

CONTINUED...

Standards

Continued from page 1

"I'm not nervous because on most of my tests it's pretty easy for me," Ashley Brienza, 9, said the week before the exam.

Ashley is a fourth-grader at Holy Rosary School in Rochester, which houses grades pre-kindergarten through sixth. She added that she supports the state's tests.

"I think that you should have to take them because it tells the fifth-grade teacher that you're smart enough to be in that class."

Her fellow fourth-grader, Chester Shellman, 10, confessed to being "a little bit nervous" about the ELA exam.

"It's the fact that it's like real big to schools and stuff," he said.

Both students said they feel like their teacher, Maria Mosiuk, spends too much time preparing them for the test by having them take practice versions.

"If it's only going to be an hour, why should we keep doing it over and over?" Ashley asked rhetorically.

Mosiuk noted that preparing for the test does cut somewhat into her regular instructional time. But she added that her principal, Mary Beth Fuehrer, sympathizes with the demands the tests place on her.

"I'm very fortunate that my principal understands that this marking period, I didn't spend as much time on science as I did on language arts," Mosiuk said.

Despite the pressure preparing students for the state exam puts on the school, the teacher and principal both hailed the exam and the standard of learning it seeks to uphold and measure. For that matter, Fuehrer said she endorses the state's assessment testing in general.

"I think the testing makes the good schools see where they can succeed better, and it gives fair warning to our friends, the bad schools, that need to be put back on line."

Raise the bar

Fuehrer's comments sum up the attitudes of several school officials in the Diocese of Rochester toward New York's assessment exams for elementary students. The exams measure whether schools are helping their kids reach the educational achievement bar raised by the state in the mid-1990s.

The exams are graded according to a rubric scale, from one to four, with three meaning the student has successfully met the standards and four meaning the student has exceeded the standards. Fourth-graders and eighth-graders are tested on math, science and language arts, with eighth-graders additionally taking exams in social studies. Next year, fifth-graders will take social studies exams. And, of course, students in 12th grade have long taken Regents exams that are also administered by the state.

The Diocese of Rochester's Department of Catholic Schools published an explanation of the standards in its December 2000 parents newsletter Partners.

"To ensure that our students succeed in tomorrow's workplace, they are being challenged to think critically, solve problems, work on teams and communicate effectively," the newsletter stated. The newsletter also noted that the standards for both schools and children encompass these principles:

- Present learning in real-life contexts.
- Require students to learn life skills.
- Require students to be actively engaged in their own learning.
- Hold the same expectations for all.
- Focus on student learning rather than on what teachers do.

The newsletter added that the goals of the standards, in part, are for students to "listen, read, speak and write proficiently," "communicate in many ways," "solve problems," "think critically" and "be responsible citizens."

The newsletter noted that Catholic schools add their own standards as well based on the message of Jesus and Gospel values.

Before you ask, "What's so new about all this?" officials pointed out that while the goals of standards may seem familiar to any graduate of Catholic schools, how they are being incorporated into learning and testing is, in some ways, new.

Prior to the institution of new standards, elementary students had been evaluated through testing by New York state for years in the third and sixth grades, officials said. Now, not only are the kids being tested in different grades — fourth and eighth — the tests themselves are more complex than the old exams which measured primarily what students knew. The current exams measure not only knowledge but the ability to express and critically think about what one is learning, officials said.

For example, Fuehrer noted that children in kindergarten at her school already engage in teacher-led discussions designed to teach them the skills they'll need to write paragraphs in the grades ahead. When she started teaching 31 years ago, kids used to concentrate on learning their ABCs in kindergarten, she said, but that's subject matter for preschoolers today.

"When kindergarteners come into first grade in September, they are academically where my first-graders were in December and January in the '70s," she said.

Principal matter

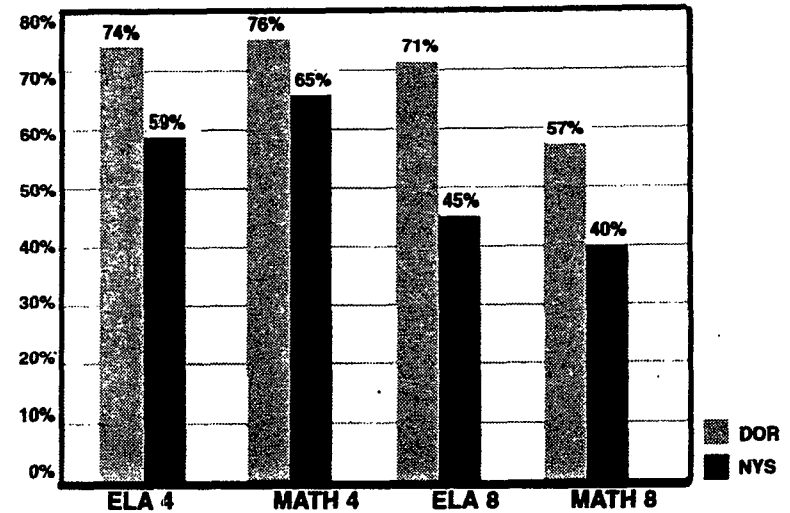
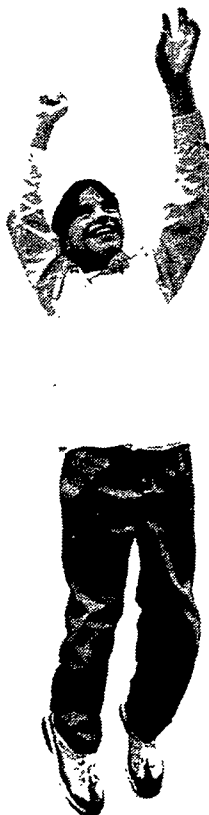
Indeed, principals around the Diocese of Rochester noted that the state's standards are helping to create a new kind of student.

