

## FOCUS SECTION

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# THE PAST IS PROLOGUE: AMERICAN CATHOLIC EDUCATION AND THE NEW CENTURY

TIMOTHY WALCH

*Hoover Presidential Library*

*The author of a recent history of American Catholic education points to three ongoing traditions—tenacity, adaptability, and identity—as evidence that parochial education will continue well into the next century. In this personal essay, Walch challenges a pessimistic assessment of Catholic education that appeared in Phi Delta Kappan. He also highlights other, more positive assessments of Catholic schooling. Walch concludes that even though American Catholic parochial education will never again attain the position of influence it had in the mid-20th century, parish schools will remain important education laboratories for the coming century.*

Does the past repeat itself? For Catholic education that seems to be the case. Catholic parents today face educational choices similar to those faced by their great-grandparents 100 years ago: Can I afford to send my children to the parish school? Is the Catholic school curriculum just as good as the public school curriculum? Will my children be better Catholics if they go to parish schools? Will my children lose their faith if they go to public schools? Each generation has answered these questions a little differently, but their answers are quite similar from one generation to the next (Walch, 1996).

In fact, the success of Catholic schools is built upon three traditions that extend back more than two centuries: tenacity, adaptability, and community. The importance of these traditions is very evident to anyone who has studied the recent history of Catholic schools. In fact, it is not too much to say that these three traditions have been, and continue to be, vital elements in the character of Catholic education from colonial times to the present day and will help secure these schools in the future.

At the heart of the Catholic school movement is the tradition of tenacity. A core group of parents, pastors, and prelates in every generation has shown a remarkable determination to keep Catholic schools alive no matter the cost. It started with the English missionaries who struggled to sustain their small flocks of colonial Catholics for more than 150 years in the face of a hostile Protestant majority. And it continues to the present day in the constant struggle to keep Catholic schools open in the face of rising costs.

Tenacity is so important because the history of Catholic education in this country has been replete with almost constant struggle. In fact, it was not clear until the 1820s that Catholicism in general, and Catholic schools in particular, would survive in America. Catholic schools exist today because of the determination of our ancestors to pay any price and overcome any obstacle to sustain faith-based education for their children. The tradition has been passed on from generation to generation.

A second tradition is adaptability. The success of parochial education has been assured by the willingness of Catholic educators in each generation to change and revise the parochial school curriculum in response to changes in the public school curriculum and to the desires and aspirations of Catholic parents. Catholic educators realized early on that a rigid, doctrinaire curriculum would force Catholic parents to choose between their religious faith and their children's future. By incorporating many of the elements of public schooling into the parish school curriculum, Catholic educators promised to secure both the faith and the fortune of their children. That tradition of flexibility and openness also continues today.

A third tradition is community. Perhaps the greatest asset of parochial schooling is that these schools have always reflected the goals, aspirations, and even the prejudices and fears of the neighborhood Catholics who supported these institutions. Public school teachers often lived outside the neighborhoods where they taught, and a school superintendent or a school committee downtown established the curriculum.

But parish schools have always been community-based in every sense of the word. Many immigrant groups established their own "national" parishes with their own ethnic Catholic schools. Parents had a sense of involvement in these schools. To be sure, these immigrants deferred to their pastors and to the nuns in the classrooms, but pastors and teachers alike were well aware that parental support was vital if parish schools were to thrive.

These three traditions—tenacity, adaptability, and community—provided moral strength to Catholic educators as they struggled to sustain their schools since the first parochial school was established in St. Mary's parish in Philadelphia more than 200 years ago. And these traditions were of vital importance during the generation of crisis in American Catholic education over the past 30 years. Furthermore, they will be the tools that will insure the success of Catholic schools in the new century.

But perhaps this assessment is too optimistic. In a very provocative article in the September 1998 issue of the *Phi Delta Kappan*, two scholars challenged the recent optimism about the future of Catholic education (Baker & Riordan, 1998).

In an essay entitled "The 'Eliting' of the Common American Catholic School and the National Education Crisis," professors David Baker of Pennsylvania State University and Cornelius Riordan of Providence College claim that

Catholic schools are on the verge of becoming a system of proprietary schools that educate growing numbers of non-Catholics, children from the wealthiest strata of the society, and increasing numbers of children who do not consider themselves religious at all. (1998, p. 17)

All the good news about the revival of Catholic schooling is for naught, claim the authors. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, Baker and Riordan predict the end of Catholic education as we know it. "Although Catholic schools as an academic enterprise seem alive," they note, "as a religious enterprise they may be even closer to death than anyone thought" (1998, p. 22). For Baker and Riordan, the end of Catholic education as we have known it for 200 years is in sight.

