

CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOLS: CAN INCLUSION WORK WITHOUT SIGNIFICANT PUBLICLY-FUNDED RESOURCES?

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Catholic high schools do not generally have a reputation for serving students with special needs. This article, using primary sources related to one high school's history, demonstrates how even an academically elite school can meet the needs of a wide range of students. Specific strategies are suggested that can help Catholic high schools be more inclusive.

INTRODUCTION

Catholic high schools have long been known for the overwhelming percentage of their graduates who are admitted to and enroll in post-secondary educational institutions. *CHS 2000: A First Look* published by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA; Guerra, 1998) concludes that 97% of Catholic high school graduates continue their education. Eighty percent attend 4-year colleges. Much research demonstrates the effectiveness of Catholic high schools in educating low-income and minority students (McGrath, 2002).

Catholic Church leaders have urged the faithful to take active steps to welcome persons with disabilities into all aspects of Church life (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1995, 1998; United States Catholic Conference, 1989). Catholic educators, particularly those involved in highly academic high schools, sometimes struggle with the extent to which they can enroll students with disabilities and still maintain their records of preparing nearly all of their graduates to enroll in college.

The number of students with disabilities who are enrolled in Catholic high schools is difficult to determine. The most recent report of data published by the NCEA does not give figures for students with disabilities at

either the elementary or high school level (McDonald, 2003). *The Digest of Education Statistics 2002* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003) is also silent on the matter. Researchers Weaver and Landers (2002) report the lack of comprehensive data. Their studies revealed that some individual Catholic high schools had impressive inclusion programs, but information about services in other Catholic high schools was unavailable.

Most of the available reports about services to students with disabilities in Catholic high schools are anecdotal. Catholic high school personnel sometimes express dismay at the few publicly funded services available to students with disabilities in private schools. They conclude that without a significant number of those services, their high schools cannot successfully educate students with disabilities. This paper will explore the validity of this conclusion.

AVAILABILITY OF SERVICES

The number of publicly-funded services that parentally-placed private school students receive varies greatly from locality to locality. Factors such as the language in state constitutions and laws and the degree to which local public and private school administrators cooperate with one another greatly affect the number and type of services students with disabilities receive when their parents choose a private school education for them.

States such as Kansas and New Jersey have legislated that all students with disabilities, even those who attend private schools, should receive publicly-funded services. These comprehensive services are financed by both federal and state monies (USCCB, 2001).

Most states, however, follow the standard set out in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) which legislates that students with disabilities placed by their parents in private schools have no individual entitlement to IDEA-funded services. Instead, federal funds are allocated to serve the group of parentally-placed private school students. The proportion of students with disabilities in private schools who reside within the boundaries of a local education agency (public school district or LEA) is applied to the total number of students with disabilities in an LEA. That ratio is then applied to the amount of available IDEA funds in order to calculate how much money will be allocated to serve at least some of the private school students with disabilities. Thus, if 10% of the students with disabilities residing in a public school district attend private schools, then 10% of the federal IDEA funds should be used to provide special education services to at least some of the private school students with disabilities (Russo, Massucci, Osborne, & Cattaro, 2002).

In addition to limitations in funding, students with disabilities whose parents have placed them in private schools sometimes do not find the pub-

licly-funded services offered to be advantageous. Federal law and regulations state that decisions about which students are served under IDEA and the place where those services are provided are determined by the LEA after consultation with private school officials (Russo et al., 2002). Sometimes decisions about the location of services offered to parentally-placed private school students result in parents forgoing special education services offered to their children. This occurs because those services are available only at a time and place that require children to lose instructional time at their regular school in order to travel to a public school for the special services.

Whether individual students with disabilities attending private schools are never offered publicly-funded services or their parents decide that accepting those offered has too many negative consequences, very few students with disabilities placed by their parents in private schools actually have their disabilities addressed with IDEA resources. The study *Catholic School Students with Disabilities* (USCCB, 2002) found that the percentage of students with disabilities in Catholic schools did not vary greatly from the nationwide percentage in public schools. During the school year 2000-2001, 7% of students in Catholic schools were found to have a disability compared to 11% of the students enrolled in public schools. Most significantly, of the 7% in Catholic schools with identified disabilities, fewer than 1% of these students (.74%) were found to receive services funded through IDEA.

Since IDEA funds are the only public funds which must provide special education services to at least some students with disabilities in private schools across the nation, and even these funds serve a limited number of students, this study demonstrates the difficulty of Catholic schools and their families depending upon public funds to provide the necessary resources to enable a student with a disability to enroll and succeed in a Catholic school.

Do limited public funds necessarily lead to limited opportunities for students with disabilities to be part of a Catholic school community? More specifically, do the paucity of publicly-funded services require college preparatory Catholic high schools to deny admission to students with disabilities?

