

# Special-needs programs benefit all students

By Tim Puet

Catholic Times Reporter

Programs that provide a quality education for children with special needs have become more available and comprehensive during the past 10 years, thanks to a combination of federal requirements, greater accountability, improved teaching strategies and increased federal and state funding.

The result of these efforts has been helpful not only for students with special needs, but also for students in general, said Maria Phillips, associate director of special populations for the diocesan Office of Catholic Schools.

"Particularly in the last several years or so, educators have become more aware of the value of an inclusive educational approach and have become very intentional about having students with special needs take part in classes, whenever possible, alongside their peers," Phillips said. "Research has found that the strategies used when teaching students with special needs and the knowledge gained of how those strategies improve learning are applicable across the board in a variety of teaching situations. Everyone in the classroom benefits.

"By extension, the classroom situation is no different than that of society at large. It needs to be an environment

where all individuals are welcome, similar to how Jesus welcomed all, and to integrate everyone into daily activities so they become the best version of themselves they were created to be. The unique nature of Catholic education, particularly its emphasis on affirming the value and dignity of each individual as created in God's image, provides many opportunities for having a positive impact on students with special needs by being open to understanding them and their needs and including them in all we do. Often, however, the biggest impact is on us by the mere presence of the Jesus in them."

Phillips said that the diocesan elementary and secondary school population of about 15,500 students includes about 1,070 with special needs.

As defined by the state of Ohio and the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, students with special needs are those identified as having one or more of the following: autism, blindness or other visual impairment, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, orthopedic impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, multiple disabilities or other health impairment, including attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

The IDEA Act mandates equity,

accountability and excellence in education for children with disabilities in public and nonpublic schools. Its predecessors, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, were the first federal laws to require that children with disabilities have the same opportunity for education as other children.

Ohio mandates that all students with special needs have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or a Services Plan written specifically for them as a requirement to receiving special-needs services from their local school districts or from a third-party provider such as Twinsburg-based Partners for Success and Innovation, the state's largest organization specializing in such assistance.

"The type of services offered to students with special needs varies from school to school and is impacted by many factors," Phillips said. "They very much depend on the capacity of each school to accommodate and provide for the unique needs of its student population."

Ohio requires all public school districts to operate special education programs. Most students with special needs in diocesan schools receive federal- and state-funded special-needs-related services through those districts. Two examples of such programs are

the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship Program and the Autism Scholarship Program.

The Peterson program, named for the former Delaware County legislator who sponsored it, began in 2012. It gives parents of children who qualify for a scholarship the chance to send them to a special education program other than the one operated by the school district of residence where the child would attend. Students must be in kindergarten to 12th grade and have an IEP from their district of residence to receive a scholarship. The maximum amount by category for each scholarship is based on the disability identified on the IEP and can range from \$7,598 to \$27,000 per year.

A portion of the money can be used to pay for school tuition, as long as the school is a Peterson scholarship provider and services a minimum of one of the goals on the student's IEP. Students identified as having a speech and language impairment may use their scholarships only to pay for related services that are included in the IEP, and not for tuition.

Parents can apply for the scholarship on a rolling basis throughout the year. They can renew the scholarship as long as the child continues to be a student

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with special needs, has an IEP and meets the state testing requirements of the scholarship. Not everyone who applies will receive a scholarship, as the number of scholarships is limited to 5 percent of the total of Ohio students identified as having special needs. If more than that number apply, a lottery determines the recipients.

The Autism Scholarship Program, similar to the Peterson program, also gives parents the ability to choose where their child will attend and receive their education and related services as outlined in the IEP, other than at the school operated by the district in which the students live. It also has a \$27,000 cap, but there is no limit to the number of scholarships awarded. Children can become eligible for the scholarship beginning at age 3.

Phillips said nearly 400 students in 40 of the diocese's 53 elementary and secondary schools are receiving a Peterson scholarship this year. Twenty-one of those schools are classified as providers, with their own intervention specialists on staff, and 19 are listed as sites, where services are provided by specialists not employed by the school. There are 22 diocesan elementary and secondary schools that accept the Autism scholarships. Of those, two are providers and 20 are sites.

While the state provides support for students with special needs through many of its programs, it is up to the parents, along with a team of specialists from the district and school, to determine which program is best for their specific child. It is not possible to re-

ceive a Peterson or Autism scholarship in addition to an EdChoice scholarship, because they are all state-funded programs.

Another source of funding for special education programs is SPICE (Special People in Catholic Education), which was founded by Bob and Mary Ginn Ryan in 1999 to serve Columbus St. Catharine School. It now has chapters in 12 diocesan schools and four others in Ohio and out of state. SPICE also extends support to parishes, particularly Parish School of Religion programs. The organization raises funds to provide funding for classroom aides, specialized therapists, teacher and staff continuing education, classroom support materials and software. For the past three years, it has sponsored an annual Mass of Inclusion at St. Catharine Church for all persons with disabilities. All the lay ministry roles for the Mass are performed by disabled people.

"United under one umbrella in the school and parish, SPICE follows the example found in Matthew 19:14, in which Jesus says, 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these,'" Mary Ginn Ryan said. "Awareness of special needs is increasing, and more and more of our parish communities are becoming more welcoming and inclusive.

"Many SPICE schools also are participants in the Peterson and Autism scholarship programs. Some provide support not only to students with diagnosed disabilities, but also to other students who might need additional as-

sistance or support for learning but do not have a disability diagnosis. SPICE funds are available to those students as well."

In 2017, a SPICE awareness and information meeting for educators and parents led to formation of the Catholic Inclusion Network of Central Ohio, a centralized resource available to help teachers and administrators throughout the diocese in their efforts to include all special-needs students in the school population.

The network sponsors regular seminars on obtaining federal funds, state grants, special needs programming, and other topics. Both the network and SPICE are supported by The Catholic Foundation.

For the 2018-19 school year, the network offered four sessions for school administrators on the basics of an inclusive school environment. Those events had about 50 participants, and their feedback led to a three-part series for this academic year that narrowed the topic and is focusing on social emotional learning. It is open to school staff members, in addition to administrators.

Phillips, who has been involved with special education for 20 years and has been with the diocesan school's office since 2011, also works with the English learner (EL) population in the diocesan schools. These are students whose principal home language is a language other than English. She said a cluster of diocesan schools have about 700 EL-identified students, mostly in areas with large populations of recent

immigrants.

"That number has been growing significantly in some of our schools over the last two or three years," she said. "Most people think of Latinos when the subject of immigrant students comes to mind, but in our schools, that number also includes students from some African nations and the Middle East. There's minimal federal aid available for programs to support these students in nonpublic schools, but our schools are willing to work with them and help them to succeed.

"With English learners, the biggest concern is one of differentiating the academic content being taught so the students can understand it. Many times, there are English learners at different levels of proficiency in the same classroom, so the teacher must differentiate the same academic content in several different ways. It becomes a way in which each of the EL students receives instruction in a manner which is best for the student's learning of the academic content.

"There are many professional development opportunities, through the districts encompassed by our diocese, available for teachers of EL students and students with special needs in our schools. We encourage them to take advantage of them whenever possible."

Diocesan teachers will be offered several different sessions on differentiating academic content during the diocese's summer learning academy in June. More details can be obtained from the Office of Catholic Schools.