

GOOD BY CHOICE: A TALE OF TWO SCHOOLS

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What are the positive and negative effects of voucher programs and school choice initiatives? Do Catholic schools benefit by receiving voucher students? Are public schools challenged to change by the availability of tuition vouchers? This essay provides an in-depth look at one voucher experiment in Albany, New York, and reports on changes in both the Catholic school receiving voucher students and the public school from which the students came.

Much of the debate about school improvement is dominated by controversy over school choice in its various forms. School choice issues are complex and include religious, political, legal, racial, organizational, and research dimensions that have been examined at length (Morken & Formicola, 1999; Peterson & Hassel, 1998; Viteritti, 1999). Despite this complexity, the basic questions raised by the debate are whether schools get better when parents can choose to send their children elsewhere, and whether choice results in improved student achievement. Answers to the latter question are uncertain because researchers have gravitated to groups and positions that are often ideological, casting doubt on their findings. Furthermore, Goldhaber (1999) notes that the multiplicity of choice options and the variety of students and types of schools involved in choice make assessment difficult, resulting in “relatively little empirical evidence on the impact of public school choice on student outcomes” (p. 23). The existing evidence on short-term achievement gains due to school choice is conflicting, and long-term data are not yet obtainable for a reform that only recently has become so widely accepted (Goldhaber, 1999).

There are more than 80,000 public schools in the United States, enrolling approximately 47 million students. It would be presumptuous to claim that any particular reform could be imposed on a system so vast with any kind of uniform results. One can, instead, look at individual schools to ascertain whether the reform in practice achieves the results desired by advocates of the theory, and if achieved, whether others can be induced to back this particular approach. This is what we have done regarding the issue of public school improvement in the face of a choice option. The school in question is Giffen Elementary School in Albany, New York, which, in 1997, was faced with an exodus of possibly one-third of its students in response to a unique private voucher program. Following a discussion of the changes that occurred at Giffen, this essay examines the nearby Catholic school, St. James Institute, in which a large number of the voucher students enrolled.

GIFFEN SCHOOL AND PRIVATE VOUCHERS

Choice advocates believe that competition forces institutional improvement and thus favor a multiplicity of mechanisms that will help advance this thesis. Magnet schools, inter- and intradistrict choice, charter schools, and voucher programs that permit public school students to attend private schools are the most notable examples of public policy initiatives designed to gather data on the school choice experiment and to provide better educational experiences for poor children.

Other important choice mechanisms that are part of this process are scholarships or private vouchers given by individuals and organizations dedicated to proving that school choice improves educational quality and opportunity. Some notable organizations created in the 1990s to support this endeavor are the Educational Choice Charitable Fund, Children's Educational Opportunity, Partners Advancing Values in Education, and the Children's Scholarship Fund. This last organization was the biggest private voucher newsmaker in 1999 when founders Ted Forstmann and John Walton, each of whom donated \$50 million, raised another \$70 million to award 40,000 private school scholarships to children in several cities. Voucher supporters and opponents alike were shocked when 1,237,360 applicants, that is nearly 1 of every 50 American public schoolchildren, sought to participate in the program (Hartocollis, 1999). A year earlier, the leading private voucher story was the alliance of the national school choice organization, CEO America, and business leaders in San Antonio to provide \$50 million over a 10-year period to fund any of the 14,000 at-risk students in the city's Edgewood school district who wished to attend a private or religious school. At the start of the 1999-2000 school year, there were 79 private scholarship programs operating in the nation supporting tuition costs of 57,000 poor children (DeSchryver, 1999).

The multiple-city and Edgewood private voucher programs represent a scaling up of private choice programs that appeared in the 1990s. An important link in this development occurred in Albany, New York, during the 1997-1998 school year. The private voucher program begun there was called A Better Choice (ABC), and was funded by a single individual, Virginia Gilder. Unique in its time, the ABC program offered vouchers to all first- through sixth-grade students in Albany's Giffen Elementary School.

