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## WHY CATHOLIC SCHOOLS SPELL SUCCESS FOR AMERICA'S INNER-CITY CHILDREN

### INTRODUCTION

It is said that economic empowerment today is linked inextricably to education. This means that Congress has the opportunity, over the next year, to give tens of thousands of America's most disadvantaged children a much brighter future. Attention from across the political and social spectrum is shifting to the astonishing success of inner-city Catholic schools in working with the very children the public schools have abandoned as uneducable. An abundance of recent research comparing public, private, and religious schools shows that Catholic schools improve not only test scores and graduation rates for these children, but also their future economic prospects—and at a substantially lower cost.

The school choice<sup>1</sup> measures now before Congress would give parents the option to send their children to public, private, or parochial schools of choice. Thanks to the growing body of research supporting Catholic school education, Congress can be certain that inner-city children would benefit from these measures. This research looks at the impact of Catholic schools on a range of outcomes such as grades, standardized test scores, drop-out and graduation rates, college attendance, and future wage gains.

In a study published in 1990, for example, the Rand Corporation analyzed big-city high schools to determine how education for low-income minority youth could be improved.<sup>2</sup> It looked at 13 public, private, and Catholic high schools in New York City that attracted minority and disadvantaged youth. Of the Catholic school students in these schools, 75 to 90 percent were black or Hispanic. The study found that:

- 1 For information on school choice, see Nina H. Shokraii and Dorothy B. Hanks, "School Choice Programs: What's Happening in the States," Heritage Foundation *F.Y.I.* No. 138, April 21, 1997, and the Heritage school choice Web site at [www.heritage.org/heritage/schools/](http://www.heritage.org/heritage/schools/).
- 2 Paul T. Hill, Gail E. Foster, and Tamar Gendler. *High Schools with Character* (Santa Monica, Cal.: Rand Corporation, August 1990).

- The Catholic high schools graduated 95 percent of their students each year, while the public schools graduated slightly more 50 percent of their senior class;
- Over 66 percent of the Catholic school graduates received the New York State Regents diploma to signify completion of an academically demanding college preparatory curriculum, while only about 5 percent of the public school students received this distinction;
- 85 percent of the Catholic high school students took the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), compared with just 33 percent of the public high school students;
- The Catholic school students achieved an average combined SAT score of 803, while the public school students' average combined SAT score was 642; and
- 60 percent of the Catholic school black students scored above the national average for black students on the SAT, and over 70 percent of public school black students scored below the same national average.

More recent studies confirm these observations. As parents, politicians, and concerned observers become aware of the benefits of Catholic schooling, particularly for the poor, the rhetoric demanding action builds. Syndicated columnist William Raspberry, a self-described "Reluctant Convert to School Choice," wrote recently, "It seems as obvious for poor children as for rich ones that one-size-fits-all education doesn't make sense."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, according to a recent survey conducted by Terry Moe, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, and John Chubb, founding partner and curriculum director for the Edison Project, a stunning 83 percent of public school parents and 82 percent of inner-city poor parents want parochial schools to be included in the choice of schools to which they can send their children.<sup>4</sup>

## THE POPULARITY OF PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE

Lawmakers and educators should use the mounting research comparing the performance of students in private and religious schools with their public school counterparts to promote real change in the U.S. educational system.

Thanks to the growing popularity of school choice,<sup>5</sup> three legislative proposals now before Congress would give inner-city low-income parents the opportunity to send their children to the public, private, or parochial school of their choice. These measures would empower parents to remove their children from violent or failing schools and send them to institutions in which they would be able to learn.

- **The American Community Renewal Act of 1997**, introduced by Representatives J. C. Watts (R-OK), James Talent (R-MO), and Floyd Flake (D-NY), and Senators Spencer Abraham (R-MI) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT), would create 100 demonstration "renewal communities" in low-income urban areas featuring pilot school choice programs.<sup>6</sup>

3 William Raspberry, "A Reluctant Convert to School Choice," *The Washington Post*, May 30, 1997.

4 Forthcoming book by Terry Moe and John Chubb, to be published by the Brookings Institution.

5 For instance, according to a recent poll, 70.4 percent of blacks with an income of less than \$15,000 a year support school choice. See David A. Bositis, "1997 National Opinion Poll: Children's Issues," Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, June 1997, Table 7.

- **The District of Columbia Student Opportunity Scholarship Act of 1997**, introduced by Representative Richard Armey (R–TX) and Senators Dan Coats (R–IN), Joseph Lieberman, and Sam Brownback (R–KS), would give some of the poorest students in the nation’s capital vouchers to attend the schools of their choice.<sup>7</sup>
- **The Safe and Affordable Schools Act**, introduced by Senator Paul Coverdell (R–GA), includes school choice demonstration projects for children who want to escape unsafe schools and provisions to encourage states and localities to design their own school choice programs.<sup>8</sup>

Congress can use the strong and widespread data available on the success of Catholic school education to strengthen and promote proposals that would increase significantly the educational opportunities and choices available to America’s inner-city poor.

