

SSJs form ministry for new teachers

Jennifer Ficaglia/Catholic Courier

Five local Sisters of St. Joseph have begun a new ministry to support fledgling Catholic school teachers by offering financial assistance, prayerful community living and the benefit of the sisters' years of teaching experience.

Sister Elaine Englert, director of diocesan Catholic School Personnel and Recruitment, is one of the sisters involved in the new ministry.

"It just really focuses in on our charism for the Sisters of St. Joseph," said Sister Englert, who a year ago learned of a similar teacher-mentoring program at Boston College. In the Boston program, first-year Catholic school teachers live together in community, supporting each other spiritually and professionally while pursuing their master's degrees with financial assistance from the college.

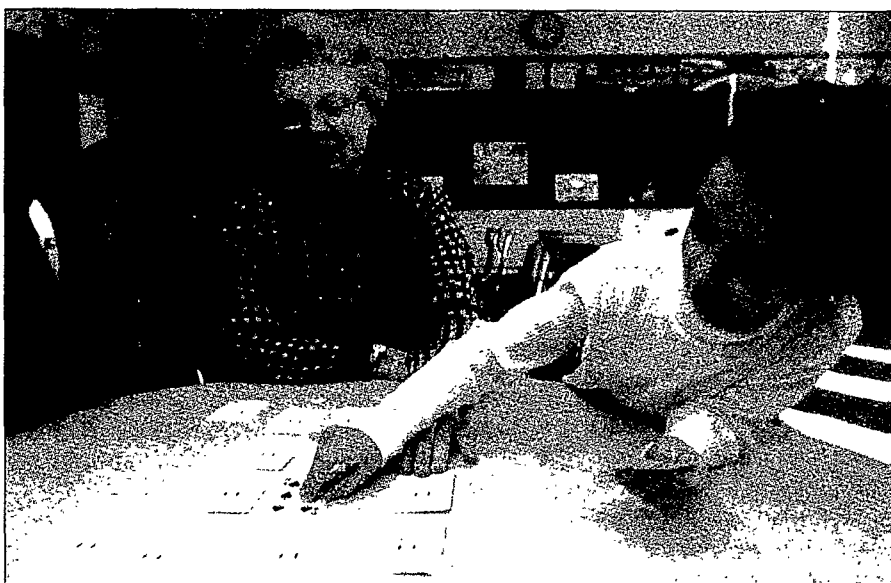
Deciding that such a program would work well in the Rochester Diocese, Sister Englert shared her idea to create a local mentoring program with a couple of her sisters in the congregation who had teaching backgrounds. They shared her enthusiasm for such a ministry and asked to be involved if one were started.

"All of a sudden, there were five of us really excited about connecting Sisters of St. Joseph with new teachers," she said.

The other four sisters who wanted to take part in the ministry were Sister Dianne Crowley, director of the early childhood education program at St. Monica School; Sister Kathleen Fletcher, a resource/remediation teacher at Corpus Christi School; Sister Dora Christian, teacher supervisor at the Monroe County Cornell Cooperative Extension; and Sister St. Luke Hardy, who at the time was serving as coordinator of the Sisters of St. Joseph motherhouse.

The five took a proposal for the new ministry to the congregation's leadership team, and also talked to officials in the Diocese of Rochester's offices of Catholic Schools and Human Resources. Everyone they approached liked the idea, and the sisters were given permission to pursue their ministry.

With the help of Providence Housing Development Corp., an affiliate of diocesan Catholic Charities, the sisters found a home for their ministry at the former Ss. Peter and Paul rectory, 720 W. Main St., Rochester. Now they are in the process of getting out the word about the mentoring program, and plan to create a



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Sister of St. Joseph Kathleen Fletcher watches 6-year-olds Rosalina Rivera (right) and Keanu Heedram play a memory game during their tutoring session at Corpus Christi School in Rochester Jan. 15.



brochure and Web site as well as provide information to area colleges and Catholic schools. They hope to recruit four or five teachers to live in the house with them and teach at local Catholic schools starting in the 2003-04 school year.