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: ONE SUCCESS STORY

The contention of the author of this paper is that, even with only limited services provided through public funding, Catholic high schools, even those which strive to maintain a rigorous college prep program, can successfully incorporate a significant number of students with disabilities into

the school community. Furthermore, welcoming students with disabilities into a school can lead to impressive benefits, not only for those persons with disabilities, but for the faculty, staff, and other students who befriend and support them.

By profiling Paul VI Catholic High School in Fairfax, Virginia, this author will describe how one Catholic high school, relying on very few services from public sources, combined the energy, motivation, and talents of parents with the commitment of administrators, the dedication and creativity of faculty and staff, and the enthusiastic response of students to create a school community in which over 98% of graduates go on to higher education while enrolling over 200 students, out of approximately 1,150 in the student body, with documented disabilities (Paul VI Catholic High School, 2004; Diocese of Arlington, 2003a). The purpose of profiling a particular school is to show how a cooperative relationship between parents and school and diocesan personnel can be used to help even highly academic Catholic high schools respond successfully to the call to welcome persons with disabilities into all parts of Church life. By detailing the planning, organization, and resources that led to the current programs at Paul VI Catholic High School, the author hopes that additional Catholic high schools will become confident that they can use the talents and resources within their own communities to begin to enroll and educate a wider range of academic levels, even when few publicly-funded services are available.

Paul VI Catholic High School in Fairfax, Virginia, one of the suburban areas of the metropolitan Washington, DC area, was opened by the Diocese of Arlington as a coeducational high school in the fall of 1983 with approximately 360 freshmen and sophomores. In the early 1980s, Catholic secondary educational opportunities in the rapidly growing northern Virginia suburbs were in short supply. The largest Catholic high school, a coeducational institution in Arlington, had long waiting lists for admission. Separate high schools for males and females served the Alexandria area of the Diocese. Neither was particularly accessible to the Catholic families moving in large numbers into western Fairfax County. Although some Catholic elementary schools in the diocese enrolled students with special needs, only boys with learning disabilities who could enroll in Bishop Ireton High School in Alexandria could find a Catholic high school in northern Virginia that had designed a program to help them succeed academically. Since not all parish elementary school graduates with good grades and excellent prospects for academic achievement could find spots in Catholic high schools, opportunities for those with special needs were even more limited. This situation was particularly difficult because parents and Catholic leaders and educators had previously cooperated in efforts to serve students with disabilities within Catholic settings.

In 1959, while northern Virginia was still part of the Diocese of Richmond, Joseph and Hazel Hagarty, parents of a daughter with Down syndrome, opened a Catholic school for children with mental retardation (St. Coletta of Greater Washington, 2004). This was over 15 years prior to the first federal legislation, Education for All Handicapped Act of 1975, which required public schools to provide educational programs for students with all kinds of disabilities. The Hagartys, with facilities provided by both Catholic and Protestant churches and major fundraising by such groups as the Order of Alhambra and Porto Caravan, taught not only their own daughter to read and to hold a job, but scores of other students with mental retardation the same kinds of life skills. The tenacity of the Hagartys resulted in the first Catholic educational institution in northern Virginia to focus specifically on serving students with disabilities.

Nearly a decade before Paul VI opened, another Catholic couple, whose family included several children with learning disabilities, sought a Catholic school environment which would assist children with specific learning disabilities. In 1975, Mrs. Ellen P. Coakley, assisted by her husband Cornelius, founded Seton Centers, Inc. for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. With the enthusiastic cooperation of the principal of the Coakley's parish school, Sister Mary Eduard White, S.N.D., the first Seton Center program opened that year at St. Agnes Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia. The school provided a room to be used as a resource center. Seton Centers, Inc. hired and supervised specially trained teachers to work with the students with learning disabilities, who were dually enrolled in both the school and the Seton Center program. Seton Center students were part of the regular school program except for the subjects most affected by their learning disabilities. These subjects they studied in the resource room under the tutelage of the Seton Center teachers. The principal and Seton Center staff cooperated in arranging professional development so that regular classroom teachers could plan effective instruction for students with learning disabilities. Parents of students enrolled in the Seton Centers paid extra tuition for the program but an effort was made to provide some tuition assistance for families with more limited resources (Seton Centers, Inc., n.d.a). In the spring of 1980, to assist the fundraising efforts of the Seton Centers, the Bishop of Arlington, the Most Rev. Thomas J. Welsh, and the Diocesan School Board wrote endorsements of the Seton Center programs.

