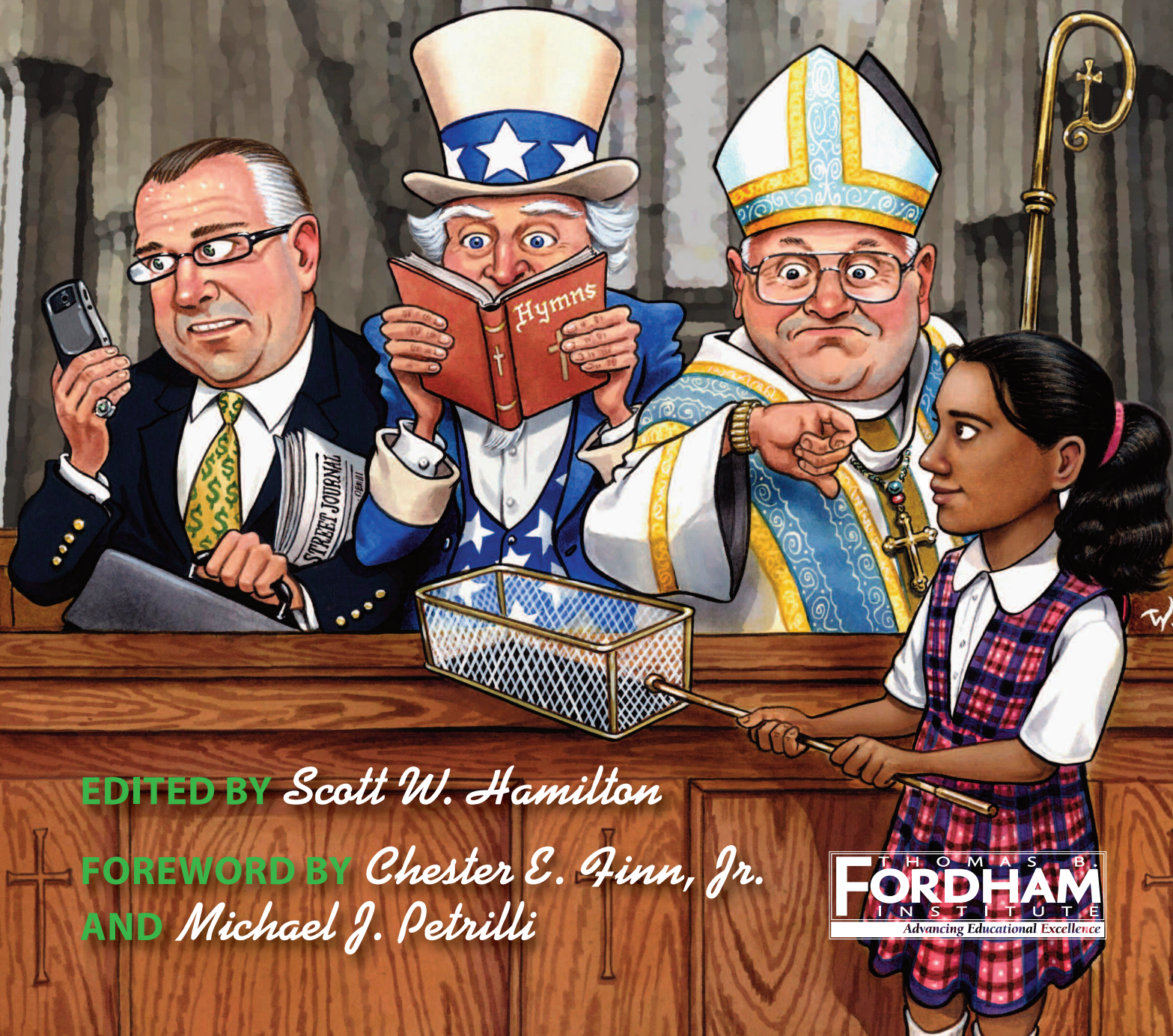


# WHO WILL SAVE AMERICA'S URBAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS?



EDITED BY *Scott W. Hamilton*

FOREWORD BY *Chester E. Finn, Jr.*  
AND *Michael J. Petrilli*

THOMAS B.  
**FORDHAM**  
INSTITUTE  
Advancing Educational Excellence



The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is a nonprofit organization that conducts research, issues publications, and directs action projects in elementary/secondary education reform at the national level and in Ohio, with special emphasis on our hometown of Dayton. It is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Further information can be found at [www.edexcellence.net](http://www.edexcellence.net), or by writing to the Institute at 1016 16th St. NW, 8th Floor, Washington, DC 20036. The report is available in full on the Institute's website; additional copies can be ordered at [www.edexcellence.net](http://www.edexcellence.net). The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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America's urban Catholic schools are in crisis. This report finds that over 1,300 schools have shut down since 1990, mostly in our cities. As a result, some 300,000 students have been displaced – forced to attend other public, private, or parochial schools. The school closures have cost taxpayers more than \$20 billion to accommodate the additional students that public schools have had to absorb.

Is this a crisis worth addressing? Are further closures inevitable, or can Church leaders, parishioners, philanthropists and/or public policymakers reverse these trends? Should they try? This report answers those questions and more.

## *Findings from a National Survey*

### ■ **American Catholics love their Catholic schools.**

Eighty-eight percent view them favorably (versus 70 percent who view Pope Benedict XVI favorably). Yet it is the schools' religious mission that inspires most Catholics – and may move them to support the schools financially. The attribute that 91 percent of Catholics most associate with their parochial schools is “developing moral values and discipline.”

■ **U.S. Catholics are also proud of the role that Catholic education has played in teaching disadvantaged youngsters.** Eighty-one percent associate Catholic schools with “providing an education to inner-city and poor students.” Still, six in ten Catholics view “working with economically disadvantaged students” primarily as the domain of public schools. (It may be that even many Catholics are

unfamiliar with the success of inner-city parochial schools in educating poor and minority students.)

■ **Nearly nine in ten U.S. Catholics (89 percent) have a favorable view of the Church, compared to 58 percent of the general public (just 42 percent of which views Pope Benedict XVI favorably).** This suggests that the Church needs to do a better job of promoting its image, especially regarding its social welfare work for the poor, sick and elderly. A vigorous campaign to inform the U.S. public about the effectiveness of Catholic schools in teaching needy inner-city youngsters may help the Church improve its reputation.

## *Case Study Findings*

■ **The primary causes of massive Catholic school closures have been demographics and economics.** Over the past several decades, many Catholics moved to the suburbs, leaving weakened parishes (and parish schools) in their wake. Meanwhile, the number of priests, nuns and brothers working in the schools plunged. This forced school leaders to hire lay teachers and principals at competitive salaries. The increased costs led to rising tuitions, which in turn forced low-income and minority families out of schools they can no longer afford.

■ **Catholic schools are showing signs of life in a handful of strongly led dioceses.** In Wichita, a vigorous campaign to encourage tithing has made Catholic schools *free* to all Catholics. The Jubilee schools in Memphis illustrate how committed Church leaders have attracted funds from philanthropists eager to underwrite that city's education revival. Increased enrollment in Denver's Catholic schools seems to result from recent efforts to market these schools to families who have more education options than ever before.

■ **Networks of schools run by independent religious orders demonstrate real energy and potential.** The dynamism and growth of the Cristo Rey and Natividad Miguel networks suggest that the best hope for renewing urban Catholic education may rest with such endeavors.

■ **Vouchers are no panacea.** In Milwaukee, the city with the nation's largest publicly funded school voucher program, enrollment is still declining in many inner-city Catholic schools. In Washington, D.C., despite federally funded vouchers for the tuition of poor, mostly non-Catholic inner city children, the Church is turning seven schools into public charters – which will be well funded, but non-religious.

■ **Catholic colleges and universities can play a constructive role.** Notre Dame's ACE program, a sort of Teach For America for inner-city parochial schools, shows much promise, as does Boston College's initiative to "adopt" an urban Catholic school.

## *Recommendations*

### **For Church leaders**

1. Make Catholic education affordable for all Catholic children.
2. Make educating the poor a signature Church mission once again.

3. Revive some by closing the other urban parochial schools.
4. Turn excess school facilities over to charter school networks with a proven track record of educating poor students.

### **For parishioners, philanthropists, and Catholic school supporters**

5. Overcome nostalgia and face these problems head-on.
6. Answer the call from bishops who make education their priority.
7. Create and support new networks of Catholic schools.
8. Grow and replicate ACE – the Teach For America for urban Catholic schools.
9. Promote efforts to collect data, foster transparency and astutely "market" Catholic schools.

### **For public policymakers**

10. Find ways beyond Title I services and school lunches to provide (federal, state and local) financial assistance to urban Catholic schools and needy children who attend them.

# FOREWORD

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*Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Michael J. Petrilli*

In 2005, Hurricanes Rita and Katrina evicted approximately 150,000 children from their homes and their schools. While the government's response to these disasters was disappointing, the public's reaction was heartwarming. School systems across the South took in students with open arms, Americans opened their pocketbooks, and communities stepped up with support and compassion. That's as it should be. The scale and immediacy of the human tragedy stirred in all of us a compulsion to act.

Meanwhile, another human tragedy has been unfolding on even a larger scale, but this one has been slower, far less visible, and thus easy to ignore. Since 1990, some 300,000 students have been displaced from their Catholic schools – twice as many as were impacted by the hurricanes. Most of these children live in the inner city, and their beloved schools closed not because of poor performance, but for lack of funding. If current trends continue, another 300,000 could lose their schools over the next two decades.

Before our very eyes – and yet so gradually as to be imperceptible – the great American institution that is the urban Catholic school is disappearing.

Does it matter?

Does anybody care?

Who will do something about it?

Those are the questions addressed by this landmark report – hardly the first to sound an alarm about the demise of urban Catholic schools on American shores, but one that comes at a critical juncture. With Pope Benedict XVI soon to arrive

in Washington and New York, the nation's attention will focus briefly on the Roman Catholic Church and its institutions. Soon thereafter, President Bush will host a White House conference on inner-city "faith based" schools. Now is a good time to consider whether one should worry that, with the closure of Catholic schools, a national treasure is being lost.

We at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute have long been concerned about Catholic schooling. Our mission is to address America's vexing achievement gaps, and Catholic schools' storied history and estimable track record in successfully serving poor and minority children make them an obvious target for attention. As part of our philanthropy in Dayton, Ohio, we have been proud to help fund a private sector voucher program for inner-city students, most of whom took their dollars to the city's Catholic schools. We admire the hard work and tenacity of the remaining Catholic schools that operate on a shoestring and out of a larger sense of mission to serve the poor.

Yet we're no Pollyannas. Just as the word "charter" over a schoolhouse door doesn't guarantee educational quality or effectiveness, neither does a cross on the classroom wall. We've seen plenty of Catholic schools plagued by silly ideas, unqualified instructors, uninspired curriculum, and weak leadership – just like many schools in the public sector.

Yet the steady loss of urban Catholic schools remains an issue deserving of further attention. And more importantly, we wondered if there weren't some examples of communities turning the situation around, successfully pushing against a tide that is often portrayed as unstoppable.

To lead this effort, we turned to our friend and colleague Scott Hamilton, whose short career has been packed with incredible accomplishments in the world of urban school reform. He served with Finn at the U.S. Department of Education, played a key role in developing Massachusetts's well regarded charter school program, then led the national expansion of the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) from his perch at the Pisces Foundation (now Fisher Fund). He is, in fact, fairly described as the guy who saw KIPP's potential, brought it to the attention of Don and Doris Fisher – and then helped design and implement KIPP's impressive growth strategy.

Hamilton assembled an all-star team of journalists and analysts to poke around in urban Catholic education and report back on promising happenings in the hinterland. We are grateful for their excellent work and keen insights. They include *National Review's* John Miller, *Education Next's* Peter Meyer, the *Las Vegas Sun's* Marshall Allen, and Bryan O'Keefe of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity.

Scott Hamilton also suggested that we commission an opinion survey of the public's views of urban Catholic schools. We invited David Cantor and the Glover Park Group to develop, field and analyze the survey – and they delivered a professional, credible product that we're proud to include herein.

We turned to the Louis Calder Foundation and the Achelis & Bodman Foundations to underwrite the project, which they did eagerly and graciously. We appreciate their generosity and trust.

We join Scott Hamilton in thanking Ed Kirby, Rev. Tim Scully, Tony Bryk, B.J. Cassin, and Mary Anne Stanton for taking time to offer suggestions, guidance, and help with this project. And we appreciate the work of Quentin Suffren, Emilia Ryan, Samuel Whitehead, and Fordham's Christina Hentges, who all played critical roles in the development of this product.

As Hamilton describes in the introduction that follows, urban Catholic education still has a pulse after all. Schools in several communities are in the midst of a bona fide renaissance; others have reforms in place that look promising. Yet those are the exceptions. The overall picture remains one of slow decline and resignation.

What, if anything, can be done? The first step, we believe, is to think deeply about this problem. It turns out to have two rather distinct elements. On the one hand, there is Catholic education for Catholic children; on the other is Catholic education for poor non-Catholics. These are different enough to call for distinct responses.

## *Catholic Education for Catholics*

The most impressive action that our team spotted in urban Catholic education is around educating Catholic children. This shouldn't come as a huge surprise. The Church's primary mission, after all, is religious, not educational. That it should recommit itself to the spiritual development of its youngest members seems commonsensical. (Though as an unobservant Jew and a lapsed Catholic, perhaps our opinions on this matter don't count for much.)

Wichita is the best example. Here the archdiocese promulgated a simple principle: Catholic schooling would be free to all parishioners. To make the financials work, the bishop asked all Church members to tithe a significant portion of their salaries, which largely went into the school operations fund. Parishioners responded enthusiastically. Today, all Wichita Catholics can send their children to parochial school. Tuition is no barrier. This is particularly important for the archdiocese's poor, urban families (yes, Wichita has some) who can benefit from the Church's religious and academic teachings.



The Wichita example is striking for several reasons. First, it flies in the face of the conventional wisdom that Catholic school tuition must inevitably rise every year. It's true that costs are increasing. Without nuns or brothers to staff the schools, Catholic education systems must hire lay teachers and administrators and pay them competitive wages. But these costs don't have to be passed on to parents in the form of tuition; they can be subsidized by the Church as a whole.

If Wichita can do this, why can't other communities? Our survey shows that Catholics love their Catholic schools – 88 percent view them favorably (versus 70 percent who hold that opinion of the pope). Sure, there are plenty of dioceses where practically no Catholics still reside near the old urban churches and schools (more on that below). Yet there are plenty of other places where today's Catholic immigrants (Hispanic mostly) have taken up residence in neighborhoods formerly inhabited by yesterday's immigrants (Irish, Italians, Poles, etc.). The sensitive question is whether these established, assimilated, middle class, suburban Catholics will be willing to support the education of Hispanic Catholic children living in the inner city.

We believe the answer is “yes.” Our optimism is rooted in the second lesson learned from Wichita: that Catholics will indeed open their pocketbooks to support Catholic schools – at least, in order to educate Catholics. For it is the *religious* mission of these schools that motivates parishioners to tithe. As Rev. Ken VanHaverbeke, the pastor of St. Joseph's in downtown Wichita, explains, “People see that the Catholic school is a very good vehicle for passing on their faith.” Thus it's not surprising that our survey found that the attribute Catholics most associate with Catholic parochial schools is “developing moral values and discipline.”

Many Catholic education leaders say they can't compete with “free” charter schools, even when recruiting Catholic families. Here's the solution: make Catholic schools free, too.

## Catholic Education for Non-Catholics

If the Church were starting anew and designing its education system from scratch, it would likely place its schools near today's concentrations of Catholic parishioners. That's certainly where it's building new schools – in the suburbs, where many Catholics now dwell. But today's urban Catholic schools are a legacy of an earlier time when immigrant Catholics lived in the city and wanted their children to get a parochial education. As Hamilton notes, most of these families decamped to the suburbs in the 1960s and 70s. The result was the slow decline of so many urban parishes – and so many parish schools. But time and again the Church renewed its commitment to keep these schools open anyway to serve the poor children who now lived in these communities. And many studies have shown that the schools served these children well.

Thus America still finds itself with hundreds of Catholic schools in its inner cities, where they mainly serve poor non-Catholics, particularly African Americans. Now, however, the Church is saying – perhaps whispering – that it can no longer afford to foot the growing bill. (The financial hit from the recent sex-abuse scandals was the last straw.)

Catholic parishioners have been willing to help to a point, but our survey shows that about six in ten Catholics now view “working with economically disadvantaged students” as the domain of public schools. And while they like the idea of keeping urban Catholic schools open, they rank that goal below many other social priorities, particularly that of caring for the poor and sick through traditional charities and Catholic hospitals.

If parishioners don't rate educating poor youngsters a high priority and the Church can't afford it, who will save these schools now?

Our case studies offer some tantalizing insights. One is that philanthropists will respond to the call if

convinced that Catholic schools are providing an excellent education for low-income children. So it was in Memphis, where the Jubilee Schools received massive donations from non-Catholics impressed by their educational results. Philanthropists in other cities could and should follow suit – and other Catholic school systems should be transparent about their educational outcomes so as to attract social investors and benefactors to their cause. (Secrecy about such matters – absolutely archaic in the NCLB era – plagues most U.S. private schools, including but not limited to Catholic schools.)

Second, though this flies in the face of school choice orthodoxy, public support for Catholic schools in the form of vouchers is no panacea. The urban schools of Milwaukee, home to the nation's largest voucher program, continue to decline. Federally funded vouchers haven't kept the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. from moving to convert seven of its urban schools into charters in order to tap even more public dollars. In both places, Catholic schools have struggled to compete with private and/or charter schools, demonstrating *inter alia* the need for better marketing (Denver shows some promise on that front) and, most importantly, for excellent academics.

It may be that many archdiocesan systems aren't up to these challenges. Some of them are weary, others broke, and in any case it makes little sense to expect parish priests to run effectively institutions as complex as high-performance schools. This brings us to our third insight: the liveliest signs of energy and strategic thinking in Catholic education today – particularly the kind that benefits non-Catholics – are found in independent networks, such as the Cristo Rey and Nativity schools. They are acting much like charter management organizations like KIPP, Achievement First or Green Dot that play critical roles in boosting the “supply side” of the charter movement by providing high-quality alternatives to monolithic district-run public schools. Supporting their Catholic counterparts and growing more such networks offers another terrific opportunity for philanthropists and, perhaps, the broader public.

## What's Worthy of Government Support?

Let's return to a fundamental question: How important is it for urban Catholic schools that serve non-Catholics to remain religious in nature and to continue operating under the Church's aegis? Already they're less “Catholic” than they used to be, as they are no longer staffed by nuns or priests. By and large, they don't seek to proselytize their charges. And rare is the diocese or archdiocese that does a bang-up job of giving its urban schools the educational and fundraising support they need to survive and thrive.

In principle, we appreciate the argument for keeping these schools Catholic insofar as it's possible. It may well be their encompassing Catholic faith that helps to make them effective. We don't really know what erasing the faith based approach would mean for the schools' future educational success.

Having said that, we're not convinced that it would be tragic for many of these schools to “go charter,” as has been proposed in Washington, D.C., or to sell or lease their buildings to high-quality charter school operators, as has happened nationwide. Ironically, for many urban Catholic schools, or at least for the kids they serve, this may be the best available option – best in the sense that it would continue to make decent educational options available to youngsters who need them. Options without a crucifix on the wall, to be sure, but lots of those kids aren't coming because of the crucifix anyway. They're coming because in these schools they can find safety, competent teachers, a solid curriculum, good behavior, and sound values. When educating low-income, non-Catholic kids, it seems to us, preserving those qualities in a viable school would find greater favor in God's eye than locking the door on an empty building.

In short, public funding is probably necessary to keep these educational options alive. And the price of such funding, at least in many communities and some states (including those with “Blaine amend-

ments”), is removing the crucifix and (where possible) recycling the school as a high-quality charter.

We wish it could be otherwise, and surely there are a few more places where generous philanthropists, selfless parishioners, or a shower of vouchers could make it so. But we oughtn’t kid ourselves into thinking that this will be the norm. These Catholic-schools-for-non-Catholics are essentially serving a public purpose. In a way, they are already “public” schools; it’s time that they receive public funds.

So let us propose three recommendations of our own to supplement the terrific ten that Scott Hamilton offers below:

**1. The Church should heed Wichita’s example and embark on a serious campaign to make Catholic education affordable – even free – for all Catholics.**

Such an effort will be particularly significant for America’s recent Hispanic immigrants, many of whom live near urban Catholic schools with a rich history of educating children new to our shores. This means asking parishioners to dig deep. It also means being aggressive about revitalizing rundown, ill-managed parish schools with an eye to making the system as a whole as efficient and effective as possible.

**2. Philanthropists should generously support networks of Catholic schools that operate independently of diocesan structures.**

Such networks have the agility and commitment to operate effective schools, including those serving poor non-Catholics. They have the potential to be the “high growth” sector within Catholic education and, if successful, could occupy facilities that would otherwise go to charter schools. University programs that place talented college graduates into needy urban Catholic schools are also worthy of support – just as worthy as the respected (and well-funded) Teach For America.

**3. If closures are inescapable, the Church should either convert those schools to charters or make their facilities available at bargain prices to high-quality charter networks.**

Both options are far better for kids than hawking old school buildings to the highest bidder and converting them to condos.

On all these fronts, what’s needed most is leadership. We have an opportunity to protect some valuable schools in our neediest neighborhoods. Who will show the way?

# INTRODUCTION

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## *The Revival of Inner-city Catholic Schools in America*

Over 1,300 Catholic schools in America have shut down since 1990, mostly in our cities. The estimated 300,000 students who were attending these schools have had to go elsewhere for their education. Some have found space at remaining Catholic schools in the vicinity. Others enrolled in charter schools. Most undoubtedly became new students at district public schools.

**Whether you are a Catholic, Baptist, Jew, Muslim, Hindu or atheist, should you care that 20 percent of U.S. Catholic parochial schools have been closed in the past two decades? The answer is “yes,” if only because these school closures have likely cost taxpayers more than \$20 billion to accommodate the additional students that district and charter schools have absorbed.**

Whether you are a Catholic, Baptist, Jew, Muslim, Hindu or atheist, should you care that 20 percent of U.S. Catholic parochial schools have been closed in the past two decades? The answer is “yes,” if only because these school closures have likely cost tax-

payers more than \$20 billion to accommodate the additional students that district and charter schools have absorbed. Your concern should deepen if you also believe in the power of education to create opportunity for children with significant disadvantages all too prevalent in U.S. cities. If you believe that good education is needed to ease achievement gaps and help needy kids succeed in American society, then there is ample reason to be worried about the demise of schools that have been a driving force in creating opportunity on these shores for more than a century.

## *How Did We Get Here?*

It was in 1884 when U.S. bishops gathered in Baltimore and agreed to establish a Catholic school in every parish in the land. For the preceding 50 years, the creation of public schools – “common schools” as they were then called – had worried Church leaders. The spread of common schools was driven, in part, by the Protestant establishment’s anxiety over the influx of poor, Catholic immigrants. Some of these schools weren’t good, either, and hewed to a belief that these newcomers could not be expected to learn much more than personal hygiene and how to obey the rules in their menial labor jobs.

Worse, from the bishops’ standpoint, even when they had a broader curriculum and decent teachers these new public schools were hostile to the faith and morals of Catholic children, in part because they didn’t focus much on teaching character – and certainly not the Roman Catholic faith. Cardinal Gibbons warned at the time that an “evil that bodes mischief to our country and endangers the stability of our government arises from our mutilated and vicious system of public education.”

That is why the bishops concluded that it was their responsibility to create a new set of better schools for American Catholics – and to require parishioners to send their children to these schools. It is remarkable, especially to those of us who have struggled of late to create new schools, that within 40 years some 5,000 new Catholic schools had been established. By 1930, a total of 10,000 of them enrolled 2.5 million students.

**These Catholic schools sent a message to their pupils that it doesn't matter where you come from or how little money your family may have; we expect you to work hard, to behave, and in time to succeed.**

The majority of these schools were parish schools, some of them collaborative efforts across multiple parishes but most operated by individual pastors. Diocesan schools, usually high schools, were operated by the bishop. Others were sponsored by independent religious orders such as the Jesuits and Christian Brothers. Teachers and principals were drawn from a legion of religious brothers and sisters, sometimes immigrants themselves, who possessed a rigorous education – and didn't expect salaries. These Catholic schools sent a message to their pupils that it doesn't matter where you come from or how little money your family may have; we expect you to work hard, to behave, and in time to succeed. Some urban Catholic schools taught students the language of, as well as an appreciation for, their homeland. All expected immigrant students to learn English and become good Americans, while also reaffirming their religious faith.

At their peak around 1965, Catholic schools enrolled almost 4.4 million students, or 12 percent of all U.S.

elementary-secondary youngsters and 90 percent of private school attendees. It was in this year that the work of the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, was concluded. Vatican II had three big impacts on U.S. Catholic schools. First, it created important new roles for lay leaders in the church, which encouraged many priests and nuns to leave religious life (and far fewer new ones to sign up for that life). This inadvertently drained Catholic schools of critical human capital. Second, it acknowledged that parents could legitimately choose to send their children to public schools. Third, it established social justice as a key goal for the Church, giving its leaders a renewed mission to help poor and minority students, regardless of their faith.

## *Strong Track Record*

Vatican II's emphasis on social justice came in the midst of America's civil rights movement, Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, and the advent of Title I aid to high-poverty schools under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It was also around this time that parochial school enrollments began to drop as successful Catholic families moved out of the urban areas where most Catholic schools were located and into burgeoning suburbs where nearly everyone attended public schools. The Church responded quickly and generously by keeping many of its inner-city schools open – despite the changing demographics – to serve poor, non-Catholic students. Given their track record of serving poor Catholic families, such schools were well positioned to teach academics and character to poor non-Catholics.

And indeed they did. In 1982, the celebrated sociologist James Coleman and two colleagues published *High School Achievement: Public and Private Schools*, which concluded that Catholic high schools were more academically effective than public schools, regardless of a student's background. That same year, sociologist-novelist Andrew Greeley published *Minority Students in Catholic*

*Schools*, showing that minority achievement was higher in Catholic schools than in public schools, especially for youngsters from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

In their well-regarded 1993 book, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee and Peter Holland summarized the research this way:

The accumulated evidence indicates that average achievement is somewhat higher in Catholic high schools than in public high schools, and it also suggests that Catholic high schools may be especially helpful for disadvantaged students....[They] manage simultaneously to achieve relatively high levels of student learning, distribute this learning more equitably with regard to race and class than in the public sector, and sustain high levels of teacher commitment and student engagement.

Bryk and colleagues also cited a 1982 study by James Cibulka that attributed the success of Catholic schools to “strong institutional leadership, shared values among staff, a safe and orderly environment, and clarity of mission and purpose” – qualities too rarely found in public schools.

In his recent and ongoing studies of families using vouchers in Washington D.C. and Milwaukee, Patrick Wolf of the University of Arkansas found that “low-income inner-city parents consider Catholic schools to have a ‘brand name’ that reliably and efficiently communicates to them that the school will have such key characteristics as high academic standards, dedicated teachers, strong discipline, and a non-proselytizing religious environment.”

## *New Challenges*

Despite their well-established “brand name” and demonstrated success with some of America’s most disadvantaged students, Catholic schools have seen their enrollments drop over the past four decades and hundreds of them have closed. Tough economics is the primary cause, attributable mainly to the changing labor pool from which the schools must draw teachers and principals, and the financial strain that this has created for schools and parents alike.

**The loss to American society goes far beyond the loss to Catholics and the Church. Whereas the earlier hemorrhage of immigrant Catholic families typically led children into decent suburban public schools, this one more commonly forces poor, non-Catholic children into low-performing urban public schools.**

In 1967, 58 percent of the teaching force in urban Catholic schools consisted of nuns, priests and brothers. Today, they comprise barely 4 percent. Whatever other qualities they brought to the classroom, the bottom line is that nuns and priests required very little pay. Today, Catholic schools must compete for lay teachers with public (and other private) schools and must offer salaries that talented individuals can command in a labor market where the demand for good teachers almost always exceeds the supply. Moreover, most Catholic school leaders – principals, superintendents and such – are also laymen and women nowadays, and they require competitive salaries, too.

Because most Catholic schools now cost more to run than the Church can afford – or at least more than it has been willing to ask parishioners and benefactors to support – parents must shoulder more of the burden. Yet the rising tuitions often exceed the reach of many poor families. The result, of course, is a second enrollment hemorrhage, as low-income and minority families leave schools they can no longer afford. The loss to American society goes far beyond the loss to Catholics and the Church. Whereas the earlier hemorrhage of immigrant Catholic families typically led children into decent suburban public schools, this one more commonly forces poor, non-Catholic children into low-performing urban public schools. Since it's clear that Catholic schools have accomplished the kinds of education results we crave in the NCLB era, and since far too many public schools are having great difficulty accomplishing this, the loss of Catholic schools from the inner cities is truly tragic. Yet recent trends point to further narrowing of these options in the years ahead.

## *Elements of Revival*

Despite innumerable efforts by philanthropists, politicians, some church leaders and community activists to stem this tide via scholar-

ship programs, tax credits and campaigns for government funds, Catholic school enrollments have shrunk to just 4 percent of K-12 education – and this decline shows no signs of abating. Though some parishes and dioceses have opened new schools in the suburbs, new openings fail to keep pace with the loss of urban schools or to stem overall enrollment losses. A wasting disease is obviously at work, and has been for some time. Is it terminal or can this patient still be rejuvenated? That's the question examined in this volume.

We searched for credible examples of efforts to revive and sustain these educational options in our cities. We explored whether inner-city Catholic schools in America can be revived or must we accept their demise, perhaps consoling ourselves that they have outlived their original purposes?

In looking for answers, we sought places that have recently stemmed or even reversed the tide of decline. The bad news is that there is no abundance of cities or programs successfully reviving inner-city Catholic schools. We did find some – indeed, more than we could profile in these pages. And the good news is that, in Kant's words, “the actual proves the possible,” and it's at least imaginable that the kinds of initiative and rebirth visible in these places might be replicated or emulated elsewhere.

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In the following pages, we offer seven case studies and the findings of a public opinion survey:

**Diocesan/Archdiocesan Leadership: Wichita, Memphis, & Denver.** Our first three case studies show what is possible with church leadership and initiative. In Wichita, Catholic schools are free to all Catholics, and the inner-city Catholic schools also offer an inexpensive option to poor non-Catholic families. The Jubilee schools in Memphis illustrate how committed church leaders and inspired educational leaders have attracted serious money from philanthropists eager to underwrite educational revival in a city whose children are stuck in public schools that have squandered tens of millions over the last decade. The recent uptick of enrollment in Denver's Catholic schools appears to result from vigorous recent efforts to market these schools to families who have more school options than ever before.

**Independent Religious Order Networks.** At a time when traditional urban Catholic school systems continue to recede, this case study looks at two growing school networks operated by independent religious

orders. The dynamism and growth of the Cristo Rey and NativityMiguel networks, the innovative yet traditional aspects of their school models, their willingness to experiment with sources of funding, and their focus on serving the poor, are reason to suspect that the brightest hope for renewing urban Catholic education may be found in such endeavors.

**Public Support for Catholic Schools: Milwaukee & Washington, D.C.** Two case studies profile schools that receive public aid for tuition, often referred to as vouchers. Many supporters of urban Catholic schools yearn for such programs throughout the country. Yet in Milwaukee, it turns out that enrollment is still declining in many inner-city Catholic schools. The fascinating exceptions boast inspired, results-oriented leaders and staff. In our nation's capital – despite vouchers for the tuition of poor, mostly non-Catholic, inner-city children – the Church is turning over seven of its schools to a group that will henceforth operate them as public charter schools, well funded, but non-religious.

**Support from Colleges & Universities.** The final case study profiles The University of Notre Dame ACE program, a Teach For America-style program for urban Catholic schools that recruits and trains recent college graduates to serve in some of the country's neediest neighborhoods. It also chronicles Boston College's recent adoption of St. Columbkille School. Both examples show how America's 235 Catholic colleges and universities can (and some say must) get practically and substantially involved in the revival of inner-city Catholic education.

**Public Opinion.** We commissioned a professional survey of public attitudes toward Catholic education and related issues. Its results reveal that many are simply not aware that the Catholic Church operates hundreds of inner-city schools serving non-Catholics. Those who are aware of these schools, especially Catholics, hold them in high regard. It suggests that renewing the Church's decades-long push to serve America's poor students would raise its standing with the public and among its members. The poll also implies that policymakers should develop additional means whereby local, state and federal governments can provide financial support to these schools and their pupils.

## *Recommendations*

Reviewing these case studies and survey findings, and considering what is necessary and what may be possible for the revival of urban Catholic schools, especially those serving students in our neediest neighborhoods, ten conclusions emerge. Four of them are addressed to Church leaders and clergy; five are for parishioners, philanthropists, and Catholic school supporters; and one is for public policymakers.

