
OPERATIONAL PARADOXES: VOUCHERS AND CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

GERALD M. CATTARO

Fordham University

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled in support of the constitutionality of the Cleveland voucher program. Will urban Catholic schools soon become filled with voucher students? Catholic school leaders have some important decisions to face, decisions which can be clarified by taking a historical view.

The Supreme Court's upholding of the Cleveland voucher program in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002) has heightened public awareness of the contributions that Catholic elementary schools have made to the common good of America. Immediately following *Zelman*, the nation's headlines (*New York Times*, 2002) singled out Catholic schools as benefiting from vouchers. What many critics of vouchers and Catholic schools miss is the enduring presence that Catholic schools have had in urban America and the academic achievement that their students have enjoyed.

Much of the discussion surrounding vouchers overlooks the religious identity issues and organizational culture of Catholic schools by simply referring to them as private schools. Sadly, such an approach negates the theological, philosophical, and historical underpinnings of Catholic elementary schools (Jacobs, 1998). In an attempt to arrive at a better understanding of the impact that vouchers might have on Catholic elementary schools, this article is divided into three sections. The article begins with a brief review of the Cleveland voucher program. The second section of the article reflects on key aspects of Catholic elementary schools. The final part of the article raises questions about the paradoxes that Catholic educational leaders must consider in the post-*Zelman* world of vouchers.

THE SUPREME COURT AND VOUCHERS

Zelman v. Simmons-Harris (2002) began in January 1996, when Doris Simmons-Harris, the mother of a public school student, and others challenged the Ohio Pilot Project Scholarship Program (OPPSP) by arguing that it violated the separation of church and state provisions of both the federal and state constitutions. The OPPSP was designed to provide tuition for poor students in Cleveland's failing public schools in order to permit them to attend participating public or private schools of their parents' choosing. The program also offered tutorial aid for students who chose to remain in public school while also creating community, or charter, schools. The tuition aid was, and is, distributed to parents according to financial need. Where tuition funds are spent depends solely upon where parents choose to enroll their children. More than 60% of the parents who chose the voucher initiative for their children were from families at or below the poverty line. Further, the number of tutorial assistance grants provided to students remaining in public school must equal the number of tuition aid scholarships. Ultimately, in *Zelman*, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the voucher program because it was satisfied that it was based on the genuine private choices of parents and was neutral with regard to religion (Russo & Mawdsley, 2003).

Turning specifically to the Catholic schools in Cleveland and to their involvement in the vouchers debate, it is worth noting that the OPPSP has operated there since the 1996-1997 school year. During the 1999-2000 school year, 82% of the private schools had religious affiliations, enrolling 96% of participating students, nearly all of whom attended Catholic elementary schools. At the same time, the Diocese of Cleveland operates 164 schools with some 63,457 students. Given the poverty in Cleveland and the great need among many of its residents, it should come as no surprise that 112 of its urban schools are eligible for nutritional programs and 108 qualify for Title I services (McDonald, 2002).