## WHY CHOOSE CATHOLIC SCHOOLS?

Not only do Catholic schools offer a safe and cooperative learning environment, but they do so at a more reasonable and much lower cost than the public schools.<sup>9</sup> For example:

- **Holy Angels Elementary School**, a 110-year-old institution, is located in the Kenwood–Oakland neighborhood of southside Chicago, Illinois, where three out of four people live in poverty and violent crime is the rule rather than the exception. Yet Holy Angels has managed to become one of the strongest academic institutions in the country. According to a 1994 report published by the Chicago Public Schools, four times as many Holy Angels 8th graders scored above the national average in math on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills than 8th graders attending the area’s three public schools. In addition, of the 8th graders who scored above the national average in reading, twice as many were from Holy Angels as from the public schools. Tuition at Holy Angels is approximately \$1,500 a year.<sup>10</sup>
- **St. Gregory the Great Elementary School** on West 90th Street in New York City serves only low-income black children from Harlem and Washington

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- 6 Among the supporters of this bill are six members of the Congressional Black Caucus, which opposed school choice until Representative Floyd Flake endorsed it.
- 7 Similar legislation offered in 1995 by Representative Steve Gunderson (R–WI) passed the House with bipartisan support but died in the Senate. The chief opponent in the Senate was Senator James Jeffords (R–VT), whose home state is one of only two that have school choice plans in place for children living in rural neighborhoods without public high schools nearby.
- 8 On May 23, 1997, by a vote of 51 to 49, the Senate passed an amendment to its balanced budget plan that would allow the use of federal funds to enable victims of school violence to attend a public, private, or religious school of choice. Although the voucher language is non-binding, it signifies support for choice in the Senate. This may be the first time a school choice plan has “passed” in the Senate.
- 9 In 1993/1994, tuition at elementary Catholic schools averaged \$1,628, not including subsidies. See “Voucher Kids: How Private Money Rescues Thousands of Youngsters from the Public School Monopolists,” *Forbes*, June 2, 1997. “The average private elementary school tuition in America is less than \$2,500. The average tuition for all private schools, elementary and secondary, is \$3,116, or less than half of the cost per pupil in the average public school, \$6,857.” See David Boaz and R. Morris Barrett, “What Would a School Voucher Buy? The Real Cost of Private Schools,” Cato Institute *Briefing Paper* No. 25, March 26, 1996.
- 10 Interview with Sister Helen Struder, principal of Holy Angels school, May 20, 1997.



Heights. It outperforms all neighboring public schools and most of the schools in its district. In 1995, 62 percent of St. Gregory's 3rd graders were reading above the minimum standard, and 92 percent functioned above the standard in math. St. Gregory charges only \$1,700 a year in tuition.<sup>11</sup>

- **East Catholic High** in Detroit, Michigan, where the principals saved for 12 years just to buy a school bus, has not allowed lack of funding to interfere with its students' academic achievements. The school serves low-income minorities almost exclusively and has been particularly successful in teaching students who were not performing well in public schools. Nearly 75 percent of its students go to college after graduation, and only 15 percent of parents paying the \$2,000 tuition fee are Catholic.<sup>12</sup>

Holy Angels, St. Gregory the Great, and East Catholic High are typical inner-city Catholic schools. They overcome financial hardships daily to deliver astounding results because they possess the ingredients that make schools work well: (1) strong institutional leadership and school autonomy; (2) shared values among the staff about school goals; (3) a safe and orderly environment; and (4) core curriculum requirements and high expectations for all students regardless of background.

Despite such examples of success, however, prejudice against allowing inner-city parents to choose Catholic schools for their children continues to linger among policymakers and the education elite. It often seems that just mentioning the term "Catholic schools" causes many opponents to conjure up images of medieval nuns using knuckle-rapping rulers on terrified children. Unlike many government-run schools, Catholic schools are strong on discipline, but the wholesome discipline at a Catholic school sends a clear message to students who consequently are able to learn in the school's safe and orderly environment. Researchers have agreed that the caring staff members at Catholic schools willingly devote their attention to the academic and emotional well-being of students.<sup>13</sup>

This difference is not lost on parents. In Cleveland, Ohio, inner-city parents immediately enrolled their children in Catholic schools during the Cleveland choice experiment,<sup>14</sup> a popular full choice program that recently was struck down by a lower court after a successful first year of operation. Most of the parents in this program who enrolled their children in the Catholic schools were not Catholic. They selected Catholic schools because, on balance, they deliver impressive results.