### **For Church leadership:**

**1. Make Catholic education affordable for all Catholic children.** Wichita shows what is possible in terms of parishioner support for Catholic schooling. Since the public schools have not improved their ability to teach character (or much else) since Cardinal Gibbons warned of their shortcomings in the 19th century, and since there may be no better way to strengthen the Catholic faith in America, leaders of the Church would do well to make the provision of Catholic education for all of its members a top priority. This priority should hold for well-off parishioners in the suburbs as well as those in urban centers. Some poor non-Catholics may be helped as a result, but the primary focus of this recommendation is on children from Catholic families.



**2. Make educating the poor a signature Church mission once again.** While resources are inevitably limited, there is much that the Catholic Church can do to help thousands of disadvantaged students trapped in failing urban public schools. Church leaders can help raise awareness of this social injustice in our prosperous country and lead efforts to address it. This isn't simply about arguing for public funding for Catholic schools. It is about making all parishioners aware of, and concerned about, the huge disadvantage that poor youngsters face in most urban public schools and using the Church's moral authority and political influence to help in myriad ways to overcome that disadvantage through every imaginable public and private means. As our poll suggests, this could have a very good effect on younger Catholics' views of the Church.

**3. Revive some urban parochial schools by closing the others.** While we did not find good examples of the revival of isolated parish schools, there is evidence that, when organized in clusters and infused with modern education and business models, some parochial schools in our urban centers can be given a new lease on life. Hand-in-hand with the rebirth of some, however, should come the closure of others, in one or a few fell swoops. Readers may think this recommendation fatalistic, even mad. But the economic pressures aren't going away and school closures are far less harmful when done purposefully and in conjunction with school revivals. Church leaders should state this openly. As our survey shows, most Americans are not even aware of the past or pending closure of urban Catholic schools – perhaps because it's been happening a few schools at a time. The dramatic news of mass school closures may elicit substantial support for the remaining Catholic schools among parishioners, philanthropists, and policymakers (as news of the near-closure of one Denver school reaped substantial donations). This would help with the targeted revival process.

**4. Turn excess school facilities over to charter school networks that can show good results in educating poor students.** If Church leaders still hew to the social justice goals of Vatican II, one way to reduce the financial burden on the Church while helping America achieve greater equality of educational opportunity is to lease or donate (even inexpensively sell) unused school facilities to charter operators with a mission and a proven track record of educating poor children. While some of these networks may have Catholic origins, such as Catalyst in Chicago, and others (like Uncommon Schools or KIPP) may not, such school programs work toward the academic and character goals they share with the Church. As landlords and perhaps as board members, Church officials can also help to oversee the performance of these school operators.

The Church should only seek to convert existing schools into charters (like those in Washington, D.C.) if the existing schools have outstanding student achievement results and are at (or above) their enrollment capacity. Poll results and common sense suggest that seeking to perpetuate a mediocre school with public dollars won't help either students or the Church.

### **For parishioners, philanthropists, and Catholic school supporters:**

**5. Overcome nostalgia and chauvinism.** America will undeniably be better off in the years ahead if a significant number of vibrant Catholic schools are part of its educational offerings. Yet in order to work successfully toward this goal, school supporters need to accept some modernizations and changes. Tomorrow's successful Catholic schools can resemble yesterday's in some key areas – notably the high academic standards and strong discipline that St. Thomas Aquinas, the great philosopher and theologian who promoted the four cardinal virtues, would approve of – but it cannot be assumed, it will take

vigilance and hard work by their now primarily lay staff members. The religious environment and strong organizational culture in inner-city Catholic schools is much harder to create and sustain with most students today not being from Catholic families and many fewer sisters, brothers, and priests in the hallways. Effective discipline, high expectations and the belief in students' abilities despite their backgrounds are all elements that seem to be rarer among lay teachers and school leaders in the inner city today than they were with those in Catholic schools of previous generations. Deliberate efforts to create and sustain these elements, such as training school leaders and teachers in how to create school and classroom culture and expectations, must be a part of today's urban revival efforts.

School supporters should also beware of mindless chauvinism. It's not helpful to believe that Catholic schools just because they are Catholic, or private schools just because they are private, will inevitably be good schools. For any revival of inner-city Catholic schools to be successful, those who support that goal must shed such dogma and recognize that being private and being Catholic does not guarantee a school's quality. Rather a private Catholic school has a number of advantages that can help talented people implement a powerful school model and curriculum in order to achieve great results with students. It can also help such people embrace evaluation, comparison, data sharing, and the assessment of work on its merits – not on the basis of belief, assertion or tradition.

**6. Answer the call from bishops and archbishops who are making education their priority.** The parishioners in Wichita are generously supporting Catholic schooling for other Catholic children, even after their own daughters and sons have grown up. Philanthropists in Memphis answered the call to revive and rebuild inner-city schools serving mostly non-Catholics. Such leadership, initiative and commitment are rare and should be supported. The results are likely to be good for students, and according to our poll, good for how both Catholics and non-Catholics regard the Church.

**7. Create and support new networks of Catholic schools.** The stories of the NativityMiguel and Cristo Rey schools suggest that these networks and others like them have the energy and mission that successful urban education demands. But they need plenty of private support. As the Milwaukee story shows, getting public dollars to cover costs does not automatically bring increased enrollment or academic success. Supporters of the public charter school movement have had to learn the same lesson over the past fifteen years when it comes to priming the “supply side” of education. The development and expansion of excellent school models requires time and planning as well as the business sense and resources of people like B.J. Cassin, the venture capitalist behind Cristo Rey and NativityMiguel. Charter supporters have created their own funds to help quality schools replicate regionally and nationally (e.g., the Charter School Growth Fund and the NewSchools Venture Fund). What is needed now is the creation of a similar large fund (or more than one) devoted to the development and replication of effective Catholic school models. Imagine what inner-city Catholic education could be if there were a dozen such networks operating hundreds of schools across the land.

**8. Grow and replicate ACE.** When Wendy Kopp graduated from Princeton in 1989, she founded Teach For America. It started small, with just 500 recent graduates making a commitment to teach for at least two years in some of America's worst neighborhoods. Today, TFA is one of the best recruiters on college campuses, with over 5,000 teachers serving as “corps members” and thousands more alumni running schools or working in education. Notre Dame's ACE program has pioneered the possibilities for such a program focused on urban Catholic schools, but in order to help Catholic schools address one of their biggest challenges (finding good teachers and building new school leaders), it

needs to be at least ten times as big and operated with the active support of many more Catholic colleges and universities.

**9. Promote efforts to collect data and market Catholic schools.** Denver has launched one of the few sophisticated Catholic school marketing efforts we could find, and nowhere did we discover a website or pamphlet dedicated to Catholic schools that displays their test results and other key indicators of academic performance. In an increasingly competitive environment for schools, and with the imperfect but rich array of school information about public schools now available, the dearth of student achievement data and other information about Catholic schools represents either archaic (possibly even smug or defensive) secrecy or a grievous failure to observe how the education world has changed since the days when parishioners could simply be admonished to send their children to a Catholic school. In the era of No Child Left Behind, Catholic schools must make a commitment to measure their performance and make the results (and much more) available to one and all. Arguably, they should provide more such information than their public school counterparts.

Along with a robust commitment to measure and publicize test results and other school information should come a vigorous and sophisticated effort to market Catholic schools. As our survey indicates, these schools enjoy a good “brand name” and thus have much to build on, but parents choosing schools for their children need to be reminded of this option and its benefits. And as the Denver archdiocese discovered, sometimes even parish priests need to be reminded of the benefits of Catholic schools. Performance and other school information should be made available in easy-to-understand formats via the internet and in hard copy. Other marketing efforts should be undertaken to get press attention for achievements and noteworthy events. The Church, as well as school leaders and staff, need the public recognition of all that they are doing.

### **For policymakers:**

**10. Find ways beyond Title I services and school lunches to provide financial assistance to urban Catholic schools and needy children who attend them.** Catholic universities and their students receive as much federal funding as non-Catholic universities, and hardly anyone fusses about it. More than half of the annual \$6 billion budget of Catholic Charities comes from the federal government. Given the increased costs that local, state and federal governments would incur if the remaining K-12 Catholic schools simply closed – as well as the country’s increasing interest in diversity, choice and student achievement – it is time for policymakers to find ways to provide additional funding to Catholic schools, especially those serving families in poverty. With urban Catholic schools providing a service for the public good, and with the existence of these schools saving government the expense of shouldering the full education costs for their students, it makes sense to find ways of providing additional funding to Catholic elementary and secondary schools. Policymakers could and should insist on accountability, transparency and results in exchange.

The U.S. Supreme Court’s *Zelman* decision has established the legal basis for aiding kids attending Catholic (and other religious) schools, and there are many ways to overcome or circumnavigate the anti-Catholic “Blaine amendments” in many state constitutions in pursuit of the same goal. They include support for teaching and leadership development programs, tuition assistance (yes, vouchers and/or tax credits), and the conversion of Catholic schools to charter schools that could still retain their Catholicity.

To be sure, even if all of these ambitious recommendations were vigorously pursued, challenges for the inner city remain. Yet despite population losses and financial challenges, 43.6 percent of all Catholic schools are still located in urban areas, and there is an extraordinary infrastructure of facilities and a long tradition of high expectations that can be built upon to preserve, expand and improve the options available to inner-city children. Based on what we found in our case studies, much is possible in the years ahead with this existing asset. If nothing is done, this asset will be squandered, which will turn out badly for poor kids, badly for American education, and very likely badly for the Catholic Church.

It may be that we are in the gloaming for inner-city Catholic schools and that, in a decade or two, few inner-city schools will remain. To be sure, there will be a few places – likely including Memphis, Wichita, Denver, and New York – where some parish schools will still thrive thanks to private donors and steadfast leadership. In Milwaukee, D.C., Ohio and other places with viable voucher programs, Catholic schools will still exist in moderate numbers and some will soar. In many cities will be found independent religious order networks, operating high-quality (and financially viable)

schools. More formerly Catholic schools are likely to have become public charter schools, and we may be glad some of them did. Yet an overwhelming majority of Catholic schools in America will be in the suburbs.

Or it could be that this is a time of creative deconstruction and reconstruction for urban Catholic schools in America, not a sunset. If the continuance and revival of inner-city Catholic schools becomes a priority to parents, suburbanites, Church leaders, Catholic universities, elected officials and philanthropists, things could look very different in the decades to come. Parish schools may be organized and supported differently, sporting a variety of school models and cluster designs. There may be a dozen or more growing networks of independent Catholic schools. Scores of school facilities may be home to high-performing Catholic charter schools. A hundred schools may have converted to charter status, and hundreds more may be receiving public scholarship or voucher funding. The Church may again be recognized as an extraordinary force for good in America's poorest neighborhoods.

For the tens of thousands of ill-served students in America's cities, we hope for such a revival.

**DIOCESAN/ARCHDIOCESAN  
LEADERSHIP**

*Wichita*

*Memphis*

*Denver*

# Wichita

## Making Catholic Schools Affordable Again

By Bryan O'Keefe

**A**t first glance, Wichita, Kansas is an unlikely place for a Catholic school revival. While Wichita and its Catholic population have grown over the past decades, Catholics number only about 120,000 in the area, a modest 12 percent of the local population. Kansas usually conjures up images of evangelical Christianity and mega-churches, not robust Catholic schools. In big eastern cities like New York and Pittsburgh, where Catholics comprise more than 40 percent of the population, the schools have struggled. Many have closed under financial and enrollment duress. If they couldn't pull it off in these Catholic strongholds, how could they in Wichita?

The truth is that bigger cities with Catholic schools could learn a thing or two from the heartland. Wichita might be home to one of the strongest Catholic school systems in the nation, with impressive test scores, rising enrollments, supportive parishes, an authentic Catholic identity, and a unique funding model. What the Diocese of Wichita has been able to accomplish in the face of declining Catholic schools across the country is worth noting. It may offer a model for how other communities could make their Catholic school system work for Catholic and non-Catholic students alike.

The secret to Wichita's success turns out to be simplicity itself. Its schools have not reinvented the wheel or adopted the latest education fad. Instead, they emphasize the roots of a Catholic education, with strong local parishes committed to the ideals of a parochial school system for their children and others.

"I really think that at the heart of this parochial school system is the notion of very strong parishes. Parishes take on the mission of providing Catholic education for the people of this diocese," says Bob Voboril, Superintendent of Schools for the Wichita diocese. "We have never abandoned the notion that it's the responsibility of the entire Catholic community to provide education for the kids of the parish."

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Of 39 Catholic schools in the diocese, 36 are parish schools, including 34 elementary schools, one free-standing preschool, and four Catholic high schools. A parish keeping a school open is in and of itself an accomplishment. What makes the Wichita system truly unusual in this day and age is the fact that all Wichita Catholic schools have eliminated tuition for Catholic students.

## Tuition Elimination

Ending tuition was not done on purpose, exactly, and it didn't happen overnight. Wichita's Catholic schools faced all the familiar problems: the need to hire more lay teachers costing the school system lots more money, necessitating higher tuitions, and leading to diminishing enrollments as families fled into the free public schools.

The familiar pattern started to turn ever so slightly in the late 1960s in Wichita, beginning with Father Thomas McGread, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi, a parish located on the western side of the city. McGread called upon his parishioners to live a "stewardship way of life" that involved a greater commitment to their parish and Catholic ideas. Part of that stewardship asked for households to donate 5 percent of their income to the church so the parish could provide church services free to all members – including elementary Catholic school education. Parishioners enthusiastically heeded his call and in the mid-70s McGread expanded the program, now asking for a donation of 8 percent, with part of the proceeds devoted to paying tuition at the Catholic high school for all willing students. Again, parishioners answered his challenge. At the time of McGread's original proposition, St. Francis of Assisi's school enrolled 220 students. Today, nearly 800 attend it on a daily basis, an astonishing testament to McGread's vision and his parishioners' devotion to stewardship.

Others took note, notably Father Eugene Gerber, who was appointed bishop of the diocese in 1982. Gerber spent the next two years studying McGread's parish and reached the conclusion that the entire diocese should adopt his call for stewardship, one that was more about a commitment to the parish and the Catholic Church than simply the financing of Catholic schools.

"The notion of stewardship was not conceived in a financial way. This is not just about funding things in your parish. It's about accepting God's gifts and

using them in the proper way," says Superintendent Voboril. "The spirituality is at the heart of this."

**Even if spirituality drove it, a major benefit of the stewardship campaign was that Catholic schools across Wichita were acquiring the financial resources to eliminate tuition, although Bishop Gerber never mandated this.**

Even if spirituality drove it, a major benefit of the stewardship campaign was that Catholic schools across Wichita were acquiring the financial resources to eliminate tuition, although Bishop Gerber never mandated this. From 1985 to 1993, about three quarters of the parishes eliminated elementary school tuition for parishioners. Most also made the decision to fund high school tuition for their students. When Voboril arrived as superintendent in 1993, nine schools still charged tuition. By 2002, without any pressure from Voboril or church officials, the last one dropped it. Voboril estimates that the cost per pupil for Catholic students is roughly \$3,500 in elementary and junior high schools and \$5,000 in high school. Not surprisingly, parishes with Catholic schools spend 80 to 90 percent of their budgets on education. Those parishes without schools of their own pay for their children's Catholic education in nearby parishes. The stewardship of the parishioners in Wichita has reaped an enormous reward for its youngest members, flying in the face of conventional wisdom that Catholic schools were doomed to raise their prices to the point of diminishing returns and eventual closure.

"The notion of ending tuition just came out of a much larger philosophy," says Voboril. "It's the responsibility of the whole church to take care of

people and provide for our spiritual needs.” Those who work at the school and parish levels in Wichita are clear that, however it came to be, the change helped save their schools.

Consider St. Joseph’s, a parish founded in 1886 and the oldest continuing parish in Wichita. Located downtown, the parish has a challenging demographic. On the one hand are young adults who are attracted to urban living before moving to the suburbs. At the other end of the spectrum are senior citizens who have lived downtown their entire lives. Neither group, typically, has children of school age. In all, only 450 families are registered members of St. Joseph’s and, of those, only about 80 have a direct stake in the school. The median household income is estimated to be only \$25,000 to \$28,000. Often the family structures are less than ideal.

“They call me father and often times I am the only continuous father they have. It’s sad but true,” says Rev. Ken VanHaverbeke, pastor of St. Joseph’s.

But despite all of the forces working against St. Joseph’s, it has been able to maintain a vibrant K-8 Catholic school. VanHaverbeke attributes it to the overwhelming commitment of parishioners to the mission of providing Catholic education.

“I find that most parishioners want to support their parish. And the missions of the parishes are Catholic schools,” VanHaverbeke says. “If everyone in my parish did not pool their money together, our school would be closed. Tuition just would not work.”

“It’s opened up Catholic education to people who could never afford it,” says Michael Burrus, president of Kapaun Mt. Carmel, a Catholic high school in the city.

Richard Montgomery, principal of St. Mary’s Catholic School, agrees. “I remember when we paid tuition. If we had continued that, we would be closing our schools.” He continues, “Take a family with three kids making \$50,000. If tuition was, say, \$3,000 a year per student, that would be \$9,000 a

year. Who is really going to pay that? It’s just too expensive. But with our commitment and tithing, it’s not only cheaper but we have done the right thing. And once that kid is out of high school, the family is probably going to keep tithing because it’s just part of their normal budget. It was a risk to eliminate tuition, but it has worked. It was God’s will.”

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## Parishioners Respond

“The parish really does have a small town feel to it,” Montgomery notes. “The parishioners do not always have a personal connection to the school, but they want the school to succeed. I feel 100 percent that the parish is behind the school.”

He cites example after example of this stewardship – from the 82-year-old parishioner who has agreed to help teach Spanish, to another parish member who is a retired guidance counselor and volunteers her time. VanHaverbeke has witnessed the same sort of commitment, noting that his parishioners volunteer as school custodians and for other staff positions just so they can do their part.

“The Catholic school is the heartbeat for the parish,” says VanHaverbeke.



## Academic Success

Voboril's confidence is borne out by results from standardized tests. A report compiled by the Wichita Eagle found that in 2007, 84 percent of students in the diocesan schools passed the state's math assessment tests, compared with 78 percent of students statewide and 64 percent of those attending Wichita Public Schools. On the reading test, 90 percent of the Catholic school students earned a passing mark, as opposed to 81 percent of students statewide and 67 percent of district students. The writing assessment showed similar results: 85 percent of the Catholic school students passed, compared to 71 percent of students statewide and 63 percent of the city's public school students.

The numbers are particularly telling for low-income students, or those who qualify for the federal Free-and-Reduced Lunch Program. Seventy-five percent of them (in Wichita Catholic schools) passed the writing assessment, while the statewide number stood at 60 percent. Of low-income Catholic school students, 81 percent passed the reading test, whereas the statewide figure for that subgroup was 70 percent. In math, 73 percent of low-income Catholic students made the grade on the state math exam, versus 68 percent of low-income students statewide.

African American and Hispanic students are also achieving academic success at a higher rate than the rest of the state. On the writing assessment, almost 95 percent of African Americans and 78 percent of Hispanic students in the Catholic schools passed the exam. The corresponding figures statewide were much lower: 57 and 60 percent, respectively.

He says that people give so freely of their time, talent, and treasure because they believe in the school and what it can accomplish. "People see that the Catholic school is a very good vehicle for passing on their faith," VanHaverbeke adds.

While parishioners and parents pass on their faith, the students themselves are earning passing grades when it comes to academics. "I would put our students up against any in the state," Voboril says.

But while Voboril is rightfully proud of these academic achievements, he's also insistent that earning high academic marks is not the foremost mission of Wichita Catholic schools. "Our number one mission is very clear. Our number one mission is to form disciples of Jesus Christ," Voboril says.

In terms of mission, the schools of the Wichita diocese may be some of the most Catholic schools in the country.

"The big 'C' Catholic comes before the little 's' school," Voboril says. "We are schools that if you come here, you are going to be formed as disciples of Jesus Christ. It is going to be taught every day. You are going to be surrounded by it in the environment. Your teachers are going to be trained that way and you're going to live it out in service. We are going to worship daily. We are going to pray daily. And in the end you are going to be expected to turn into a young person who knows that the gifts they have are going to be put into the service of the entire community, not just to enrich themselves," Voboril says.

In many struggling dioceses, the opposite is more the norm. The schools' Catholic identity has been slowly eroded, replaced with focuses on athletics, academics or whatever other educational avenue the tuition-paying families desire. Voboril understands this challenge.

“These schools become subject to market forces,” he says. If you’re going to charge someone \$8,000 or \$12,000 in tuition, then you are going to have to listen very carefully to the people who pay that kind of money.”

What frees Wichita of those pressures is the parish and stewardship model. With the parish providing the funding and no wealthy donors (or government program) calling the shots, the schools can retain a strong Catholic focus.

“We are not academically elite prep schools,” Voboril explains. “We are not schools that cater to athletes. But we are able to do what we can because parishioners are committed to the notion that Catholic schools should be available for every active Catholic, not just those who can pay for it and not just for those who are academically talented. That changes the nature of the school in a good way. It exists for the mission for which it was created instead of morphing into something because that’s all it can afford.”

Voboril also insists that his schools’ success is not due to failing public schools in Wichita, as in other urban areas across the country. “We are not schools where the non-Catholics are running away from public schools necessarily. That’s because, for an urban system, the Wichita public schools are excellent,” Voboril says. “But the difference here really is Jesus Christ. The reason you should send your child to a Catholic school is because we will teach your child about Jesus. We will form them into a steward that gives back instead of just somebody who takes.”

Tuition for non-Catholics runs about \$2,500 to \$3,000 per pupil at the elementary level and \$8,500 at the high school, though there’s an exception at Holy Savior Catholic Academy, which primarily serves non-Catholic youngsters. There, tuition is \$2,000 per student, and over 75 percent of the students are low-income, 88 percent are minority, and, as is the case in most of the diocesan schools here, 10 percent are special education students. Once students leave Holy Savior (provided they attended for at least three years), they can continue on to a Catholic high school for the same tuition price.

**“Because parishes provided the funding, we can serve a much more diverse group of young people. We have some very good schools where 60 to 70 percent of the students are low-income. And we also have diversity in terms of academic ability. We have no entrance tests.”**

Indeed, the support of the parishes and strong mission focus allows the schools to be diverse in terms of socioeconomic background and academic ability. Voboril estimates that among the almost 11,000 students in Wichita Catholic schools, over 1,300 are Spanish-speaking and over 2,300 are minority. Almost a quarter come from low-income families.

“Because parishes provided the funding, we can serve a much more diverse group of young people. We have some very good schools where 60 to 70 percent of the students are low-income. And we also have diversity in terms of academic ability. We have no entrance tests.”

## **Serving All Students, Including Needy Non-Catholics**

**N**on-Catholics are welcome in Wichita’s diocesan and parish schools so long as they realize that the Catholic focus is front and center.

Voboril tells the story of a student with Down syndrome at Bishop McCarroll High School, one of the top high schools in the diocese. Voboril takes pride in knowing that his school system is educating that student. He's aware that in many other dioceses, students with disabilities are either turned away because of a lack of resources or a lack of want.

"He will be served in one of the best high schools in the state of Kansas. We have a group of counselors and nurses that do everything they can to serve every kid with a disability. We do that without any federal funds. It's not about how smart they are," Voboril says. "When people come to me and say, 'We don't need those low-learners,' I tell them every time, 'Okay, I'll buy that, if you can show me in the Bible where it says that Jesus came to save only the top 50 percent.' We have a care for every darn kid here."

Burrus, president of Kapaun Mt. Carmel, is proud of his students' academic successes. Ninety-eight percent go on to college. But he's also quick to point out that 100 of his students are under Individualized Education Programs due to some form of learning disability. These can range from dyslexia and attention deficit disorder to simply having lower IQs. Nevertheless, because of the stewardship model, they are welcome in Kapaun Mt. Carmel's classrooms.

"We will make the accommodations that will help them become successful learners," Burrus says. "We give these kids the resources so they can be like the kids who have more academic ability."

He's also firmly in agreement with Voboril that, while academics and athletics are important, the school never loses sight of what makes them truly Catholic. "Our mission first and foremost is to educate and form the total person in the image of Jesus Christ," Burrus insists. "We cannot be turning out great kids if all we give them is book knowledge...we are driven by our core values as a Catholic school. And we introduce some element of those values into every course. We will force it in if we need to. It's that important."

## Expect Hard Work

The traditional discipline of Catholic schools – both for teachers and students – is also alive in Wichita. Voboril says the diocese has high expectations for its teachers and that they are instructed on how to be more than just an educational resource. "We focus on preparing all our teachers to be ministers. Every teacher takes an in-service of ten hours a year on what it means to teach in a Catholic school. We discuss with them subjects like integrating your faith into science and math and how Catholics look at scripture. It's a very important aspect of their job."

Jenny Peloquin, an eighth-grade English and religion teacher, says that teachers are held to a high Catholic standard and are expected to practice their faith. "This isn't just a job. This is a calling," she declares. "Part of our evaluations look at whether or not we are active members of our parish and how we are living our faith. You are supposed to be a role model for your students."

In the same way, diocesan officials and teachers instill a strong sense of Catholic discipline into students.

"Our Catholic schools are tough. We don't compromise here," Peloquin says. She mentions some of her elementary students who eventually went on to a public high school and found the work there easy by comparison. "The students come back and tell us, 'this is so easy and it was much harder when you were our teacher.' But a lot of them end up missing the structure and challenge of our environment."

The schools' deep dedication to Catholicism also serves an evangelization purpose. In homes where a parent might be from a different religion or not have any faith at all, the Catholic school allows the church to spread its message. This is especially true in a parish like VanHaverbeke's, with many low-income parishioners and non-traditional family structures.

"I call it my parking lot ministry," VanHaverbeke says. "Parents drop their kids off at school and I talk

with them about their faith life, too. It gives me the opportunity to reach out to fallen-away Catholics. The school becomes that rallying point for a lot of other needs we can address.”

VanHaverbeke estimates that his “parking lot” ministry has brought in an additional 50 to 75 families and increased giving by about \$100,000. Burrus says that even at his school, he has seen people convert to Catholicism after having contact with the Catholic school.

## Expanding Ambitions

Ending tuition, staying true to their Catholic roots and serving children from all backgrounds are not the only things that Wichita does differently. In fact, a large part of the diocese’s success revolves around its willingness to expand Catholic schools and their offerings.

For example, Richard Montgomery has witnessed enrollment in his own school rise from 245 students when he was named principal eight years ago to almost 300 pupils today. He attributes much of that growth to expanding a preschool program years ago from one classroom of kids every other morning to three classrooms of kids meeting every day.

“There is something about it when they attend a Catholic school at the age of three and four. There is a high percentage chance they will come back again for kindergarten. It seems to be the hook,” Montgomery says.

Expanding a preschool program however took resources, and at the time of its initial expansion, there was no guarantee that it would necessarily succeed. It was a risky move by the parish to embrace the plan. The preschool also requires tuition from Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Montgomery says that the parish finance council does not live in fear of failure but rather believes in

hope, and, as a result, was willing to invest resources where others might balk.

**“The parish finance council has been willing to take risks and stretch the budget to make things happen. And every time they have done it, it has worked. We always come out ahead and the giving increases. I really commend the parish because they are willing to take risks to make our schools better.”**

“The parish finance council has been willing to take risks and stretch the budget to make things happen. And every time they have done it, it has worked. We always come out ahead and the giving increases. I really commend the parish because they are willing to take risks to make our schools better,” Montgomery adds.

Expanding preschool is one thing. Taking over closed public schools is quite another. Wichita’s Catholic educators have shown themselves up to both tasks.

On the outskirts of Wichita but still relatively close to the city is another St. Joseph’s Catholic school (different from VanHaverbeke’s). It has a complicated past, initially opening as a Catholic school but then converting to a public school in the Renwick School District after World War II. When the school converted, the pastor at the time added a clause stating that in the event Renwick ever closed the school, ownership would revert back to the parish.

By 2003, enrollment had plunged to 62 pupils and the school district gave up on St. Joe’s. Improbably,

the pastor at St. Joe's, Father Ivan Eck, asked Catholic school officials if they would consider taking over the school again – even in the wake of its closure as a public school

“I gave him a list as long as both my arms of things they needed to do,” Voboril recalls. “You need to get books. You need to get teachers. You need to increase your Sunday income by 33 percent. You need to enroll at least 60 students. And I just asked him, honestly, can your little parish really change this culture? And he said we can do it.”

Part of the challenge facing St. Joe's was that while the school district agreed to return the building to the diocese, it also removed every last book, desk and piece of furniture. The parishioners literally had to replace an entire school within the building shell. On top of that, they were in a race against the clock. Ownership of the school transferred to the diocese on July 1, 2004. The parish set the new school opening day for August 18th, barely a month and a half later.

**Catholic school closures in Voboril's diocese are off the table – another strategy that defies the trend seen elsewhere.**

Against many odds, the parishioners of St. Joe's got it done. One hundred volunteers agreed to revamp the 82-year-old brick school and serve as plumbers, electricians, carpenters, and cleaning crews. Others volunteered on a daily basis as secretaries, teaching aides, and lunchroom workers. The school initially hired six full-time teachers, enrolled 80 students, and found creative ways to replenish their resources, such as buying textbooks via eBay. Three years later, enrollment has rebounded to 94 students.

“It's a great story and a great spirit,” Voboril says. “I ask people at St. Joe's, why do you care? And they tell me, that's our school. And we will do anything for that school. This is the heart of what we are talking about. This is the result of stewardship done properly.”

He even goes farther, saying that Catholic school closures in his diocese are off the table – another strategy that defies the trend seen elsewhere.

## Leadership Matters

“It's simple. If you close one of my schools, you can find yourself a new superintendent,” Voboril says matter-of-factly. But Voboril has little to worry about in the way of job security. That's because unlike some bishops that have closed Catholic schools or converted them to public charter schools, Wichita Bishop Michael O. Jackels enthusiastically supports Catholic education and Voboril's mission.

### Bishop Jackels

Writing in the diocesan newspaper, Jackels stressed the importance of Catholic schools:

*A Catholic school is worthy of everyone's support to ensure that it not only survives but thrives. The Catholic school is important because of the first and greatest commission that Jesus gave his followers: to make disciples of all nations, teaching them everything he commanded. A Catholic school holds pride of place among the ways to learn and teach about Jesus. It has the greatest potential to form future disciples most effectively, at least if it is Catholic more than in name only.*

**“I was just so impressed when he came and did that walk-through,” recalls Montgomery. “As a professional, when you see somebody like the bishop showing that kind of interest, you feel supported. You feel like the diocese wants you to do well.”**

In a back-to-school letter in 2007, Jackels was clear that Catholic schools would remain a diocesan priority: “The Catholic school ministry concerns all the baptized. Moreover, we should make this ministry a priority and give it our best resources in people and energy, without sparing effort, toil or material means.”

Those working on the front lines in Catholic schools have nothing but praise for Jackels and Voboril, saying the duo has been very supportive of their efforts. Montgomery recalls Jackels visiting his own school for a tour, an experience that proved to him that the diocese was dedicated to his school and students.

“I was just so impressed when he came and did that walk-through,” recalls Montgomery. “As a professional, when you see somebody like the bishop showing that kind of interest, you feel supported. You feel like the diocese wants you to do well.”

He also praises Voboril for his hands-on approach as a superintendent. “Bob Voboril is always emailing us, calling us, and staying in touch. He’s very helpful. It’s tough to stay connected to everyone, especially when you have 39 schools, but he does it.”

Peloquin, who teaches at the recently reopened St. Joseph’s school, says the commitment to Catholic schools from the diocese’s leaders makes a difference for the students as well: “It means the world to

the kids. When they see them in our schools, it sends the message that they are not just some guy sitting in their office. It tells the kids ‘You’re the reason I am here.’”

Peloquin also praises Voboril for being both visible and accessible. “He always remembers your name. He shows up at your church’s fish fry. He’s checking up on us and he’s there for us. He sets a very positive tone for the entire diocese.”

Voboril himself deflects the praise that regularly seems to come his way. Even while recognizing the success of his schools, he’s eager to talk about other stewardship programs, like the Lord’s Diner, a church-sponsored soup kitchen that feeds the needy and homeless of Wichita every day at 5 p.m., or the Guadalupe Clinic, which provides health care services to the poor. “The schools are just one small part of a lot of wonderful things happening here,” Voboril insists.

## **Enrollment Nears High-water Mark**

Still, it’s impossible to ignore what Voboril has done. Since taking over as superintendent, enrollment has risen from 8,854 students to 10,806. That rate of growth is nearly double the increase from 1982-1992, before Voboril arrived. Enrollment now stands at a 40-year high and could easily surpass the diocesan peak of 11,066, a mark set in 1967. The diocese and its parishes have also undertaken an ambitious infrastructure renewal project. Nearly two thirds of their schools have either been completely renovated or built anew during Voboril’s tenure.

