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# THE SCHOOL CHOICE MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES: HOW IT WILL AFFECT CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

THEODORE J. WALLACE

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*In this article, some of the most prominent school choice initiatives will be described. Opinion research trends regarding school choice and initial results from comprehensive research efforts to document student achievement in privately funded school choice scholarship programs will be summarized. The article concludes with implications which this exciting but increasingly complex arena of school choice may create for Catholic educators.*

**M**agnet schools, charter schools, Afro-centric schools, schools operated by for-profit companies, religious schools, independent schools, inter- and intra-district public school choice, publicly funded school choice, and privately funded school choice. These are some of the growing number of educational options for parents to consider. Theoretically, this expanded era of choice should cause schools that have been in existence to reexamine their missions to ensure a strong position in this diverse school marketplace.

What does or should this mean for Catholic schools in the United States? To answer this question, one must consider two different perspectives regarding the current status of Catholic education. On one hand, supporters of Catholic education point to an increase in enrollment for the past five years as well as the success of many development efforts to raise money for endowments, tuition assistance, and facility renewal and expansion as signs that Catholic schools will fare well in this era of choice in education. On the other hand, there are some who posit that Catholic education is actually at a critical juncture in its history in this country. Harris (1996) observed that enrollment in Catholic elementary and secondary schools in the United States decreased from a high of 5.5 million students in 1966 to 2.5 million in 1993, despite the fact that the Catholic population in the United States grew from 44 to 55 million during the same period. In addition, in 1991, only 21% of

the Catholic school-age children in the United States attended Catholic schools, as compared to 47% in 1962. Harris also generated an important insight regarding market share. He noted that if Catholic schools had continued to attract the same percentage of the Catholic population in 1993 as they did in 1966, an additional 413 Catholic elementary schools would have been needed.

To those who take Harris's data seriously, the future of Catholic education in the United States is currently in crisis and a growing menu of school choice options could pose an enhanced threat to many Catholic schools. This threat comes from a misguided sense of security on the part of those who subscribe to the notion that Catholic schools, as we know them, will continue to prosper regardless of the broader educational context. But too many Catholic schools have relied on the perception that they are the best of only a couple of choices in depressed areas of many cities. As more choice options such as free charter schools become available to the families who live in these areas, what guarantees are there that the local Catholic schools will be *the* choice? What about suburban Catholic schools that already compete with public schools with solid reputations? Will parents be more satisfied with the public school options if they can opt to send their children to the public school of their choice within that district or in a neighboring district?

In this article, some of the most prominent school choice initiatives will be described. Opinion research trends regarding school choice and initial results from comprehensive research to document student achievement in privately funded school choice scholarship programs will be summarized. The article concludes with implications which may be drawn for Catholic educators thorough this exciting but increasingly complex arena of school choice.

## PERSPECTIVE

According to Hoxby (1998), private schools in the early 1960s in the United States enrolled a peak of just under 15% of the elementary and secondary school-age children. Hassel (1998) indicated that Catholic schools represented 32% of all private schools and enrolled 51% of all private school students in school year 1993-94. As Metzler (1998) reported, by the 1995-96 school year, Catholic schools represented 30% of all private schools and enrolled 50% of all private school students. These statistics decreased slightly in those two years despite Metzler's report, which highlighted the fact that Catholic school enrollment has increased 81,000 students in the past five years through the 1997-98 school year.

These data, combined with Harris's as reported earlier, document that as school choice options expanded, Catholic schools not only lost market share as a percentage of the total student population in the United States, but they

also lost market share of the total private school population. This information is important as we now look at the growth of recent school choice initiatives in the United States.

## **PROMINENT SCHOOL CHOICE INITIATIVES**

This section will focus on: 1) privately funded school choice scholarship programs, 2) the growth of charter schools, and 3) the publicly funded vouchers. While there are other school choice initiatives, these are spotlighted because of their significance.

