



April 2014

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Recommended Citation

Knowles, K. (2014). Building Assets: The Strategic Use of Closed Catholic Schools. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 17(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1702122014>

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Building Assets: The Strategic Use of Closed Catholic Schools

Ronald J. Nuzzi, James M. Frabutt, and Anthony C. Holter
Notre Dame, Indiana: Alliance for Catholic Education Press
66 pages, \$18.00 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-935788096

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Catholic educators may find it troublesome to explore the strategic use of closed buildings that were once thriving communities of faith-filled education. Stepping away from the emotion that the image of a closed Catholic school may bring and looking at the issue through a lens of large scale Church and (arch) diocesan resource management opens up a much-needed dialogue regarding these facilities and how they are, or are not, being used to promote the mission of the Catholic Church.

Since the peak of Catholic school enrollment in 1965, over 6000 Catholic schools have closed. This staggering amount of real property owned by the Catholic Church is no longer serving the original purpose of educating Catholic youth, a crucial mission of the Church. Nuzzi, Frabutt, and Holter take an in-depth look into the realities of nine (arch)dioceses in the United States, aiming to answer questions regarding the use of such facilities. The economic and demographic realities that closed these schools do not make the facilities inert for utilization in advancing the mission of the Church in other ways. The study sheds light onto creative ways the facilities can and often are being used. The study also exposes larger, systematic issues within the Church that are making the organized effort to best use the facilities difficult. Surprisingly, of all the real properties examined, 24% of these facilities turned up no records of current use; the data regarding the facilities was simply not readily available. The study also revealed that regardless of how facilities were being used, most (arch)dioceses have no clearly articulated policies or procedures in place to facilitate or monitor effective use of the buildings.

The uses of the closed school buildings uncovered during the study were diverse in nature and in their effectiveness in promoting the mission of the Church. One potential (and controversial) use for the closed school build-

ings is leasing the buildings to public charter schools. Of the nine (arch) dioceses studied, seven had leased former Catholic school buildings to new public charter schools. The study uncovered serious concerns, specifically from pastors of parishes with functioning Catholic schools, regarding the practice. Some of the (arch) diocese studied stated there is extreme caution used and steps taken to ensure the charter schools would not be in direct competition with neighboring Catholic schools before leases were allowed. The study makes it clear, however, that although the closed school buildings are being leased to both public and charter schools, there remains a strong sense of pride within each (arch) diocese system of Catholic schools and an evident motivation to protect the tradition of Catholic education.

The impact of the study is already evident, specifically in the Diocese of Brooklyn. Shortly after the visit from the research team in 2011 the Diocese of Brooklyn, under the leadership of Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, revised the Diocesan policy for leasing school buildings. The policy reflected Canon Law in stating that the Bishop is the legitimate authority over all Catholic schools. Under this authority, the Bishop insisted that diocesan officials follow a specific process to understand the implications of leasing a Catholic school building to a public or charter school; specifically, he requested investigation into the long-term well being of surrounding Catholic schools. Furthermore, the Bishop put into place a profit sharing model wherein 40% of the rental income received by the parish community leasing the building is shared on a per capita basis with Catholic schools in the immediate area of the building. The work of Bishop DiMarzio is an example of how well articulated policies regarding the use of closed Catholic schools can provide models of good stewardship and continue to promote a strong system of Catholic schools.

The data gathered and discoveries made in the study bring to light some core issues surrounding Canon Law and governance within the system of Catholic (arch)dioceses throughout the nation. Catholic institutions celebrate the principle of subsidiarity, and rightly so. Subsidiarity allows parish communities to enjoy a level of site-based management that empowers local communities to respond to specific needs. However, in circumstances such as best practices for the utilization of facilities as researched in this study, there is a lack of central authority and collaboration on a larger organizational level. The study uncovers the need for a balance between the benefits of site-based management and the need for collaboration on a larger organizational scale.

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