While 90 percent of the teachers in these diocesan schools are Catholic, only 3 percent are brothers or sisters. Yet religious vocations are also up in the diocese, going from 28 to 38 seminarians in the last three years, with as many as 50 possibly for next year. Vocations have increased for women as well,

Voboril's own background makes him an unlikely leader of the Wichita system. Voboril isn't originally from Wichita and did not work in the diocese before taking over as superintendent. Instead, he hails from Nebraska, where he rose through the Catholic education ranks – first as a teacher, then as an elementary school principal, and finally as a high school principal. His last assignment in Nebraska was at a school with only 100 students, a far cry from the thousands he now leads. Voboril admits that even he was a little surprised when the Wichita diocese selected him to take the helm. He also never imagined it would be a long-term job, especially in an area with a relatively small Catholic population.

"When I came here to interview, I just kind of laughed. Who's going to hire somebody to be a superintendent that comes from a high school with just 100 kids out in the middle of Nebraska? But they hired me. I thought initially I would be here for three or four years and then I would go back to Nebraska and be a high school principal again. I didn't really know what I would see out in Wichita."

What he saw has powerfully impacted his life. "This is how Catholic schools should be," Voboril concludes. "They are built around faith. They are built around parish. They are built around community. And they are built around the spirit. We don't separate school from parish, parish from diocese, it's all part of the same whole. And that whole is living the stewardship way of life."

His success in Wichita has not gone unnoticed. He is frequently asked to speak at conferences across the nation. Other dioceses, some far bigger than Wichita, have tried to lure him away with lucrative job offers. But Bob Voboril is staying put.

"I've been asked to take superintendence of four or so of the largest dioceses," he says without boasting. "I could go to other places that have more resources. But in the end, I am going to make a difference by staying in a diocese that is so committed to forming people the right way. Nobody is doing it as effectively as we are and nobody is as passionate as we are. In other places, they are just talking about holding on and surviving. Here, we are talking about new and innovative ways to spread Catholic schools even further across the diocese."

with Voboril hoping to have a nun back in every school by 2025.

## A Different Kind of Scholarship Fund

To cover the average costs of \$3,500 per elementary student and \$5,000 per high school student, the entire Wichita Catholic school system brought in \$41 million dollars in ordinary income

in the 2006-07 school year. Of that, \$32 million came from individual parishes through Sunday collections, \$4.7 million from development efforts, and another \$4 million in tuition and fees – with the bulk of tuition coming from preschool programs. In addition to the ordinary income, another \$19 million came through extraordinary income, largely from special donations that were then earmarked for specific capital improvement projects. For example, \$8.5 million was spent on building a new grade school. When adding the figures together, it's clear that more than half of all

income comes from individual parishes and their generous parishioners.

Varying economic circumstances among parishes and parishioners can be used as an excuse not to provide Catholic education. “In Wichita, we have schools in the suburbs, in rural areas, and in the center city. It’s our ability to work together is the heart of it all. It’s a real testimony to the parishes and pastors, especially in areas where the kids are very different from the parishioners,” Voboril says.

Voboril mentions several parishes where, because of immigration and generational changes, the wealthier, older parishioners are in fact supporting children who are ethnically and culturally very different from themselves. In particular, Voboril singles out one school where 75 to 80 percent of the student population is Hispanic while 60 percent of the parishioners are white. But for the parishioners, the skin differences really don’t seem to matter.

**Voboril singles out one school where 75 to 80 percent of the student population is Hispanic while 60 percent of the parishioners are white. But for the parishioners, the skin differences really don’t seem to matter.**

The latest effort to help spread Catholic resources across the diocese is the St. Katharine Drexel Catholic School Fund, an initiative that is Voboril’s pride and joy.

The fund provides financial support to those parishes with a large number of families that are at or below the poverty level. To qualify, a parish must be spending at least 50 percent of its Sunday income on Catholic education and 30 percent of its

families must qualify as low-income. Voboril says that tuition assistance plans are common in other cities with Catholic schools, but that a traditional tuition assistance plan obviously would not work in Wichita since the schools have now eliminated tuition. “We decided that if we were going to do a tuition assistance plan, we had to structure it so it helped each individual parish,” Voboril adds.

Even though the fund is in its infancy, it has shown impressive results, already raising \$2 million dollars. They hope to raise even more money through select appeals to generous donors and Catholic-school alumni. The goal is that the Drexel Fund can become a long-standing endowment of sorts for the city’s poorest parishes, many of them located in the city center and serving minority populations. In the past year, the fund paid out \$289,000.

Voboril insists that poor students from the inner city will not be denied an education, thanks to support from parishioners across the diocese. “If you attend a center-city school, our goal is that you will have the same resources as the other schools. Your teachers are going to make the same salaries as those in the suburban schools. We can make a great difference for these kids through the Drexel Fund.”

Father VanHaverbeke’s parish was one of those aided by the Drexel Fund and he is grateful for its assistance. “It gives us some necessary stability. When I first came here, we had three pennies in the bank. We were living from Sunday to Sunday. But now with the Drexel Fund, we have a good financial safety net for the parish.”

Part of the reason why Voboril is so committed to the Drexel Fund is because of Maria Silva, now a teacher at St. Thomas Aquinas. Silva grew up Catholic, but her parents sent her to public school because of finances. Through a previous scholarship program, Silva was given the opportunity, starting in sixth grade, to attend St. Patrick’s Catholic school, a school with a predominantly Hispanic population.



**“If you attend a center-city school, our goal is that you will have the same resources as the other schools. Your teachers are going to make the same salaries as those in the suburban schools.”**

“It was the turning point in my life,” Silva now recalls.

Her parents did not speak English but practiced stewardship for the school whenever possible, volunteering their time and labor. “My parents would go to work so we could go to school,” Silva says.

After graduating from Bishop McCaroll Catholic high school, Silva pursued an education degree from nearby Wichita State University, also on scholarship. She completed it in three years, but at the end of her studies was informed that the scholarship was contingent upon her teaching in a public school. Rather than go that route, Silva took out a loan, gave back the scholarship money, and pur-

sued a job where her heart led her, in a Wichita Catholic school. She now teaches Spanish to the next generation of students. Even with the personal financial cost so high, Silva wouldn’t have had it any other way.

“This is where I want to be,” she says. “This is what I want. I feel like I need to give back to a system that meant so much to me.”

Voboril views Silva’s selflessness and service as a living embodiment of all that is special about the Wichita approach – and a lesson to be learned about the power of a Catholic education done the right way.

“The notion that because you are smart you should make yourself smarter until you get wealthier is at the root of a materialistic sickness that pervades our country,” Voboril says. “We are after something different here. What we are after is forming a kind of human being that sees everything they do as stewardship. We say to our kids that God gave you these gifts. You did not earn them. Everything you have is a gift from God and you have an obligation to give back to God the best you have in you. That’s what it’s all about.”

# Memphis

## Revitalization of Diocesan “Jubilee” Schools

By Peter Meyer

**W**hen you spot a rushing white SUV with a license plate that says “Support Catholic Schools” and a bumper sticker that proclaims, “Miracles Happen,” you better slow down or get out of the way. The driver, Dr. Mary McDonald, is on a mission to educate the disadvantaged, and she gave up slowing down for slackers a long time ago.

In fact, if you’re in the passenger seat with McDonald driving, you’d better hang on. The vehicle barrels through the city that is home to Federal Express and has a history that includes slave traders, Elvis Presley, and the Lorraine Motel. McDonald talks about miracles and money. She’ll first tell you how, just after being appointed Director of Education for this sprawling west Tennessee Catholic Diocese in 1998, with orders from the Bishop to reopen shuttered downtown Memphis parochial schools, she was shown a crucifix without arms. “I had never seen such a thing,” says McDonald, who immediately took it as a sign from God. Her guide told her that the crucifix meant “I had to be the arms of Christ.” And she’ll also tell you how, after working tirelessly for a year trying to raise awareness about the need to reopen Catholic schools in impoverished downtown Memphis and wondering how she could possibly find the money to do so, she received a phone call from a local, non-Catholic businessman who wanted to contribute \$10 million to the effort.

The public sector could learn a lot about education excellence if it recognized the core truth of McDonald’s lifelong work: miracles come not only

to those who believe, but also to those who work at it. “No one stole Catholic schools from the inner city,” says the life-long Catholic and Philadelphia native who has lived in Memphis since 1976. “We simply left them in the dust as the Catholic population shifted away from the urban areas.” Nearly a dozen parish schools in downtown Memphis had closed since the 1960s. And the three diocese-supported high schools in Memphis were beginning to feel the strain of less enrollment (and revenue) from the loss of their feeder elementary schools.

**“No one stole Catholic schools from the inner city... We simply left them in the dust as the Catholic population shifted away from the urban areas.”**

There were 6,800 students in seventeen schools in the Memphis Diocese in 1998, when McDonald took over. Now there are 8,500 in 28 schools. And the increase has come almost exclusively from her efforts to reopen abandoned schools, aptly called Jubilee Schools. The “Memphis Miracle,” as it has been dubbed, is a tale about defying demographics, believing in what is possible, having faith in a powerful idea, and working hard. And unlike so many public schools that may lack faith even in the academic abilities of disadvantaged children of color,

Memphis Catholics, with Mary McDonald's considerable leadership, have kept hope alive.

McDonald has overseen the reopening of eight Jubilee elementary schools in some of the poorest neighborhoods in America – while managing the affairs of Catholic education in the rest of the diocese. And she has had to break the mold in doing it. The Catholic schools in the “rest of the diocese” (where most of the students and schools are) operate as they have for over a century in America – local parishes open, manage, and pay for them. Yet in much of downtown Memphis, Catholic parishes could barely afford to keep their churches open, much less support a school. And while Catholic schools in the rest of the diocese catered to the sons and daughters of Catholics, in downtown Memphis most of the potential students are sons and daughters of non-Catholics with little or no money.

McDonald mounted an effort in downtown Memphis that was more like that of early missionaries converting a foreign country than tending a backyard garden. She regularly quotes Washington, D.C.'s former Cardinal James Hickey, who said “We educate the poor not because they are Catholic, but because we are.”

McDonald put together a multi-million dollar marketing and fundraising operation that subsidizes everything from tuition to food to uniforms for the 1,400 children now attending the “new” Jubilee schools. Tuition at the reopened diocesan schools, like at the rest of the diocesan schools, is already a bargain: \$3,800 per year for Catholics and \$4,450 for non-Catholics in grades prekindergarten to six, and \$4,000 and \$4,725 per year in seventh and eighth grades. The cost of a public education in Memphis is over \$6,500 per pupil, and over 90 percent of it is paid for with “scholarships” from a special Jubilee nonprofit organization McDonald established. (There are no Jubilee high schools yet, but McDonald has plans to allow Jubilee scholarships to follow students to one of these secondary schools, where tuition is \$5,175 per year for Catholics and \$6,125 for non-Catholics.) The

Jubilee fund now boasts an endowment of some \$50 million, which tantalizingly suggests something new: endowed diocesan schools.

## Lay Reinvention

“When the priests and nuns left the schools,” McDonald explains, “Catholic schools and those who benefited from them were devastated. It has been mostly lay people who have kept the schools alive. But we’ve had to reinvent them.” And reopen them, she might have said.

**Both reinventing and reopening schools have involved an unusual blend of sacred and secular. But it’s not just fundraising among non-Catholics that is key to the Memphis miracle; it’s a reorientation of decades-old institutional habits, organizational and spiritual.**

Both reinventing and reopening schools have involved an unusual blend of sacred and secular. But it’s not just fundraising among non-Catholics that is key to the Memphis miracle; it’s a reorientation of decades-old institutional habits, organizational and spiritual. For instance, McDonald has introduced, out of necessity it might be said, the ecumenical spirit in teacher and student recruitment. In the new Jubilee Catholic schools, 30 percent of teachers and administrators are from “other faith traditions,” as are 81 percent of the students, 86 percent of whom are black. And it is important to note that Dr. McDonald takes the distinction between “non-Catholic” and “other faith traditions” seriously. “We don’t care that you’re not Catholic,” she says matter-of-factly, “but you have

to believe in our mission, which is to educate these children in the Catholic manner.” That means that each teacher is expected to “bring Christ to the students and bring the students to Christ.”

This does not mean the diocese skips reading, writing, math, or science. In fact, the Church’s Canon Law (the rule for Catholics the world over), Section 806, paragraph 2, says that “Directors of Catholic schools are to take care under the watchfulness of the local ordinary that the instruction which is given in them is at least as academically distinguished as that in the other schools of the area.”

“I’m an educator,” says McDonald, who was a teacher and school principal in Catholic schools, mostly in Memphis, for 20-plus years before being appointed director of education and superintendent of schools for the Memphis diocese. She has a Ph.D. in Leadership and Policy Studies from University of Memphis, as well as an instinctive sense of efficiency and a distaste for waste. In a near-perfect rejection of standard public school improvement techniques, McDonald has increased school enrollment by 25 percent without increasing administrative costs. Her entire administrative staff still consists of an assistant superintendent, two administrative assistants, and a part-time grant writer and maintenance supervisor, who also doubles as an elementary school principal.

Reinventing Catholic education has not been easy. The parish-support model, which relied on the neighborhood or parish constituency to cover the majority of the costs of the school, could not work in economically devastated neighborhoods. And the annual “Bishop’s Appeal,” which asked richer parishes to contribute to their less fortunate brethren, was simply not enough to sustain schools that had no parish support whatsoever.

The traditional business model for Catholic schools took stable demographics – and a near militaristic enforcement of Catholic support for schools – for granted. In the past, says McDonald, there just wasn’t much planning or budgeting. “The schools lived

year to year – because they could.” Today, in addition to the intense, ecumenical fundraising efforts on behalf of the Jubilee schools and their ecumenical staff and student body, the diocese now has a business plan for its schools that extends several years into the future. McDonald has also put in place a “Teacher/Principal Incentive Program” that makes no-interest loans to any teacher, principal, or teaching assistant who wishes to return to school for certification or advanced degrees – as a way to shore up the system’s instructional base. The program includes grants to schools to implement innovative, teacher-designed programs as well as cash incentives for publishing professional reports and stipends for joining leadership programs. McDonald says the program has been a great success, contributing to a decrease in turnover in the diocesan teacher ranks.

**“We’re heavy into leadership,” says McDonald, “creating it, promoting it, celebrating it.”**

McDonald also created a leadership academy, so that the diocese could train its own school leaders. The first year the academy graduated sixteen future administrators; the following year nine of them were either principals or assistant principals in diocesan schools.

The diocese also partners with the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) at the University of Notre Dame and thereby receives several teachers a year who are working on their master’s degree; it has a similar agreement with Christian Brothers University in Memphis through its Lasallian Association of New Catholic Educators (LANCE) program. Among LANCE’s “core” values are educating the poor and underserved, which is also the center of Jubilee’s mission.

“We’re heavy into leadership,” says McDonald, “creating it, promoting it, celebrating it.” Principals at each diocesan school, including Jubilee schools, are expected to manage their own budgets (totals for Jubilee schools are set by McDonald and her staff, and range from \$600,000 to \$1 million) and do their own hiring and firing. In many ways, this is a reworked version of an ancient Catholic tradition – subsidiarity – and similar to the site-based management in the public and business sectors. While many non-Catholics believe that the papists walk lockstep behind the robed man in Rome, the Church in fact believes – and practices – that the central authority delegates decision-making to the lowest competent authority. Applying modern business practices to the paradigm, McDonald created leadership teams for everything from curriculum to public relations and development.

Members of the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Leadership Team, for example, were directed to meet with teachers throughout the

school system. One of their more interesting findings, McDonald explains, was that despite the fact that average pay was about \$10,000 a year less than in the public system, “teaching in a Catholic school is a vocation, a calling rather than just a job.”

McDonald used this finding to emphasize the importance of mission to the Catholic school community as she spread the Jubilee word on the Web, on the radio and in video, in booths at community events, and at job fairs. “For those who are not Catholic,” says McDonald, “there was the assurance that their chosen way home to God is always respected.” The team made a video that was sent to colleges and companies to show workers approaching retirement and to “hundreds of friends of the schools.”

It worked. “The advantages of the Catholic system for teachers,” says Jamie Bremmer, who has taught at a Jubilee school since 2002, “are the discipline, the smaller class size, and the spirituality.”

## Surrounded by Failure

A big part of what makes the Memphis Miracle possible – and, in the Church’s eyes, necessary – is the failure of the city’s public school system. With 120,000 students (and falling) and 190 schools, Memphis has the 21st largest public school system in the country. And it is one of the worst, with a reported graduation rate of 65 percent (apt to be much lower in fact) and 58 of its schools failing to meet NCLB proficiency benchmarks. “And that number would probably be closer to 100,” says George Lord, director of research at Partners in Public Education, a Memphis nonprofit dedicated to improving the public schools. “If it weren’t for the ‘safe harbor’ provisions of NCLB, which discount actual proficiency levels for such things as improvement rates, it would be much worse.”

Memphis also lives with its charged racial heritage. Unlike cities in the Northeast, whose schools were crippled by deindustrialization, Memphis was shattered by the civil rights revolution. It took more than a decade for resistance to *Brown v. Board of Education* to disappear, says Steven Ross, who directs the Center for Research & Education Policy (CREP) at the University of Memphis. “But then people just left. There was a lot of white flight.” And even then, as history records, the city bears the scars of the death of Martin Luther King, who was in Memphis to support striking African American sanitation workers and assassinated there on April 4, 1968.

Many churches took advantage of the opposition to integration by starting their own private schools. Though nominally open to blacks, most of these schools were segregated – and most were successful. Today, says Ross, Memphis has some 65 private schools and ten independent school organizations, giving it one of the healthiest private education sectors in the land. These schools are, for the most part, white – as is the area’s second largest public school system, Shelby County, which has 45,000 students. Memphis City Schools, however, has become increasingly black and disadvantaged; it is 86 percent black and 70 percent of its students qualify for the federal Free-and-Reduced-Lunch program.

There have been attempts at reform, including millions of federal dollars for New American Schools “design adoption” by schools, but they produced few and fleeting achievement increases. Ten charter schools have opened in the last four years (Tennessee did not allow charters until 2002), with several more on the way. According to a study conducted by the University of Memphis’s Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP), there have been “mostly positive” results in both academic achievement and parent satisfaction at most of the charters, but with only 2,000 students served out of Memphis’s 120,000 the charters are unlikely to have a huge impact anytime soon.

In 2003, Carol Johnson came to Memphis as superintendent of the city’s school system, following a well-regarded term as head of Minneapolis public schools and bringing with her an engaging enthusiasm for change. Yet little changed during her tenure, which was brief. In 2007, Boston wooed her away to run its public schools. Adding insult to injury, Johnson left in her wake a major operational scandal, characterized by Education Week in a front-page story in early January 2008, as arising from “mounting questions about lucrative, no-bid contracts awarded to busing companies.”

“Especially in Memphis, Catholic schools are not simply competition,” says Greg Thompson, education program officer at the Hyde Foundation, a big supporter of the Jubilee effort. “They are also ways to illustrate what works, what is possible in places and with people where lots of people have given up hope.”

## A Bishop’s Vision

“When I became Bishop, in 1993, I was shocked that our schools were closing,” says Memphis Bishop J. Terry Steib. “I thought, that’s not the Church’s way. Catholic schools are meant to make a difference in people’s lives. They are the primary vehicle for evangelization.” An African American who grew up poor in Louisiana, Steib had always wanted to be an African missionary. Even now, after fourteen years at the helm in Memphis, Steib says, “If I had my druthers, I’d be in Africa.”

But the Church is still not particularly druthers-oriented and Steib has had to apply his missionary zeal to inner-city Memphis. “It is the mission of the Church to be places where others aren’t,” he notes, as if bemused to think he chose a white woman from Philadelphia, now a grandmother, to wade back into the meanest, blackest areas of Memphis.

“It was daunting,” McDonald recalls. “I just went out and started talking to anyone who would listen – even those who didn’t – about the value of and need for Catholic schools.”

That first year, says McDonald, “all I saw were silos, individual schools that didn’t see each other.” She also saw that the 80-year-old Memphis Catholic High, in downtown Memphis, was on the brink of closing. “We had closed all the feeder schools. Naturally, it’s going to fail. Why didn’t anyone think of that?”

Since it was now McDonald’s job to reopen those feeder schools, the bishop, over objections, decided to keep the high school open. Eventually, the diocese would raise a million dollars for renovations. Meanwhile, McDonald kept talking, promoting the value of Catholic schools on the one hand and entreating any Memphian she encountered to contribute to the cause of reopening inner city schools – not for the Church, but for the children.

Some of the stiffest resistance to her efforts came from the parishioners themselves, those whose schools had been closed. “The people who were left were still angry,” recalls McDonald. “They felt they had been abandoned by the Church when it failed to come in and help them save their schools and were not sure they wanted to trust the diocese to reopen them.”

Yet it was a new Church with a radical new mission: to bring education to mostly non-Catholics. They could not reverse the demographic trends and bring the white Catholics back. But they could, thought Steib and McDonald, bring the Church back to needy neighborhoods. “These were among the poorest zip codes in America,” says McDonald. And the playgrounds at the schools she was told to reopen had become hangouts for drug pushers, prostitutes, and gangs.

“I knew I had to just get one school open,” she recalls. “If I could just get one school open, I could show that it was possible – and I would surprise the bishop.”

McDonald set her sights on St. Augustine’s in south Memphis, which had only closed in 1995 and whose facility, built in 1939, was in decent shape. The parish was, in fact, established for black

Catholics and its school won three city football championships in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when it had over 600 African American students and was one of the largest Catholic grammar schools in the state. (Though integration would come to Memphis Catholic schools a little easier than to the city’s public schools, it was still not until 1963 that the local Christian Brothers Academy, a high school, admitted its first black student.)

**“I knew I had to just get one school open,” she recalls. “If I could just get one school open, I could show that it was possible – and I would surprise the bishop.”**

In time, however, St. Augustine succumbed to poverty and crime, which engulfed the Calvary Cemetery neighborhood and chased even the black middle class families away. By 1994, the school had only eighteen students enrolled.

Still, McDonald estimated that it would take less than \$50,000 to renovate the still sturdy building, and just twice that sum to put a kindergarten class there, with teachers and a principal. However, since the parish was poor and most of the prospective students would be non-Catholic and poor, McDonald knew that the school would need a full scholarship program, which would require donations in order to work. She did not want a big and flashy opening, but she wanted a beachhead. She wanted to get a class of children being taught in the Catholic way – integrating a Christ-like life into all aspects of a school – to show what was possible. She knew that the educational need was there. But where was the money?

Then came the miracle.

## Philanthropy Makes It Happen

On May 7, 1999, McDonald got a phone call from a local businessman who wanted to meet her to hear her ideas on education. “I met with him that day and we talked for a couple hours,” she says. “Later that same day he called and invited me to meet with him and another businessman and their attorney to discuss possibilities. I met that afternoon, late in the day. I went back to the office after the second meeting and told the bishop that if he wanted to reopen St. Augustine, I just found a way.” When she presented to her anonymous benefactor the plan for reopening St. Augustine, she said that renovation, startup, and operational costs for five years would be about a million dollars. The donor said he would give \$10 million.

McDonald quickly went back to the drawing board and worked feverishly – and in secret – on a plan to reopen six schools. It was front-page news in Memphis on July 15, 1999, and for the next two weeks McDonald was a constant presence on local radio and television stations, talking about the miracle. As she told the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, “I know a miracle when I see one. These donors wanted to invest in the education of the children in Memphis living in poverty; those children and families underserved and undereducated for generations. They wanted to save our city. They wanted to provide a way out of poverty through education, and they concluded that to do that, the best investment was in Catholic education.”

One of the first meetings that McDonald convened after the May 7 phone call was with the pastors of the parishes earmarked for school reopening. “The bishop wanted to tell them himself,” recalls McDonald. “These were parishes with 80 parishioners, no money, an average age of 80. It was like six old men sat down at the table that day and six young ones got up. They couldn’t believe it. They were rejuvenated. They knew what this would do for the neighborhood.”

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The \$10 million, according to McDonald’s plan, would reopen six inner-city schools, but it would be on a staggered schedule, one or two a year, each starting with kindergarten and adding a grade a year until the exit grade. “Starting small and deliberate would allow us time to monitor and adjust to ensure success.”

By the time the day came to apply for St. Augustine’s on August 1, the line stretched around the block. “The first lady in that line was crying,” McDonald recalls. “She was saying, ‘I just can’t leave my baby in those other schools.’”

But despite the application demand at St. Augustine, McDonald was so determined to get it right that first year that she reopened the school with just six students.

McDonald and her staff quickly worked out the kinks and were able to reopen future Jubilee schools with more students and more grades. Still, the challenges were great.

In the context of running a school, this need to “keep them safe and keep them alive,” as McDonald explains it, has meant adjusting the enrollment goals downward. “We have long waiting lists at each of our schools and I would love to add more classes,” she says. “But we have to succeed as schools.” That means making tough decisions about whom to admit, a process that involves the



One of the toughest reopenings for McDonald, who is a small and slender grandmother, was Jubilee's sixth school, at the Holy Names parish, in the center of one of the city's most blighted neighborhoods. The school had been closed for 37 years. The shadows of its mostly empty building and playground had become an attractive gathering place for prostitutes and drug dealers. It was a scary place, McDonald recalled. But the diocese reopened Holy Names School in 2002 in a fighting mood, with grades three to six instead of just a single class of kindergartners. Today, it has 91 students in grades three through eight. "With the school reopened, it forces people in the neighborhood to see the children," says McDonald. "The drug dealers now stay away. So do the prostitutes." The parish itself is also coming back. Having been without a priest for years, two clerics now live in the parish house.

Inside the solid red brick Holy Names school building, it's all business – and probably much quieter with 90 instead of the 400 students it once schooled. Sister Donna Banfield, a sweet-smiling black nun from Harlem, who is with the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, wears a gray and white scarf and floor-length grey and white robes. She notes that the children that come to Holy Names are two and three years behind in all their subjects, "functionally illiterate," she says, "even though they've already had five and six years of public schooling." This was a rescue operation.

Jamie Bremmer taught at Catholic high schools for thirteen years before coming to Holy Names the year it opened. "It was an opportunity to be involved in this movement and help build a school from the ground up." All that was left of this ravaged neighborhood, in fact, was the old school building. "I really learned the absolute necessity of creating relationships with kids," says Bremmer. "They come from a world in which they can trust nobody. They don't have the safety net of family that middle class people do. For them, it really is 'I don't care how much you know until I know how much you care.'"

principal, teachers, and McDonald. "We require some parental commitments," says McDonald, "but we are not skimming – all of these kids are extremely needy."

The diocese is mindful that what they need most of all is an education. In fact, as Janet Donato reminds us, that's the Canon Law directive. "We have to be equal to or better than the local community schools academically," she says. "It's not enough to just teach religion."

Thus McDonald built Jubilee schools mostly one grade at a time, one child at a time, with academic excellence firmly in mind. And along with the extended day and eleven-month school year, the

schools offer after-school tutoring twice a week for children who need the extra help. "This has been a super boost for the kids," says Dave Ellis, a retired businessman who came to his reopened alma mater, St. John's school, as a teacher, 40 years after graduating. "The kids don't like the summer school because all their friends are out for the summer, but they get used to it. And it really pays off."

It has so far proven difficult to make direct academic comparisons between public school children and their Catholic school counterparts. Public school students take state tests, and Jubilee students take the nationally normed Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). The Jubilee students are tested both at the beginning and end of the year.

“There’s a big difference,” said St. Augustine’s principal Sister Lynn Marie Ralph, “especially in the new students in the course of the year.” A CREP study to be released at the end of 2008 on the academic performance of the Jubilee schools may confirm the big difference Sister Ralph claims, but the diocese has not and will not make public any such data before the study is completed.

Strong results would be welcome news, since in the 38106 zip code area where St. Augustine School is located, anywhere from 15 to 30 percent of the public school elementary students – almost all of them poor and minority – score “below proficient” on state reading and mathematics tests.

**According to McDonald, Jubilee students are reading at grade level within a year of arriving at their schools; they are then outperforming their peers. And this is not adjusted for family income and background, as McDonald says, “because we want to prepare these kids for life in the real world and the real world doesn’t make such adjustments.”**

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McDonald is optimistic. “We have a 99.9 percent graduation rate in our three high schools. And virtually no one drops out.” Given the lackluster performance of Memphis public schools – with its graduation rate in the low 60s and dropout rates of over 15 percent – the Jubilee schools, which serve the same disadvantaged population, are clearly on the right track.

McDonald admits that the schools’ weaknesses are their inadequate use of tests and data, and she is pushing on that front. “We need that data to drive system-wide improvement,” she acknowledges. And while there are several studies of academic outcomes in the works, including that of CREP, for now Jubilee schools have the most important evaluation of their success in their parent and teacher testimonials, waiting lists, and continued investor support.

“I don’t have nothing against public schools,” says Tony King, the mother of a Holy Names sixth-grader, “but I couldn’t get my child a better education than here.”

Disabled with Crohn’s disease since 1984, Mrs. King, a single mom, is thankful that her daughter’s education is free – made possible by the Jubilee endowment, which funds full scholarships for most of the students. (Other than a reimbursement for students who qualify for the federal Free-and-Reduced-Lunch program, which is managed by an outside provider, the Memphis diocese has requested no state or federal aid.)

Walter Williams, an unemployed father of three, recalls riding by St. John’s School on Lamar Avenue when he spotted a banner on the side of the building offering scholarships. He never thought he could afford Catholic school but decided to inquire. “I went in and talked to the principal and she said I should apply,” recalls Williams. “I couldn’t believe it. They took both my boys. It was \$7,000 a year for the two. And I was not even working at the time.”

## Revitalizing More Than Schools

Though the schools do not “push” Catholicism, faith is part of daily school life. All children go to Mass and say the Rosary together once a week. (All the children, in all the Jubilee schools, prayed the Rosary when McDonald was stricken by a stroke – her rapid and complete recovery is another one of those miracles.) School hallways are dotted with statues and pictures of saints, bishops, and popes. The entryway of each school has a plaque on the wall that says, “Be it known to all who enter here that Christ is the reason for this school. He is the unseen but ever present teacher in its classes. He is the model of its faculty and administration, and the inspiration of its students.”

And such investors come in all kinds of packages, from the multi-millionaires to the man who volunteered to lay the entryway flooring in the renovated St. John’s school.

But religion is so seamlessly woven into the schools’ fabric – walls are also decorated with Saxon Math posters and pictures of Elvis – that parents seem not to notice. Most appreciate the moral values and accept Jesus as “the inspiration of its students” as a small price for a good education. As do the Jubilee school donors, many of whom, including the original anonymous businessmen, are not Catholic.

Mary McDonald understands this, emphasizing that these philanthropists are “investors” not donors. “They are investing in a better education for children,” she says.

And such investors come in all kinds of packages, from the multi-millionaires to the man who volunteered to lay the entryway flooring in the renovated St. John’s school. “See that furniture,” says McDonald as we toured the newly refurbished library in the basement of Holy Names School. “It’s from a casino.” McDonald has formed “many partnerships,” but the schools, she says, “belong to everybody.” Such a sentiment echoes the thesis of the groundbreaking 1993 book *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* by Anthony Bryk and two colleagues: that Catholic schools do a better job of accommodating the common good than public schools do.

“All along my goal was to spend as little as possible on bricks and mortar – and more on programs,” she says. She has streamlined operations and established a separate 501(3)c nonprofit organization, the Catholic Memphis Urban Schools Trust (CMUST), to raise and manage money for the Jubilee schools and oversee the majority of the scholarship programs. (As McDonald will admit, another reason for CMUST is to keep Jubilee funds separate from the diocese’s general funds, which are susceptible to all Church liabilities, including the kinds of scandals that have bankrupted some dioceses and usually have nothing to do with schools.)

McDonald’s Jubilee marketing campaign is dizzying: press releases, press packages, CDs, PowerPoint presentations, press conferences, and “Postcards from God.” McDonald uses every vehicle possible to get the word out – cell phone, Blackberry, e-mail, Fedex. A team of television reporters from Detroit came to investigate the “Memphis Miracle” and returned to the Motor City recommending that the Bishop of Detroit NOT close the city’s Catholic schools.

The children themselves are the best promotion. They look sharp, they act sharp. Visitors to a classroom are always greeted to a full class, “Good Morning.”

“Something as simple as writing thank you notes to donors has an unbelievable impact,” says Jamie Bremmer. “A Fortune 500 CEO receiving a manila envelope with cards from a class of third-graders does wonders.”

So far CMUST has raised \$60 million and spent \$10 million, most of it, as McDonald promised, for renovation and construction.