The story of the ABC voucher program offered to 458 eligible first-through sixth-grade students in Giffen Elementary School became national news when it appeared on the cover of the June 2, 1997, issue of *Forbes* magazine and on the front page of *Education Week* on May 28, 1997 (Archer, 1997; Lee & Foster, 1997). The *Forbes* writers, who visited the school, found nothing positive to report about a place they characterized as "atrocious," and, based on third-grade reading scores, "one of the worst public schools in New York State" (Lee & Foster, 1997, p. 146). The story actually said very little about the Giffen school, but served as a vehicle for announcing a new private voucher program based on a \$1 million dollar gift from Virginia Gilder, a conservative philanthropist, who somewhat uniquely concluded that all the voucher funds should be available for students from a single school. "If four or five students fade out of a public school, nobody notices," Gilder reasoned, "and it's easier for the school to go about its business as usual; but if a big bunch leaves, the message can't be ignored" (Lee & Foster, p. 146).

The *Education Week* article presented information similar to that found in the *Forbes* piece but in a more neutral way. The article contained a quote from Thomas Carroll, executive director of Change-NY, the conservative lobbying and research organization that would organize and manage the ABC voucher program, expressing one of the program's main goals: "The publicity on this has embarrassed the public schools," Carroll said. "A lot more people are paying attention to Giffen than ever before" (Archer, 1997, p. 27). The article also contained a response from a public school official who noted the extreme poverty of the Giffen neighborhood and who worried about the morale of those who remained in a school that had been so negatively portrayed. During the summer of 1997, the ABC-Giffen story received considerable attention in the Albany area as a result of a continuing stream of news and editorial pieces about the voucher offer and the educational issues it laid bare.

The 1997-1998 ABC-Giffen private voucher program offering up to \$2,000 for each student for as many as six years grew out of a 1996-1997 program organized by Change-NY that had similar goals but operated quite differently. In the earlier program, funds raised from a variety of conservative donors offered \$1,000 scholarships to 50 students from 13 low-achieving schools in the three Capital District cities, Albany, Troy, and Schenectady. Forty-three of the 50 scholarships went to Albany students (who constituted

90% of the applicants). Of those three cities, Albany had a 63% enrollment of minority students in its schools, followed by Schenectady with 34% and Troy with 24%. Change-NY had been an advocate for school choice since its founding in 1991 and viewed this modest 1996-1997 program as an effort to demonstrate the benefits and need for educational alternatives for poor children (Rappaport, 1996).

This earlier effort helped to launch the larger and more noteworthy ABC-Giffen program in 1997-1998. For example, Change-NY noticed that 20% of the applications for the 1996 program were from students enrolled at Giffen. Furthermore, Giffen is physically located near the state capitol complex and lawmakers would notice the publicity generated by the new program funded by Virginia Gilder. For Gilder and other founding members of Change-NY, educational alternatives are necessary to achieve better educational results for all children. Change-NY was leading the effort to obtain legislative approval for charter schools in New York, and Gilder financially supported a charter school in New Jersey when such schools were approved and became operational in that state in 1997. The ABC-Giffen program in Albany in that same year was part of the agenda established by Change-NY in 1991 to create an educational revolution. The ABC-Giffen effort was a demonstration project that supporters hoped would play an important role in that process (Karlin, 1997c).

Not surprisingly, the teachers' union and district administration achieved immediate solidarity in opposition to the voucher plan. It was, in the view of public school officials, "an expensive publicity stunt aimed at embarrassing teachers and making a political statement at the expense of an impoverished neighborhood and its school" (Karlin, 1997a, p. A1). The *Albany Times Union* understood the level of educational conflict at issue here and headlined its first extended examination of the ABC-Giffen plan a "war of ideas" (Karlin, 1997a). A few days later, in its Sunday opinion section, the *Times Union* front page feature was "The Giffen Experiment," which consisted of articles written by Thomas Carroll from Change-NY and by Eleanor Bartlett, interim superintendent of the Albany City School District.

Carroll's (1997) piece was similar to the *Forbes* account. To him, Giffen was "the worst public school in Albany," one to which Albany public school officials "would never send their own children" (p. B1). He hoped that the loss of many students through the voucher offer would "prompt Giffen and the Albany Public School system to clean up their acts" (p. B8). Carroll passionately defended the right of poor people to be able to choose better schools, and he noted the success of public school choice options in East Harlem. He also cited the well-known characteristics of successful private schools that serve the poor, such as higher academic standards, increased homework, more parental involvement, and a greater emphasis on order and discipline. Although Carroll did not identify these private schools as

Catholic, nearly all of the students from both the 1996 and the 1997 voucher program did select a Catholic school as their school of choice, and Change-NY worked with administrators of the Catholic system to insure that ABC students would be accepted (B. Backstrom, personal communication, September 18, 1998). For Carroll, the voucher plan was an immediate and concrete opportunity for poor families to obtain a better education for their children rather than waiting another decade to find out if the school district's heretofore "hollow promises" of school improvement might actually be delivered. At the time of Carroll's article (June 22, 1997), it was believed that one third, approximately 150, of the eligible school population would accept vouchers and leave Giffen.

