

'NOW' is the Time! Preparing for the Coming School Year

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WHEN DOES CHURCH SCHOOL BEGIN?

"The Sunday after Labor Day" might be the casual answer to this question. Those involved in planning religious education programs for their local parishes more likely see 'opening day' as one stage in a process that may have begun months earlier - as far back as May or June, with the class session of the previous school year.

That is the time for an assessment of the year. Some points to consider are

- ★ In general, how did the year go?
- ★ Did we meet our goals?
- ★ Did we have well-understood goals?
- ★ Was attendance generally good? Poor? For what reasons?
- ★ Were the teachers well prepared?
- ★ Was the material covered?
- ★ Did the pastor spend time with students and teachers?
- ★ Were students aware of the purpose of church school and activities?
- ★ Was the emphasis, even in social activity, on education and growth, or was the major concern with having "fun" or providing entertainment?

Answering questions like these can help set a proper perspective for planning the next church school year.

CURRICULUM

If we consider that actual class time for the school year is probably less than twenty-five hours, we may appreciate the value of thorough, conscientious curriculum planning.

Begin by consulting the pastor, the one who will be most acutely aware of the needs of the parish regarding Christian education. He, together with competent, interested lay leaders can determine subject matter, materials, class groupings. OCEC manuals *are available for pre-school through high school. Choose what suits the needs of your parish. *Our Church and Our Children* by Sophie Koulomzin has excellent guidelines for curriculum planning, including ideas for enrichment activities for home and school. *[pmo: Also check Greek Archdiocese curriculum]

Once you have decided on materials, get your orders into publishers - the sooner the

better. It is important for teachers to have their texts well in advance for thorough planning and preparation of their courses.

SCHEDULING

Choosing a time for church school that is convenient and satisfactory to all concerned is a difficult if not impossible task. Some possibilities are before or after Sunday Liturgy, before or after Saturday vespers or vigil, Saturday morning, or a weekday evening. It is essential that attending church school does not interfere with or detract from attendance at liturgical services. Church school is not a substitute for worship.

Once the weekly time is established, make a calendar for the school year, focusing on Sundays. Include holy days. Advent and Great Lent cycles, hierarchical visits, parish dinners, bazaars, lectures, adult education programs in neighboring parishes. Note Sundays when there is no church school, such as between Christmas and Epiphany. Include anything you think will be helpful to teachers and parents in facilitating an effective program.

The calendar could be distributed monthly, quarterly, or semi-annually - whatever is convenient. It should be given to students, parents, teachers, parish council members, and members of other parish organizations. If your parish has a regularly published bulletin for all members, the calendar might be included in that. In any case, the church bulletin, a newsletter, or postcards could be used for updating the calendar, for keeping the parish informed as to church school activities - projects, events, special assignments.

PARENTS

Parents are an invaluable resource for your church school program. Do not fall into the trap of relying exclusively upon the faithful few who are most visible and available. Make a church school family list of names, addresses, and phone numbers. Include the first names of parents - it helps people get acquainted and makes newcomers feel welcome. Names of children, birthdays, and grade level can be included. This list would be given to all church school families,

and would be especially useful for those planning church school related functions. A visiting day early in the school year provides the opportunity for parents to meet and get acquainted, as well as for them to 'see' the school.

Contact with parents of students should be full and constant. They should be informed of the content of their child's classes through meetings, bulletins, phone calls, or personal visits. Offer suggestions, when possible, for activities at home or school to reinforce the child's church schoolwork. Give parents lists of articles and materials they might be able to supply for class projects; make them aware of the opportunity for them to assist as teacher aides, to help with tasks such as taking attendance, leading discussions, supervising activities, working with students who missed previous classes, etc. This need not be a full-time position for one person - parents could alternate by weeks or months. Choose what works best in your situation.

Parents should also be included in field trips and as project chairman for church school related activities. The more involvement, the better, but, again, be sure the goals are clear and the emphasis is on education. Some church schools have the firm support of parent's organizations. The function may vary from parish to parish. Generally, the members of such organizations help in special projects and arrange fund-raising activities. They may take responsibility for providing instructional materials, sponsoring outside speakers, providing library books, supplying scholarships, buying gifts for graduates, financing workshops or paying registration fees for teachers to attend workshops and conferences. Parents' organizations may arrange and finance special activities such as communion breakfasts or annual dinners to honor students and teachers.

TEACHERS

Concerning the teachers in your church school, more is better - the more information, communication, preparation and planning in the program, the more productive, rewarding, and enjoyable the work will be. Communication and information are essential; the teacher, pastor, and supervisor must know, understand, and agree upon the overall goals and plan of the program. The teacher must be aware of his part in this plan.

The assessment meeting at the close of the school year would be a good place to discuss a date for a planning meeting for the next term. Encourage veteran teachers to enlist anyone they know is interested and qualified as new teachers or aides. It would be beneficial for teachers to know their texts and assignments before the planning meeting. In any case, both the assessment and planning meetings should be occasions for teachers to share observations, experiences and suggestions. In addition to goals and course content, disciplinary standards should also be discussed, and guidelines established.

To further help the teacher prepare, supply a list of prospective students with any available information about individual needs and talents. Ideally, the teacher could visit or meet with each family to gain better understanding of the child's education, interests, culture, and home environment.

CLASSROOM

A church school that has its 'own' classrooms is very fortunate. If yours is such a school, use bulletin boards and display areas to full advantage, to emphasize and reinforce the course content, as well as to give the students the sense that the area is theirs for work and study. Make the surroundings as cheerful and pleasant as possible. Use furniture groupings and arrangements that are advantageous to your work - do not be afraid of being unconventional or nontraditional.

If your classroom is yours only for the hour, portable boards and displays can help to personalize it and set the atmosphere for that one hour. As much as possible have the students participate in 'decorating' or 'assembling' the classroom.

EXPECTATIONS

Despite the most careful planning, the well-prepared lessons and all the curriculum materials money can buy, there will be problems. Children will still be absent, parents and teachers will disagree, there will be many Sunday mornings of frustration for all. But those of us who teach church school and the parents who regularly bring their children to Church and school know that as believing Orthodox Christians there is only one place to be on Sunday morning, and so we will continue to be there, together in worship, work, and study.