Opponents of school choice often state that Catholic schools succeed because they can pick and choose students, they have more freedom to dismiss disruptive students, and their parents are more involved in their children's education. The evidence, however, proves otherwise. According to Lydia Harris, principal of St. Adalbert, a leading Catholic school in Cleveland, "There's no cream on my crop until we put it there. It's a myth that we take discipline problems and throw them out of school. It's the other way around. I get the kids

11 Sol Stern, "The Invisible Miracle of Catholic Schools," *City Journal*, Summer 1996.

12 Susan Chira, "Where Children Learn How to Learn: Inner-City Pupils in Catholic Schools," *The New York Times*, November 20, 1991, p. B8; also based on interview with Rochelle Griffin, principal, East Catholic High, June 3, 1997.

13 A. Bryk, V. Lee, and P. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

14 Until a ruling by the Ohio Court of Appeals on May 1, 1997, striking down the Cleveland choice experiment. Cleveland had the only school choice program in place that included religious schools. It was in operation for the 1996/1997 school year.

the public schools can't handle."<sup>15</sup> St. Adalbert is not alone. On average, Catholic high schools dismiss fewer than two students per year, and fewer than three students per year are suspended for any reason.<sup>16</sup>

In 1996, Sol Stern, a contributing editor at New York's *City Journal*, wrote about how Catholic schools worked to teach their predominantly low-income minority non-Catholic clientele.<sup>17</sup> Stern concluded that "[Catholic schools are] constantly reminding us that the neediest kids are educatable and that spending extravagant sums of money isn't the answer. No one who cares about reviving our failing public schools can afford to ignore this inspiring laboratory of reform."<sup>18</sup> This is a strong admonition to those in Washington, D.C., who can direct the future of education reform in the United States.

The success of these Catholic education "laboratories" has been well researched, and that research deserves Congress's attention. As John DiIulio, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, attests, "The Catholic-school story is as solid as you can make a case.... It's not even close to the warning zone, when it comes to sociological credibility."<sup>19</sup>

## OVER 20 YEARS OF RESEARCH: THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Over the past several years, Cardinal John J. O'Connor repeatedly has asked New York City to allow him to educate the lowest-performing 5 percent of its public school students. But even though Mayor Rudolph Giuliani responded positively, the city's board of education chose not to accept the cardinal's offer. Cardinal O'Connor may be speaking from personal conviction, but a substantial body of professional research supports his assertion that Catholic schools can do a better job of educating the country's poorest and most disadvantaged children. In fact, evidence that Catholic schooling benefits inner-city children has been mounting since the early 1980s.<sup>20</sup>

15 Roy Maynard. "Pro-Choice (on Education)," *World*, August 17, 1996.

16 Bryk *et al.*, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*.

17 Stern, "The Invisible Miracle of Catholic Schools."

18 *Ibid.*

19 Quoted in Joe Klein, "In God They Trust." *The New Yorker*, June 16, 1997.

20 See Peter Rossi and Andrew M. Greeley, *The Education of Catholic Americans* (Chicago, Ill.: Aldine Press, 1966); Andrew M. Greeley, William McCready, and Kathleen McCourt, *Catholic Schools in a Declining Church* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1976); James S. Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore, *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared* (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1982); Andrew M. Greeley, *Catholic High Schools and Minority Students* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1982); James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1987); Hill *et al.*, *High Schools With Character*; Bryk *et al.*, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*; John J. Convey, *Catholic Schools Make a Difference: Twenty-Five Years of Research* (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Educational Association, 1992); National Center for Education Statistics, *A Profile of the American High School Senior in 1992* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995); National Center for Education Statistics, *Two Years Later: Cognitive Gains and School Transitions of NELS:88 Eighth Graders* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995); National Center for Education Statistics, *High School Seniors' Instructional Experiences in Science and Mathematics* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996); National Center for Education Statistics, *National Education Longitudinal Study Descriptive Summary Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996); James S. Coleman, *Equality of Educational Opportunity Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966); and Derek Neal, "The Effects of Catholic Secondary Schooling on Educational Achievement," *Journal of Labor Economics*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1997), pp. 98-123.

