

Parenting & Family Life

Many seek child care at Catholic institutions

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Twelve children, ranging from ages 4 to 5, sat at the feet of their teacher's aide, Pat Campbell, in one of the classrooms at the Early Childhood Center in Guardian Angels School, Henrietta.

"Thank you for the world so sweet / Thank you for the food we eat / Thank you for the birds that sing / Thank you, God, for everything," the children intoned in unison with Campbell.

Such prayers are music to the ears of Melissa Schafer, who is divorced and has sole custody of her 4-year-old son Ryan, and must work full-time. Although she's an Episcopalian, Schafer likes the Catholic atmosphere of the childhood center.

"I think it's good to have that kind of structure," she said in a phone interview. "He's learned all his prayers. I like that."

Schafer had nothing but compliments for the Early Childhood Center, which was established at Guardian Angels four years ago. She noted that many child-care centers she examined in the area did not meet her standards for cleanliness and lighting. The Early Childhood Center was a well-lit, orderly place with a staff that has encouraged her son to grow socially and intellectually, she said.

"He learns a lot, I've noticed," she commented. "In a home setting, I don't think he'd get that."

Schafer is one of hundreds of parents in the diocese who have entrusted their children to the care of Catholic institutions. Several diocesan schools, for example, in recent years have become a home away from home for school-age and pre-school children whose parents work full-time. In fact, more than 30 diocesan schools offer before and/or after-school care; and/or offer all-day early childhood education, according to the diocesan schools office.

To qualify for admission, children must be at least 3 years old and toilet-trained. Information is available from the schools office, 716/328-3210.

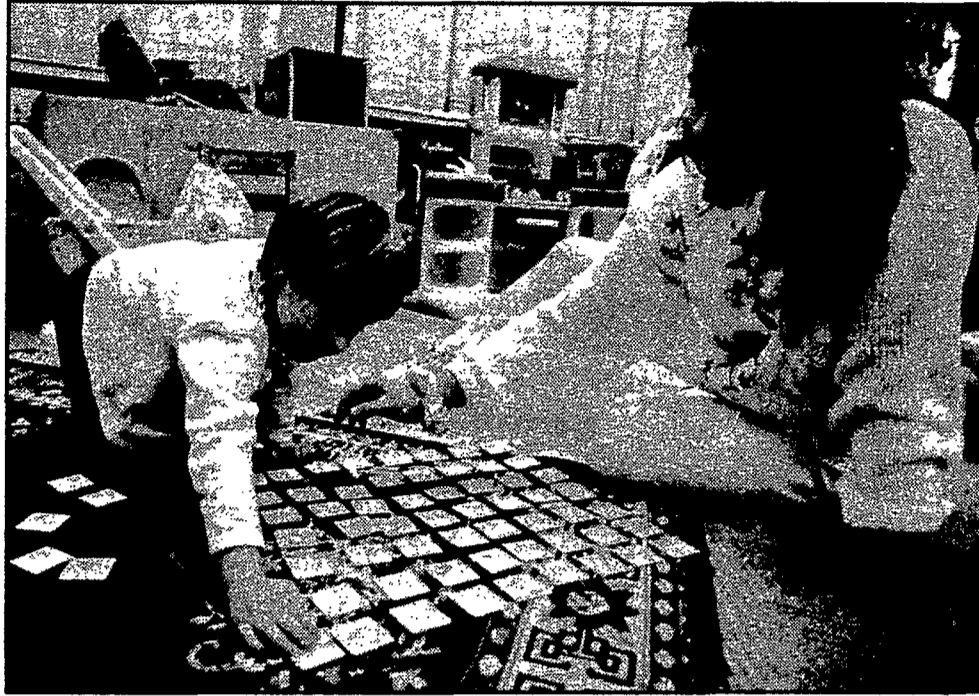
Jane Gerace, director of the center at Guardian Angels, said 40 students come to her year-round child-care/preschool program. The program runs from 6:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., she said, and costs \$110 a week — a fairly typical rate for Catholic child-care programs in the diocese.

Many parents who use the child-care program are single, Gerace said, and, especially in the wake of welfare cuts, need day care more than ever since they can no longer expect public assistance indefinitely when they have small children.

"My desire is to keep them off the welfare rolls and keep child care affordable," she said.

The Guardian Angels program was originally funded with a start-up grant administered through the WEE program — Wegman Early Education — which was supported by Robert and Peggy Wegman of Wegmans Food Markets, Inc. The funding program began in 1993, and lasted three years, helping to supplement and expand pre-kindergarten programs at 13 Monroe County Catholic schools.

