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Sustaining the Heart: Attracting Latino Families to Inner-City Catholic Schools

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Like many urban Catholic schools, St. Mary of Carmel Catholic School in Dallas, Texas, is faced with many challenges: filling empty seats; supporting increased costs; and, possible closure. The small parish is primarily Latino, but few parish families are enrolled in the school. This action research project used in-depth interviews to examine parishioner-parent perspectives on the importance of Catholic education in the Latino community. Understanding the perspectives of parishioner-parents is a key step toward the ultimate goal of developing a marketing plan that attracts and engages Latino families. Participant interviews show that Latino parents believe Catholic schools are better than area Dallas Independent School District (DISD) schools in academics and preparing students for high school, and better than other religious education programs in teaching the Catholic faith. Ultimately, the study showed that these Latino parents strongly desire to send their children to Catholic schools.

Catholic schools in America were created in the 1800s to assure that children, mostly those of immigrant families, would be educated in our Catholic faith. For years our schools have provided these families with an assurance that a Catholic education would be available to all who desired one. With the near extinction of vowed religious men and women in our classrooms and the changing demographics of urban America, the financial viability of these schools is precarious, jeopardizing the opportunity for new generations of immigrant families to educate their children in Catholic schools.

As stated in *To Nurture the Soul of a Nation*, “Latinos now comprise 35 percent of all Catholics, and 67 percent of practicing Catholics age 18-34” (Notre Dame Task Force, 2009, p. 21). However, only 3% of all school-aged Latino children attend Catholic schools (Notre Dame Task Force, 2009). As our Latino population continues to grow, it will become increasingly more important that we increase the percentage of Latino children in our Catholic schools. Doing so deepens the faith formation of innumerable youth and their families and, ultimately, sustains the health of our Church. St. Mary of Carmel is an inner-city Catholic school that has been serving the Latino population

of West Dallas for over 65 years. The school has capacity for 225 students, but enrollment has fluctuated between 120 and 206 students over the past 10 years, reaching its peak enrollment during the 2010-2011 academic year.

Within our community of St. Mary of Carmel, the parish and school are independent organizations. The pastor is very active in the parish, but has a limited presence in the school. We are working hard to strengthen this relationship, for an effective pastor-principal relationship is foundational for successful school operations. St. Mary of Carmel Catholic Parish has also had a dwindling parishioner base. Fifty-three of our 106 school families are registered parishioners, but many are registered only to receive the discounted parishioner tuition rate. In contrast, there are 180 families in the religious education program of our parish. Over the last three years, the school has enrolled an average of two new families that have come directly from the parish. We lose about five families a year to graduation and other school choices. In order to replace the families leaving, we need to enroll five new parish families per year. In addition to our own parish, St. Mary of Carmel Catholic School has the ability to draw Latino Catholics from parishes that are close in proximity, but have no schools. These parishes include the Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Lourdes, Santa Teresita, St. Edwards, and Our Lady of Pillar. Our current enrollment from these parishes totals only eight students despite the fact that nearly 1,600 families are registered parishioners.

Throughout the last decade, the school has labored to meet its financial obligations. Once run by the Sisters of the Holy Spirit, the school had a ready supply of free or reduced salary teachers. Since 1999, the number of nuns teaching in our classrooms has dwindled and during the 2010-2011 school year only one Sister remained on staff.

This fiscal reality, shared by many Catholic schools across the nation (McDonald & Schultz, 2010), has placed a financial burden on our school as payroll costs and insurance obligations continue to soar. If we were to raise the tuition to match our rising costs, families simply would not be able to afford to send their children to our school. In fact, 73% of our families have household incomes at or below the required levels to qualify for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program. In 2008, we implemented a very aggressive tuition assistance plan in order to attract more families to fill our empty seats. However, the perception is that our school is still too expensive for our parish families. This causes many families to not even inquire about our school because they feel that there is no way for them to afford the cost of a Catholic education even though empty seats still remain.

Cash strapped and with many empty seats to fill, St. Mary of Carmel Catholic School is at a crossroads and must take a strategic path to assure that our faith community has a strong future. When trying to discern next steps, we must go back to the central purpose of any Catholic school: to educate our children in the faith. Our school must do what it can to make sure that the directives of the Church are followed. We are told that “all Christians—that is, all those who having been reborn in water and the Holy Spirit are called and in fact are children of God—have a right to a Christian education” (Vatican Council II, 1965, para. 15). The message is that Catholic education is not just for the affluent and must be made available to the new immigrant children of our country, most notably Latinos.

The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium tells us that the Catholic school is at the heart of the Church (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1998). A body cannot fully function without a strong heart. As stated earlier, Latinos make up a majority of our active parishioners ages 18-34. They are clearly the future—the very heart—of our Church. Urban Catholic schools, thus, have a unique opportunity to serve these children. It is up to us to make the Body of our Church healthy.