## General Characteristics of Catholic Schools

In general, studies show that Catholic schools by design foster the academic, religious, and moral development of their students. These schools frequently are characterized by parents as exhibiting a strong sense of community and as having an environment characterized by high academic standards, discipline and order, and a strongly committed and collegial faculty.<sup>21</sup>

Anthony Bryk of the University of Chicago Department of Education, Valerie Lee of the University of Michigan School of Education, and Peter Holland, the Superintendent of Schools in Belmont, Massachusetts, compiled empirical evidence on Catholic school organization and its effects for a study published in 1993. They based their findings on extensive field visits to seven high schools around the country that represented the diversity of Catholic secondary education, and on an extensive analysis of data collected for the U.S. Department of Education's comprehensive study of high school seniors and sophomores, *High School and Beyond* (HS&B).<sup>22</sup> After studying the social and intellectual history of these schools and coupling their findings with information gathered by the National Catholic Educational Association, the authors generalized their observations to the Catholic school sector as a whole and found the following common elements:

- More internal diversity with regard to race and income than the typical public school;
- On average, an 88 percent acceptance rate for those who apply;
- Less specialized staff and less complex school organization than in the large public secondary schools;
- More advanced academic courses and fewer vocational courses, with 72 percent of Catholic school students studying an academic program and only 10 percent concentrating on vocational studies (in public schools, children are distributed approximately equally across the academic, advanced academic, and vocational tracks);
- A focused curriculum and high standards;
- A principal with discretion in hiring and firing staff;
- A written code of conduct that includes a dress code, standards for social behavior among students and faculty, and a list of prohibited behaviors; and
- A lower incidence of students' cutting class, refusing to obey instructions, talking back to teachers, and instigating physical attacks on teachers compared with public and other private schools.<sup>23</sup>

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21 Convey, *Catholic Schools Make a Difference*.

22 The *High School and Beyond* (HS&B) longitudinal study of U.S. high school seniors and sophomores was conducted for the U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement's National Center for Education Statistics by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. It was designed to complement an earlier study, the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS-72). HS&B studied high school students of the 1980s and looked at sophomores in addition to seniors. Adding the sophomores allowed for researchers to study not only dropout rates, but also changes and processes during high school. HS&B is considered by some to be a better measure of student achievements because it looks beyond grades to whether high school achievement translates into future employment gains or post-graduate work.

## Impact on Academic Achievement

The seminal work on Catholic school education and inner-city children was conducted by the late James Coleman, a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. The results were widely reported in 1981 after appearing in summary form in *The Public Interest*.<sup>24</sup> Using data from the ongoing National Longitudinal Sample collected by the U.S. Department of Education,<sup>25</sup> Coleman found that Catholic schools not only helped children achieve academically, but also provided a more integrated school setting for students with a higher likelihood for dropping out.<sup>26</sup>

In 1982, Coleman published *High School Achievement: Public and Private Schools* with Thomas Hoffer of the National Opinion Research Center<sup>27</sup> and Sally Kilgore, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. The authors concluded that “Catholic schools, in comparison to public schools, produced higher cognitive achievement; that they were less racially segregated; and that variation across students in patterns of achievement was much less dependent upon family background.”<sup>28</sup> In analyzing HS&B data, they found that Catholic school students—especially minority students—scored significantly higher on standardized tests even after controlling for differences in family characteristics.

Catholic schools send a higher percentage of their students to college than do public schools. For example, approximately 66 percent of the 1980 Catholic high school graduates had enrolled in a four-year or two-year college before the spring of 1982,<sup>29</sup> compared with fewer than 50 percent of the 1980 graduates of public schools.

Catholic schools also are more successful in preventing dropouts than are the public schools. For example, while 13.1 percent of white students drop out of public schools, only 2.6 drop out of Catholic schools. The dropout rates for black and Hispanic students in public schools are 17.2 percent and 19.1 percent, respectively, while the dropout rates for these ethnic groups in Catholic schools are 4.6 percent for blacks and 9.3 percent for Hispanics (see Chart 1).<sup>30</sup> The differences in achievement between minority and white students within each school are narrowed substantially in Catholic schools in comparison with public schools. Subsequently, Coleman concluded that Catholic schools are a better example of the “common school” ideal of American education than today’s public schools.

Andrew Greeley, professor of social sciences at the University of Chicago, and his associates conducted much of the research on the outcomes of Catholic schools in a series of

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23 Bryk *et al.*, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*.

24 James S. Coleman, “Public Schools, Private Schools, and the Public Interest,” *The Public Interest* No. 64 (Summer 1981).

25 Data are available for independent analysis from the U.S. Department of Education.

26 Denis P. Doyle, “The Social Consequences of Choice: Why It Matters Where Poor Children Go to School,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 1088, July 25, 1996. Catholic school sophomores scored 10 percent higher in science, 12 percent higher in civics, and from 17 percent to 21 percent higher in mathematics, writing, reading, and vocabulary. Catholic school seniors also consistently outscored public high school students: 10 percent to 17 percent higher in reading, mathematics, and vocabulary, and from 3 percent lower to 7 percent higher on three tests that measure ability more than achievement.

27 A nonprofit social science institute.

28 Coleman and Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities*.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*