### **PRIVATELY FUNDED SCHOOL CHOICE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS**

In 1991, the first program to provide scholarships allowing low-income families to move their children from public to private schools was launched in Indianapolis. Named the Educational CHOICE Charitable Trust, the program has provided approximately 2,900 grants to students since its inception (Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation, Fax, June 2, 1998). As of the 1998-99 school year, privately funded programs exist in more than 40 cities, with 10 having begun this year, which is a record year of growth for the movement (Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation, Fax, June 2, 1998).

Typically, these programs provide tuition assistance scholarships that average about \$1,000 per child to low-income families. From 1991 through the 1997-98 school year, more than \$33 million was awarded to more than 14,000 students in these cities. The demand has been much greater, however. Applications during this same period exceeded 40,000 (Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation, 1997).

The Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation, also known as CEO America, was established to assist cities in the creation of new programs and to share information among those already involved in such initiatives. The Children's Scholarship Fund, known as CSF, was announced in June 1998 by two businessmen, John Walton and Theodore Forstmann. Each of these men contributed \$50 million to a fund designed to match contributions in their partner cities. The total of \$200 million (half from CSF and half from partner cities) will create approximately 50,000 scholarships, guaranteed for at least four years, for low-income families to exercise school choice. A national lottery day is planned for April 1999 to award these scholarships.

Together with the impressive total of CSF scholarship funds available, another illustration of the popularity of school choice of this kind is the diversity of persons included on the national board of advisors for the CSF program. Included among the more than 40 board members are Reverend Floyd

Flake, former U.S. Congressman and pastor of Allen AME Church, New York; Martin Luther King III, president, Southern Leadership Conference; Peter Lynch, vice chairman, Fidelity Management; Trent Lott, U.S. Senator; General Colin Powell, former chairman, U. S. Joint Chiefs of Staff; Andrew Young, chairman, GoodWorks International; Jill Barad, chairwoman and CEO, Mattel, Inc.; and Dorothy Height, chair, National Council of Negro Women.

Central to the privately funded school choice scholarship movement is a shared mission. Of primary importance to the growing number of local and national business leaders, clergy, educators, and others is empowering families without means to choose where their children will be educated. The overall demand from families for choice has demonstrated the need for this mission.

While no comprehensive study has yet been conducted about the effect of these programs on Catholic school enrollment, approximately 50-75% of the scholarships awarded in the cities with privately funded school choice programs have been used by families to enroll their children in Catholic schools. The primary reasons given are the proximity of Catholic schools to low-income families and the schools' positive reputation. Several Catholic dioceses are taking a very proactive role in establishing privately funded programs. In fact, the Toledo (Ohio) Diocese has taken the lead in creating a local program that will begin awarding scholarships in the fall of 1999. The Toledo program is among the most recent to form a partnership with the Children's Scholarship Fund.

## CHARTER SCHOOLS

The advent of charter schools coincided with the first privately funded school choice scholarship program. In this section, case studies will illustrate the concept so that Catholic educators can better understand how charter schools present a challenge to the enrollments of Catholic schools in their neighborhoods.

Peterson (1998) explained that charter schools were first authorized in the United States in 1991 by a Minnesota law. The charter school concept stipulates that an agency of the state (i.e., a local school board or community education council) gives to those wishing to establish a school a charter and a fixed amount of dollars per pupil, free of most governmental and teacher-contract regulation. By 1995, about 250 charter schools had been created in the United States. According to Stern and Manno (1998), 33 states have enacted charter school legislation and some 800 charter schools operate, enrolling approximately 170,000 children.

A prime example of the accelerating popularity of charter schools is Washington, DC. Mathews (1998) reported that 3,200 students enrolled in new charter schools opening in Washington for the 1998-99 school year. The

city has 19 such schools and dozens more in DC are applying for charter status to open in the school year 1999-2000. This makes the Washington area the fastest growing charter school system in the United States.