Eventually seven other Catholic elementary schools opened Seton Center programs so that more students with learning disabilities could be educated within parish schools. In the early 1980s, the Diocesan Superintendent of Schools, Rev. William F. Davis, O.S.F.S., coordinated a dialogue between elementary school principals and staff and Seton Center

personnel to clarify the relationship between Seton Centers, Inc. and local Catholic schools (W. F. Davis, personal communication, May 1981, July 1981). Ultimately documents detailing admission procedures, teacher qualifications and supervision, and the expected relationships with the host school, parents, and Seton Center students were developed (Seton Centers, Inc., n.d.c, n.d.d).

Additional Catholic elementary schools in northern Virginia made arrangements with other educational programs, such as Kingsbury Centers, so that students with learning disabilities could be successful in Catholic schools. On the diocesan level, a speech and language specialist was contracted to offer screening and services on-site at the Catholic school to children who could benefit. These again were paid for by parents, but the willingness of the specialists to work with the classroom teachers of their clients and the convenience of having the screening and therapy on-site at the Catholic school provided extra benefit for students and families involved in the programs.

Despite the growth of services at the K-8 level, before Paul VI opened, only the Bishop Ireton Seton Center provided a formal program to help students with disabilities succeed in a Catholic high school in northern Virginia. The high school Seton Center functioned primarily as a tutorial program, designed to assist students with learning disabilities to succeed within the regular curriculum. Seton Center staff worked with faculty members at Bishop Ireton to select classes for their students. Instead of attending study hall, Bishop Ireton students enrolled in the Seton Center went to their designated classroom for small group instruction and organizational and test-taking strategies. Seton Center teachers met with regular classroom teachers to discuss students' learning styles and appropriate accommodations that could be used to help students succeed. Seton Center staff assisted both parents and teachers to communicate effectively with one another about particular students' progress and needs (Seton Centers, Inc., n.d.b).

Although Bishop Ireton High School had taken a significant step in establishing a program for teenagers with learning disabilities, it was the smaller of the two Diocesan high schools and, at that time, enrolled only young men. No high school program was yet available for families who sought a Catholic secondary education for their daughters with learning disabilities or who wished to have their sons in a coeducational Catholic high school.

In December 1982, however, the Diocese of Arlington purchased a former public high school building and announced that Paul VI Catholic High School would open as a coeducational school the following fall. The school would enroll 9th and 10th graders the first year, and the next two grades

would be added over the next 2 years. An Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, Rev. Donald J. Heet, a faculty member at Bishop Ireton High School, was appointed as the founding principal of the new school.

Having experience as a teacher at Bishop Ireton and an awareness of the limited opportunities for students with special needs to be admitted to northern Virginia Catholic high schools, Father Heet planned, from the beginning, that Paul VI would not only offer high level college preparatory courses but a diversified curriculum and support programs that would allow less academically talented teenagers to become part of a Catholic high school community.

The earliest academic program at the school not only had regular college preparatory and honors level courses, but also core subjects where the instruction was at the general level. General courses in math, English, science, and social studies typically had a smaller teacher-pupil ratio and covered the material in a slower, more structured way. Another early decision was to bring the Seton Center and its tutorial model to Paul VI. Thus students with learning disabilities could enroll in different levels of core courses depending on how much their specific disability affected their progress in a particular academic subject. Those enrolled in the Seton Center program also had daily professional assistance to help them succeed academically (Seton Centers, Inc., n.d.b; Seton Center Staff, personal communication, August 16, 1983).

By the fall of 1985, the administration and board at Paul VI concluded that more students at Paul VI could benefit from an additional tutoring program. Planning began to open the Academic Support Program, in the fall of 1986, which would serve a broader range of students than the Seton Center staff. Whereas the Seton Center program specialized in assisting students with identified learning disabilities, the Academic Support Program (ASP) did not require an evaluation or the determination of a disability in order for a student to participate. Students who were experiencing academic difficulty for any number of reasons could be recommended for the ASP program. The fee to participate in the daily tutoring session was less expensive than the cost of the Seton Center program, which at that time was \$2,400 in addition to the regular tuition. Full time educators were to be employed specifically to work in the ASP program.

In October 1987, within 4 years of the school's opening, the visiting committee reviewing Paul VI's program for accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools commended the establishment of the Seton Center and Academic Support programs in their final report.

When another SACS visiting committee came to Paul VI 5 years later, the team specifically commended the school community for the academic successes – scholarships, honor roll status, enrollment in honors level

classes, science fair awards – of students with special needs. The visiting committee also praised the professional development opportunities for regular faculty members and the orientations for parents, both of which addressed how to help teenagers with learning difficulties succeed.

