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## KEEPING "EVERY CATHOLIC CHILD IN A CATHOLIC SCHOOL" DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION, 1933-1939

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*The quest for state and federal aid for Catholic schools is not new. Concerns regarding excessive entanglement, mission dilution, and external control have been voiced for decades. A particularly instructive historical period on this issue is the era of the Great Depression. Because of widespread economic hardship across sectors, Catholic leaders were active and engaged in the politics of federal and state aid for schools and experienced both success and failure.*

### INTRODUCTION

Legislation limiting child labor and mandating compulsory schooling, along with increased immigration and a steady rise in the population, led to a tremendous expansion of schooling in the United States in the early 20th century. As a result, during the 1920s both public and Catholic schools centralized and organized their efforts to respond to these rising enrollments. While relative economic prosperity facilitated this task of bureaucratizing schools, it was soon thwarted by the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The Depression drastically shifted the course of education in the United States. Public schools pared back educational and vocational programs, cut faculty and staff or offered work without pay, and at times resorted to charging tuition or closing schools. These severe economic conditions caused educational leaders to make the first serious effort to secure federal assistance for schools (Angus & Mirel, 1999; Smith, 1982). Given the magnitude of these measures and their effect on the short- and long-term practices of public schools, there is relatively scant research on this topic (Fass, 1982; Kantor & Tyack, 1982; Mirel & Angus, 1985; Smith, 1982; Tyack, Lowe, & Hansot, 1984). There is even less research on the experiences of Catholic schools during this critical period.

Some attention has been given to the effects of the Depression in larger histories of Catholic schooling (Walch, 1996), but few studies examine the subject deeply. An important contribution on this topic is the work of Clegg (1964), who examined the Catholic hierarchy's reversal in their objections to

federal aid to schools and their contention that education was solely a state-level concern. Poluse's (1997) examination of the efforts of Archbishop Joseph Schrembs to secure state aid for Catholic schools in Ohio during the Depression also adds important context to the effects of this financial crisis on Catholic schooling.

This article examines this critical period in the history of Catholic schooling through an analysis of the records of the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC) and its Department of Education, as well as the proceedings of the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) and related publications. The records of the NCWC offer a sense of the discourse among Catholic leaders at the national level, but also include reports from individual dioceses across the country. These reports reveal the effects of the Depression on Catholic schools and the strategies employed to mitigate them. The proceedings of the NCEA allow for an analysis of the issues raised by those educators directly connected to the schools. These offer insight on the local, national, and transnational issues that shaped Catholic school responses to the Depression. The following questions guided the analysis of these documents: (a) How did Catholic school experiences of and responses to the Great Depression compare with those of public schools? (b) How did the history of Catholic school funding shape Catholic responses to the Great Depression? (c) How did the Great Depression affect Church-state relations?

In exploring these questions, several key themes emerged. First, Catholic leaders and educators were determined to keep their schools open during "hard times" and maintain their growing presence in the American educational landscape. This involved pulling on their historical experiences of developing and sustaining schools with few resources and making great sacrifices to continue to provide Catholic education. Secondly, the Great Depression marked a significant shift in Church-state relations as Catholics leveraged their emerging political power in seeking state and federal aid in response to the financial crisis. Although their efforts to secure funds ended in uneven results, they influenced the public debate on the funding of public and private schools. Finally, the debates among Catholic leaders and educators over public aid to schools demonstrated the complex context of American Catholics. As with other significant educational issues of the day like standardization and IQ testing (Ryan, 2006; Ryan & Stoskopf, in press), Catholic educators vigorously debated the effects that public funding would have on their schools. These debates involved local, national, and transnational considerations and did not always result in a unified stance. However, similar to other educational reforms, many pragmatically supported efforts to secure public funding for Catholic schools to ensure their survival. This furthered the assimilation of Catholics into American society, but also

strengthened their position within it. Their efforts resulted in maintaining a good deal of the educational infrastructure they invested in and developed in the 1920s.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The effort to advance and expand Catholic schooling in the United States began in large part at the Third Plenary Council of American bishops in 1884. This required all new parishes to establish an elementary school and Catholic parents to send their children to Catholic schools. These declarations were summarized by the catch phrase, "Every Catholic boy and girl must attend a Catholic school" (Veverka, 1988, p. 4). During the latter years of the Great Depression, Rev. George Johnson, the director of the Department of Education of the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), located in Washington, DC, at The Catholic University of America, recommitted the Church to the declarations of the Third Plenary Council by recasting its popular motto: "Every Catholic child in a Catholic school, and a Catholic school for every Catholic child" (Johnson, 1938a, p. 67).

