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Superintendent reviews years in school system

By DANNY HEITMAN
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In 1977, when she was principal of Holy Ghost Elementary School in Hammond, Sister Mary Michaeline got a phone call as she was headed to a meeting. It was Bishop Joseph Sullivan of the Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge, who wanted her to be the diocese's next superintendent of schools. "He asked me if I was interested in the job," Sister Michaeline recalled. "I told him, 'No, not really.' I didn't think it was for me. I was happy with what I was doing. When you come up here, you're not with the children anymore. And the reason we exist is for the children."

Also, though she had been at Holy Ghost nearly a decade, Sister Michaeline felt that she didn't have enough experience to lead the school system. "I had only been in administration for nine years," Sister Michaeline said. "And my master's degree wasn't in administration. It was in curriculum and reading."

Despite her reservations, Sullivan managed to talk Sister Michaeline into the job. And today, after more than two decades at the helm of the local Catholic school system, she can't claim lack of experience. Since 1977, when Sister Michaeline moved into her modest superintendent's office at the Catholic Life Center on Acadian Thruway, the Catholic schools system here has had a 17 percent climb in enrollment. She now oversees 34 schools — 26 elementary schools and eight high schools, along with two special education centers — that boast a total enrollment of 16,522 students.

With costs rising, computers coming into the classroom and lay faculty figuring more.

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Sister Michaeline is shown on the day she received her first veil as a candidate of the Dominican Sisters of St. Mary of the Channel. Sister Michaeline has the distinction of being one of the few female diocesan school administrators in the country. She counts herself among a small group of women who are working very diligently with our schools in what we call marketing and development.

"Sister Michaeline usually begins her day at 6:30 A.M. After she's dressed and finished with breakfast, she heads to the office. "I'm not a very sedentary person, so I like to walk a lot, and I have a desk where I can sit for a few minutes," she said.

"I'm dealing with adults here," Sister Michaeline said. "You don't have to be a politician to be a diplomat in this job," she said. "I wouldn't want to be a politician, at least not with the reputation that politicians have today.

"Sister Michaeline said that her administrative style is known for its candor. "People have told me I can be direct," Sister Michaeline said. "But I don't have to be tough in the same way that I did when I was principal.

"Sister Michaeline has no immediate plans to retire. "I'm not a very sedentary person," she said. "I'm certain not going to be home forever. But I'd like to stay in some form of education until the Lord takes me to the hereafter."

"Sister Michaeline attended Catholic schools throughout her education, starting from Dominican High in 1955. "I am forever grateful to my parents for the value they placed on Catholic school education, graduating from Dominican High in 1953."

"All of our programs are financially independent," Sister Michaeline said. "The money for the school is raised and administered at the local level." As superintendent, she said, the records of each school offer support services and illustrate regular visits. Sister Michaeline said that she looks forward to her tours of area schools because it allows her to get back in the classroom.

"When she became superintendent, classroom visits by diocesan administrators under involved us in the observation of the back of the classroom. But in recent years, Sister Michaeline, she and her assistants have been talking to students and attempting to become more engaged. "We're letting them interact," she said. "If we can open a weak spot, we can improve our teaching techniques.

In the evenings, she visits an elderly, congenial friend who needs routine assistance. Back at home, Sister Michaeline enjoys reading before retiring for the day. "I read religious books, of course, and biographies - mainly of historical figures," she said. "And I've always been interested in politics."

James Carville and his wife, Mary Matalin. "Does Sister Michaeline consider herself a politician? "Well, I think you have to be a diplomat in this job," she said. "I wouldn't want to be a politician, at least not with the reputation that politicians have today.

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