“Our initial projections estimated that we would need a \$28 million endowment to run eight Jubilee schools,” says Lance Forsdick, a retired hotel magnate who is chairman of the CMUST board. “That was based on the assumption that parents and guardians could pay 40 percent of the cost. But they can’t. They’re now paying closer to 20 percent, which means we needed a \$60 million endowment.”

While parent and neighborhood support for the schools is enthusiastic and generous, some 90 percent of the endowment has come from less than two dozen groups and individuals. Under the diocesan umbrella, using the CMUST financial management organization, the Jubilee school effort has become the equivalent of a private sector voucher program. There is a scholarship for everything, from tuition to clothes. The Angel Robe Program provides uniforms, and even the shoes – classy Bass suede lace-ups and Nike sneakers – are donated.

The Memphis-based Hyde Foundation provided \$600,000 early on to the Jubilee program and in the spring of 2008, announced its intention of giving \$5 million more over the next ten years. “This is a sizeable gift for the Hydes,” says Greg Thompson, “and represents their commitment to increasing educational opportunities for the most disadvantaged children of Memphis.”

In addition to the CMUST program, nearly 300 Jubilee students receive tuition assistance through the Memphis Opportunity Scholarship Trust (MOST), which was founded seven years ago by businessman Robert Somson and his wife. They provided about 150 scholarships to pay for tuition

at private schools their first year – and nearly 9,000 applications poured in the following year.

“When the Catholics announced their intent to reopen inner-city schools, they came to us and asked us to partner,” says Gayle Barnwell, Executive Director of MOST. “We had many of the same financial guidelines and serviced the same kids.... It was a natural partnership. And the Catholic system, historically, has a very good track record. They provide a good education for very little money. Their tuitions are still way under the top-tier private schools.”

**“These people invest in the structure of the Catholic schools ... Since they are not Catholic, they are not investing in the structure of the Church, or in the Catholic Church.”**  
**The brand name “is a by-product of their generosity, their investment, but the focus is education as a means of lifting up children in poverty and providing the city with an educated citizenry. They see Catholic schools as the best means to do that.”**

In a 2002-03 study of its scholarship recipients, MOST found that over two thirds of the parents reported improvements in their children’s academic performance and classroom and study behaviors. And on comparisons with Memphis City Schools performance indicators, “the average MOST student performance on [nationally-normed Terra Nova] tests exceed that of Memphis City Schools....”

Though she is a true-blue, Bible-quoting Catholic who believes she is doing God's work in providing education for inner-city Memphis children, Mary McDonald also recognizes how universal that mission is. "These people invest in the structure of the Catholic schools," she says. "Since they are not Catholic, they are not investing in the structure of the Church, or in the Catholic Church." The brand name "is a by-product of their generosity, their investment, but the focus is education as a means of lifting up children in poverty and providing the city

with an educated citizenry. They see Catholic schools as the best means to do that."

After seeing an increase in seminarians studying to be priests or paint going on houses in formerly abandoned neighborhoods, she likes to think that the Jubilee schools have contributed. They are, after all, "there to give people hope." And she is building a system to make sure that such hope will last. "It's not some platitude," she says. "We're not just passing through town."

# Denver

## Marketing Efforts Yield Results

By Marshall Allen

Superintendent Richard Thompson is sitting in his office in the Archdiocese of Denver's John Paul II Center with Assistant Superintendent Sister Elizabeth Youngs. They're shaking their heads in dismay over the results of a recent marketing survey they commissioned in an effort to revitalize their schools. The findings are sobering. One in three Catholic priests in Denver whose parishes do not operate schools said they "don't know" whether Catholic schools promote Catholic faith and values. About one in four of the pastors said they "don't know" whether the schools have an excellent core curriculum, provide a safer environment than public schools and teach the whole child – moral, spiritual, academic and physical.

Youngs and Thompson have an image problem they're determined to change. "Until we convince this group of people that Catholic schools are valuable, we're not going to get our best advertisers sending people to Catholic schools," Youngs says.

Suburban Catholic schools may be fine without more support from pastors and parishioners across the archdiocese, but at stake is the future of inner-city Catholic schools in Denver, where great gains are being made to educate poor and minority children. The sustainability of these schools is in question.

School leaders have now realized that it's not enough just to provide an excellent education. They must brand themselves in a way that clearly defines what they have to offer, and that boldly asserts their product in on the market. Thompson says they've ended the pity party that's been taking place in Catholic schools – saying "poor us" as schools are

shuttered. Instead they're boldly proclaiming the story of what's happening in the schools. Catholic education is a "great gift," Thompson says.

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Some pastors may be slow to catch on, but the message has gained traction in recent years. Unlike many inner-city Catholic schools in America, enrollment is up in all but one of the six such schools in the Denver archdiocese. It's hard to narrow the successes down to one factor, Thompson says, but the efforts to brand and market the schools, combined with an increase in privately-funded vouchers or scholarships, has allowed the schools to make encouraging gains.

## Marketing What Is Possible

In 1978, Thompson was a teacher in South Dakota looking for ways to help his kids pay for college. So he opened a restaurant – a risky proposition considering that they fail more than almost

any other small business. That's where he cut his teeth on marketing his business to attract customers. A single restaurant led to two others and more success than he anticipated until he got out of the business in 1992.

**One school lost 20 families in 2007 when a charter school opened nearby. That one was a gut punch. "Devastating," was all Thompson could say about the loss.**

There are parallels with the challenges facing Catholic schools, Thompson says. As an entrepreneur, he knows you have to differentiate your product to survive. For instance, Thompson's flagship food-service establishment, a 400-seat roadside restaurant called The Sluice, was known for unique dishes like rattlesnake appetizers and a variation on a club sandwich that was fried and served with strawberry dipping sauce. Catholic schools in Denver, he says, are now similarly branded so they stand out in the "noise" of the education marketplace.

The strategic approach is vital because the challenges are so many. School facilities are aging. White flight led to declining enrollments and left few paying customers in the neighborhoods surrounding these Schools in Urban Neighborhoods, aka SUN. Charter schools are opening near SUN campuses and siphoning off students. One school lost 20 families in 2007 when a charter school opened nearby. That one was a gut punch. "Devastating," was all Thompson would say about the loss.

Meanwhile, almost all the children in the SUN schools are in desperate need of financial aid. They face severe learning deficits. At some schools, few speak English at home. And an alarming number

have parents in prison and come from single-parent families where education has not been a priority.

The population of metropolitan Denver has tripled over the last two decades. As in much of the rest of the country, the growth has mostly been outside the city limits, causing big changes and challenges for the city itself and for its Catholic schools. Nineteen of them have closed since 1960. Others have moved out to suburban growth areas.

The Archdiocese of Denver, which includes both the city and its suburbs, is now comprised of 37 elementary schools, two archdiocesan high schools, three affiliated elementary schools, and five private Catholic high schools affiliated with the independent religious orders. Combined, they serve more than 14,000 students, 30 percent of them minority. The biggest challenges, of course, are to be found in the inner city. But there's also hope to be found there. The marketing is paying off and two voucher programs are thriving. They're gaining ground at several schools and reversing the trend of decline that has beset many urban Catholic schools.

All but one of the SUN schools have seen enrollment increases since a low point in 2001. St. Rose of Lima's student population jumped from 161 in 2005-06 to 197 the next year, and since 2001 enrollment has risen by 30 percent. Guardian Angel School's enrollment has climbed 29 percent since 2001, Loyola Catholic's has increased by 8 percent and Annunciation has seen an 11 percent over the same time span.

The individual schools are run by parishes and are not under Thompson's authority, but he says the goal is for the archdiocese to provide resources to help them thrive. Thompson credits two interlinked factors for the enrollment increases: the marketing effort, now in its fourth year, and the new private voucher programs. Through a nonprofit organization called Seeds of Hope, run by the archdiocese, about 400 students have received vouchers for the schools.

The marketing project started in 2003 by spending about \$100,000 on research to determine why parents – both those who send their children to Catholic schools and those who do not – were drawn or not to parochial schools and how the schools compared to the competition. Thompson hired a Colorado-based company called BrandEd Consultants Group to lead the effort. They learned that there is much ignorance about Catholic schools – even in the parishes that one would expect to be favorable to them. The upside of this image problem is that it’s not rooted in reality. Many things are going well in the school, so the hope is that perceptions can be changed with outreach and education. They even have a slogan – “Catholic Schools: Take Another Look.”

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Thompson said the archdiocese turns over about 100 teachers a year, about 10 percent of the total, and its lowest turnover is in the SUN schools. “We have no trouble recruiting and retaining teachers, especially in our inner-city schools,” he says. “All of our teachers have a sense of a calling to the vocation of education. They are very mission-driven.”

**The archdiocese’s pitch, boiled down to its essence, is that Catholic education is not a cost but an investment in the future.**

Prospective teachers say in interviews that they want an environment where they can include faith-development in the curriculum and teach academics instead of baby-sit, Thompson says.

The archdiocese also notes that parents who send their children to Catholic schools are not better off financially – they may just have different priorities about safety, quality, and character development.

The archdiocese’s pitch, boiled down to its essence, is that Catholic education is not a cost but an investment in the future. The promise is that children will experience “a more complete development and unsurpassed academic and personal success” in schools that nurture faith and Catholic community, reinforce family and focus on academics.

Still, a survey, conducted in the past year, revealed that Denver’s Catholic schools still have an image problem within the Church itself. That’s about to change. Thompson says Archbishop Charles Chaput is committed to persuading parish priests to support the schools. As it is, many view the schools as little more than a drain on parish coffers. (For each child in their parish who attends a Catholic school, pastors must donate \$1,000 to

After the research was complete, the marketing went into its “messaging” phase. Now Thompson and other school leaders are highlighting what they bring to the table, informing people and correcting mistaken assumptions. To address the widespread myths, the archdiocese has created talking points: The teachers are credentialed and the schools are accredited. And though teachers are paid less than in public schools (they start at about 80 percent of a public school salary, and it drops to about 67 percent within five years) it’s not a sign they are less effective. Rather, it’s a mark of their commitment to the mission of educating children in the context of faith.



the school.) Chaput declared 2006 as the “Year of the Catholic School” in Denver - so there would be a concentrated time for parishes to celebrate and discuss Catholic schools and talk about the importance of their ministry. It was one of the key steps in the branding and marketing effort, and the move greatly boosted the attention given the schools. The emphasis on developing talking points for priests and parents is driven in part by Denver’s competitive climate, Thompson says. Charter schools, the variety of public schools, home schooling and private schools threaten to erase any enrollment gains that get made. The situation remains fragile, and it’s unknown whether all the schools can survive.

Thompson said all defensiveness must be thrown out the window. “It’s important you don’t look for excuses, that you soul search, that you’re transparent and really look for what’s good and get rid of what’s not good.”

Fortunately, the archdiocese is committed to marketing Catholic schools that serve poor Catholics as well as the better-off suburban ones. And visits to several of the former schools show that they’re succeeding – finding ways to overcome many economic and social barriers to education. At Annunciation, they’re truly broadening children’s horizons and life prospects.

## What’s Worth Marketing – Annunciation Catholic School

It was a warm spring day so Rick Stack rolled down his car window a few blocks from Annunciation Catholic School, where he teaches physical education and runs the mentoring program. At a stop near Downing Street a woman popped her head in the window. “Can I get in?” she asked. “Why would you get in?” Rick asked. “Because I’m a ‘ho, and you rolled your window

down,” she told him, before he drove away, alone and incredulous.

**Every year the children of Annunciation receive Christmas presents from students at the archdiocese’s more affluent suburban schools. For some kids, they are the only presents they will receive. Yet many of the children choose to donate one of the gifts to homeless children.**

That happened a couple years ago in Annunciation’s neighborhood, where prostitution, drugs and gangs are woven into the fabric of life. Stack – who wears a blue tracksuit and has short white hair with a neatly trimmed goatee – is bouncing along the narrow streets in his old pickup, pointing out notable sites. He points to a wall that’s spray-painted with a graffiti tribute: “RIP Gilbert.” That’s where an Annunciation alumnus was gunned down about a year ago. A gang member fatally shot the nineteen-year-old in a case of mistaken identity. Gilbert wasn’t a gangbanger himself. He was a good kid gunned down while he was on his way to get a birthday card for his mom. Stack shakes his head. The young man was in his first year of college.

When Annunciation opened in 1890, this area was made up of German and Irish immigrants. Now the school is within a mile of a Purina Dog Chow factory and the Denver Coliseum, a seedy arena that’s currently hosting the circus. It’s still a neighborhood of immigrants. A one-story wall mural on a building shows two brown hands clenched, an artistic call for a gang cease-fire from a newly

formed Hispanic anti-violence group.

Stack has been at Annunciation for nine years and says there are several keys to providing its 200 K-8 students with a way out of the barrio. Giving them awareness of the outside world is critical, he says. Every year the children of Annunciation receive Christmas presents from students at the archdiocese's more affluent suburban schools. For some kids, they are the only presents they will receive. Yet many of the children choose to donate one of the gifts to homeless children.

"You have to give them a chance to retain their dignity," Stack says. Annunciation's eighth-graders participate in a mentoring program that includes volunteering for a local multiple sclerosis fundraising walk. They set up the course, pass out water bottles to participants and tear down the event, he says. The students also serve regularly at a local homeless shelter.

Stack also expands the eighth grader's worlds through his program. They can join a drama club that attends local plays, learn about cooking, go on hikes in the mountains and attend football games at the Colorado School of Mines, a well-regarded engineering college in nearby Golden. "We want to create an awareness of things outside the scope of this inner city they're in," Stack says.

The mentors who work with the students are volunteer adults who take an interest in the lives of students, says Sister Jean Panisko, principal of Annunciation. Mentors work with eighth graders to prepare for their high school entrance exams; they pick them up and escort them to the test on exam day. Mentors serve the children at their own expense. When mentor Rose Field learned her charge was not going to graduation because she did not have a dress, she bought her a blue dress with matching shoes and purse. The girl looked beautiful and attended her graduation with pride. "Sometimes mentors pick up things that we miss," Panisko says.

## Hands-on Order

Welcoming visitors is a hallmark of classroom etiquette at Annunciation. On a recent tour with Panisko, a classroom of two dozen students paused and all eyes turned to a designated greeter. He rose, walked to the door, looked the adult guest in the eye and extended his hand, saying, "My name is Marcos, welcome to Annunciation's kindergarten."

The students still inspire Sister Jean – especially twelve-year-old Gabriella Lopez, who walked herself to Annunciation's steps a few months ago to hand deliver a letter. It was her request to attend a good middle school. "I can write a three page-story, letter or essay in half an hour," the girl wrote in her letter. "I do have a tough time in math, but I always try my best in that subject."

Lopez's letter goes on to say that she had a "tough time" at her previous school because she was taunted "because of the color of my skin" and because she spoke correct English. She came to Annunciation because of "a family friend who said your school was safe and kind, and would not just give me a great education but would teach me more about my faith."

It's a struggle to make ends meet financially for many Annunciation pupils, and Lopez's family didn't have the \$3,300 tuition. But there was no turning away a girl with so much initiative, Sister Jean says.

Teachers and administrators don't just want to educate children for academic success. They also want to give them life skills. "When they leave us, they

need to interact with a bigger world,” says the school’s social worker, Sheila Karpan. “And the better we equip them, the better off they’ll be.”

Sister Jean strides with confidence through the halls and classrooms of Annunciation, a boxy three-level structure built just after World War II. She’s not quite five feet tall and thus looks some students in the eye. And though she’s entering her 27th year at the school, and has been an educator since 1964, she does not appear to be slowing down.

She greets students by name, asking about their family members, recent illnesses, pointing out that this child recently had a cast on his foot and other details that seem small to most adults but loom large in the lives of kids. Stack, the PE teacher, recalls that at one time Sister Jean made the gym available to rival Crips and Bloods to play basketball in peace.

Sister Jean says running Annunciation is like operating a social service agency. The students get free breakfast and lunch every day, can attend before and after school programs, and have mentors and social workers working to enhance their well being.

**“You can’t put a child in a classroom who is hungry or upset,” she says. “If they don’t have these services, they’re not going to learn. Our goal is to teach the whole child – social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual.”**

“You can’t put a child in a classroom who is hungry or upset,” she says. “If they don’t have these services, they’re not going to learn. Our goal is to

teach the whole child – social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual.”

Karpan may be the most unique asset at Annunciation, compared to other SUN schools and those in the public school system. She’s a licensed social worker who works full time with students and their families. Teaching nonviolence is a focal point of her program, and it extends from school to home. Select Annunciation middle school students are trained in peer mediation and are available to resolve minor spats between feuding youngsters in the cafeteria. But parents also attend classes to learn how to bring peace to the home.

“We can pull all the stops to make this school a nonviolent place for them, but if they go home and get a different message it dilutes it,” Karpan says. The school tells parents that the program is “mandatory” and, though they don’t have the authority to require attendance, about 80 percent show up for the classes.

Sister Jean runs the school on a shoestring – about \$891,000 in 2005-2006, or equivalent of about \$4,500 per student. Denver Public Schools spent around \$7,300 per pupil in the 2004-2005 school year. The archdiocese and Seeds of Hope, a non-profit that funds the SUN schools, contribute about \$370,000 a year; grants total \$175,000 and donations from alumni and others total about \$190,000. Annunciation’s tuition is set at \$3,300 to \$3,500 annually. Every family pays something to attend the school, but 199 of the 200 students receive financial aid.

“We get their W-2s when they apply for grants,” Sister Jean says of the families, shaking her head. “I don’t know how they live.” But God provides, she says. One private donor “adopted” 63 children and has pledged to fund their education through high school and college. “*Si Dios Quire* – If God wants – it will happen,” Sister Jean says. “It’s that sense of trusting totally in God. I have learned to trust that God will take care of us.”

## Taking Literacy Seriously

Mary Beth O'Hagan, the reading consultant, calls Sister Jean a "mover and a shaker" who's taking radical steps to invigorate Annunciation's literacy program. In 2003, Sister Jean and the public school Title One coordinator collaborated to find a third-party provider to deliver more effective literacy remediation services. O'Hagan, an assessment expert who is at the school half a day a week, winces when she remembers how the students scored when the revamped literacy program started.

"We tested all of the kindergartners and first-graders and it was probably the most depressing day of my life," O'Hagan says. The new literacy program was built from the ground up. Now, 20 percent of class time – the same 75 minutes every morning for every student – is devoted to a school-wide literacy program. Students are divided into reading groups according to ability, not age or grade, so every teacher can teach students at the necessary level. Three outside literacy experts come to Annunciation every day for the sessions.

It was a radical step because people are generally resistant to change, says O'Hagan, but it was necessary considering the circumstances. Every SUN school has students who enter multiple grade levels behind, she says. About 90 percent of Annunciation students come in as English language learners.

Annunciation students are tested three times a year and are showing improvement. For instance, at the end of the 2004-2005 year, 48 percent of second graders scored at or above the 50th percentile (nationally) for oral reading fluency. By the end of the 2005-2006 year, the numbers had climbed to 82 percent. Meanwhile the number of second-graders finishing the year as "at risk" (below the 25th percentile in oral reading fluency) dropped from 38 to 18 percent.

## Positive Results

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The long-term success of the schools depends on results. And when it comes to academics, the Catholic schools have room to boast. Though their pupils still face many deficits, the SUN schools have found ways to succeed – sometimes exceptionally – where the Denver Public Schools have failed.

Enrollment in the Denver Public Schools (DPS) is at an all-time low and this year there are about 30,000 empty seats in classrooms. Academic achievement is flat lining, according to the

Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP). To address the enrollment problem, the district is closing eight schools and restructuring five more.

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A direct comparison between the SUN schools and DPS is not possible because they use different tests. The archdiocese assesses student achievement via the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS), a nationally normed test that registers what students know compared to their peers across the country. CSAP is a criterion-based test that measures how well public school students have learned specific skills defined by the state. Archdiocese officials say they would welcome ways to compare the performance of their schools with public schools in a more direct fashion.

The 2007 ITBS test showed that 2nd graders from the six SUN schools averaged a passing percentage (the proficient and advanced levels combined) of 55, 67 and 70 for Math, Reading and Language/Writing. The same tests showed that 8th graders from the SUN schools averaged a passing percentage of 50, 54 and 56.

Students at Loyola Catholic School, where 88 percent of the students are African American and few are Catholic, scored especially high. Loyola students, who have the advantage of being native English speakers, scored above the 80th percentile for all subjects and grades save sixth grade math.

Sister Mary Ellen Roach, Loyola's principal, says it's common for students to transfer from public schools and be multiple grade levels behind. But they catch up. The size of classes in the public schools is the biggest complaint of parents who come to Loyola. Loyola's classrooms have just twelve to sixteen students each, so everyone receives individualized attention.

Loyola also excels in teaching students with learning disabilities. They spend 2.5 hours a day in learning lab, where twelve children work with two teachers. In addition, about a dozen volunteers spend Tuesdays and Wednesdays tutoring children at Loyola.

Thompson says the Catholic faith lays the foundation for academic success. "If you truly believe that every child is a gift of God and they have talents and gifts, then our ministry is to get the best out of them so they can go on and serve. We can hold them to a higher standard."

That's not to say the SUN schools are a utopia. But they are ordered and disciplined. Every day begins with prayer and the students are uniformed, which reduces distractions. No gang colors bleed into the everyday attire. There's no social hierarchy based on brand names. The uniforms are an equalizer and a subtle benchmark for community, Thompson says.

## Struggling to Stay Afloat

The archdiocese runs its 39 schools on a \$45 million annual budget. The per-pupil costs average \$4,600 overall and \$4,900 in the six SUN schools, and the budget climbs about five percent a year because of the rising cost of insurance, utilities and teacher salaries.

Most of the archdiocese's income to fund the schools, about \$35 million, comes from tuition, though contributions from SUN parents are miniscule compared to those in the suburban schools. Across all schools, tuition makes up an average of 66 percent of annual income. At Annunciation it's just 16 percent.

The schools also receive a 1.5 percent tax on every offering in the archdiocese, which amounts to about \$1.2 million annually. And parishes that do not sponsor a school send \$1,000 per year, per child, to any school attended by a child in its congregation. The archdiocese receives no government money to run the schools, though individual schools may receive Title I services, and about a dozen have federally subsidized lunch programs.

The archdiocese provides financial assistance so that low-income families can enroll their children in SUN schools. Seeds of Hope is a charitable foundation that plays a key role. The \$10 million organization adopts classes with grants of \$10,000, and schools with grants of \$50,000, but its most widespread work is through its voucher programs. Three years ago, Seeds of Hope donated \$3 million to provide 250 students with four-year full-tuition scholarships of \$3,000 each. When the program

was launched, all 250 vouchers were snapped up in five days, with another 200 students on a waiting list. News coverage led to grants for another 150 vouchers of \$2,000 each through Seeds of Hope, with the promise that the grants will increase by 15 percent every year as long as the archdiocese can come up with matching funds.

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Seeds of Hope started in 1996 out of a campaign called “Hearts on Fire,” which then Archbishop J. Francis Stafford called a “new beginning” to secure the Church’s footing in the 21st century. He termed the \$34 million fundraising campaign a “decisive moment” in the archdiocese. The plan called for raising \$7 million to create Seeds of Hope, which would provide scholarships to impoverished students in order to break the cycle of inner-city crime and despair. Seeds of Hope invigorated the SUN schools and became one of their primary financial supports.

Laurie Vieira, executive director of Seeds of Hope, says the hardest part of her job is the widespread poverty that makes the scholarship need overwhelming. The fact is that many poor families do not get enough help. The full-tuition scholarships go only to students whose families are at 125 percent of the federal poverty level (that translates to an annual income of about \$26,000 a year for a family of four).

She says she’s also hoping to get more support from donors outside the Catholic community. Most donors who visit SUN campuses are inspired to give money, she says. “They go and see it, the level of respect – you feel the difference in those schools,” she says.

In 2004, a new state law that provided public funds to private and religious schools was struck down by the Colorado Supreme Court. Still, Thompson believes that the private vouchers could be a “gateway for public voucher movements down the road.” The archdiocese is keeping careful data on youngsters who receive full vouchers so they can show their level of achievement in the Catholic schools compared to students in public schools. Similar efforts paid long-term dividends in Milwaukee. Thompson says the same thing could happen in Denver, with sufficient legal and political work. “I think we’ll show that indeed we take kids who weren’t doing that well and that over time, they’ll do much better,” he said.

The leaders in Denver have discovered that it’s not enough merely to achieve what many others struggle to do – provide an excellent education to inner-city youngsters facing severe learning deficits. They must reach out to the community, raise funds, and promote themselves tirelessly to Catholics and non-Catholics alike – all for the right to continue their mission.

# INDEPENDENT RELIGIOUS ORDER NETWORKS

*Independent  
Networks*

# Independent Networks

## NativityMiguel & Cristo Rey

By Peter Meyer

Unlike the predominant Catholic school system model, geographically based on the parish unit, a growing number of new “network” schools run by religious orders open and operate where the low-income children reside. In many ways, they are the Catholic school counterpart of “charter management organizations” in the public education sector.

Leading the way in creating the new network schools are the Christian Brothers and the Jesuits, two venerable religious orders<sup>1</sup> with deep roots in American education. They joined forces several years ago to nurture a growing movement of religious middle schools designed for low-income students. Separately, the Jesuits have created a new type of high school, also serving the educational needs of the disadvantaged. Together, the NativityMiguel (for middle-schoolers) and Cristo Rey (in high school) networks have 83 faith based schools serving nearly 10,000 low-income students in 30 states.

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The new schools’ academic model includes religion, smaller classes, longer school days and years, and, in the Cristo Rey high school system, a sophisticated work study program. The business model includes lots of fundraising and, for Cristo Rey high schools, a unique tuition-subsidy program tied to the stu-

dents’ own work. Wealthy people and philanthropists are asked to support the schools, but their sons and daughters are not the intended customers.

**Most educators would also agree that the middle school years are among the toughest in any student’s life – and that high school is too late to save them. Thus the two orders have their work cut out for them.**

The goal seems simple enough to increase the educational achievement and academic options for low-income children. Yet the two religious orders have taken on one of the most intractable education challenges in America: teaching children left behind not only by struggling urban public school systems, but also, increasingly, by traditional Catholic parishes. Most educators would also agree that the middle school years are among the toughest in any student’s life – and that high school is too late to save them. Thus the two orders have their work cut out for them.

<sup>1</sup> Called “Institutes of Consecrated Life” in Catholic Canon Law, such organizations report directly to Rome, but work collegially with the dioceses and parishes. There are nearly 300 such orders, each with a specific religious “mission” and geographic reach. The Jesuits, known officially as the Society of Jesus, were founded in 1540 by Ignatius Loyola and currently operate in over 80 countries. Sanctioned by the Vatican in 1680, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, also known as the Christian Brothers or the De La Salle Christian Brothers, for their founder, John Baptist de La Salle, are also in over 80 countries. De La Salle was later designated by the Church as the patron saint of teachers.



**Both orders have a long history of schooling Americans, but both had also become victims of their own success – by the late 20th century most of the Jesuits’ 40 secondary schools and the Christian Brothers 90 high schools and education centers were catering to middle- and upper-class youngsters.**

Such daunting tasks, however, are exactly what these orders specialize in. And in America their education mission to the poor is a return to their roots. The founding Jesuits in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain established schools throughout the world as part of their global evangelization efforts. And the Christian Brothers, in 17<sup>th</sup> century France where they were founded, were committed from the beginning, as a contemporary of the order’s founder wrote, “to the idea of setting up gratuitous schools where the children of workmen and the poor would learn reading, writing and arithmetic, and would also receive a Christian education through catechisms and other forms of instruction appropriate for forming good Christians.” Both orders have a long history of schooling Americans, but both had also become victims of their own success – by the late 20th century most of the Jesuits’ 40 secondary schools and the Christian Brothers 90 high schools and education centers were catering to middle- and upper-class youngsters.

Though the Catholic Church has always walked a fine line between the moral imperatives of the Sermon on the Mount (“blessed are the poor in spirit...”) and the need to pay the bills, one important outcome of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 was to push the Church back to the spirit of the Beatitudes and its mission to the poor, the

meek, and the persecuted. For religious orders like the Jesuits and Christian Brothers, that meant re-focusing on the educational needs of low-income children by giving them schools that believed in their potential.

**In part because the Church did not recognize how serious the Catholic school crisis would become (at its zenith in the mid-60s one of every eight American children was schooled by priests and nuns), it took nearly twenty years before the next Nativity schools would open.**

The Jesuits were early out of the starting gate, opening the Nativity Mission Center School on Manhattan’s gritty Lower East Side in 1971. The idea was to provide high quality education to middle school boys – a break from Jesuit tradition since the order specialized in high school and college education – who had no alternative to their troubled public schools and were not on the radar of traditional parish schools. In fact, many of the boys at Nativity Mission were immigrants or first-generation Americans; most were far behind in academic achievement. Nativity Mission pioneered the practice of longer school days and years. It also established a support system for its graduates as they proceed through high school and on to college.

In part because the Church did not recognize how serious the Catholic school crisis would become (at its zenith in the mid-60s one of every eight American children was schooled by priests and nuns), it took nearly 20 years before the next Nativity schools would open, one each in New York

and Boston. The Christian Brothers followed, opening a school for low-income middle school students in Providence, RI, in 1993 and one in Chicago in 1995. These two schools launched the San Miguel “movement,” soon to be officially known as the Lasallian Association of Miguel Schools. The floodgates gradually opened wide. By 2005, the Christian Brothers were running nineteenth faith-based Miguel middle schools and the Jesuits were running more than 30 Nativity middle schools and nineteen Cristo Rey high schools. Today, there are over 80 network schools.

When *Education Week* sent a reporter to investigate the new network phenomenon in 2003, she concluded that the new schools “may be enacting a small miracle. They take in students who often lag one or more grades academically behind their peers, Nativity school educators say, and, within three years, prepare most of them to handle a rigorous high school curriculum. The schools are a lesson in themselves: It can be done—achievement gaps can in fact be closed.”

According to *Education Week*, the average daily attendance rate at the Nativity schools was 97 percent. And graduates had gone on to many prestigious colleges and universities (something that these middle schools knew because of their energetic follow-up efforts). Though Catholic schools had always been successful with poor kids, the Nativity and Miguel schools were seeking out the most disadvantaged children of every faith at the most troubled time of their lives. This was education missionary work at its best.

## Venture Philanthropy

**B**.J. Cassin, successful venture capitalist and Catholic, was so taken by what these schools were achieving, that he created the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation (CEIF) in 2001 to help them grow. Specifically, Cassin wanted to

offer his expertise – and resources – to help bring effective business practices to these seemingly successful but still struggling networks. “I wanted them to do what Wal-Mart does when it opens a store,” says Cassin. “Do feasibility studies and market research. Train your managers, train your staff, and find out where the customers are. I wanted to take proven business concepts and apply them to these two educational models. It seemed the straightforward thing to do.”

**The “transformative power” of the schools is a phrase that you frequently hear from those who work in them. And their students are not just receptacles into which knowledge is poured, but “agents of transformation themselves.”**  
**“Transforming urban America one student at a time,” is Cristo Rey’s motto.**

It was more than that, of course. “Breaking the cycle of poverty” is the sign-off on emails from the Rev. John Jordan, who would become executive director of a merged NativityMiguel middle school network in June of 2005. The “transformative power” of the schools is a phrase that you frequently hear from those who work in them. And their students are not just receptacles into which knowledge is poured, but “agents of transformation themselves.” “Transforming urban America one student at a time,” is Cristo Rey’s motto.

Cassin helped convince the two religious orders to combine their middle school efforts, transforming the movement into a single entity with modern

business strategies and practices - and the increased fundraising leverage that such consolidation could bring. While no one doubted the need for schools for the poor or their potential to educate them, it became clear that the rapid expansion – more than 50 Nativity and Miguel middle schools were started in just the last ten years – carried risks.

“We had to build a sustainable infrastructure,” says Cassin.

“We are not giving out any more seed money for new schools,” says Jordan. “We want to strengthen the schools we have now.”

The Cristo Rey network, the Jesuit’s high-school initiative, pursued a more focused and methodical expansion – though nineteen new Cristo Rey schools since 2001, and three more slated to open in 2008, could be characterized as anything but slow – and did not have the challenge of a competing network. “A lot of what we do is help schools share best practices,” says Jeff Thielman, Cristo Rey’s vice president for development and new initiatives. Cristo Rey was already doing what Cassin hoped a combined NativityMiguel network to do more efficiently: focus on the educational mission.

## Network Supports

Both the Cristo Rey and NativityMiguel networks made training teachers and principals, a top priority - through “collegial visits” to share best practices and on the review of individual school progress. So far, the network staffs are small. NativityMiguel’s national office, for instance, is located in Washington, D.C. and employs only two people, including Rev. Jordan, though it has just hired a development director to help “leverage the national brand,” as Jordan says. Cristo Rey employs seven full-timers to run its network, which is headquartered in Chicago. Both national offices focus on support services for the network schools. “We’ll have 300 teachers in St. Louis for training,” says

Jordan, who is 66 and sees his current assignment as “my last chance to do missionary work in America.”