To aid this effort during the Depression, parish elementary schools often subsidized, reduced, or offered free tuition for those who could not afford it. This proved more difficult for Catholic high schools and colleges, which depended on tuition for the majority or sole source of funding, but they too made great attempts to keep students in school. Catholic parishes and religious orders and congregations focused on keeping their educational institutions afloat and allowing as many students to attend as possible.

Catholics had a great deal to lose if their schools failed, since the Church's broader status in American society had, in many ways, become tied to the reputation of its schools. Schools represented the growth and strength of the Church in America and of Catholics at large. This system-like network of Catholic schools provided for significant class mobility in the 1920s and keeping it intact became essential to maintaining those socio-economic advances (Sanders, 1977).

After fending off the possible extinction of Catholic schooling with the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* in 1925, reversing an Oregon law requiring all children to attend public schools, the Depression threatened the very reputation of the American Catholic Church. Although the decision protected private education, it strengthened the Court's 1923 decision in *Meyer v. Nebraska*, acknowledging the right of the state to regulate private schools. Efforts to sustain Catholic schooling in the 1930s focused on retaining its place in American education and avoiding undue influence by the federal government during a time that greatly expanded its role in most spheres of American life.

## **CATHOLIC AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE DEPRESSION**

Like most public schools, the effects of the Great Depression were a bit delayed for Catholic schools, but by 1933 they along with their public counterparts felt the sting of its harsh economic realities. The Department of Education of the NCWC distributed and culled surveys on the effects that the Depression had on Catholic schools across the country. A summary of a May 1933 survey distributed by the NCWC noted that, "Not a single Catholic educational institution was closed in any of the following Sees reporting: Archdioceses of Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Dubuque, Milwaukee, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Portland in Oregon, and Santa Fe" ("Few Parochial Schools Closed, Survey Reveals," 1933). It also listed 44 smaller dioceses that avoided school closures that year; however, 24 dioceses did have to close schools. In an itemized summary of diocesan reports, the NCWC indicated that 29 schools closed and 19 of those were described as closing directly due to the Depression or a lack of funding (National Catholic Welfare Conference, n.d.b).

In November of 1933, the NCWC conducted a survey of 21 archdioceses and dioceses, collecting 17 responses (J. Cummings, personal communication, March 5, 1934). Only 3 schools among the 17 dioceses did not open for that school year. In 5 dioceses, teachers received full salaries, but the percent of teachers with no salary or a reduced one ranged from 20% to 60% or more. Ten of the dioceses reported that their schools avoided defaulting on interest payments, while the other 7 had varying degrees of schools defaulting on these payments. Only 2 dioceses reported having to turn children away who wanted to attend a Catholic school; whereas 5 others reported increased enrollments (National Catholic Welfare Conference, n.d.b).

As with the Depression itself, schools in some areas of the country experienced more severe circumstances than others. In the case of those hardest hit and as the economic depression deepened, the strategy for surviving in these economic times fell largely to reducing teachers' salaries. Catholic schools at this time relied almost completely on religious teaching orders and congregations for their teaching staff. These teachers earned a salary, which was awarded to their religious community; therefore, the reduction of salaries had a significant effect on the solvency of these communities. As a result, many increased their debt to continue their work and sustain their members.

A comparison of the per capita cost of Catholic schools and public schools conducted in 1932 demonstrated how the strategy of reducing or eliminating teaching salaries, among other factors, made a significant difference in Catholic school budgets. The cost per capita in public grade schools

equaled \$76, while per capita cost equaled \$26 in Catholic grade schools (National Catholic Welfare Conference, n.d.a). At the high school level, public schools cost \$168 per capita and in Catholic high schools it cost \$40 (National Catholic Welfare Conference, n.d.a). Indeed Catholic schools struggled, but public schools experienced a sizeable setback during the Great Depression as well.

Public school systems employed a range of strategies to offset the effects of the Depression, including school closures and reducing teacher salaries. In 1933, public school closings denied 100,000 children access to education, while some schools charged tuition and only enrolled those children whose parents could afford it (U.S. Office of Education, 1933). Budget cuts and shortages resulted in shortened school terms for 25% of U.S. cities and 25% of all teachers received a salary of less than \$750 with the average salary for all teachers equaling \$1,050 in 1933 (U.S. Office of Education, 1933). "Sooner or later, most hard-pressed urban school districts had to cut teachers' salaries, for such pay constituted about three-quarters of the budget" (Tyack et al., 1984, p. 39).

