

# DIOCESAN NEWS

## School enrollment decline concerns officials

By Kathleen Schwar  
Assistant editor

The first day of school brought disturbing news to diocesan Catholic school officials: Enrollment in K-eight schools across the diocese dropped 6.5 percent compared to last year.

Monroe County Catholic schools suffered their largest drop — 5.6 percent — in recent years, according to the schools office.

The number of diocesan Catholic school students this year totals 9,540, compared to 10,136 last year.

"It took us quite by surprise, these enrollment figures," said Patricia Hayles, chairperson of the Catholic School Board of Monroe County.

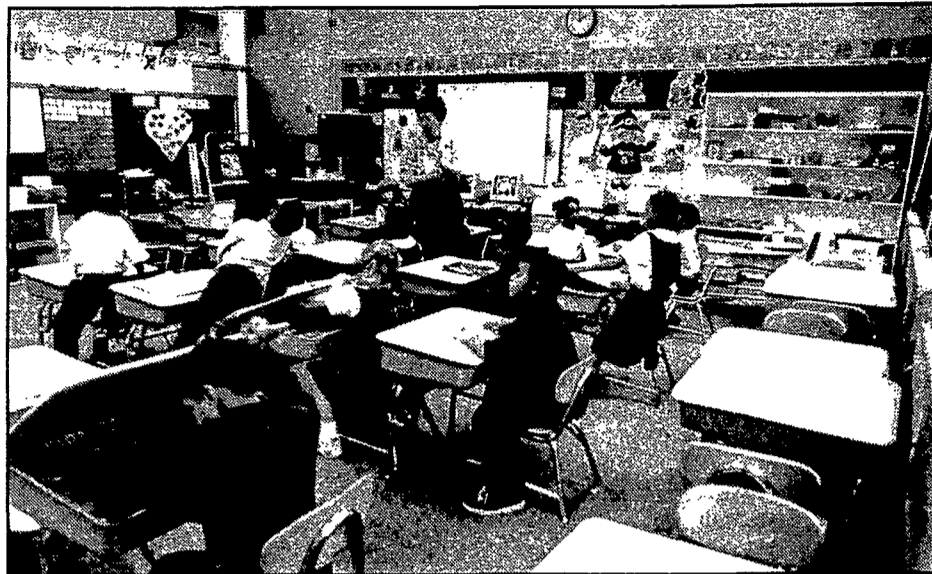
The enrollment decline breaks down as follows: 14.35 percent in the WIN schools, which are subsidized by the Wegman Inner City Voucher program; 12.34 percent in schools within the City of Rochester; and 3.41 percent among Monroe County suburban schools.

In the Finger Lakes, meanwhile, Catholic schools lost 3.46 percent, with enrollment dropping to 1,394 students. Southern Tier schools lost 9.26 percent, resulting in an enrollment of 1,420.

The Monroe County Catholic school board is forming an ad hoc tuition committee that will begin meeting Oct. 25 to review tuition models. This is a priority the board planned last spring, according to Hayles, who also chairs that committee. But because of this year's declines, the schools

### Note to readers:

Bishop Clark did not write an Along the Way column this week.



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Only 16 children are enrolled in first-grade teacher Dorothy Rouse's class at Corpus Christi School at Blessed Sacrament in Rochester, where classes averaged 23 students in past years.

office will continue to review enrollment, and the two groups will work closely together, she said. Also, a University of Rochester survey of families who left Catholic schools is expected to be released by December.

A number of factors may play into the decline, according to Hayles and Dominican Sister Elizabeth Meegan, superintendent of schools. Among them: the creation of charter schools, full-day kindergarten programs and subsidized pre-K programs in Rochester; tuition increases; and families moving.

Tuition has risen 6 percent in each of the past two years in Monroe County, where enrollment has dropped from 7,606 in 1995-96. Enrollment only increased one year since that time, in 1997-98.

Sister Meegan, who came on board after Timothy Dwyer left this year, defends the tuition increases. Costs continue rising and teachers must be paid, she said.

"We have greater and greater needs for tuition; we are woefully behind in paying our teachers," Sister Meegan said. "Even now the beginning salary for a teacher with certification is \$18,100. It is just intolerable and we cannot keep people (teaching) in our schools on that basis." She added that turnover was not a problem this year, "which means the teachers know we are trying to do what we can."

Teachers' salaries aren't adequate to live independently, she said. "I think the church has a larger question of justice; whether our teachers are satisfied or not, it is wrong for us to be satisfied with that."

Rather, the challenge is to determine where additional revenue may be found, she said. She added it is important to keep children whose families "can't afford tuition as it is."

Noting that even the WIN schools suffered enrollment declines, she commented, "Tuition is up in those schools as well. The difference in what people can pay is much tighter there; even a small (tuition) increase in WIN schools will be felt even proportionately greater because of the parents' income."

Eighty-seven percent of the students in WIN schools lived at or below the national poverty level last year.

"It is probably not possible for a Catholic school system without enormous help from benefactors to provide for everyone who wanted to send their children to Catholic schools," Sister Meegan said, "But if we are not providing for people less than wealthy, then we shouldn't be in business. In other words, we can't limit these schools to the affluent ... and be who we say we are."

The WIN schools' full-day kindergarten enrollment dropped to 119 from 175 last year, Hayles noted. "It's a huge difference," she said.

Among the WIN schools, the largest drop in overall enrollment occurred at Corpus Christi at Blessed Sacrament, which lost 26 percent of its student body, dropping to 109 students. Other WIN schools' percentage losses were: St. Boniface, 18; Holy Family, 13; St. Andrew, 12.9; Holy Rosary, 6.7; and St. Monica, 9.3.

Perhaps the schools should offer sliding-scale tuition or a college financial aid model, Hayles said. Every school could charge the same tuition, but every applicant could be reviewed for financial aid. Such a policy would include middle-class families, she

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