



Why the Decline of Catholic Schools Matters

Carol Ann MacGregor, St. Jerome's University

In his 2008 book *The Street Stops Here*, journalist Patrick McCloskey documented the successes of at-risk black young men at Rice High School in Harlem. For many years, this Catholic school run by the Christian Brothers overcame traditional gaps in educational achievement to get one hundred percent of its graduates accepted for college. Yet just three years after the book was published, the school closed due to financial shortfalls.

Overall, America's Catholic schools are closing at a rapid rate. At their peak in the mid-1960s, more than 13,000 Catholic elementary and secondary schools enrolled twelve percent of U.S. school children. But by 2012, fewer than 7,000 Catholic schools enrolled about two million, or five percent, of U.S. school-aged children – and the future is likely to bring further contraction. Because Catholic schools have a long history of serving under-served minority and poor people, their decline reduces the U.S. Catholic Church's ability to further social justice – and will likely reduce equality of educational opportunity.

The Catholic School Effect

In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars documented and debated the educational benefits children got from attending Catholic schools – including higher grades, better performance on standardized tests, and higher rates of graduation and attendance at college. What explained these benefits?

- Some scholars argued that tight social ties between teachers and parents allowed Catholic schools to control misbehavior and reinforce positive norms for children. Yet the evidence was not conclusive because, unlike public schools, Catholic schools can expel or refuse to admit students who underperform academically or exhibit behavioral problems.
- Documented benefits turned out to be greatest for urban and minority students, the kinds of youngsters who would otherwise have to attend the worst-performing public schools.

Looking at the next few decades in the United States, we can see that Catholic education could be especially important as the Hispanic population continues to increase. Most Latinos are at least nominally Catholic, and research has documented that their children often fall short in learning outcomes.

Why are Catholic Schools Declining?

If Catholic schools can make a positive difference – especially for vulnerable families – why are they in such sharp decline? Research points to several interrelated factors.

- **No More Nuns.** Female religious orders have traditionally provided most of those who staff Catholic schools. At the peak, more than 100,000 sisters worked in schools, but today there are only about 6,500

still at work, less than one per Catholic school. Costs have risen sharply as new staffers replace nuns who seldom required additional salaries or benefits.

- **Rising Prices for Families.** In 1970, nearly three-quarters of Catholic schools charged less than \$100 in tuition (the equivalent of roughly \$300 today), but by 2010 the average tuition was about \$4000 at a Catholic elementary school and around \$8000 for a high school. Including all the extras, costs per student at the elementary level have skyrocketed from roughly \$1,500 to about \$5,500 today. Not surprisingly, many parents cannot afford these higher prices and fewer are opting to send their children to Catholic schools.
- **Faltering Commitment.** Some scholars suggest that, because American Catholics no longer face strong prejudices, the Church would like to withdraw from general education and use limited resources for strictly religious instruction.
- **The Sexual Abuse Crisis.** In Catholic dioceses where large numbers of sexual abuse victims received financial settlements, subsidies to schools were squeezed. Data show that dioceses with a greater number of abuse incidents had more school closures between 2000 and 2010.
- **Less Focus on Supporting Upward Mobility.** Given all of the problems just surveyed, some critics suggest that the Church may be turning away from providing Latino immigrants with the kind of support for assimilation and upward mobility it once offered to Irish and Italian Catholics. The Notre Dame Task Force on Participation of Latino Families and Schools found that the dioceses with the largest number of empty classroom seats were located around cities with the largest Hispanic populations. Since 1990, moreover, Catholic schools have served fewer African American students and more have closed in black areas.

Efforts to Sustain Catholic Schools

All Americans concerned about education should be keenly aware that the disappearance of Catholic schools leaves many parents and communities with fewer choices. Closures of underperforming public schools in struggling areas are sometimes presented as an opportunity to improve student achievement elsewhere. But Catholic schools have usually done an exemplary job of improving student achievement, especially for urban minorities, so their closure usually hurts families and neighborhoods. Often, close-by public schools must struggle to educate additional youngsters in systems that are already broken and woefully underfunded.

Some innovations hold promise for bolstering Catholic schools:

- **Making Catholic Schools Affordable.** Proponents are working to create financial models that would allow families to use Catholic schools even if they cannot afford thousands of dollars in tuition. The *Cristo Rey* network of schools, for example, allows students to work one day a week for businesses or non-profit organizations that, in turn, cover their tuition.
- **Public Vouchers.** Voucher initiatives are controversial, and they exist only in few Catholic dioceses now. But studies show that parents will use vouchers at relatively inexpensive Catholic schools, rather than to pay higher costs at other types of private schools.

Read more in Carol Ann MacGregor, "School's Out Forever: The Decline of Catholic Education in the United States," Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, November 2012.