School officials in the Archdiocese of Washington reported that their urban Catholic schools have not been affected by these charter schools, but they believe that competition for students will increase with the addition of many more charter schools next year. A major factor in the stabilized enrollments in the urban Catholic schools in Washington has been the presence and growth of the Washington Scholarship Fund. This privately funded school choice scholarship program has awarded more than 1,000 scholarships in recent years, and about 70% have been used in the urban Catholic schools. While this has helped the Catholic schools, it may also mask some of the initial impact that the new charter schools in Washington urban areas have had on their enrollment.

Early results regarding charter schools were documented in an extensive study by the Hudson Institute. In this study, as reported by Vanourek, Manno, Finn, and Bierlein (1998), four sets of quantitative data on 50 charter schools from 10 states enrolling about 16,000 students were gathered. The data reported satisfaction levels among the schools' essential constituents, comparisons between charter schools and schools formerly attended, reasons for choosing a charter school, and basic demographics.

When asked what they liked most about their charter school, students identified items primarily related to teaching and learning. When asked to compare the charter school with their previous school, they commented most about better teachers and the fact that they, as students, were more interested in their schoolwork. Of the students who rated their academic performance at their previous school as poor or failing, 70% rated themselves better academically as a result of moving to a charter school. Parents cited many factors for their high satisfaction with charter schools, particularly the individual attention, class or school size, curriculum, and quality teaching. Parents said higher standards, educational philosophy, and better teachers were the primary reasons they chose charter schools for their children. Interestingly, fewer than one in five parents listed "child doing badly" in their previous school as a reason for moving their child to a charter school.

Stern and Manno (1998) offered an insightful look inside two charter schools: the Boston Renaissance School and the Fenton Avenue School in Los Angeles. A summary of these case studies is offered to enrich understanding of the practice and distinctiveness of charter schools. For Catholic educators, there are two major reasons to be aware of the progress and operation of charter schools: 1) they are opening in neighborhoods where Catholic schools have had a long-term presence; and 2) they are a tuition-free viable option to low-performing public schools in the neighborhoods.

### **Boston Renaissance School**

The Boston Renaissance School, created by the Horace Mann Foundation, opened in September 1995 with 637 students in grades K-5. While the enrollment of most charter schools is about 250 students, Boston Renaissance School grew to 1,050 students by 1997—80% are minorities—with a waiting list of 1,000 students. A recent Massachusetts Department of Education study found that while the school's students scored below the national average on standardized tests when they entered, after one year at Boston Renaissance they performed at or above grade level (Stern & Manno, 1998).

The Edison Project, a for-profit education management firm headed by entrepreneur Chris Whittle, was hired to establish the curriculum, staff development program, and testing tools. The Boston Renaissance School enjoys much autonomy from the normal centralized bureaucracy that characterizes most public school operations. The absence of a teacher's union master agreement has allowed the school to craft a longer school year and day, as well as an enhanced teacher compensation program. Teachers are organized in teams led by master teachers who help develop the less experienced teachers. Most teachers are paid about the same amount as they would if they taught in the local public schools, but the master teachers earn more. The school can fire ineffective teachers. An administrator at Boston Renaissance rejoiced that their charter school does not have to defend the indefensible by keeping a poor teacher only because the regulations make it practically impossible to do otherwise.

In the Archdiocese of Boston, some Catholic schools have experienced a high loss of students due to the presence of charter schools. Another issue there and elsewhere concerns diocesan leadership agreeing to lease closed Catholic school buildings to new charter schools. Some dioceses, Boston and Toledo for instance, have chosen to lease to new charter schools but not without some debate about the possibility of hurting Catholic schools in those neighborhoods.

### **Fenton Avenue School, Los Angeles**

The Boston Renaissance School is a "start-up" charter school; that is, a completely new school. Fenton Avenue School, a "conversion" school, was an established public school converted to charter status. The decision to convert Fenton Avenue School to a charter school was based upon its bleak record in recent years, characterized by poor attendance, poorer academic performance, low staff morale, and gang activity.