Paul VI High School's greatest challenge for incorporating students with special needs into the school community began in the fall of 1996 when, once again, parents of a student with special needs took the lead. Janae and Larry Harrington's son Darby had Down syndrome. Siblings of Darby's had been students at Paul VI in previous years. Darby, however, had been attending the local public schools in order to have services for his particular type of disability. As the Harringtons expressed in their first letter to Rev. John Lyle, O.S.F.S., principal at Paul VI:

We have a child that has so much to offer to the general public and who has so much to learn from the general public in order to be a contributing citizen. We do not look forward to a life for him that is isolated. We have big dreams. But that is what miracles are made of. We found St. John Newman's parish which welcomes him with an open heart. He has brothers and sisters who love him dearly and provide wonderful experiences for him. But the public schools insist on segregation and have failed to nurture the goodness that our children possess and have failed to welcome them in a full life. (J. Harrington & L. Harrington, personal communication, September 5, 1996)

Mr. and Mrs. Harrington had more than an eloquent plea for assistance when they contacted Father Lyle. They had identified a Catholic high school in Bellevue, Washington, Eastside Catholic, which had the kind of program they were proposing Paul VI begin. Eastside Catholic had established a program, referred to as Options, 12 years earlier which enrolled five new students with developmental disabilities each year. Students in the program remained at Eastside for the 4 years of high school and participated in a modified inclusion program. They took some classes within their own program but took other classes with the rest of the student body. Heavy reliance on student peer mentors fostered the inclusion of these students into some regular classes, homeroom, and many of the social activities associated with high school.

Mr. and Mrs. Harrington not only identified a model program but offered to fly persons from the Paul VI community to Seattle to see the program firsthand and to discuss the program with the members of the Eastside community.

The compelling letter from the Harringtons encouraged Father Lyle to bring their proposal firsthand to other administrators in the school. In a subsequent meeting, the Harringtons described all the options they had

explored for Darby before they had approached Paul VI. They reiterated their offer of assistance if the school would seriously look at beginning such a program. Although the other administrators had many questions about how a program could work, including whether the school had the room or personnel to launch such a project and what impact the program would have on other aspects of school life at Paul VI, ultimately the school committed to take a serious look at the possibility of opening an Eastside-type program at the school.

In a letter to Father Lyle following their meeting with his administrative team, the Harringtons noted: "It was most impressive that your first reaction was not one of 'absolutely not,' which is a response that parents of special needs children learn to expect" (J. Harrington & L. Harrington, personal communication, n.d.).

Over the next 2 years the Paul VI community became much better informed about how teenagers with developmental disabilities could become a part of their school. The school's development director, Mrs. Anne Marie Chester, and the school's chaplain, the Rev. Matthew Hilliard, O.S.F.S., volunteered to take the lead in exploring the Eastside program. Under their leadership, a philosophy, the admission standards, an educational program, and a financial plan were all developed. In March of 1998, a team of parents and administrators from Paul VI spent several days at Eastside High for a more detailed view of the program. The following month Eastside High representatives, including the assistant principal for academics, an Options teacher, a parent of an Options alumnus, a current parent, and a student who had been a peer mentor, came to Paul VI. They explained firsthand how their program worked and the positive impact it had made on the overall school climate. Their visit included general presentations to the faculty, staff, and students and individual meetings with faculty members when requested. The presentation of the student peer mentor was so effective that over 200 Paul VI students signed up to be trained as peer mentors for the following year.

Before the 1997-98 school year ended, the chaplain visited all the religion classes to share with students the characteristics of prospective students in an Options-type program and to hear their concerns about the initiation of such a program.

Persuaded by the amount of planning that had gone into the proposed program and the positive reaction of the faculty, parents, and students who had become familiar with it, the Paul VI Board of Governors authorized Options to begin as a pilot program during the 1998-99 school year with the understanding that the program would be self-supporting. Families participating in the Options program agreed to assist with fundraising efforts so that tuition would only be \$1,200 more than that of a mainstream stu-

dent (Paul VI Catholic High School, 1998a).

The Options program opened in the fall of 1998 with six students, four of them considered as ninth graders, and two students, including Darby Harrington, who began as 11th graders. The school community spent considerable time and effort during the preceding summer to ensure the smooth beginning of this new program. Full day workshops, given by trained special educators, allowed faculty and staff to receive information, ask questions, and voice concerns. The school employed a certified special educator with experience in teaching students with mild to moderate mental retardation to lead the program. An Options Support Team of six members was formed to provide expertise in the areas of special education, speech/language pathology, family counseling, spiritual development, and government affairs. This committee took on the primary responsibility of developing the policies and procedures for the program. An Options Advisory Council of 15 members, each with expertise in some phase of education, agreed to meet at least twice a year to offer their guidance. A Parents Advisory Committee, to include all parents with students in the Options program, was established to assist with public relations, fundraising, socials, and sports (Paul VI Catholic High School, 1998a).

