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CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

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Life Cycle Institute

The Catholic University of America

Our project, "Legacy at the Crossroads: The Future of Catholic School," is a 30-month study of the nation's Catholic elementary and secondary schools. During this period, we will assemble and make sense of available empirical data in order to clarify the present status and future prospects of these schools. Topics to be addressed are staffing patterns; costs, tuition, and other sources of income; the demographics of families who use the schools; views of bishops and pastors; governance issues; sponsorship of religious orders; the teaching of religion; effectiveness of parish education programs; mission; and Catholic identity in contemporary American culture, among others. When possible, we will focus on recent trends which have implications for future restructuring.

WHY THIS STUDY AT THIS TIME?

We approached the Lilly Endowment because of its record of supporting research with prospects of strengthening Catholicism and other major religious denominations. The officers were knowledgeable about the recent history of Catholic schools and the need for rational policy regarding problems these schools face. It was agreed that the importance of Catholic schools in the history of the Church in the United States warranted a serious policy study that was grounded in empirical evidence which could then be submitted to public discussion. Our work would then fit within a strong tradition of research and have clear application to policy (Convey, 1992; Greeley, 1969).

We proposed to begin by establishing basic facts about the condition of the schools. We have already invited scholars and researchers to appraise and synthesize available data in the areas mentioned above. We have also invited expert critics to reflect on the facts and suggest strategies for solutions. We will next hold a working conference at which participants will suggest various strategies and weigh their respective advantages and costs. The participants will represent the several constituencies with stakes in Catholic schools and education in general. The results will be publicized and made available to the decision makers who are formally responsible for Catholic schools.

HOW SERIOUS ARE THE DIMENSIONS OF THE PROBLEMS?

One leading fact is that Catholic school enrollment has declined by about 50% over the past 25 years. This decline is larger than the drop in the school-age population. Examples of reduced enrollment are dramatic. For instance, elementary schools in the Brooklyn diocese enrolled 161,000 students in 1970 but 56,000 in 1990. During the same 20-year span, elementary school enrollment declined from 210,000 to 105,000 in Chicago, from 182,000 to 97,000 in Philadelphia, and from 82,000 to 36,000 in Boston. In the 20 largest diocesan systems, the smallest decline for the period was 29% while the largest was 65%.

Although in some dioceses today parents are waiting in line to enroll their children in Catholic schools, the scope of interest and parents' main motivations are not clear. Lack of such information is unfortunately common, just as we know little about reasons for the past 30 years of declining enrollment. Even with optimistic outlooks on the future, it is improbable that the schools will regain in the foreseeable future the enrollment that would allow them to educate the proportion of Catholic children they once did. Not knowing why a prior generation of parents withheld their children from these schools, or why some parents today desire these schools, one could hardly expect to predict the future with confidence.

Another fact is that costs of schooling have escalated and, consequently, so has tuition gone up. At the same time, parish income has not kept pace with these increases. According to Harris's (1996) calculations, parishes contribute on average, about 40% of the typical elementary school's costs. Obviously, the remainder must come from tuition and other sources. The cost problem extends beyond parish income to the changing structure of the schools. Schools have lost and will continue to lose their traditional teachers who were women and men religious. Most religious orders are aging and have small numbers in upcoming cohorts. Religious are being replaced by lay teachers who require higher wages.

Costs cannot be isolated from other aspects which show these schools to be systems with interlacing parts. For instance, not only do changes in staffing add to costs, they may also alter the religious atmosphere and character of the schools. Consider Galetto's (1996) study of teachers of religion in elementary schools. His results indicate that today's teachers of religion do not necessarily know the Church's positions on major issues and do not necessarily agree with the hierarchy's official position on matters such as divorce and remarriage, birth control, and abortion.

Broader dynamic effects of the income-cost disparity can be exemplified in other ways. During the past 30 years, many Catholic families changed residence from cities to suburbs, leaving behind their home parishes and

schools. In some instances, the teaching sisters and local pastors chose to maintain schools in order to serve the families who had newly moved into the neighborhoods. These were frequently non-Catholic African American families in which parents sought high-quality education, discipline for their children, and a safe school environment. The change in student population constituted a shift in mission which needed no special justification because it fit the Catholic ethos of working for social justice. But over time, as the home parishes lost income and as the teaching sisters have retired, this mission has been put in jeopardy. To sustain it, diocesan and community funds are needed; but the need potentially creates tension with middle class suburban Catholic families who do not have but want schools in their communities.

These affluent Catholics may begin to ask why money they donate through their local parishes is reallocated to geographically distant non-Catholic students instead of being returned to their own Catholic children.

FURTHER COMPLICATIONS

From the point of view of the media, Catholic schools have never had it so good. The *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*, which have national audiences, have repeatedly praised Catholic schooling in contrast to public education. In the prototypical story, a reporter visits a Catholic school and is politely greeted by well-groomed students who ask if they can be of assistance. The reporter sees order in the halls, knows that achievement scores are high, and wonders why the public school around the corner cannot duplicate this educational environment. The story takes on added significance when the reporter notes that the cost per pupil in the Catholic school is only a portion of the cost in the public school. Why, people then ask, are they paying more for less? Despite first appearances, this narrative form does not serve Catholic schools well. There are several reasons why the public school v. Catholic school comparison may look better than it is.

First, an estimated 80% of Catholic school-age children attend public schools. Who could be pleased with their, or any child's, receiving an inferior education?

