

TEST SCORES

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That sentiment was echoed by Sally A. Cardilli, principal of Aquinas Institute in Rochester.

"This particular exam did present difficulty for some of our students," she said, adding that her math department "didn't feel it was fair."

But at both Aquinas and Kearney, all the students taking the exam were underclassmen, according to Cardilli and Bishop Kearney President Mark Peterson.

"We had no seniors in jeopardy," Cardilli said.

Statewide, students are expected to begin taking Math A in their freshman years, according to Jonathan Burman, spokesman for the state education department. However, public high-school seniors who took the Math A Regents exam this year may have taken the course late in their high-school careers or have been forced to repeat it after having failed it before, he said.

Educators at Catholic high schools in the Diocese of Rochester noted that their students are generally expected to complete Math A in their sophomore years. As a result, Catholic-school students were less likely than their public-school counterparts to be in danger of not graduating because they failed the Regents exam.

Tom Hogan, the state education department's supervisor for non-public schools, said Catholic schools demand a great deal academically. Catholic-school students are often characterized by what they ask of themselves, he said. The question isn't "Will I go to college or not?" It's "What college am I going to?" he said.

PASSING THE TEST

As evidenced by the flap over the Math A Regents exam, standardized testing is a significant part of students' lives, and one that has been growing in importance since the New York educational-reform movement of the mid-1990s. Starting with the high-school class of 2001-02, for example, the state began requiring that public-school students pass Regents courses and exams. Some private schools and Catholic schools instead use their own exams, Hogan said, but most Catholic high-school students also take Regents exams.

As part of an overall effort to improve educational standards in the late 1990s, the state also developed a system of assessments for fourth-, fifth- and eighth-graders. Its implementation has affected curriculum design and influenced what takes place in the classroom, according to such educators as Ann Frank, coordinator of assessment and profes-



sional growth for the Diocese of Rochester's Department of Catholic Schools. Overall, Frank said, the state's heightened standards have invited students to become critical and articulate thinkers.

"You have a lot more participation as far as the students are concerned," Frank said. "Now it's like they are becoming part of the lesson that's taking place."

She added that students are challenged more today than were students of the past. For example, math students must explain *how* they got a math answer right, not simply write a correct answer on the test, she noted.

Hogan said Catholic schools across the state embraced the assessments and standards at their onset and, here in the Rochester Diocese, Catholic-school students have done well under the system.

According to information provided by the diocesan Catholic Schools office, 78 percent of Catholic-school fourth-graders met the state's standards in math in 2002, as compared to 68 percent of students in New York's public schools. Meanwhile, 79 percent of diocesan fourth-graders met the state's standards in English/language arts in 2003, whereas 64 percent of the state's public-school students met the standards.

Some individual schools are doing even better. For example, 100 percent of fifth-grade students at St.

Agnes School in Avon met the state's standards in social studies from 2001-03; and 95 percent of the school's fourth-graders met the state's standards in English/language arts in 2003. At St. Pius Tenth School in Chili, 98 percent of fourth-graders met the state's standards in science, compared to 67 percent of the state's public-school students.

QUIZZING THE EDUCATORS

The performance of diocesan Catholic-school students reflects the overall superior performance of Catholic-school students across the nation, according to *Catholic Schools Still Make A Difference*, published by the National Catholic Education Association. The book is a study of Catholic schools between 1991 and 2000, and in its fourth chapter on "Outcomes" cites the U.S. Department of Education's finding that Catholic-school students consistently score higher than their public-school counterparts in all academic areas. Additionally, the book notes that in 1993-94, 90 percent of Catholic high-school seniors applied

to college, compared to 75 percent of private-school seniors and 50 percent of public-school seniors.

Some observers have attributed this success to the ability of Catholic and other private schools to pick and choose their students. Catholic-school educators in the Rochester Diocese note that they generally admit any student regardless of academic prowess, although some students do leave — or are asked to leave — if they consistently fail to meet a particular school's academic standards. Also, Catholic schools are sometimes unable to accommodate special-needs students, and in some cases may recommend that these students enroll in public schools that can better meet their needs, diocesan educators said.

Sister Elizabeth Meegan, OP, diocesan superintendent of schools, was a co-author of the "Outcomes" chapter of the NCEA book, which observed that "questions related to the exact causes of the higher achievement from Catholic school students may never be answered." However, she, Hogan and diocesan educators speculated that the causes are many, including the following:

- Catholic schools usually have more orderly, disciplined classrooms than do other schools.
- Larger numbers of Catholic-school parents take more of an active interest in their children's academic progress than do public-school parents, and Catholic schools demand more parental involvement than do public schools.
- Catholic schools tend to demand more of their students academically than do public schools.
- Catholic-school parents and students know that Catholic education is a privilege, not a right, and play by the rules of their schools.

• Catholic schools are able to implement new educational approaches more quickly because they have fewer layers of bureaucracy than do public schools.

• Catholic schools generally have smaller class sizes and lower student-to-teacher ratios than do public schools.

Sister Meegan added that Catholic schools have another advantage that may fuel their academic success: the fact that they view children as eternal souls.

"I think the religious atmosphere of our schools contributes to a sense of dedication and importance of what we're doing," she said.

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