

CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Catholic schools have always served immigrant populations, minority groups, and the urban poor. Demographic shifts in society at large and in Catholic circles have precipitated changes in the mission and purpose of Catholic education. This article explores ways to both preserve and expand the historical mission of Catholic schools as we progress into a new century filled with technological advancements.

Catholic education has always served both a spiritual and a socioeconomic purpose. It is a vehicle through which the Catholic Church has transmitted its doctrines and practices to generations of its youth living in a society that is religiously heterogeneous and at times hostile to Catholic beliefs. The extensive Catholic school system in the United States is unique and represents the traditional Catholic belief that the Catholic Church and the parents of children share together the primary right to educate the young (Beggs & McQuigg, 1965, p. 90). In more religiously homogeneous cultures, society promulgated the religious faith of its people and Catholic schools as such were not a major concern. But in the United States with its sometimes anti-Catholic attitudes, there was a greater need for safe environments in which to teach Catholic doctrine.

In the 1972 pastoral letter *To Teach as Jesus Did*, the bishops of the United States identified three elements of Catholic education:

- 1) to teach doctrine, the message of hope contained in the Gospel; 2) to build community, not just as a concept to be taught but as a reality to be lived; and 3) to serve all mankind, which emanated from a sense of Christian community. (Carper & Hunt, 1984, p. 15)

Catholic educator Michael O'Neill summed up the impact of these three maxims:

When people in a school share a certain intentionality, a certain pattern or complex of values, understandings, sentiments, hopes, and dreams, it deeply conditions everything else that goes on, including the math class, the athletic activities, the dances, coffee breaks in the teachers' lounge, everything. (as cited in Carper & Hunt, 1984, p. 16)

The school will be able to do what it does "extremely well" and will "stimulate everyone in the school to deepen and broaden their own perspectives" (Carper & Hunt, 1984, p. 16).

But as the Catholic school system evolved in the United States, it served a unique social and economic role. Andrew Greeley's study in the late 1970s of the impact of Catholic education showed a dramatic increase in social activism among those Catholics who attended Catholic schools (Greeley, McCready, & McCourt, 1976). Greeley concluded, therefore, that Catholic education creates more open-minded citizens who develop a social conscience toward the problems within society while maintaining their Catholic faith. In examining the Catholic school mystique in 1996, Karen Arenson quotes the Harvard study *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, which asserts:

Even where children are not Catholic, there are retreats and liturgy requirements and a sense of spirituality that pervades the schools. This makes it clear that the schools are not just there for academic gains but for a broader purpose. It provides a social context. (p. E14)

Greeley's (Greeley et al., 1976) study, as well as an earlier one in 1963, indicated that significantly more children in Catholic schools had a chance of attending college than their Catholic counterparts in public schools.

There continues to be an educational and economic advantage in parochial school attendance and the economic advantage seems to be the result of some not-fully-understood ability among those who had more than ten years of Catholic education to convert integration into the Catholic community into economic success to the tune of more than a thousand dollars a year in 1974. (1976, p. 218)

(To show the relative value of \$1000, beginning teachers' salaries in 1974 were about \$7500.)

The history of Catholic schools' assistance to generations of immigrants is legendary even among critics. Their aid to minorities in inner cities today underscores their commitment to providing opportunities for the less fortu-

nate. Derek Neal (1997) claimed that urban minority students who attend Catholic schools achieve higher graduation rates from high school and college than students from similar backgrounds who attend public schools (91% high school graduation rate from Catholic schools versus 62% from public schools). In New York City, 98% of Catholic school children graduate high school in four years as compared to 48.2% from public schools (Foderaro, 1996). In discussing why he wouldn't close the 35 schools in the inner city as his economic council recommended, Archbishop John O'Connor said:

