
The

CATHOLIC
VISION *of*
EDUCATION

*Leading Our Children to Christ
in a Challenging Era*



CATHOLIC
EDUCATION
PARTNERS

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Foreword

For several decades, America's Catholic schools were rightly called—even by some critics of the Church—the greatest success story in American education. Built upon a sacred and centuries-old foundation, parochial schools provided millions of Americans a quality education regardless of their background or ability to pay.

Over the last fifty years, however, this powerful and charitable educational system has for many reasons seen a precipitous decline, to the great detriment of many families and communities who have had nowhere else to turn but similarly diminishing public options. Today, especially in the wake of Covid-related trials that have only exacerbated the gap in educational quality, these families are among the greatest proponents of true freedom of choice in education. As is so often the case, an opportunity is arising from a time of extreme challenge, both for these families and for the Catholic Church.

Yet most Americans, and indeed many Catholics today, do not know what Catholic education is and what we need to do to ensure that this treasure is not lost in the coming years. With this booklet, Catholic Education Partners seeks not only to edify and inform American Catholics about the history, nature, and purpose of distinctly Catholic education. We argue that with emerging school choice opportunities being embraced and supported by a surprising array of communities nationwide, we have the potential to reignite the Catholic educational system in America. For the common good of our nation—especially those families who lack access to the best and most popular private schools—we simply must take advantage of this moment and momentum.

As the only national Catholic education choice organization, CEP's mission is to serve the American Catholic community by advancing policies that empower families to enjoy the benefits of a Catholic education. We do this through education, advocacy, and research that both furthers our cause and protects the religious integrity and autonomy of our nation's Catholic schools. After all, the vision is not simply to multiply schools with a "Catholic" label, but to encourage and foster the growth and establishment of schools that make Catholic education again truly authentic, accessible, and transformative.

I hope you find this work helpful, and I would be thrilled to collaborate with you in rebuilding the Catholic educational system in America.

Thank you especially for your prayers and support of our work.

Sincerely In Christ,

Shawn M. Peterson

President of Catholic Education Partners.

Introduction

Yellow school buses. An apple for teacher on the first day of school. Pep rallies, homecoming, and prom.

It is hard to think of something more quintessentially American than our collective experience of education. The images and sentiments associated with going to school readily come to mind and are woven into our cultural imagination and lexicon. And no wonder: the average school-aged child spends more than 1,000 hours, nearly 20% of their time awake, in school each year.¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that educational settings serve as the backdrop for many of our nation's most familiar stories, from *The Magic School Bus* to *Saved By the Bell*.

Catholic education in the U.S. also has its fair share of “stock” images, from school uniforms to students filing into their pews for an all-school Mass. Although they have not always been welcomed and accepted in broader society, Catholic schools have now reached and enjoy a status of widespread familiarity, and to some degree, acceptance, in American life. They, too, are part of the fabric.

But as with any enterprise that becomes familiar and accepted, there is the danger that our schools, including our Catholic schools, become stuck in the superficial, forgetful of the distinctive purpose for which

¹ National Center for Education Statistics, “Average number of hours in the school day and average number of days in the school year for public schools, by state: 2007-08.”



Although they have not always been welcomed and accepted in broader society, Catholic schools have now reached and enjoy a status of widespread familiarity, and to some degree, acceptance, in American life. St. John's Cathedral, Cleveland, Ohio, USA; Roman Catholic Diocese of Cleveland. (No edits, license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/legalcode>).

they exist. When this happens, it can be hard for schools to move forward, as we only have the outward practices and images to guide us, not the core and animating principles. It can be a bit like relying on an outdated map for a cross-country journey, trusting the markings of roads that no longer exist more than something more enduring, like the direction of the setting sun. This lack of reliable direction is especially concerning at a time when our schools, like our society at large, are facing a crisis of purpose and meaning.

To move forward, then, we need to return to the reasons why we educate in the first place. Not in order to turn back the clock, but to refamiliarize ourselves with the true purpose of education, so we can effectively carry out this timeless task amidst the contours and challenges of a changing American societal landscape.

I

The Catholic Vision of Education

EDUCATION IN LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL

It might help to begin this recovery by stepping beyond a narrow consideration of “Catholic education,” which too often consists of a “religious” version of the status quo found in our public school systems. If contemporary education suffers from a crisis of purpose and direction, then simply adding a “Catholic flavor” to this model is no solution. Beginning our conversation by talking about Catholic education risks boxing us in to the already existing terms and categories defining education today, without allowing us to critically examine them. Instead, we need to reflect on the Catholic vision of education: the truth of what education is and what it is for in light of the Gospel.

