

COVID-19 and Catholic Schools

Summer 6-10-2020

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Subsidiarity & Innovation During the Pandemic

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As the COVID-19 pandemic has unfolded, Catholic schools have been faced with numerous challenges, including finances, human resources, and curriculum. Catholic schools are founded on the principle of subsidiarity, a system that provides an uneven capacity for each school. This essay reflects on the impacts of subsidiarity in this time of crisis, concluding that a system founded on allowing each school to make its own decisions has provided uneven results.

Keywords

Subsidiarity, innovation, COVID-19 pandemic

Since March 15th, more than 40 Catholic schools have announced their closures.¹ Loans received through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) have improved the immediate financial position of many struggling Catholic schools but I expect the carnage will encompass more than 100 schools over the summer and perhaps enrollment declines of more than 10 percent. If the next school year includes more remote learning and parish closures, the numbers will push higher. This acceleration of an already-downward trend has led some to call this an “existential crisis.”² Yet we are seeing pockets of innovation as well as pockets of stagnation. The concept of subsidiarity can provide insight into this changing landscape.

The twin challenges of remote learning and the economic slowdown are proving too difficult to overcome for many Catholic schools. Often fiercely independent and proud of their site-managed character, these schools celebrate subsidiarity. I suggest the selective application of subsidiarity has contributed to this decline, just as it has contributed to the uneven efforts toward innovation. As the Congregation for Catholic Education is poised to rule on the application of subsidiarity at Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School, it’s worth considering how subsidiarity has shaped our understanding of Catholic schools.³

1 For a running list, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/17LzBjtpvillehfD9hw78Gfjm2g7RBOF9uBM43ZklTYM/edit>

2 <https://www.cato.org/blog/private-schools-face-existential-threat>

3 <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/vatican-temporarily-suspends-decree-indianapolis-jesuit-high-school>

Subsidiarity is defined as solving problems at the lowest possible level. This concept, first introduced by Pope Pius XI to critique communism and fascism, is commonly understood as a social teaching of the Church giving people rights in opposition to centralized tyranny.⁴ For many Catholic schools, this means that the Central Office/diocese rarely interferes, and the schools are site-managed. Many priests celebrate and guard the independence of their parishes (and schools) and their ability to make appropriate decisions. Many Catholic school administrators celebrate their ability to shape their own school cultures and not serve as subjects of a large diocesan bureaucracy.

For the past year, my colleague Dr. Jorge Peña of the Greeley Center at Loyola University Chicago and I have developed and administered a survey “Discerning Catholic Worldviews.” As we work through our data in preparation for publication, we have come across some interesting findings in the area of subsidiarity, one of the five dimensions we measured. For instance, we found that both pastors and school administrators had a stronger affinity toward centralized authority—as long as they were the centralized authority! Meaning that a pastor was unwilling to agree to sharing power with a Governing School Board, for example, instead opting for an Advisory Council. These findings were true in our national sample of 1450+ respondents across many dioceses. This has important implications for our church, as constituents value their own independence yet are less willing to collaborate with other groups. The centripetal force present in any bureaucracy works to centralize power and we certainly found this affinity among school administrators and pastors.

The attraction toward subsidiarity extends beyond pastors and administrators. Catholic school parents, who now provide the majority of school income through tuition, wield influence on decision-making such as using the Common Core. In fact, one could argue that it is the parental influence alone that is driving subsidiarity. Many Catholic schools have become more like private schools since tuition-paying parents are influencing decision-making. Teachers enjoy their independence in Catholic school classrooms and reject the standardization of curriculum, pedagogy, and lesson plans of their public school counterparts. These summaries of the attraction of subsidiarity are perhaps oversimplified, but it’s important to recognize that there are real benefits as well as drawbacks to subsidiarity.

4 See paragraph 80 in http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadregesimo-anno.html

Testimonies of innovation have been sprouting up in our Catholic schools. Parents have been impressed that Catholic school teachers pivoted to remote learning in a short time and students have been challenged and cared for through this crisis. Catholic school leaders cite their ability to be nimble and responsive, quickly improvising to meet the challenges.

Yet we've seen Catholic schools fail to rise to the challenges of a growing Latino population, an underserved group of diverse learners, and a working-class population unable to afford rising tuition.⁵ There are no national solutions. We leave it to local schools to solve their issues. Dependent on the quality and capacity of the individual Catholic leader, Catholic schools can struggle to meet systemic challenges such as pandemics. Subsidiarity has given Catholic school leaders the freedom to create new educational models. Or not. We have seen teachers (and entire Catholic schools) resist any type of change and resort to worksheet-type practice to buy time until face-to-face instruction resumes. These schools are now currently attacking the justification of safety measures and promising that a return to the normal is imminent.

