

Grant to help fund
'healthy' education
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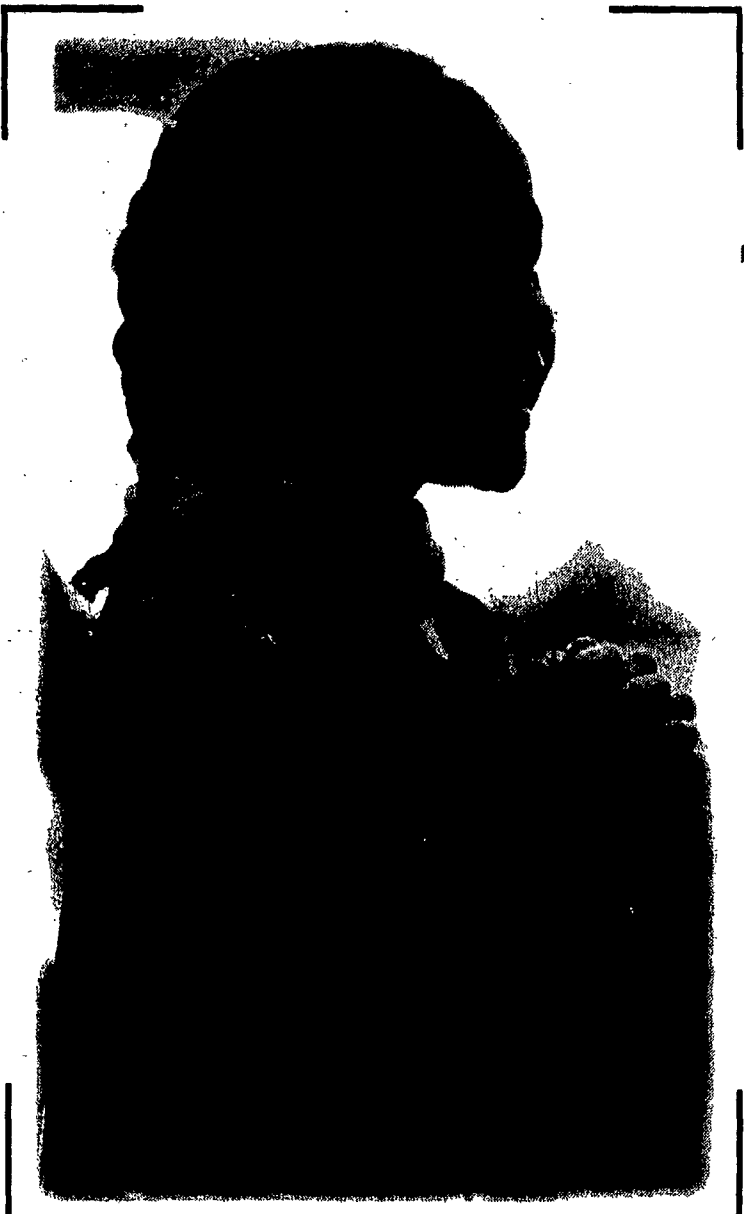
Catholic Schools Week:
Look for school coverage
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'Grandpa Norb'
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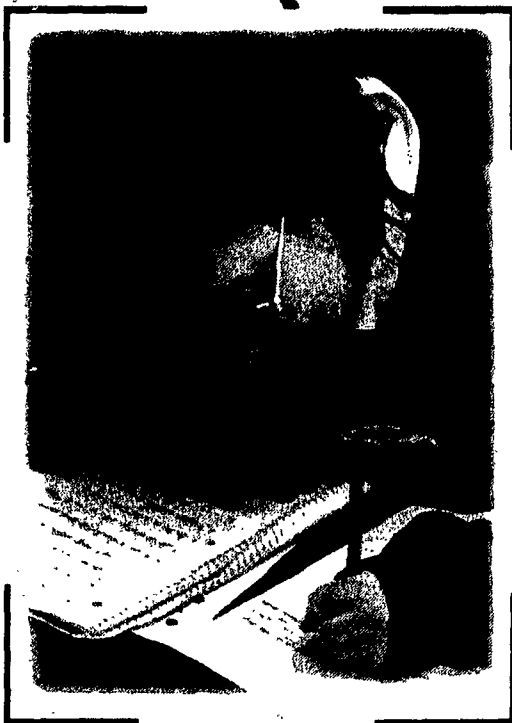


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Zoe Johnson, a first-grader at Rochester's St. John the Evangelist School, prays at the beginning of class Feb. 3.



Elayna Reed, 10, does some book work in teacher Christine Clesla's fifth-grade class.

STORY BY MIKE LATONA

PHOTOS BY GREG FRANCIS

SCHOOL CHOICE

Supreme Court action

Development in the Milwaukee case has drawn great interest from families about having their children attend Rochester's St. John the Evangelist School, where she is principal.

But when the first bill came due in August, Fortunato said, a number of those prospective families called, saying there was no way they could pay it.

Sister Stephanine Riley, SSJ, principal of Rochester's Sacred Heart Cathedral School, said that many parents' regard for her school is greater than their ability to afford it.

"They say, 'I guess I'm forced to go to public school,'" Sister Riley reported.

But if legislation were enacted for school choice — a system by which parents could direct their school tax dollars toward the school of their choice, including Catholic and other private schools — Sister Riley said that would definitely make a difference for many families she knows.

Fortunato agreed that a huge financial burden would be eased, saying, "The tuition (at St. John the Evangelist) is \$2,100 and you're already putting out \$1,000 or more in (public) school taxes."

The odds of school choice surfacing in the Rochester Diocese may have increased following a U.S. Supreme Court action last fall — though it won't be any time soon, Rochester-area school officials predicted.

In November, the Supreme Court refused — by an 8-1 vote — to hear an appeal of a voucher plan known as the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. The program was enacted by the Wisconsin state legislature in 1995 and upheld by the state Supreme Court in June 1998.

The vote let stand a tax-funded voucher program for up to 15,000 low-income children in the Milwaukee Archdiocese to help pay tuition at private schools, both religious and non-religious. It marked the first federal Supreme Court action allowing such legislation.

The development has encouraged school choice advocates in such states as Arizona, Ohio, Maine and Vermont, where Supreme Court voucher cases have pended in the past year.

Meanwhile, Dr. Leonard DeFiore, president of the National Catholic Education Association, said he hopes for establishment of a national school choice program. For this reason, however, DeFiore was only partly pleased that the Supreme Court refused to hear the Milwaukee plan.

"The fact that it wasn't (reviewed) means that the Milwaukee program structure is not the law of the land. We need a definitive Supreme Court decision," DeFiore said in a February 1999 article in *Catholic News Service*.

Will the Milwaukee case also impact the Diocese of Rochester and the rest of New York, a state whose legislature has traditionally opposed school choice?

Tim Dwyer, diocesan superintendent of schools, said that the Milwaukee situation raises some hope. However, citing political opposition, he predicted that school choice in New York could still be three to five years off.

"We're not close to it in New York, like other states are," Dwyer said.

Dr. John Woods, executive director of the Monroe County School Board Association, believes the time frame could be even longer.

"You'd get strong opposition. There is a stronger feeling in New York about the sep-



Fifth-grade teacher Christine Clesla helps Kevin Tabor write a report.

See related story on Page 5.



Emma Morach, 6, holds the flag during the Pledge of Allegiance at St. John's.

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