Purpose Statement

The short-term purpose of this action research project was to investigate—through individual interviews—Latino parents’ overall perceptions of Catholic school education within the Roman Catholic Diocese of Dallas. Ultimately, such information is critical in order to devise an effective marketing plan to attract Latino families to our schools. The major questions in this action research project include:

1. How do Latino parishioners-parents view the importance of a Catholic school education and the academic benefit of area Catholic schools?
2. How important is it to our Latino parishioner-parents that their children remain Catholic?
3. If finances were not involved, what reservations do Latino parishioner parents have about their children attending Catholic school?

Literature Review

The following literature review uses Catholic Church documents to reveal how sustaining Catholic schools and making them available to all children is at the

heart of our mission as a Church. Additionally, the literature review underlines the importance of reaching out to the Latino community in an effort to fill our Catholic schools.

Church Documents on Sustaining Catholic Schools

As we approached the new millennium, Catholic bishops realized there was a need to address the importance of Catholic education to both the Church and society. In *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the New Millennium*, the Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) addressed the critical nature of our schools and the importance of continuing their mission:

It is opportune to devote careful attention to certain fundamental characteristics of the Catholic school, which are of great importance if its educational activity is to be effectual in the Church and in society. Such are: the Catholic school as a place of integral education of the human person through a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation; its ecclesial and cultural identity; its mission of education as a work of love; its service to society; the traits which should characterize the educating community. (para. 4)

The Congregation stressed the role of the schools in the “evangelizing mission of the Church throughout the world” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1998, para. 5). The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1977), with the same vigor, proclaimed the importance of Catholic schools’ role within our Church when they wrote, “the Church is absolutely convinced that the educational aims of the Catholic school in the world of today perform an essential and unique service for the Church herself” (para. 15).

Pope Pius XI stressed not only the importance of educating our Catholic children, but the indisputable duty of the Church to assure that our faith is intertwined in all aspects of life in his letter to Catholic bishops, *Divini Illius Magistri* (1930). In it he pontificated,

Again it is the inalienable right as well as the indispensable duty of the Church, to watch over the entire education of her children, in all instructions, public or private, not merely in regard to the religious instruction there given, but in regard to every other branch of learning and every regulation in so far as religion and morality are concerned. (para. 23)

Our schools are meant to educate the young and bring them to evangelize our faith throughout the world. Pope John Paul II wrote, “the future of the world and of the Church belongs to the younger generation, to those who, born in this century, will reach maturity in the next, the first century of the new millennium” (John Paul II, 1994, para. 8). Both the words of John Paul II and those of the Congregation for Catholic Education bring to the forefront the urgency of educating our children so that they may continue to grow in faith and spread the Gospel.

Educating our children does not mean that we must educate only those who are affluent, come from well-educated families, and are already strong in our faith. While Catholic education should be available to all who desire it, financial barriers to access are the biggest hurdle our schools face in making that ideal a reality. *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the New Millennium* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1998) declared,

Finance is a source of further difficulties, which are felt more acutely in those states in which no government aid is provided for non-state schools. This places an almost unbearable financial burden on families choosing not to send their children to state schools and constitutes a serious threat to the survival of the schools themselves. Moreover, such financial strain not only affects the recruiting and stability of teachers, but can also result in the exclusion from Catholic schools of those who cannot afford to pay, leading to a selection according to means which deprives the Catholic school of one of its distinguishing features, which is to be a school for all. (para. 7)

The Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) has strongly asserted that Catholic schools are to be an educational refuge for those that are spiritually or materially poor. The Congregation wrote,

To these new poor the Catholic school turns in a spirit of love. Spurred on by the aim of offering to all, and especially to the poor and marginalized, the opportunity of an education, of training for a job, of human and Christian formation, it can and must find in the context of the old and new forms of poverty that original synthesis of ardor and fervent dedication which is a manifestation of Christ’s love for the poor, the humble, the masses seeking for truth. (para. 7)

Likewise, The Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) implored us to understand that “the person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ’s teaching. This is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school” (para. 8). The Congregation further stated that “the Catholic school is at the heart of the Church” (para. 10). Believing that our Church is one body in Christ, and that Christ is at the heart of every human person, then it is to be understood that teaching the Word of Christ in our Catholic schools, not only sustains, but nourishes our Church.

We are reminded that “in a very special way the Catholic school affords the opportunity to meet young people in an environment which favours their Christian formation” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1998, para. 13). Our ability to give our children a place where they are free to learn about our faith on a daily basis is immeasurable. The fact that we can do so with ordained and religious hand in hand with laity is irreplaceable, driven home by the Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) when they proclaimed, “the presence of men and women religious, side by side with priests and lay teachers, affords pupils a vivid image of the Church and makes recognition easier” (para. 13).