Central Harlem—we've kept seven parishes and seven schools. Those schools are packed; what would we have done without them? The only high school in central Harlem is Catholic—Rice High School. I'll never forget that day when the corporate CEOs examining the diocese reported in. The first thing on their flip chart was "Close those seven schools in Harlem for efficiency." I said, "There's no way." 60% of all our kids in inner-city schools are from single parent families. 60% are below the poverty line. 85% are black and Hispanic, and 90% go to college. What would happen if we close those schools? Where would those kids be? (as cited in Jones, 1998, p. 9)

African American author Jacqueline Jordan, a non-Catholic who attended Catholic school in Phoenix City, Alabama, between 1952 and 1964, said that Catholic schools "sheltered children from the psychological despair and an inferior education inherent in an evil system of racial segregation" (as cited in Delpet, 1998, p. 3). Albert Schorsch III (1997), an assistant dean at the University of Illinois at Chicago, further argues that Catholic education in our cities is an excellent model for fighting poverty. He compares its economic impact to that of the GI Bill of 1944 and Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty in the 1960s. He continues:

In many of our impoverished neighborhoods, greater economic development is nearly impossible because its necessary forerunner, human development, is in shambles. Long before children are ready to be organized, they need parents who will nurture them as infants and toddlers. They need parents who will read to them. Stable institutions like parishes and schools provide the broad networks of loving encouragement for such basic human improvements to take place.... Parish schools are the best self-help programs going for the poor of our nation. Because of these schools, yesterday's poor Catholics are today's successes. The poor of the 21st century should not miss the same opportunity. (1997, pp. 24, 25)

The purpose of Catholic schools in the United States has been consistent over the two centuries of our history. It continues to echo the faith, commitment, and social values that improve society and offer economic opportunities to millions of people. The question is, as we enter the 21st century what

will be the role of Catholic schools? Can they, and how will they, keep their purpose and their value in the new technological age when society and economies have little in common with anything from past generations?

BEGINNINGS OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN AMERICA

The history of Catholic education is an interesting one that parallels the growth of public education and the major waves of immigration. As early as 1792, the first Catholic bishop of the United States, John Carroll, instructed Catholic parents on the lifelong benefits of Catholic education. Parishes and individual philanthropists supported Catholic schools in the early 19th century. In New York in the 1840s Bishop John Hughes challenged the public schools over funding and texts and founded an extensive parochial school system after he was rebuffed. Catholics, especially children of immigrant families, frequently encountered bigotry and prejudice in the purportedly nonsectarian but largely “pan-Protestant” public school systems that were emerging (Carper & Hunt, 1984). Catholic schools created a safe haven for the children and a large audience for church leaders to teach Catholic doctrine. In 1855, the Provincial Council of Cincinnati was praised for its “excellent German congregations” in supporting Catholic education (1984, p. 5). Each immigrant group found comfort and support for their ways and traditions within their Catholic school communities.

Over the course of almost two centuries Catholic schools enjoyed continuous growth until the 1965-66 school year when 5.6 million children in attendance represented 87% of nonpublic school enrollment. Enrollment began to decline after 1966. In 1978 Catholic schools enrolled 3,289,000 students, making up 70% of nonpublic school enrollment, and in 1981-82 it fell to 3,094,000 students accounting for only 64% of nonpublic school enrollment (Carper & Hunt, 1984). Enrollment fell to 2.5 million students in the 1991-92 school year. However, beginning in the 1992-93 school year, student enrollment began to climb again, gaining almost 150,000 students in only six years. This figure, however, does not include over 1 million children in Catholic home school associations such as Seton Home Schools in Front Royal, Virginia (Schorn, 1999). The following chart shows the growth of Catholic schools over time. The early years represent enrollment in elementary schools, which mirrors public education that focused primarily on grades 1 to 8. Until about 1900 approximately 10% of children attended high school (Carper & Hunt, 1984).