Interim Superintendent Eleanor Bartlett, an African-American educator who had been with the district for many years, gave the school district's perspective. Bartlett's response to the ABC-Giffen program included criticism of Change-NY for its broad brush labeling of Giffen School since it was clear that the majority of its current students would remain and that such labeling would likely make matters worse for them. Bartlett suggested that the positive opportunities presented by the voucher program could have been proclaimed without the negative assessment of the effort Giffen had been making to improve student scores. She further argued that it was unfair to compare public schools that were required to enroll everyone with private schools that could impose varying degrees of selectivity in both admission and retention. The heart of Bartlett's response was to remind the community of the realities faced by a school like Giffen. Among the realities noted were increased school size (51 more students than two years earlier), high student turnover (about 46% per year), cognitive deficits many Giffen children brought when they entered the primary grades, and the limited English proficiency of other students in the school. Despite those difficulties, Bartlett proudly cited an array of achievement gains not mentioned when critics described the school, for example, that sixth-grade reading scores and math scores at both the third- and sixth-grade levels were up substantially from the year before. Bartlett concluded by noting efforts during the prior year to achieve better results including the use of a modified reading recovery program, scheduling to increase continuity of instruction, workshops for parents, and tutoring partnerships with area colleges and a nearby state agency. Bartlett's portrait was one of a school working hard to improve (Bartlett, 1997).

Despite Bartlett's explanations, the school district was on the defensive and quickly took action for damage control. The principal, Dorinda Davis, who three days earlier had been warmly mentioned in Bartlett's *Times Union* article, resigned with a promise of another principalship or administrative job somewhere in the system (a new co-principal position in another school was later created for her). School officials claimed the voucher plan controversy

had nothing to do with this change, but that claim cannot be taken seriously (Karlin, 1997g). A month would pass before a new Giffen principal was appointed.

The removal of the principal foreshadowed even more significant changes that were announced within three weeks after the arrival of Lonnie Palmer, the new superintendent, on July 1, 1997. On July 19, 1997, it was reported that eight teachers were being reassigned from Giffen to other Albany schools. Since Giffen was already hiring four new teachers, this meant that when the 1997-1998 school year began there would be 12 new teachers in Giffen, that is, one-quarter of the 49-person faculty would change. Bill Ritchie, head of the Albany teachers' union, was annoyed that this action suggested that teachers were the only problem at Giffen when his view was that Giffen was a "stepchild" in the system when it came to securing resources. Brian Backstrom, deputy director of Change-NY, had another perspective: "Giffen is now the focus of attention when before it wasn't [and] that's clearly attributable to the ABC scholarship program" (Karlin, 1997f, p. A4).

On July 22, 1997, a more comprehensive set of personnel changes at Giffen was announced. Maxine Fantroy-Ford, district director for elementary education and director of Albany's popular and successful elementary magnet school program, was returning as Giffen principal, a position she held from 1986 to 1990. Two new assistant principals would also be appointed, one focusing on curriculum, the other on improving parent and community involvement. This new leadership team, along with the 12 new teachers, was expected to play a major role in the revitalization of the Giffen school. In understated fashion, Superintendent Palmer acknowledged that the ABC voucher offer "might have accelerated the pace we moved on things, and we think it definitely helped the cooperation we got from different people" (Parsavand, 1997b, p. B4).