The Church, aligned with education experts (e.g., Rosario & Rosario, 2008), points out that parents are primarily responsible for the education of their children. Just as Mary was primarily responsible for the education of Jesus, parents today hold the utmost responsibility in providing a Catholic education to their children. The Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) interjected, “parents have a particularly important part to play in the educating community, since it is to them that the primary and natural responsibility for their children’s education belongs” (para. 19). This statement was an affirmation of Vatican Council II’s (1965) declaration that,

As it is the parents who have given life to their children, on them lies the gravest obligation of educating their family. They must therefore be recognized as being primarily and principally responsible for their education. (para. 3)

Vatican Council II went further, stating that it is the duty of Catholic parents “to send their children to Catholic schools wherever this is possible, to give Catholic schools all the support in their power, and to cooperate with them in their work for the good of their children” (para. 8).

These declarations point out the Church’s emphasis on the value of Cath-

olic schools. Moreover, the Church takes the position that parents have a duty to send their children to Catholic schools if possible. Thus, it is our duty, at St. Mary of Carmel Catholic School, to remove all barriers to accessing Catholic education.

Catholic Schools as a Needed Educational Option

Our inner-city public schools are failing to educate our minority children, a circumstance that has heightened the need for more choice in the education marketplace. This type of educational choice was at the very root of the origin of Catholic schools in the United States. Our Catholic schools were started in the 1800s to provide “equal” opportunity education for our immigrants. Streich (2010) discussed the founding of Catholic schools not only as an educator in the faith, but as a counterpoint to the anti-Catholic bias in public schools. In fact, Pope Pius IX, in the 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*, stated that, “Catholics cannot approve a system of education for youth apart from the Catholic faith, and disjointed from the authority of the church” (para. 8). In 1853, the First Plenary Council in Baltimore dictated that all bishops establish parish schools. Catholic schools are still needed today to deliver this integrative, faith-based education. In addition, urban Catholic schools continue to serve as another option that allows parents to exert broad selection in their choice of schools.

Latinos are the fastest-growing minority in the United States. Rivera-Batiz (2008) confirmed that Latinos are “the largest racial and ethnic minority in the country: 44 million strong, as estimated by the U.S. Bureau of the census in 2006” (p. 1). This large population’s experience in public schools has not, on the whole, been objectively positive. For example, as the Notre Dame Task Force (2009) identified, “in 2003 only 53 percent of Hispanic students graduated from high school with a regular diploma, a rate 25 points behind non-Hispanic whites” (p. 19). The Task Force further stated that “college attendance rates have risen for African American and white students over the past few decades, but rates for Latinos have not improved” (p. 19). Similarly, Rivera-Batiz (2008) pointed out, “the overall Latino population faces serious challenges in education” (p. 1). The report showed great disparity in the number of years on average that different races and ethnic groups attend school.

The average Latino 25 years of age or older had 11 years of schooling in 2005, which is lowest in the country, compared to 13.8 years among Whites, 13 years among Blacks/African Americans and 14.2 years

among Asians. There are differences among Latino groups, though, with Cubans and Colombians having higher educational attainment while Mexicans and Salvadorians having lower schooling. (p. 1)

The most alarming statistic is the lack of academic progress from generation to generation for Latino students. The Notre Dame Task Force (2009) wrote that Mexican American's educational progress "does not improve over the generations; the achievement gap is evident even into the fourth-generation for Mexican Americans, for example, whose high school graduation rates lag 17 percent behind their white peers" (p. 19).

Many point to the racial segregation of our schools as a major reason that Latinos are suffering educationally. Matthew Bigg (2007) stated in a report by the Civil Rights Project of the University of California in Los Angeles,

One of the chief complaints of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s was that black-only public schools were inevitably starved of resources by local government with the result that black children received inferior education. Latinos are the fastest growing minority in U.S. schools and for them segregation is often more profound than it was when the phenomenon was first measured 40 years ago. (p. 2)

The report continued to explain that the reason for this profound impact on the Latino students goes well beyond just racial segregation: "too often Latino students face triple segregation by race, class and language" (p. 2). Lockette (2010) confirmed this assessment in writing, "One-third of all black and Latino students attend high-poverty schools (where more than 75 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch); only 4 percent of white children do" (p. 1). He continued by stating,

Latino students are finding themselves in what Orfield calls "intensely segregated" schools—schools where students of color make up more than 90 percent of the student body. Typically these schools have high concentrations of students in poverty—what Orfield calls "double segregation." And increasingly there is "triple segregation" as English language learners in poverty find themselves concentrated in certain schools. (p. 2)

Beverly Clark (2009) likewise noted the impact racial segregation has on minority students when she wrote that minorities “are less often taught by certified teachers than are white students” (p. 2).