The new NativityMiguel network also sponsors principal training sessions at the University of Notre Dame and organizes seminars in fundraising and board development. (Each NativityMiguel school has its own governance board.) “Ninety-five percent of our costs are covered by fundraising,” says Jordan of educating a NativityMiguel student. “Only five percent comes from tuition.” Most schools have their own fundraising teams; last year they brought in over \$52 million all together. The Network has also begun collecting outcome data and has contracted with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University to conduct data analysis.

Startup costs for a new NativityMiguel school, which like a McDonald’s franchise must abide by rules from the central office, range from \$500,000 to several million dollars (excluding capital construction). Though the religious orders maintain control over the networks – each network has its own board of directors – none of the schools is “Jesuit” or “Christian Brothers” per se and there is no mandate even to be Catholic.

Operating expenses at NativityMiguel schools range from \$11,000 to over \$17,000 per student. The high cost – nearly double that of the average public or parochial school – reflects network expenses, smaller classes, longer years, and support services that rival “special education” programs in public schools. For these network schools to come close to being tuition-free (the model calls for some parental “buy in,” but that has never exceeded 5 percent of actual costs), there had to be a solid donor base capable of contributing \$2 million to \$4 million annually, according to Cassin, who knew that you couldn’t get that kind of money by chance. “We didn’t want to just stick pins in the map,” says Cassin, who also promoted serious and comprehensive feasibility studies before a school could open.

Sponsoring groups, which range from parishes and private nonprofit groups to Episcopalian ministers – must agree to nine mission effectiveness standards:

- 1-A NativityMiguel School is explicitly faith based in its mission.
- 2-A NativityMiguel School offers a financially accessible, not tuition-based education to students from low-income families in impoverished communities and reflects the faith, cultural, and racial demographics of the local community.
- 3-A NativityMiguel School addresses the academic, physical, social, emotional, moral and spiritual needs of a student, and develops the growth of the student in all areas.
- 4-A NativityMiguel School involves the family and the student's support system in the education of the child and provides opportunity for the growth of the support system.
- 5-A NativityMiguel School extends the hours and days that a student is in session and offers structured opportunities for learning, enrichment and growth during that time.
- 6-It is the expectation that any and all students in a NativityMiguel School will graduate from high school and go on to some form of post-secondary education. A NativityMiguel School offers a Graduate Support Program that eases a graduate's transition into high school; tutors, advocates for and maintains a connection with all graduates during high school; supports the high school in preparing the student for graduation and post-secondary education; and tracks the growth and achievements of all graduates.
- 7-A NativityMiguel School is governed by an effective administrative structure that includes a strong board comprised of leaders committed to the financial and academic sustainability of the school and a working administrative team, based on the president/principal model, that attends to the operational and educational stability and vitality of the school.
- 8-A NativityMiguel School is accredited by a recognized accrediting association as providing a quality middle school education that will prepare students for success in high school and utilizes standardized tests and other appropriate assessments to track and document student performance and adapt the educational design if needed.
- 9-A NativityMiguel School is an active participant in the collaboration, support, and development of the NativityMiguel network. This includes conferences and institutes, collegial visits, data gathering etc.

The feasibility study for the Chicago Jesuit Academy, for instance, was a 125-page report prepared by a twelve-member task force that included several Jesuit educators, a community services manager, a mathematician, and a Harvard-educated

teacher. Several dozen other professionals from many walks of life are listed in the study as having offered “constructive feedback and support.” The report included an analysis of the local public education situation, community surveys, accreditation

In Cristo Rey's case, there are ten standards that "each and every" school must follow:

1. Is explicitly Catholic in mission and enjoys Church approval.
2. Serves only economically disadvantaged students. The school is open to students of various faiths and cultures, and is culturally sensitive and community-based.
3. Is family centered and plays an active role in the local community.
4. Is accredited by a recognized regional accrediting association. It has a college preparatory curriculum designed for a high level of student engagement in their learning.
5. Requires participation by all students in a work-study program that follows the Corporate Internship Program (CIP) developed at Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago.
6. Seeks to integrate the learning present in its work program, classroom and extracurricular experiences for the fullest benefit of its student workers.
7. Has an effective administrative structure—normally including positions such as a separate president, principal, CWSP director, and development director—and a board structure that includes religious, education, community, business and civic leaders; complies with all applicable state and federal laws, including immigration, labor and not-for-profit tax laws.
8. Is financially sound: at full enrollment – 300 to 500 students, after five years – a Cristo Rey school's revenue from collected tuition and paying work-study contracts covers more than 85% of operating cash flow. In addition, the school maintains an aggressive development/advancement program to ensure financial stability.
9. Seeks to understand, assure, and improve how and how well its students learn and grow.
10. Is an active participant in the collaboration, support, and development of the Cristo Rey Network. Each school is different. The assessment process serves as a way for the Network to evaluate the progress of each school concerning these standards as well as a means for Network schools to share expertise and learn from one another.

challenges, the local housing market, and fundraising needs. In Chicago, the report describes, the "philanthropic environment" for a NativityMiguel school – based on the ten years of experience by the pioneering San Miguel School (see below) – in these terms 45 percent of donations would come from high-wealth individuals, 25 percent from foundations, 18 percent from corporations, 8 percent from groups of individuals, and the remaining 4 percent from reimbursements, tuition and fees.

Initially, Cassin's foundation targeted money to prospective sponsoring groups to fund feasibility studies and would be willing, if those studies suggested that a school was viable, to give the group a grant (usually for three years) to help get the school up and running. Such operational seed money amounted to \$150,000 over three years – not nearly enough to pay a school's costs, but extremely valuable as a means of leveraging other donations. Michael Anderer–McClelland, director of commu-

nity outreach at San Miguel schools of Chicago (now part of the merged NativityMiguel Network), called Cassin's involvement "a watershed moment."

During this same period, Cassin also discovered both the Cristo Rey high school in Chicago as well as those Catholic educators wanting to replicate it. Billed as "the school that works," Cristo Rey had inaugurated an innovative corporate work-study program combined with a rigorous college preparatory curriculum. This, too, was targeted at low-income students. In 2001, Cassin and his wife made a \$12 million commitment to replicate the Cristo Rey schools. Today there are nineteen of them, all committed to the same mission of effectiveness standards and together serving over 4,000 students.

The Nativity/Miguel standards and those for Cristo Rey are keys to quality expansion for such networks. They were also evident in visits to individual schools, such as the San Miguel Gary Comer school in Chicago and the Cristo Rey High School in Tucson – somewhat confusingly called San Miguel but not affiliated with Nativity/Miguel.

## San Miguel in Chicago

It's 7:15 a.m. in Austin, a neighborhood on Chicago's west side. Fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth graders – all of them African American – form a line as they enter the front door of the San Miguel Gary Comer campus. Their friends who attend public middle schools are just waking up, but they have to get up early and stay at school late to attend San Miguel, which has an 8.5 hour day.

The first thing students see are the smiling faces of three committed adults standing in their own line. They are Principal Caprice Smalley, social worker Denise Smalley, and Brother Ed Siderewicz, a Christian Brother and president, co-founder, and driving force of his order's San Miguel Schools, now part of the NativityMiguel Network. (Siderewicz is on the board of the merged network). There are now three NativityMiguel schools in the

Windy City, including the Chicago Jesuit Academy, which opened in 2005.

At San Miguel Gary Comer, most students look each adult in the eyes just as they have been taught. Those who forget are gently reminded.

"Good morning, sir," one boy says as his small hand firmly clasps Brother Ed's. "Good morning," responds the 50-year-old brother, who despite his lanky 6-foot-1 frame and ambitious education agenda, exhibits a gentle, approachable persona to these kids. "Are you ready?" "Yes sir," replies the boy. "For real?" "Yes," he says again, with gusto, finally convincing Brother Ed.

This daily morning ritual is about more than just creating a welcoming environment. It's a brief but critical assessment of whether each child is in the right frame of mind to learn. Many of the children dress and feed themselves because their parent or parents are already off to work. Some have been forced to deal with more traumatic situations and "have pain written all over their face," explains Principal Smalley.

Those children – there is usually at least one every day – are taken to a room where Smalley tries to diagnose the problem. Earlier this week, she learned that one boy was down in the dumps because he was still recovering from an argument he had with his mother. She let him process his feelings, sent him off to class, and later in the day called his mother.

"Most of the parents appreciate it when we call," said Smalley. "We're almost like extended family members to them."

On this morning, Smalley and her colleagues quickly noticed a student who wouldn't smile as they greeted him. After a short talk, Smalley learned it was just an issue of him not getting enough sleep. A pep talk and a hug from Smalley proved reassuring.

Like Brother Ed, who lives two miles from the San Miguel Gary Comer campus, Lasallian brothers live in a religious community. Lasallian volunteers assist

brothers but without taking vows. Whether a brother or a volunteer, the mission is the same – to educate poor children.

“What’s going on here is really nothing new for our Lasallian world,” Brother Ed says of his San Miguel Schools. “This has been going on for more than 300 years. It’s a charisma, a spiritual gift, that’s living in this building. It’s contagious. It’s life-giving. That’s what Catholic education is all about, giving life to what was death. It’s the resurrection story.”

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The Christian Brothers’ first San Miguel School, the Back of the Yards Campus, was launched in 1995 in a Latino neighborhood behind Chicago’s historic stockyards. Land’s End clothing company founder Gary Comer gave \$1.2 million to launch the second school in 2002. Even though these middle schools draw from impoverished, gang-ridden neighborhoods with some of the highest dropout rates in Chicago (approaching 70 percent) nearly 99 percent of their graduates are pursuing a high school degree or a G.E.D. It’s not unusual for students to improve two reading grade levels within six months of exposure to the school’s nurturing environment and high expectations.

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As with all NativityMiguel schools, the formula for success at San Miguel Gary Comer includes:

- **Small classes:** A 9:1 student to teacher ratio enables teachers to provide individualized attention.
- **More class time:** The 8.5 hour school day provides 53 percent more time in class than required by the state.
- **A focus on reading and language arts:** Students read an average of 120 books a year with 80 minutes of reading included in each school day. Reading comprehension and progress is tracked.
- **Committed staff and parents:** Half the teachers are Lasallian volunteers who receive a monthly stipend of only \$200 to \$800, keeping costs down. Many live together in the neighborhood. Parents are expected to attend meetings with teachers every three weeks and 97 percent do.
- **Low tuition:** The two schools cost nearly \$3 million a year to operate but most families pay about \$750 a year in tuition (far more than Brother Ed would like them to pay). Donations cover the rest.

Renee Clark walked around desks as she instructed the nine boys in her sixth-grade reading class. The lesson this day was being alert to textual cues in magazines and the task was figuring out the date of a particular issue. Her boys thumbed through the make-believe magazine's pages before discovering "November" on the corner of the front cover.

"You see, guys," said Clark, characteristically raising her voice and waving her arms with excitement, "it's really that simple!"

A former manager overseeing job fairs at Sprint PCS, the 44-year-old, lives for moments like this. She took a \$24,600 cut in salary to become a teacher here four years ago. Financially, she has to live "on a wing and a prayer" in an Austin apartment with government-controlled rent but is quick to explain that "this is not about money."

While she was working at Sprint, a friend died. At her funeral, the friend was eulogized as a person who made a difference helping the homeless. That provoked some soul-searching for Clark. "I asked myself, 'At the end of my life, what will people say about me?'" she recalls. "I prayed to God, asking for something that will work for me."

Clark's thoughts eventually went back to the 1970s, when she was a child and part of one of the first black families to move into the Austin neighborhood. She thought about how hard it was to fit in, and how she struggled to learn how to read – acting up, doing whatever was necessary to hide her illiteracy when called upon to read. Finally, a caring high school teacher caught on to Clark's game, confronted her and said she was there to help. Clark learned to read. She thought about the power a teacher can have in a child's life.

Soon Clark found herself returning to her old neighborhood to become a teacher at San Miguel. She considers the job an answered prayer. "I look forward to coming here every single day," she said.

Nearly every teacher at San Miguel has a story like this. Brother Ed calls them "our new urban missionaries," playing the teaching role that Catholic nuns used to play when there were far more of them in Catholic schools.

Kathy Donohoe teaches eight-grade history and reading at San Miguel. A former Chicago public school teacher, she still has friends in the public system and says the bureaucracy makes them feel as if they are living the myth of Sisyphus, ceaselessly attempting to roll a rock up a mountain, which "keep falling backwards."

In contrast, Donohoe says the small class sizes, long days and collegial spirit at San Miguel make her job

feel more like "a fun roller coaster ride." There are low days, she says, when you ask, "What am I doing here?" But that's when Denise Smalley talks to me and props me up or another teacher says, 'Let me take little Bobby for awhile and we'll figure something out.'"

Takiyah Olatunbosun, 31, is a sixth grade math teacher with a bachelor's degree in marketing and economics and an MBA. She once dreamed of a career with an advertising agency that would allow her to buy her own condominium on the Chicago lakeshore. Instead, she's an urban missionary in one of Chicago's roughest neighborhoods.

"I'd be lying if I told you I don't sometimes think, 'Wow, if I did X, Y or Z life would be a lot easier,'



said Olatunbosun. “But I really feel called to this. I really feel as if God directed me to be a teacher here.”

Then there is Brother Ralph Heppe, who doesn’t have or want a job description. A Lasallian, he has two master’s degrees (in theology/religious education and pastoral studies) and 49 years of teaching experience instructing students, in among other things, English, Spanish, history, psychology, theology and band. During the day, he lends a hand wherever it’s needed – for example, by reading one-on-one with a student in the hallway outside Clark’s classroom. Before school even opens, he usually walks the grounds of the campus, picking up litter and chatting with the residents.

**Faith grows when you see education miracles, and there have been plenty since San Miguel opened.**

One day, Brother Ralph reached into a bush to pull out what he thought was debris. A man sprinted to the site and pulled out a stash of drugs he was hiding there. While on litter patrol, Brother Ralph has seen a pusher selling his products out of a basement window directly across the street from the school. A policeman once told him that seven out of ten young men in Austin will be a drug dealer, in jail or dead by the time they are 21.

Brother Ralph is white but the African-American community loves him. Holding his cup of coffee from the nearby McDonald’s, he greets neighbors with a joyful smile and a “How are you?”

The common response, he said, is “I’m blessed, Brother Ralph.” Brother Ralph sees that as a testament to the community’s abiding faith and “deep spirituality,” no matter what the circumstances.

Faith grows when you see education miracles, and there have been plenty since San Miguel opened.

Take, for example, Dominique Wilson, who is fifteen years old and, now an eighth-grader. When he was ten, Dominique’s mother died. He could have taken that pain and destructively acted out, as so many understandably do, compounding one tragedy with another. Instead, Dominique has excelled academically and plans to attend one of two elite high schools: Fenwick High School, a Catholic school run by Dominicans; or Whitney M. Young Magnet High School, the city’s first public magnet school, recognized by *U.S. News & World Report* as being in the top 10 percent of all schools nationally. His goal is to become a corporate lawyer because as he states “I personally like arguing.”

“My spirits here have been lifted,” he said. Dominique now lives with his grandmother but knows he has a part in something even bigger. “I believe that every teacher here knows every kid and every parent by name,” said Dominique, referring to his school. “It’s just like a family here.”

## A Partnership with Chicago Public Schools

In light of the success that Catholic schools like San Miguel have had educating at-risk children, Arne Duncan, Chicago Public Schools superintendent, has proposed a novel idea: turn Catholic schools about to be shuttered into taxpayer-funded public charter schools – run by Catholics.

“It would instantly double the school’s income,” Duncan told the *Chicago Tribune* editorial board, which endorsed the idea. “They could double teacher salaries, triple them if they wanted to. If they’re charging \$3,500 per kid, and have \$6,500 or \$7,000 coming from us, that would give them tremendous possibilities.”

The archdiocese declined Duncan’s offer. “We operate Catholic schools,” said superintendent Nicholas Wolsonovich. “Charter schools are public schools. Religion infuses everything we do in

Catholic schools from the way we give the announcements in the morning to the way we run our sports teams at the end of the day.”

**“The core question,” said Brother Ed, “is if we can be true to our mission of providing education to the poor? The soul-searching question was if we could be authentic, maintaining who we are and at the same time having integrity with the rules of a public school. Our board, after examining this issue for six years, said there is only one way to find out. We have to try it.”**

As the head of a school run by a religious order, not the archdiocese, Brother Ed has more flexibility. “The core question,” said Brother Ed, “is if we can be true to our mission of providing education to the poor? The soul-searching question was if we could be authentic, maintaining who we are and at the same time having integrity with the rules of a public school. Our board, after examining this issue for six years, said there is only one way to find out. We have to try it.”

Enter Catalyst Corp., headed by Brother Ed and many of the same people who run San Miguel Schools. In September 2007, Catalyst opened two K-8 charter schools, Catalyst-Howland and Catalyst-Circle Rock, both in poor parts of the inner city, in accordance with the philosophy of St. John Baptist De La Salle. Catalyst is entirely separate from, yet significantly similar to the NativityMiguel schools nationwide. A third organ-

ization, the Lasalle Education Network, provides both with services, including human resources, finance, technology, marketing, public relations and database maintenance and administration.

“It’s a bit like Coke,” Brother Ed wrote in a memo. “You have Coke and you have Diet Coke. Both come from the same recipe but have adaptations or adjustments that make them more appropriate for some people than for others. The fundamental recipe is the same but there are clear differences.”

If you visit one of the NativityMiguel schools and then step into Catalyst-Circle Rock, the difference is immediately noticeable. There are no crucifixes, no paintings of St. John Baptist De La Salle and no symbols of faith. The walls of the new school – formerly a Baptist school – are mostly barren, except for occasional, entirely secular adornments such as a “weather calendar” and “August and September words.”

Deanna English, assistant principal at Catalyst-Circle Rock, boasts that all classrooms have a maximum of thirteen students taught by both a teacher and an instructional aide. The school day is two hours longer than in most Chicago Public Schools and includes 180 minutes of reading, language arts and writing. Students wear uniforms: forest green shirts and khaki pants. When a visitor enters a classroom, he is greeted by a student ambassador, who has been taught to look the adult in the eye and offer a firm handshake.

While NativityMiguel schools teach values, character and good citizenship with religion, Catalyst attempts to do the same thing through a nationally renowned secular program called Character Counts.

Tanika Tern, a parent volunteer, is filling in at the front desk at Catalyst-Circle Rock. A Baptist, she has two children here, one in third grade, the other in fifth. The school is so new it’s difficult to give it a fair evaluation. That may take years. But as a parent, Tern is impressed with what she sees so far.

“Even though they’re not teaching the Bible, there is a positive atmosphere here,” said Tern. “I don’t see overtly Christian values stressed but true morals

are taught. There is discipline. They are right on it, but it's an encouraging, not a degrading, discipline policy. It's still a family atmosphere in which everyone is helping out and no child is – what's the term – left behind."

## Cristo Rey in Tucson

**N**amed in honor of San Miguel Febres Cordero, a Christian Brother from Ecuador who was canonized in 1984, this high school is located in the southern end of the corridor of poverty running south from downtown Tucson for nearly fifteen miles. Confusing though it is, the fact that San Miguel is run by the Christian Brothers but part of the Jesuit Cristo Rey speaks to the collegial and collaborative spirit of the Church's new educational network movement. The mission at San Miguel High, as at all Cristo Rey schools, is college prep for low-income kids. That means a classic and rigorous focus on academics. But it also means – a serious work-study program (one of Cristo Rey's trademarks).<sup>2</sup> In fact, the students work not for their supper but for their tuition, which costs about \$15,000 a year.

As with all new ventures, San Miguel's opening, in the fall of 2004, came with its share of challenges. The school launched with 60 students in borrowed space and trailers (with broken air-conditioning). But it is now on track and will graduate its first senior class in May 2008 in a state-of-the-art \$9 million building complex. It now enrolls almost 225 students, a little over half its projected capacity of 400, in four grades.

As with all Cristo Rey schools, San Miguel resembles an oasis in one of Tucson's most impoverished neighborhoods. The median family income in its zip code is about \$27,000, \$20,000 below the city-wide median. Unemployment in the area is at 14 percent, four times the county average. Half of the area's children live in poverty.

It wasn't hard to make a case for economic or educational need. The question was how to pay for it. The diocese, which had first realized the need for another high school in this largely Catholic community, could not afford to operate another one. It already had three and was suffering its own financial distress. Several feasibility studies had already concluded that the donor base in Tucson was not large enough to support a school whose students couldn't afford to pay tuition. "In Tucson, 50 percent of the population works for businesses with fewer than five people," says Elizabeth Goettl, president of San Miguel High School. "So there's not a lot of big business, corporate headquarters here which would have been necessary to support such an effort."

**The mission at San Miguel High, as at all Cristo Rey schools, is college prep for low-income kids. That means a classic and rigorous focus on academics. But it also means a serious work-study program one of Cristo Rey's trademarks. In fact, the students work not for their supper but for their tuition, which costs about \$15,000 a year.**

As a sign of the centuries of experience of working independently and together, in May 2002 the Tucson diocese called on the Church's school experts, the Christian Brothers, to help them start a high school. And the Brothers, who had clearly rediscovered their educational roots in educating

<sup>2</sup> The Cristo Rey story is now the subject of a book, *More than a Dream*, published by Loyola Press in early 2008.

the poor, drew from the Jesuits who had by then fine-tuned their successful Cristo Rey model. Eighty percent of the costs of operating the school would be provided through work-study, called the Corporate Internship Program. (With each job worth almost \$21,000 a year, and four students per job, the program would not fully support the school until it reached its full capacity of 400.)

**Brother Nick Gonzalez, the school's principal, often tells the story of a neighborhood boy who wandered into the new school, curious to see what was going on. Told that it was a school, he asked, "Do you have kids here?" Yes, he was told. "But you can't hear them," said the boy. "We took that as a great compliment," says Brother Nick.**

The Cassin foundation agreed to put \$700,000 into the Tucson high school's first three years of operation and pledged another \$150,000 toward construction of a new school building. The school opened in temporary quarters as scheduled in the fall of 2004 and moved – thanks to Cassin and a generous loan from a local business man – into its new building two years later.

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"We took that as a great compliment," says Brother Nick.

Goettl and Gonzalez form a dynamic duo. The tall, lean female school president, a master of facts and figures, speaks articulately and rapidly about the school and its business operations. The square man in Christian Brothers robes, while no slouch in the fact-and-figure department, speaks softly, has a wry sense of humor and a ready smile, and focuses on curriculum and student and parent support. They both think the president/principal leadership model is the right one for their kind of school.

And Sherie Steele, the development director, says it's her job "to drag Elizabeth and Brother Nick to all kinds of groups to tell the school's story." Along with overseeing PR (including a four-color newsletter) Steele does local outreach to groups like the Rotary Club and Chamber of Commerce. "You find that there is a great fear about this part of town," she says, "especially among business folks. But they also know how important this work is. They know it's the right thing to do."

**"We hear a lot of the parents say they are seeking a safe environment for their children," says Brother Nick. "And that's fine. But we are now also finding that parents are remarking on the quality of the teachers. And that's better."**

"It's hard for people to understand what kinds of neighborhoods these kids come from," says Goettl, who admits to not having been this far south in all her years in Tucson. "Gangs and violence are a way of life here."

San Miguel is about changing that way of life. "We hear a lot of the parents say they are seeking a safe environment for their children," says Brother Nick. "And that's fine. But we are now also finding

that parents are remarking on the quality of the teachers. And that's better." There is a full-time college career counselor and a college counseling center, packed with computers and adorned with college banners. The students themselves have formed a college counseling team that mentors the freshmen and sophomores. "It's not IF you're going to college," says Ja'Re Harmon, a senior who in her third year at the school is working at Advanced Ceramic Research, "it's WHERE you're going." She will be the first in her family to go to college. Harmon attended a summer science program at Cornell after her sophomore year; she then received a full scholarship to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and plans to major in biomedical engineering and "find a cure for diabetes and pancreatic cancer."

There are no uniforms at San Miguel, but there is a strict dress code. Boys must wear long sleeve shirts and ties, slacks, and polished shoes. Girls have a pants/skirt option, but if they choose the latter the hem must be knee-length and the legs covered with "nylons." The ladies also have to wear a long sleeve shirt, with a collar (no tie) and close-toed shoes. "This is especially tough in Tucson," smiles Goettl.

"My husband was quite touched," says Melissa Suarez. "When he brought our son to school that first year, there were all these boys outside asking him for help tying their ties. He said they were all so polite." There is also no doubt that San Miguel is a school – even if not the kind that the boy from the street knew. And that's the idea. "We are trying to change a culture here," says Goettl, guiding a guest into a new science lab.

Each student must take three years of science (biology, chemistry, and physics); four years of English; four years of math; three years of Spanish; and four years of theology. There are no electives. And there are no excuses. "We know where these kids come from," says Brother Nick, himself the son of Mexican immigrants. "But we are here to educate them... We want them to know that it's cool to be a good student. They get the message that there are

no jobs for uneducated people – and that they can get educated here."

All fifteen teachers – including three Brothers – are certified in the subjects they teach, but arrange themselves into two neat demographic clusters: those with over 20 years of experience and those with less than five. Many of the older teachers "were fed up with the public system and wanted to go where they thought they could make a difference," says Goettl.

**There are no electives. And there are also no excuses. "We know where these kids come from," says Brother Nick, himself the son of Mexican immigrants. "But we are here to educate them... We want them to know that it's cool to be a good student. They get the message that there are no jobs for uneducated people – and that they can get educated here."**

The school believed they could make a difference. "You have to have strong teachers with experience to get these kids to college," says Brother Nick. "We have to cram at least six years of schooling into four years. We sought the experienced teachers first because we knew we had to make a reputation right away that we were a serious school."

In a 50 percent dropout world (90 percent for Native Americans) San Miguel's goal is to graduate 100 percent of its students. In a culture where high school is considered higher education, San Miguel wants to send all of its graduates on to college. "We make that promise," says Goettl. "Every child will

go to college. That starts in the admissions interview process.” All 37 seniors of the school’s first graduating class were accepted into one or more colleges.

**“When I heard about this thing, I wasn’t so sure I wanted my kid flipping burgers instead of going to school,” says Eddie Sanchez, the parent of a senior. He laughs now, because he knows that these are career building jobs, not menial labor.**

The work-study program is one of the highlights of the school’s model. Every day a small fleet of vans carries some 60 students to jobs all over Tucson. The bus leaves the school parking lot at 7:15 and brings them back at 5:30 or 6:00. (A student’s academic day, which consumes four days a week, begins at 7:45 and ends at 3:30.) Each student works one day a week and each “job” is shared by four students.

“When I heard about this thing, I wasn’t so sure I wanted my kid flipping burgers instead of going to school,” says Eddie Sanchez, the parent of a senior. He laughs now, because he knows that these are career building jobs, not menial labor. The school has 24 students working at the University of Arizona alone, in five different departments. Some of them are doing serious research – for pay. In fact, one San Miguel student presented a paper on plant genetics to undergraduate science students as part of her work-study program.

“There’s some hesitation at first on the part of companies,” says Lisa Winterton, director of the program at San Miguel. “Having a fourteen-year-old

work for you seems a bit odd.” But they soon see that the school means business. It trains the kids in everything from workplace etiquette and dress to Excel spreadsheets, and there are now several dozen businesses participating in the program – including Advanced Ceramics Research, *Arizona Daily Star*, the Better Business Bureau, the City of Tucson, Southwest Gas, Texas Instruments, and the Tucson Museum of Art.

“Part of what we educate the students about is that they are not selling out by behaving well at work,” says Brother Nick. “They are not selling out by doing well in school. We have to teach them that this how you get success. You can do the neighborhood stuff, in the neighborhood, but here you are different. The street ends here. They know that. They get it.”

## Bucking the trend

As scores of Catholic schools are shuttered each year by dioceses in America’s cities, the new network schools are showing what is possible in terms of growth. The same nurturing, academic, and spiritual education seen in San Miguel of Chicago and San Miguel Cristo Rey are showing the way for another generation of Catholic educators – and even, as Chicago is learning, for public schools. Elizabeth Goettl, for one, is thankful for the network. Both the Cristo Rey and NativityMiguel networks have national conferences about assessment and are learning how to use data. They are doing their research and spreading the word – and the Word.

Both Cristo Rey and NativityMiguel networks share a mission of providing learning in the context of faith. It may have been faith that has helped them grow and find success at a time when many Catholic schools serving inner-city kids are being closed. Time will tell if the experiment in translating that faith – and that success – into a charter and secular setting will work.

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## The Mixed Blessing of Vouchers

By Marshall Allen

**T**erry Brown is walking on unfinished cement floors, past workmen knocking holes in dry-wall, under 20-foot ceilings with exposed wiring and air ducts. Brown runs St. Anthony, which serves 1,000 students in Milwaukee and is the largest and fastest-growing Catholic elementary school in the nation. In appearance, he looks like a corporate executive. He is neatly groomed, from his salt-and-pepper hair to his smart gray suit and polished black shoes. He sounds like an executive, too. In Brown's parlance, parents are customers, curriculum is evaluated by test results, and schools compete for students in the marketplace.

The fact is that Brown has an MBA and left his job as a business executive in 2002 to become president of St. Anthony School. He brings a business sensibility to everything he does there. He searches for best practices and he demands results.

Now, in a scene familiar to Catholic school leaders nationwide who are dealing with dilapidated old buildings, he's checking the progress of a costly renovation project. "My joke is that the mission of the Catholic Church is roofs, boilers and asphalt because that's where the money goes," he quips.

Unlike many Catholic schools in the country, St. Anthony can afford the reconstruction work, though it takes some careful accounting. Milwaukee is home to the nation's oldest and largest voucher system – the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. It gives low-income families up to \$6,501 per pupil from public coffers so they can enroll their children in the schools of their choice.

Many low-income families want their daughters and sons to attend St. Anthony.

This means the school's renovations counter the trend of consolidating and closing urban Catholic schools. St. Anthony is expanding. After the new building opens in mid-2008, there will be space for 350 more pupils. Brown is confident he'll fill the seats.

**The demographics are reflected in St. Anthony's student body: 98 percent are Hispanic, 95 percent come from non-English-speaking homes, and 99 percent qualify for federal free- and reduced-lunch subsidies. Ninety-nine percent use Milwaukee's voucher program to attend.**

Like many places in America, Hispanic immigrants have transformed urban Milwaukee. The Southside neighborhood was Polish and German when St. Anthony opened in 1872. Now, the shops and restaurants have signs in Spanish and the area is nicknamed "Little Mexico." The demographics are reflected in St. Anthony's student body: 98 percent are Hispanic, 95 percent come from non-English-speaking homes, and 99 percent qualify for federal free- and reduced-lunch subsidies. Ninety-nine percent use Milwaukee's voucher program to attend.



The children enter St. Anthony with multiple academic deficits. Many are from single-parent homes where reading has not been encouraged. Some of their fathers are in jail. Some live with multiple families in cramped quarters. Some are concerned about finding their next meal.

Through intensive instruction and a highly structured curriculum, students' academic performance improves dramatically the longer they attend the school. In 2006, St. Anthony's students took the same test as their public school counterparts statewide – the Wisconsin Knowledge Concepts Examination. The percent of third graders scoring at the proficient or advanced levels in reading was 22 for new students, 35 for those who had been there for a year, and 55 for those who had been at the school more than a year.

Eighth graders showed even greater improvement. Among those scoring at the proficient or advanced level in reading were 20 percent of new students, 31 percent of students who had been there one year, and 68 percent of students who had attended more than a year.

The growth of St. Anthony, its multiple improvements and its strong academic achievement would not be possible without the vouchers, Brown says.

## Adapting to Vouchers

The Milwaukee archdiocese educates about 33,000 children in 135 schools spread across ten counties. About 20 percent of them are involved in the Parental Choice Program (MPCP), which is limited to the city of Milwaukee.

The voucher money comes with obvious benefits that no Catholic school leader will downplay. "Without [MPCP] our presence as a Catholic Church in the inner city would have gone away," says Sue Nelson, associate superintendent of the archdiocesan schools. "[MPCP] helped us maintain

a Catholic presence in neighborhoods where we may not have otherwise been able to."

**"Without [MPCP] our presence as a Catholic Church in the inner city would have gone away ... [MPCP] helped us maintain a Catholic presence in neighborhoods where we may not have otherwise been able to."**

Yet the program has also created new challenges and forced the schools and archdiocese to adapt. While MPCP gave Milwaukee's urban Catholic schools the means to fulfill its mission of serving impoverished children with severe learning deficits, it also forced the schools suddenly to navigate ever-changing layers of red tape in a politically charged atmosphere where the local teachers union and other voucher opponents are continually watching for missteps.