Public educators opposed federal control of schools, but many hoped President Franklin Roosevelt would offer some kind of aid to schools during this crisis. Roosevelt had little interest in aiding schools, since he considered education the business of local and state level authorities and believed that the schools were fiscally sound relative to other sectors of the economy (Fass, 1982; Tyack et al., 1984). He also resisted federal funding of schools because he thought that educational leaders were overly protective of their role as the experts on youth. Resisting federal aid to schools allowed him to avoid any battles over aid to private schools, but the controversy over funding private schools was not the driving force in his opposition to federal aid for schools (Fraser, 1999).

Roosevelt invested in education, but generally chose indirect ways to do so. He funded such things as school construction projects and alternative education and job training for adults (Fass, 1982; Tyack et al., 1984). Roosevelt eventually devoted some emergency relief funds to teacher salaries in states faced with closing a significant number of schools, but he saw this and other support for schools as temporary (Clegg, 1964; Fass, 1982; Tyack et al., 1984).

## **CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: SHARING THE BURDEN AND BEARING THE BRUNT**

As far as I can find out all the Sisters and Brothers are being paid. However, the salary of the Sisters has been cut this year from \$350.00 to \$225.00....When the Archbishop announced the cut in the Sisters' salaries, he also ordered that

no child should be turned away from a parochial school because the parents could not pay. Personally I think the depression has hit the Sisters more than anyone else connected with the schools. (T. Stritch, personal communication, November 22, 1933)

In his November 1933 report to the NCWC, Thomas E. Stritch, the Superintendent of Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of New Orleans, emphasized the inordinate burden placed on religious sisters. Many of his contemporaries reported similar reductions in salary and expressed concern for both religious sisters and brothers (M. Nicholas, personal communication, November 21, 1933; Peterson, 1933; F. Pitt, personal communication, November 21, 1933). Stritch also pointed out the strange dichotomy of reducing salaries to bring down the cost of running schools and at the same time mandating schools to accept all students who wanted to attend. Many dioceses followed similar policies during the Depression.

At first glance it seemed an impossible task, but school closures for Catholics did not reap the same benefits as they did for public schools. George Johnson and others lauded the limited number of school closures compared to public schools as a sign of stability, but Bishop Karl J. Alter of Toledo, Ohio, questioned this conclusion, "We save no salaries in consequence merely by closing schools. All that we can save by such a method is the cost of janitor service and the coal bill. We would still have to support our Religious whether on the parish grounds or at the Motherhouses" (K. Alter, personal communication, February 5, 1934). In a direct challenge to Johnson, Alter stated "I think that you overstate the soundness of our Catholic educational system as it exists today. Even though the reports of Diocesan Superintendents breathe a spirit of confidence and hope" (K. Alter, personal communication, February 5, 1934).

Alter went on to argue that public school districts could use bonds and other means to amortize their debts and that Catholic schools had no real equivalent to this. He noted that in his diocese no schools had paid toward the principal on their debts, only the interest, leaving them in a much more tenuous situation than public schools. In addition to this, Alter pointed out that the consequence of not paying salaries to the sisters teaching in the schools caused their Motherhouses to go deeper into debt. "Where is the hope of paying our multitudinous debts and where is there any confidence that we can expand our system in the future to meet the growing needs of our school population?" (K. Alter, personal communication, February 5, 1934).

Keeping Catholic schools open required a range of budget strategies including the reduction of salaries and other cost-saving measures. Parish schools often reduced operating costs by enlisting parent volunteers to main-

tain school buildings and in some cases accepted these services as in-kind tuition payments ("Few Parochial Schools Closed, Survey Reveals," 1933; Sanders, 1977). In an examination of Chicago Catholic schools, Sanders (1977) found that during the Depression "the schools functioned at minimum cost. Further, the entire congregation, not just the parents, supported the meager expenditures. This made free tuition possible for children of the unemployed" (pp. 184-185).

