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Beyond Academic Performance and Faith Formation: A Focus Section on Values and the Future of Catholic Schools in the United States

Quentin Wodon^{1,2}

Readers of the *JCE* are likely familiar with the enrollment crisis in K–12 Catholic schools in the United States. In 1965, 5.2 million children were enrolled in close to 13,000 Catholic schools. Today, 1.7 million children are enrolled in fewer than 6,000 schools (National Catholic Educational Association, 2022). The future does not look particularly promising. The reduction in the number of students due to lower fertility rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022) and a decline in the share of the adult population who are religiously affiliated (Smith, 2021) are sources of concerns. What might be done to stem the long-term decline in enrollment in Catholic schools while also strengthening the ability of the schools to fulfill their mission in a rapidly changing society? There are no easy answers, but the articles in this focus section suggest that a stronger emphasis on the role played by Catholic schools in instilling values may be a path forward.

In the first article in the focus section, Lapsley and Kennedy (2022) explore what Catholic education's value propositions could be. They suggest two main aims: a) supporting students in the development of a personal, self-selected religious–spiritual identity across the life course; and b) moral-character formation. They argue that the first value proposition has been overshadowed by a focus on the Catholic identity of schools as opposed to the spiritual development of students, while

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the second has been subsumed by catechesis and liturgy and remains too implicit or hidden in the curriculum.

Strengthening the Catholic identity of schools matters, and standards have been developed to that effect (Center for Catholic School Effectiveness, 2012), but Lapsley and Kennedy argue that more work is needed on how to enable students to strengthen their own identity. Early research has suggested that attending a Catholic school makes students more likely to practice their faith as adults (Sander, 2001), yet these effects may have been due to self-selection and may vanish over time (Smith & Snell, 2009; Smith et al., 2014). A Catholic education is just one of several paths to religious identity development and “brand loyalty.” If other paths are absent or weak—that is, if a Catholic education is not embedded in broader structures of religious plausibility—its effects may not be sustained.

Regarding values, a focus on moral choices, self-discipline, and character development is a natural fit for Catholic schools (Robey, 2011). When values are instilled together with a strong faith, they benefit from a solid foundation. Yet this cannot be left to an “invisible pedagogy” of personal formation: It needs to be tended to. While religiosity is linked to formal religious and ritualistic observance in church settings (Smith, 2017), spirituality is a more personal project that may take place outside of formal religions (Astin et al., 2011). In adolescence, identities are shifting and in a continuous process of “recentering” (Tanner, 2006). Adolescents place a premium on beliefs not simply handed down to them but felt as their own (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). A strong Catholic identity for schools is an asset, but a developmental approach for the spiritual development of students is also needed. Lapsley and Kennedy unpack what is often implicit in the role that schools play in the transmission of faith and values.

In the second article, Wolf et al. (2022) note that policy debates and research on Catholic schools have focused on their contributions to human capital. This emphasis is natural. Human capital accounts for about two thirds of the wealth of nations (Lange et al., 2018; World Bank 2021; see also Wodon et al. [2018] on girls’ education). Yet gains from enrolling in Catholic schools for educational achievement and attainment may not be as large as sometimes argued. Are there other areas where a Catholic education could make a difference? The authors point to an emerging literature on such benefits, including for participation in the democratic process as an adult (Cheng & Sikkink, 2020; Campbell, 2008), the likelihood of being convicted of committing a crime (Deangelis & Wolf, 2019; McEachin et al., 2020), and the likelihood of marriage (Uecker & Hill, 2014; Uecker & Stokes, 2008).

Using data from the Understanding America Study, Wolf and co-authors assess how attending different types of school is associated with marital and childbirth outcomes in adulthood. Compared to adults who attended public schools, adults who attended religious schools have higher marriage rates, lower divorce rates, and a lower incidence of nonmarital childbirths. Effects are greater for

Protestant schools, older adults, and those who grew up in less financially secure households (the presence of both biological parents does make a difference). The analysis may not imply causal effects, but it suggests positive long-term marital outcomes for students who attend religious schools.

Finally, using data from a market research survey (Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities & National Catholic Educational Association, 2018), the third article considers parental priorities for what children should learn in school (Wodon, 2022). For every family with its youngest child enrolled in a Catholic school, there are three families “very willing” to consider Catholic schools who have not yet enrolled their youngest child in one. This suggests scope for growth if schools respond to those parents’ priorities. The issue is that priorities differ between the two groups of parents. For parents with their youngest child in a Catholic school, deepening the faith is important. It ranks below an emphasis on a sound moral base and communication skills, but at the same level as critical thinking, preparing for the job market, or preparing for college. By contrast, for parents very willing to consider Catholic schools but not having enrolled their youngest child in one, deepening the faith is at the very bottom of their priorities. Emphasizing faith may not be attractive to them. Another difference is that few parents with their youngest child in a Catholic school emphasize teaching children to embrace diversity, while this matters for the larger group of parents willing to consider the schools.

What might be the implications of these findings? First, Catholic schools must strive for academic excellence and ensure the acquisition of skills by students as this is valued by all parents. Second, if schools are to respond to the priorities of parents very willing to consider them, they may need to pay attention to the promotion of values apart from the transmission of the faith. This does not mean weakening the schools’ Catholic identity, as an emphasis on values is fully consistent with the Catholic tradition. But this slight shift in focus means that schools should think about “how to” transmit the faith while also promoting values and welcoming children who may not be Catholic.

In different ways, the articles in this focus section emphasize the role that Catholic schools play in instilling strong values among students. Faith is a foundation for strong values, and those values can make a real difference in a wide range of outcomes in adulthood. But if deepening the faith comes at the cost of respect for diversity—including diversity in religious beliefs—this may exacerbate the perception that some Catholic schools not only tend to lack diversity in their student body, but also that their ethos may not be welcoming for all. This would be to the detriment of their core mission. In its landmark document *The Catholic School*, the Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) cited *Gravissimum Educationis* in reminding us that “first and foremost the Church offers its educational service to ‘the poor or those who are deprived of family help and affection or those who are far from the faith’” (n. 58). Catholic schools should transmit the faith to Catholic students and maintain their academic excellence, but they should also enable students

who may not be Catholic to deepen their own faith or spirituality. This is essential for educational pluralism, regarding both the availability of different types of schools from which parents can choose (Wodon, 2021), and a respect for pluralism within all schools.

In the United States, adherence to formal religion may be weakening, but there is a yearning for meaning. There is also a pushback against narrow visions of academic excellence based only on test scores and similar metrics. Beyond their traditional emphasis on academic excellence and faith formation, to respond to the aspirations of parents for their children, Catholic schools may need to focus more on helping students develop their values and spirituality in a manner that would be palatable to a larger share of the population, including non-Catholics. While many other factors may have contributed to the decline in enrollment in Catholic schools over time (Murnane & Reardon, 2018), this shift could contribute to keeping Catholic schools relevant. The good news is that Catholic schools may have a comparative advantage in those areas, and market research data suggest a willingness of a substantial share of parents to consider such schools for their children.

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