What is their evidence? The authors base many of their conclusions on papers prepared for an ongoing project on the future of Catholic education sponsored by the Lilly Foundation and administered by the Life Cycle Institute of the Catholic University of America (Youniss, 1997).

The authors claim that a major reason for the demise of Catholic schooling is that the Catholic educational establishment has abandoned its roots. "Without much notice," they write, "Catholic schools have drifted far away from their origins as common schools for all Catholic children, with the mission of religious indoctrination and low-cost basic education" (Baker & Riordan, 1998, p. 17). To document their notion of "common school for all Catholic children," Baker and Riordan use a chapter from Wills' book *Bare Ruined Choirs* (1971) and Powers' popular memoir *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?* (1975).

The authors hone in on data that suggest that Catholic schools are moving in two directions: Some of these schools are becoming elite institutions where academic courses take precedence over religious instruction; other Catholic schools are thriving as an alternative to public education for non-Catholic inner-city youth. In both cases, Baker and Riordan imply, the Catholic school system has mortgaged its soul to insure its survival. Because of these changes, they argue, Catholic education in the waning years of this century is suffering an "identity crisis" (1998, p. 17).

In a spirited rejoinder, Greeley (1998) challenges the suppositions used

by Baker and Riordan (1998). Greeley correctly chastises the authors for their failure to use the considerable body of sociological work that has been published on Catholic education since the 1950s. But just as important, Greeley lambastes the authors for the superficial attention they give to *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, the influential study of Catholic schooling written by Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993). Although Greeley does not say as much, he leads the reader to the conclusion that Baker and Riordan are not interested in data that conflict with their "gloom and doom" scenario.

Many Catholic educators believe that Greeley is quite correct. Baker and Riordan accuse Catholic schools of "abandoning their roots," but there is no evidence that these two scholars have explored those roots. Even a cursory examination of the history of Catholic education shows that these schools were never as numerous as Baker and Riordan suggest (Walch, 1996).

Although there is no statistical evidence, it is not likely that any more than 50% of the Catholic school-age population in this country at any one time ever attended parochial schools. Restated, the majority of Catholic children attended public schools.

If that is the case, then, parochial schools have always served a minority of Catholic children. This does not mean that parochial schools were elitist in the pejorative sense of the word. These schools were open to all who desired a Catholic education. For a minority of Catholic parents parochial education was very important and they were willing to pay the price of a private education. For the majority of Catholic parents parochial education was not as important and they chose to send their children to public schools. In short, every Catholic parent in this country from 1840 to the present has made a choice on where to send their children to school (Walch, 1996).

Those who chose Catholic schools made financial sacrifices, to be sure. But it is important to remember that the cost of a Catholic education has never kept any child from receiving that schooling. On occasion there were not enough desks for all students, and some children were put on waiting lists, but that has been relatively rare. Virtually all parents who wanted a Catholic education for their children got that education regardless of their economic status (Guerra, 1999).

So Baker and Riordan are not wrong literally when they talk about the "eliting" of the Catholic school population. But they are wrong when they imply that this is a new phenomenon or that the self-selection process was based on economic class. In short, middle-class Catholic families have not been priced out of the parochial school market. Although the percentage of Catholic children receiving a parochial education today is smaller than it was in the 1950s, it is a school population that is not as closely tied to economic status as Baker and Riordan would have us believe (Lee, 1997).

Who chooses to send their children to Catholic schools? Baker and Riordan (1998) correctly point out that a sizable percentage of parochial

school students now come from non-Catholic working-class families. But rather than applaud the Church for providing a vital service to the underprivileged, these scholars imply that the Church has abandoned its mission of indoctrinating only Catholic children.

Baker and Riordan (1998) also tell us that the non-Catholic families who support parochial schools have little interest in the religious instruction and the values taught in those schools. This argument is debatable, however. It seems more likely that these parents see religious instruction as a benign byproduct of a Catholic education. And wouldn't this world be a better place if we had a few more Catholic-educated non-Catholics?

