

# Education

## Non-Catholic parents praise Catholic schools

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

If you want to hear some reasons why your child should attend a Catholic school, ask someone who isn't Catholic.

Take Chung Ma, a Vietnamese immigrant who oversees maintenance at St. John the Evangelist School in Rochester. Ma's parents were Chinese Buddhists who moved to Haiphong, Vietnam, in the 1940s, and he was also raised Buddhist. But his 7-year-old son, Lawrence, is a first-grader at the Rochester Catholic school.

"I really love the Christians," Ma said. "They teach people the same things as the Buddhists. No matter if people are rich or poor, you treat them the same, then you are happy."

Ma is one of hundreds of diocesan school parents who aren't Catholic but who want their children in Catholic schools. In fact, non-Catholic students make up the majority — from 85 to 90 percent — of the student bodies in Rochester's inner city Catholic schools, according to Timothy Dwyer, diocesan superintendent of schools.

Dwyer added that about 20 percent of the students in schools located in outer Rochester and the suburbs are non-Catholic. In schools outside Monroe County, 10 to 15 percent of students are non-Catholic, he said, with a lower percentage, 4-5 percent, particularly in rural areas.

Although non-Catholic school parents are eligible for financial aid — and many receive it — they still must pay a tuition rate that's generally 30 percent higher than that paid by Catholic school par-

ents, according to Sister Anne Guerin SSJ, assistant superintendent for school advancement. That's because Catholics who are registered in parishes contribute to parish subsidies that support diocesan schools, she said.

Whatever price they are paying, non-Catholics interviewed stressed that they chose Catholic schools because the schools value family participation and strong academics. Such schools also teach their children self-discipline and the importance of faith — even if the faith being taught doesn't quite jibe with their own.

The Rev. David Ruppe, for example, is Episcopal rector of Trinity Church in Seneca Falls. However, his son, Silas, just graduated from St. Patrick's School there, and his daughter, Susanna, will enter the first grade this fall. The Episcopal priest noted that the few differences between Catholic Christianity and Episcopal Christianity weren't enough to warrant him removing his children from St. Patrick's.

"If Susanna decides to say a Hail Mary at night before going to bed, I don't freak out," he said.

School principals stressed that learning about the Catholic faith is not an option in their schools — it's a requirement. However, they also stressed that they try to handle non-Catholic parents' concerns about what their children learn diplomatically.

For example, Sister Dolores Ann Stein, RSM, principal of St. Ann's School in Hornell, encountered one non-Catholic parent who was uncomfortable with her child learning the Hail Mary.

"What I said to her was 'Don't



Lawrence Ma, shown with his father Chung Ma, tries out a seat in Rochester's St. John the Evangelist School, where he will be a first-grader this fall.

Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

you honor your own mother?' and she said, 'Yes, of course,' and I said, 'Well, we honor Mary as the mother of Jesus,'" she recalled. The explanation satisfied the mother; Sister Stein remembered.

In fact, rather than driving non-Catholic parents away from Catholic schools, requiring all students to take religious educa-

tion and participate in religious activities seems to attract non-Catholic school parents.

"Public schools don't teach religion," said Valerie James, whose daughter, Ashante Singletary, just graduated from St. Monica's School in Rochester. "I send my daughter here because I attend church every Sunday."

She attends Rochester's Antioch Baptist Church, affiliated with the National Baptist Convention, USA.

School principals stressed that they encourage parents to become stronger in their own religion so as to reinforce at home the faith-filled messages the children receive in school. In fact, St. Monica's even requires its parents to attend a religious service regularly. But some parents have found their children's Catholic school experience affect their own religious views.

Patti Robbins, for example, belonged to a United Methodist Church in Hornell when she be-

gan sending her sons to St. Ann's. Married to a Catholic, Robbins said she agreed to send her boys to St. Ann's because she wanted them to get a good education. However, a few years back, she found herself intrigued by the religious questions her oldest son, Michael, kept raising.

"He wanted to know things about the Catholic religion, and I was frustrated because I couldn't answer them," she said.

So, rather than keep sending her son to his father for answers, she decided to join the Catholic Church herself.

"I wanted to convert, not only for myself, but also for my children," she said.

But even parents and grandparents with no intention of converting to Catholicism believe that Catholic schools are a good place for their children.

Jamaican native Norma Hacker's granddaughter, Charlissa Brown, will be a first-grader at St. Monica's this fall. Hacker, who volunteers along with Valerie James at the school, said many Protestant Jamaicans like herself attended Catholic schools in their native land, and now send their offspring to such schools in their adopted country.

"The children are taught to love God in a Catholic school," she said, adding, "The discipline in a Catholic school I don't see in a public school."

Sister Mary Marvin, RSM, St. Monica's principal, said a safe learning environment also attracts many non-Catholics to Catholic schools.

"I would like to say they come here because it's God-centered," she said of the non-Catholics who make up 85 percent of her student body. "But in reality, many are avoiding the public schools."

Sister Eileen Daly, SSJ, principal of Corpus Christi School at Blessed Sacrament in Rochester, which is 80 percent non-Catholic, also noted that safety concerns make many parents enroll their children in her school.

"We've been a non-Catholic majority school for 20 years," she said. "Parents have always wanted good education and a sense of discipline and moral values for their children. Within the last five to seven years, they've added 'safe environment.'"

## 'Ribbons' go to schools

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Twenty-one Catholic elementary schools have been selected by the U.S. Department of Education to receive its Blue Ribbon Schools awards, the nation's highest honor presented to schools.

The Catholic schools are among 262 public and nonpublic schools nationwide selected for the awards, which will be presented later this year.

"These schools serve as an example of the excellence that Catholic schools contribute to our nation's educational system," said Robert Kealey, executive director of the elementary school department of the National Catholic Educational Association.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the School Recognition Program identifies public and private schools that

are exceptionally effective at educating students.

In choosing its winners the program looks at such criteria as a school's focus and support of students; its standards and curriculum; its quality of teaching; how a school judges student performance; and daily teacher and student attendance rates.

"Catholic schools have been recognized by many of our nation's leaders as a great gift to the country," said Leonard DeFiore, NCEA president. "This 'blue ribbon' commendation is a big 'thank-you message' to the thousands of Catholic school educators who work so diligently to give their students a value-centered education."

The Blue Ribbon Catholic schools include one in New York, St. Joan of Arc School in Flushing.

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