

CONTINUED...

Small-town

Continued from page 1

Livonia and Geneseo. To attract students, schools like St. Agnes must contend with limited populations and, in several cases, long distances to travel.

For that reason, Benjamin said it's vital all year long to reach people who, as he puts it, "may have heard of St. Agnes but haven't heard enough."

As part of his promotions, Benjamin brings to the school such professional performers as the Dady Brothers, a popular Irish duo that will appear for a St. Patrick's Day concert in March. Benjamin has also been known to hold coffee hours for anyone who wants to stop by — right on the sidewalk at the school's entrance.

Community fixtures

St. Agnes' efforts seems to be getting results: There are 105 students in grades kindergarten through 6, a dramatic increase from 69 students in 1995-96. The pre-kindergarten program has 55 children.

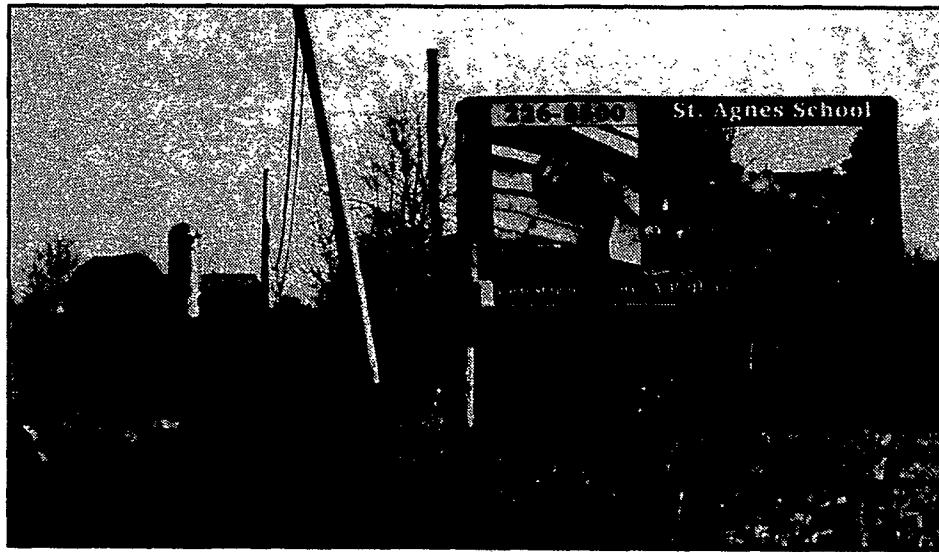
By the same token, St. Agnes is one of only two diocesan schools outside Monroe County that has more students than it did two years ago, according to figures provided by the diocesan Department of Catholic Schools. St. Agnes has gone from 94 to 105 students in grades K-6, and Holy Family Intermediate School in Elmira has risen from 163 to 182 in grades 4-6.

Sister Elizabeth Meegan, OP, diocesan schools superintendent, said her department is developing a new marketing plan to boost enrollment at all diocesan schools. She noted the importance of preserving schools outside Monroe County: "Long-term histories exist for many Catholic schools in the outlying areas, and I'm sure that while some of the demographics have changed, the Catholic community has remained strong."

Indeed, many schools in the Finger Lakes and Southern Tier have been around for more than a century, and were established not long after their parishes were founded. St. Michael's in Penn Yan, for example, was begun in 1882, and St. Agnes in Avon dates back to 1875.

"There's just a lot of history in this school. It's like an heirloom, in a sense," said Julie Welch, who has two children at St. Agnes and whose in-laws taught or attended there.

Benjamin said the small-town feel is apparent at his school, saying that nearby merchants are strong supporters of St. Agnes. "Whether they're Catholic or non-Catholic, they'll ask, 'Do you need this or



St. Agnes School has erected a billboard along Route 39 between Avon and Geneseo to promote Catholic Schools Week.

need that?" he remarked. "Because of the size, there's a certain intimacy that permeates the climate."

The climate seems to agree with Welch's nine-year-old son, D.J., a fourth-grader at St. Agnes: "I like it. It's not too big; I know everybody; I like our teachers ... and I like our principal," D.J. said, grinning at Benjamin.

Monette Mahoney, principal of St. Joseph's School in Wayland, said she's become an easily recognized figure in town, even though this is only her first year at St. Joseph's.

