

DIOCESAN NEWS

State grants permanent charter to Hope Hall

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

GATES — In 1994, Sister Diana Dolce, SSJ, established Hope Hall, 1612 Buffalo Road, as an alternative nondenominational school designed to help elementary students who were falling behind their peers academically and socially.

Now, just three years later, Sister Dolce's dream school is being recognized as a model for the rest of the state, according to Tom Hogan, superintendent of the Office of Nonpublic School Services for the New York State Department of Education.

Hogan said the state's Board of Regents has granted a permanent charter to Hope Hall.

"It lets the community know that we're not some fly-by-night organization that's just going to up and close," Sister Dolce said of the charter. "The charter is a vote of confidence that we're effective."

The charter makes the school a member of the University of the State of New York, which encompasses thousands of public and nonpublic schools, as well as many museums and libraries.

The university is not to be confused with the State University of New York, Hogan said, referring to the collection of higher education institutions commonly known as the SUNY system.

About 20,000 institutions have state charters, Hogan said, adding that at least half of those that apply each year for charters fail to get them. That's because charters go beyond mere state accreditation of a school's academic program, he said. He pointed out that a charter means the state essentially endorses the school's philosophical and academic approaches to education.

"Certainly, I think what they're doing there is worthy of replication," Hogan said of Hope Hall, in a phone interview from his Albany office.

The privately funded school houses grades three to eight, and had a 1996-97 enrollment of 86 students, Sister Dolce said. About 60 percent of the students are Catholic, and 70 percent transfer to the school from area public schools, she added.

Hogan added that it commonly takes schools five years to obtain a permanent charter, and he complimented Hope Hall for its swiftness in meeting state standards. He said that he has invited

Sister Dolce to speak about her school in Albany for a November conference of state nonpublic school administrators.

"I do have a sense that it is a model program that other communities can look at and learn from," Hogan said.

Hogan conducted an extensive review and audit of Hope Hall last spring, interviewing staff members, students, faculty and trustees. He said he looked at the school's financial stability, academic programs and compliance with local health and safety laws, among many other factors. He was particularly impressed that the entire school — students, teachers and staff — meets every morning for an assembly.

"It's kind of like a large family," he said of Hope Hall.

Sister Dolce said the charter gives the privately funded not-for-profit school tax exempt status, and will enable Hope Hall to obtain grants from foundations that consider a state charter a condition of funding.

She added that Hope Hall already receives regular support from five diocesan parishes — Corpus Christi, Rochester; St. Thomas More, Our Lady of Lourdes and Our Lady Queen of Peace, all in Brighton; and Transfiguration in Pittsford; as well as Christ Episcopal Church of Pittsford. The school has also received grants from other Catholic churches, she said.

Hope Hall works with students who are unable to succeed in traditional academic settings, Sister Dolce said, because they have "auditory processing problems." Such students can't simply hear something and remember it because they have difficulty retrieving such information later, she said. This frustrates them and often causes them to become disruptive in class.

Hope Hall teaches a copyrighted study method to such students, she said. She explained that both the method and the school's classes emphasize learning ma-



Ann Marie Heintz, math teacher for grades six-eight at Hope Hall, counts books Aug. 27 for the new school year. The school recently received a permanent state charter. Greg Francis/Staff photographer

terial with all five senses. Hope Hall students find they can learn material in this way more easily than they would if they only verbally discussed material with their teachers, she said.

For example, she said, she teaches junior high students about "imperialism" by drafting one student to empty out the other students' lockers. When Sister Dolce refuses to return the students' locker contents — and even threatens to sell the stuff — the students then understand her when she explains how one

nation takes over another nation and exploits it, she said.

Students are quizzed every other day on material they have learned, she said, adding that students must score at least 80 percent on all tests in order to pass a class. If they can't remember at least that amount, they won't retain it, she said.

She has already seen a number of her graduates go on to academic success in traditional high schools, she said.

"When they leave here, their foundation is solid," she said.

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