

DIOCESAN NEWS

Public school recruiting drains diocesan faculties

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

Catholic schools across the Diocese of Rochester were forced to scramble in the weeks before the 1999-2000 school year began to replace teachers siphoned off at the last minute by public schools.

According to Sister Virginia Steinwachs, SSJ, assistant superintendent for human resources in the diocesan Department of Catholic Schools, the diocese had hired approximately 125 new teachers as of Sept. 7. Many of those teachers replaced ones who had departed for the "greener" pastures of public schools.

"This year more than any other we have a drain to the public schools," she said. "We can't compete with the salaries."

In Auburn, for example, Mary Caffrey discovered in a three-week span in August that she'd lost six teachers to public schools — on top of one who had departed in June.

"Every one of my teachers at least doubled their salaries by going to public schools," Caffrey acknowledged.

By her first faculty meeting, Sept. 1, the principal of St. Joseph Elementary and St. Joseph Primary schools in Auburn had filled all the positions.

Sister Mary Marvin, RSM, likewise lost six teachers in recent weeks at Rochester's St. Monica's School. Five went to public schools, one to a fitness center. Another teacher had decided earlier to remain home with a newborn. Thus Sister Marvin faced replacing seven of her 13 teachers.

"This has never happened to us before," Sister Marvin said. "One of the teachers who left had been here 13 years. Another

one eight years ... They both left crying.

"It's money, really," she continued. "We can't pay."

Catholic school salaries are currently about half those paid at public schools, Sister Steinwachs noted. Many new teachers facing large student loan bills are compelled to go for the higher pay.

The starting salary for an entry level teacher in Monroe County Catholic schools for the 1999-2000 school year, for example, is \$16,622. In Rochester city schools, the starting pay is \$31,750.

The public schools, meanwhile, are also scrambling to fill positions due to the lateness of the New York state budget, Sister Steinwachs explained. School officials did not find out until it was passed in early August how many teachers they could afford to hire. It also included incentives for long-time teachers to take early retirements.

But Catholic schools in New York state are not the only ones facing a teacher drain, according to Timothy Dwyer, superintendent of diocesan schools.

"I was at a meeting in Baltimore last weekend, and superintendents all across the country were saying this is a terrible crisis everywhere," Dwyer said.

The trend in New York is about two years old, Sister Steinwachs said. Prior to last year, the replacement rate for diocesan Catholic schools averaged 60 to 80 teachers a year — out of approximately 1,000 teachers overall. Last year, that number surged to 120.

Sister Steinwachs noted that in 1998 "there were 300 classrooms in the state of New York that did not have a classroom teacher for the opening of school. We did not have that."



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Fifth-grade teacher Christine Clesia leads a class at St. John the Evangelist, Rochester, in February. Public schools have been actively recruiting Catholic school teachers this summer.

Nor does she expect that to happen in the Rochester Diocese this year.

Armed with the awareness that the problem is likely to continue for several years, Sister Steinwachs has been actively recruiting qualified teachers. She also met with diocesan Catholic schools principals May 27 in Geneva. At that time, she advised them to have contingency plans just in case they had classes without teachers for the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year.

Among the options she discussed with them were using certified non-classroom teachers — such as art, music and gym teachers — to temporarily fill slots; advertising in area church bulletins for retired teachers willing to help out; and temporarily using paraprofessionals such as classroom aides known to the children and staff.

"I say without hesitation that we will have quality teachers in the classrooms," she declared.

Meanwhile, Dwyer said, the Monroe County Catholic School Board is preparing to develop a five-year plan to address the is-

sue of increasing teachers' salaries.

"We've just begun gathering information and trying to determine what the impact will be of various increases," Dwyer said.

Two sources of additional funding would be development and tuition increases.

But Christopher Meagher, principal of Holy Trinity School in Webster, said that raising tuition would pose other problems.

"I think if we raised it too much we'd lose (students)," said Meagher. He had to replace two teachers lost to public schools in the past few weeks.

Sister Steinwachs said that one long-term solution to the problem exists.

"What we need is an across the board voucher program where parents can pick where their money goes to," she said.

Notice to readers

Bishop Clark did not write a column this week. His column will return next week.

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