Year	Parochial Schools	Pupil Enrollment
1880	2,246	405,234
1890	3,194	633,238
1900	3,811	854,523
1910	4,845	1,237,251
1920	5,852	1,710,219
1965	Approx. 13,000	5,679,523
1978	8,281	3,289,000
1982	N/A	3,094,000
1992	Approx. 6,800	2,567,599
1998	6,903	2,648,844
1999	N/A, increase of 36	2,714,697

From Carper & Hunt, 1984, p. 9; Schorn, 1999, p. 10.

The factors that have influenced this recent growth are complex. Growing dissatisfaction with public schools, however, does not appear to be the underlying reason for this turnaround. Many believe that the new interest in Catholic schools has to do with a greater fear that society is failing our children and Catholic schools offer a spiritual dimension, which gives a balance to the rapid-paced, material-centered, technological society. Children seem to have fewer restrictions, less guidance, and more time on their hands. They have been saturated with images of violence on television, in movies, and in video games. Technology has given them a false sense of values where instant gratification and little accountability for their actions are standard. We believe that Catholic education is needed to create that balance in the 21st century. Technology is here to stay. It offers tremendous possibilities for human improvement. The fast-paced lifestyles and the visual imagery through the media are now a part of life. However, like any other advancement over the centuries, technology can be used for good or bad. Without an education rooted in values that promote respect for human life, honesty, selflessness, and responsibility, unlimited technology could destroy human life as we know it. Catholic education with its emphasis on values, spirituality, and social responsibility offers an alternative learning environment, which creates a balance between technological advancement and the human and spiritual needs of all individuals.

FAITH AND VALUES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The center of a Catholic school is always the Catholic faith. Even with the increased enrollment of non-Catholics (17 to 20% nationally, over 50% in some inner city schools) the emphasis remains on the Faith. In *To Teach as Jesus Did*, the American bishops said:

Catholic schools afford the fullest and best opportunity to realize the three-fold purpose of Christian education among children and young people.... A school has a greater claim on the time and loyalty of the student and his family. It makes more accessible to students participation in the liturgy and the sacraments, which are powerful forces for the development of personal sanctity and for the building of community. It provides a more favorable pedagogical and psychological environment for teaching Christian faith.... Only in such a school can they experience learning and living fully integrated in the light of faith. (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1972, pars. 101, 103)

In 1997, the American bishops issued a statement committing themselves to new goals for the 21st century as a sign of affirmation of the principles laid down in *To Teach as Jesus Did*. As the Archdiocese of Santa Fe (1999) notes in its *Mission Statement*,

- The Catholic school is an integral part of the Church's mission to proclaim the Gospel, build faith communities, celebrate through worship, and serve others.
- The commitment to academic excellence, which fosters the intellectual development of faculty and students, is an integral part of the mission of the Catholic school.
- The Catholic school is an evangelizing, educational community.
- The spiritual formation of the entire school community is an essential dimension of the Catholic school's mission.
- The Catholic school is a unique, faith-centered community which integrates thinking and believing in ways that encourage intellectual growth, nurture faith, and inspire action.
- The Catholic school is an experience of the Church's belief, tradition, and sacramental life.
- The Catholic school creates a supportive and challenging climate which affirms the dignity of all persons within the school community.

We are in the midst of a revolution in technology which is moving at a staggering pace. Catholic schools offer a vehicle to create a bridge between technological progress and human development. In Catholic schools the spiritual and community aspects of the organization and their emphasis on service to others, family and parental involvement, and leadership will serve to heighten personal and social responsibility and to address the questions of values and purpose that are part of a child's growth. Faustin N. Weber (1998), a Catholic school principal in Montgomery, Alabama, says that the

...need for Catholic schools is more acute now than ever... We need Catholic schools as an antidote to our religious amnesia. We need them to remind us about the beauty of God in "dappled things," our students—rich/poor, black/white/red/brown/yellow, smart and learning-disabled.... We need Catholic schools because we and our children need to be called to serve others. (p. 16)

Catholic schools can be the center of educational reform. We offer the blueprint for Catholic education that will blend the best of both worlds: technological progress used wisely and young people with a deep sense of their own spirituality and concern for others.

SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

Catholic education teaches students the importance of social commitments through engagement with the communities in which schools reside. Research has shown that the academic success of inner-city Catholic schools is due to the emphasis on shared values and individual achievement (Foderaro, 1996). Besides the Faith, these values include helping others, respect for others, individual responsibility, and academic rigor. Chicago, with a public school system of 413,000 children, also has 135,000 children in 323 Catholic schools which consistently outperform the public schools in academic tests and graduation rates. St. Agnes School, which teaches 580 Latino students, has a 95% graduation rate compared to a 40% graduation rate of Latinos in the public school system. The existence and example of the Catholic school give students an understanding that despite the great progress and prosperity of the 20th century there are values and commitments to addressing the needs of those who do not share in the prosperity or opportunities that progress and technology have made possible.

An extension to faith is witness. Students in Catholic schools are deeply involved in service projects and programs to witness to what they profess. This raises the social conscience of the children and the community. Not only do Catholic schools make great antipoverty investments in inner cities, they also teach their students to take responsibility for their own neighborhoods and help others who are less fortunate (Buechlein, 1999; Lefevere, 1997, 1998; Schorsch, 1997; Weber, 1998). Mandatory community service is part of the graduation requirement of over 50% of Catholic high schools. All of the Catholic middle schools that have emerged in the inner cities have service components (Anderson, 1999; Youniss & McLellan, 1999). In religion and other classes, social values and issues, such as poverty, discrimination, genetic engineering, distribution of wealth, war and peace, environmental responsibility, and life issues, are discussed. Social action is frequently an outgrowth of those discussions (Anderson, 1999; Buechlein, 1999). Clearly the role of social responsibility and one's value as a citizen are needed to balance the mechanized lifestyle and self-focused social orientation of the Digital Age.

BLUEPRINT FOR A CATHOLIC SCHOOL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The key to restructuring our schools lies in a reformation of purpose and the creation of a vision of school that is consistent with this purpose.

- It must be a community of harmony and support, in which regardless of person, gift, or talent, all members feel accepted and nourished—free to risk, to grow, and to embrace their God-given potential.
- It must be a community of justice, where concern for others is equal to concern for self, where service and servant are the foundation of action and discernment.
- It must be a community of love, in which to witness love is to see the presence of Jesus in the face of each member of the community.
- It must be a community of educational excellence, in which children are encouraged to stretch their minds, ideas, and interest, where discovery is encouraged, and questions are basic to discussion.
- It must be a community of teachers who emulate the model teacher, Jesus, teaching with compassion, understanding, story, and example.
- It must be a community of hope, in which members ask how they want to be, not what they want to be, for what one is, is not the same as how one is.
- It must be a community of leaders who are willing to stand for what is right and just, to make decisions, and to be examples of faith.
- It must be a community of faith, where all believe that God acts through them, that they can make a difference, that they can touch all the future, that they can build the kingdom of God. (Moon, 1999, p. 37)

Catholic schools have always started with the vision and values by which, according to Schlechty (1990), all schools must be managed in the 21st century. Catholic schools must integrate their vision with reality by retaining their purpose and character while moving forward academically and technologically. Curriculum and extension activities need to be redesigned to allow children to get work and research experience to augment their academic education. They need to see themselves as facilitators for discovery, not dispensers of knowledge.

For the child of the 21st century, the schools of that century must merge the best of the past with the needs and demands of a more complex and changing world. The schools must teach children communication and technology skills and risk taking. Children need to believe in something other than the material satisfactions of life; they need to serve others and pursue excellence. Catholic schools offer an alternate learning environment which can balance what we prize from the past with the imperatives of the future. Catholic schools can offer an understanding of the human dimension through spiritual reading, liturgies, service to others, value-centered discussions, and pursuit of academic excellence as a moral imperative.

CURRICULUM

In the 21st century, curriculum will become highly individualized (Schlechty, 1990). Teachers should have the ability to develop activities for students that, while embodying the learning objectives, are clearly linked to intellectual products that the students value (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996).