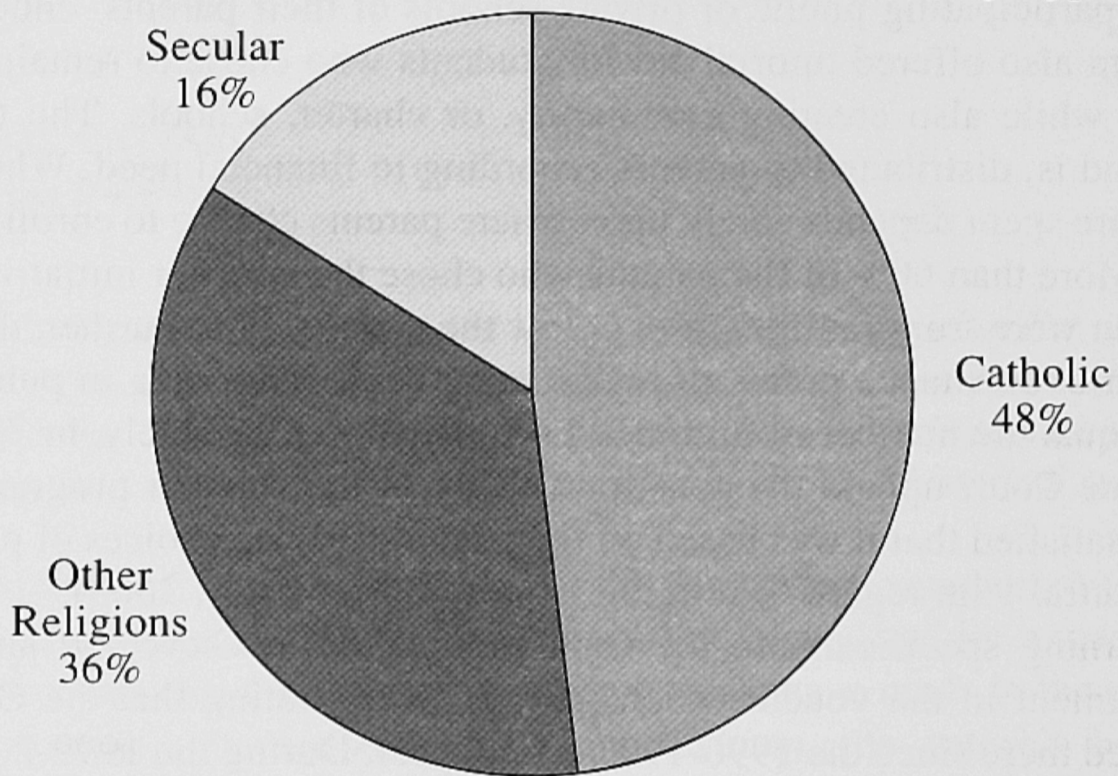
CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

PRESENCE

Catholic schools continue to represent the largest sector of nonpublic schools in the nation. After peaking in 1965 with approximately 87% of nonpublic school enrollment, Catholic schools went into a decline. Today, Catholic schools represent 48.6% of the nation's nonpublic schools (see Figure 1) as small religious schools of other faiths have grown rapidly in suburban and rural areas over the past decade (Mawdsley & Russo, 2003). Even so, Catholic schools have stayed the course in urban areas (Broughman & Colaciello, 2001) since 45.6% of the nation's 6,886 Catholic elementary schools are located in the inner city (McDonald, 2002). Moreover, Catholic