Those students who requested to be peer mentors were given specific training so that they could help students in the Options program with getting to the right class, taking notes, exhibiting appropriate behavior at assemblies, liturgies, and lunch time and generally entering into the social life of the school (Paul VI Catholic High School, 1998a).

Newspaper reports (MacDonnell, 1998) illustrate the success of the planning. Parent Janae Harrington was quoted as saying: "My son is so happy. The school feels like family to him—he is so comfortable" (p. 15). Laura Armitage, another parent, was reported as saying that her daughter "had never been so happy. 'She seems to grow more confident every day. The staff and peer mentors have made her feel so at home'" (p. 15). Parent Daaiyah Rashid recalled that "when she picked her daughter up from her previous school she was always alone. The reports that 200 fellow students wished to be peer mentors brought tears to her eyes" (p. 15).

In a letter to faculty members at the same time, Laura Armitage wrote:

We have spent many years negotiating with school systems, trying to make changes, and trying to have our children's needs met. Some of us had resorted to home schooling. We all felt that our children and their needs were not understood. Our children are now part of a wonderful nurturing school community. We are all truly thankful. Everyone of you has made a positive difference in our lives and the lives of our children. (1998, p. 2)

As the 1998-99 school year continued, academic goals for Options students revolved primarily around improving their language skills. Small group instruction focused on listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Each Options student was mainstreamed each semester into a physical education class and one other class selected according to the student's interests and abilities and the openness of a staff member to have an Options student, with a peer mentor, in class. Both Options and other faculty organized frequent field trips as educational experiences. Options students opened a savings account at a nearby bank where one of the employees taught them the skills needed to manage their accounts.

Through the efforts of Options parents and interested faculty members, Paul VI organized soccer and basketball teams to participate in local and state Special Olympic programs.

In the summary report of May 18, 1999, after the first year of the Options program, Mrs. Chester stated that portfolios of each of the students showed considerable progress in their verbal and writing skills, their math levels, and their socialization skills.

That first year, however, was not without its challenges. The program director left mid-year to have a baby. Several meetings for homeroom and class teachers of Options students were called specifically to deal with how to guide some of the Options students toward more appropriate behavior (Paul VI Catholic High School, 1998b).

Because the successes clearly outnumbered the negatives of the program, Options concluded its pilot phase and became a full-fledged school program during the 1999-2000 school year.

In more recent years, Paul VI made one other significant change in the administration of services to students with special needs. Beginning with the 2000-2001 school year, the arrangement with Seton Centers, Inc. was discontinued and the Paul VI administration began to administer directly the support program specifically for students with learning disabilities. Since the Options program began, the school had operated two of its special programs, Options and Academic Support, and had contracted out the third, Seton Centers. Since a full-time special educator had begun administering Options and ASP during the 1999-2000 school year, the decision to have all three special programs under the same director seemed increasingly logical. To honor the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales who founded Paul VI, but withdrew at the end of the 1999-2000 school year, the school named the new program the De Sales Learning Center (Paul VI Catholic High School, 2000).

By the fall of 2003 Paul VI Catholic High School had identified 216 out of 1,140 students with disabilities. These included 155 students with specific learning disabilities, 50 of whom were enrolled in the DeSales

Learning Center, and 12 students with mental retardation, who were enrolled in the Options program (Diocese of Arlington, Office of Catholic Schools, 2003a). Many of the students had undergone evaluations by public school districts; others had private evaluations to determine if they were eligible for special services or accommodations.

During the 2003-2004 school year, all students in the school, except those in the Options program, were required to earn at least 25.5 credits in order to graduate from Paul VI. Minimum requirements included 4 credits in English and religion; 3 each in mathematics, science, and social studies; 2 in the same foreign language and physical education; 1 in computers; and a half credit in fine arts. The other three credits could be gained from a variety of elective courses (Paul VI Catholic High School, 2003a).

The largest numbers of students were enrolled in regular college preparatory classes. Students who demonstrated the ability and work ethic to excel in a particular subject were eligible to participate in an honors course for that subject. Nearly 180 different students took over 300 Advanced Placement exams in the 16 AP classes the school offered. The school reported a combined SAT score for seniors of 1112. From the graduating class of 2004, the National Merit program honored one finalist and 13 commended students (V. Colwell, personal communication, March 2004; E. Hanley, personal communication, March 2004).

To accommodate students who struggled in particular core subjects, general level classes continued to be available. These emphasized fundamentals and normally had a smaller teacher-student ratio than did either the regular college prep or honors classes. A specially designed 2-year Spanish language program, taught by a teacher with expertise both in Spanish and in teaching students with learning disabilities, allowed students with language-based disabilities to pursue the 2-year foreign language graduation requirement (Paul VI Catholic High School, 2003a).