Many schools benefited from using these strategies, but in some cases they continued to require parents to pay tuition. In Chicago, parishioners sometimes responded to the demand for tuition by moving their children to public schools (Cohen, 1990). Although not financially sound, many parish schools remained open and operated on a deficit due to the threat of losing students to the public schools and the concern that they would not return once the grip of the Depression eased. The network of human resources available to Catholic schools, the obligation to support the sisters, brothers, and priests, albeit at a meager level of subsistence, and the pressure from parents to provide affordable Catholic education for their children made the closure of schools a solution of last resort. Hence, the relatively small number of school closures created an illusion of stability, when in reality schools remained open because closing them offered little relief. The conditions in Catholic schools were severe and as the Depression wore on, Catholics focused their efforts on seeking public funds to stabilize their schools.

## **STATE FUNDING AND CATHOLIC SCHOOLING: REVISITING OLD DEBATES**

The network of human resources among Catholics sustained many schools during the early stages of the Depression, but dioceses across the country eventually revisited the call for public funds to support their schools. Catholics insisted that as a result of their double taxation, first by the state for public education and secondly in the form of tuition by the Catholic school their children attended, they had a right to state support. This represented a familiar argument used by Catholics since Bishop Hughes' unsuccessful fight for a portion of public funds for Catholic schools in New York City in the early 1840s ("Petition of the Catholics of New York," 1840/1964).

In the late 19th century several states experimented with merging the educational efforts of local public and Catholic schools (Fogarty, 2003). In 1891, Archbishop John Ireland supported such a plan in Faribault and Stillwater, Minnesota, where the public schools employed Catholic sisters to teach their secular subjects during the regular school day. After school, Catholic children stayed for religious instruction from these same teachers. Ireland's project had forerunners including "semi-public" schools in Lowell,



Massachusetts, and Poughkeepsie, New York (Clegg, 1964); however, the plan drew heavy criticism from more conservative clergy because of Ireland's outspoken advocacy of public education (Gleason, 1988).

In response to a speech Ireland delivered to the National Education Association (NEA), where he characterized himself as a "friend and advocate of the state school"...more conservative Catholics, convinced that Ireland and his supporters sacrificed faith to a craven nationalism, waged war through pamphlets, letters to Rome, and manipulation of the secular press" (McGreevy, 2003, p. 121). Ireland and his supporters responded in kind, characterizing their efforts as pragmatic ways of working with the state to bring education to all children.

This conflict, known as the Americanist Controversy, did not come to an end without the intervention of the Vatican. The pope sent his personal representative, Archbishop Francesco Satolli, to the American Conference of Bishops in 1892, where he supported the attendance of Catholic children at public schools with the permission of their respective bishops (Walch, 1996). The Faribault and Stillwater arrangements ended in 1893, but the debate over the role of the state in Catholic schools continued (Federal Writers' Project, 1938).

By 1915, all but three states had prohibited the use of public funds for denominational schools (Walch, 1996). The limited success of securing state funds convinced many Catholics that they would need to rely on their own resources in order to support and expand their schools. In the 1920s, this strategy seemed feasible with a growing number of Catholics entering the middle class and sending their children to Catholic schools. The number of Catholic elementary schools grew from 6,551 in 1919 to 7,923 in 1929, and high schools grew from 1,552 in 1919 to 2,123 in 1929 (Snyder, 1993). The Great Depression stemmed this growth and caused many Catholics to revisit the debates over public funding in order to sustain their schools. Catholics appealed to state legislatures and even entertained federal funding during these troubling times.

In 1930, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the case of *Cochran v. the Louisiana State Board of Education* upheld a Louisiana law allowing the use of state funds to purchase textbooks for students in private schools. The Court's decision offered hope to Catholics that they might be successful in garnering this type of support in other states and possibly even from the federal government (Smith, 1982). These hopes were never realized in a substantial way. Some states devised plans to offer limited assistance to private schools during the 1930s, but many states were too financially strapped to do so. Federal aid to public and private schools alike remained limited and indirect during the 1930s with no significant relief for private schools.

## STATE FUNDING AND CATHOLIC SCHOOLING: RESUMING THE CALL IN OHIO

Ohio provides an interesting case study in the debate over state funding of Catholic schools in the 1930s. The Depression affected schools unevenly, but it seems only in levels of severity. While public and private schools had to make adjustments, some had to deal with graver circumstances than others. The public schools in Ohio certainly experienced some of the direst conditions (Tyack et al., 1984). Like their public counterparts, Catholic schools in Ohio faced significant financial challenges.