The ABC-Giffen program was a major news story throughout the summer of 1997, and Change-NY must have felt that the organization's effort to "give a kick in the pants to the Albany school district to clean up the worst school in Albany" was already somewhat a success (Parsavand, 1997c, p. B1). Publicity about the program not only forced substantial organizational change on Giffen, it also encouraged increased community support from the Urban League and from a private foundation that financed a reading tutorial program at the school called "Two Together" (Button, 1997; Parsavand, 1997c). Changes at the school were positively noted, and one editorial praised the district for abandoning the "prolonged snit" it exhibited when the voucher program was first announced in favor of the decisive action that occurred shortly before and immediately after Superintendent Palmer assumed office (Movement, 1997). The changes at Giffen were partially responsible for reducing the number accepting the ABC opportunity. Earlier

projections by Change-NY indicated that the number of transfers out of Giffen would be in the 150s; ultimately 105 left for various private schools (Karlin, 1997d).

There was, of course, a downside to the stream of negative commentary attached to the Giffen story. Among other things, the weight of the stories seemed to suggest that Giffen was some kind of horrible place, a school that someone like Jonathan Kozol might select for an exposé. Neither the *Forbes* writers nor the Change-NY officials quoted in almost every article about Giffen complimented any person or program at the Giffen school, and the unflattering media portrait demoralized teachers, the vast majority of whom had been working hard to raise academic achievement, and in fact, had done so.

Also absent from critics' descriptions of the school was any sense that the school building itself was a bright, attractive, and welcoming place. Giffen School is shiny and clean with little clutter or evidence of disrepair. The main entrance of the school is flooded with inspirational posters, pictures of historically famous black women and men, statements of educational goals and ideals, a bulletin board celebrating the achievements of photographed Giffen students, a flashing message sign welcoming visitors, and a functioning aquarium. None of this, perhaps, translates into better achievement scores, but in a neighborhood school serving mostly African-American children where the poverty is such that 96% of Giffen's students qualify for the federal lunch program, the building appears to be a haven; and it seems unfair for critics of the school not to have noticed (R. Ognibene, site visits at Giffen, July 2, 1998, and July 16, 1998).

At the beginning of the 1997-1998 school year, Thomas Carroll and Lonnie Palmer were cited in the same newspaper article and seemed in agreement: "I think they're clearly making a serious effort to turn the school around," Carroll said, while Palmer acknowledged that the voucher program hastened changes that were needed at Giffen (Parsavand, 1997a). The *Forbes* article and all the subsequent publicity had been a wake-up call for the district, and its rapid response quieted alarms for the next school year. In fact, there was a decrease in the stream of Giffen stories, and those that appeared were generally reporting good news. In mid-September, 1997, a laundry list of changes attributed to Giffen's new principal was reported including physical changes in the front office that made it more accommodating to little children, new outreach efforts directed to parents, the acquisition of professional development material for teachers to promote discussions about more effective teaching, and the initiation of teacher self-improvement plans that would be regularly reviewed by school administration (Karlin, 1997e).

In November, Giffen and its principal got glowing coverage for a multicultural fair held at the school as part of a Russell Sage College graduate course in urban education taught by Maxine Fantroy-Ford and Loretta Long,

who portrays "Susan" on *Sesame Street*. Several Giffen teachers participated in the course, and the activities of the fair were the responsibility of the graduate students whose primary audience was students from Giffen School. Two key aspects of the program that benefited the whole Giffen community were the emphasis on using community resources as a basis for enhancing teaching and the use of technology to acquire information about the world and to foster international understanding (O'Brien, 1997; Stevens, 1997a).

As the school semester came to a close in December 1997, both the Albany School District and Change-NY had something to cheer about. For the school district, the intense criticism and scrutiny were past, a positive momentum had been achieved, and eight of the voucher students returned to Giffen from Catholic schools for financial, disciplinary, or academic reasons (Karlín, 1997b, 1997h). Change-NY also had reasons to be pleased. They had pulled off a unique program that still retained many satisfied clients and they could take substantial credit for being the catalyst for school improvement activities at Giffen (Stevens, 1997b).

During the second semester, the pattern of reporting positive changes at Giffen continued. In January 1998, a special educational supplement in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr., published by Siena College and the *Albany Times Union*, devoted a full page to the story of "Giffen's Growth." The article cited several changes already noted above, and, without using the term, told of Giffen's movement toward some elements of a full-service school model. In cooperation with Parsons Child and Family Center, an agency that works with children and youth with disabilities or who are at risk, a three-year federal grant was obtained that supports two social workers at Giffen to develop a school-based social work program. The program provides direct service to clients, works with families, and provides inservice for teachers. Giffen has also developed a healthy lifestyles program called "An Apple a Day" that emphasizes prevention in the areas of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco (Del Greco, 1998).

