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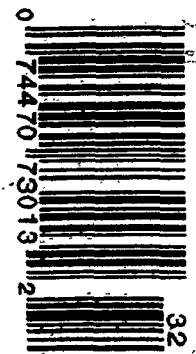
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Education
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Catholic Courier's
annual back-to-
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page 6.

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Diocese hopes 'authentic' approach takes students beyond rote learning

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Remember that wisecracker who would raise his hand in math or social studies class and ask the teacher: "Are we ever going to use this stuff in the real world?"

According to a number of education experts in the Diocese of Rochester, rather than dismiss that question — or answer it by noting the value of learning for its own sake — more and more teachers have decided that the student's inquiry deserves a real answer.

That answer can be found by incorporating "authentic assessment" in teachers' teaching and grading systems.

Authentic assessment is sometimes used interchangeably with such terms as "alternative assessment" or "performance-based assessment." Whatever its name, this form of pupil evaluation calls on students to apply their knowledge to concrete, real-life situations.

Instead of merely filling in the bubbles on a standardized multiple-choice exam, for example, students may have to perform a science experiment during their final exam.

And rather than just take quizzes or spelling tests, students are being asked to create writing portfolios over a period of time — portfolios whose essays demonstrate a growth in the students' creativity, grammar, expression and logical thinking.

Such portfolios echo the collection of works visual artists often must produce during interviews to get a job, observers noted.

Other subject areas may qualify for a portfolio approach, experts added, pointing out that, for example, students may photograph class projects over the years, or use audio- and videotaping, to record oral presentations for assessment.

In order for authentic assessment to succeed, teachers and students must have a clear idea of what outcome they wish to obtain from a student's efforts, according to Sister Edwardine Weaver, RSM, director of professional development for the Warner Graduate School of Education at the University of Rochester.

Sister Weaver's school hosted a consortium of public and non-public school teachers, including a team of teachers from the diocese, who met throughout the last school year to discuss performance-based assessment.

She explained that a good assessment program must ask the following questions:

- * What is the desired outcome for the learner?
- * What task must he or she perform to demonstrate what he or she has learned?
- * What are the factors that can be observed and measured that will accurately assess whether the student has achieved the desired outcome?

Using an example, Sister Weaver said a student asked to give an oral essay on the school mascot's origins would be assessed on such factors as use of appropriate vocabulary, correct enunciation, logical thinking and organization.

The final questions schools must answer in creating performance-based assessment programs is how they plan to record, store and use the information garnered from students who are being assessed.

Sister Weaver added that not only can

As the 1995-96 school year approaches, the Diocese of Rochester is asking more of its educational institutions to implement 'authentic' or 'portfolio' assessment, a form of pupil evaluation calling on students to apply their knowledge to real-life situations instead of merely filling in the bubbles on a standardized exam.