The DeSales Center continued its practice of requiring all ninth graders enrolled in the program to delay studying a foreign language and spend two periods a day in the DeSales Center resource room. DeSales students above the ninth grade generally spent one period a day receiving specialized assistance. The three DeSales teachers worked with two to three students each period. They also spent considerable time reviewing the individualized educational assessments of the DeSales students in order to provide the teachers of each of their students with information about the specific nature of the disability and the kinds of strategies or accommodations that worked best for each student. They also collected frequent progress reports from teachers and communicated these to parents of students enrolled in their program. Emphasis was given to assisting students and parents to establish routines and procedures that would lead to academic success in all

subjects (Paul VI Catholic High School, 2003b).

Fees for the DeSales program during the 2003-2004 academic year were \$2,300 per year for a student who used the program one period a day and \$3,500 for students who used it twice each day. Students in the DeSales program needed to commit to being in the program for the entire year unless there was consensus between staff and parents that leaving the program was desirable (Paul VI Catholic High School, 2003a).

As it had begun, the Academic Support Program (ASP) in 2003-2004 was not limited to students with identified disabilities and did not require an educational evaluation in order to qualify for the program. Over 70 students participated each semester. Families needed only to make a semester commitment to be in the program which assisted students in a resource room during their study halls. Each of the three ASP teachers worked with four to five students each period and emphasized completion of homework, studying for tests, and general organizational techniques. If ASP students had documentation about their learning needs, ASP teachers communicated those to the regular classroom teachers. ASP teachers also facilitated communication between parents and subject teachers. Fees for the ASP program were set at \$750 for each semester used. Both DeSales and ASP charged a one-time registration fee of \$100 to reserve a spot in either program (Paul VI Catholic High School, 2003a).

The 12 Options students enrolled during the 2003-2004 school year paid \$2,000 per year above tuition, but parents in the program were expected to raise an additional \$70,000 from fundraising events and other donations. The budget for the program included a full-time staff of three plus their share of the Director of Special Programs' compensation (Paul VI Catholic High School, 2003d).

Before a student could be accepted into the Options Program, both the student and parents needed to visit the school and meet the Program staff and at least one parent of a current Options student. The school considered an applicant's ability to participate in a conversation, work in a group setting, and demonstrate an interest in learning when determining which new students could be accepted into the program (Paul VI Catholic High School, 1999).

The program continued to emphasize language and math skills and the development of work habits that would allow students to hold jobs. All students in the Options program have regularly scheduled time for acquiring skills for employment and independent living. Within Paul VI these students have worked in the Student Life and Administration offices involved in such activities as preparing packages for mailing or counting out newsletters. During the past 2 years, the Options staff member in charge of the transition-to-work program has accompanied, as a job coach, students

to offsite work at a bank, a sporting goods store, a clothing store, a nursery, and a Montessori pre-school (Holden, 2003).

The peer mentors continued to be a prominent part of the Options program. Students who did not have study halls to assist Options students with classroom activities were able to participate in a Peer Mentor Club. The club brought together students with and without developmental disabilities in such activities as bowling or shopping at a nearby mall. Peer mentors accompanied students in the Options program to school activities such as Homecoming and Prom and a variety of school social events.

Like other seniors, the fourth year students in the Options program looked forward to the graduation ceremony where they would wear their caps and gowns and receive their Certificates of Achievement to the cheers of families and friends.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION

By most assessments Paul VI Catholic High School has successfully included students with many different kinds of disabilities in its school life while still maintaining a school community where 98% go on to college. This has been accomplished with very few publicly-funded services, other than evaluations, available to students with disabilities, their families, or their school. The Commonwealth of Virginia has one of the most stringent prohibitions against public funds going to sectarian schools in the nation, as expressed in the Constitution of Virginia, Article VIII, Section 10.

Serving students with disabilities whose parents place them in private schools does not receive much emphasis in manuals published by either the Virginia Department of Education or Fairfax County Public Schools, the public school district where most students attending Paul VI live. In the 68 page state publication *A Parent's Guide to Special Education* (Virginia Department of Education, 2001), only part of one page gives any information about the obligation of a local education agency to evaluate all or serve some children suspected of having a disability whose parents place them in a private school.

The only guidance the 81 page Fairfax County Public School's *Special Education Handbook* (2004) gives to private school parents about evaluations or services to children suspected of having a disability simply refers them to the student's neighborhood school.

A more detailed manual published by the Department of Student Services and Special Education of Fairfax County Public Schools (2001) does give referral information about parentally-placed private school students with disabilities on page 1 but other, limited information is scattered throughout the 127 page document.

Not surprisingly, parents of children with disabilities who wish to have them in private, especially religious, schools in Virginia have sought cooperative private school administrators and teachers to help them. Paul VI Catholic High School, from its origins, has been such a place.