Education is the means by which society creates the conditions for its perpetuation. To do this, the needs and interests of the young must be taken into account, but meeting the needs of children is not all that education is about. Education is about helping children grow up to be vital, significant, self-aware, and reflective adults capable of living useful lives in a democratic information-based society. (Schlechty, 1990, p. 72)

School is not about common school work; it is about common learning. For example, one should be significantly conversant with the Constitution to make an intelligent decision as a citizen about abortion, school prayer, funding, capital punishment, etc. Students can learn this by reading *The Federalist Papers*, by writing a play about *The Federalist Papers*, by creating a mock trial, or writing a brief on a constitutional issue identifying the agencies and constitutional clauses most relevant. Based upon the learning styles of the student, the learning could be individual or cooperative.

Integration of many disciplines and a research approach to learning are also essential. There will be less course distinction and use of traditional texts. The learning objectives and the processes the students choose to demonstrate their understanding will determine the sources. Technology will give them access to information, but they may also choose to go to a museum or a concert or watch videos or a play to gain an understanding or appreciation of the cultures and the conflicts. They may choose to use interviews, newscasts, poetry, or song to get the information they need. There will be a wide variety of options in the implementation of curriculum in the 21st century, allowing for much more integration. Technology will give access to information and, if used well, will help students make relationships and connections between ideas, disciplines, people, and events.

This can be done in a public school as well as a Catholic school. The dimension that Catholic schools offer is the discussion of morals and religious values. They can use scripture or religious writings to offer understanding or alternatives to the resolution of conflicts. They can apply the principles or religious values to the relationship the learning unit has to their students' lives. They can see the whole group of projects or studies within the confines of a faith community where the moral dimension is the natural outgrowth of any study.

Some of the characteristics of a 21st-century curriculum in a Catholic school are:

- Community identification of a set of essential learning outcomes
- Integration
- Faith response and approach to learning
- Value-centered curriculum studies, projects, and discussions
- Real-life application
- Many options for student choice
- Many options for assessment aligned with student learning style
- Cocurricular and service experience beyond the confines of a school
- Research-based units of study
- Problem-solving approach to units of study

RELIGIOUS CURRICULUM

As we enter the 21st century the teaching of faith is notably different than in most of the 20th century. Fr. Francis J. Principe (1998), chair of the Religion Department at Cardinal Spellman High School in the Bronx, asserts that the changes in the presentation of the faith are healthy and thoughtful changes. Since 1980 the intellectual content of religion courses has become more substantial. The basic truths are still presented but with references to their scriptural and historical foundations. Principe says,

This presentation defines Catholics as members of a faith community that feeds its understanding of faith, morality, and spirituality on the word of God and the tradition that was born of it and that shapes our understanding of that written word...aim at critical and sophisticated understanding. (1998, p. 18)

This greater emphasis on thinking, questioning, and understanding is an essential ingredient for education in any school in the 21st century. Children no longer simply memorize over 1600 *Baltimore Catechism* questions and answers. They examine the tenets of their faith and seek application to their lives.

Church history also is more frequently taught than in the past. Students learn that the Church has adjusted to numerous political, historical, and social challenges without abandoning its essential message. A good lesson for the digital age: “necessary adjustments come slowly and painfully” (Principe, 1998, p. 18). Teaching Catholic morality in the context of a society that prizes self-fulfillment over self-discipline and accepts premarital sex and abortion while giving little attention to broader social issues like social justice, racism, and poverty amidst plenty, is especially challenging. The need for moral guidance rooted in a core of faith or values is more necessary than ever before for young people.

Teaching the faith in the 21st century will be a thoughtful process that encourages discussion and dissent. Learning the faith will offer children opportunities to extend it in their lives. They will be able to understand the

social problems in their society and work for solutions through understanding their historical evolution. Religious curricula in Catholic schools will be centered on the application of values and Catholic beliefs to improve individual lives and society collectively.