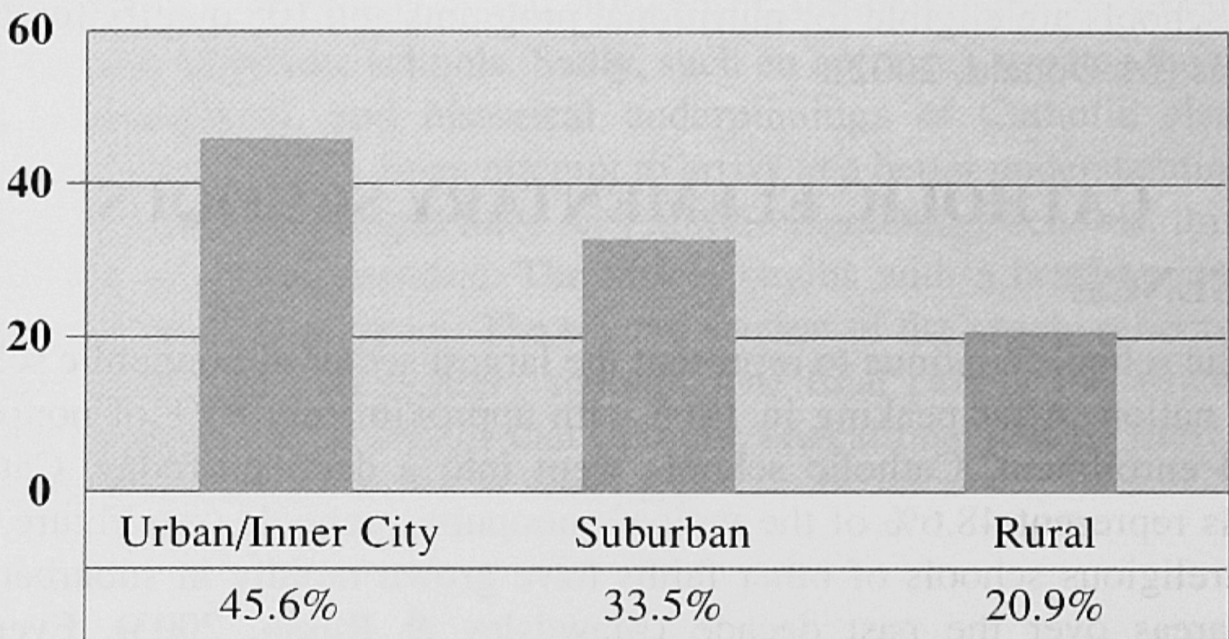
schools have remained true to their initial commitment of providing low-cost, high quality education to the urban poor and to new waves of immigrants (see Figure 2). In light of the role that Catholic schools have played in urban areas, it should not be surprising that the voucher debate arose in Cleveland, home to many underprivileged children.

Figure 1:
Percentage Distribution of Students in Private Schools by Typology



Source: *Private School Universe Survey* (Broughman & Colaciello, 2001).

Figure 2:
Location of Catholic Schools 2001-2002



Source: *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2001-2002* (McDonald, 2002).

DOLLARS AND CENTS

Urban Catholic schools have made every effort to keep tuition as reasonable as possible; for example, the median parish school tuition cost is \$2,178 as opposed to the average public school per-child cost of \$6,505 (McDonald, 2002). Consequently, most of those receiving vouchers in Cleveland chose Catholic schools to get the best "bang for their buck." Thus, Catholic schools play a critical role in the cities where poor families that suffer economic privation have few choices.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Research clearly demonstrates the academic success that students in Catholic schools have enjoyed when compared to their public school counterparts. A number of social scientists (Bryk, Holland, Lee, & Carriedo, 1984; Cibulka, O'Brien, & Zewe, 1982; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Greeley, 1982) have recorded the academic quality and successes of Catholic urban schools. Ancillary research by Irvine and Foster (1996) categorizes the variables examined for impact on urban achievement in Catholic schools under three designations: family background and parental characteristics, student demographic characteristics and school climate, and program and teacher characteristics.

The statistical data can be buttressed by the work of such researchers as Shokraii (1997), whose study, in *Why Catholic Schools Spell Success for America's Inner-city Children*, provides the qualitative context as to how Catholic elementary schools operate in urban America. The vignettes she offers provide a rich voice reflecting the achievement of Catholic schools that serve the educational needs of the inner-city poor.

In the first of two case studies to be reviewed here, Shokraii (1997) revealed how Holy Angels School became one of the strongest academic institutions in the country. Holy Angels, a 110-year-old school in Southside Chicago, is located in a neighborhood where three out of four people live in poverty. A 1994 report published by the Chicago Public Schools indicated four times as many Holy Angels eighth graders scored above the national average in math on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills as did their peers in the area's three public schools. In addition, of the eighth graders who scored above the national average in reading, twice as many were from Holy Angels as were from the public schools.

Among other schools, Shokraii (1997) also described St. Gregory the Great Elementary School on West 90th Street in New York City. This school, which serves only low-income Black children from Harlem and Washington Heights, outperforms all neighboring public schools and most of the schools in its district. Based on the efforts of Catholic school educators, in 1995, 62% of St. Gregory's third graders were reading above the minimum standard, and

92% functioned above the standard in math. Based on all of these measures, both quantitative and qualitative, parents who wish to afford their children opportunities to succeed in life have a difficult time resisting the lure of urban Catholic schools.