The program was later expanded under



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Alicia Ferguson, 5, top, plays 'memory' with preschool teacher Lisa Ondra in after-school care at St. Anne's Family Resource Center, Palmyra Nov. 21.

a second grant in 1995 that created the Wegman Inner City Voucher Program, or WIN, which gave grants to inner-city Catholic school students in grades kindergarten through six attending six Rochester city Catholic schools. Guardian Angels, Gerace pointed out, does not receive WIN monies. The end of the WEE start-up grant also dried up a lot of Guardian Angels' funds to subsidize tuition, she said.

"We still have a lot of needy families, and we'd like to offer better subsidies," she said. She added that parents can apply for up to 50 percent off tuition, and that the school is seeking foundational and private grants to offset the end of the WEE grant.

St. Andrew's on Portland Avenue in Rochester is one of the six inner-city schools that receive WIN monies, monies that helped to create WEE programs at the schools. Connie Berndt directs the school's WEE program, which serves 60 students, ages 3 and 4, she said.

Berndt added that the majority of the students come from single-parent homes, and enjoy a host of educational and recreational programs, ranging from art and gym to music and science. Like Gerace, Berndt said working parents entrust their children to St. Andrew's because of its Christian environment.

"They want Christian values instilled in their children," she said. "I think parents feel in a private school, they're going to get a better education, more structure, more values."

Meanwhile, St. Michael's School in Newark, which houses a pre-K-to-grade-eight program, offers before and after school care to all school parents, according to Kathleen Peters, the school's principal. Twenty-five children arrive at the school between 7 and 8:30 a.m. on weekdays, and 30 to 40 stay at the school until 5:30 p.m., she said.

St. Michael's charges parents \$2 an hour per child, and installed the program about nine years ago in order to keep enrollment up, Peters said.

"It's worked out great," Peters said. "We



Preschool teacher Sherri Cruickshank reads stories to children while holding Cody Rogers, 3.

have people fighting for the spots ... You don't have to go to the babysitter, and it's kind of a homey situation."

Schools aren't the only place, however, where children can receive care in a Catholic setting. Places like Corpus Christi Child Care in Rochester and St. Anne's Family Resource Center in Palmyra are examples of how parishes have created day-care programs for working parents.

A relative referred Edna Rollins, a single working mother with two children, to the Corpus Christi program, an outreach center of Corpus Christi Parish. The center has operated since 1980.

According to the center's director, Linda Hagarty, the Corpus center takes care of 23 children between the ages of 18 months and 5 years, as well as 15 other children with learning disabilities in collaboration with a program operated by Monroe County Board of Cooperative Educational Services.

Rollins said she used to let a private sitter take care of her son Jordan, 3, and her daughter, Jaylin, 23 months. But she wanted them to meet other children, learn about God, and learn social skills, so she put them in the Corpus program. In particular, she's pleased with the progress she's seen in her son, Jordan, she said.

"He does artwork and things that he just wasn't getting at the sitter's," she said.

Hagarty said most of her children come either from homes headed by working single parents, or by grandparents who need help in dealing with the demands of child care. The center offers a variety of financial assistance to parents, most of whom have low incomes, she said, and the center has a waiting list of 56 children.

"Some people are very desperate, and they'll lose their jobs if they don't get (child care)," she said.

Meeting the needs of working parents has compelled St. Anne's Family Resource Center in Palmyra to offer a variety of child-care programs, according to the center's administrator, Janet Gunkler.

A joint ministry of the Catholic parishes of St. Anne's, Palmyra, and St. Gregory's, Marion, the center offers year-round, school-year and summer-long day-care programs for preschool and school-age children, Gunkler explained.

Staff members will walk children to and from their local public school, if necessary, Gunkler said. She added that the center charges only \$89 a week for care that's available weekdays from 5:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.

"Child care today is not a luxury, it's an absolute necessity," Gunkler said. "One of our goals is to keep child care affordable."

Lori Dalton certainly found St. Anne's affordable. Her son, Justin, 7, has been in the center's day-care program since he was 4. She pays the full fee to keep her son there, she said, and considers St. Anne's price well within her means.

"I looked at other day-care centers," she said. "They were twice as much money, or one-and-one-half as much. It was just too much money at the other places."

She added that the staff at St. Anne's was willing to listen to her when she complained about her son's poor relationship with another boy. The staff spoke to her, as well as the other kid's parents, and brought the children together to reconcile, she said.

"I think the care and the amount of money you spend on the care is excellent," she concluded.

The perfect touch at your
next family gathering.

Famous for Quality Sausage
& Meat Products since 1980



651 Plymouth Ave. N. • Rochester
(716) 546-1740



CHOOSE...

Bishop Kearney High School

Register to take the

ENTRANCE EXAM

Saturday, December 6, 1997 • 8:30 a.m.

EXCELLENCE

...an essential of a Bishop Kearney education

"The Christian Brothers' school encourages each person to use their talents the full whether academic, cultural or physical"



125 Kings Highway South • Rochester, NY 14617-5596
For information on admissions call: (716) 342-4000

A Heritage Of Vision & Values