In February 1998, the Giffen story went national again with nearly full-page coverage in *Education Week*. The history of the ABC-Giffen program was retold but the article provided some important additional information about activities in the school not previously noted; for example, staff workshops devoted to instructional methodology; a mentoring program for new teachers; increased emphasis on school discipline; and a schoolwide 20-minute assembly every day following the breakfast program. Both Palmer and Fantroy-Ford claimed that changes at Giffen would have occurred, but more slowly, without the ABC program. The new principal made a statement that was probably more accurate: "I think we would be in denial to say that the school didn't need improvement" (Archer, 1998, p. 5).

With all the honest effort devoted to improving Giffen from June 1997 to the end of the next year, June 1998, this story deserves a happy ending. But

it does not have one yet, or perhaps it does but it is too soon to tell. Let us get to the bad news first: Third-grade reading scores in 1998 dropped six percentage points below 1997 levels; that is, 47% of Giffen third graders were reading at the third-grade level, down from 54% in 1997 (Karlin, 1998). It is difficult to know what to make of this except to note the obvious, that organizational change does not always produce immediate results. The realities of the Giffen neighborhood, to use Eleanor Bartlett's term, were still stronger than the multiple changes that occurred within the school.

Perhaps the most unexpected outcome of the reading score decline was that the news produced barely a ripple. The school district had worked hard to improve the school and that message was still the strongest one presented. Furthermore, even before the news broke, the Giffen faculty had voted (97% in favor) to adopt Robert Slavin's "Success for All" whole-school reading improvement program. The faculty was excited about getting trained in this program during the summer of 1998 and came in for three unpaid days in August for that purpose. Reports from the school 18 months later indicate that enthusiasm for the program remains high even though it has created more work for teachers and substantially altered their curriculum, grouping practices, and the allocation of instructional time. Results from New York State's new fourth-grade reading test administered in January 2000 are not yet available, but teachers voice positive expectations that this whole school reform effort will succeed and they already observe improved effort and reading performance from many students (Parsavand, 1999; Giffen teacher, personal communications, February 19, 1999, and December 27, 1999).

Change-NY officials were pleased with the positive outcomes and favorable publicity for school choice resulting from the ABC program (B. Backstrom, personal communication, September 18, 1998). Clearly their private voucher plan had a significant impact in revitalizing a public school that serves poor children. In December 1998, Change-NY experienced an even bigger victory in its campaign to revolutionize education in New York State. The legislature approved a charter school law demanded by the governor in return for his approval of legislative pay raises. Governor Pataki's proposal had been crafted by Change-NY; and, although modified by the legislature, it represented a dramatic reversal of policy in a state in which teacher union influence over education legislation was thought to preclude the possibility of charter schools (LeBrun, 1998).

In our view, the ABC-Giffen program had a variety of positive outcomes. For parents who wanted their children out of Giffen, the vouchers represented an opportunity to pursue educational goals in schools not burdened by the tradition of failure associated with their neighborhood public school. For students who remained and those who will come in the near future, they have in Giffen a school that is working hard to be better than it was in its recent past. We concur with Goldhaber (1999) that the results of a story like the ABC

voucher program for Giffen students “lends credence to the notion that competition between schools would be beneficial” (p. 23).

ST. JAMES INSTITUTE: GOODNESS SUSTAINED

The history of St. James Parish has many familiar elements. The parish began in 1913 with 100 members, as Catholics in Albany increased in number and migrated outward from the city’s center. A school was incorporated into the original one-story church in 1926 and then occupied the structure completely when a new permanent church building opened in 1929. A convent to house the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet who ran the school was built in 1926.

The church building was an imposing Gothic stone structure that no doubt reflected the pride and confidence of early 20th-century Catholics (Morris, 1997). A world-class organ was installed in the 1930s in the midst of the Depression, and 900 parish families contributed to the purchase of new stained glass windows for their church after World War II. Over the years, care has been taken to maintain the church and other parish buildings. In 1999, the pastor, Rev. Dominic Ingemie (1999), launched a capital campaign to raise over \$4 million to implement a 15-year repair and renovation master plan. The campaign’s theme, “Securing Our Legacy,” seems appropriate for the parish as a whole and the parish school in particular.