Baker and Riordan (1998) would have benefited from a closer reading of *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* because the book does such a good job of analyzing the motivation of both Catholic and non-Catholic parents in their support for parochial schools. It is worthwhile, however, to start with a wonderful synopsis of the book written by one of its authors, Professor Valerie Lee of the University of Michigan.

In a clearly written, largely jargon-free article, Lee (1997) makes the case for the value of Catholic education. This article will warm the heart of anyone who struggles to pay tuition bills or lives on the modest salaries paid to Catholic-school teachers.

But don't assume that Lee is a champion of Catholic schools. By her own admission, she has never been a fan of Catholic schooling. And yet as a social scientist, Lee could not dispute the incontrovertible conclusion provided by all the available educational data that Catholic schools "did better" than comparable public schools. Catholic schools "were able to create two favorable outcomes simultaneously: high average achievement and equitable distribution of that achievement among students from different social class, racial, and ethnic backgrounds" (Lee, 1997, p. 153).

Why? Lee concludes that the success of Catholic schools in the inner city and in the suburbs is the result of communitarian values. Implicit in Catholic schools from coast to coast is a vision of the common good. As Lee notes so well, Catholic schools provide an environment that is intimate and caring. It is this special environment that is the vital element in determining the success of minority students (Lee, 1997).

But Lee and others also note that the renewed popularity of Catholic education is the result of the unwavering commitment by Catholic educators to teaching the basics (Lee, 1997). After decades of experimentation, many public educators have come to the realization that there is no substitute for mastering basic literacy and mathematical skills. Just as important, educators across the nation have concluded that values-based instruction is a vital part of a complete educational experience. And no group knows more about basic skills and moral values than Catholic-school teachers.

Further evidence of the truth of Professor Lee's thesis can be found in the January 18, 1999, issue of *U.S. News and World Report* (Dickerson, 1999; Holland, 1999; Toch, 1999). In a cover story entitled "America's Outstanding High Schools," the editors surveyed over 1,000 institutions in six major metropolitan areas looking for the keys to a successful educational experience. In this process, the editors discovered that outstanding schools share many of the following traits: high academic standards, a core curriculum, highly qualified teachers, strong mentoring for new teachers, partnerships between parents and schools, administrators and teachers who know each child, and high attendance rates.

Do those traits sound familiar? I believe that they describe many of the Catholic high schools across the nation. Indeed, two of the six schools selected for special attention in the *U.S. News* report were Catholic schools—Malden Catholic in the Boston suburbs and Aquinas High in the South Bronx.

As Lee and the editors of *U.S. News* clearly articulate in different ways, Catholic schools are at a new peak academically and spiritually. Students in parish schools in big cities and their suburbs outperform their friends in comparable public schools on virtually all standardized tests, and even President Clinton has taken notice in his push for more charter schools. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and charter schools are little more than Catholic schools stripped of catechesis (Hartocollis, 1999b).

Some might argue that the success of Catholic schooling in the nation's inner cities and prosperous suburbs cannot be duplicated in the small towns of this nation. Unfortunately, the data on Catholic schools nationwide are incomplete. Students in rural Catholic schools in my home state, however, consistently score higher on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills than students in the local public schools even when the results are controlled by social class (Stover, 1998).

Others will raise that old canard about Catholic schools accepting only the best and the brightest students and refusing the rest. Professor Lee argues to the contrary by citing data that the "family income of Catholic school students exceeded that of their public school counterparts by about \$6,000, and the average parent had one more year of education" (Lee, 1997, p. 154).

Attention should be paid to the Options program being conducted at East Side Catholic in Seattle and Paul VI High School in the suburbs of Washington, DC (MacDowell, 1998). The Options program incorporates developmentally disabled children into Catholic schools without mainstreaming or segregation. Each Option student is assigned a peer mentor and takes core curriculum courses designed to meet his or her specific needs.

The program recognizes that each student learns at a different pace. Perhaps one teacher at Paul VI described the program best. "Catholic means universal," she noted. "That means we should teach all of God's children. We are taking seriously the word catholic and the teaching of the Gospel." Just

like the Good Shepherd, the teachers at Paul VI and East Side Catholic are caring for the least of their flocks.

Catholic schools are now and will continue to be models and alternatives to public education. Where Catholic schools had once followed every innovation introduced in public education, the roles have been reversed. Catholic schools are becoming laboratories for the development of effective tools in reaching a broad cross section of children (Costa, 1998; Hartocollis, 1999a).