Let us begin with the word “educate” itself. It comes, in part, from the Latin word *educere*, which means “to lead out.” Perhaps no classical image evokes this sense of education more clearly than Plato’s allegory of the cave, which likens the educative process to a person being led out from the darkness and bondage of an underground prison to the light and freedom found on the surface above. Education is our students’ journey from ignorance to wisdom, from the illusory to the real. It involves leaving behind what is comfortable, enduring the difficulty of conforming ourselves to the truth, and being led to a better place.



Plato’s allegory of the cave likens the educative process to a person being led out from the darkness and bondage of an underground prison to the light and freedom found on the surface above. Plato’s Allegory of the Cave by Jan Saenredam.

But to where, exactly? Schools today certainly suggest that they will lead our young people *somewhere*. But do they have the right destination in mind?

On the one hand, some approaches promise to lead students to the end goal of financial and social security. Rather than anything transformative, the value of education is connected to how useful it is, with “useful” typically understood as whether it helps a student achieve their “long term plans.” This encourages a utilitarian approach to education, in which a student’s focus in the classroom is not on growing in wisdom or knowledge, but on doing what it takes to get a good grade. In fact, some schools indicate this utilitarian approach in their names: “college preparatory.” This model suggests that the education a student receives in elementary, middle, and high school is simply directed toward the goal of getting into college. In turn, a college education is simply directed toward the goal of breaking into a good-paying and well-respected career field. Education has no higher aim than helping the individual student achieve a desired degree of comfort, security, and status through employment and social standing.



In 2021, it seems as though we are less concerned that our young people are well-versed in and celebrate America’s founding principles than we are that they can identify and address the perceived failures of our country. Charles Carroll, the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Other approaches promise to lead our students to a place of “good citizenship.” On this model, schools focus on forming students to contribute to civil society, grounding their education in learning about America’s founding principles, democratic processes, and civic values, and inculcating a sense of pride and responsibility in the hearts of pupils. Related to this approach is a form, growing in popularity today, that focuses on equipping students to recognize social injustices and influence the necessary institutions and places of power. Although it can seem like this model is the polar opposite of the more traditional American approach

of educating students to be “good citizens,” it is actually its successor. What has changed is our society’s definition of a “good citizen”: We are less concerned that our young people are well-versed in and celebrate America’s founding principles than we are that they can identify and address the perceived failures of our country. Whether or not we agree with this shift in understanding, the destination this approach proposes is the same: education should lead us to become engaged citizens in our community. Unlike the “college preparatory” model, this approach to education *does* aim at the transformation of students’ hearts and minds, and sees education ordered to something more than just individual material success.

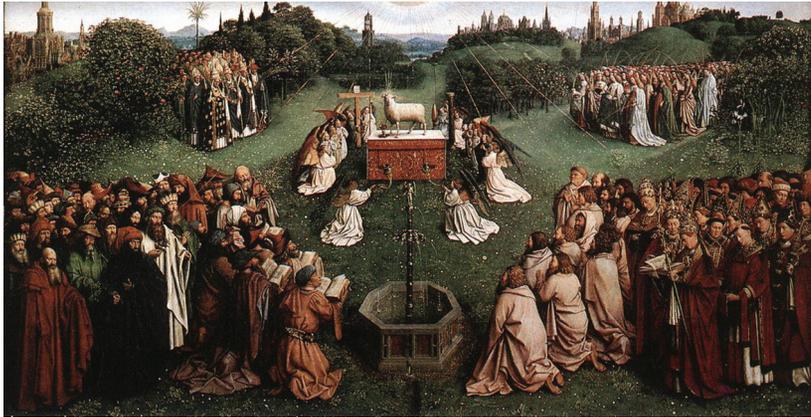
But do either of these visions offer a satisfying destination? Are they capable of leading our young people to where they truly and ultimately belong?

If our children were simply destined for a life of comfort, and if material security and prestige were the deepest longings of the human heart, then the utilitarian, “college prep” approach would be enough. Similarly, if the greatest form of belonging we could hope for was citizenship of an earthly city, and if unaided human efforts were enough to establish perfect justice, then education as a training in civic action would suffice.

However, while a good career and good citizenship are both worthy things—and a good education is in no way opposed to either—these goals alone can never be enough. They are simply not proportionate to the greatest desires of the human heart. And any approach to education that aims to lead its students only to these ends will never suffice. It will inevitably come up short.

THE PERSON’S TRUE DESTINATION

Why are these approaches insufficient? Because they fail to consider who the human person is and what each of us is made for. In short, we are made for relationship with God, the source of all things, a purpose beyond that which any of us could conceive or achieve on our own. As Pope Benedict XVI told German pilgrims (and us) upon his inauguration as the successor of Peter, “Christ did not promise an easy life. Those who



The Ghent Altarpiece, *Adoration of the Lamb* by Jan van Eyck.

desire comforts have dialed the wrong number. Rather, he shows us the way to great things, the good, toward an authentic human life.”²

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains this more fully: “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for” (27). Humanity’s relationship with God is the end for which we were created, the reason God entered time and space in the person of Jesus, and the purpose for which the Spirit works in the Church and the world today.

