

DIOCESAN NEWS

School program prizes pupils who 'rise above'

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Ashley Willis, 10, a fifth-grader at Holy Family School, will be the first to tell you that sometimes she's "nice" to her peers, but other times she has been "mean."

The quiet but articulate girl will also point out that her school offers coupons and toys to kids who behave well. Then again, she stressed that such rewards aren't the real reason she tries to do the right thing.

"I'm not doing it just for the prizes, but because it's the right thing to do," she said.

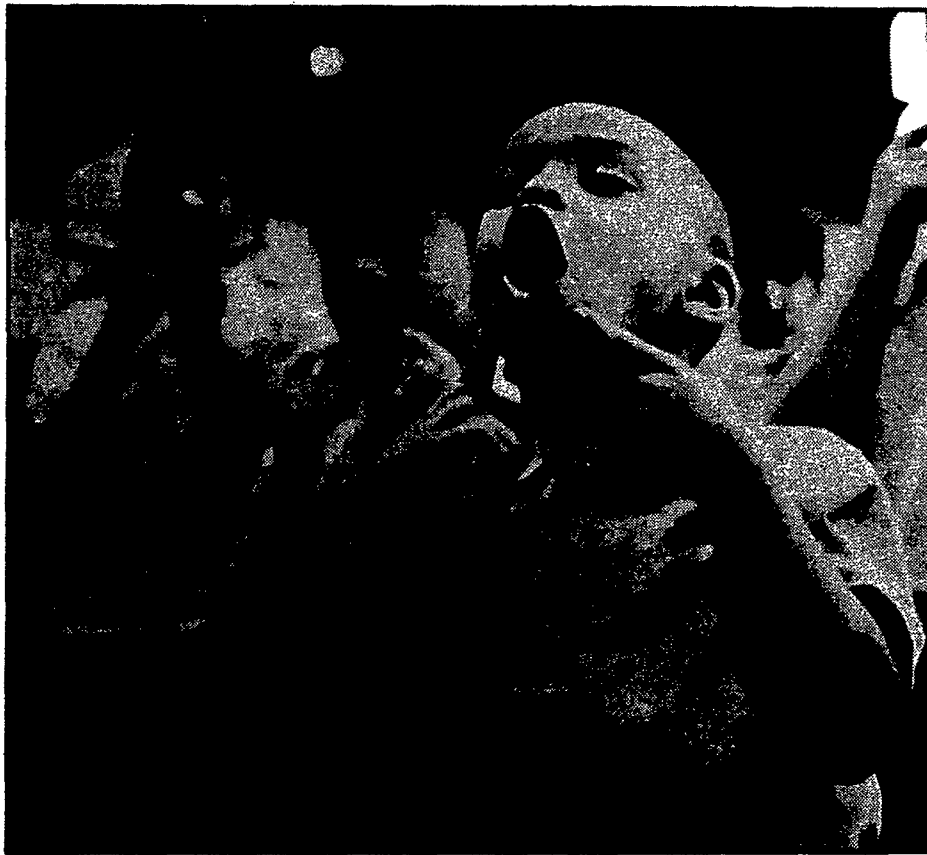
Along with several other students at the pre-kindergarten-to-sixth-grade school, Ashley has been a winner in the "Rise Above" program instituted at the beginning of the school year to encourage good behavior. The students in each grade vote for a "Student of the Month" who exhibited good behavior in their grade. Winning students are recognized at a monthly school assembly and receive prizes donated by area merchants. At the end of the year, one boy and one girl out of all the Students of the Month and Week will win a drawing for a large-item gift like a bicycle or electronic equipment.

Justin Wright was a Student of the Month winner in December. A 10-year-old fourth-grader, Justin said he was recognized for helping an immigrant student from the African nation of Togo with her reading.

"I helped her out because the teachers asked me to, and I wanted to," he said.

In addition to Student of the Month competition, all students who behave well at least one day of the week are entered into "Student of the Week" drawings in their respective classes. The randomly selected winner generally gets some sort of prize like a fast food or amusement center coupon.

Two Student of the Week winners were Orlando Torres, 11, a fifth-grader, and James Campbell, 8, a third-grader. Both boys said they were helpful to their teachers, helping them out with such tasks as cleaning their classrooms. Orlando noted that although not every student can win each week or month, there's always a reason to hope.



Andres Dixon/Staff photographer

Joshua Salters, 5, a kindergartner at Holy Family School in Rochester, practices a song with the rest of the school following "Student of the Month" awards Jan. 25. The awards are part of the school's "Rise Above" program that recognizes good behavior.

"You've always got to remember if you weren't picked for that month, try to do your best, you've got next month," he said.

The Rise Above program was the brainchild of Aimee O'Connell, Holy Family's school psychologist, and her mother, Helene Darmer, a school volunteer and coordinator of Rise Above. Darmer said Rise Above uses carrots instead of sticks to get kids to behave well since many of Holy Family's almost 200 students live in low-income neighborhoods marked by domestic and street-level strife.

"Some of these kids come from situations so horrible that punishment is just another burden on their back," Darmer said.

Her daughter said the name Rise Above originally referred to six girls she worked with in small group sessions in the 1999-

2000 school year. Rise Above members were united by a shared experience of service to others, she said.

"The idea was we're going to rise above our own hurts, our own problems, by helping people," O'Connell said.

Ashley belonged to the group, which still operates, along with Elizabeth Jackson, 10, a fourth-grader, and Angela Nguyen, 10, a fifth-grader. Elizabeth said the group made colorful refrigerator magnets for residents at the Sisters of St. Joseph infirmary. She added that the project made her feel "good that I did something for people."

