

Catholic educators examine best way to educate middle-school students

ST. LOUIS - Educators nationwide continue to debate the best way to educate middle-school students - in a single school for kindergarten through eighth grade or a separate middle school.

In the St. Louis Archdiocese, the focus is not on where to teach them but how.

The type of building isn't the issue, according to Karen Tichy, associate superintendent for instruction for the Catholic Education Office in the St. Louis Archdiocese.

Most of the 121 elementary schools in the St. Louis Archdiocese serve kindergarten through eighth-grade students in one building.

There are some exceptions - three stand-alone Nativity-model middle schools; three middle-school academies embedded in existing elementary schools; and several schools that serve seventh-and eighth-graders within a high school program.

Around the country Nativity schools have opened in low-income areas, offering a tuition free education to students.

"Our educational philosophy is that it's important that all children's needs be met," Ms. Tichy told the St. Louis Review, the archdiocesan newspaper. "Children in middle school have different needs. It doesn't take a separate building to meet those needs. We strive to meet the needs wherever the children are."

Ms. Tichy said a lot of research has been done during the past 20 years on the needs of middle-school students, those in grades 6-8.

"They are more capable of abstract thought, so they need lessons that require more reasoning. They have a strong need to feel a sense of belonging, and this is a huge

stage in moral development, so they need more assistance in making moral decisions," she said.

One way the archdiocese is working to address the needs of students at different age levels is through coalitions of educators meeting with parents during the year for presentations on issues affecting middle-school students, such as bullying, Internet concerns, eating disorders, peer pressure and substance abuse.

Alan Winkelmann, associate superintendent for elementary schools in St. Louis, said that although there has been talk about separate buildings for middle-school students, most parents don't want their children in different schools.

Ms. Tichysaid the typical grade school, with kindergarten through eighth grade, provides several pluses such as fewer transitions for students, greater parent and family involvement, and the opportunity to create valuable relationships between older and younger students.