The school, St. James Institute, like the church, experienced continuous growth. In the 1950s, Catholic school enrollments in the United States were expanding faster than the frenzied pace of new school construction could accommodate (Walch, 1996). At St. James, a new two-story school building, funded through pledges from 1,550 parish families, was constructed in 1957 and then enlarged almost immediately thereafter. Sister Anne Clark, principal from 1960 to 1966, recalls enrollment in grades 1 through 8 at about 800 students, or 50 per classroom, each grade having two sections. The students were White and came from middle class Catholic homes or families moving toward that status. The school did not charge tuition. An annual parish fair and Sunday collections paid school expenses for a faculty consisting of 16 sisters and 3 laywomen (Sr. A. Clark, personal communication, January 24, 2000).

Residential patterns in Albany were affected in the 1960s by the construction of the Empire State Plaza, a massive complex of government buildings in the downtown area that eliminated some housing occupied by poor people and gentrified other residential sections adjacent to the complex. Although sections of the parish remain high quality urban neighborhoods, other portions were affected by the outward spread of Albany’s poor, including the avenue on which the church is located. Even so, the parish remains a vital organization made up of over 2,000 families who participate in liturgy,

social events, youth ministry, and Christian service activities. St. James Parish is more an intentional community than a residential one. Eleven hundred of those 2,000 families live beyond the parish boundaries, and, of course, send their children to public and private schools elsewhere.

Located about a mile from Giffen Elementary, St. James Institute, which now also includes full-day pre-K and kindergarten classes, began the 1999-2000 school year with 197 students, 68 of whom are supported by funds from the ABC voucher program. The impact of the program is obvious. Slightly more than one third of the enrollment is voucher supported; without those students, enrollment would be 129. Without the voucher program, Father Ingemie believes the school would have closed (Rev. D. Ingemie, personal communication, November 8, 1999). In fact, in neighboring Schenectady, NY, which is part of the Albany diocese, controversy exists over the rumored closing of Mt. Carmel School, located in a poorer section of the city. Four years ago, Mt. Carmel enrolled 190 students; in 1999, enrollment dropped to 111 (Ciervo, 1999; Sturgis, 1999). Enrollment figures for St. James and Mt. Carmel suggest that Baker and Riordan (1998) are correct; despite all the favorable publicity regarding the superior academic achievement of at-risk students in Catholic schools, many of those schools that remain open in poor neighborhoods are in real danger. The Catholic school system as a whole has achieved stability, but not in places where the schools are needed most.

To lose a school like St. James would be a shame. Predictors of educational failure are present in the school. Sixty-five percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch, and more than half live in single-parent households. Nevertheless, the school exemplifies many characteristics that education reform leaders believe will produce enhanced learning outcomes for all students, even those at risk (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

One such characteristic is the school's determination to help students achieve academic success, combined with the evident caring exhibited by adults and expected of students in their relationships with each other. The school's mission statement proclaims these goals both on its web site and in printed material, and one can see them in the school's requirements and the way people live and work in the building. The school tests incoming students to insure their ability to meet the requirements of their grade level. Some ABC students were put back one grade in order to make up deficits and to help them achieve the 75% report card average needed to remain in the school. In addition, two staff members are employed by the school to provide remedial help in math and reading. The urgency to achieve academic success is evident in team meetings called to discuss individual student performance, the requirement that parents come to school to obtain and discuss their child's report card, and the impressive array of special teachers (art, Spanish, music, physical education, librarian, computer) employed by the school to supplement instruction in core subjects.

The most hopeful indicator that St. James students will achieve academic success is the progressive pedagogy practiced throughout the school and the way in which students are motivated by it. In the kindergarten, one observes 20 students doing group work clustered around tables in the center of the room. As students complete their projects, they wander off to various learning centers in the room and work on their own. In the computer lab, 12 networked computers are in constant use. One observes third graders come in for a keyboarding lesson, work from the minute they arrive, and express loud disappointment when the period ends and they cannot continue the lesson. These classes are taught by veteran female teachers who taught elsewhere before joining the St. James faculty, and whose competence, calmness, and control in the classroom are instantly evident.