Over the summer, O'Connell and her mother, along with Sister Lorraine Burns, SSND, principal, worked on a plan to encourage all the students at Holy Family to serve others and behave well. Since Rise

Above's inception in September, Sister Burns said she has noticed a big change in behavior among the school's students.

"I don't see children here for discipline reasons, very, very few," she said in the school office. The school may just be having a lucky year, she stressed, but she theorized that Rise Above may be working magic by shifting responsibility for behavior from the teachers to the students.

"We can't solve all their problems for them," she said of the students. "They've got to learn to solve their problems."

Virginia Capostagno, the school's second-grade teacher, said the Rise Above concept seems to work best with students who find it a challenge to behave well.

"I'm beginning to find that the (misbehaving) students are looking to the students who got the award," she said, adding that misbehaving students "are beginning to see what they have to do to get the award."

The Holy Family staff acknowledged that there are some risks, most notably the possibility that a student may only behave well to earn a prize. Staff members added that they are also aware that the Student of the Month could turn into a popularity contest rather than a competition based on ethical behavior. However, the staff actually seem impressed by the students' integrity when it came to adhering to the Rise Above rules.

On that note, the students themselves noted that while they appreciate the prizes, they do actually enjoy behaving well without any need of reward. Indeed, Angela sounded like a veritable young philosopher when asked about the subject.

"The prizes don't really matter to me because I don't really like the prizes," she said, adding that for her the most important lesson of Rise Above had more to do with how to live her life whether she's recognized for it or not.

"You're still a friend to someone, and you're still a good student. That's what counts."

More coverage of
Catholic schools coming
next week.

DeSales

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high-quality Catholic education, despite formidable financial challenges," a diocesan press statement quoted one donor as saying. "Given the outstanding caliber of the students and the superb job that dedicated teachers in these schools currently perform, several of us decided to pool our resources and really give these schools a chance to shine."

DeSales' endowment supports tuition assistance to students and overall program improvement. In light of the gift, several improvements are already planned to be in place by fall, including the recruitment of additional teachers; better science laboratories; an enhanced music program; building improvements and the addition of track and cross-country to the school's sports program.

Skinner added that the school will seek to increase its enrollment from 146 to 200 in the next couple of years. After seeing how well the school handles any enrollment increases, the school would like to ultimately enroll a maximum of 300 students, he said.

The remaining \$10 million of the donors' gift will be given over the next 10 years to the six elementary schools. Three of the schools reported receiving \$50,000 each last October and diocesan officials said that money was part of the gift announced Jan. 26.

The seven schools together serve more than 1,300 students from Ontario, Seneca, Wayne, Yates, Monroe and Steuben coun-

ties.

Smith said his St. Mary's School in Waterloo will use the money to purchase everything from new rugs to new computer infrastructure equipment. Down the road, he said, his school is also looking to add classroom space and a cafeteria-auditorium complex. He pointed out that St. Mary's was already planning to seek funding for improvements before the donors contacted the schools, and added that the donors' money will help to seed any new campaigns.

On that note, the donors' gift is contingent on all the schools pursuing fund-raising campaigns, and on continual improvement in student performance.

Addressing the news media representatives on hand, Bishop Clark noted some of the same journalists were reporting in the early '90s when diocesan schools reorganization forced several schools to close. Since then, Dwyer said enrollment had stabilized, and in some cases increased, in the diocese's schools. He pointed out that the Wegmans' gift helped to keep several schools from closing, buying time for the schools to stabilize after the turmoil of reorganization. Hence, all the diocesan and school officials expressed gratitude to the Finger Lakes donors for the confidence their large gift showed in the future of Catholic education just as did the Wegmans' gift.

Officials added that they hope more people will be inspired by the donation to give smaller gifts to diocesan schools.

"There's still a fragile nature to our schools," Dwyer said. "We can't rest on our laurels."

Bishops urge religious clause for contraceptives coverage

On Jan. 29, the New York Assembly passed a bill stating that employers who provide prescription coverage must cover contraceptive costs. New York's Catholic bishops immediately issued a statement urging that any such new legislation include a religious-conscience exemption.

"We can think of no governmental action at this time so unwarranted or intrusive ..." they stated.

In an additional statement Jan. 30, Bishop Matthew H. Clark said, "No one should be forced to provide coverage that violates their most sincere moral and religious beliefs."

The requirement for contraceptive coverage is contained in a women's-health bill that also mandates coverage for such procedures as mammograms, bone-density screenings and cervical screenings.

"There are a lot of good things in it," said Dennis Poust, spokesman for the New York State Catholic Conference. Yet, "We consider this thing pretty serious in terms of our basic religious freedom," he added.

The state Senate's version of the bill, passed Jan. 23, includes a religious-conscience clause. The Senate and Assembly must now negotiate a compromise, Poust said.

About 20 states now have such bills mandating insurance coverage for contrac-

ptives, according to reports by Catholic News Service; most have created exemptions for religious reasons. New York legislators tried to take similar action last year, Poust said, but the bills died when the two houses could not reach consensus.

Poust said that if the Assembly bill wins this year, it would require contraceptives be covered by HMOs including Fidelis and MDNY, which are Catholic-sponsored.

Bishops are responsible for each diocese's directives regarding coverage for their employees, he noted. Contraceptives are not covered for employees of the Diocese of Rochester, according to Michael Tedesco, diocesan communications director.

"The legislators who reject conscience protection support using the coercive powers of government to force the Church to violate its teachings," stated John Kerry, executive director of the New York State Catholic Conference, Jan. 29.

"Even New Yorkers who disagree with the church's position on these issues can appreciate the dangerous precedent that would be set by such a blatant governmental intrusion in to the practice of religious faith. The free exercise of religion is one of this country's most hallowed principles and is guaranteed to us by the First Amendment."

-Kathleen Schwarz