The superintendent of the Catholic schools in the Diocese of Cleveland, John R. Hagan, described the severity of circumstances in his schools in a report to the NCWC:

Of the 1133 teachers who staff the 111 school [*sic*] replying to date, 68.84 percent, are not being paid....Of the 111 reporting, 46, 41.44 percent, have defaulted on their interest payment. Many others have added notes stating that they will have to default at the time of the next payment....The 111 schools reporting state that they have turned away 2118 children this Fall [1933]. This is not a large number relatively, since these 111 schools have an enrollment of about 40,000. The striking thing is that the parents have insisted on sending their children to these schools in spite of the fact that all expenses were being curtailed in the schools themselves. (J. Hagan, personal communication, November 22, 1933)

Hagan's report confirmed the deep commitment that many Catholic parents had to sending their children to Catholic schools, but painted a rather bleak picture of the realities facing schools in Cleveland. Hagan followed his letter with a telegram to the NCWC adding the results from another 49 schools in his diocese. The additional information noted that 251 of the teachers were unpaid, over 80% of the teachers in those 49 schools (J. Hagan, personal communication, November 23, 1933). Although Hagan stated in his original letter that all of the schools opened for the 1933 school year, he added that; "They reopened mainly because the Pastors lived in hopes that the Ohio Assembly would come to their aid" (J. Hagan, personal communication, November 22, 1933).

The conditions in Cleveland and other Ohio dioceses convinced the state's Catholic leadership, supported by the broader American Catholic leadership, to pursue state funds as part of a plan to address their financial crisis. At the NCEA meeting in 1935, members passed a resolution commending the clergy and Catholics of Ohio "for their campaign to share in the emergency funds set aside by the State to meet educational demands"

("Educational Notes," 1935, p. 368). This was not the first attempt to procure state funding in Ohio. The state legislature denied the Ohio Catholic bishops' three different requests for state funding in the 1910s and 1920s (Poluse, 1997).

The Catholic leadership contemplated several strategies to persuade the Ohio legislature to make public funding available to Catholic schools. They proposed the familiar arguments of "double taxation" and calculations of how Catholic schools saved the public millions of dollars each year by educating a large portion of the state's children (Poluse, 1997). Embedded in this reasoning was the threat that if Catholic schools failed, public schools would not be able to absorb the sizable number of Catholic students. Besides these arguments, Ohio's Catholic leadership asserted that Catholics could use their political power to vote against public school bond issues (Poluse, 1997).

Although Catholics in some states obtained public funding for books and transportation, the bid for this type of funding failed in Ohio (Fogarty, 2003; Poluse, 1997; Walch, 1996). The continued resistance of some states to offer any aid to Catholic schools led many Catholics to consider federal funding. While interested in seeking this funding to ease the economic crisis many schools faced, Catholics remained wary of the possible complications federal funding posed.

## **TRANSNATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND THE ISSUE OF FEDERAL CONTROL**

The NCWC monitored the national political scene and lobbied on behalf of Catholic interests. As part of that charge, the NCWC's Department of Education gathered and reported data on Catholic schools in order to make a case for public funding. It opposed federal funding of schools at first, preferring state funding, since at the state level Catholics had more options to lobby their local representatives, mobilize their constituents, and argue that their tax dollars directly supported education. This state-level focus shifted with the onset of the Depression and the increased likelihood of federal involvement in schools, an unnerving notion for Catholic leaders.

Most Catholics considered it reasonable to seek funding from state governments, but shunned the idea of federal funding for schools. For Catholics, federal funding represented centralization and threatened local control. The experiences of the Church in Europe and other regions of the world reinforced their fear of federal control and the possibility of dismantling private education. Socialist, communist, and fascist movements of the early decades of the 20th century threatened the position of the Church in Europe. The transnational experiences of Catholics influenced their thinking on matters in the US, even though circumstances were quite different, and contributed to

the intense resistance to state involvement by many members of the Church's hierarchy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Gleason, 1988). While European experiences certainly raised concerns for American Catholics regarding federal control of schools, political events in Mexico from the 1910 Revolution through to the 1930s exacerbated those concerns.

The Mexican Constitution of 1917 served as a critical event, because it limited the power and influence of the Catholic Church in several areas of political and social life and specifically education. The constitution stipulated that primary education was to be secular in content and under government control (Cronon, 1958). This represented a great blow to the Mexican Catholic Church, an influential institution in Mexico since the 16th century. The Mexican government continued to limit the role of the Church throughout the 1920s. This, coupled with attempts to extinguish Catholic education in the US by groups like the Ku Klux Klan in Oregon, made U.S. Catholic leaders anxious.

