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Catholic High Schools: Facing the New Realities

James L. Heft, S.M.
Oxford University Press, 2011
\$24.95, 272 pages

Reviewed by Andrew F. Miller, Boston College

In this period of perceived financial crisis in the American Catholic school system, many advocates for Catholic schools yearn for the support they feel has been lacking. Budgetary issues, faced institutionally by the American branch of the Church and locally by dioceses trying to fund day-to-day operations, have resulted in the acknowledgment that one of the great gifts of the American Church to the faithful, the Catholic school, is not financially viable. Lay and religious Catholic school leaders are faced with stark choices when determining how to manage the high costs needed to operate the network of Catholic schools in this country. The best solutions for Catholic schools in the 21st century seem to be found in the search for new funding formulas and management structures, the infusion of private capital, and the promotion of publically funded educational policy initiatives that benefit private schools. These methods have appeared most effective in solving the financial problems faced by Catholic school leaders.

But a financial argument may not be sufficient to solve the problems facing Catholic schools. James L. Heft's new book, *Catholic High Schools: Facing the New Realities*, tries to continue a tradition of probing the theoretical good of Catholic education in this country. He situates his book in the tradition of Bryk, Lee, and Holland's (1993) seminal work *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, looking for how structural benefits of Catholic schools lead to positive civic outcomes. Heft attempts in his monograph to make three basic points about the state of Catholic education in this country: 1.) Catholic schools have an enduring value which deserves greater support; 2.) the value of Catholic schools can be sustained by lay leadership; and 3.) dedicated leaders must critically address issues of American culture that shape students in order to fulfill the mission the Catholic Church has set for its schools in the United States.

Heft's argument provides a useful framework for talking about the current issues facing Catholic school leadership at all levels of a school's operations:

teachers, administration, staff, and parents. He conceptualizes the evolving mission of Catholic schools in the 21st century and claims a Catholic high school should promote the integration of knowledge and support faculty to find new ways to do so; communicate a sense of cultural and communal history; emphasize art, speech, and drama within a high-expectations curriculum; and have an explicit service orientation. He claims these four aspects of mission will confront the major currents of modern American culture, such as excessive individualism and a therapeutic sense of spirituality, which tear apart a deeper understanding of the common good. In order to appropriately overcome these cultural challenges, Heft claims a Catholic high school must have strong leadership that believes in the communal and transformative possibilities of education for adolescents. Catholic schools can fulfill the promise of the Catholic school effect, conceptualized in Bryk, Lee, and Holland's structural analyses, if they meet one condition: Catholic schools need *Catholic* leaders. Even if the leaders are not all practicing Catholics, Heft argues a faculty can be both "little c" catholic and "big C" Catholic to produce, enact, and embody a unified moral, theological, and educational mission. Once this mission is established, the educational work of the school can begin.

Readers may be disappointed that Heft offers no practical solutions to the problems facing most Catholic high schools. He does not support many of his ideological contentions with empirical evidence, primarily drawing on anecdote and secondary data analysis. He describes some innovative models that address modern issues in Catholic schools, highlighting in particular the successes of the Cristo Rey Network in transforming urban Catholic high schools. But he ultimately concludes that a focus on finances is myopic: "Money is important, but not the most important factor in ensuring the vibrancy and future of Catholic education. This, then, is the time to reiterate what is most important for Catholic education to flourish" (p. 208). A reader looking for a plan to help turn a financially struggling Catholic high school around will find little in this book to help triage those palpable budget realities.

This is not a book about how to keep Catholic schools open; he leaves that work to the multiple research reports that have been generated in the past few decades exploring models of finance and leadership. This book is about the nature of what Catholic school leadership should be; his mantra throughout the book is "Money follows vision." It is not enough for a school to reconcile financial issues if that school does not have a clear vision. It is not enough for a school to stay open and continue to minister to families looking for better educational prospects if that school has no sense of what that ministry is. This

line of argumentation has been absent from many recent debates on Catholic education as the question over what the nature and purpose of Catholic schools should be has been forsaken in favor of an assumption that Catholic schools are inherently good by nature of being Catholic schools. Heft uses his book to move away from an excessive concern about the practical and financial issues, acknowledging that a much deeper issue exists behind problems with finances striking at the core of what it means for a school to be Catholic.

Given Heft's mission to promote a focus on philosophy and ideology in Catholic school leadership, he engages in a cultural polemic against the dangerous pathology he finds in modern American culture. Yet this line of argumentation, which he develops throughout a majority of the text, tears away at the unifying potential of his argument. Heft claims leadership in Catholic high schools should be decisively Catholic but assumes, without empirical support, a school's Catholic leadership will be able to solve all future problems through its adherence to mission and by nature of its prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. He focuses more time on how Catholic schools can prevent what he sees as the dangerous trends of secularism and individualism in adolescence than on how Catholic high schools could use a responsive and nurturing approach to help support the oftentimes crippling realities of adolescent experience. Instead of encouraging an ongoing conversation about what the mission of a Catholic school should be, he promotes an increasingly narrow view of this mission and does not leave much room for discussion or negotiation. This narrow mission will, when enacted by Catholic leadership, provide opportunities for students to grow in this mission yet the students' place in helping construct this mission is not clear from his argument. For this reason, his views on Catholic school leadership ultimately work better as a framework than as a method for how modern Catholic school leadership should operate in practice among faculty, administrators, and students.

The leadership framework in *Catholic High Schools* offers a glimmer of hope in the current debate on the future of American Catholic education. It is not a naïve hope that financial problems will go away, but a hopeful challenge to Catholic school leaders to not lose sight of the philosophical and educational ideologies essential to the daily work of a successful school. These leaders have the opportunity to provide a space for Catholic and non-Catholic students alike to develop into engaged, moral citizens. Though Heft provides little empirical support for his claims, his cultural polemic highlights the need for a strong philosophy and theology of Catholic education that is all too often lost as school leaders face budget crises. The hope of Heft's work must be tem-

pered by an understanding that if Catholic school leaders want their schools to truly support the common good, they must have a clear sense of what that common good is and how they plan to empower their school community to promote it. Without this kind of leadership, Catholic schools will suffer from the same lack of vision that plagues any failing institution, even those which are financially secure.

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