What aspects of the Paul VI experience may be applicable to other highly academic Catholic high schools which would allow them to include more students with disabilities without diminishing the college preparatory character of the school?

Certainly, Catholic schools in northern Virginia have had the advantage of enrolling many students from the affluent families who live in the Washington, DC Virginia suburbs. Having at least some parents who are able to pay extra fees, however, is not the primary factor in the success of Paul VI's special programs. The following aspects seem to have been more crucial.

THE INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT TO INCLUDE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN AN ACADEMIC CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL

From the beginning of his work to open Paul VI, the first principal, Rev. Donald Heet, O.S.F.S., articulated a commitment to create a Catholic high school where students who found academics a challenge would find an academic program which supported them. The decisions to offer core courses at different levels of intensity, to open a Seton Center for students with specific learning disabilities, and, subsequently, to institute the Academic Support Program enabled students with disabilities coming from both Catholic and public schools to integrate successfully into the academic life of the school. The fact that the Diocesan Office of Catholic Schools, many Catholic elementary schools, and Bishop Ireton High School had previously collaborated to provide needed services to students with disabilities offered a basis on which Paul VI Catholic High School could build its much more extensive programs.

THE WILLINGNESS TO LISTEN TO PARENTS AND THEIR IDEAS

As the correspondence between Janae and Larry Harrington and the Paul VI community illustrated, school personnel who truly listen to parents' aspirations for their children may find that parents of students with special needs come to the conversation with detailed and creative ideas for addressing those needs. The determination to have their children in a supportive environment has motivated many parents to invest incredible time

and energy to help a school begin a program which will allow their children and others to flourish. Not all schools can accommodate all students, but an openness to listening to parents can lead to wonderful programs which enrich a school community. Because school and parish personnel cooperated with Joe and Hazel Hagarty, Cornelius and Ellen Coakley, and Janae and Larry Harrington, innumerable students with disabilities have flourished in a Catholic school environment.

THE COMPELLING STORY OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES TO POTENTIAL DONORS

St. Coletta School, Seton Centers, Inc., and the Options program at Paul VI have all been recipients of financial support from the wider community. The Knights of Columbus, KOVAR, the Order of Alhambra, the Raskob Foundation, and various businesses have all demonstrated, through their financial support, their regard for schools which serve children with special needs. Organizations and businesses donated over \$300,000 to Paul VI's Options program during its first 5 years (Paul VI Catholic High School, 2003c).

THE WILLINGNESS OF THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION AND FACULTY TO CREATE AND SUPPORT AN ACADEMIC PROGRAM WHICH SERVES STUDENTS WITH WIDELY VARYING ABILITIES

Because Paul VI offers required English, social studies, science, and mathematics courses at three levels of instruction, or four when there is an Advanced Placement level, students can take the courses needed for graduation in the classroom atmosphere that best suits their ability in a particular subject. This allows a student, whose disability or poor preparation will make the English curriculum difficult but the mathematics class less so, the opportunity to be in a general English class but regular college prep or honors math class. Students at Paul VI are not automatically tracked into different levels. Each year a student's aptitude for and achievement in a particular subject is reviewed before the level of that subject is determined for the next year. This provides incentives to students with disabilities, who have the opportunity to enroll in more advanced classes as they learn strategies and work habits which help them achieve despite a disability.

Such individualization requires a school to have faculty members who are dedicated to the concept that a college preparatory Catholic high school

is enriched when it enrolls students of widely varying abilities. At Paul VI, the characteristics of the student body are discussed during interviews with potential faculty and staff. Applicants who have experience with or enthusiasm for working with students with special needs are sought as employees. Administrators, teachers in the special programs, and department chairs spend considerable time assisting new teachers to adopt strategies which allow all students to learn and become accountable for their own learning.

Paul VI also makes a concerted effort to place experienced, highly effective teachers with classes that have numerous students who need special attention. These classes frequently have a smaller pupil-teacher ratio, but require considerable creativity and persistence on the part of the teacher. The willingness of experienced teachers to teach such challenging classes has been an essential part of the success of Paul VI's academic program.

Another reason the program at Paul VI works is due to the willingness of faculty members to incorporate accommodations needed by individual students into classroom procedures. Teachers in the DeSales, Academic Support, and Options programs review available documentation on individual students and then notify the teachers of each of their students of accommodations for which the students are eligible. The guidance counselors assume this responsibility for students with documented disabilities who are not enrolled in any program. Accommodations that most faculty members use for at least some students include: sitting in a desk near the front of the classroom, having extra time to finish a test, having assignments given in both written and oral formats, and providing frequent reports to parents about how a student has done on tests and quizzes, completing homework, and being attentive in class.