The U.S. Supreme Court's 1925 decision in the Oregon case of *Pierce v. the Society of Sisters* allayed those fears somewhat, but the economic depression of the 1930s renewed them. To complicate matters, the anti-clerical movement in Mexico accelerated at the same time. This included the passage of a law in 1934 that placed Mexican schools under the federal government's control and made their content not only secular, but socialist (Cronon, 1958; Reich, 1995). While not strictly enforced, the law signaled the changing role and status of the Church in Mexico and elsewhere.

American Catholics empathized with their Mexican coreligionists. Catholic educators in the US condemned the Mexican government's actions. At the NCEA's annual meeting in 1935 members passed a resolution protesting the "condition of affairs in Mexico" and the "suppression of religious freedom and academic liberty" ("General Meetings Proceedings," 1935, p. 47). The final statement of the resolution characterized the situation in Mexico as "fraught with a significance that reaches far beyond the borders of that unhappy country" (p. 47). Events in Mexico and Europe, along with the financial uncertainty of the Great Depression, increased Catholics' concerns about federal intervention and regulation of Catholic schools in the US.

## **FEDERAL FUNDING AND CATHOLIC SCHOOLING: DEVISING NEW DEBATES**

In the American tradition education is a function of state and local government....We would be renegade to the ideal of American liberty were we not to exercise the utmost vigilance lest in these disturbing days there should be a drift in the direction of the control of the policies and processes of education by the Federal Government. ("General Meetings Proceedings," 1935, p. 47)

This resolution, passed by the NCEA in 1935, responded to the increased role of the federal government in all spheres of public life during the Depression. Catholics once again defended their existence and resisted outside intervention, but this time they had a stronger footing. Considered more marginalized at the turn of the 20th century, by the 1930s Catholics possessed and exercised more political influence.

Keeping Catholic schools independent and free of federal control served as the central goal of the Church's hierarchy, but this position became more difficult to hold as the Depression worsened. In November of 1933, George Johnson shared his argument against federal aid to schools in a memorandum to the Federal Advisory Committee on Emergency Aid, a group brought together by the U.S. Office of Education. In the memo, he argued against federal aid to schools, but insisted that if aid materialized it needed to be given to both public and private schools. Johnson's memorandum also appeared as an article in the *Catholic Educational Review* (Johnson, 1934).

Bishop Alter of Toledo, Ohio, took issue with Johnson's conclusions. Alter contended that Catholics weakened their position by asking for federal funds. He suggested maintaining their opposition to federal aid to schools without qualification (K. Alter, personal communication, February 5, 1934). Although the deprivation of the 1930s was very real, Alter and others did not think it called for compromising the leadership's position against federal funding. For Bishop John Peterson of Manchester, New Hampshire, pursuing relief from the federal government threatened the autonomy of Catholic schools. "Our independence to direct our policy, under reasonable state requirements as we are doing now, is worth more to us than money.... Assistance that would lead to secularization would never be worth the price" (Peterson, 1933, p. 12). Peterson supported his position by claiming that Catholic schools developed out of impoverished circumstances and therefore could weather this economic storm without compromising their independence. He did not entirely rule out accepting federal funds, but if those dollars came with any hint of public control he advocated refusing them.

The debate about federal funding for schools increased as Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933. He and his administration quickly began work on bringing relief to the American economy through the New Deal. This energized members of the NEA, who ardently lobbied for federal funding for public schools. As this lobby effort grew, Johnson argued against federal aid to public schools by extending the familiar "double taxation" argument, adding that if the federal government decided to offer aid to public schools, then Catholics would be subjected to a "triple tax," since federal aid would invariably require the raising of taxes (Johnson, 1934, p. 80).

Although in principle Johnson continued to oppose federal aid to schools, he pragmatically supported aid to Catholic schools in the event Congress allocated funds to public schools (Johnson, 1934). In a response to Johnson's opinion on the matter, Archbishop Curley of Baltimore commented,

I am convinced that depression has brought us nearer than ever to Federal control of education. The States as the result of their poverty are perfectly willing to hand over their work to Washington to supply the funds. Your attitude on the matter is right. If funds are going to be distributed by Uncle Sam, then we should get our share. (M. Curley, personal communication, December 4, 1933)

A good number of Catholic leaders came to the uneasy conclusion that in the event of federal aid they would need to demand a share of it, worried that they would be unable to sustain their schools should public schools receive funding and draw students away from struggling Catholic schools.

