

Amherst schools' pre-K program examined by board

by PATRICK J. NAGY
Reporter

The history of pre-kindergarten in the Amherst Central School District was explored at the March 6 Board of Education meeting.

Mary Lavin, principal of the Windermere Boulevard Elementary Early Childhood Center, said pre-kindergarten has undergone significant expansion since the board approved it three years ago.

Lavin said in 2004-05, 48 district children were enrolled in pre-kindergarten. This year, the number of children has more than doubled to 109 thanks to three New York State Education Universal Pre-K grants totaling \$294,255 that the district won last June.

The increase in funding allowed the expansion, which includes a second location site in addition to Windermere at Amherst Community Church Child Center, 77 Washington Highway, and did not cost taxpayers any money, Lavin added.

Karen Redding, the district's educational coordinator for pre-kindergarten, who works as a liaison between the Windermere and ACCCC sites, said there are currently three half-day pre-K sessions at ACCCC totaling 51 children. The classrooms at Windermere and ACCCC follow the same curriculum and assessment procedures. Windermere has four

half-day sessions.

"The goal is to design an early school experience that will possibly affect children as they grow and learn," said Redding. "The long-term goal is to ensure a quality program spread throughout classrooms."

ACCCC is the third collaborating pre-kindergarten partner with the district. Bornhava, a private agency that provides special education services at Windermere to preschoolers who are identified as needing special support because of a disability, and Bethel Head Start, located at the Harlem Road Community Center, 4255 Harlem Road, are the others.

Pre-kindergarten in the district is having a positive impact on the children. Using Marie Clay's Observation Survey, Lavin found children's scores for vocabulary and hearing and sounding words doubled from the spring of 2004 to spring of 2006. Marie Clay is a well-known researcher in educational literacy who has helped change the way schools teach literacy instruction.

"I am not telling you that pre-K is the only thing that changed these scores but that pre-K is an essential component," Lavin told the board.

The future of pre-kindergarten in the district looks bright. Lavin projects enrollment for pre-K next year will be 121 students, approximately half of the district's 4-year-old population. Ideally, Lavin would like to have

pre-K available for any interested 4-year-old in the district.

However, it does look like pre-kindergarten will cost district taxpayers money. Lavin said New York State Gov. Eliot Spitzer is recommending statewide pre-K, meaning, if approved, pre-K would no longer be a grant-funded program. Amherst has received all of its pre-K funding through grants.

Lavin said state funding would become part of the proposed foundation aid formula which is a proposed increase of \$99 million for pre-kindergarten. Lavin said the foundation aid formula would most likely not yield the per pupil amount the district currently receives through the pre-K grants, but a save harm feature is included to ensure that all districts receive at least as much pre-K funding as they did in 2006-07.

"Basically, this means a couple of years down the road, it will cost Amherst more money in order to operate the pre-K program and at the same time, have the expectations of all parents that the program exists because that's what will be emerging in neighboring communities," said Amherst Superintendent Dennis Ford. "By the time it catches on elsewhere, we're also simultaneously receiving less financial assistance under the proposed formula to run the program. That's where it becomes a real budget issue long term."

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BAND FESTIVAL — Casey Middle School students (from left to right) Samantha Payne, Mark Flemming and Domonic Scaduto, members of the trumpet section, performed in the District Middle School Band Festival held March 7 at Williamsville South High School. Transit, Heim and Mill middle schools also performed.

Photo by Joe Eberle
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St. Edmund's, St. Christopher's merge under diocesan plan

by NICHOLAS J. PRIMERANO
Ken-Ton Editor

The Catholic Diocese of Buffalo has announced that 10 parishes and one mission will merge into five parishes and one oratory will close, as part of the effort to cut costs.

Announcements of the mergers were sent to affected parishioners this past weekend.

In the Town of Tonawanda, St. Edmund's will merge with St. Christopher's. The two parishes are the only suburban parishes that will merge, with the other remaining parishes in the Southern Tier and rural Western New York.

"This weekend we began communicating phase one of our parish restructuring," said Bishop Edward U. Kmiec. "The Journey in Faith and Grace is an effort to create parish communities that are much more than a place where Sunday liturgy is celebrated. Our goal is to establish faith communities that provide formation programs for the sacraments, religious formation for both children and adults, and outreach to those in need. This restructuring will provide for even more lay involvement, good pastoral leadership, and financial stability."

The churches designated to merge are St. John the Evangelist in Sinclairville with Immaculate Conception in Cassadaga and the Mission of St. Patrick in Crittenden with St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Corfu. St. Mary's of East Arcade and Blessed Sacrament in Delevan will merge into SS. Peter & Paul in Arcade and be known as St. Mary's.

St. Elizabeth's in Buffalo will merge into Assumption Church, also of Buffalo.

"The merging of St. Edmund and St. Christopher parishes is very much a homecoming," said Rev. Charles Slisz, pastor of St. Christopher's. "Some 42 years ago, St. Edmund was established from a large segment of St. Christopher parishioners and some from St. Francis. Good liturgy and a strong commitment to Catholic education are hallmarks of both communities."

"With more people working together, having the advantage of increased space and more facilities, I see only the potential for spiritual growth for the people of the merged parish and greater service to the wider community," Rev. Slisz added. "May God, who has begun the good work in us, bring it to perfection in the day of Christ Jesus."

Rev. Robert Wozniak expressed happiness about the joining of the two churches.

"As pastor of St. Edmund's, I am excited for our faith community for the new opportunities of ministries and life that await us as we join together with the faith community of St. Christopher's Parish," he said. "I strongly feel this merger is much like a marriage, where two people bring their unique giftedness and join together to become one, thus creating something new that would not have been possible alone."

"This merger will benefit both communities by offering new life in the form of ministry and strengthen both existing congregations to expand beyond their present realities," he added. "This result of the merger was a collaborative effort of many through the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit."

There are currently 273 parishes, missions and oratories in Western New York.

According to Bishop Kmiec, the Journey in Faith and Grace strategic planning process was designed to identify the religious, spiritual, and education needs of the Catholic faithful throughout the diocese, and determine how those needs can best be met. The goal is to ensure that parishes will have the membership, leadership, and resources to be vibrant centers of parish life.

School News

St. Leo the Great School, on Sweet Home Road, recently held their St. Leo the Great Spelling Bee. Channing McCabe, a seventh grader was this year's champion. In second place was Alex Walfrand, a fifth grader and in third place was Hadi Al-Jabir-Lopez, a sixth grader.

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