MPCP created a marketplace where schools compete for the attention of parents. That means some voucher parents in Catholic schools have more of a consumer mindset than a commitment to the Catholic community. Because schools that accept vouchers cannot discriminate based on religion, many Catholic schools are filling up with non-Catholic students. That doesn't necessarily change instruction, but it certainly alters a school's religious identity.

Dan McKinley, a Catholic and the executive director of one of the influential organizations in the local choice movement, Partners Advancing Values in Education (PAVE), says there are cautionary lessons to be drawn from the ways that Milwaukee's Catholic schools have handled and responded to vouchers. St. Anthony is one of the highly touted

success stories, yet enrollment is still declining in many of the city's Catholic schools and, the vouchers have exposed shortcomings in the governance of the individual schools and the archdiocese.

If Catholic school leaders across America are envious of the vouchers in Milwaukee, McKinley offers a warning in the form of a familiar adage: "Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it." He fears that most archdioceses would be totally unprepared.

## Uncommon Initiative in a Highly Competitive Market

The plain brown placard is about the size of a postcard and sits on Terry Brown's desk at St. Anthony School. "It can be done," the sign reads.

Brown is characterized by such matter-of-fact self-assurance. After a dozen years as a marketing specialist at GE Healthcare and a stint as an investment executive at US Bank, Brown runs St. Anthony with a no-nonsense philosophy: "We run the school for the children and not the adults."

That's one of the first mindsets among staff that had to change when he arrived at St. Anthony in 2002, he says. And that simple statement justifies every change he puts into place – a series of steps that makes St. Anthony one of the nation's more exciting models of school reform.

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In his first year, Brown cleaned up the finances. Previous administrators did not know the difference between capital and operations budgets, and that affected reimbursements. The school had a \$2 million budget but was about \$750,000 in debt. Now the budget is about \$8 million, with roughly \$6.3 million coming from vouchers, \$700,000 in school meal payments, and about \$850,000 in federal aid for things like reading programs.

Brown also led a major school expansion, leasing an additional building and increasing enrollment from

400 to 1,000 students. He brought in a top-notch principal, Ramon Cruz, who had previous experience with Direct Instruction literacy program. Because so many of St. Anthony's pupils are non-native English-speakers, Brown and Cruz increased the amount of literacy instruction from 50 minutes to two hours, and then again to two-and-a-half hours a day. The school day was stretched to eight hours, too, and the number of recesses was curtailed from three to just one that lasts 20 minutes.

If Catholic school leaders across America are envious of the vouchers in Milwaukee, McKinley offers a warning in the form of a familiar adage: "Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it." He fears that most archdioceses would be totally unprepared.

St. Anthony's teachers are paid starting salaries equivalent to about 80 percent of those paid by Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). But teachers receive full health benefits at no cost. This year Brown instituted merit pay, too. Students were tested in September in reading and math, and will be tested again in May. Potential bonuses for teachers, in addition to their contracted salaries, range from \$50 to \$4,000 for reading and math teachers in grades K-8. The program was created to motivate current teachers to improve performance, retain effective teachers and recruit high-quality teachers to join St. Anthony's staff.

Given all the innovation, the balanced budget, the expansion, and the promising academic results, one might suppose that Brown and St. Anthony would be celebrated as models within the archdiocese, but that has not been the case. The schools are overseen

and run by the parish, and as a result, some Catholic school administrators in Milwaukee have never heard of the innovations at St. Anthony. What's more, there were "constant rumors" circulating under the archdiocese's previous regime that the bishop was planning to usurp the parish priest's authority and fire Brown. People criticized the K-8 school for having a president in addition to a principal because it seemed wasteful, he says.

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Similar criticism would likely befall anyone acting as a change agent within any bureaucracy, not just the Catholic church. Brown insists he just keeps doing the best job he can. "And if I lose my job over it, I lose my job over it," he says.

Kern Family Foundation president Jim Rahn says schools like St. Anthony and Messmer High School – another celebrated school that's instituted many reforms with great results – are outliers vis-à-vis other Catholic schools in Milwaukee. They've done things their own way and pushed boundaries, but the archdiocese can't afford to disown them, he says. "The archdiocese doesn't know what to do with them," Rahn says of St. Anthony.

The current leadership of the archdiocesan schools, which has been in place for less than a year, praises

Brown's reform efforts. School superintendent David Lodes says he's seen schools find success by appointing a president to oversee the business and strategic development roles in the school. Other schools should consider the model.

Brown insists that his school needs a president to handle business matters. Yet it was his business-like perspective that initially created conflict. During his first year, the principal and a number of teachers left because they disagreed with the practice of analyzing test results to see how St. Anthony's kids performed compared to their public school peers. But seeing how the school stacked up in the marketplace was essential given the climate in Milwaukee.

In addition to the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, there are about 56 charter schools in the city enrolling more than 16,000 students. There are also non-traditional district-operated schools that focus on the arts and other specialties. What's more, Wisconsin has inter-district public school open enrollment – meaning students can attend any public school in the state if there's a seat available.

"It's probably one of the most competitive education markets in the country," Brown says of Milwaukee. "If you qualify for free- and reduced-lunch there's no cost for you to go to whatever school you choose – public, private or charter... (Parents) have complete economic freedom to choose a school they feel is best for their child. That type of competitive landscape is something the first generation school leaders didn't understand."

Parents' actual exercise of choice has forced accountability on the schools, whether they like it or not. Most school marketing is word-of-mouth with parents recommending a school to other parents. So Brown thinks about things from a branding perspective. He identifies what the parents want – excellent academics, character formation and Catholic values – and then ensures he delivers a product that will meet demand.

Brown warns that many Catholic school leaders in non-voucher environments fail to understand competition, which exists in the free alternative provided by charter schools, and also in communities where Catholic schools survive by raising money from corporations, foundations and private donors.

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“Whether you compete or not determines whether your school survives or not,” Brown says.

## Choice Transforms Milwaukee Schools

76 **C**ompetition is so fierce in Milwaukee because low-income parents are empowered to choose what they believe is best for their children. McKinley, head of PAVE, and Dan Schmidt, vice president of the Milwaukee-based Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, tell the history of the city’s Choice program through the first-hand experience of helping to lay its foundation. Catholic leaders played key roles in the movement from day one.

In 1987, when this effort began, Catholic schools were closing and consolidating in Milwaukee much as they were doing throughout the United States.

So the archdiocese worked with McKinley to create a Catholic foundation now known as PAVE to raise money and to try and save Catholic education in Milwaukee. The city is historically Catholic and some of its most prominent businessmen were on the new foundation’s board.

In 1992, PAVE broadened its mission to provide scholarships to all low-income students in Milwaukee. It was understood by the Catholic leadership that non-sectarian foundations would not fund the archdiocese directly but would be open to funding a nonprofit organization with a broad mission. They were right.

As PAVE was evolving in its efforts to raise private scholarship funds to help save the city’s Catholic schools, the Bradley Foundation was ramping up its efforts to bolster public school choice in its home town. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program officially started in 1990-91 through the hard work of dynamic African-American leaders who were dissatisfied with how black children were achieving (or more often not achieving) in traditional public schools. It started with 341 students in seven non-sectarian schools. The reimbursement to schools was only about \$2,500 per pupil and the program languished from 1990 to 1995, Schmidt says. There was a cap placed on the vouchers – no more than 900 a year – yet hundreds of them went unused because the money was insufficient to cover most private school tuition, and it could not be used for religious schools.

In 1992, the Bradley Foundation decided to work with PAVE to launch its own scholarship program for low-income parents. Together, they wanted to demonstrate the strength of the market for choice to push the process forward. Parents would be able to send their children to the school of their choice – religious or not. “The idea was to develop enough requests for these scholarships to show policymakers the demand,” Schmidt says.

The Bradley Foundation gave \$500,000 the first year and PAVE raised \$1 million more. About \$1.4

million in scholarships went out the first year. By 1995, the program had grown to 4,500 low-income students receiving scholarships to attend 120 schools of their choice. Choice advocates ramped up their public relations efforts, sending students holding placards calling for choice to the legislature. Articles were written. Rallies were held. McKinley says it became clear that “low-income folks need good public policy as much as anyone else. We were the demonstration of what a choice program would look like.”

**The parochial schools were caught off guard by the new rules, Schmidt says. Many did not even know how to calculate tuition – much less account for the influx of money that came from the government. Lots of voucher money was returned, which looked terrible politically. And the shifts in school culture soon followed. The money brought students with increased learning deficiencies and parents with no commitment to the local parish.**

Due to the public demand for full-tuition scholarships and religious schools, Governor Tommy Thompson was able to expand the choice program in 1995 by increasing the voucher amount to \$5,900, and taking the revolutionary step of adding religious schools to the mix. Immediately, groups like the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association and People for the American Way started a legal battle, claiming the move violated the U.S. Constitution’s clause prohibiting any establishment of religion.

The Bradley Foundation and PAVE continued to fund the scholarships as the battle entered the courts. On June 10, 1998, the Wisconsin Supreme Court released a landmark opinion in favor of the expansion of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program to include religious schools.

That decision was handed down the day after PAVE and the Bradley Foundation had formerly launched their scholarship program. “There were some people thinking this really is beyond coincidence that all this could happen,” McKinley says. “There was so much good being done here. This was a broad effort across all Milwaukee.”

Suddenly, religious schools could benefit from vouchers, but the rules dictated that once schools committed to the number of MPCP students they were willing to accept, they could not turn away any voucher student – regardless of religion or level of academic ability. Moreover, the religious schools must allow voucher-bearing students to opt out of non-academic religious activities, though Catholic school officials say this has not been an issue. They note that most parents enroll children in religious schools because they want the values found in religion.

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## Difficult Transitions

Archdiocesan school administrators in Milwaukee admit that the transition to vouchers has been rocky. Sue Nelson, the associate superintendent, was a principal at a Catholic school that started integrating voucher pupils. She points out

that each school was an independent satellite that had to “stumble through” the transition. In hindsight it’s clear that schools were not prepared, but it’s hard to know realistically how they could have done better.

Nelson says the vouchers diversified the demographics of Catholic schools, which was a good thing, but also boosted the number of children with disabilities and other learning needs, so schools were compelled to develop more specialized programs.

There have been other challenges. Chuck Allison, director of schools for the archdiocese, says a big one has been “How do you remain a clearly Catholic school when the majority in a Choice school are still non-Catholic?” In response, he maintains that retaining a school’s Catholic identity is accomplished by practicing the sacraments and traditions of the faith, making prayer a regular part of class and keeping crosses in the classrooms.

Nelson says that the goal of the schools is to “teach as Jesus did,” passing on a mindset that’s focused on service and community. Thus Catholic social teachings are integrated into every content area.

In some cases, children who arrive at the school as non-practicing Catholics commit to the church because of their involvement in the Choice schools. At St. Anthony, most of the children are culturally Catholic but do not attend Mass with their parents outside of school. There have been dozens of baptisms every year and Brown expects to have 40 this year.

In some cases the culture of a school is changed by the consumer mentality that’s an inherent part of the voucher program. Julie Robinson, principal of Catholic East Elementary School, says one of the biggest challenges with the MPCP pupils is that they’re more apt to switch schools than other students. Her school has about 140 students enrolled today, almost two thirds of them via vouchers.

Catholic East students perform well on the nationally-normed Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). Third

graders score between the 49th and 56th percentile nationally on the test across all subjects; fifth graders fall between the 60th and 80th percentile; and seventh graders rank from a low at the 46th percentile in math to a high at the 70th percentile in science.

**She points out that each school was an independent satellite that had to “stumble through” the transition. In hindsight it’s clear that schools were not prepared, but it’s hard to know realistically how they could have done better.**

Robinson says the parents who pay tuition are more dedicated as a whole than the voucher parents, who don’t have as much loyalty to the school. It’s possible that some of the MPCP families take the education for granted, she says. And if they see something they don’t like, “they bolt.”

Jane Bartlett, the business manager at Catholic East, says all nine families who have left the school in the current school year were Choice families. Their reasons include dissatisfaction with the program, house-moving, child custody changes or behavioral issues associated with their child.

Bartlett and Robinson are proud of their school’s diversity but have noticed some discrimination from the non-Choice suburban schools in the archdiocese, which view schools that participate in the voucher program as “ghetto” schools. “They assume it’s black kids and poor kids and God forbid they would rub shoulders with those kids,” Robinson says.

Some of the other burdens that come with the voucher program include close scrutiny by oppo-

nents and the ever-changing bureaucratic rules governing the state-funded program.

“The stress level of administering a Choice school is huge,” Nelson says. “The most innocent mistake can land you on the front page of the newspaper.”

**Allison, the archdiocese’s director of Catholic schools, says if any Catholic school leaders in other cities desire vouchers for the sake of money alone, they “have a big spoonful of reality ahead of them” – what with all the operational headaches that accompany them.**

The highly charged politics of choice mean the schools must accept many regulations, some reasonable, some ridiculous. For instance, regulations used to require just one audit a year until a bad apple in a Choice school misused school funds, Nelson says. Now there are two. Nelson says the craziest rule required all teachers to have copies of their high school diplomas on hand at the school. Though teachers are already licensed with the state Department of Public Instruction, the school’s staff was forced to scramble to assemble the documents before the next audit.

Allison, the archdiocese’s director of Catholic schools, says if any Catholic school leaders in other cities desire vouchers for the sake of money alone, they “have a big spoonful of reality ahead of them” – what with all the operational headaches that accompany them. “They’ve got to have a much larger social justice motivation and passion to help a diverse student body. Otherwise, they don’t know what they’re in for.”

## Parents Choose Religious Schools

The Catholic schools may have been buffeted by the challenges, but parents of voucher-eligible children are flocking to them and other religious schools. The program’s cap was recently increased to a maximum of 22,500 students, and voucher enrollment now stands at 19,233 students in 123 schools, according to a February research brief by the Public Policy Forum, a nonpartisan watchdog organization. That amounts to about 22 percent of the Milwaukee Public School’s total enrollment in 2007-08 – and about 30 percent of district students in the lower grades.

**In the 32 Catholic schools accepting vouchers, for example, 59 percent of the students are part of the Choice Program.**

The report revealed that the MPCP’s popularity is due chiefly to its inclusion of religious schools. Consider that

- 37 percent of voucher users attend Catholic schools;
- 16 percent attend Lutheran schools;
- 16 percent attend non-denominational Christian schools;
- 3 percent attend Islamic schools; and
- 21 percent attend non-religious schools.

The Public Policy Forum report also showed that voucher students make up a large percentage of the total students enrolled in religious schools. In the 32 Catholic schools accepting vouchers, for example, 59 percent of the students are part of the Choice Program.

Brett Healy, director of governmental affairs for the advocacy group School Choice Wisconsin, says the established network of Catholic schools has been essential to the success of the choice movement. Time has shown that it's much more difficult to start a new school with vouchers than to bolster the efforts of an existing one.

"The whole philosophy of school choice would not be the success it is here in Milwaukee if they did not have the high-quality schools that parents want," Healy says.

Studies have shown that the Choice schools are an improvement on the public school system. A January 2008 study by John Robert Warren, a professor at the University of Minnesota, produced for School Choice Wisconsin, compared the graduation rates from 2003 to 2006 of students in Milwaukee who attended private high schools on vouchers, versus those who attended a public high school. It found that MPCP students were more

likely to graduate than those in Milwaukee Public Schools.

"If the MPS graduation rate had been equal to the rate for school choice students, a cumulative total of 1,870 additional MPS students would have graduated over the four years – a 14.3 percent increase," Warren wrote.

A recent study led by Patrick J. Wolf of the University of Arkansas found that fourth-grade voucher students scored "somewhat lower" than Milwaukee Public School students, but by eighth-grade voucher students scored "somewhat higher."

Neither study broke down results by Catholic schools, and the previous regime that ran the archdiocese did not gather academic test results from the schools, which are parish-run. Current archdiocese leaders says they plan to collect the information in the future, so they can at least monitor performance internally. Many would like to see them release such information publicly.

## One School's Focus on Results

Mary Budiac, who teaches third grade at St. Anthony, is snapping her fingers in time as she and her 21 pupils practice reading. The children don't even notice when a visitor enters the room with Brown and Cruz. The desks are facing away from the doorway and windows to minimize distractions. Not to mention they're just too busy. In this instance, they're learning two-part words. Their fingers are on the words that Budiac is calling out, and they're responding.

"First part!" Budiac says. "Out!" the students call out. "Second part!" she says again. "Out-fit!" the students say. "Word one! Word two!" Budiac says, leading them through a list of words on the page. "Bathroom! One-way!" the kids cry out, making their way down the list. Budiac snaps with each word. The students are on pace, focused and tracking with the drill.

"Good job! I can't see anyone without his finger in the right place!" Budiac says. Teachers try to praise the children at least three times for each criticism, Brown says.

In a nearby second-grade classroom, teacher Michelle Chase is sitting at a round table surrounded by nine children, leading them in a similar exercise. "Know! K-N-O-W! Know!" she cries out, pointing at each letter. The children repeat: "Know! K-N-O-W! Know!"



Again, no one pays attention to the visitors in the room. Chase calls out letters and words in a punctuated staccato rhythm. The children must pay close attention to keep up.

Four independent learning stations can be seen in other parts of the room. Julian is one of two children on a computer, using an “English in a Flash” program that flashes pictures of things like “knee pads” and “baggy jeans” along with the words to describe them.

All the instruction is in English. The children who enter speaking only Spanish require about two years to get up to speed, Brown says.

It was somewhat controversial when Brown and Cruz implemented Direct Instruction four years ago. But staff members who didn’t like it “found another school.” Since Brown took over, all but a handful of the old teacher cadre has left, which is what he wanted.

“We had hoped for turnover,” Brown insists. “The best thing you can do when you’re trying to make a dramatic change is bring in new staff and hope to train them.”

Such a commitment to reform can ruffle feathers, but Brown has always emphasized that his fundamental philosophy is doing what’s best for the children. And improvements must be quantifiable. “To me, what are the best practices?” he asks. “Not just what you did last year. I come out of industry. Show me the numbers!”

At St. Anthony, Direct Instruction is combined with the Core Knowledge curriculum, which guides students through a coherent sequence of content knowledge that builds year by year. The course of study combines visual arts and music with a classic education in English, history and geography, mathematics, and science. St. Anthony’s walls are covered with Core Knowledge reminders. One stairwell is decorated with portraits of presidents – Washington, Lincoln and Roosevelt – whose names the kindergarteners are expected to learn. Another stairwell features paintings from various periods and schools – paintings students are supposed to recognize before they finish seventh grade.

When children are learning at different levels – many typically enter St. Anthony’s several grades behind – they’re grouped by ability for subjects like reading and math so that those who need extra help receive it.

St. Anthony leaves little to chance, and that’s by design. In Brown’s opinion, most schools underestimate how much students can accomplish. “Generally, the more structure that’s provided and the more work that’s provided, the happier the kids are. Discipline issues go away with busy learning. Self-confidence goes up. We don’t have a self-esteem program – they don’t need it.”

Yet low expectations for students are a factor at some Catholic schools accepting Choice students, Cruz says. In a recent meeting one of the principals at a Choice school made a comment that “we’re training these kids to work at McDonald’s.”

Cruz shakes his head as he recalls this moment in an open meeting with other teachers and administrators. If that's the attitude in public, what are they thinking in private, he asks. "No! We're training these kids to compete!" Cruz says. "They should go to high school and college, to do the best they can do."

The St. Anthony curriculum is laid out, step-by-step, lesson-by-lesson, and teachers have little flexibility in what they teach or, in many cases, how they teach it. They are given about 100 hours of training in the Direct Instruction method. Instructions on the classroom walls direct teachers to ensure that each student's back is on the back of his chair, that feet are on the floor and that hands are clasped together on the desk. Every classroom is equipped with a laptop, and teachers are expected to record their progress through the lessons every day. These reports are monitored by the administration and if a teacher veers off track or falls behind, he/she will receive assistance from a learning coach or administrator.

Budiac, the third-grade teacher, says this level of accountability represents a partnership with administrators and learning coaches to ensure that students are making quantifiable progress. She could get defensive, she says, but the feedback is respectful and helpful. The curriculum works so well because it provides an explicit goal for where the class should be by year's end, and it's great at assessing each lesson.

"I love the structure," Budiac says. "I love not having to correct student behavior all the time." In her opinion, plenty of mediocre teachers out there could use more accountability, and it's hard to believe they don't have it in most schools. In many schools, if a teacher happens to love oceanography, or some other random subject, it can dominate a course of study.

Some of St. Anthony's student achievement data suggest that Budiac and her colleagues are making a real difference. Results from the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) test, which measures early literacy development, show a stark difference between new and returning students when it comes to their risk of reading failure. In 2007,

- 56 percent of new first graders were "at risk" of reading failure while 2 percent were "low risk," compared to 14 percent and 51 percent, respectively, of returning students;
- 50 percent of new second graders were "at risk" of reading failure and 21 percent were "low risk," compared to 31 and 52 percent, respectively, of returning students; and
- 67 percent of new third graders were "at risk" of reading failure and 8 percent were "low risk," compared to 38 percent and 35 percent, respectively, of returning students.

Brown insists that the intense focus on achievement is important from a social justice perspective but also necessary in the context of Milwaukee's Choice program. "The results have to be ahead of the public school system to justify the vouchers to the broader community," he says. "We have to produce results."

## More Schools Must Rise to the Challenge

According to Brown, the Catholic community nationwide needs to “wake up” and realize that their schools are no longer the first alternative to public schools in the inner city. Charter schools have assumed that role. He does not tolerate the argument some Catholic school leaders put forth: that enrollment is down because they don’t have the money they need to attract parents. “In my business if people aren’t coming through your front door it’s because you haven’t created a product people want,” he says.

**In the traditional model, the parish pastor is the chairman of the school and the principal is the CEO, McKinley says, and there’s rarely a board involved that has financial expertise. This simply isn’t adequate given the challenges created by the choice program.**

Dan McKinley, head of PAVE, says that the archdiocese needs to hear a similar wake-up call. He wants to be constructive and honest in his criticism, so that things will change. McKinley adds the governance of most Catholic schools has not been up to the challenges presented by the Choice program.

In the traditional model, the parish pastor is the chairman of the school and the principal is the CEO, McKinley says, and there’s rarely a board involved that has financial expertise. This simply isn’t adequate given the challenges created by the choice program. “There are few schools like that that have been successful.”

It’s hard to tell how well the Catholic schools perform academically because few of the schools release their test data. It is a handicap for Milwaukee and other urban Catholic schools, especially in a competitive environment, that some supporters believe should be eliminated.

**Archdiocese officials say the drop in numbers is taking place throughout Milwaukee, in public and private schools, because there are fewer children in the area. But McKinley believes it’s because neither the schools nor the archdiocese have adapted well to the voucher environment.**

Yet some pastors of parish schools resist change efforts. PAVE recently pushed for reform at four schools, suggesting they add 800 students by expanding the sites and building a new school. Critical to this effort were forming a new board and hiring an executive capable of the task, and PAVE spent \$100,000 on top consultants to design the plan. In the end it failed because the pastors were not willing to cede control. “They were more comfortable with the problems they knew than with the ones they did not know,” McKinley says.

McKinley points to the declining enrollment numbers in some schools as evidence that not all is as well as it should be, despite the big voucher program in Milwaukee. According to statistics he’s compiled, the 31 Catholic elementary schools in Milwaukee had a combined enrollment of 7,750 in 2006-07 while their capacity was 10,472. Thirteen of the schools had declining enrollment and fifteen were operating at less than 70 percent capacity.

Archdiocese officials say the drop in numbers is taking place throughout Milwaukee, in public and private schools, because there are fewer children in the area. But McKinley believes it's because neither the schools nor the archdiocese have adapted well to the voucher environment. The archdiocese's new school administrators – a result of turnover at the top in the past year – are doing much better, he says, but the previous administration was not prepared.

The new regime seems to recognize the need to adapt and change. Administrators are in the process of forming five Centers of Excellence to share best practices and improve the schools:

- Leadership Excellence will focus on governance, policy, personnel and practices;
- Product Excellence will focus on Catholic identity and academic excellence;
- Investment Excellence will concentrate on marketing, development, planning and finances;
- Community Excellence will include diversity and family involvement; and
- Infrastructure Excellence will be concerned with facilities and technology.

“We recognize the need to change and we are changing,” says Chuck Allison, current director of schools.

Despite the challenges created by the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, Catholic administrators and teachers say they could not fulfill their mission without the vouchers. And any problems pale in comparison to the opportunities to educate low-income children. Some suggest that their colleagues around the country start thinking beyond fundraising and consider influencing public policy to sustain their schools.

“The biggest barrier to Catholic education nationwide is affordability and accessibility,” says Nelson, associate superintendent of the Milwaukee archdiocese. “I’m not sure why they would not work toward it.”

# Washington, D.C.

## Archdiocesan Schools to Go It Alone

By John J. Miller

**O**n the morning a seven-year-old Clarence Thomas left his mother's house and moved in with his grandparents, his grandfather issued a stern announcement: "The damn vacation is over." By this, he meant that the future Supreme Court justice would submit to a system of strict rules and discipline in his new home. One of the first things he did for the boy was to enroll him in St. Benedict the Moor Grammar School, a segregated school in which white nuns taught black students. He "thought that children learned better when they wore uniforms and studied in a structured environment. It followed that Catholic schools had to be better than public schools," wrote Thomas in his recent best-selling memoir, *My Grandfather's Son*. A vacation may have ended, but a life of accomplishment was launched. Thomas credited his Catholic education with giving him a good start and making it possible for a poor kid from a town called Pinpoint, Ga., to become one of America's top jurists.

Today in Washington, D.C., in the city where Justice Thomas listens to oral arguments and writes legal opinions, many black parents make the same choice for their own children. Yet a lot has changed in half a century. The typical tuition rate for a Catholic elementary school in inner-city Washington is thousands of dollars, rather than the \$25 that Thomas's grandparents paid in 1955. Law and custom no longer segregate schools by race, though the student population at many of the Catholic schools in the District of Columbia is almost entirely black. The

nuns are gone as well; most teachers and staff at these schools are laypeople.

Despite these changes, the fundamental appeal of Catholic schools endures, and thousands of black parents continue to pick a parochial education for their children. Many more would join them if they had the financial means. "They choose it for the safe environment, the quality education and a Christian atmosphere that seeks to instill certain values, probably in that order," says Christian S. White Jr., the principal of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian Catholic School, which is located about fifteen blocks east of the U.S. Capitol. He ought to know. The vast majority of the 189 students at his K-8 school are black, and their parents have made a deliberate choice to send them there.

### Seven Schools Face Conversions or Closure

**T**hat choice almost certainly won't be available at the start of the 2008-09 school year. The Archdiocese of Washington is preparing to perform last rites on Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian and six other Catholic schools. They're ailing from a sad but common predicament. "This week has been a time of heartache and hopes for the future," wrote Archbishop Donald Wuerl on September 14, 2007, shortly after announcing his plans. "Under heartaches is the realization that even with the best of intentions and the greatest of aspirations the Church also faces a limit to the resources available

to us.” In other words, the archdiocese has decided that it can no longer keep paying the bills to run these schools.

It would be wrong, however, to say that the seven schools are shutting down for good. Wuerl wants them to stay open – not as Catholic schools, but as public charter schools. In the months and years ahead, this experiment could become one of the most watched developments in urban education.

**It would be wrong, however, to say that the seven schools are shutting down for good. Wuerl wants them to stay open – not as Catholic schools, but as public charter schools. In the months and years ahead, this experiment could become one of the most watched developments in urban education.**

At its core, the concept is simple. The schools agree to shed their Catholic identity and thereby become eligible for the taxpayer funding that will allow them to continue educating the poor children they now serve. As a practical matter, it means the schools will no longer practice those things that make them Catholic: daily prayer and religious education, weekly or biweekly Mass, and disciplinary models that allow teachers to enforce behavioral standards by asking questions such as “What would Jesus do?”

The school buildings will look different, too. Schools everywhere decorate their corridors with colorful student artwork, but at Catholic schools the content is key. One display in the auditorium of Sacred Heart, in Washington’s Columbia Heights

neighborhood, features imitations of Keith Haring murals, and the pictures focus on themes such as cooperation, courage, honesty – and faith in God. Through a set of doors, in the middle of a first-floor concourse, there’s a statue of Mary. Its location is perhaps best described as “in the way.” Nobody who walks down the hallway can avoid it; in fact, many students pause for a moment, fold their hands and bow their heads before moving on. The walls on the second floor of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian feature student responses to this question: “Why should we study the Bible?” Public charter schools may have cheerful art, but they don’t have cheerful art that references God, the Bible, or statues of Mary anywhere.

## “Charter” Will Mean Loss of Catholicity

Advocates of Catholic education often say that their schools’ most important value is their Catholicity. A school devoted to atheism presumably could dress its boys in ties and its girls in plaid jumpers and force two-hour detentions on students who pass notes during science class. But it wouldn’t be filled with the religious spirit that animates the ideal of Catholic education – its only prayers would be hasty ones, muttered quietly as math teachers pass out pop quizzes.

Does Catholicism make a difference? The question must be asked, even if there is no clear answer. The works of those who have studied Catholic schools in depth, such as the late sociologist James Coleman, Anthony Bryk, and Andrew Greeley, seem to agree that there is something in the “social capital” or “organizational culture” of these schools that might explain the powerfully positive “Catholic school effect” on students – something created or sustained by Catholic belief, faith or training.

Washington’s beleaguered Catholic schools surely have lost some of their Catholicity already. They’re

no longer run by men and women of the cloth, roughly half of the teachers and staff aren't Catholic, and neither is a large majority of their students. It's possible to think that people who attended them a generation or two ago wouldn't recognize what they've become. Yet there are clearly some commonalities: daily prayer and religious education, regular Mass attendance, and occasional visits from priests.

**“Our overriding goal is to keep these schools and their kids and a culture of excellence together,” says Patricia Weitzel-O’Neill, the superintendent of schools for the Washington archdiocese. “There are just two options. Either we do this, or the schools really will be closed.”**

Under the archdiocese plan, most of these Catholic connections will be severed. As a legal matter, the Catholic schools will close and new ones will replace them. Yet the concept is for the schools to go on as before, at least in certain respects. They'll occupy the same buildings, employ much of the same staff, teach many of the same children, and pass on a lot of the same values, albeit in a secularized form. “Our overriding goal is to keep these schools and their kids and a culture of excellence together,” says Patricia Weitzel-O’Neill, the superintendent of schools for the Washington archdiocese. “There are just two options. Either we do this, or the schools really will be closed.”

Traditionally, when Catholic educators have confronted the problem of declining enrollment, rising salary costs for lay employees, and mounting bills that can't be paid with tuition fees and requisite church subsidies, they've had no choice but to shut-

ter beloved institutions – and notify students and parents that they must look elsewhere for an education. Compared to countries that support Catholic schools with state money, “the United States is a disaster,” complained Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski, prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, at a press conference in Rome in November 2007.

**Can a process of conversion preserve a measure of stability for kids and parents from one school year to the next and also satisfy concerns about the separation of church and state? And perhaps most important, can the experience in Washington become a model for Catholic schools in other cities as these institutions confront their own stark choices about how to survive in the 21st century?**

The Washington archdiocese now proposes a solution for struggling Catholic schools – a middle path between an unsustainable status quo and the bleak prospect of turning out the lights. To a certain extent, this is the tale of a plane being built while it's still flying. At press time, no one is certain that these Catholic schools will actually convert to public charters by the beginning of the next academic year, which is the goal, or if they'll even do it at all. The archdiocese still has important decisions to make about how it will proceed, and the public agency that approves charter schools for the District of Columbia has yet to sign off on the idea. The initial signs are positive, however, and the archdiocese

has won praise from the *Washington Post's* editorial page for coming up with “a bold and creative alternative to closing the schools.”

Assuming the plan moves forward, it will raise a series of significant questions for the Catholic Church, public school educators, charter school and school choice activists, poor families, and education-minded philanthropists. Can a Catholic school become a public school and still retain the features that originally made it a success? Can a process of conversion preserve a measure of stability for kids and parents from one school year to the next and also satisfy concerns about the separation of church and state? And perhaps most important, can the experience in Washington become a model for Catholic schools in other cities as these institutions confront their own stark choices about how to survive in the 21st century?

**“We don’t educate these children because they are Catholic, we educate them because we are Catholic,” Hickey once explained. It is a sentiment that Wuerl, Hickey’s successor, believes too expensive to sustain.**

Jesuit-run Georgetown Preparatory School. The school actually predates the formal creation of the District of Columbia by a year. Today, the Archdiocese of Washington is home to 106 Catholic schools in the District and five Maryland counties. Together, they enroll about 32,000 students. In the District alone, there are 28 schools and about 7,700 students, compared to 142 public schools and 55 charter schools together serving 75,000 students. Most of the Catholic schools are operated by the archdiocese, but some are independent.