Many Catholic educators in the schools came to the same conclusion. At the 1934 meeting of the NCEA, members of the Secondary School Department passed a resolution calling for the hierarchy of the Church "to secure for non-profit private schools a just share of public funds raised by common taxation" ("Secondary School Department Proceedings," 1934, p. 169). They likely supported pursuing public funds both out of concern for keeping their schools running and the pressure of needing to keep as many students in attendance as possible. Catholic educators thought that an infusion of aid to public schools would make them more stable and attractive to Catholic parents (Smith, 1982). If Catholic schools lost a significant number of students to public schools, it made full recovery from the Depression less likely.

## **RENEWED EFFORTS FOR FEDERAL FUNDING OF SCHOOLS**

By 1936, some members of the U.S. Congress were swayed by the lobby of the NEA and began working on legislation to aid public schools. In response to the political maneuvers of public educators and in anticipation that resulting legislation would not include aid to nonpublic schools, Johnson reframed the Catholic opposition to federal funding once again.

Here a dilemma faces those who are in favor of [federal] aid. Either they will give the aid without any Federal control, which means that there will be no guarantee that the funds will be spent wisely by the local authorities, or they will give the aid on condition that it will be used according to a blue print in the hands of the United States Commissioner of Education. (Johnson, 1936, p. 83)

Johnson asserted that money given directly to the states without direction would result in widespread misuse of public funds. This seemed contradictory to the Catholic position of preferring local and state control of education. It was in fact an argument crafted to safeguard Catholics residing in states more resistant to supporting nonpublic schools with public funds.

The Harrison-Black-Fletcher bill introduced in Congress in January of 1937 confirmed those concerns. It proposed \$300 million in aid to public schools over 5 years in the form of flat grants to states proportionate to their school-age population (Smith, 1982). The NEA supported the bill, but it met with considerable resistance from several groups, including Catholics. At the General Meeting of the NCEA annual meeting in 1937, members argued against the bill.

The ostensible purpose of this bill, according to its preamble is: "To provide for the general welfare." Well may we ask what assurance is there that these great sums of money will make any appreciable contribution to the general welfare.... That a school system, at present mismanaged or making no effort to help itself, will be transformed by the magic of a federal grant is a ridiculous assumption. ("General Meetings Proceedings," 1937, p. 64)

The bill did not pass, but the issue of federal aid did not die. In 1937, Roosevelt's Advisory Committee on Education, originally established in 1936 to study vocational education, had its work expanded to examine the overall relationship of the federal government to education. The committee consisted of union leaders, business leaders, government administrators, and educators (Smith, 1982). Roosevelt appointed George Johnson of the NCWC to the committee, signaling the growing political influence of Catholics at the national level. The committee took on the controversial issue of aid to schools and developed a report that addressed the critical issues of equity in aid and the fear of federal control over schools.

Johnson highlighted his work on the committee and two key aspects of the report in an article published in *The Catholic School Journal* in 1938. He called for federal funds to be distributed on the basis of need and that "local autonomy in the conduct of the schools be maintained at all costs with no interference on the part of the Federal Government in the actual administration of the schools" (Johnson, 1938b, p. 137). With some optimism, he noted that the committee recognized the contributions of nonpublic schools and asserted "that for purposes of federal-aid distribution the states may determine what schools are public" (Johnson, 1938b, p. 137).

The report stated that, "It is both desirable and feasible for the States to decide whether schools which are not completely tax supported should share in Federal aid" (Mort, Lawler, Cornell, Newcomer, & Ramsey, 1939, p. 74).

This recommendation left the door open to offer aid to nonpublic schools with state accreditation. This offered considerable hope to Catholics, given the majority of Catholic secondary schools had obtained that status by the early 1930s (O'Dowd, 1936).

The report did not lead to legislation allowing the distribution of federal funds to public or private schools. In fact, Congress never passed legislation offering sustained direct aid to schools during the Depression. It vigorously debated the topic several times through the 1930s, but only signed off on legislation that provided indirect or temporary relief. The reluctance of Roosevelt and members of Congress to become involved in school funding, in part over the tensions it would cause regarding the funding of private schools and namely Catholic schools, served as a significant measure of Catholics' increased influence at the national level (Smith, 1982; Tyack et al., 1984; Walch, 1996).