These views (Bigg, 2007; Clark, 2009; Lockette, 2010) confirm some of the myriad challenges facing urban public education. While Catholic education is not a panacea for all that ails education in this country, Catholic schools do have a strong track record of success with minority students. The Catholic school effect, documented via a long and varied literature base, suggests that minority, low-income children of noneducated parents outperform students from similar backgrounds in public schools (Carbonaro & Covay, 2010; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Greeley, 1982; Neal, 1997; Sander, 1996). Further, as stated by Hunt, et al. (2004),

For a minority student in an urban public high school the predicted probability of graduating is 62%. For a minority student in an urban Catholic high school with the same observed characteristics (education of parents, parents’ occupation, family structure, and reading materials in the home), the predicted probability of graduating is 88%, a striking difference. (p. 52)

Given that some have highlighted “the failure of these urban schools for Latino students,” (Notre Dame Task Force, 2009, p. 19), and that “there is overwhelming evidence that low-income, minority students, more than any demographic group, benefit the most from access to a Catholic education” (p. 20), making sure that a Catholic educational option is available to Latino families is critical. As the Church has taught us, our Catholic schools need to be made available to all, specifically those families that need it the most. The Notre Dame Task Force (2009) found,

For the 2007-2008 school year, there were over 691,000 empty seats in existing Catholic school, and 36 percent of those seats were in 13 states where the Latino population was either the largest population or the fastest-growing over the past 10 years. (p. 21)

Clearly, there are many empty seats that could be filled. Additionally, the Notre Dame Task Force (2009) noted that most of these empty seats were found in large metropolitan areas such as Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, and Philadelphia. It went on to state that these cities are also “magnet

Latino migration destinations from Mexico” (p. 21). St. Mary of Carmel Catholic School is located in West Dallas, 2 miles west of downtown Dallas. Like the cities just mentioned, the parish is a destination point for immigrants and already has a large Latino community. Most of the inner-city Catholic schools in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Dallas have plenty of open seats that could be filled by our Latino parishioners.

While larger cities are often cited as destination points for Latino migration, smaller urban areas are not immune from the same phenomenon. Ryan (2008) provided a clear picture of the lack of Latino families enrolling in Northern Virginia Catholic schools when she wrote,

The disparity between the overall Latino population and the population of Latino schoolchildren was surprising. In the communities surrounding both schools, the number of Latino schoolchildren was more than 50%, but Latinos made up 17 to 19% of the overall population. The comparison between the percentage of Latino schoolchildren in public schools (50 to 60%) and the percentage in Catholic schools (5 and 11%) was much starker than expected. (para. 25)

Summary

As it has been shown throughout this literature review, the Catholic Church for more than a century has continually stated the importance of Catholic schools and the necessity of making them available to all who desire them. During Pope Benedict’s (2008) last trip to the United States, he affirmed this vital ministry of our Church by stating,

Their [Catholic schools] long-term sustainability must be assured. Indeed, everything possible must be done...to ensure that they are accessible to people of all social and economic strata. No child should be denied his or her right to an education in faith, which in turn nurtures the soul of a nation. (para. 5)

The continued growth of the Latino population in the United States and our Catholic Church requires our schools to make room for them regardless of financial ability; the sustainability of our Church depends on it. For this reason, our Catholic schools must not only be welcoming, but become proactive in their recruitment of Latino families.

Method

In addition to St. Mary of Carmel Catholic School, parents of public school children from the surrounding parishes of St. Cecilia Catholic Church and St. Augustine Catholic Church participated in this study. Both parishes have similar demographic characteristics to St. Mary of Carmel Catholic Church. Semi-structured interviews were used in this study, and the paper focuses principally on the qualitative interview data derived from these parent interviews.

A sample of interview participants ($n=9$) was randomly selected from a pool of all individuals ($n=224$) who previously completed a survey instrument on Catholic education. Participants were selected from a convenience sample of individuals who responded to an announcement in the parish bulletin and CCD announcement, and accepted a survey after Saturday and Sunday Masses at their parishes or at CCD classes.

Instruments and Materials

An original interview protocol delivered in English or Spanish based on the interviewee's preference, was used to engage parishioners of St. Mary of Carmel Catholic Church, St. Cecilia Catholic Church, and St. Augustine Catholic Church in questions regarding the importance of Catholic school education (see Appendix A). The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of 10 open-ended questions that addressed affiliation with the Catholic Church, Catholic schools, and perception on the importance of Catholic school education in the religious formation of children. Participants were asked to respond to questions such as "Do you believe that Catholic schools are welcoming to Latino families? Why or why not?" and "What type of sacrifices would you have to make to send your child to a Catholic school?"

Design and Procedure

Nine participants, four from St. Cecilia, four from St. Mary of Carmel, and one from St. Augustine, were randomly selected from a group of participants who completed a parent survey by October 17, 2010, and also indicated a willingness to participate in the interview portion of the research. All nine of the interviewees were female and Catholic. One interviewee completed high school, and eight had completed some high school.