Innovation is happening. Innovation is not happening. And we can thank subsidiarity for both! There are very few accountability measures for Catholic school leaders, measuring how they are responding and innovating or compelling them to make changes. As an example, I began offering daily meetings for principals during the COVID crisis. I am the superintendent serving a mostly rural population of Catholic schools. We scheduled a standing virtual meeting at 9 am, Monday-Friday. Some principals showed up every day, asked questions, and made connections. They learned about PPP loans, Emergency Paid Sick Leave, sanitation issues, synchronous and asynchronous instruction, and CARES equitable services. They would probably argue that they felt stronger connections with other principals than ever before. But some principals never came and some were infrequent attendees. When issues surfaced or information changed, there was inconsistent capacity of schools to deal with this new information. There's really not much more I could do. I provide relevant, timely, and compelling material and it is their choice whether to participate.

I could not mandate participation in these meetings, nor could I mandate reading important articles. Yet one of our schools developed a robust student outreach program replete with daily assemblies, frequent check-ins, and flex-

5 https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/lsoe_sites/cce/pdf/STM%20Catholic%20Schools_final%20v4_opt.pdf

ible scheduling. I didn't do that; the school did. They innovated. The success of subsidiarity hinges on the creativity and mindset of the school leaders. It's not on me; it's on distributed leadership which trusts that our school leaders will have the right mindset to size up new challenges and plan for the future.

Growing out of those meetings, I surveyed school leaders to find out where they need help in improving remote instruction. I'm operating out of the assumption that we'll be forced to do some form of remote learning at some point next year. Beyond that, I'm willing to conceive that remote learning could fundamentally reshape our schools. They suggested project-based learning, formative assessments, and pathways to learning at home for early primary grades—the “no tech” options that we all need to include in our remote instruction. I set out to solicit proposals and found one company who could provide a variety of interactive webinars on all three topics. It was a comprehensive but expensive program. None of our schools could have afforded this alone. Working on with CARES Act guidance, I developed a proposal and suggested an equitable dollar amount. But I had no money so my proposal was dependent on the schools' agreement. And some decided not to participate. Do they have a better plan? Probably not. But they have the right to exercise their own judgment. Although I found myself exasperated, frustrated, and frankly, a little hurt, I accepted their decision. We allow schools to make their own decisions and they are only as good as their leaders.

In the current environment, the challenges have continued to mount. As Masses were suspended, donations to parishes have dropped. Economic struggles have led many parents to postpone or reduce their tuition payments. Cancellation of activities and gatherings has also resulted in a drop in income. Even if dioceses offer robust education programs, our structures allow schools to try to solve these problems themselves. There is no mandated training, there is no mandated course of action. Schools with very little capacity to understand and meet these challenges are floundering. Tasks such as applying for a PPP loan, stress testing budgets to anticipate a drop in enrollment, or developing a new method of course delivery are all too difficult to complete on one's own. If we don't intervene sooner and articulate the compelling reason to all stakeholders, we can expect that the number of Catholic schools closing will continue.

Is there another way? Perhaps the Partnership Schools in New York City are the best example of a collaborative group of schools founded on cooperation and solidarity, not competition and subsidiarity. Other examples such as

the Cristo Rey Network also testify to the value of working together and not repeating efforts.

As the pandemic has unfolded, schools have been faced with challenges in finance, human resources, and curriculum, to name only a few. A system founded on subsidiarity provides an uneven capacity for each school. A system founded on allowing each school to make its own decisions has provided uneven results. For a variety of reasons (lack of funding, deficits, low enrollment) the diocesan leadership will then swoop in and announce a school's closure, usually involving a centralized decision overriding any type of subsidiarity.

It occurred to me that when a bishop announces the closure of a school, it's one of those times you see a prelate talking about Catholic schools in the news. The other is when a gay teacher or principal is let go. And we had an example of that last month when a high school teacher was outed by a secret letter to the Archbishop. All concerns for subsidiarity are secondary to this personnel action. It's interesting to note what types of actions cause a bishop to intervene and supersede subsidiarity. It usually involves gay marriage or unwed pregnancy, usually not ineffective teaching or offensive conduct. Or perhaps a better argument is that the moral causes put the bishop on the news.

When Brebeuf refused to fire a gay teacher, they cited subsidiarity—the same right to choose whether or not to innovate or change that is afforded every Catholic school. They appealed the Archbishop's decision to the Vatican Congregation for Education based on their right to make personnel decisions appropriate to their community, which has suspended the Archbishop's sanctions while they wait to rule on the appeal.

Catholic dioceses have allowed subsidiarity to shape operations of Catholic schools, which has contributed to their rapid decline during the current COVID pandemic. We can expect that if we continue to let schools manage their own affairs without any interference, support, or collaboration the number of Catholic schools will continue to decrease at a rapid rate.