"I do think children are thinking through processes now," said Sister Dolores Ann Stein, RSM, principal of St. Ann's, a pre-K-eight school in Hornell.

To illustrate her point, she noted that children are now being asked on the state's math exams to explain how they solved a math problem. She added that her students are rising to the challenge, for the most part.

"I would say that your average and above average children can do it with no problem," she said.

Below-average students may need even more help than they did in the old days, she said. However, she also pointed out that the new standards allow for children to demonstrate their



Percentage of students satisfactorily completing New York state tests 1999-2000 school year. Diocese of Rochester students are represented by the lighter bars.

grasp of a subject in more diverse ways than in the past. For example, she said, students taking science exams now must perform laboratory experiments as part of the test, a method that may favor kids who excel at hands-on work rather than written.

Gerald E. Benjamin, principal of St. Agnes in Avon, a pre-K-six school, echoed the sentiments of Sister Stein, noting that the implementation of new state standards has encouraged a "recognition of different learning styles." For example, he said, rather than learning about the Iroquois peoples just through textbooks, students may earn credit now for projects that range from building miniature log houses to writing poems about the Iroquois.

Like Sister Stein, Elizabeth Berliner, principal at Holy Family Junior High, Elmira, said her students have been able to adapt to the state's new standards.

"I think they've adjusted very well to (them), better than the teachers or administrators," she said with a chuckle.

Testing, testing

The diocesan newsletter contains a chart (shown above) indicating diocesan students do better on average than their fellow students throughout the state on the New York tests. Yet, diocesan officials will be the first to tell you they don't think test scores, good or bad, tell the whole story about any school. Indeed, some diocesan officials said they felt it defeated the purpose of the assessment tests to publish such data in the news media in the first place.

Sister Margaret Mancuso, SSJ, diocesan assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, said news media accounts on assessment testing ignore the fact that the assessments are really meant to diagnose a student's problem areas, as well as a school's deficiencies. Such areas can then be improved by the student and/or school, she noted.

The assessments should not constitute a be-all and end-all judgment of school or student performance, she added. She pointed out, for example, that, for various reasons, one group of fourth-graders can do better than another group of fourth-graders even if they're taught by the same teacher in the same school.

For that matter, Berliner pointed out that parents may become overly concerned about how their kids' school is doing in the assessment area without looking at other factors such as the overall atmosphere of the school and the quality of its teachers.

"I think you can raise your scores with-

out truly providing (students) a better education," she said, echoing the oft-repeated warning of educators to not "teach to the test."

Indeed, since their inception, the standards and the exams have gotten a lot of press, some of it indicating a sense of frustration among some school officials and teachers. Among recent articles in area newspapers, one story detailed public school students being asked to come in during their Christmas vacations to prepare for exams. Other stories have noted that some fourth-grade teachers have quit because they can't stand the pressure anymore to produce students who perform well on the exams.

Diocesan school officials said there are a number of ways to help teachers and students decrease the anxiety associated with the tests. One way is to make sure all of a school's teachers, not just its fourth- and eighth-grade teachers, realize they have a responsibility to prepare students to be assessed. In fact, some schools even insist that teachers of grades other than fourth and eighth attend workshops on the tests. Fuehrer has even had her teachers take practice versions of the tests themselves so they know what's required.

Catholic school officials, including those at the state level, have also said they need more state funding for teacher training to help them better implement the state's standard. Officials said they plan to lobby for a bigger slice of the teacher training pie in this year's state budget.

And some principals would like to see the tests administered in a different fashion, say one test yearly in a different subject area over the course of a child's journey from fourth to eighth grade. Children in both grades are close to taking more than their fair share of exams, they noted.

On the whole, though, Catholic educators seemed to welcome the state's three-year-old experiment in standards, and spoke highly of the effect they are having on their students and schools. For example, Benjamin served for several years in public education before he became principal at St. Agnes more than three years ago, and he noted that he has come to value the standards.

"I know when the standards came out, I was in the public school arena, and it was like 'Ugh! More to do!'" he said. "To me, (now) the standards have provided a meaningful blueprint of instructional and behavioral objectives."

Pictured on the cover are Holy Rosary fourth graders, from left, Kirsten Reyes, 10, Taylor Converse, 9, Peter Brett, 9, Ashley Brienza, 9, and Chester Shellman, 10.



Catholic
Family
Center

Pregnant? Need Help?

Catholic Family Center's Pregnancy Hotline

CALL 1-800-CARE-002

25 Franklin Street • Sibley Tower Building, 7th Floor
Rochester, New York 14604-1007 • 716-546-7220
www.cfcrochester.org

HELP WANTED ADVERTISING SALES

The Catholic Courier has an opening for a display-advertising sales representative. Will be responsible for a range of established accounts as well as new-customer development. Job offers competitive pay/benefits, pleasant work environment. Strong customer service, copy writing & math skills required. Prior experience in advertising sales with a newspaper or magazine strongly preferred. Send resume and letter to: General Manager, Catholic Courier, PO Box 24379, Rochester, NY 14624-0379; fax to (716) 328-8640; or e-mail hfanz@catholiccourier.com.