Interviewees were notified of their selection as a participant by October 25, 2010, and were asked to set up an interview over the course of the following two weeks. All interviewees were asked to sign a consent form prior to the start of the interviews. The interviews were conducted by the researcher's bilingual assistant in the researcher's office at Saint Mary of Carmel Catholic School. Questions were asked and answered in the language most comfortable for the interviewee. All interviews were digitally recorded. Notes were taken during the interview by the researcher if the interview was conducted in English. If the interviews were conducted in Spanish, the researcher's bilingual assistant took notes during the interview. All interviews conducted in English were transcribed by the researcher, while the bilingual assistant with consultation from the researcher transcribed interviews conducted in Spanish.

Data Analysis

Parent interviews were transcribed and evaluated for common responses and tendencies. A grounded theory approach was used to open code the responses to divide them into an initial list of different emic codes. The emic codes were then collapsed into larger, more abstract codes to organize the data further. The data were then used to determine themes for the responses and those themes allowed the researcher to make evidence-informed claims based on the data collected through the interviews.

Findings

The findings are organized according to the primary research questions, providing an overview of: a) how Latino parents view the importance of a Catholic school education; b) how Latino parents view the academic benefits of Catholic school education; c) how important is it to Latino parents that their children remain Catholic; and, d) if finances were not involved, what reservations do Latino parents have about their children attending Catholic schools. Coding procedures were used to identify common themes to the open-ended responses given by participants during the structured interviews.

How Do Latino Parishioner Parents Describe Catholic School Education?

Parishioner-parent responses to the structured interview statement—describe your feelings on Catholic school education—were analyzed to determine the most common themes. Three major themes were uncovered during the open

coding process: Catholic schools provide a better education than the most proximate Dallas Independent School District (DISD) schools in the area, Catholic schools are not affordable, and parishioner-parents have a desire for their children to attend Catholic schools.

High-quality education. The most common response to the statement, describe your feelings on Catholic school education, was that Catholic schools provide a superior education compared to area DISD schools (nine out of nine participants). All participants mentioned that they were aware of the significant difference in quality of education between area Catholic schools and DISD. One parent commented, “Catholic schools have a reputation of being the very best, there is really no choice when you are talking about a great education.” Another parent simply stated, “it is the max, it is the best,” when commenting on the quality of Catholic schools’ education. These parishioner-parent responses reflect a common feeling among interviewees that Catholic school education is undoubtedly of a higher quality than DISD.

Cost prohibitive. The second most common response to the statement, describe your feelings on Catholic school education, was that Catholic schools are simply not affordable (7 of 9 responses) for Latino families. A majority of all interviewees mentioned the problem of cost as a prohibiting factor of Catholic schools. One parent replied, “we simply cannot send our kids there [Catholic schools] because the cost is too high.” Another observed, “the price is too high for the ones that need it the most.” Thus, these parents voiced one of their most prominent concerns regarding Catholic school education—while they consider it the best educational option for their children they cannot afford the cost.

Desire to attend. The third most common response to the statement, describe your feelings on Catholic school education, was that parishioner-parents had a strong desire to send their children to Catholic schools (six of nine responses). One parent said that they “would love to have their kids there [Catholic schools].” A second stated that, “I never attended, but I wish my children could.” The majority of parents expressed the same sentiments when responding to this statement, clearly signifying that, based on this sample, there is no shortage of desire when it comes to sending their children to Catholic schools.

How Do Latino Parishioner Parents View the Academic Benefits of Area Catholic Schools?

Parishioner-parent responses to two structured interview statements were analyzed via open coding procedures to determine common themes related to Latino parishioner-parent perspectives on the benefit of Catholic education. The statements were: How important to you is it that your child attends college; and, if Catholic schools were free, what would keep you from having your children attend?

Open coding procedures used to analyze parishioner-parent response to the question, how important is it that your children attend college, unveiled two common themes: a good education is the key to attending college, and college is the key to a good future. Additionally, coding revealed that all parents believed that the opportunity for their children to attend college was very important to them.

Good education is key. The most common response to the interview question, how important is it that your children attend college, was that a good education is the key to their children attending college (six responses). “It is very important. Without a good education it will not be possible,” was the opinion of one respondent. Another stated that, “without good schools and good teachers, this goal will not be reachable.” These responses indicated the sentiment among a majority of the interviewees that their children must receive a good education in order to have a successful future.

College is the key to a good future. The second most common response by interviewees to the interview question, how important is it that your children attend college, was the idea that the key to a successful future was the ability to attend and graduate from college. “Our children will not go far in life unless they go to college,” said one parent. She continued, “all of the good jobs are only there for people with a high level of education.” Another commented, “I tell my children that if they do not want to be like me, they must go to college.” These statements indicated the general belief among a majority of the interviewees that in order to have a successful future, children must attend college.

Open coding procedures used to analyze parishioner-parent response to the question, if Catholic schools were available for free to anyone who desired them what would prevent you from sending your children, unveiled one common theme: Nothing would stop them from sending their children to Catholic schools if they were free (nine responses). “Public schools would be empty

if that were true,” insisted one parent. “There is no comparison. If they were free, people would be fighting to get in,” stated another parent. Another parent put it simply, “nothing would keep me from sending my child to Catholic schools if that were true.” These comments represented the general response from all participants in the interview process.