The story behind today’s public-charter conversion began in 1995, when the Washington archdiocese commissioned a study on its urban schools. Two years later, the late Cardinal James Hickey received a report that called for the closing or consolidation of sixteen inner-city schools to just four. But he refused to accept its conclusions. “I won’t abandon this city,” he said. His sheer grit helped give birth to the Center City Consortium, an effort to revitalize Catholic education by helping troubled schools combine costs and share resources. When it started in 1997, the consortium included eight schools. Membership peaked at fourteen and has since fallen to twelve. Right now, they enroll about 2,200 students, who are predominantly African American. More than 70 percent aren’t even Catholic. “We don’t educate these children because they are Catholic, we educate them because we are Catholic,” Hickey once explained. It is a sentiment that Wuerl, Hickey’s successor, believes too expensive to sustain.

The charter conversion plan would affect seven schools: Assumption, Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian, Holy Name, Immaculate Conception, Nativity Catholic Academy, St. Francis de Sales, and St. Gabriel. Four others would remain in a downsized consortium: Sacred Heart, St. Anthony, St. Francis Xavier, and St. Thomas More. The twelfth, St. Augustine, has opted to remain open outside of the consortium and has possibly found the financial means to do it.

The decision to convert to public charters did not come easily and was announced with anything but fanfare. “We have attempted to educate as many people as possible, and have done so beyond our means,” Wuerl says. Despite D.C. having one of the nation’s few private school voucher programs, Wuerl concludes, “We can’t continue to be an alternative to public schools in the District.”

The history of Catholic education in Washington stretches back to 1789, when John Carroll, the first Catholic bishop in the United States, founded the



## Big Changes Have Led to Charter Decision

Over the course of a decade, the archdiocese and private donors pumped \$60 million into the consortium schools. It represented a brave attempt to defy demographic developments at both the national and local level. In the United States, enrollment in Catholic schools reached its high-water mark in the early 1960s, when more than 5 million students attended almost 13,000 schools, according to the National Catholic Educational Association. By 1990, however, a long and steady decline had taken a severe toll, with about half as many students attending less than 9,000 schools. Since then, the erosion has slowed but not ceased. In 2006-07, about 2.3 million students were enrolled in fewer than 7,500 Catholic schools.

A series of factors contributed to these trends. As Americans moved away from the Northeast and Midwest and resettled in warmer climates, they abandoned regions with concentrations of Catholic schools in favor of areas that had far fewer. The obvious result was an emptying out of classrooms. “While people move, schools don’t,” states an analysis by Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. Moreover, many Catholics drifted away from their parishes. Between 1955 and 2004, weekly attendance rates at Mass fell from 74 percent to 45 percent. The loss of religious staffing at schools, combined with efforts to provide competitive salaries for lay teachers, has increased the cost of running Catholic schools. And in recent years, the clergy sex-abuse scandals have added enormous strain to an existing financial crunch, with some communities especially hard hit. Despite these challenges, Catholic schools remain a large presence on America’s educational landscape. The Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education called them “the largest private school system in the world.”

The consortium schools in Washington represent just a tiny piece of this very big picture, but for a decade they have been a bright spot on the map

simply because they beat the odds and stayed open during a period when many thought that they should close. A different group of church leaders in another city might have allowed them to vanish. Yet the hard facts of demography have finally caught up with the consortium. Between 1950 and 2005, the population of Washington declined from 802,000 to 515,000 – a drop of 36 percent. In the five years from 2000 to 2005, the District lost about 10 percent of its inhabitants. Fewer people mean less demand for schools, Catholic or otherwise. Patterns of mobility also complicate matters for Catholic schools. Many of Washington’s residents can’t afford to pay tuition. As they climb the economic ladder and these payments become more feasible, however, they often flee distressed or crime-ridden neighborhoods. They may want a Catholic education for their children, but they want it in the suburbs. Across the Potomac River in Virginia, in the Diocese of Arlington, Catholic school enrollment is rising thanks to Hispanic immigration and regional growth.

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At the same time, charter schools in Washington have thrived. In some neighborhoods, they seem to

be everywhere – jammed between apartment buildings or occupying second-story space above drug stores. The District is currently home to 56 charter schools on 80 campuses and almost one in three public school students attends a charter. Compare that to just 31 charter schools in all of Maryland. There are even fewer in Virginia – just three in the entire state, and none of them in the Washington metropolitan area.

**The emergence of charter schools is such a strong factor in these departures that the archdiocese calculated how many charter school seats are within a mile of its schools. For most of them, it's more than a hundred, and in some cases several hundred.**

Charter schools have flourished in the District for two primary reasons. “There’s a big parental demand for them and there’s a good law,” says Nelson Smith, president of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. The demand exists in many cities, of course. Wherever there’s a dysfunctional public school system, parents are hungry for other options. The D.C. difference is the law. “It’s arguably the best in the country,” notes Smith. Charter schools aren’t controlled by the public school system. Instead, they fall under the authority of a separate entity called the District of Columbia Charter School Board, established by Congress in 1996. This agency has worked to promote the growth of charter schools rather than stop them, as public school officials fearing competition have tried to do elsewhere. What’s more, charter schools benefit from a student-based funding formula that has given them true financial independence, allowing them to collect between \$12,000 and \$15,000

per student. All told, the District has become what the *Washington Post* recently called “a national epicenter” for the charter school movement.

Just as charter schools have attracted students from Washington’s regular public schools, they’ve also taken students away from Catholic schools. It’s hard to see how they wouldn’t. They offer a wide range of choices; they’re conveniently located all over the city; and perhaps most important of all, they’re free. Since 1997, enrollment in the twelve schools currently in the Catholic consortium has dropped from 2,519 to 2,167 – a loss of 14 percent. Only four of the schools saw enrollment gains and only one of them posted substantial gains. The emergence of charter schools is such a strong factor in these departures that the archdiocese calculated how many charter school seats are within a mile of its schools. For most of them, it’s more than a hundred, and in some cases several hundred.

## Vouchers Aren’t Enough

The consortium schools – and Washington’s Catholic schools in general – have received a big boost from the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, which provides federally funded school vouchers to K-12 students from low-income households. During the 2007-08 school year, more than 1,900 students are taking advantage of the program, and many of them enroll at consortium schools. About a third of all the students at consortium schools receive one of these scholarships. Although the vouchers pay the entire tuition at a consortium school (about \$4,500), they do not cover the entire cost of an education (about \$7,500). Thus the archdiocese must somehow make up the difference through direct support and private fundraising. One possible solution to the budget crunch might be to raise the price of tuition, which would increase the value of each voucher. But that’s a Catch-22, as increasing the price of tuition would hurt families that pay tuition without the help of vouchers.

There's also a lot of uncertainty about the \$13 million voucher program's future. Congress has authorized it through the 2008-09 academic year, but not beyond. And there's a good chance it won't be renewed. In 2003, when the program was approved for five years, it had the support of a Democratic mayor and a GOP-controlled Congress. Yet it only managed to pass the House of Representatives by a single vote. Much has changed since then – and not in the program's favor. Mayor Anthony Williams is gone, replaced by Mayor Adrian Fenty, who has criticized school choice. Democrats now run Congress, and as a party they're hostile to vouchers. The outcome of the 2008 presidential election may also impact the future of school choice in the District, particularly if a White House that's been friendly to the program is replaced by a new administration that isn't.

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Put it all together – the shifting demographics, the growth of charter schools, and the questionable future of the District's voucher program – and the outlook for the consortium schools doesn't look good. Moreover, the archdiocese has made a determined effort to increase teacher salaries, which make up about three quarters of each school's budget. (The incomes of Catholic school teachers traditionally have lagged behind those of their public school peers; the efforts underway to close the gap stem from reasons of simple economic justice as well as

the need to retain a talented faculty at a time when parish affiliations are weakening.) The consortium estimates that only about half of its teachers are Catholic. Although many of them are committed to their schools, as a group they probably have a weaker commitment to the Catholic mission and are more apt to be tempted by better paying job opportunities in the public school system.

**In September, a questioner asked Wuerl about finances and suggested "a bake sale or a walk-a-thon." In reply, the archbishop deadpanned, "That would be a lot of bake sales."**

On the bright side, many of the consortium's costs are low. While Washington's new public schools chancellor Michelle Rhee complains about her system's "faceless bureaucracy," the consortium employs just fifteen people in its central office. This office handles an enormous number of tasks so that the schools can focus on educating kids. Among the consortium's responsibilities are tuition collection, accounts payable and receivable, personnel, payroll, professional development, and technology support.

It also handles fundraising – but in the past few years, the amount of cash coming in hasn't been enough to pay for the consortium's mounting fiscal commitments. "Our expenses kept going up, especially teacher salaries, and our fundraising reached a plateau," says Chris Kelly, co-executive director of the consortium and a longtime teacher and principal in Washington's Catholic schools. The archdiocese projected a budget deficit of \$7 million for the 2007-08 academic year and, if nothing changes, \$56 million over the next five years. That's a lot of money for just a dozen schools, especially when other schools throughout the archdiocese – includ-

ing many that serve almost entirely Catholic student populations – are also clamoring for help. (In September, a questioner asked Wuerl about finances and suggested “a bake sale or a walk-a-thon.” In reply, the archbishop deadpanned, “That would be a lot of bake sales.”)

**On September 7, 2007, the Archbishop announced the charter conversion plan. “I wish more than anyone that these schools could remain Catholic, and I am always willing to receive from anyone the millions of dollars it would take to do this ... In the meantime, the Catholic response has to focus on the children. That is what this framework does. It puts the children first.”**

In fact, members of the consortium’s board studied successful efforts to raise money for Catholic schools in Chicago and New York, and they learned the art of hosting dinners that raise more than \$1 million. Yet Washington differs from these cities in a significant way: it’s essentially a one-company town, and that company is the federal government. There are plenty of private employers, but from a relative standpoint the consortium has not been able to tap as many corporate donors as fundraisers in other cities.

Fewer corporate donors poses a fundamental budget problem for the consortium because of the yawning gap between the price of tuition and the real cost of educating students. The tuition at a consortium school is \$4,500, and most of the consortium

students are only able to meet this amount because they receive some form of financial aid, whether from a D.C. voucher or another source. Yet the true cost of an education at a consortium school is about \$7,500, and that figure does not account for any capital improvements a school might need. (This contrasts with a funding formula for public charter schools that awards between \$12,000 and \$15,000 per student.) For years, the archdiocese made up the difference between the price of tuition and the actual cost of an education, but the economics of maintaining the consortium schools in their current form has become a Herculean task.

Archbishop Wuerl decided that something had to be done. In March 2007, the archdiocese began a process of studying ways to deal with the funding problem. “We were motivated by the need to continue serving these students but also living within budget constraints,” says Superintendent Weitzel-O’Neill. Dividing into three teams of parish and school leaders, they looked at how to keep the schools open and keep them Catholic, what to do if they couldn’t be kept open and Catholic, and what might be done with the school buildings if they couldn’t be used as schools. In July of the same year, the groups submitted a comprehensive report to Wuerl, who spent the next few weeks mulling it over.

On September 7, 2007, the Archbishop announced the charter conversion plan. “I wish more than anyone that these schools could remain Catholic, and I am always willing to receive from anyone the millions of dollars it would take to do this,” he wrote in an online forum a week later. “In the meantime, the Catholic response has to focus on the children. That is what this framework does. It puts the children first.”

The news was jarring, but many accepted it. “It’s very sad,” says Sandra Rojas, the principal at Sacred Heart, one of the consortium schools that will remain Catholic. “But at least the schools will be open – that’s the good part.” Her predecessor as principal of Sacred Heart agreed. “We were very apprehensive about this at first,” says Juana Brown,

who is now co-executive director of the consortium. “But after we saw the plan, we were able to breathe a collective sigh of relief that the schools will remain schools.”

To be sure, the plan also attracted critics. On September 30, 2007, Wuerl celebrated the Red Mass, which is held each year on the Sunday before the first Monday in October (i.e., the Sunday before the Supreme Court begins its session). Outside of St. Matthew’s Cathedral, protestors gathered to complain. Their slogan-bearing signs read, “Keep Black Catholic Schools Alive” and “Educate by Faith, Not by Race,” according to an account in the *Washington Times*. A group called Black Catholics United issued a press release: “Archbishop Wuerl has chosen to abandon providing a Catholic education to black children, and turn his back on our community.” Critics also contended that the archdiocese had failed to involve parish and community leaders in its decision-making process. “Nobody had the understanding that a proposal like this was on the table,” said James Cooper, a parishioner at St. Augustine. “I learned about it from reading the newspaper.” Others have argued that the consortium made a critical mistake when it agreed to expand the number of its member schools, and that perhaps better decision-making could have averted the crisis altogether. The archdiocese continues to defend itself against such allegations – noting, for instance, that people who have devoted their lives to Catholic education are responsible for the conversion plan.

## Worries about Beloved Schools

Whatever the merits of these complaints, their mere existence is a testimony to the value of the schools, which are quarreled over because they are loved. This love comes from both long-lasting emotional attachments and hard-headed examinations of how well they educate students. As for the latter, the consortium schools perform fairly well. In

2007, their students achieved at the 52nd percentile in reading, the 60th percentile in math, and the 62nd percentile in language on the nationally-normed Terra Nova test. These are laudable scores in and of themselves – even more so when compared to the results of other low-income minority students. Perhaps most impressive, the scores represent improvement over time. Since 2000, test scores have surged from below average to above average, and they have done so during a period when the consortium schools have absorbed a number of high-poverty students. In 2000, the students performed poorly on the Terra Nova test – at the 33rd percentile in reading, the 32nd percentile in math, and the 44th percentile in language. These scores are a far cry from more recent results. (Some D.C. charter schools, such as the KIPP schools, manage to outshine these results, but most charter schools do not.)

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“When we started, the schools just weren’t as good as they are now,” notes consortium co-director Kelly. Yet the improvements were anything but an accident. The consortium’s previous executive director, Mary Anne Stanton, reorganized the schools around a set of common principles. She laid off a number of staff, hired new staff, and insisted on rigorous academic standards – borrowed from those used by the state of Indiana and customized for Catholic schools in Washington. (She chose the Indiana standards because the Thomas B. Fordham

Institute rated them highly and the archdiocese of Indianapolis reported a positive experience with them.) The new approach involved adopting the same curricula and textbooks across the consortium, testing children regularly, and holding teachers accountable for student performance. Professional development focused on how to take the best advantage of the new system. “Teachers know where every kid in the class is at, in terms of learning,” says Kelly.

Of course, it is possible for students to attend secular schools and maintain personal religiosity. Yet consortium schools that switch to public charter schools will undergo an enormous transformation from an operational standpoint: there will be no prayers, no Mass, no sacramental preparation, no crucifixes on the walls, no pictures of Jesus or Mary in pre-K coloring books, no stories about saints in middle school readers, no Christmas or Easter celebrations, no priests who roam the hallways, and no field trips to the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Teachers won't be able to shape the behavior of children by asking them to emulate Jesus. Even the names of the schools probably will have to change in order to eliminate Catholic connotations. Religious images that are embedded in a building's architecture – a stained-glass window or a bas relief, for instance – presumably will remain in place (though possibly covered over). And perhaps an art class might turn its attention every once in a while to the great Madonnas, though it will study them for technical reasons rather than symbolic ones. But the bottom line is that the culture of these schools will change dramatically.

This encouraged teachers to work harder and also to appreciate the rewards of success. “When teachers don't experience success, they get burned out and quit,” Kelly adds. “With this system, they're able to plan for success and then see it.” And in recent years, they've been able to see it just about every time the new Terra Nova scores come back.

Apprehension over the conversion to public charter schools, in part, springs from the old adage that if “something ain't broke, don't fix it.” The consortium's finances may be unsustainable, but its educational model clearly works. The worry is that as schools strip away their Catholicity, they'll lose the very thing that makes them special.

Will it matter? The archdiocese now finds itself in the paradoxical position of hoping that it won't, at least in terms of preparing children for success in school. As it happens, the consortium's educational model, based on those Indiana standards, will remain in place. “None of the educational piece will need to change,” said Kelly. The schools will still apply the same basic methods, collaborate on professional development, and share administrative duties, much as they do now. This task will be kept simple by the fact that rather than operating as seven independent charter schools, the schools will operate as a single charter school on seven different campuses – an arrangement similar to what they have with the consortium right now. In December, the archdiocese chose a new nonprofit group, the Center City Public Charter Schools, to manage the schools. Its board members include Ralph F. Boyd of the Freddie Mac Foundation, S. Joseph Bruno of Building Hope, and Jack Griffin, a retired businessman who once chaired the consortium's board. Stanton, who at one time ran the consortium's day-to-day operations, will be executive director of Center City Public Charter Schools.

The consortium schools already subscribe to a “Values First” program that tries to teach a series of virtues such as compassion, integrity, and courage – virtues not exclusive to Catholicism, Christianity, or even religious faith. The program was originally

developed for Washington's public charter schools, and the consortium liked its approach so well that it chose to adopt "Values First" for its own use. Posters that draw from its lessons line the walls of consortium schools. Their content will remain in place through any conversion process.

In Washington, an army of civil libertarians will no doubt try to make sure any conversion to public charter schools is complete enough to satisfy concerns about religious proselytizing. The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program comes under regular attack from groups such as Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and any public charter school with religious roots can expect a severe level of scrutiny. In Florida, the Ben Gamla Charter School, which opened this fall, has faced criticism for a curriculum that teaches Hebrew and draws from other aspects of the Jewish tradition.

Washington's formerly Catholic charter schools will have to establish clear boundaries between school and parish activities. From a legal standpoint, this should not be hard. Yet some observers may see blurred lines rather than sharp distinctions as churches lease parts of their own buildings, use the same facilities for after-hours religious instruction, and employ a staff that's largely made up of former Catholic school teachers and principals. This will be doubly true among those who view even the slightest display of religion in the public square as a crime.

**These concerns won't be foremost on the minds of the predominantly non-Catholic families affected by the conversion. They'll simply want their kids to continue benefiting from the same quality education that they received in the consortium.**

This will not mark the first time a Catholic school has become a public charter. Two Texas schools have done it. St. Mary's Academy in Beeville (in South Texas) became a charter school in 2001, and St. Anthony School in Dallas followed in 2003. Stan Simonson, the principal at St. Mary's, describes the experience as a qualified success. "In terms of keeping the school open, serving the kids, and improving the finances, it's been phenomenal," he said. "Without the conversion, the school would have closed." That would have been a shame, considering what has happened since. In October, the Texas Business and Education Coalition honored St. Mary's as one of the best 385 public schools in the Lone Star State, which has more than 8,700 schools. "We're a better school than we were ten years ago," insists Simonson. Still, he acknowledges a substantial downside: "You can't teach religion." In terms of advice for other Catholic schools that might consider becoming public charter schools, Simonson says, "I tell others, if you can keep your Catholic schools open, keep them open because then you can still teach Catholic values."

These concerns won't be foremost on the minds of the predominantly non-Catholic families affected by the conversion. They'll simply want their kids to continue benefiting from the same quality education that they received in the consortium. Still, some parents may transfer their children to the District's remaining Catholic schools. Others could opt for different charter schools. The archdiocese hopes, of course, that many will decide to stay put – and that over time, the new charter schools will attract even more students than they have now as

Catholic schools. If the new schools meet enrollment expectations, the next question will be whether they meet academic ones. The results of the Terra Nova tests will provide that answer.

Many of the teachers and principals who are Catholic would like to stay on with the public charter schools, and they're hopeful about the future. They say the new arrangement will give them an opportunity to live their faith, even if they can't talk about it. The new schools will be secular, but their survival is consistent with the Catholic mission of social justice. Catholics run hospitals and soup kitchens. Why not public charter schools?

“When I first heard about these plans, I felt a sense of loss because the Catholic identity of this school is not a small thing,” says Christian White, the principal at Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian. “When you lose something, it’s okay to be mournful and sorrowful, but then you have to move on and that’s what we must do because these kids still need us. This is what we have to do.”

Monsignor Charles Pope, the pastor of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian, agrees: “At the new school, they won’t be able to pray for us. But we’ll be praying for them.”



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## Catholic Universities Find Ways to Help Urban Schools

By Marshall Allen

**M**iddle school teacher Joe Manning's voice takes on the metallic tone of the crackling public address system as he leads about 200 students in prayer.

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,* the assembly says in unison.

The famous prayer of St. Francis holds special meaning in this neighborhood. Manning and the students, kindergarteners through eighth graders, are in an asphalt courtyard surrounded by the low-slung concrete classrooms of St. Malachy Catholic School, a rare safe haven amid the violence of South Central Los Angeles.

St. Malachy was formed in 1948, when the neighborhood was mostly Italian. African Americans began populating the area in the 1960s and in the 1980s, Latinos started moving in. The present violence is rooted in a brown-against-black gang war.

*Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon;*

Just days before Manning led this prayer with his St. Malachy students, 61 members of the local Latino street gang "Flores 13" were indicted on federal charges of racketeering, drug dealing, money laundering, and shooting African Americans in an attempt to seize control of these streets. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's



Students at St. Malachy Catholic School gather for morning prayer in an asphalt courtyard, a rare safe haven amid the violence of South Central Los Angeles.

Department, one of several law enforcement agencies involved in the three-year investigation, documented more than 80 shootings, including 20 murders, directly linked to a turf war between "F13" and black gangs, that claimed innocent black residents targeted because of the color of their skin. Some of Manning's students have seen people shot. Many have brothers, cousins, uncles and fathers in gangs.

*Where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope;*

A cast iron security fence rings St. Malachy, and visitors need to press a buzzer to be admitted. The sidewalks outside are scrawled with the stylized sig-

natures of taggers and F13 graffiti mars buildings nearby. Plastic bags, bottles and broken-down cars line the street; tattered mattresses are flopped in an alley near the school. St. Malachy's students live on streets like these. Schools measure their poverty level by the percentage of kids who qualify for federal subsidies for free-and-reduced lunch. Here, all the kids qualify.

**This growing cadre of service-minded educators are foot soldiers in an offensive by some Catholic universities to re-invigorate Catholic primary and secondary schools. They're driven by a sense of justice that's rooted in their faith. They believe children deserve a good education and need to think big to escape their seemingly impossible circumstances.**

Joe Manning is an unlikely character in this setting – an optimistic, hopeful 24-year-old from a small town in Washington State. He's here thanks to the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE), a two-year program through which he serves as a teacher in an urban Catholic school while earning his master's degree in education at the University of Notre Dame. He's one of about 200 such Notre Dame students. And there are hundreds more from thirteen other graduate schools nationwide working in Catholic K-12 schools under similar conditions.

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that's rooted in their faith. They believe children deserve a good education and need to think big to escape their seemingly impossible circumstances. During their two years of service, these teachers live together in a community, grow spiritually and complete intensive online coursework to earn their degree. It's like a Teach For America program for urban Catholic schools, but with graduate education included.

These talented and motivated teachers run into harsh realities in their first year of teaching in places like inner city Los Angeles; Washington, D.C.; Brownsville; Dallas; and Kansas City. Like their Teach for America counterparts working in similar neighborhoods, their initial months are full of challenges and discouragement. Yet they grow and contribute in energetic ways to the students and campuses they serve. Archdiocesan school administrators and principals say they share characteristics with the religious orders of nuns who were the foundation of the Catholic schools in decades past.

*Where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.*

Catholic K-12 schools perform well academically in many inner cities, but they also struggle to survive. Enrollment has been declining for about four decades. Church attendance and giving at many parishes that run schools have also seen a decline. Meanwhile, the nuns who were the backbone of the schools, and staffed them for free, are mostly gone, replaced by lay teachers who must be paid salaries. And facilities built 50 or 100 years ago often require costly repairs if not outright replacement.

These inner city parochial schools have been slowly suffocating. Like a body going into shock to preserve its core functions, they've charged tuition, sold off real estate, begged donors, eliminated staff, cut programs and consolidated campuses – all in an effort to stay alive for one more year.

There's now widespread recognition among Catholic universities that the parochial schools, particularly those in America's inner cities, are in

crisis. They're desperate for assistance and new models of sustainability. Notre Dame's ACE program is one of the best developed and farthest reaching initiatives in what can only be described as a revival effort.

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Neil Quinly, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles's liaison with the ACE program, said the young teachers are set apart by a faith-based ethic of justice and service. "They have a true desire to reform a school and make a school better, because they see the injustice of an inadequate education," Quinly says. "So they are tireless in working to make that school better."

But the institutions of higher education are also training principals and other Catholic school administrators. In the process, they're bringing the rigor of research-based academic assessment – and the credibility it provides. In the case of a historic effort between Boston College and the Archdiocese of Boston, a result of the tragic aftermath of the sex abuse scandals of 2002, the university has taken over a K-8 school in order to develop a new education model as well as keep parochial education alive in a historically Catholic community.

Michael James, executive director of Boston College's Center for Catholic Education, calls the nationwide renewal a "collective" effort among universities. "No single school can do it alone, and we've got a narrow window of time to turn back the tide of school closures," he says.

## Notre Dame's Alliance

In 1973, the University of Notre Dame shuttered its school of education because there was a persistent and disheartening belief it wasn't adding anything to the field. For two decades thereafter, the prestigious university did little to contribute directly to Catholic primary and secondary schools. Meanwhile, a crisis was developing in that sector.

John Staud, a Notre Dame English professor who now directs the ACE program, says he remembers the predicament brewing when he was in elementary school in Pittsburgh. Enrollment in Catholic schools peaked in 1965, the year of Staud's birth, and he can distinctly recall his parents fighting to keep his school open when he was in first grade. Resources were scarce, so Staud's father brought home scrap paper from work to donate to the school's classes.

"Many in the church said, 'Kennedy has been elected president, we don't feel discriminated against any more,'" Staud recalls. "There was a question about the validity of Catholic schools." Twenty years later, hundreds of Catholic schools in cities across America have closed – and many more are at risk.

Some Catholic higher education institutions, such as Boston College, never gave up their involvement in the schools, but many, like Notre Dame, had stopped contributing. That's now changing. A decade ago, Notre Dame revived its commitment to invest in the schools, and other institutions have followed its lead. Together, they seek to bring about needed reform and rebirth of primary and secondary Catholic education.

Notre Dame professor Joyce Johnston leads the University Consortium for Catholic Education, a group of fourteen institutions with teacher placement programs modeled after ACE. She said the revival is grounded in more than self-interest. It's a "sense of responsibility that [K-12 education] is the best program for educating the Catholic lay people in the United States."

One of the university's leaders, Rev. Timothy Scully, worked with recent Notre Dame graduate Rev. Sean McGraw to found ACE in 1993. It began with just 90 K-12 schools. Then as now, ACE teachers received a small stipend from the school in which they're employed – usually about \$1,000 a month, perhaps a bit more in cities where the cost of living is high; the balance of their first-year teacher's salary is paid to Notre Dame to fund the program. Teachers also qualify for a \$4,725 AmeriCorps award, which can be used to pay for their education.

**The revival is grounded in more than self-interest. It's a "sense of responsibility that [K-12 education] is the best program for educating the Catholic lay people in the United States."**

By the late 1990s, Catholic educators across the country were calling on Notre Dame to provide more ACE teachers. ACE had about 160 teachers in 1999 and had no desire to grow beyond 200, Johnston says, for fear of compromising the personal attention and guidance the teachers needed to survive. So she began working with other universities to replicate the program. In 2000, a \$460,000 congressional earmark funded an expansion of the program to four universities; private foundations kicked in capital for four more new programs. Soon, seven funding streams flowed into ACE-like programs at ten universities, including College of Notre Dame in Baltimore, Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, Providence College, Seton Hall and Valparaiso University.

Collectively, the fourteen schools comprise the University Consortium for Catholic Education.

ACE is the giant among the programs, with a nationwide footprint and about 175 teachers. But others are growing and also making their mark in archdiocesan schools.

The programs in the consortium are built on three pillars: professional development, community, and spiritual development. The new ACE teachers come to Notre Dame for eight weeks of intense coursework before their first year of teaching and continue online studies during the school year. They work with a mentor teacher at the school where they serve and continue classes at Notre Dame after year one. By the end of the program, they have a fully funded master's degree in education and plenty of valuable experience – not to mention the important contribution they have already made to their students' education.

## **A Peace Corps for American Cities**

ACE teachers, like Manning and his three housemates in Los Angeles, live in groups of four to seven – with balanced numbers of men and women – in the cities where they teach. The goal is to help the new teachers create a sense of community in their houses – second year teachers supporting beginners, for instance – so they can do the same in the schools and communities where they teach.

The first year of teaching anywhere is extremely difficult, but in inner city Los Angeles the challenges are so daunting that even the most gifted young instructors can feel like giving up. Hillary Simpson, for instance, says working with ACE has stretched her more than she could have ever expected.

Simpson, 22, is like many ACE teachers – driven, successful and characterized by a desire to serve that's rooted in her faith. She was valedictorian of her high school class in Ohio and excelled in extracurricular activities. But now her mission to edu-

cate inner city kids has met a tsunami of obstacles. She's only been at this a few months and is overwhelmed.

Simpson has had an incredibly difficult month of October. Veteran ACE teachers warn that October is toughest because the honeymoon is over, the culture shock is severe, and there are no holiday breaks. Teach for America teachers often feel the same way.

At times Simpson says she feels like she's going to break down. Every time she sleeps, she dreams about teaching. She logs her hours for AmeriCorps – between 83 and 100 per week in October. “I feel like I'm exhausted to the core,” she says.

Fortunately, Simpson is not alone. Notre Dame has a pastoral staff that visits the houses and counsels one-on-one with the young teachers. But her primary support system is her housemates – Manning, Kevin Green, Patrick Lopez and Carolyn Gibbs – three of them second-year teachers. The housemates have dinner together on Sunday and



First-year ACE teacher Hillary Simpson says working with ACE has stretched her more than she could have ever expected.



“It's frustrating because you realize it's not just this school, it's not just this city,” says second-year teacher Carolyn Gibbs.

Wednesday evenings and share many impromptu conversations about teaching and life. The second-year teachers smile and reassure Simpson that her pain and suffering are entirely normal, that her difficulties echo their own of a year ago. Simpson may not always seem reassured, but at least their discussions put her frustrations into perspective.

The second-year teachers say they've realized that they cannot control many of the circumstances affecting a child's education. “It's frustrating because you realize it's not just this school, it's not just this city,” Gibbs says. “Throughout the country there are kids that aren't getting what they need and aren't receiving the valued education they deserve. In the grand scheme, it's kind of daunting.”

## Faith at the Core

ACE teachers don't have to be Catholic, but they do have to embrace the mission of Catholic schools and strive to grow spiritually. The teachers are expected to bring their faith into the classroom as they instruct students and pray together in their houses – though a group in Los Angeles said that busy schedules, exhaustion and stress can get in the way of this ideal.

**The teachers are expected to bring their faith into the classroom as they instruct students and pray together in their houses – though a group in Los Angeles said that busy schedules, exhaustion and stress can get in the way of this ideal.**



Jennifer Beltramo started in 2002 as a first-year teacher and is now principal of the school. In most cases, ACE teachers leave after fulfilling their two-year commitment.

The spiritual component of the ACE program holds great appeal for Simpson, who starts every class day with prayer. “I hope they can see that I’m genuinely praying,” she says. Sometimes she starts off with a moment of silent prayer or an exercise like *Lexio Divina* – an ancient practice of contemplating scripture.

Simpson wants faith to be a normal and everyday part of her students’ lives, so she models it and practices it in the classroom. “Spirituality gives us hope and it gives us purpose and it gives us something bigger to keep our eyes on,” she insists.

Manning and Simpson have a hard time knowing what type of tangible good they’re doing at their schools. The kids’ and schools’ problems seem so immense that they don’t know if they can be overcome. ACE teachers make a two-year commitment, so they can’t expect to see much long-term growth in the lives of their students.

In most cases, ACE teachers leave after fulfilling their two-year commitment, and that makes Jennifer Beltramo’s contribution stand out. She started in 2002 as a first-year teacher at Mother of Sorrows Catholic School, also in South Central Los Angeles. Now she’s the principal.

Beltramo might seem an unlikely candidate for this post. She’s from a town of 20,000 in eastern Tennessee. She’s a white woman with a Notre Dame master’s degree leading a school in a blighted, mostly Latino neighborhood. Nearby buildings are marred

by cracked plaster, boarded windows and graffiti. All 214 students at Mother of Sorrows are poor.

Beltramo never planned to become a teacher, but she had an awakening of sorts during a service project in India. She had seen her desire to serve as separate from her faith until she read the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus says, “Whatever you do for the least of me, you did for me.”

“That was the first time I really realized that this expression to serve really was my faith,” Beltramo recalls. She stayed at Mother of Sorrows because she was asked to become principal and saw it as an opportunity to revamp the school’s curriculum and assessment. Many of the students are transfers from public schools and they’re several grade levels behind. She sees improving the curriculum as the fastest way for them to gain lost ground.