HISTORICAL AMNESIA

Individuals on both sides of the voucher debate seem to oversimplify the discussion, sometimes reducing it to the levels of presence, academic performance, or dollars and cents. In order to understand American Catholic schools, one must be knowledgeable of the transition that has affected them since the Second Vatican Council. Shifting from a purely goal-oriented system to a postmodernist venue, American Catholic education, as a subsystem of the Catholic Church, made a pivotal transformation to a specific spiritual mission at the close of the Second Vatican Council.

The history of American Catholic education can be divided into two major periods. The first major period was shaped by the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884, while the second was affected by the post Vatican II perspective. During the first era, as in most organizations whether spiritual or temporal, leaders in the Catholic Church targeted and aligned the institution to goals. Catholic school goals were directly tied to the Church's mission to teach, sanctify, and govern (Grant & Hunt, 1992). Fichter (1958) observed the close alignment between the choice parents made in seeking a Catholic school education for their children and the Church's objective of providing a spiritual education. This assured Catholic schools of a vital place in the life of Church members. The schools were also entrusted with the tasks of assimilating cultures and educating for citizenship as immigrants flocked to both the Church and its schools for their service and comfort. As national parish schools developed, separate Black elementary and secondary schools developed in cities such as Baltimore, New Orleans, Washington, DC, and St. Louis, where segregation was mandated by law. Northern cities such as Boston, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia established predominately Black parish schools after desegregation as Blacks migrated north (Franklin & McDonald, 1988). These are very similar to the Catholic schools that continue to operate in Cleveland and which are at the heart of the debate in *Zelman*.

The Second Vatican Council (1961-1964) influenced the life of the American Church and in particular the operation of its schools. No longer were goals and mission as clear. The predilection of a separate school system was questioned (Ryan, 1964) as many perceived ambiguity about the purpose, and even need, of Catholic schools. Further, as ethnic groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Germans began to assimilate, many no longer needed or even valued the comfort of the familiar parish school. Children of the first

wave of immigrants, who were now part of the mainstream, moved to the suburbs and abandoned the Catholic school system as they began to pay high tax dollars.

Despite the significant changes that occurred in Catholic schools, the *New York Times* (2002), perhaps suffering from a bout of historical amnesia in failing to recognize the contribution of Catholic schools, took a very different view of their developments. The editorial in the *New York Times* on June 28, 2002, the day after *Zelman*, while giving scant mention of other religious schools, narrowed its focus to Catholic schools. The editorial pejoratively referred to sectarian Catholic activities such as celebrating the Mass, reading the Bible, and the inclusion of crucifixes in classrooms. The editorial further segregated Catholics by discussing the influence that Catholic schools would have in passing on their values to the students. If anything, the editorial inferred that Catholic values may be dangerous for our diverse American society. Yet, the editorial writer failed to mention the contextualization that has dramatically taken effect in many Catholic schools.

Contextualization here refers to placing a group, religious or secular, in a historical, political, social, and economic condition within which it finds itself, thereby providing the theoretical framework for the transitions taking place in Catholic urban schools (Geertz, 1971). Based on their response to external environments, Catholic urban schools are transforming themselves from institutions that convert, assimilate, and protect to ones of pluralistic complexity. O'Keefe (2000) provides information about urban Catholic schools and their pluralistic religious demographics. Table 1 reports that more than 72% of students attending Catholic urban elementary schools are Catholic. These data differ significantly from all Catholic primary schools where 88.6% of students are Catholic. Based on these data, it is evident that urban Catholic elementary schools are adapting to their environments (Metzler, 1998). These data reinforce Cooper and Guare's (1997) research, which maintains that the process of contextualization critically assesses the forces that shape or distort the particular mission of religious education. Herein lie the paradoxical quandaries.