What can public education learn from parish schools? Lee offers some excellent ideas in her essay and I will leave it to you to read her work. Let me offer a few ideas of my own that closely parallel those proposed by Lee.

Foremost among the qualities of parish-based education that would benefit public education is decentralization. To be sure, all parochial schools are nominally controlled by superintendents and diocesan boards of education. But for the most part, parish schools are administered at the local level. Funding for the schools comes from the community and principals hire teachers without interference. Parents have a greater involvement and effectiveness in the education process because they are working with a single institution in their neighborhood rather than a faceless bureaucracy downtown (Lee, 1997).

A second quality of Catholic schools related to the first is the fact that parents, students, and faculty share a broad set of beliefs that give each school a moral purpose. Achieving this unanimity in a public institution may not be easy. But if our nation's motto means anything, then public institutions must do more to achieve "one out of many." Shared values are possible if parents, students, and faculty care about education (Lee, 1997).

This care is also reflected in a shared code of conduct that stresses "human dignity and the belief that human reason can discern ethical truth." This code need not be religious, but neither can it be arbitrary. More important, the care must stress a good greater than individual achievement or gratification. "It is difficult to envision," wrote Lee, "how unleashing self-interest becomes a compelling force toward human caring" (Lee, 1997, pp. 158-159).

Another hallmark of parochial schools worthy of emulation is size. The small size of most parish schools promotes interaction between students, parents, and staff. Because teachers serve in many different roles during the school day—disciplinarians, counselors, and friends as well as specialists in one or more academic disciplines—they become mentors and role models. The small size of most parish schools insures that parents and teachers know one another and their children well. In short, small size facilitates communication.

Finally, parish schools place a special emphasis on academics. Small size and limited resources necessarily require administrators to concentrate on basics. The result is a student body well grounded in the mathematical and

literary skills so necessary for success at future educational levels. Large schools with cafeteria-style curricula may very well meet short-term demands for relevant instruction, but there is little evidence that courses in industrial management and family living are as valuable as literacy and mathematical skills in a constantly changing society (Lee, 1997; Hartocollis, 1999a).

Will Catholic schools be around in the middle of the 21st century? I think so. The recent history of Catholic education makes it clear that the parents and teachers of the children who are educated in these schools will determine the future of Catholic parochial education. And Catholic parents and teachers learned a lot about themselves and their schools through the past 15 years of soul searching (Hidey, 1998).

I want to relate a wonderful story about Alice McDermott (Streitfield, 1998), the author of prize-winning books such as *At Weddings and Wakes* and, most recently, *Charming Billy*, the winner of the 1999 National Book Award. As you might surmise from her name, McDermott is an Irish American Catholic and the product of Catholic parochial schools.

McDermott lives in Bethesda, Maryland, with her husband, David Armstrong, and their three children. When the family first moved to Bethesda, McDermott and Armstrong checked out the local Catholic school separately and came away with completely different experiences.

McDermott thought that the school was horrible—just like the parish schools of her childhood. Like a grizzled war veteran, she flashed back to all those “mean” nuns, and “awful” uniforms! Most of all McDermott was repelled by the smell. “Why do all Catholic schools have the smell of disinfectant and wet wool and incinerators?” she thought to herself. She started to hyperventilate!

McDermott’s husband had the opposite reaction. Raised a Methodist, David Armstrong had attended public schools and he was overwhelmed by his first visit to a Catholic school. “This is great,” he thought to himself. “Look how they’re all sitting up straight. And look at those nice uniforms. The kids are so much better behaved than kids in public school.”

I am pleased to report that the non-Catholic view prevailed in the Armstrong-McDermott household. The children do attend parochial school and they love it! Thank the Lord for Methodists with open minds!

As long as there are parents, pastors, and teachers interested in parochial education, these schools will survive and thrive. Even though American Catholic parochial education will never again attain the position of influence it had in the mid-20th century, parish schools will remain important education laboratories for the coming century. This is a valuable piece of information that comes as the result of many years of doubt and struggle.



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*A previous version of this essay was presented as the inaugural Joseph Rogus Lecture at the University of Dayton in March 1999.*

*Timothy Walch is director of the Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, IA, and associate editor of the U.S. Catholic Historian. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Timothy Walch, 65 N. Westminster, Iowa City, IA 52245.*

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