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Relations

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rector of the Department of Elementary Schools for the National Catholic Educational Association. Brother Bimonte has worked in education for 30 years, and recently stepped down from his position as superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Buffalo.

As an executive since July with the NCEA, which advocates for and supports the nation's Catholic schools, Brother Bimonte said he and his organization uphold the church's teaching that parents are the primary educators of their children.

"We view our role as that of helping them in that primary responsibility," he said during a phone interview from his Washington, D.C., office, and he added that trust is a fundamental element of any good relationship between parents and educators.

"The parents who are the easiest to deal with were those who come in (to the school) with no preconceived beliefs or preconceived notions," he said. To illustrate his point, he recalled what he used to say as a principal each year during an opening meeting between school staff and parents.

"If you promise not to believe everything your children come home and tell you about me and their teachers, I promise not to believe everything they tell me about you," he told parents.

Catholic schools often do a good job of educating children, he said, because they stress creating strong relationships between parents and teachers, between teachers and students and between administrators and all concerned parties. In part, that's because Catholic schools simply do not have enough money to maintain themselves without substantial parental involvement.

"Catholic schools have always been dependent on volunteer help," he said. "Parents working in schools as volunteers become part of the environment."

Parents and pupils

The truth of Brother Bimonte's observations can be confirmed by walking into any classroom at St. Margaret Mary's School in Irondequoit, according to Joanne Knorr, who teaches first grade. Every teacher is supported by parent volunteers who handle such tasks as working with small groups of students on class projects, providing transportation for field trips and organizing school events, she said.

Parents appreciate the school's willingness to enlist their aid, added Michel Melidona, whose children Taylor, 9, and Samuel, 6, will be in the school's fourth and first grades, respectively, this fall.



Michel Melidona and her 4-year-old daughter, Quinn, visit first-grade teacher Joanne Knorr's classroom at Irondequoit's St. Margaret Mary School Aug. 9.

"If you have an idea, St. Margaret Mary's administration and their teachers are right behind you to carry it through," Melidona said.

Melidona serves as a "room mother," and has worked directly with children on projects in the classroom. Knorr said parents like Melidona benefit both themselves and their children by volunteering in the classroom.

"I think the more they become involved and see what's going on, the more (the school) becomes a community," Knorr said.

Melidona added that being involved in the school allows her to know exactly what her children are learning and to reinforce it at home.

"You know where the expectations are, and you're not coming down and quizzing them too hard," she said.

Her children said they enjoy seeing their mother come into their classrooms.

"It's fun because sometimes she brings my brother (Luke, 1) and sister (Quinn, 4), and I get to play with them," Taylor said.

Samuel offered somewhat similar sentiments.

"She does a lot of fun things with me,

and made my cake for my birthday in my class," he said.

Melidona and Knorr emphasized that even if both parents work, there are plenty of ways to get involved in their child's school life. Parents can read to their children regularly and attend events in the evening, or come in once in a while to eat lunch with their children at the school, Knorr said. Knorr added that parents are welcome to call her at any time to discuss their children's progress.

"I want people who are interested in their children's education, who care enough to contact me and ask a question," she said.

Contract and covenant

Diocesan educators try to create the home-school connection in a host of ways. At Rochester's St. Monica's School, for example, parents sign a contract that pledges they will attend a church with their children weekly; attend monthly Parent-Teacher Association meetings and any conferences their children's teachers request, as well as school events; make sure their children's homework is completed; and support the school's uniform and discipline codes. The contract also requires that parents volunteer at least 10 hours a year at the school and participate in fundraising.

The contract enables parents to see in writing what it is they and the school want for their children, said Mercy Sister Mary Marvin, school principal. She added that before the contracts were instituted a decade ago, hardly any parents showed up regularly for parent-teacher meetings. Now, the vast majority of St. Monica's parents uphold the contract, she said, and those who routinely flout it are asked to withdraw their children. Practically speaking, she said, the contract also ensures that parents are getting their money's worth when they pay tuition to St. Monica's.

St. Joseph's School in Wayland, Livingston County, is in the process of drawing up a similar contract — or "covenant," as

the school plans to call it — between parents, teachers and students, according to principal Monette Mahoney. Pending faculty and parental approval, the covenant should be in place by October, she said.

She added that the covenant will enshrine the school's belief that parents need to model learning for their children. For example, she said she encourages parents to let their children see them reading.

"We can't talk about ... learning here if they're not seeing it at home," she said.

Faith at home

Like their Catholic school counterparts, public school students also can benefit from parental involvement in their education, especially as they learn about their Catholic faith through parish catechetical programs, according to Patrick B. Fox, former diocesan director of youth ministry and currently director of faith formation at St. Joseph's Parish, Penfield. Fox was a workshop speaker at the University of Rochester Institute on Catholic Education, and shared a host of insights into how Catholic schools and catechetical programs can work with families to reinforce lessons learned in the classroom.

His parish gives families binders filled with suggested faith-based activities that can take place in the home, he said. For example, he said, families are encouraged to celebrate the feast days of the saints for whom their members are named. Families can also plan arts and crafts activities around the lessons children are learning in religious education, he said.

Whatever activities parents plan for their children, what's most important, diocesan educators agreed, is that parents know they must be involved in their children's education if they want their children to do well inside and outside the classroom.

"That responsibility of education is the first responsibility of parents," Sister Marvin said. "We're not here to take the job over."

Religious orders

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the diocesan bishop. Father Keating stressed that the CMSM is a service organization with no legislative or administrative authority over the religious superiors who form its membership or the orders which they govern. Some 260 major superiors of men's orders of priests or brothers are full CMSM members. There are also more than 500 associate members, priests or brothers who are in other leadership positions such as vice provincial or member of an order's governing council.

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