How Important Is It to Latino Parents That Their Children Remain Catholic?

Parishioner-parent responses to three structured interview statements were analyzed by using open coding procedures to determine common themes related to Latino parishioner-parent perspective on the importance of their children remaining Catholic. The statements were: how important to you is faith formation through CCD or Catholic schools, how important is it that your children remain Catholic as adults, and how important is it to you that morals are taught in school?

All interviewees responded that it was very important that faith formation was taught through CCD or Catholic schools (nine out of nine participants). Open coding procedures revealed two common themes related to the statement, how important is faith formation through CCD or Catholic schools: Catholic schools are better teachers of our faith than parents and CCD, and Catholic schools and CCD are the only way to grow faith.

Better teachers of our faith. The most common theme related to the interview question asking about the importance parishioner-parents place on their children remaining Catholic, was that Catholic schools are better teachers of our faith than parents (six out of nine responses). “The teachers at CCD and (Catholic) schools have much more knowledge of our faith than most parents,” one parent commented. Another parent stated, “we do our best at home, but the difference is through the Church, CCD and Catholic schools.” The parent comments reflected the need for children to receive their faith formation through Church mission such as CCD and Catholic schools.

Catholic schools grow our faith. The second most common theme related to the interview question asking about the importance parishioner-parents place on their children remaining Catholic, was that Catholic schools and CCD are the only way children can grow their faith (five responses). “We look to the Church to grow the faith of our children,” stated a parishioner-parent. “This is the only way our children will grow strong in our faith.” This statement summarized the general response from a majority of the interview-

ees who answered this structured interview question and confirmed the belief among parishioner-parents that Catholic schools and CCD are important in helping their children remain Catholic as adults.

Stabilize their lives. When responding to the structured interview question regarding the importance of their children remaining Catholic as adults, open coding procedures showed that a majority of parishioner-parents believed that it was very important to remain Catholic (seven respondents). A majority of the respondents also believed that remaining Catholic would help stabilize the lives of their children (five respondents). “With so much trouble out there, remaining Catholic will allow our children to have stability in their lives,” one respondent commented. “Stability can only come from a strong foundation in our faith,” remarked another. Such comments underscore the importance that these Latino parents place on their children remaining Catholic as adults.

Home is equally important. When responding to the structured interview question regarding the importance parents place on morals being taught in the classroom, open coding revealed that a majority of the respondents believed that it was very important (eight responses). The most common theme regarding the importance was that parents believe that what is taught at home is equally as important to what is taught at school (six responses). “It does not matter what is taught at school if parents are not building the belief at home,” stated one parent. “Children will only do what parents make them do,” added another. These comments demonstrated the belief among the interviewed Latino parents that teaching morals at school is important, but those lessons and that message must be supported at home.

What Barriers to Attending Catholic Schools Do Latino Parishioner Parents Describe?

Parishioner-parent responses to the structured interview statement, describe the sacrifices you would have to make to send your children to Catholic schools, were analyzed to determine common themes. Two major themes were uncovered during the open coding process: Catholic schools are cost prohibitive; and, Latino parents would have to take another job in order to send their children to Catholic schools.

Cost prohibitive. Of the two most commonly occurring responses to the previous statement, the first was that Catholic schools are cost prohibitive to Latino families (six responses). A majority of participants mentioned that there was no way they could afford to send their children to a Catholic school.

One parent commented that “It would be too hard financially to send our children to Catholic schools. Even if we thought we could afford it, I would be too afraid that I would have to eventually pull them out.” Another stated that, “most of our community has low paying jobs. We can barely pay our bills right now. Unfortunately, Catholic schools are just not an option.” These parishioner-parent responses reflected a common feeling among interviewees that Catholic schools are unaffordable for many Latino parents.

Take an extra job. The next most frequent theme was that Latino parents would be forced to find a second or third job in order to afford Catholic schools (six responses). A majority of all interviewees when commenting on this statement mentioned that they would have to find an additional job in order to make Catholic schools a possibility. One parent replied, “Finding another job would be my only option. I do not have any money to spare right now.” Another observed, “Because it is so expensive I would have to find more work, or a better job.” These Latino parents expressed that while Catholic school education is the best option, the sacrifices may be too large for them to afford to send their children.

Parishioner-parent responses to the structured interview question relating to whether or not Catholic schools were welcoming to Latino families were analyzed by using open coding procedures to determine common themes. Six of the interviewees mentioned that they felt Catholic schools were extremely welcoming to Latino families. Additionally, two major themes were uncovered during the open coding process: Latinos were treated differently based on financial situations; and, Latino parents were afraid to inquire about Catholic schools due to perceived inability to pay the tuition.