Because relationship with the Triune God, both now on earth and forever in heaven, is our ultimate end, any authentic education must be directed toward this reality. Education must lead us out of isolation, self-centeredness, and apathy, and towards virtue, wisdom, and loving union with God. Only when we adopt the most limited and stunted understandings of education can we consider it solely in terms of book-learning, civic training, or career prep. Instead, we must recall the words of Christ: “Let the children come to Me.”³ Education is the means by which we help our children come to Jesus.

² Pope Benedict XVI, “Address to the German Pilgrims Who Had Come to Rome for the Inauguration Ceremony of the Pontificate,” (2005).

³ Matthew 19:14. All biblical quotes from New American Bible Revised Edition.

This has been a consistent theme in the Church’s articulation of the Catholic vision of education. In *Divini illius magistri*, for instance, Pope Pius XI teaches that “the whole work of education is intimately and necessarily connected” with the “pursuit of the last end”—eternal union with God. In fact, he even goes so far as to say that because Christ alone has been revealed as “the way, the truth, and the life,” there can be no ideally perfect education which is not Christian education” (n. 7). An education that neglects to teach its students divine truths and fails to aid them in living a Christian life is like a car without an engine. While it might contain some good elements, it is insufficient, and incapable of getting its passengers to where they ultimately need to go.

Applying Christ’s words in Mark 8:36 to the issue of education, we might say, *What profit is there for one to gain admission to Harvard if he never knows Jesus?* While getting into an elite school may be a laudable goal, it is not the ultimate one. In fact, if it takes too much of our focus, it can undermine an authentic education by distorting our priorities. Speaking of Christ taking on our human nature in the Incarnation, St. Gregory of Nazianzus said, “That which is not assumed cannot be redeemed.” In other words, that which is not taken up into God cannot help us reach God. We can say something similar about education: the totality of a young person’s educational experiences must necessarily be focused on leading her to Christ, or it may lead her astray.



Pope Paul VI promulgated the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Christian Education. Photo of Pope Paul VI.

EDUCATING THE WHOLE PERSON

In *Gravissimum Educationis*, Pope Paul VI and the Church Fathers of the Second Vatican Council reemphasize the lofty goal of the educative process, stating that “a true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end.”⁴ But they also link this pursuit with “the good of the societies to which” the student belongs and has responsibilities. Canon law, the law that governs the life of the Church, says something similar:

⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965), 1.

“True education must strive for complete formation of the person that looks to his or her final end as well as to the common good of societies.”⁵

An important point is being made in these selections. Contrary to some mistaken assumptions, rooting the purpose of education in the ultimate goal of leading souls to God does not come at the expense of equipping our students to be good citizens, competent professionals, and responsible family members here below. As Christ says in Scripture, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these [earthly] things will be given you besides” (Matt. 6:43). This is not an instance of the erroneous “prosperity gospel”; Jesus is not promising his followers that, by prioritizing God, they will win the lottery, marry their dream girl, or live a successful and comfortable life. But He does make clear that pursuing a relationship with God will allow us to live more fully and more humanly.

Why? Because if relationship with God is what we are made for, an education that leads us to know and love God more fully will inevitably lead us to use the good things that He has entrusted to us during our earthly lives with more responsibility and fruitfulness. If we are educated to love God, we cannot help but be educated to love others, ourselves, and the world He has created.

Another way of considering this is to unpack what many Catholic schools mean when they say that their number one goal is to “lead students to heaven.” Heaven, of course, is the state of being in perfect union with the Blessed Trinity, which those who leave this earthly life as friends of God will experience. But the path to heaven is not one that is *unrelated* to heaven, just like the path that leads a couple to marriage is not unrelated to married life—it includes things like affection, acts of service, and intentionality. In both cases, the path is marked by many of the same qualities that will be experienced more fully in the stage to come. So, while heaven is defined by qualities like union with God, active love, and communal belonging, a form of these qualities is experienced by the one who is already living in cooperation with the salvation of Christ today. Thus, leading students to heaven entails not only reaching their ultimate end, but equipping them to receive the love of God more fully *today* and

⁵ Code of Canon Law, 795.



The integrative fruitfulness of the Catholic vision of education is evident in the number of Catholics who have made incredible contributions to the arts and sciences.- *Disputation of the Holy Sacrament* by Raphael.