The expectation that faculty members keep parents informed about their student's progress is an essential part of the culture at Paul VI. Students are expected to assume more responsibility for their own academic success as they progress through the grades but parents are to be kept informed when student performance and behavior jeopardize academic success. Phone calls, e-mail correspondence, and meetings are common when students are falling behind. Classroom teachers of students in the special programs give reports to the program directors every few weeks so that a combined report from a student's multiple teachers can be sent to parents.

THE CAREFUL PREPARATION IN BRINGING THE OPTIONS PROGRAM TO PAUL VI

Although Paul VI had experience with educating students with disabilities from the beginning, certainly including adolescents with mental retardation

into the school community was a step that required planning far beyond that needed previously. The fact that the school used a successful model as its guide, brought in numerous specialists as consultants, did extensive in-service with students and faculty members, and incorporated a peer mentor program allowed the Options program to become an intrinsic part of the school in a remarkably short time. The willingness of the school chaplain and development director to lead the examination and implementation of the Options program was also crucial.

Another aspect that reduced anxiety about the program was the decision to allow faculty members to choose whether to have an Options student in class or homeroom. Faculty members who were reticent about including a student in the Options program and the peer mentor into the dynamics of a particular class were not asked to do so. As the Options students became more a part of the school community, an increasing number of faculty members volunteered to have Options students as part of their classes and worked with the Options faculty to develop appropriate ways for the students to participate.

SUPPORT FROM THE DIOCESAN ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

Almost since its inception in 1974, the Arlington Diocesan Office of Catholic Schools has had someone on the staff with an active interest in increasing the opportunities for students with special needs to be educated in Catholic schools. In the past this support has taken the form of assisting the development of Seton Centers, planning relevant in-services for teachers and principals, arranging for specialists, such as speech therapists, to provide services to schools, and participating both on boards of private special education facilities and public school special education committees.

Today, the support has evolved into a full-time position on the Diocesan level as a Special Needs Coordinator. This specialist has published information about how to access the Child Find process in each public school jurisdiction in the Diocese of Arlington and has put together a very useful manual. The manual, *Guidelines and Resources for Working with Students with Special Needs*, (Diocese of Arlington, Office of Catholic Schools, 2003b) assists both families wishing to access publicly-funded services and schools wishing to develop appropriate service plans and accommodations for students with disabilities who enroll in a school in the Diocese. Having such a well informed Diocesan resource during the last few years has made it easier for local Catholic schools to make reasonable and consistent decisions about serving students with special needs.

CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the experience at Paul VI, including students with widely varying academic talents into a college preparatory Catholic high school involves much dedication, preparation, and flexibility. Why should a Catholic high school, already successful at preparing large numbers of its graduates for college, embrace such a labor-intensive challenge? Certainly the most recent statement by the U.S. Bishops, *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities* (NCCB, 1998) provides a primary reason: "Each person is created in God's image, yet there are variations in individual abilities. Positive recognition of these differences discourages discrimination and enhances the unity of the Body of Christ" (para. 2).

Clearly the message of Church leaders is that Catholic communities must be inclusive. Catholic high schools, which educate many Church and civic leaders of the future, aid their students when they create a school environment in which each student is seen and appreciated for his or her own individual talents.

Paul VI students have had the opportunity to study and socialize with peers of widely varying academic abilities. They have seen students with severe learning disabilities win college scholarships and become class president. They have cheered for Special Olympian basketball, soccer, and track teams. They have participated in national Buddy Walks sponsored by the National Down Syndrome Society. They have chosen career paths because of their inclusive high school experience.

Perhaps the significance of an inclusive high school experience can best be described by one of the original peer mentors for students in the Options program:

Our school motto is *to grow in grace and wisdom*. I truly think that the Options program and students have certainly helped me to do this. Before I became part of the program, I was very unsure what my outlook on helping mentally retarded kids was. I really did not know what to expect. I had never worked with kids with special needs, so this was certainly a new experience for me. I have to admit that my first day in the Options room, I was scared out of my mind. It appeared very depressing. I later was comforted to find out that the students in Options were equally afraid of me. At first, I did not know if I was going to be able to handle the program, but I told myself to just take it a day at a time. I began to think about why the program was in our school and what was the purpose of my involvement. The answer quickly became obvious. As a peer mentor, I was going to be able to give of myself to others and share some of my many blessings. It was not long before I became very comfortable with the kids and they became comfortable with me. A certain sense of trust between us grew rapidly. Before long, I began to see the kids in

Options as unique individuals who are some of the happiest, warm, and genuine people I know. (Paul VI Catholic High School, 1999)

Catholic high schools, even without numerous services provided through public funding, should not miss opportunities to nurture such insights in their graduates.

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