Beltramo has found that school administration is a thankless job. But she’s making progress. She’s ordered new social studies books aligned with California’s acclaimed academic standards and is pushing for accountability and raising the expectations of children. She says one of the strengths of the ACE program is that it brings a new perspective to the schools.

The downside is that Beltramo is the exception. Most teachers in the ACE program, like their young peers in other professions, are short-timers at these inner city posts. (ACE officials do note that about 70 percent of its graduates stay in the field of education, and a majority are still involved in Catholic schools elsewhere.) Even so, principal Daniel Garcia of St. Malachy, and Neil Quinly, regional supervisor of schools for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, point to many benefits that ACE teachers bring. Garcia noted their growth as teachers is phenomenal during the course of their commitment, and they bring a spirit of service that rubs off on the students and other faculty.

Quinly adds that the ACE teachers “inspire and challenge” the school’s veteran teachers. They step into leadership roles, as Manning has done by leading prayer in the mornings in the courtyard. They are role models who proudly display their connection to Notre Dame and encourage their pupils to dream big and prepare for college. It is also a creative solution to the broader labor challenges that urban schools, particularly urban Catholic schools, now face.

Quinly and Garcia both says the ACE program could be compared to the religious orders that established the Catholic schools. They live in the community, serve to the point of exhaustion, and bring a devout spiritual ethic to their efforts.

“The gifts they bring for those two years are just amazing,” Quinly says. “They bring such an energy with them, and I think it is that pure belief in what they’re doing, and the service. I believe that for them this is very much a vocation, a mission. It’s not employment, and I think that makes all the difference in the world.”

## Adopting a School

ACE and other teacher placement programs are just one way that Catholic universities are bolstering K-12 schools today. There’s also a new wave

of research being launched to support the schools and to infuse rigorous academic standards and assessment measures into their culture.

Additionally, higher education is taking an interest in training principals and providing consultancy partnerships to help schools improve. ACE now has a leadership development program for principals, a consulting organization for urban Catholic schools. It also recently convened a conference of Catholic academics and philanthropic leaders to discuss building a field of “Catholic education” in universities.

All these initiatives are important, but one of the most hands-on commitments is the partnership of Catholic institutions in Boston. More than anything else, inner city Catholic schools need to develop innovative models of sustainability. If a school fails financially, research into standards and assessment is moot.

It’s a frigid Monday afternoon in December and Boston College professor Audrey Friedman, an expert in literacy and pedagogy, is working a white board in front of a room of sixth graders at St. Columbkille School in a working-class Boston neighborhood.

She asks the students to name all the “connections” they can imagine. Hands shoot in the air and young minds race. The third floor windows are frosty and the hisses and pops of the historic school’s steam radiator provide background noise as the youngsters blurt out a number of connections: a Christmas stocking is “connected” to the wall; computers are “connected” to the Internet; trains “connect” to different stops along a track.

Friedman’s icebreaker flows into an engaging lecture about how readers make connections to text in Gary Soto’s book, *Taking Sides*. Friedman’s head may live in the world of education theory, but her heart beats in this classroom. In a separate interview, she calls the sessions at St. Columbkille a “highlight of my week.” Her visits appear to be a highlight for the sixth graders as well, but the person arguably learning the most from Friedman’s lec-





Boston College professor Audrey Friedman visits St. Columbkille weekly to discuss literacy instruction techniques that are strategic, focused, and research-based.

**Such individual coaching is new at St. Columbkille and has re-invigorated Wesner's approach to education. Previously, the teachers just did the best they could.**

tures is the oldest student in the class: sixth-grade teacher Jackie Wesner.

Friedman is Wesner's coach, and the two meet weekly to discuss literacy instruction techniques that are strategic, focused and research-based – and the children reap the benefit. Such individual coaching is new at St. Columbkille and has re-invigorated Wesner's approach to education. Previously, the teachers just did the best they could.

The two educators are working together because of a groundbreaking partnership between Boston College and the Archdiocese of Boston. The archdiocese has been scandalized by the priest sex abuse crisis that became public in 2002. Since then, it has teetered on the brink of financial ruin, selling off assets and closing churches and schools as it faced declines in giving and mounting settlements from abuse victims.

In March 2006, it was announced that Boston College would take over St. Columbkille in order to save the struggling parish school and preserve Catholic education in the Allston-Brighton section

of Boston. The area had already suffered two painful school closures and St. Columbkille was the last parochial school left standing in the historically Catholic area.

There had been a huge erosion of trust in Boston, due to the sex abuse scandal and the closure of schools, so the new partnership was met with some cynicism, notes Michael James, who leads the venture for Boston College. But the community's confidence has been bolstered by its affiliation with the university.

Boston College's vision for transforming St. Columbkille goes far beyond saving one school. It's making the school a pilot project for a new model of sustainability for urban Catholic schools. It's the



The partnership with Boston College allows St. Columbkille to preserve Catholic education in the Allston-Brighton section of Boston.

only place in the country where a Catholic university has partnered with an archdiocese to take over a school. The initial success of the project is drawing interest from other Catholic universities in cities that are also awash in struggling parochial schools.

**There are many challenges to overcome in such a transition – curriculum, facilities, fund-raising, and more. But some of the most difficult challenges have been emotional. Any change is an implicit criticism of the past.**

The benefits are clear. Boston College has an extensive network of fund-raisers and donors and has already infused \$1 million into the school. The college is revamping St. Columbkille's curriculum and coaches are taking a hands-on approach with teachers. But the obstacles are also clear. It could cost \$10 million more to refurbish the aging school than to tear it down and start over again. And there is currently no accurate measure of students' academic performance.

There are many challenges to overcome in such a transition – curriculum, facilities, fund-raising, and more. But some of the most difficult challenges have been emotional. Any change is an implicit criticism of the past. James notes that his biggest challenge is turning St. Columbkille into an excellent school while honoring its culture and the contributions of its dedicated staff. The vision is not to change one school, he says, but to create an authentic partnership that can be replicated by other Catholic institutions.

The coat hooks are one illustration of St. Columbkille's history. Nearly 300 of them line the first floor hallways. On this snowy day, few of them



Two generations ago, when St. Columbkille's enrollment was at its peak, there were twice as many coat hooks and they were crammed full.

are burdened with bags and coats. Two generations ago, when enrollment was at its peak, there were twice as many hooks and they were crammed full.

Mary Battles remembers those days. There were 1,800 students at St. Columbkille when she attended first grade in the 1950s. She graduated from the school, then came back later as a teacher for fourteen years and principal for 21 years. Six months ago she was replaced and given a new position as outreach coordinator.

Battles has spent her entire life walking these broad corridors, through handcrafted doorways framed with thick crown moldings and classrooms with built-in bookcases and deep windowsills. She enters a spacious first-grade classroom and points to the faint marks, still visible on the tile floors, where 60 desks were bolted in rows. Now a third as many students are in the room and most of the area is play space.

Back then the Allston-Brighton section of Boston was populated by Irish and Italian Catholics. But in recent decades a veritable United Nations of immigrants has moved in – Chinese, Haitians, Hispanics, Russians and Vietnamese. Numbers and giving dropped at the parish that sponsored the school, and all of these changes were reflected in the classrooms.



In recent decades a veritable United Nations of immigrants has moved in to the surrounding area. The school's current demographics reflect these changes.

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The school's current demographics reflect them, too. Forty percent of the students are white; 20 percent are Hispanic and Haitian, respectively; 12 percent are Asian; 5 percent are multi-racial and 3 percent are black. Nearly eight in ten are Catholic and about seven in ten get financial assistance with the \$3,000 tuition.

The sex abuse scandal further exacerbated pre-existing enrollment and financial challenges. And as St. Columbkille's enrollment dropped and parish attendance and giving faltered, its expenses rose. About three dozen Sisters of St. Joseph founded the school in 1901, but few remain. Lay teachers who require salaries have replaced them. And the cost of maintaining a century-old facility has escalated.

The financial suffocation had an air of tragic inevitability when viewed alongside the struggles of other Catholic schools nationwide. Boston College officials note that 277 Catholic elementary schools closed nationwide in 2004-05, and that sad fate would have struck St. Columbkille, too, had the university not stepped in. The revolutionary partnership was negotiated for about a year before being announced in the spring of 2006. Since then, there's been a whirlwind of change.

**Boston College officials note that 277 Catholic elementary schools closed nationwide in 2004-05, and that sad fate would have struck St. Columbkille, too, had the university not stepped in.**

## Worth Replicating?

Michael McCarthy, St. Columbkille's new head of school, marvels as he walks through the school's first floor. The walls in the expansive hallways are smooth and brightly painted. The air smells like new carpet.

"When I came in here a week before Labor Day, it was chaos," McCarthy remembers. That's when a team of volunteers from Boston College repaired the plaster walls, installed new sheet rock and brought in all new furniture, toys and educational materials for the new Early Childhood Development program. Dumpsters of debris and excess materials that had been stored in the basement, making it essentially uninhabitable, were hauled away.

McCarthy is proud of the upgrades to the school and optimistic about its future. The goal is to increase enrollment to 400, he says. He's even eyeing a wing of the school that was once St. Columbkille High School. It's been closed since 1991 and is currently leased to a charter school.

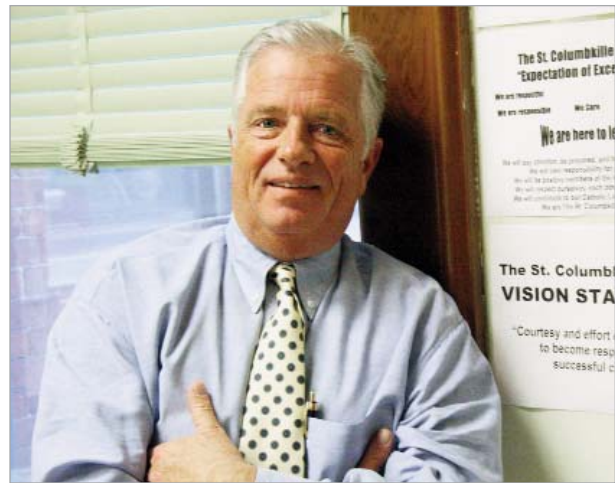
So far, the partnership between Boston College and the archdiocese is working well for St. Columbkille, McCarthy says. The school is its own nonprofit organization with a board that includes members from both institutions, so McCarthy doesn't have to navigate red tape to get responses to his requests. Neither institution always says "yes," but McCarthy

has access to their resources and both have contributed to the school's resurrection. A facilities expert from Boston College led the recent basement renovations, and archdiocesan information technology staffers helped network the school's computers.

"It's easy to see the possibilities of what can be accomplished," McCarthy says. "The reality is that small Catholic schools can't survive on their own anymore." McCarthy highlights the Early Childhood Development program because it's been the initial focus of efforts to revitalize the school. Kindergarten teacher Ellen Ward maintains that there's no comparing the resources of St. Columbkille before and after the Boston College partnership. When she came to the school sixteen years ago, the toys were culled from the local flea market or acquired as hand-me-downs from her own children. She bought craft supplies with her own meager salary. And she came up with the curriculum on her own, too, cobbling together ideas from other teachers and adapting first-grade worksheets for younger children.

Boston College is overhauling the curriculum much as it did the basement, starting with the Early Childhood Development program. Ward says the new literacy curriculum, "Opening the World of Learning," has its pros and cons. After the first year, her pre-K students arrived in kindergarten with more vocabulary, better letter recognition and improved motor skills compared to previous classes. And as a teacher, the course is charted through the entire semester, with six four-week-long units of daily word play, songs and writing activities.

But there's also less flexibility, and with all the coaching and new teaching guidelines, it's like being a first-year teacher again, Ward says. Where there was once too little structure and guidance, now there is too much. The transition has been difficult. "You get comfortable and you get in a groove," Ward says about teaching. "All these years I could just do it all out of my head. It's been a remaking and re-educating process."



"It's easy to see the possibilities of what can be accomplished," McCarthy says. "The reality is that small Catholic schools can't survive on their own anymore."

Then there are the painful personnel changes. Boston College replaced Battles as principal, which Ward and others notes has been one of the hardest parts of the transition. Boston College also wants to raise the professional standards of the teachers. All of them are expected to be certified and to earn a master's degree in education – fully paid for by the university – as long as they can qualify for the graduate program and are willing to do the work. A few of the older teachers were given waivers from the new educational standards, but most will have to earn their degree or leave St. Columbkille. Ward isn't sure she's going to do it.

The growing pains have been difficult. Yet the school is financially secure for the first time in recent memory, and its standards are improving, Ward acknowledges. In hindsight, she believes the changes were the right thing to do. "It really needed a shake-up."

McCarthy regards the academic improvements as one of her first priorities at the school. There is currently no accurate measure of student achievement – nor have there been consistent standards and high expectations for children to succeed.

Michael James knows St. Columbkille faces challenges on multiple fronts: poverty, immigrants who

don't speak English, and a distrust of the Catholic Church. Boston College has already put \$1 million into the school for coaching, curriculum and facility improvements. In the current year, James wants to raise an additional \$250,000 for tuition assistance. He's looking to hire a director of development and has plans eventually to raise \$1 million per year. Right now, he has the assistance of the university's marketing and communication specialists to create branding materials, a website and letterhead. In addition, Boston College professors are lined up to gain access to St. Columbkille to do research.

**“The challenge has been that of a highly resourced institution like Boston College creating an authentic partnership so it’s not just B.C. cleaning house, taking over and pushing out everyone invested in this parish,” James says.**



Kindergarten teacher Ellen Ward maintains that there's no comparing the resources of St. Columbkille before and after the Boston College partnership.



Boston College replaced Mary Battles as principal, which Ward and other notes has been one of the hardest parts of the transition.

“The challenge has been that of a highly resourced institution like Boston College creating an authentic partnership so it’s not just B.C. cleaning house, taking over and pushing out everyone invested in this parish,” James says.

Boston College could have continued providing piecemeal financial assistance to St. Columbkille, but university president Father William Leahy wanted to create a model so that other Catholic institutions could learn to work together. The St. Columbkille partnership is an example of a university and an archdiocese resolving issues about turf and authority for the greater good of everyone.

Other Catholic universities are taking note and James has fielded calls from Loyola University-Chicago, University of San Francisco, and others. Senior administrators and deans at universities across the country insists they want to roll up their sleeves and invest in Catholic elementary and high schools.

“The days of Catholic universities sitting back and doing their own thing are gone,” James says. “We have to do things differently.”



**PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT  
CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**

*American Opinions  
on Catholic  
Education*

# American Opinions on Catholic Education

By David Cantor, Glover Park Group

The Glover Park Group conducted a nationwide telephone survey of 800 adults between March 6, 2008 and March 16, 2008. The margin of error on a sample size of 800 is +/-3.5 percent. The margin of error on subgroups is higher, due to the lower sample size. Oversamples of 250 Catholics, 100 African Americans and 100 Hispanics were also conducted. The total number of Catholics interviewed was 509, with a margin of error of +/-4.3 percent.

This chapter provides topline findings. A full survey report by Glover Park is available on the Thomas B. Fordham Institute web site ([www.edexcellence.net](http://www.edexcellence.net)).

## Summary of Findings

■ Generally, Americans have a favorable impression of the Catholic Church (58 percent), though ratings are lower than we see for other institutions and organizations. For example, about nine in ten adults view the Salvation Army and the Red Cross favorably. This leaves room for improvement in terms of how Americans view the Catholic Church.

- American Catholics have a more favorable impression of the Church (89 percent favorable). However, older Catholics (age 50 and older) are more likely to have a “very favorable” view of the Church (57 percent very favorable) than are younger Catholics (46 percent very favorable).

- Americans hold a less positive view of Pope Benedict XVI, with only 42 percent favorable. Only seventy percent of Catholics view him favorably.

■ There are many substantive things the Church can do to improve its image. Many of the good deeds the Church is already doing are seen as important both by Americans generally and by Catholics. Actions seen as part of a larger Catholic commitment to social justice tend to resonate with people, and especially with people under the age of 50.

- Enhanced efforts in the areas of disaster relief, aid to the poor and disadvantaged, and inner-city Catholic elementary and high schools all have the potential to lead to more favorable views of the Church (both among Americans generally and more specifically among Catholics).

■ Catholic schools are viewed positively (66 percent favorable overall, 88 percent favorable among Catholics), and more positively than the Church itself. Catholic schools get particularly strong ratings from people age 50 and older. American Catholic Schools have a clear, but narrow brand identity—they are credited for instilling discipline and moral values. However, Catholic schools are less likely to be associated with a commitment to working with disadvantaged and inner-city students and providing students the tools for success.

■ Demonstrating a commitment to inner-city schools has the potential to enhance the Church’s



image among Americans generally, and lead to more intense support among American Catholics.

- There is broad support for government funding for many Church-led charitable efforts, including Catholic charities that help the poor and homeless, hospitals affiliated with the Church, and Catholic elementary and high schools.

## Topline Findings

### *Favorability of Catholic Figures and Institutions*

- The Catholic Church is overwhelmingly viewed favorably by Catholics. While not viewed as favorably by adults generally, two-thirds of adults do hold a favorable view of the Church.
- Catholic schools are also viewed favorably, especially among Catholics.

% Favorable	All Adults	Catholics
Salvation Army	91	92
American Red Cross	89	90
Catholic Schools	66	88
The Catholic Church	58	89
Pope Benedict XVI	42	70
Local parish priest	NA	80

### *Perceptions of Different Types of Schools*

- When asked to grade a variety of school types, adults give private schools the highest ratings (69 percent A/B grades). Catholic schools (58 percent

A/B) and public schools are viewed similarly (55 percent A/B).

- Home schools are most likely to get a failing grade (15 percent D/F).

AMONG ALL ADULTS				
Type of School	A/B	C	D/F	DK
Private	69	12	3	15
Catholic/Parochial	58	15	8	18
Public	55	28	13	3
Home	45	20	15	19
Charter	37	14	6	39

- Catholics generally give schools similar ratings to adults overall. However, Catholics give Catholic schools significantly better ratings than do adults overall—76 percent A/B among Catholics, 58 percent among all adults.

AMONG CATHOLICS				
Type of School	A/B	C	D/F	DK
Catholic/Parochial	76	11	4	9
Private	67	12	3	18
Public	57	28	12	3
Home	36	22	17	23
Charter	35	11	5	43

- Participants were asked which types of schools best exemplify certain performance traits. In this context, Catholic schools are identified with values and discipline, while traditional public schools are seen as working with inner-city and disadvantaged students.

AMONG ALL ADULTS					
Trait	Public	Catholic Schools	Charter Schools	Private	Home
Offering a disciplined learning environment	15	40	3	25	8
Instilling moral values	10	50	2	14	15
Providing a nurturing environment to grow	20	19	6	18	25
Working with economically disadvantaged students	57	8	12	7	5
*Giving students the tools for success	35	12	8	30	4
*Giving students in inner cities the tools for success	42	11	14	16	2

AMONG CATHOLICS					
Trait	Public	Catholic Schools	Charter Schools	Private	Home
Offering a disciplined learning environment	13	55	2	17	5
Instilling moral values	8	70	1	8	7
Providing a nurturing environment to grow	19	39	4	12	15
Working with economically disadvantaged students	59	13	9	6	2
*Giving students the tools for success	30	29	7	24	1
*Giving students in inner cities the tools for success	42	19	14	13	1

\*Split sample question asked of half of participants

- Catholic schools get particularly strong ratings for “instilling moral values” (Catholic schools selected by 50 percent of adults) and “offering a disciplined learning environment” (40 percent).

students” (8 percent) or “giving students in inner cities the tools for success” (11 percent), traits overwhelmingly associated with traditional public schools.

- Catholic schools are less likely to be identified with “working with economically disadvantaged

- Catholics are even more likely to identify these traits with Catholic schools, including “instilling

moral values” (Catholic schools selected by 70 percent of Catholics), “offering a disciplined learning environment” (55 percent), and “providing a nurturing learning environment” (39 percent).

- However, like adults generally, Catholics are far more likely to associate public schools with “working with economically disadvantaged students” and “giving students in inner cities the tools for success.”

### Characteristics Associated with Catholic Schools

■ Participants were also asked how well certain traits apply specifically to Catholic schools. A majority of adults associate Catholic schools with the characteristics of “developing moral values and discipline” (79 percent associate this value with Catholic schools), “providing a safe and nurturing environment” (76 percent), “realizing academic achievement” (74 percent), and “developing life-long skills” (71 percent).

% ASSOCIATE WITH CATHOLIC SCHOOLS		
Traits	All Adults	Catholics
Developing moral values and discipline	79	91
Providing a safe and nurturing environment	76	89
Realizing academic achievement	74	89
Developing life-long skills	71	85
Providing an education to inner city and poor students	67	81
Providing an alternative to public schools for those who can't afford private school	66	72

■ Not surprisingly, Catholics are more likely to associate these characteristics with Catholic schools than are adults generally. Catholics are more likely to link a host of other attributes to Catholic schools.

- An overwhelming majority of Catholics associate providing an education to inner-city students with Catholic schools (81 percent), 14 percent higher than adults generally.

### Importance of Current/Future Catholic Church Initiatives

■ Adults tend to see many of the good deeds the Church does as being “very important.” In particular, adults feel the Church’s work in providing care for the sick and elderly (79 percent “very important”), efforts to help the poor (75 percent), and offering counseling for young people (65 percent) are particularly important.

% VERY IMPORTANT		
Initiative	All Adults	Catholics
Providing care for the sick and elderly in their communities	79	84
Funding efforts to help the poor and homeless	75	81
*Providing counseling for young people and teenagers	65	78
*Providing counseling to married couples and people about to get married	54	66
Operating Catholic hospitals	48	48
Operating Catholic elementary and high schools in the inner city	46	62
Operating Catholic colleges and universities	33	47

\*Split sample question asked of half of participants

% MORE FAVORABLE		
Initiative	All Adults	Catholics
Disaster Relief: Responding quickly to help victims of natural disasters get to safety and get their lives back to normal as quickly as possible.	83	86
Poverty: Spending more time and money helping the poor and disadvantaged.	82	87
*Health Care: Providing affordable quality health care to those who cannot afford it.	78	77
*Health Care: Supporting Catholic hospitals that provide high quality healthcare to people around the country.	71	79
K-12 Education: Increasing funding and commitment to inner-city Catholic elementary and high schools.	64	78
Immigration: Supporting initiatives that help bring recent immigrants into the mainstream of their communities.	49	58

\*Split sample question asked of half of participants

- Close to a majority of adults see the Church’s work in operating inner-city schools as being “very important” (46 percent), and a large majority see this activity as at least somewhat important (81 percent overall importance).

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- Catholics are more likely to see operating inner-city schools as being very important (62 percent), and an overwhelming majority see this activity as at least somewhat important (93 percent overall importance). But Catholics are also more likely to see most of the Church’s efforts as being “very important.”

- As with adults generally, Catholics see the Church’s work in providing care for the sick and elderly (84 percent “very important”) and efforts to help the poor (81 percent) as being “very important.”

- Participants were read descriptions of five areas where the Church is currently active and could increase its commitment moving forward. Generally, action in each area would lead people to view the Church significantly more favorably.

- While an increased commitment to inner-city, K-12 education would increase Church favorability, this initiative ranked behind Church efforts to address poverty, disaster relief and healthcare.

- Each of these efforts is even more powerful with Catholics.

- *Importantly, Catholics are more likely to view the Church more favorably if the Church increases its commitment to inner-city, K-12 education (78 percent). While this is a second tier initiative (trailing disaster- and poverty-relief efforts), Catholics respond more to efforts with inner-city schools than do adults more generally.*

## Inner-City Catholic School Closings

- Information about the closing of inner-city Catholic schools over the last five years leads to slightly less favorable views of the Church, though the margin is larger for adults generally (10 points more likely to view the Church less favorably) than for Catholics (4 points less favorably).

REACTION TO INFORMATION ABOUT CLOSING INNER-CITY CATHOLIC SCHOOLS		
	All Adults	Catholics
Total More Favorable	27	30
Total Less Favorable	37	34
Difference	-10	-4

- Given arguments for and against closing inner-city Catholic schools, the majority of people prefer not closing inner-city Catholic schools.

AMONG ALL ADULTS		
	All Adults	Catholics
Social Justice		
Statement 1: Some people say that is important for the Catholic Church to continue to support K-12 education in urban areas because it is a stabilizing force for struggling families looking to provide moral guidance and an affordable quality education in some of the toughest areas in the country.	62	63
Statement 2: Other people say that because Catholics are increasingly moving out of cities, urban Catholic schools no longer serve Catholic students. The Church should dedicate its efforts to the suburban schools where more Catholics who can afford full tuition live.	25	30
<b>Margin</b>	<b>+37</b>	<b>+33</b>
Public Funding		
Statement 1: Some people say that it is important for the Catholic Church to make it a priority to actively seek public and private funding in order to keep inner-city Catholic schools open since they help equalize opportunity through an affordable, quality education in some of the toughest areas in the country.	56	63
Statement 2: Other people say that because Catholics are increasingly moving out of cities, urban Catholic schools no longer serve Catholic students. The Church should dedicate its efforts to the suburban schools where more Catholics who can afford full tuition live.	28	27
<b>Margin</b>	<b>+28</b>	<b>+36</b>

- Among adults generally, a social justice argument for keeping the schools open (+37) is slightly more effective than a public funding message (+28). Among Catholics, both messages resonate similarly.

## Attitudes toward Public Funding Initiatives

■ A majority of adults (and Catholics) tend to support public funding of various Church-affiliated initiatives. Not surprisingly, Catholics are more supportive of public funding of Catholic affiliated charitable efforts.

- Support for public funding of “inner-city Catholic elementary and high schools” is a second tier priority, trailing help for the poor, homeless, and for hospitals. However, majorities of both adults generally (64 percent at least

% FAVOR EACH INITIATIVE		
	All Adults	Catholics
Catholic charities that help the poor and homeless	77	83
Hospitals affiliated with the Catholic Church	72	79
* Inner-city Catholic elementary and high schools	64	73
* Catholic elementary and high schools	59	76
Catholic colleges or universities	57	68
Charitable organizations that have a religious affiliation	56	65

\*Split sample question asked of half of participants

somewhat favor) and Catholics (73 percent) are at least somewhat supportive of public funding of inner-city Catholic schools.

■ Majorities support public funding when presented with the potential taxpayer cost of closing schools. After hearing about a potential \$2 billion price tag if inner-city Catholic elementary and high schools close, the majority of adults (55 percent) support a proposal to subsidize programs such as support for young teachers who choose to work in inner-city Catholic schools and financial support for technology and transportation in these schools.

- Catholics are even more supportive of such a proposal, with 69 percent favoring such a proposal to subsidize inner-city Catholic schools.

## Attitudes toward Converting Catholic Schools into Charter Schools

■ There is little support for converting Catholic schools into public charter schools. A majority of adults oppose such a proposal.

- Opposition is even higher among Catholics, where 62 percent oppose converting Catholic schools into charter schools. Given their strong support for Catholic schools, this may suggest a concern over losing what it is they like about Catholic schools if they are converted into public charter schools.

PUBLIC FUNDING AS WAY TO SAVE MONEY		
Some people have said that when inner-city Catholic elementary and high schools close, it could cost tax payers \$2 billion a year to serve those students. One proposal to reduce operating costs is for the government to subsidize programs that will help keep these schools open, including support for young teachers who choose to work in inner-cities and financial support for technology, transportation, and special education in inner city Catholic schools.		
	All Adults	Catholics
Favor	55	69
Oppose	40	27
Difference	+15	+42

SUPPORT FOR CONVERTING TO CHARTER SCHOOLS		
Some people are considering converting Catholic schools into public charter schools. Charter schools are public schools that are given more freedom to be innovative in exchange for being held accountable by public authorities for improved student achievement. As public charter schools, the Catholic schools would be required to stop all religious practices and teachings.		
	All Adults	Catholics
Favor	39	31
Oppose	52	62
Difference	-13	-31

## APPENDIX A: Question Wording

### Favorability of Catholic Figures and Institutions

**Q1-6** - Now I'm going to read you a list of public figures and groups, and I'd like you to tell me whether you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of each one. If you have never heard of the person or group, or don't know enough to have an impression, please just say so.

### Perceptions of Different School Types

**Q7-11** - Next, I'm going to ask you some questions about education and different types of schools that students may go to. For each one, I'd like you to tell me what grade you would give them – an A, B, C, D, or F. If you have never heard of the type of school, or don't know enough to have an impression, please just say so.

**Q12-17** - I'm going to read some phrases some people have used to describe these types of schools. After each, please tell me which type of school the phrase describes best.

### Positive and Negative Associations of the Catholic Church

#### Q18-19

- When you think about the Catholic Church, what positives come to mind? (OPEN END)
- When you think about the Catholic Church, what negatives come to mind? (OPEN END)

### Importance of Current/Future Catholic Church Initiatives

**Q20-26** - Next, I'm going to read you a list of things the Catholic Church does today. For each one, please tell me how important it is for the

Catholic Church to be doing this work – very important, somewhat important, not very important, not at all important.

### Favorability Toward Church Commitments

#### Q27-32

- Next, I'm going to read you a list of things the Catholic Church is currently working on. For each of these initiatives, the Church could increase its commitment now and in the future. For each, please tell me what impact increasing the Church's commitment would have on your view of the Catholic Church – would it make you feel much more favorable toward the Church, somewhat more favorable, somewhat less favorable, or much less favorable toward the Catholic Church? Or does it not make a difference?

#### Q33

- And which of these issues do you think would most improve your impression of the Catholic Church?

### Reasons to Send Child/Children to Catholic School

#### Q35

- What are the primary reasons you send your child/children to Catholic schools? (OPEN END)
- Which of the following is the most important reason to send your child/children to Catholic schools?

### Characteristics Associated with Catholic Schools

**Q37-42** - Next, I'm going to read you a list of characteristics some people associate with Catholic schools. For each, please tell me if you associate this characteristic with Catholic schools strongly, not so strongly, a little, or not at all?

## Catholic Preferences for Child/Children

### Q43-45

- If you have children, or if you ever were to have children, how important is it to you for your children to learn the basic teachings of the Catholic Church – very important, somewhat important, not very important or not at all important?
- If you have children, or if you ever were to have children, how important is it to you for your children to learn the moral values that come through a Catholic education – very important, somewhat important, not very important or not at all important?
- If you have children, or if you ever were to have children, how important is it to you for your children to become practicing Catholics – very important, somewhat important, not very important or not at all important?

## Inner-city Catholic School Closings

**Q46** - As you may know, due to escalating operating costs, the Catholic Church has closed approximately 339 inner-city Catholic elementary and high schools in the last five years. Does this information make you feel more or less favorably toward the Catholic Church?

## Closing Schools Messaging

### Q47

#### SSA:

Next I'm going to read you two statements that people have made about the Catholic Church closing inner-city schools.

STATEMENT 1: Some people say that it is important for the Catholic Church to continue to support K-12 education in urban areas because it is a stabilizing force for struggling families looking to provide moral guidance and an affordable quality

education in some of the toughest areas in the country.

STATEMENT 2: Other people say that because Catholics are increasingly moving out of cities, urban Catholic schools no longer serve Catholic students. The Church should dedicate its efforts to the suburban schools where more Catholics who can afford full tuition live.

Which statement do you agree with more?

#### SSB:

Next I'm going to read you two statements that people have made about the Catholic Church closing inner-city schools.

STATEMENT 1: Some people say that it is important for the Catholic Church to make it a priority to actively seek public and private funding in order to keep inner-city Catholic schools open since they help equalize opportunity through an affordable, quality education in some of the toughest areas in the country.

STATEMENT 2: Other people say that because Catholics are increasingly moving out of cities, urban Catholic schools no longer serve Catholic students. The Church should dedicate its efforts to the suburban schools where more Catholics who can afford full tuition live.

Which statement do you agree with more?

- **Q 49** - What is the best reason for a renewed Church commitment to inner-city Catholic schools?

## Attitudes toward Public Funding Initiatives

### Q50-55, and 56

- Next, I'm going to read the names of some specific religious groups that provide social services that may apply for government funding to support their efforts. For each one that I name, please tell me whether you would favor or oppose government funding to the organization?



- Thinking again about inner-city Catholic elementary and high schools.

Some people have said that when inner-city Catholic elementary and high schools close, it could cost taxpayers \$2 billion a year to serve those students. One proposal to reduce operating costs is for the government to subsidize programs that will help keep these schools open, including support for young teachers who choose to work in inner-cities and financial support for technology, transportation, and special education in inner-city Catholic schools.

Do you favor or oppose this proposal to use government money to support programs such as

these to keep inner-city Catholic elementary and high schools open across the country?

### **Attitudes toward Converting Catholic Schools into Charter Schools**

- Some people are considering converting Catholic schools into public charter schools. Charter schools are public schools that are given more freedom to be innovative in exchange for being held accountable by public authorities for improved student achievement. As public charter schools, the Catholic schools would be required to stop all religious practices and teachings.

Do you favor or oppose converting Catholic schools into public charter schools?



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