Despite the school's poor record within the local public school district, there was resistance to the conversion. It became a charter school in 1994, and amazing progress occurred immediately. Stern and Manno (1998) reported that student test scores for the California Test of Basic Skills—which covers math, reading, and writing—increased 16% in the first year. Following

the second year of operation, scores for English-speaking students at the school increased 5.5% while Spanish-speaking student scores jumped an incredible 28.7%. As a result, the state department of education named Fenton Avenue School a distinguished elementary school in 1997.

Another goal set by the Fenton Avenue School was to become as good as the most technologically advanced university in the country. While skeptics abounded, the school invested heavily in its technology plan, resulting in all classrooms containing multimedia computers, VCRs, CD players, and satellite and cable TV. The school also housed a broadcast studio. Two sixth-grade classrooms have a computer on every desk as a model of their long-range vision for the entire district.

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles cautions that as more charters are introduced in the neighborhoods that have Catholic schools, the only way Catholic schools will survive the competition of these free charter schools is to refocus on their distinctive Catholic identity (Personal communication, October, 1998).

Several conversations with diocesan officials add to the initial anecdotal information regarding the effect that charter schools have had on the enrollment in Catholic schools. In Chicago, charter schools have hurt enrollment in some of the urban Catholic schools. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, the presence of charter schools has forced Catholic schools to focus upon and improve the promotion of their mission as Catholic schools. Detroit's Catholic schools are growing despite the presence of charter schools. Finally, in Saginaw, Michigan, the poorer urban Catholic schools in which most students are not Catholic are being encouraged to become charter schools. The Michigan information was provided by the director of the charter school center at Central Michigan University. The center supports 46 of the state's 138 charter schools. Thirty of the state's charter schools opened for the first time for the 1998-99 school year.

While implications for Catholic schools are reviewed in the conclusion of this article, it is clear from early research results that charter school legislation is increasingly popular. Reports from diocesan officials suggest that charter schools have, and will continue to have, an effect on enrollment in Catholic schools, especially those which are unable to market their strengths, including their religious distinctiveness.

## **PUBLICLY FUNDED VOUCHERS**

The case for the use of public funds to support the parents' option to choose from among private and public schools has begun to move from rhetoric to reality. The rhetoric of the debate over public opinion on vouchers continues in many cities, taking the lead from the battleground in Washington, DC. The D.C. Student Opportunity Act, passed by Congress on April 30, 1998, would have offered 2,000 vouchers worth up to \$3,200 each to District of Columbia



students to help them attend a public or private (including religious) school of their choice. Opponents of the legislation tried to put the “spin” on President Clinton’s veto by claiming that District of Columbia parents, ministers, and local leaders have made it clear that they do not want vouchers.

Shokraii (1998) responded to this rhetoric by sharing the results of a *Washington Post* poll from May 1998 that indicated that 65% of African Americans who are District of Columbia residents and make less than \$50,000 per year favor federal funds to send children to public or private schools. Further, the poll found that 56% of all DC residents supported school choice. Rose and Gallup (1998) also reported that the opposition to publicly funded vouchers decreases when public schools are included as part of the option and when the funding provided would support part, but not all, of the tuition cost.

While in DC, some states, and local communities, proposals to use public funds for vouchers to private schools have been defeated, some major inroads have been made in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and the little-known American Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in the Pacific Ocean. The next section details these programs that provide public funds to parents to send their children to any school, including those with religious affiliations.

### **Milwaukee**

The Milwaukee program was the first publicly funded school choice program in the United States. Initiated in 1990, it was quite limited. Vouchers were few in number and could be used only in secular private schools, which represented 10% of the private school capacity in Milwaukee. Additionally, no more than one half of a school’s enrollment could use vouchers, a policy that was designed to discourage the creation of new schools, according to Greene, Peterson, and Du (1998).

The Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled in June 1998 that the Milwaukee choice program did not violate portions of the U.S. Constitution calling for the separation of church and state, thus opening the use of publicly funded vouchers in religiously affiliated schools (Williams, 1998). The state law allows for up to 15,000 vouchers at \$5,000 each for poor families who are Milwaukee residents. According to Dr. John Norris, Superintendent of Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, about 6,200 children took advantage of the state Supreme Court decision, even though it was announced just two months before the start of the school year. These children moved to 87 different private schools, including 35 Catholic schools. Catholic elementary and secondary schools in Milwaukee added 1,800 new students with vouchers this year, an 18% increase in elementary school enrollment and 7% in high schools. In addition, 1,600 students who had already been attending Catholic schools qualified for vouchers.

