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To Nurture the Soul of a Nation: Latino Families, Catholic Schools, and Educational Opportunity

The Notre Dame Task Force on the Participation of Latino Families and Children in Catholic Schools
Alliance for Catholic Education Press, 2009
\$20.00, 128 pages

Reviewed by Katherine Tompkins

As the Latino population in the United States continues to grow, the national need to educate minority children has escalated to dire importance. With an expected projection of 1.2 million Latino children entering kindergarten by 2020, the potential for Catholic schools to meet this demand is significant. In *To Nurture the Soul of a Nation: Latino Families, Catholic Schools, and Educational Opportunity*, the Notre Dame Task Force addresses the challenges Catholic schools face in their ability to assist with tuition, to create an attractive environment, and to market themselves to Latino families effectively. Through a series of developmental opportunities and key recommendations, the authors offer a new approach for Catholic schools aiming to serve the Latino community, and how the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) and the Institute for Educational Initiatives (IEI) look to have a role in making it possible.

The authors outline that within the last 40 years the Latino community has expanded to comprise the largest minority group in the United States, with the number of Latino students in American schools more than tripling since 1972. Children of these families tend to live within low-income, ethnically segregated areas, and, in turn, attend underprivileged schools that do little to aid the students' growth in an English-dominated society. However, research has consistently confirmed the ability of Catholic schools to close the achievement gap for urban young people successfully: throughout history "no system of schools—charter, private, or public—has demonstrated such proven effectiveness for children most vulnerable to unsatisfactory schooling" (p. 9). Yet, only 3% of school-age children attend Catholic schools, according to the Notre Dame Task Force findings. If the Catholic schools want to serve the Latino community and fill the 691,000 seats that were empty during the 2007-2008 school year, a new direction is crucial.

Over the course of a year the Notre Dame Task Force intensively studied

Latino involvement in Catholic education. As a result, they found the primary concern of low-income families to be the tuition attached to attending a Catholic institution. While financial aid is frequently made available to Latino families, the substantial cost is still prohibitive. Additionally, those students who are in the Catholic school system find the cost to be the biggest challenge, as the price continues to increase. With this in mind, the authors suggest making Catholic education affordable and accessible through the assistance of diocesan and civic leaders, and with the help of ACE and IEI. Dioceses should aggressively seek opportunities to expand and promote tuition assistance through established endowments from potential benefactors within the Catholic community. Civic leaders, in partnership with Catholic higher education, should pursue investments from stakeholders in order to strengthen local scholarship funds. Lastly, ACE and IEI propose to develop the strategies necessary to creating such a partnership between foundations and philanthropists to give Latino students the advantage of a Catholic school experience.

While tuition is a frequent cause for concern when parents make the decision to send their child to a Catholic school, the Notre Dame Task Force found they also express a feeling of disconnect with the school. Culture and religion have a powerful influence on Latinos; for example, Mexican-American students strongly identify with Our Lady of Guadalupe. This is one aspect that many Catholic schools serving immigrant families lack—a connection with student culture. Just as a retailer tailors to the needs of a consumer to make a guaranteed sale, Catholic schools should tailor to the needs of their students in order to maintain enrollment successfully. The Notre Dame Task Force suggests making tangible changes within the school, such as instituting religious Latino icons, employing more Latino teachers, and utilizing an abundance of murals and artwork that reflect Latino culture and values. Given these recommendations, ACE and IEI aim to develop a “portable school cultural model” that connects with the Latino community and encourages an investigation of a worldview modeled by service and social justice. These physical alterations within the school, in conjunction with the exploration of the Latino culture through an ethical standpoint, cater to the Latino students in a way they need it most.

Through the study conducted by the Notre Dame Task Force, researchers found Latino families are often uninformed about Catholic schools, including the application process, the services they provide, and their ability to serve immigrant children. Thus, the last recommendation for reaching the Latino community is an effective marketing strategy that recruits more students and

acquires more financial investors. As most schools do not have a marketing division or someone who promotes the school to the public, Catholic education is missing out on the potential for increased enrollment. Flyers, regular open houses, and rental of school space to community organizations familiarize the local people with the building and the institution's mission. The Notre Dame Task Force believes that these opportunities help bridge the gap that frequently deters parents and guardians from sending their children to an unfamiliar environment. ACE and IEI aim to conduct a national marketing study that will pinpoint precisely what practices will be most effective in accomplishing this goal. Additionally, from those students who attend Catholic schools, the Notre Dame Task Force recommends expanding their social network beyond low-income students to include students whose families can give back to the school and its parish. With assistance from influential investors, there is hope for further growth and expansion into the Latino community.

While the authors offer strategic research that lends insightful recommendations for Catholic schools aiming to reach the Latino community, many of these goals seem idealistic. Hence, many foreseen obstacles fail to be addressed. If Catholic schools consistently offer financial aid on a large scale, schools may fail to sustain themselves. It would be ideal to provide every student with significant support, but this is not currently feasible. Investors could help relieve the monetary burden for Catholic schools, but where do we find these people, especially in our current economic situation? In a community struggling to accommodate their children's tuition, it should prove difficult to find people willing to invest in a school that needs substantial support.

Catholic schools still have much to learn from the findings of the Notre Dame Task Force in their approach to reaching Latino students. Placing religious Latino icons within a school will undoubtedly help students feel more comfortable. However, the challenge remains in making the tuition affordable and finding other sources of monetary income, both of which prove nearly impossible without the hard data that documents the benefits of enrolling a student in a Catholic school. As a Catholic educator myself, I recognize the holistic impact of Catholic education, but if Catholic schools want a chance to attract Latino students they need evidence to prove its effectiveness with this type of population. While these schools may improve their community outreach using practical adjustments, these changes seem insufficient and must be supplemented with more reactive solutions.

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