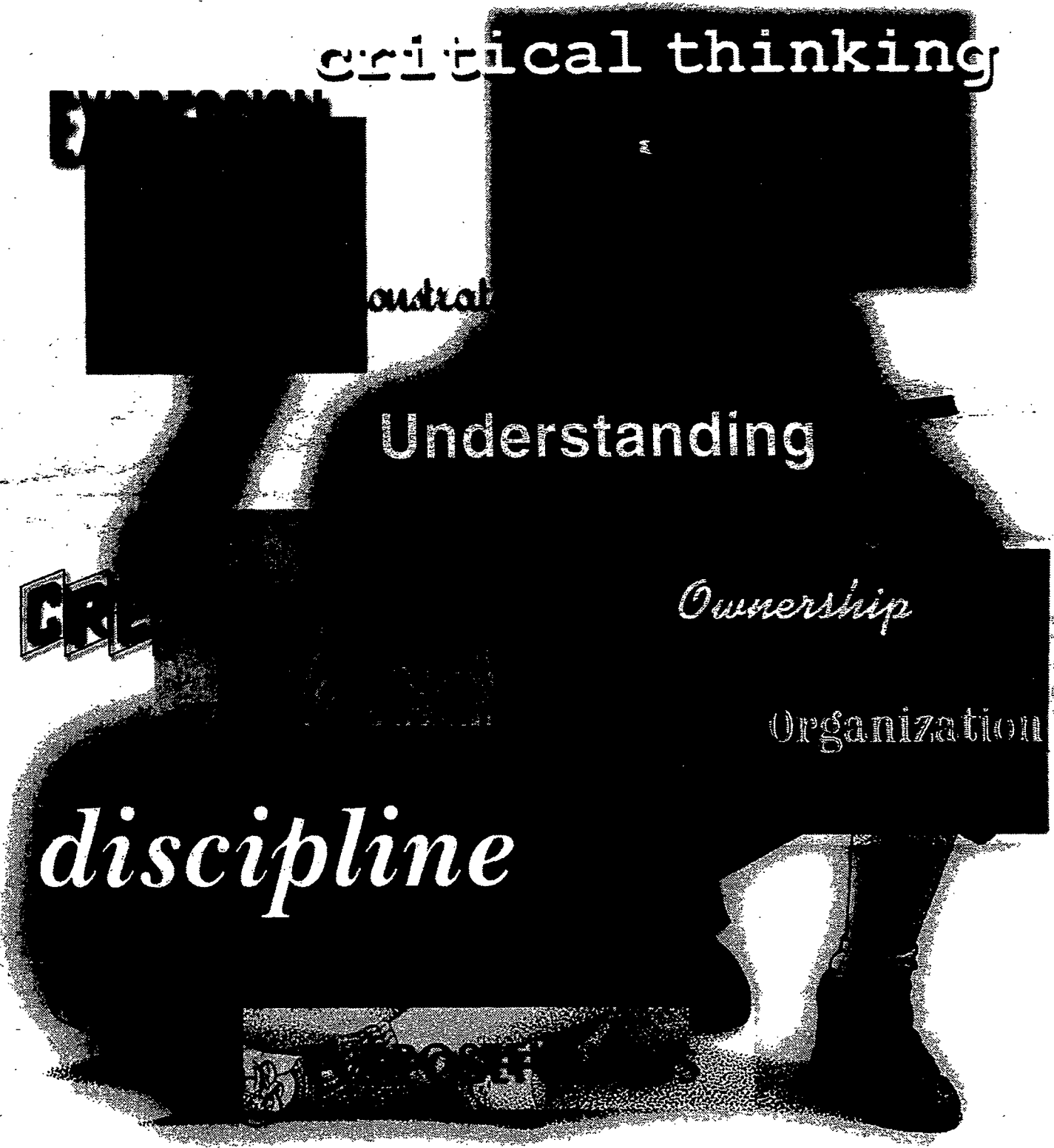


Illustration by Lorraine Hennessey/Graphics manager

students learn more about how and what they learn through a performance-based approach, their teachers can also more closely monitor their own teaching style by adjusting their techniques to meet the demands of students who teachers may not have reached through more traditional methods.

The business world has, in part, inspired schools to incorporate authentic assessment in education and grading, according to Sister Margaret Mancuso, SSJ, assistant superintendent for instruction and staff development for the diocesan Department of Catholic Schools.

"The business community is saying to the education community: 'We need different students,'" Sister Mancuso said.

Businesses want graduates who can communicate effectively, think critically, and willingly cooperate and solve prob-

lems, she added.

All schools, whether they be public, Catholic and private, have always attempted to turn out such students, Sister Mancuso explained, and many of the elements of authentic assessment — student projects and oral presentations — would be familiar even to older adults who remember being graded on the basis of such performances.

But in the 1990s, the nation's schools have embarked on a formalized effort to educate children who will do more than just memorize learned material for an upcoming exam, only to forget the knowledge they acquired once the test is over, Sister Mancuso remarked.

According to this month's edition of *Learning* magazine, most states have already incorporated authentic assessment practices to varying degrees. The maga-

Continued on page 10