Treated differently. Some Latino parents feel they are treated differently due to their financial situations (three responses). “We feel that we are not respected as much for our opinion or ideas because we are not rich,” claimed one parent. Another simply stated, “the Church does not take us seriously because we do not have the money other parishes have.” These interviewees maintained that Catholic schools are cost prohibitive to Latino families (6 responses). These parishioner-parent responses also reflect a feeling among some interviewees that Catholic schools discriminate against Latino families that are impoverished.

Afraid to inquire. Another common theme was that Latino parents would be afraid to inquire about Catholic schools because they believe they cannot afford the cost (three responses). One parent replied, “It is embarrassing to go into discuss wanting our children in the school, only to say that the price is

too much. It makes us look bad.” Another observed, “I don’t see the point in asking. It is very humiliating.” These parents voiced concerns and trepidation about approaching Catholic schools to enroll their children.

Summary: The Desire for Catholic Schools

The qualitative interview data from this action research project revealed many perceptions of Latino parents regarding Catholic school education. Latino parents responded that they feel that Catholic school education is stronger than what area DISD schools can provide, which would allow them to continue on to college in order to have a more successful life. They stated that Catholic schools are necessary for the continued faith development of their children, which they believe will help them remain Catholic as adults. They expressed a desire for their children to attend Catholic schools, but point out that the cost is prohibitive for them. The implications of these findings will be discussed in the following section.

Discussion and Extension

Ultimately, because Latino parishioner parents believe that Catholic schools are better academically than DISD schools and Catholic schools are the most effective way to educate our children in the Catholic faith, there is a deep desire among Latino parishioner parents for their children to attend Catholic schools.

Catholic Schools Provide Superior Education

This action research project was designed to discover how a small sample of Latino parents viewed the academic benefits of Catholic schools compared to area DISD schools. It is no surprise that Latino parents have positive feelings regarding the benefits of an education from Catholic schools. Their perceptions are backed by an array of social science literature documenting the Catholic school effect. Likewise, some of the evident challenges of urban public education factor into their perceptions of Catholic education. The inner-city DISD schools are in low-income areas where racial segregation has occurred. Tim Lockette (2010) pointed out that Erica Frankenberg, a scholar on the Civil Rights Project, said,

These schools are just fundamentally different from other schools. In terms of AP classes available, number of veteran teachers, graduation rates—on almost every measure you see an indication of a school in severe stress. Students in these intensely segregated environments are far less likely to graduate, or to go on to college. It's a problem that is well known to many people of color. (p. 2)

Matthew Bigg (2007) confirmed this problem when he wrote, "Many segregated schools struggle to attract highly qualified teachers and administrators, do not prepare students well for college and fail to graduate more than half their students" (p. 1). In sum, the educational effectiveness of Catholic schools coupled with the challenges of urban education in general align with these parents' opinion that Catholic schools are extremely important educational option for Latino parents.

Catholic Schools Build Our Catholic Faith

When attempting to answer how important it was to Latino parents that their children remain Catholic, parents were not only asked that question directly, but questions were asked to determine Latino parents' thoughts on where is the best place to educate their children in the faith. The interview data showed that Latino parishioner parents believe that Catholic schools are the best way to educate their children in the Catholic faith.

The Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) affirmed this belief of Latino parents when it stated, "the Catholic school is at the heart of the Church" (para. 10). Catholic schools are the most significant way for our Church to educate our children in our Catholic faith. The Congregation of Catholic Education (1998) explained this importance when writing,

The Catholic school as a place of integral education of the human person through a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation; its ecclesial and cultural identity; its mission of education as a work of love; its service to society; the traits which should characterize the educating community. (para. 4)

It is interesting to note, however, that participants in this study commented that schools are more effective at faith development and catechesis than parents themselves. They did acknowledge, though, that what is taught at school

must be supported and reinforced at home, and vice versa. It is apparent that the Church and Latino parents agree on the importance of the role Catholic schools play in the faith formation of our children. The question remains how to make such a valuable mission within our Church available to all.

Latino Parents Desire Catholic Education for Their Children

This action research project uncovered that Latino parishioner parents both approve of and desire Catholic education for their children. When asked if cost was not a factor in sending their children to Catholic schools, 100% of parents stated that nothing would prevent them from sending their children to our schools. This is an overwhelming vote of confidence for our schools, but it is also condemning. As has been stated by the Notre Dame Task Force (2009), “for the 2007-2008 school year, there were over 691,000 empty seats in existing Catholic school” (p. 21). Many of these seats were in areas where the majority of the population served consists of Latino families. Catholic schools are failing to reach out to the Latino community to fill these empty seats. This fact highlights the need for schools to be more creative and understanding in making the seats available, thus providing Catholic education to all.