Table 1
Religious Affiliation of Urban Catholic School Students (n=138,996)

Religious Affiliation	Percent Elementary	Percent High School
Catholic	72.1%	77.3%
Other Protestant	7.4%	9.2%
Baptist	13.6%	6.9%
Pentecostal	1.8%	2.1%
Non-Christians	<1%	1.5%
Muslim	<1%	<1%
Buddhist	<1%	<1%
Hindu	<1%	<1%
Jewish	<1%	<1%
Report Other	4.9%	3.1%

THE PARADOX OF VOUCHERS

Each educational system or institution in the United States has developed its own culture. The way individual institutions live out their particular visions of culture differ, based upon a continuum provided for by their particular contexts and environments. This much is certain: A culture is lived out in all schools. Schools have cultures that are definitely their own as they blend complex rituals of personal relationships, sets of mores, folkways, and sanctions to develop moral codes. In Catholic schools, the culture is shaped by a wide array of elements ranging from religious beliefs to cultural values to compliance with governmental rules and regulations.

According to a 1993 report by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Non-Public Education, the regulation of private educational institutions, including Roman Catholic elementary schools, currently revolves around the following issues:

- Record-keeping and reports: To ensure compliance with compulsory school attendance statutes, states often require private schools to maintain student records. Annual or periodic reports must then be forwarded to state or local educational agencies. Nineteen states require the maintenance of student attendance records. Thirty-one states and the Virgin Islands require periodic reports of attendance and/or enrollment to a government agency.
- Licensing, registering accreditation: The majority of states that choose to certify private schools simply "approve" elementary and secondary private schools. Ten states have voluntary approval provisions for private schools. Eight states have mandatory approval provisions: two of these states provide

exemptions or alternatives to approval while three of these states mandate approval only on a limited basis. Only South Dakota mandates accreditation of all private elementary and secondary schools.

- Health and safety: The majority of states have statutes requiring certificates of immunization prior to enrollment, allowing for religious or medical exemptions. In addition, safety standards generally include regular fire drills, drug- and alcohol-free zones, and protective eyewear for laboratory classes. Several states have enacted statutes that restrict smoking in private buildings, outlaw disturbances on private school property, and assist law enforcement officials in finding missing children. A few states require criminal checks for teachers or employees directly working with students.
- Curriculum: Requirements are generally broad, referring only to the subjects usually taught in the public school or itemizing basic subject areas such as reading, writing, English, arithmetic, and history. Many states specify studies in the state and federal constitutions. Texas requires a study of good citizenship. Iowa requires a multicultural, nonsexist approach with a global perspective incorporated into all levels of the educational program for state accredited nonpublic schools. Some states require health education in private schools. (Office of Non-Public Education, 1993, pp. 2, 3)

Many current governmental regulations, including those discussed above, interfere in varying degrees, albeit for the most part benignly, with the school culture in Catholic, and other religiously affiliated, nonpublic schools (Mawdsley & Russo, 2003). Yet, the state must continue to exert some role in all education. Consequently, such a relationship must continue to be based on the essential interest of both the state and religious schools to maintain a proper mix of responsibility and freedom.

As Catholic elementary schools face the post-*Zelman* future and may open themselves up to increased regulation by virtue of accepting students who are using vouchers, they are likely to be confronted by a series of difficult questions that have the potential to impact significantly on their mission and identity. For example, if Catholic schools accept voucher students, how many will not be parishioners or even members of the Catholic faith? Will school officials have to report undocumented students? If faculty members are to serve as role models, who will define what it means to do so? Whose health curriculum, relating to such matters as birth control and abortion, will have to be taught? Will administrators and teachers be viewed as ministers of the Gospel or agents of the state?

