



**CATHOLIC
EDUCATION
PARTNERS**

The CATHOLIC VISION of EDUCATION: Leading Our Children to Christ in a Challenging Era

In this white paper, Catholic Education Partners' intent is to offer *hope*, *information*, and *practical steps* forward for all who recognize this moment as essential for the future of Catholic education in America. Herein, we consider the nature and purpose of Catholic education, the history of what many have deemed the greatest success story in American education, and why recent developments in law, policy, and society are opening up the most promising opportunity in generations to advance the Church's educational mission.



This white paper has been adapted from a booklet published by Catholic Education Partners. View the booklet [HERE](#).

First, it is vital to clarify the nature and purpose of Catholic education. Merely mimicking the public school model and adding some religious aspects is not a sustainable way forward. Preparing students for college, successful careers, and responsible citizenship is a good and worthy goal, but none of these can be the end goal of a Catholic school. Our ultimate goal is heaven, and nothing less. This fact has implications for Catholic intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation that—when pursued with integrity and rigor—cannot fail to produce excellent students, workers, leaders, and citizens.

The purpose of a Catholic education must lead us out of isolation, self-centeredness, and apathy towards virtue, wisdom, and loving union with God. Education is the means by which we respond to Our Lord's call: "Let the children come to Me" (Matt. 19:14). The Church has consistently—in many magisterial documents and exhortations—argued for an authentic Catholic vision of education. The Church has

*"Let the children
come to Me"*

(Matt. 19:14)

also said time and again that parents are the primary educators of their children. And because they have the duty to provide an integral education, one that includes moral and religious formation, no one can usurp this responsibility. Indeed, the Church has argued powerfully—in language that may surprise us today—that the state has an obligation to ensure that such education is available to all citizens.

By educating the entire person, Catholic schools both prepare students for their ultimate end of union with God and prepare them to live with virtue, character, as neighbors and colleagues worthy of being called Catholic and American. But the Church does not want these ultimate and practical benefits merely for those students of exceptional piety or capacity to pay for private education. The Church wants a fully authentic and excellent Catholic education available to every student, regardless of his or her background, zip code, or ability to pay.

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This had been the Church's vision for education since its first schools appeared on American shores in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—long before the Catholic School System began to expand rapidly in the first half of the nineteenth century. Often in opposition to anti-Catholic sentiment and policies, outright and at times violent persecution, and other obstacles, the mission of Catholic schools was born and shaped in struggle and perseverance. Staffed primarily by religious sisters, the schools could for remarkably low cost welcome migrants, the poor, and the affluent, providing a laboratory for the American melting pot ideal.

Thus able to serve a wide range of students, lifting up with the gospel and a quality education those who often had no other means of lift, Catholic schools flourished for a century and a half. By 1965, nearly 150,000 teachers in 13,292 Catholic schools were serving over 5.5 million students. More than twelve percent of all children in the United States were being educated at Catholic schools.

This would prove to be the apex of Catholic schools' reach and influence, however, as a confluence of social factors and changes in the Church would lead to a reversal of fortunes. Following the Second Vatican Council (though for reasons not reducible to the Council itself), a mass exodus from religious orders led directly to a dramatic shortage of teachers. Schools closures followed, and those that remained open were forced to change their financial model to accommodate teachers who needed more substantial salaries. In many places, it followed that the cost of a Catholic education leapt out of reach for many families of modest means. Finally, as Catholicism saw wider acceptance in rapidly secularizing American culture, the distinctiveness of Catholic schools also waned. Following wider trends of lessening religious practice, Catholics by and large felt less need to invest in a Catholic education that did not differ substantially from available secular options.

The stunning decline of Catholic schools corresponds closely with the tragic decline in Catholic faith and religious practice in America. Today, about 1.6 million students are served by Catholic

schools—only twenty-nine percent of the number of students served in 1965. While the most immediate factor in the 2019-2020 school year’s steep decline was the Covid pandemic, this has only accelerated what has clearly been the failure of Catholic schools to adequately reach out to recent Catholic immigrants.

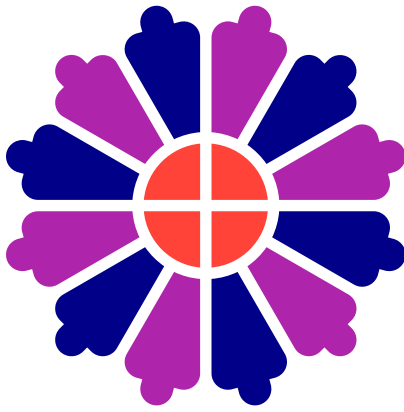
Yet, many outlets have reported that the star of Catholic education is again rising, as parochial schools opened for in-person instruction far before public schools. Many schools are reporting spikes in new student applications; with many, again, coming from non-Catholic backgrounds. At the same time, polls show support for school choice is higher than at any time in recent history, with a perhaps surprising diversity of families interested in “red” and “blue” states alike. And because the U.S. Supreme Court now has established strong precedent for parents’ right to choose the best education for their children, we believe that we’ve entered a moment of historic potential to restore the Catholic school system and again provide an excellent education to children, regardless of their parents’ income level.

We need to stop looking at American education as a system that needs protecting, and focus rather on children’s right to be well educated in whatever setting suits them best.

State-level education choice policies most often have at least one of four distinct funding and delivery mechanisms: vouchers, tax credit scholarships, personal tax credits and deductions, or education savings accounts. Each has merits and limitations, and their applicability can vary from state to state. But despite widespread support for school choice, only twenty-seven states enjoy some form of nonpublic school choice option for families at the beginning of 2021. Of the fifteen most populous states, seven have no choice programs at all, including California, New York, and Texas.

This means that the majority of Catholic (and non-Catholic) parents in America today have no option but to send their children to the local government school, and therefore have no real choice regarding their children’s education. While it is estimated that school choice programs currently help the parents of 500,000 students exercise their right to be the primary educators of their children, and enrollment in these programs has doubled since 2012, far more must be done. And considering recent trends toward politically radical indoctrination of public school students nationwide, the status quo is completely untenable.

We need to stop looking at American education as a system that needs protecting, and focus rather on children’s right to be well educated in whatever setting suits them best. Public education funding should be directed toward the education of the public, not toward preserving government schools to the detriment of society. As a matter of justice and consistent with the Church’s teaching on education, the rights of parents, and the government’s duties, every state should enact policies that offer all parents genuine freedom to direct their children’s education.



The Catholic Church, standing firmly upon its magisterial teaching and its proven history of excellence and equality of educational opportunity, can and should play a leading role in advocating for school choice.

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Shawn M. Peterson, *President*

Shawn Peterson is President for Catholic Education Partners, a national Catholic nonprofit whose mission is to serve the Catholic community by advancing policy that empowers families and children to enjoy the benefits of a Catholic education. Before joining the staff at Catholic Education Partners, Shawn served as Associate Director for Public Policy with the Minnesota Catholic Conference. Prior to that he spent two decades working on numerous legislative and policy issues, including parental choice in education.

Shawn is also a member of the Knights of Columbus, on the Advisory Board of Institute for the Transformation of Catholic Education (ITCE) at The Catholic University of America, and served two terms on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Federal Assistance Advisory Commission.

CONTACT

P.O. Box 2065 • Stillwater, MN 55082 • CatholicEd.us

The Catholic Education Partners Foundation (CEP)

is a 501(c)3 that serves the Catholic community by advancing policy that empowers families and children to enjoy the benefits of a Catholic education.