TECHNOLOGY

The vision is enticing. Computer technologies become the norm in schools that are equipped with multimedia, graphics and animation, access to the internet and hand-held and remote devices. There is seamlessness of learning activities among home, school and community settings. Students use technologies like they use pencils, books, and manipulatives to learn content in all subject areas. Learning goes beyond skills and facts, and students develop thinking and problem solving skills. The world is their classroom. In this vision, technologies help students gain mastery of content areas and zip at speeds of the fastest internet connection well beyond and above the standards. Computer technologies are the norm rather than the exception, and they become enablers rather than another subject taught in school. (Goldman, Cole, & Syer, 1999, p. 1)

This vision will become a reality in the 21st century. Technology will be an integral tool of the school, home, and workplace. It will help us integrate disciplines, modes of learning, and other dimensions of our lives. Students in technology-rich environments consistently show a higher level of reasoning and problem solving skills. They learn more in less time and are able to make connections and predictions because of their access to vast amounts of information. The following recommendations will help to advance our vision:

- Technology should be an integral part of the curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment of students and programs.
- Classrooms should be equipped with the technology necessary to prepare students for the 21st century.
- School computers should be able to be accessed from the home, allowing for greater independence in learning.
- Teachers will be trained through staff development programs on how technology can be and should be used. There should be a technology competency demonstration required of all teachers prior to receiving tenure. Schools should continuously update teachers on technological advances.
- Depending on the size of the school, all schools should have one or more technology learning consultants to assist teachers in finding material, people, and information they need to make the best use of technology.
- Ethics and moral issues that relate to technological progress will be an integral part of the curriculum. Activities to keep students connected to one another and aware of the impact of technology on their lives will be ongoing.
- Students should be able to pursue independent research and learning at home defined with objectives and rubrics.

Faith begins the cycle of needs. It is essential to any individual's growth and happiness. Since faith always demands a response, it prompts teachers in Catholic schools to want the best for all students. It is not selective. It also requires a response on the part of the students to do their best. Academic excellence should not be sacrificed in a Catholic school community; rather it should be the central focus after faith. Catholic schools should guarantee technological competencies and independent thinking. To do less would negate the history of Catholic education in preparing students for their world by offering opportunities to seek out and define their individual lives by making decisions, exploring new ideas, debating conflicts, and experimenting with scientific possibilities in a value-centered community. Service will be the cornerstone by which the students will apply what they know, share their treasures, and explore new personal perspectives. For it truly is in giving that we receive. Children learn a lot about themselves and the human condition through service to others.

The curriculum, whether it be the general curriculum or the religious curriculum, and technology will be the backdrop for the complete education of the child in the 21st century. Catholic schools through their faith focus, community organization, and witness and service experience will make the educational experience a holistic one. Integration and research get a unique perspective within Catholic schools, and the children will learn the place of technology and the value of other life experiences.

CONCLUSION

What separates Catholic schools from public and other private schools is the experience of faith within community. It truly reflects the 2,000-year-old message of Christ: to love God above all things and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Catholic schools in the 21st century will continue to offer witness through communal prayer and service as an outgrowth of curricular study. Service through programs within the community and active participation on a regular basis in social, spiritual, economic, and religious community experiences will help children grow and develop as mature, caring, and responsible adults. Spiritual activities and service programs help young people to define themselves beyond this world and its demands and influences. Through mission club, liturgy celebration, and retreats, children learn to become reflective individuals. They learn to give to others, stand for what is right according to the gospel of Christ, and balance their wants and those of society with the more important human and spiritual dimension of their lives. Catholic schools in the 21st century will serve as the alternate learning environment that will balance the demands of a highly technological age with the human and spiritual needs of all individuals. In the 21st century the greatest

challenge for Catholic schools will be to maintain faith as their focal point and service as their manner of speaking as society around them continues to adjust to a revolutionary age of human achievement and self-focus.

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