

Pupils 'buddy up' so they can learn, grow

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

At 11:30 in the morning on a sunny June day, most of the students at St. Patrick's School in Seneca Falls were sitting on the lawn eating a picnic lunch. Twelve kindergartners, however, lined up outside the school's main entrance, anxiously waiting for the eighth-grade students to come outside.

As soon as the eighth-graders walked through the doors, a kindergarten student walked up to each one, took them by the hand and the pair walked away to get a lunch.

These kindergartners and eighth-graders have been paired up through the school's buddy program, which has been in effect at the school for 11 years.

"It's been a wonderful program. They've just developed wonderful friendships," said Michelle Brown, kindergarten teacher at St. Patrick's, and one-half of the pair that developed the program.

Eleven years ago, the school decided that the kindergarten students would start attending first Friday Mass with the rest of the students in the school. Brown met with Mary Ann Kolo, who teaches seventh- and eighth-grade social studies and math and seventh-grade religion, and the two decided that the kindergartners might behave better if they went to Mass with an eighth-grade "buddy." The eighth-graders would set an example for the younger students and help supervise them, Kolo said.

As the year went on, however, Brown and Kolo discovered that matching up the students had more benefits than they originally thought. One of these benefits, Kolo said, is to "make it very obvious to the eighth-graders that they are not only the (student) leaders of the school, but they're looked up to and their example is followed."

Having a younger buddy is also a good experience for the eighth-graders who don't have younger siblings, Kolo added. Both classes this year were very affectionate, she said, and when the kindergarten students saw their older buddies in the hall, they all wanted to stop and say hi to or get a hug from their buddy. Many strong relationships have formed, and some students have even developed baby-sitting contacts through the program.

Fourteen-year-old Nicole Golonski

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ki thinks the buddy program helps the younger students adjust to and feel more comfortable in their new school.

"I think the younger kids are sometimes scared; it helps them get together and bond with the older kids. I think it gives you a chance to get to know other people," said Golonski, who also said she's enjoyed getting to know her own kindergarten buddy, 5-year-old Lexi Salerno.

St. Patrick's is not the only local Catholic school to pair up older and younger students. On their first day of school at Rochester's Nazareth Academy, freshmen meet their "big sister." Through the school's big and little sister program, each freshman is paired with a junior at the school, and the "sisters" stay together for two years, until the older girl graduates and the younger of the pair is given her own "little sister."

"This seems to help the freshmen as they adjust to high school. It gives them an older student to talk to about concerns they might have," said Sister of St. Joseph Mary Anne Mayer, who coordinates Nazareth's big and little sister program. "We work to build community here at school. We stress the idea of working together and looking out for each other. If we have competition among the classes, it is on a more friendly vein rather than a cut-throat, competitive vein."

Jillian Borkowski, 18, who will be a senior in the fall, vividly recalls her first day of school, when the only other person she knew before she met her big sister, Stephanie Tadaro, was her actual sister, Janelle. Jillian said she saw Stephanie every day in the hall, if only for a few seconds in passing, and felt more secure knowing she had two sisters in the school.

"It was really good, because I didn't really know anybody when I was a freshman, so at least I had two people that I felt comfortable to talk to. She (Stephanie) was really welcoming and she was willing to help me if I had questions about the school or needed to talk to somebody," Jillian said.

Jillian and Stephanie also gave each other small gifts at Christmas, on their birthdays and on their re-



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St. Patrick School eighth-grader Nicole Golonski (left) reads a Dr. Seuss book to her "buddy," kindergarten student Lexi Salerno, during a March 2 event that celebrated the 100th anniversary of Dr. Seuss' birthday. The students enjoyed a breakfast of green eggs and ham before spreading blankets on the gymnasium floor and sitting down with their favorite books.

spective freshmen and junior appreciation days. Through the school's mentoring program, the pair met with a teacher once a month to discuss preassigned topics and get to know each other better. Through these interactions, lasting friendships often develop, Sister Mayer said.

Now that she's entering her senior year, Jillian has already been a big sister for one year and is looking forward to another year. Helping to look out for a younger student gives juniors and seniors a feeling of worth and responsibility, she said.

"I'm actually the one that she's looking up to instead of me looking up to other people," Jillian said.

Our Lady of Mercy High School in Rochester also has a big and lit-

tle sister program. Through this program, however, incoming seventh-graders are matched up with eighth-graders. If an eighth-grader transfers into the school they are assigned a fellow eighth-grade girl as a "cousin." The pairs of sisters and cousins take part in several activities together throughout the school year and know they have someone they can talk to.

Since hospitality is one of the charisms of the Sisters of Mercy, the big and little sister program is a way to be hospitable to new students, said Sue Clifford Alvut, who designed the Our Lady of Mercy program 14 years ago. It's also an opportunity for the older girls to rise to the occasion and be leaders, she added.