealing with the same basic type of student."

Barbara A. Tarolli, a Siena teacher who formerly taught at a Catholic K-8 school in Rochester, noted that a centralized junior high serves as a psychological cocoon for students during a crucial stage in their lives.

"They can be themselves ...," she said. "You wouldn't say to a student in this type of junior high, 'You have to set an example for Joey down in first grade.' That responsibility is lifted from them."

That doesn't mean junior-high students are allowed to run pell-mell all over the school halls, Schockow remarked. However, relieved of having to set a quiet, orderly tone for a K-8 school housing younger students who need stricter discipline, centralized junior highs can allow students more freedom to talk between classes and develop their social skills, he said.

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is important," Schockow explained. "If we can help that along during the school day, that's important."

In addition to offering a transitional environment from childhood to the teenage years, Caffrey also stressed that the vastly more varied programming offered by the centralized junior highs is a plus that the smaller schools are unable to match.

"While everyone may have lost something in the change of schools, every student gained something," Caffrey commented.

Indeed, diocesan junior highs offer numerous features that most smaller elementary school-based programs could not afford to offer — at least not on the scale that the centralized schools can.

Computer instruction; foreign language classes; multiple levels of such subjects as math; science labs; a variety of sports teams and clubs that appeal to the mind as well as the body — these are among the varied programs that the centralized junior highs can afford.

Yet, many parents are concerned that their children will become a number in a larger school, something impossible in the smaller elementary schools.

All four principals stressed that their faculty and staff take the time to get to know the students on an individual basis. In fact, centralized junior highs generally house "teams" of teachers who serve a specific group of students.

For example, Siena is split into two teams that serve about 125 students each. Students have the same set of teachers for each of their classes and homeroom periods. The teachers in each team meet regularly to discuss instructional strategies and issues regarding their group of students.

Still, even dividing the student body up into more manageable groups of a 100 or so kids leaves open the question of how a child will react to being among so many of his peers in a larger school.

Joseph Holleran, principal of Irondequoit's Northeastern Catholic Junior High, noted that his school tries to put new students at ease about the transition they'll be making by attending a larger school by having them take a walk-through in the spring before they attend.

"We kid with them about how we haven't lost any of them yet," he said.

Holleran added that fears of a larger school are usually easily allayed among new students.

"They're a lot more adaptable than we give them credit for," he said. "They get used to the size of the building right away."

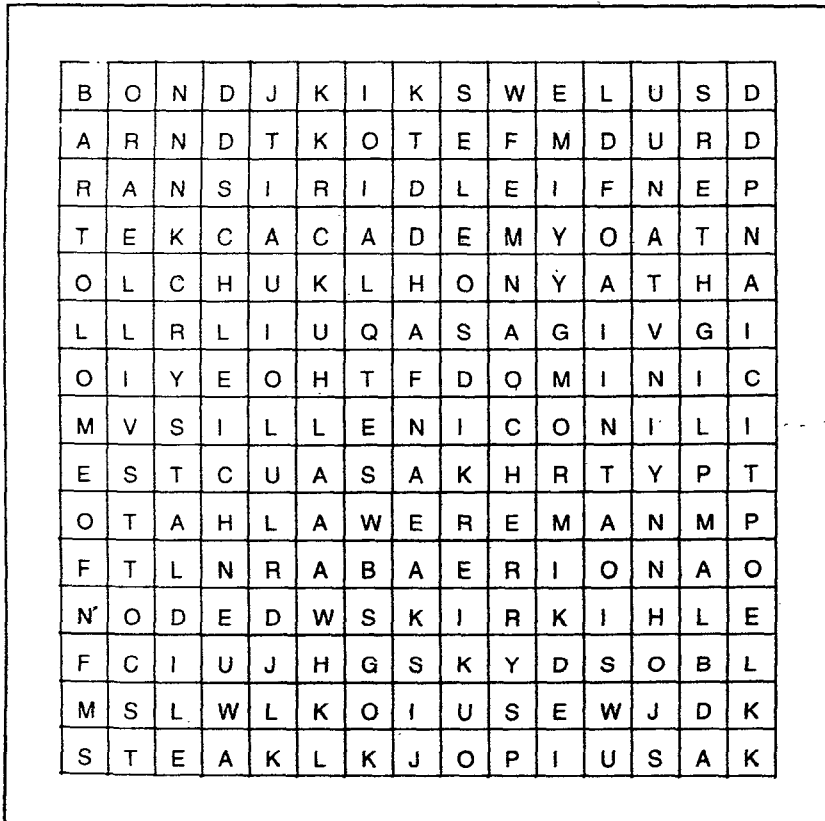
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EDITORS' NOTE: This is the first of two articles on the diocese's centralized junior highs. Next week's article will include analysis of a new diocesan report on centralized junior highs along with additional comments from school officials, parents and students.

Advertisers'

The puzzle below contains the names (or one word from the names) of 20 advertisers in this week's Catholic Courier. Read this week's advertisements to complete the puzzle. Send or deliver your entry to Puzzle, c/o Catholic Courier, 1150 Buffalo Rd., Rochester, NY 14624 or fax it to 716-328-8640.

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