In November 1998, the United States Supreme Court chose not to accept the appeal of the Wisconsin Supreme Court decision filed by voucher opponents. While much debate has ensued about what this decision will mean to the constitutionality of other publicly funded voucher programs being formed in other cities across the United States, the Milwaukee program can now proceed intact, since the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling stands. Dr. Norris estimated that there are about 2,700 seats still available in Catholic schools in Milwaukee and he expected them to be filled by more parents choosing to use vouchers now that the program's future is assured.

Dr. Norris reported that accepting voucher families into their Catholic schools is in concert with their mission. The core of the mission is to transmit the Catholic faith and to enable the poor and marginalized to succeed. However, since many Catholic families have achieved financial success and moved en masse to suburbs in recent decades, he believes that the urban Catholic schools should also strive to serve the poor, no matter their faith. In addition, the most significant effect that the high number of voucher students has had on Milwaukee Catholic schools is the assimilation of many students with academic deficiencies. To improve the ability of the schools to respond effectively, the Archdiocese has created the Catholic Urban Education Institute. This consortium is designed to raise the cultural and racial sensitivities of Catholic school teachers and enhance their skills in dealing with greater student and academic diversity.

### **Cleveland**

Cleveland, Ohio, is the only other city in the United States with a publicly funded voucher program, which was begun in March 1995. Vouchers, each worth up to \$2,250, have been made available to up to 1,500 students. A state appeals court has ruled that the inclusion of religious schools violates the state and federal constitutions. The program has been allowed to continue pending an appeal before the Ohio Supreme Court, which is expected to rule by June 1999. According to Greene, Howell, and Peterson (1998), the Ohio Department of Education broadened the number of vouchers to accommodate any family with an income below 200% of the poverty line.

The Cleveland program has proved to be quite a research battleground. Metcalf (as cited in Greene, Howell, and Peterson, 1998) reported research that showed that students using vouchers to attend private schools slightly outperformed their public school counterparts in language skills and science and are doing about the same in reading, math, and social studies. The study also reported that fourth-grade students attending private schools that were created specifically to serve the voucher program are performing worse in all subjects tested than both Cleveland public school students and voucher students in other private schools.

Paul Peterson of Harvard University has been conducting research on

school choice in Cleveland and Milwaukee and is also directing studies of the students using privately funded school choice scholarships in New York City, Washington, DC, and Dayton, Ohio. His findings from the Cleveland program conclude that the voucher students outperform their public school counterparts (Greene, Howell, & Peterson, 1998). The student effect studies on academic achievement for those who have exercised choice using private scholarships or public vouchers have only limited data because of the programs' short history. Much will be learned through various studies now being conducted that are designed to track student progress for at least four years.

### **Northern Mariana Islands**

Ten thousand miles from our nation's capital is the American Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). Unlike in any city or state on the mainland of the United States, publicly funded vouchers are solidly supported by both political parties, the business community, and many public school officials. As a result, our nation's first universal school voucher program is about to be established in CNMI. This interesting phenomenon can be explained by the fact that no teachers' unions exist there (Bolick, 1997).

When implemented, two features will make this program unique. First, it will be the only program to offer vouchers (worth about \$1,500) to every student to be used in any public or private school. Up to this point, if a student left one public school for another, no funding followed the student. Second, it will change the way public schools are funded. Before this program, the commonwealth appropriated money to the public school districts, whose centralized bureaucracy decided how much would go to each school. The voucher monies will follow the child and will be used by the school (public or private) that each student decides to attend. It is hoped that this will create increased competition as schools treat parents more as customers who could affect the financial picture of each school.