## CONCLUSIONS

Historically, Catholic schools operated on less-than-extravagant budgets, but by the 1920s Catholic schools grew in number and many incurred substantial debts to finance their buildings. As a result, the Great Depression represented a challenge to the existence and expansion of Catholic education. Catholics had a great deal at stake in preserving their schools. Due to their efforts during World War I and into the 1920s to transform themselves from a largely immigrant church to an American one, the wider reputation of Catholic Americans improved. Schools served as one of the more visible signs of Catholics' presence and legitimacy in American society, while also representing their growing prosperity.

Despite the hardships of the Great Depression, Catholics successfully kept a large portion of their extensive network of schools intact. Catholics sponsored 10,046 elementary and high schools in 1929 (Snyder, 1993). The number of Catholic schools dipped to 9,875 in 1935, but rebounded to 10,049 schools in 1939 (Snyder, 1993). The economic setback of the 1930s caused Catholics to scale back plans for expansion in the short term, but a resurgence of growth would come after World War II with the number of Catholic elementary and high schools rising steadily to a high of 13,292 in 1965 (Snyder, 1993).

Catholic schools survived the Great Depression in large part because of their network of human resources and a history of mobilizing those resources. Members of teaching orders and congregations provided essential educational services at little or no cost. Parents gave of their time and services, but that alone could not have sustained Catholic schools. In this respect, religious sisters, brothers, and priests largely made Catholic schooling possible during the Great Depression.



Catholic leaders focused on more than surviving the Depression. National and state-level leaders debated and pursued state and federal funding for Catholic schools. In pursuing federal funds, the Catholic leadership crafted a compelling argument for receiving aid if the federal government assisted public schools. They also outlined that direct aid to public schools meant an inevitable increase in taxes, thereby foisting a triple tax on Catholics.

The dire circumstances of the Depression complicated the debate over public funding for Catholic schools. Some Catholics eased their rigid opposition to federal aid and moved to a position of qualified support for it with the inclusion of nonpublic schools (Clegg, 1964; Walch, 1996). This shift toward Catholic support for federal funding caused dissension within the Catholic leadership. Some thought seeking federal aid invited the centralization of schooling and compromised the autonomy of American Catholic schools and violated states' rights by encroaching on the role of the state in providing and governing its educational institutions (Clegg, 1964). Pursuing state-level funding for Catholic schools found widespread Catholic support. Although efforts to obtain public funds in Ohio failed, by 1936 in some states students in Catholic schools received funding for textbooks and transportation among other services (Clegg, 1964; Fogarty, 2003; Poluse, 1997; Walch, 1996). These mixed results during the Great Depression offered new avenues for Catholics to pursue state funding.

The Great Depression forced all educators to rethink how schools were funded. The failure to secure federal aid for public schools led the National Education Association to work on tax reform at the local level for public schools. The organization encouraged states to fund schools through state-wide taxation instead of relying on local property taxes at the district level (Urban & Wagoner, 2004). Catholic educators increased their efforts to secure state funds for their schools and became more strategic in their bid for such funds. They considered requesting support for specific aspects of their educational programs that promoted the general welfare, a defense used by the Roosevelt administration for its many New Deal programs that crossed traditional government boundaries. Catholics also used one of the central arguments of the *Cochran v. Louisiana* case of 1930, allowing states to support specific educational services with a direct benefit to the child, rather than supporting the general operations of religious schools (Clegg, 1964). For state governments, the resources offered to Catholic schools, while limited, represented a significant departure from the rigid denial of all funds and signaled a new era in Church-state relations.

Debates over public and Catholic schools sharing resources in the late 19th century became virtually dormant by the early 20th century, but were

revived with the deepening crisis of the Great Depression. The debate spurred in the 1930s renewed efforts to seek public support for Catholic schooling that persisted well beyond that era. Eventually, Catholic schools received both state and federal aid through various programs. At the federal level, iterations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, originally passed in 1965, allowed Catholic schools to receive funding for their efforts to meet the educational needs of their students in poverty (De Luca, 2004; McDonald, 2004). Many states have continued to fund such things as textbooks and transportation, while some have increased their funding of Catholic and other private schools through tuition tax credits or vouchers. The limited, but certain success of efforts to secure funding during the Great Depression led to increased efforts by Catholics to look for ways to secure public funding for their schools without abandoning their central goal of remaining relatively autonomous.

## NOTE

All citations of personal communication are available from the National Catholic Welfare Conference/United States Catholic Conference Office of the General Secretary/Executive Department Records, American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives, Washington, DC.

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