"You go into the store, everyone knows I'm the principal," Mahoney remarked.

Meanwhile, Penn Yan's Long said her father — who lives in a heavily populated area near Philadelphia — was surprised to hear that many children travel to St. Michael's School by foot.

Then there's the other extreme, at which students travel considerably for their Catholic education. Long noted that three St. Michael's students are from Hammondsport, 22 miles from Penn Yan. Although she acknowledges that these distances are a deterrent for many potential St. Michael's students, "We couldn't live to be 118 years old without a lot of heart and the grace of God," Long wrote in a newsletter last summer.

Challenges

In that same newsletter, however, Long discussed some of the difficulties faced by St. Michael's, which offers grades pre-K through 6. The school's enrollment for K-6 has dropped from 84 to 70 students in just the past year; Long said several families desire Catholic education but can't

overcome the financial burden.

"A number of children are from farming families. If the crops don't do well, they're hit financially," she said. Long also noted that St. Michael's has the highest tuition of any Catholic elementary school outside Monroe County.

Tuition was a word unknown to St. Joseph's School in Wayland until just a few years ago. Previously, Mahoney noted, St. Joseph's Parish absorbed all operating expenses, including tuition. In 1996-97, a \$500-per-family tuition bill was implemented. The cost now is roughly three times that amount, depending on the number of students per family.

Even though St. Joseph's still has one of the lowest tuition rates in the diocese, the grades K-6 school has gone from 124 students in 1995-96 to 62 students in those grades this year. A few miles to the north, St. Mary's School in Dansville has 83 students in grades K-5.

Both parish schools are located in the Holy Family Catholic Community, a cluster formed in 1998. The cluster has established a feasibility committee to assess the two schools' futures, and will present a report to parents and parishioners Feb. 7. Sister Meegan acknowledged that the cluster has been weighing "either cooperative programs or mergers."

According to Sister Meegan, parish leaders and pastoral-planning groups handle most of the decision making in schools outside Monroe County. School finances also are handled by the parish or parishes with which the school is affiliated. This system contrasts with the organization and financing of schools in Monroe County, which the diocese consolidated into a

countywide system in 1989.

Sister Meegan explained that to operate schools outside Monroe County "as though they were a system would probably be much more difficult. I think the communities are a little bit more self-contained than in Monroe County."

Because her local leadership is so involved with Catholic schools, Long commented, "I don't want our new pastor (Father Robert Ring, who began in September), or any pastor, to perceive the school as a (financial) nuisance."

Selling the schools

St. Michael's in Penn Yan gets an annual allotment from the proceeds of a \$15 million gift from a group of anonymous donors. The donation, announced in January 2001, also benefits five other Finger Lakes elementary schools as well as DeSales High School.

Yet St. Michael's has also generated its own funds through a rejuvenation last year of its Adopt-A-Student program, through which donors can pledge tuition assistance for St. Michael's students. "We did very well, close to \$4,000," Long said.

Long said she urged people to contribute to the Adopt-A-Student fund by sending out bulletin notices and speaking at Masses. She added that the school is considering new fundraisers for the upcoming year, and that it hopes to eventually draw more students from the other five churches in the Our Lady of the Lakes cluster — none of which has a Catholic school. The cluster was formed in 2000.

Why all this sweat and toil? For Long, Catholic education is well worth the time that she and other volunteers put in.

"Boy, they do great work," she said of the St. Michael's staff. "The teachers are so gosh darn generous with their time and talents ... the students truly learn respect for each other and their students."

Benjamin likes publicizing his students' great success on standardized testing. He also praises the Avon school's family atmosphere, saying St. Agnes' success really rests with the teachers and parents.

Welch respectfully disagrees, saying that Benjamin, 64, deserves the biggest credit. A former public-school administrator in Geneseo, Saratoga Springs and Caledonia-Mumford, Benjamin was retired for two only weeks before taking the St. Agnes position in 1997. He said he now considers the job his ministry — and that's evident from the way he stands outside in all kinds of weather, greeting students each day with lots of handshakes and hugs.

"He sells the school," Welch said. "And the kids just love him."

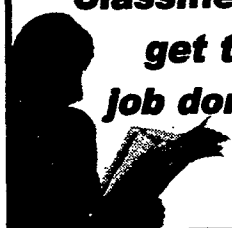
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