## **SCHOOL CHOICE: IMPLICATIONS FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**

The research of the 1980s suggested that many of our nation's school-age children were at risk educationally. Despite the well-published documentation during this period underscoring the success of Catholic schools in the United States, Harris (1996) claimed that Catholic schools lost market share. How could successful Catholic schools have failed to capitalize on such public dissatisfaction? More research is needed to inform Catholic educational leaders so that as school choice options unfold, a repeat of this scenario is avoided.

Early indications regarding the effect of the expansion of school choice

on Catholic schools are mixed. On one hand, privately funded school choice scholarship programs (and the couple of publicly funded voucher programs) have helped to improve enrollment in many urban Catholic schools. On the other hand, the introduction of free charter public schools, in urban areas especially, has hurt enrollments in neighboring Catholic schools. Vanourek et al. (1998) reported that in their study of 50 charter schools in 10 different states with a total enrollment of 16,000 children, 10.7% of these students left private schools to attend the charter schools. According to Peterson (1998) almost 50% of the 16,000 students were Hispanic and African.

If this is an example of the effect that charter schools will have upon private schools across the United States, the future of many Catholic schools is cloudy. Logic supports this assumption. As more parents of private school students, including those in low-income situations, become aware of satisfaction levels of parents who have chosen charter schools, this less costly option will become the choice of more and more families. Harris (1996) argued that the business-as-usual approach that causes Catholic schools to raise tuition at rates in many cases higher than inflation will only put more schools at risk. He calculated that if Catholic elementary school tuition had been kept at the 1990 rate, enrollment would have increased by more than 100,000 students in 1993. He believes that the primary reason for loss of market share by Catholic schools is due to the tremendous rate of tuition increase in recent years.

Given these assumptions, could the Catholic schools have been better prepared to take advantage of the positive light shone upon them by the national press recording the research? Could there have been better preparation for the escalating costs of Catholic schools, primarily due to the faculties becoming more and more lay? Could anything have prevented the closure of more than 500 urban Catholic elementary schools from 1983 to 1993 (Harris, 1996)?

In other words, what have we learned, if anything, about how Catholic educators respond to the marketplace of education? This is as critical if not moreso as the school choice horizon expands. It is simplistic to think that vouchers, public or privately funded, will bolster Catholic school enrollment. Choice goes beyond these examples, as witnessed by the charter school movement. There are many answers to these questions, but a few of the most critical are explored as this article concludes: 1) mission/Catholic identity, 2) finance, 3) national leadership, and 4) academic excellence.

## **MISSION**

As we heard from several diocesan officials responding to the effect of the presence of charter schools on Catholic school enrollment, Catholic schools must be clear on their mission and communicate to families how that mission translates into the daily atmosphere and function of the school. If increasing-

ly astute “consumers” are not convinced of the distinct nature of Catholic schools, why pay for what is free at a charter school? More and more parents will cease making the sacrifice of paying tuition, as many of their neighbors did during the past three decades.

Many Catholic schools, especially in urban areas, have long traditions of service to Catholic communities, many with distinct ethnic populations that began with the mass immigrations during the initial decades of the 20th century. Changing demographics, created by the suburbanization of many Catholics as they accumulated wealth, have presented challenges for the clarity of mission of these urban Catholic schools. Key questions focus on how these schools can continue to be Catholic while serving students and families who are not Catholic.

To help answer these important questions about mission, attention should be focused on the evangelical Christian school movement in the United States. This is one of the fastest growing private school systems, as evidenced by the fact that 90% of these Christian schools did not exist before 1965. These schools have a clear mission about whom they wish to serve in their schools, and this is conveyed to prospective families and teachers. The space and money needed to support these students are being identified through aggressive initiatives. It is this same kind of conviction and fervor that led to the initial growth of Catholic schools in the late 19th century as Catholics were persecuted in America. Catholic schools will not regain the market share that has been lost in recent years, and may lose additional share if the predominant thinking of Catholic leadership rests with such success measures as consecutive years of minimal enrollment increases and small numbers of new Catholic school openings.