HOW IT WORKS

New teachers as well as first- or second-year teachers already in the Catholic school system will be considered for the program, which is open to both men and women. Those chosen to participate after an application process will live at the Sisters of St. Joseph's house on West Main Street and teach at a Catholic school while pursuing their master's degrees.

Participants will pay a small rent to live in the house "so their money is available for graduate work," Sister Englert said. The ministry will pay for one course per semester for each teacher, and the sisters are working on getting them financial aid and scholarships from local colleges and universities.

Sister Englert said the program has several goals.

One of them is to preserve and ensure Catholic identity within the school setting by encouraging teachers and helping them to realize that they are serving all without distinction. This involves looking at each student as special and unique and putting the real focus on the person first, then the content.

The ministry also aims to help new teachers with such things as time management and prayer. The sisters

also hope to encourage new teachers either to volunteer or to conduct service-oriented classrooms.

The sisters also want to offer new teachers the benefit of their many years of teaching experience as well as provide them with people with whom they can relate their day-to-day classroom experiences.

"I was very lucky in my beginning teaching years to have supportive teachers," said Sister Kathleen Fletcher. "I'm hoping we can be that for teachers too."

Sister Englert also hopes the ministry will encourage teachers to stay in Catholic education as a life's vocation.

NATIONAL FOUNDATION

Sister Englert said the concept for the new ministry is based on three other national programs — Boston College's Urban Catholic Teachers Corps, the Alliance for Catholic Education at the University of Notre Dame and Lalanne at the University of Dayton, Ohio.

There is one main difference between the Sisters of St. Joseph's ministry and the programs it is based upon: In the national programs, only the young teachers live in community. The Sisters of St. Joseph ministry involves both teachers and women religious living together.

Sister Englert learned from an Urban Catholic Teachers Corps participant that community living was the toughest part of the program experience. Sister Englert believes that teachers in the Rochester program will benefit from sharing a

house with those who are quite experienced at living in community.

After becoming a Sister of St. Joseph in 1992, Sister Dianne Crowley said she learned the benefits of living with more experienced teachers. Living in community "has made a connectedness I feel is important and I feel would be important for young people," she said.

David Conard, who participated in the University of Dayton's Lalanne program, agrees.

"It was incredible to be able to go home and talk to someone who had had that same experience and talk about it," he said.

Conard, a freshman religion teacher and assistant director of ministry and service at Chaminade-Julienne Catholic High School in Dayton, was one of six teachers who joined the program at its inception at the start of the 1999-00 school year.

"I'm committed to what goes on at Chaminade-Julienne, and committed to Catholic education in general," he said. Participating in Lalanne "really confirmed what I already believed about Catholic education. It's very valuable and very important."

Marianist Brother Edward Brink, director of Lalanne at the University of Dayton, noted that three more teachers, who lived in community in Detroit, were added to the program in 2000. In 2001, participation jumped to 20, and new houses were established in Cleveland and Albany, N.Y. Now, the program includes 29 teachers, and new houses have been established in Indianapolis and Toledo.

Of the six teachers who originally entered the program, he said four stayed on for a third year. The other two finished the program, but opted to continue working at the Catholic schools in which they were originally placed.

"We were really excited about that," Brother Brink said.

Excitement about Catholic education is something Sister Englert hopes to keep going with the new Sisters of St. Joseph ministry.

"My hope is that we will do all for the honor and glory of God," she said. "And that we with the Sisters of St. Joseph continue to work in partnership with lay men and women in the ministry of Catholic education. This is a new way to do it."

EDITOR'S NOTE: For more information on the teacher-mentoring program, contact Sister Elaine Englert at 585/436-6144, 585/328-3210, ext. 1252, or by writing to englert@dor.org.