Newer faculty make equally strong contributions to the instructional strength of the school. One observes a first-year fifth-grade teacher create groups for her 19 students for a social studies lesson on the future consequences of ecological and political decisions made in the present. When asked by a student whether group recommendations had to follow ideas suggested by information supplied in handout material, the teacher's response was unambiguous. Thinking for ourselves, she said, is the basic work we do in this class.

A first-year junior high language arts teacher sits on the floor in a circle doing language precision work with her nine sixth graders. Based on a story they had read, the students write single word "memories" on slips of paper that they wished to give a character in that story, and place those papers in a box. Students and the teacher take turns in pulling out words and describing the thing, event, or circumstance the word represents while the rest of the group tries to identify the word. Student participation is joyful, enthusiastic, and sustained, a condition fostered by the teacher's high energy level, constant questions, and obvious affection for the group. It is an exquisite lesson on meaning making, a far cry from drab vocabulary lists that are a common experience in schools (R. Ognibene, site visit at St. James, November 23, 1999).

The activities described reveal several "best practice" elements at work. First, the school enrollment is small, as is class size. Contemporary educational thinking persuasively makes the case that small size is a key variable in improving educational outcomes (Boyd-Zaharias, 1999; Meier, 1995). Second, there is an unabashed emphasis on active in-depth student learning (Darling-Hammond, 1997). One outcome of this student centeredness is the evident contentment students display simply about being in school. At St. James, attention dominates the classroom and laughter fills the hallways. Third, there is a balanced use of technology. Computer skills are taught directly in one classroom, while a second computer room is used for remedial work, Internet searching, and word processing. Computers in other class-

rooms are used in a learning center mode. Junior high students use a digital camera and appropriate software to produce a school newsletter. Outdated images of Catholic schools as stern and tradition-bound places are rendered obsolete by the everyday reality of St. James Institute. It is a fact not well known that Catholic schools are surprisingly progressive in their educational practice (Chandler, 2000).

Catholic schools are socially progressive as well. Teaching about peace and justice and service learning activities are central elements in the lives of Catholic schools. Justice is also served by providing access to high-quality educational opportunity to populations that historically have been underserved. "The Church's lingering presence as an educational haven for aspiring children in poor city neighborhoods," Morris (1997) wrote, "is still the crown jewel of Catholic social endeavor" (p. 314). At St. James, the voucher program enabled a significant number of minority children, mostly African-American, to move to an educational environment more traditionally associated with success than failure. The student population at St. James is less poor and substantially more integrated than at Giffen, circumstances generally associated with higher academic performance. The minority population at St. James is about 65%, as opposed to the nearly complete segregation of minority students at Giffen. The Albany public school system operates several successful magnet schools in which the racial composition of the students more accurately reflects the racial makeup of the city. But the system also tolerates the existence of several schools that are dramatically segregated, like Giffen, and parents from some predominately white schools in the district have fought reform proposals that would change enrollment patterns in the system.

Racial integration in schools as a means to promote academic success and racial accord is a value that came to the forefront during the mid-century struggle for civil rights. As Kirp (2000) notes, that idea is largely out of fashion today, but in fact is an everyday reality at St. James. In classrooms and common areas, the self-selected separation by race often found in other schools is virtually nonexistent. When the St. James junior high chorus came together for its first Christmas concert rehearsal, the 28 minority and 17 White students in the room were as intermingled and harmonious as they routinely are in classrooms and in other activities sponsored by their school. As we have pointed out, it is paradoxical that political conservatives committed to individualism have created in school choice a mechanism that may succeed in promoting the kind of group change that earlier had been associated with the liberal agenda (Shay & Ognibene, 1999).

Beyond what has been previously noted, St. James is an appealing institution for many of the reasons the general literature about Catholic schools suggests: attention to moral and spiritual development; a safe and orderly environment; formal and informal mechanisms that promote significant

parental involvement; and a strongly felt sense of community that generates connections among faculty, staff, students, and parents. The good qualities of St. James are drawn together by an effective leadership team: the pastor, Father Dominic Ingemie, and the principal, Elizabeth Barton-Rubinstein.