Catholic educational leaders believe the primary mission of Catholic schools is to prepare students to live lives of faith that are informed by the teachings of the Church, thus perpetuating the future of the Church and ultimately building the Kingdom. What is unclear, however, is how effectively this is happening and for whom this is of value, especially in a market that includes an increase in less expensive alternatives.

## **FINANCE**

Many Catholic educators have responded in a lukewarm fashion to the prospect of vouchers. Several reasons are usually given. Some voucher or scholarship programs offer only partial support and some administrators are concerned about being able to collect the balance from low-income families unfamiliar with the obligation of paying tuition. Another concern is how well the school can absorb a number of students who bring academic deficiencies with them, thus stretching an already overworked staff. Finally, many voucher students will not be Catholic, and the effect this will have on the school's ability to serve its parishioners is in question.

In too many cases, though, Catholic educators are not making a comprehensive appraisal of how to be positioned for expanded school choice. The fear of more government strings preempts more thoughtful consideration. In the business world, successful companies are always projecting many years ahead to respond to external issues that may affect their business. This enables them to be prepared to respond when changes occur. This surely was not the case for Catholic schools. Many suburban areas were unprepared to serve the Catholic population that moved there in large numbers over the last 40 years. Therefore, many Catholic families are turned away from Catholic schools unable to enroll all of these students. The long-term effect of this lack of preparedness is proving to be devastating. Succeeding generations of Catholics, mostly educated in good suburban public schools, are increasingly unwilling to pay Catholic school tuition for their own children. Why should they, when their experiences in the suburban public schools were mostly positive?

Catholic education was also ill-prepared to handle the cost impact of the disappearance of vowed religious on faculties. This did not happen overnight, yet the financial impact on schools and families was concentrated in a short period of time due to a lack of planning. In our consumer age, few of us are willing to pay more and more for that which differs so little from that which is free.

## **NATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

*Decentralized* and *autonomous* are words often used to describe why Catholic schools are successful. While this is somewhat true, at times this nationwide network of Catholic schools lacks a cohesive vision due to its localized authority. Many critical issues are identified and agreed upon factually and intellectually (e.g., ensuring Catholic identity, identification and preparation of the next generation of leaders for Catholic schools, finance, etc.) but systemic solutions are difficult to develop.

In the case of school choice and overall educational funding, the United States Catholic Conference lobbies to influence federal legislation on behalf of Catholic schools. The development and progress of this type of effort, however, is not well known by teachers, parents, and administrators in Catholic schools. Usually results are communicated, but that hardly allows for schools to plan accordingly.

A consensus opinion, or position, needs to be developed by the United States bishops and other Catholic educational leaders to guide them to prepare for and respond to school choice issues. A positive step is the conference entitled "Catholic Schools and School Choice: Partners for Justice" being sponsored by the National Catholic Educational Association in early 1999. Research on the effect of school choice initiatives on Catholic schools should come from a national agenda, carefully crafted, in a timely fashion.

## ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

With a closer look, it may be discovered that many Catholic schools, particularly in urban settings, are not at an acceptable academic standard. These schools have survived because they are perceived to be the only alternative in some depressed neighborhoods. As school choice introduces alternatives such as charter schools in these neighborhoods, what is being planned proactively to address these academic shortcomings in the Catholic schools in order to make them more competitive? It is suggested that these schools embrace one of the many school improvement models (Comer, Accelerated Schools, etc.) in order to ensure the future viability of these schools.

## CONCLUSION

Choice challenges Catholic schools to recommit to their distinctive identity and to become more intentional about whom they wish to serve and how. The value of any product is brought into question when consumers are presented with an ever-expanding array of options. The more Catholic school leaders underestimate how and why parents make educational choices for their children, the harder the choices will be for Catholic schools. Catholic education must develop a vision that will direct Catholic schools in preparing for and responding to school choice initiatives. This will go a long way in determining the future market share that Catholic schools capture in this sometimes complex but nevertheless exciting era of school choice in the United States.

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