

BOOK REVIEW

The Street Stops Here: A Year at a Catholic High School in Harlem

Patrick J. McCloskey
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Reviewed by Ashley Gabriel

Sustaining Catholic education is a hot topic in contemporary education. Those who support Catholic education push for vouchers and endowments that will keep their schools functioning in order to continue the instruction of those in low-income, urban neighborhoods. Those who are against such measures for Catholic education claim that public funding for these schools would go against our secular nature, a direct violation of the separation between church and state. In *The Street Stops Here: A Year at a Catholic High School in Harlem*, Patrick McCloskey not only asks how can we sustain urban Catholic schools, but more importantly, why is it important to sustain these schools? McCloskey answers these questions eloquently by taking his readers through a year at Rice High School, a Christian Brothers school located in central Harlem.

Established by the Christian Brothers in 1938, Rice, like most Catholic schools at this time, was founded to educate young Catholics, predominantly White and of Irish or Italian decent. As “White flight” took effect in Harlem, the population of Rice gradually became more and more Black. Today, Rice is 85% Black and almost 15% Hispanic, making it the only predominantly Black Catholic high school in the Archdiocese of New York. Many of these students come from disadvantaged homes and single-parent families, and the majority of them are from neighborhoods where drugs and gang violence are the norm. In the public school system, students with these demographics would have little to no chance to graduate and of those who do manage to graduate, few go on to be successful in college. Rice High School, however, provides these students with the much needed guidance and support that is necessary not only to be successful in school, but to go on to college and pull themselves out of the cycle of poverty that often inflicts their neighborhoods.

In order to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of Rice High School, McCloskey focuses his story on the school's leader, Orlando Gober. Throughout his writing, McCloskey presents Gober for who he really is, both positive and negative. As a reader there are times where we see the negative side of Gober: his insatiable desire for power and his bias in dealing with the faculty and staff. However, one can see that although he is not perfect, Gober puts the needs of the students first, even at the risk of his own health. Often acting as a father figure, Gober counsels countless students as they work through the struggles of homelessness, drug addiction, and gang violence.

While it would be unrealistic for McCloskey to provide an account of each student who attended Rice during the 1999-2000 school year, he does choose to follow several notable students through their year. For some, such as Linwood Sessoms, the stories are inspiring. Like many of the students at Rice, Linwood does not have a positive male role model in his life. His father has a severe drug addiction, often leading him to engage in illegal activities, and he is consistently in and out of prison. Linwood's father issues have led him to have anger management problems throughout his life, especially during the early years of his education. After coming to Rice, Linwood soon learned what it means to be a "Rice man" and began following the leadership of men like Orlando Gober and Chris Abasse, the school's dean of students. His strong relationship with Gober led to Linwood's eventual turnaround and we learn in the epilogue that Linwood finished a 4-year degree at Hofstra and is working as an assistant branch manager at Bank of America.

While Linwood serves as proof that this Catholic school method works, McCloskey does not simply present the success stories. Due to Gober's no-tolerance policy, we see even some of his favorite students expelled from the school for their inability to control their behavior. Yusef, for example, became like a son to Gober, but was expelled after being accused of theft. Although Yusef was no longer a student at Rice, Gober stayed in frequent contact with him to ensure he was successful in another Catholic school. Due to the values he had learned at Rice and the constant support of a positive male mentor, Yusef went on to graduate from high school and is planning to continue his education.

The stories of trials and triumphs, successes and failures that McCloskey presents do not just tell why Rice is a good high school; they explain why the Catholic school model works so well for inner-city youth. The model presented in *The Street Stops Here* is one of high expectations, no tolerance for misbehavior, and a dedication to excellence. Despite his weaknesses in dealing with faculty members, Orlando Gober builds a school dedicated to excellence in and outside of the classroom. Gober raised the failing grade

to 70% and pushed all students to attain honor roll recognition, often providing rewards paid for from his own pocket. With immense Black pride, which he developed as he grew up in the civil rights era, he speaks messages of empowerment. Gober believes that the use of the “n-word” and the idea that Black males cannot leave the “hood” is simply a way for others to disempower their race. His messages encourage the students to remove the n-word from their vocabulary and to believe in themselves. He teaches them to be excellent students and to be men in a world where society is convincing them otherwise.

Allowing the readers to see into the workings of Rice High School, *The Street Stops Here* makes a strong argument for inner-city Catholic education by providing a working example of how effective such an education can be compared with the public schools. While New York City public schools graduate less than 40% of all students, urban Catholic schools are posting graduation rates in the 70th and 80th percentiles. Even students who are asked to leave Catholic schools tend to fare better in public schools due to the focus on excellence that has been ingrained in their attitudes to some level. McCloskey sums his argument up when he writes, “The fact that Rice and other similar schools can succeed in educating the most difficult demographic despite scant resources as well as underpaid teachers and administrators is a powerful argument for applying the Catholic school model to urban public schools” (p. 408). With stories like that of Rice High School and other schools with similar success stories, it will become increasingly difficult for politicians to ignore the need to support urban schools—public or private—that are proving effective for inner-city youth.

The Street Stops Here is a powerful story of one school’s effort to change a community. For anyone unconvinced of the need for effective urban Catholic schools, McCloskey provides the perfect example of why these schools are essential. For anyone already committed to urban Catholic education, the story of Rice High School provides innovative ideas for how Catholic high schools can work to raise standards, improve excellence, and work toward long-term sustainability.

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