Second, there is a potential ideological trap in these comparisons. Since the 1980s, a number of neoconservative commentators have attacked the public schools, in a concerted effort to sway public opinion against them. This attack has involved the misuse of data to support the charge that schools are failing society. For example, these commentators have emphasized recent declines in academic achievement, signified, for example, by SAT scores. On closer inspection, it is seen that there has not been a 25-year decline in SAT scores which have, in fact, remained stable during and have even increased for minority students, whom the critics say the public schools have in particular failed (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). There is no gain for advocates of

Catholic schools to be associated with this kind of attack. If Catholic schools are doing well, let us find out why and promote the infusion of these features in all schools (McDonald, 1993).

Third, researchers who study Catholic and public schools cannot agree on why differences favoring Catholic schools are generally found. One possibility is a selection factor; the 5 to 6% or so of American school-age children who attend Catholic schools may constitute a different population from the 90% who attend public schools. Moreover, some scholars have argued that outcomes like achievement scores are less the product of the internal workings of schools than the result of extra-school factors such as healthy parental relationships.

Fourth, one needs to be cautious about claims that Catholic schools are "common schools" in the sense of enrolling America's heterogeneous student population. Recent increases in tuition have brought about a rapid change in the student body which is getting more homogeneous in its socioeconomic makeup. Further, although the schools enroll between 20 and 25% non-Catholics, these students also tend to be from upper income brackets.

Fifth, much of the comparative data is focused on achievement scores which consistently favor Catholic schools. But the differences are not large and, more pointedly, studies only weakly inform us about the educational processes that account for achievement.

Sixth, emphasis has been given to Catholic schools' success with achievement in low-income minority students. The actual success is no trivial feat. But it needs to be tempered by the fact that inner-city schools which serve this population are in most jeopardy for closing. In a preliminary report on our project, Sheila Nelson (1994) looked at the governance structure among 33 inner-city schools in Chicago in 1987-88 and again in 1996. She observed that five of the original schools had closed while another seven had been absorbed through consolidation, and six others had changed governance in other ways.

Seventh, the Catholic-public contrast is also a misleading rhetorical ploy that has stoked the fires of vouchers and school choice. The epitome was reached in 1983 when President Ronald Reagan promised the attendees at the National Catholic Educational Association annual meeting that he would personally lead the charge for school vouchers. It is now 15 years later and his promise has not been met, nor have courts hinted that they might support such a law were it enacted. The issues of choice and vouchers divide Catholic educators, with advocates banking on them for economic survival and their opposites arguing that schools should remain independent and self-sustaining, the very characteristics that sustained them historically.

VARIATIONS

Discussion has ordinarily been focused on Catholic schools as a single category or national system. In reality, schools differ according to diocese; governing religious order; urban, suburban, or rural settings; region of the country; and historical tradition. The problems we have noted are not distributed equally across these factors, and the prospects for solutions vary as well. For example, schools in the northeast operate in a different environment than schools in the southeast and southwest.

There may be a general will among the United States bishops to have thriving schools, but this does not constitute a single system. Indeed, one of our sub-projects includes a survey of bishops to discover their various perspectives toward the schools. One of our goals is to discern the degree of variations across dioceses and schools in the hope that we can learn from the differences. If we can differentiate among schools that are doing more and less well, we may be able to identify factors that can be promoted to benefit other schools and their students.

This may seem to be an obvious point, but it is often forgotten in the rhetoric on school issues. We have observed in other projects that diocesan structure tends to diminish communication so that administrators in one locality know little about the problems and solutions of administrators in the next diocese or state. This kind of isolation—also called diocesan autonomy—is not restricted to schools but pertains to many areas of operation.

By collecting data and communicating them widely, we can make an important contribution simply by making information available. Although solutions must come from local decision makers and depend on local resources, problems seem to be universal. Information on one diocese's solution to staffing issues or success with fund-raising development can be useful to other dioceses facing similar problems. Much information does get communicated through national bodies such as the Education Secretary of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Catholic Educational Association, the Chief Administrators of Catholic Education, and the like. We view our project as one more vehicle for communication that schools can use as they confront this era of change.

CONCLUSION

Having not yet completed the data synthesis stage of our project, we are in no position to project results or predict outcomes. Our aim is to provide empirical grounding for the ongoing discussions about schools so that informed policy can be made. We do not glibly support a simplistic model of ideal rational choice regarding data and policy. Data are useful only when they are submitted to rigorous discussion that includes multiple points of

view. Discussion of school issues ought to occur at all levels, for instance, in diocesan councils and national forums. The key is to stimulate discourse that is grounded in empirical realities that are too frequently blocked out by ideological priorities.

Much is changing simultaneously within the Church that has an aging priesthood and sisterhood, a population that is growing in heterogeneity through new immigration, an altered parish structure, a cohort of young adults that is not attached to the institutional organization as older cohorts were, and pressures on its social services due to changes in population and government regulations. And while the institution is adapting to these changes, the meaning of Catholic identity is undergoing cultural revision for a large portion of the Catholic population.

When schools are viewed in this context, their present state and future form become both clearer and more ambiguous. Which segments of the Catholic population seek these schools for their children and for which purposes? Which parents want the schools to socialize their children into Catholicism and which use the schools as a way to avoid social problems? And, what about the fate of new immigrants who might prize Catholic education, as the immigrants of a century ago did, but who cannot afford the costs? Whom should Catholic schools serve when it is clear that they can accommodate only a tiny portion of Catholic school-age children? We have phrased questions in this manner to highlight the fact that the future of Catholic schools is inherently connected to the institutional Church. The challenges for the schools should not be separated from the larger issues facing the institutional Church and our society as they enter the next millennium.

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