Ingemie, an ardent supporter of Catholic education, is a credentialed school administrator who was once the principal of an innovative secondary school and served as diocesan school superintendent. He provides oversight at the school through weekly meetings with the principal to discuss budgetary and other school matters related to students, parents, or teachers. The students know Ingemie because he leads liturgies and prayer services, provides periodic religious instruction, and reads stories to primary-grade children. He also regularly interacts with faculty, providing professional development opportunities in the area of religion and catered dinners when faculty have to remain at school for parent-teacher events. He works hard to create a unified community in the parish, including those connected to the school. His master plan for the parish capital campaign lists several expensive priority items related to the school building, which, along with the financial subsidy given to the school, indicates his commitment to keep the place going. In an earlier time, critics blamed the decline of Catholic schools on inattentive and ineffective Church leadership (Greeley, McCready, & McCourt, 1976). Ingemie's work on behalf of St. James Institute demonstrates the opposite.

Elizabeth Rubinstein came to St. James in 1997 with seven years' experience as a Catholic-school teacher and a new master's degree and principal's certificate in hand. It is easy to see why the search committee chose her. She is decisive but not domineering, thoughtful, exuberant, hardworking, and above all, caring. Like the effective school leaders Lightfoot (1983) portrayed nearly two decades ago, she does her work firmly focusing on the needs of teachers while simultaneously exhibiting great empathy for parents and their children.

Rubinstein's school day begins before 7:00 a.m. with checks of voice mail and e-mail and the composition of a daily message for the faculty bulletin board. She then takes a position in the main hallway, greeting and doing business with students, parents, faculty, and staff. The professionalism, light repartee, and connectedness displayed in those early morning encounters sets the tone for the rest of the day. Rubinstein is the school's first lay principal. She supervises a faculty of 16, only one of whom is a sister. That stark reversal of the ratio of lay to religious faculty has not altered the spiritual and moral tone in the school, a tone Rubinstein sets by her expressed convictions and by the natural respect she accords each person.

Although the small voucher program of 1996 placed a few students at St. James, the large number came in September 1997, the beginning of Rubinstein's appointment as principal. From her perspective, the Change-NY staff who manage the voucher program have been an easy group with whom

to work. Administrative issues are settled quickly and in favor of the school, in contrast with the difficulty sometimes experienced when arranging mandated services through the Albany public school district (E. Rubinstein, personal communication, November 8, 1999). The diocesan central office has the same perspective. Although not called for in the original plan, the ABC program provides bus transportation to voucher students attending three Catholic schools. The program has also purchased school uniforms for families who could not afford to do so (T. Fitzgerald, personal communication, January 24, 2000). Each year in December, Change-NY and Virginia Gilder host a luncheon for voucher students, their parents, and Catholic school administrators. It is a grand party to celebrate an educational experiment that so far seems to benefit all those involved.

The relationship between the Catholic schools receiving voucher students and Change-NY officials, staff, and Virginia Gilder has worked so well that the ABC program has been quietly reopened and currently supports the tuition of 140 students primarily at four Albany schools: St. James, St. Casimir, Christ the King, and Blessed Sacrament. New families arrive in the Giffen school zone, hear about the program, and want to be a part of it. Parents with children in the program ask if siblings can also participate, and the answer is always yes. By the end of the 1997-1998 school year, the ABC voucher program had successfully made its point. The ongoing commitment of Change-NY and Virginia Gilder to this small but important chapter in the evolving history of school choice is a reflection of their honest convictions and the genuine appeal of the quality educational alternative that Father Ingemie, Elizabeth Rubinstein, and the faculty at St. James Institute provide.

CONCLUSION

Our goal in this article was to provide data concerning the question of potential improvement in a school when the opportunity for parents to choose an alternative is present. Looking at what transpired at Giffen Elementary School in Albany, New York, we conclude that the answer is yes, schools do improve when competition is present. This is an important finding because Giffen School did not disappear; 561 students are enrolled there during the 1999-2000 school year and they deserve the best education available.

We also believe that the voucher program helped sustain a quality Catholic school that many parents who are poor prefer. Read the words of one voucher parent at St. James (personal communication, November, 1999) and recognize the goodness of choice:

The school surrounds my child with the learning environment that I was looking for. He is taught to be accountable for his actions and to care for and respect others, and extra assistance is available if it is needed. I appreciate the smaller size of the school and the non-threatening way in which parents

and families are treated. The principal's door is always open and she knows each child and parent. The opportunity to have the choice of which school my child attends has been a Godsend.

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