Limitations

One limitation of this action research project hinges upon the distribution of surveys to parishioners of the three participating parishes. The surveys, which were the recruitment tool for the interview sample, were advertised in parish bulletins, distributed after Masses, and sent home with religious education students. However, parents who did not receive the bulletins, chose not to attend Mass during the weekends of distribution, or did not have students currently enrolled in the religious education programs within their parish did not have the opportunity to participate in this study. Their involvement may have had an impact on the overall pool of interviewees, and in turn, could have impacted the overall results of this study.

It could be assumed that parents who send their children to religious education programs and attend Mass regularly express more positivity toward the importance of Catholic education for their children and Catholic schools overall. Changes to the interview recruitment process could have included distributing a mailer to all parishioners, survey distribution at a greater variety of

parish functions, and distribution of surveys during Masses where the highest percentage of attendance is expected, such as Easter or Christmas.

While the intensive, in-depth, and locally focused nature of this study is a strength, a larger sample size, garnering additional interviews, would be desirable to capture fully the entire range of themes and parent perceptions. Additionally, the parishes that participated in the survey and interview process are in historically underserved areas. In fact, local survey results showed that these parishioners have a lower level of educational attainment than those Latino parents in more affluent school districts and parishes. Extending this interview to Latino parents attending wealthier parishes and school districts would provide a different pattern of findings.

Future Directions of Research

There remain considerable avenues for research on Latino families and Catholic education. First, given our current economy, and the stress that it has placed on expendable income, why and how are parents of Catholic school children making the sacrifices necessary to keep their children in our Catholic schools? The analysis of data from this question could provide information to help our Catholic schools not only fill vacant seats, but also help our schools develop programs to assist parents in their struggles to provide a Catholic school education for their children.

Next, we must analyze other inner-city Catholic school programs that have proven successful over the last decade, such as the Jubilee model in Memphis, Tennessee. These models provide necessary funding to inner-city schools through local corporate support or full diocesan participation to provide a high-quality Catholic education to all students who desire one. Programs like these must be investigated to see what it is they are doing that makes them successful. There is a great need to understand the programs that are in place, financially, spiritually, and academically that allow for success when other inner-city Catholic programs are struggling.

St. Mary of Carmel Catholic School has increased enrollment from 156 students in 2008-2009 to 206 students during the 2010-2011 school year. The number of families served has increased from 101 to 136 over that same time period. These enrollment gains were realized through several strategies: focused recruitment and marketing efforts at area parishes; parent-to-parent outreach and positive word of mouth; and willingness to consider creative financial support packages for families. Given these positive developments, another poten-

tial next step in this action research process is to interview St. Mary of Carmel Catholic School parents who have enrolled children within the last two years. The questions would focus on why parents decided to send their children to Catholic schools; what benefits they see over public schools; whether they are happy with their decision to send their children to a Catholic school; and what type of sacrifices are they making to send their children to a Catholic school.

Conclusion

Catholic schools are in a state of crisis across our country. They are closing or being consolidated with very few new schools being opened. Costs are being cited, however, vacant seats that would cost little money if anything to fill, are being left empty, as opposed to offering them up to families who desire them. This project helped point out that the Latino community, the fastest-growing sector of our Catholic Church, believes that Catholic schools are the most viable option for educating their children both in academics and Catholic faith. It also confirmed their desire to have their children attend Catholic schools. The research from this project is vital to understanding the need to make sure that our Catholic school seats are filled by all who desire them and that we must come together as a Catholic community to make it happen. Bishop Kevin Farrell of the Diocese of Dallas confirmed this when he wrote, “it is the mission of all Catholics to support our youth by helping to make Catholic schools accessible and affordable for all, as they are the future of our Church. This is not only my conviction, but it is one shared by the bishops of the United States” (K. Farrell, personal communication, January 28, 2011).

By coming together as a parishes, communities, and dioceses, we can work together to formulate a marketing plan that will educate Latino families on the importance and availability of Catholic schools, investigate why other Latino families are sending their children to Catholic schools, and devise a plan to raise funds to make our Catholic schools available to all who desire them. As stressed throughout this article, the Catholic school is at the heart of the Church. In order for a heart to survive, blood must be pumped through it. Our Latino children are the new blood for our Church community and our Catholic schools. They must be allowed to enter our Catholic schools, or the heart, in order to keep the body of our Church alive. They are our future. Indeed, Latino children must be served in order for us to sustain the heart.

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Appendix A

Structured Interview Protocol

Date of Interview:

Time of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Interviewee Number:

Describe your feelings regarding Catholic school education.
Do you believe that Catholic schools are welcoming to Latino families?
Why or why not?
Describe the importance of your child(ren) receiving Catholic faith formation either through Catholic schools or CCD.
Describe the importance of your child(ren) remaining Catholic as adults.
How important is it to you that there is strong discipline in school?
How important is it that there are strong morals taught in school?
How important is it that your child(ren) attend college?
What type of sacrifices would you have to make to send your child to a Catholic school?
If Catholic schools were free to all who desired them, what would keep you from sending your child to Catholic schools?
Are there any comments that you would like to make regarding Catholic education or education as a whole?