Jacobs (1998) identifies six elements comprising what he calls the grammar of Catholic schooling: God is the beginning and end of human existence; education is essentially a moral endeavor; parents are the primary educators of their children; the subject of education is the student; teaching is an intimate communication between souls; and educational decisions are best made locally. Based on Jacobs' principles, as educational leaders in Catholic

schools consider participating in voucher programs, they would be well advised to consider how taking public funds might impact their mission and identity.

The paradox is that by accepting students who use vouchers, Catholic schools may run the risk of having to change the ways in which they operate and become less religious in their outlook. Educational leaders in Catholic schools must consider these possibilities before they choose to participate in a voucher program.

REFERENCES

- Broughman, S., & Colaciello, L. (2001). *Private school universe survey 1999-2000*. (NCES No. 2001-330). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Bryk, A. S., Holland, P. B., Lee, V. E., & Carriedo, R. A. (1984). *Effective Catholic schools: An exploration*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- Cibulka, J. G., O'Brien, T. J., & Zewe, D. (1982). *Inner-city private elementary schools*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press.
- Coleman, J. S., & Hoffer, T. (1987). *Public and private high schools: The impact of communities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Coleman, J. S., Hoffer, T., & Kilgore, S. (1982). *High school achievement: Public, Catholic & private schools compared*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cooper, B. S., & Guare, R. E. (1997). Cross-national analysis of religious schools: Institutional adaptation from four perspectives. In T. Hunt & J. Carper (Eds.), *Religion and schooling in contemporary America: Confronting our cultural pluralism* (pp. 107-138). New York: Garland.
- Fichter, J. H. (1958). *Parochial school: A sociological study*. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Franklin, V. P., & McDonald, E. B. (1988). Blacks in urban Catholic schools in the United States: A historical perspective. In D. T. Slaughter, & J. Johnson (Eds.), *Visible now: Blacks in private schools* (pp. 93-108). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Geertz, C. (1971). *Islam observed: Religious development in Morocco and Indonesia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Grant, M. A., & Hunt, T. C. (1992). *Catholic school education in the United States: Development and concerns*. New York: Garland.
- Greeley, A. M. (1982). *Catholic high schools and minority students*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
- Irvine, J. J., & Foster M. (Eds.) (1996). *Growing up African American in Catholic schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Jacobs, R. M. (1998). *The grammar of Catholic schooling*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- Mawdsley, R. D., & Russo, C. J. (2003, March). Vouchers and religious schools: Why some religious schools may refuse to participate. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 6(3), 362-371.
- McDonald, D. (2002). *United States Catholic elementary and secondary schools 2000-2001*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- Metzler, M. J. (1998). *United States Catholic elementary and secondary schools 1997-1998-2001*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2002). *Key statistics in public elementary and secondary schools*. Washington, DC: Author.
- New York Times*. (2002, June 28). The wrong ruling on vouchers, p. A26.

- Office of Non-Public Education. (1993). *The regulation of private schools in America*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- O'Keefe J. (2000). The challenge of pluralism: Articulating a rationale for religiously diverse urban Roman Catholic schools in the United States. *International Journal of Education and Religion*, 1, 64-88.
- Russo, C. J., & Mawdsley, R. D. (2003, March). The Supreme Court and vouchers: An overview for educators in Catholic schools. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 6(3), 318-327.
- Ryan, M. P. (1964). *Are Catholic schools the answer?* New York: Guild Press.
- Shokraii, N. H. (1997). *Why Catholic schools spell success for America's inner-city children*, Backgrounder No. 1128 (Report No. BBB 19698). Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED421562)
- Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 122 S. Ct. 2460 (2002).

Gerald M. Cattaro, Ed.D., is an associate professor in the Division of Education, Administration, Leadership and Policy and Director of the Center for Non-Public Education and Catholic School Leadership in the Graduate School of Education at Fordham University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Gerald Cattaro, Director, Center for Non-Public Education, Fordham University, 113 W. 60th Street, Room 1024, New York, NY 10023-7478.

Copyright of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice* is the property of Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.