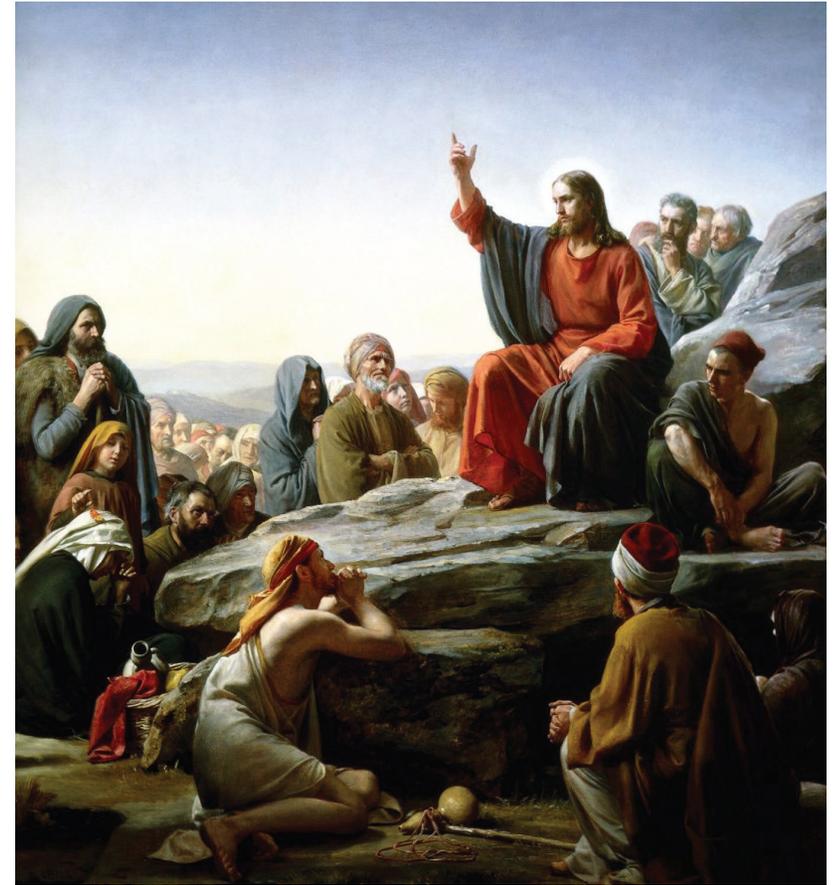
putting it into practice in their families, friendships, and communities. The quality that set the early Christians apart from their contemporaries was their love, and those who receive a Catholic education should similarly be recognizable by the way this love animates their work, service, and relationships.

Therefore, an authentic education is inherently a *holistic* one. It seeks to perfect *all* aspects of the person—his spiritual capacities, to be certain, but also his physical, moral, psychological, and intellectual dimensions. As evidence of this, we can look to periods of history when the Catholic vision of education flourished. It is not an accident that these were times of not only great spiritual and theological richness, but also cultural and scientific ingenuity and excellence. The integrative fruitfulness of the Catholic vision of education is also evident in the number of Catholics who have made incredible contributions to the arts and sciences—some even Catholic priests, like Gregor Mendel, the father of modern genetics, or Georges Lemaitre, the first to postulate the “Big Bang” as an explanation of the physical origins of the cosmos. For these men, loving God and making meaningful contributions to human knowledge and society were not in conflict. The same is true for an authentically Catholic vision of education.

Sr. John Mary Fleming, a Dominican sister and board secretary for Catholic Education Partners, articulates the personalistic, holistic heart of Catholic education: “Integration is the aspect of developing [students]’ faith life and helping children understand and keep their eye on the final goal—which is Heaven—and integration in their human flourishing, in their development as human persons.”

In “The Catholic School”, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education taught that the place of education must be a “center of human formation,” which “must begin from the principles that is educational programme is intentionally directed to the growth of the whole person.”⁶ Any school that fails to incorporate this holistic vision “hinders the personal development of its pupils.” The same congregation taught in “The Catholic School” on the Threshold of the Third Millennium that the “solid Christian formation” Catholic schools are to provide is simply an aspect of “the development of the whole man.”⁷

The Catholic vision of education leaves nothing out. It prepares our students to be good citizens, because it is rooted in our God-given duty to love and serve our neighbors. It encourages academic excellence and professional development because it recognizes that our abilities are gifts from God to be cultivated and shared. It fosters physical and psychological wellbeing, because it is grounded in the truth that Christ affirms the goodness of not only our souls, but our bodies and minds as well. And it helps students develop in virtue and moral practice, because it takes seriously the call to holiness.



As Catholics, we are called to love and serve our neighbors. *Sermon on the Mount* by Carl Bloch.

⁶ Sacred Congregation of Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (1977), 29.

⁷ Congregation of Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (1997), 8.

II

Educating Everyone: *Catholic Schools, the Rights of Parents, and the Duties of the State*

AN EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE

Clearly, the Catholic faith has a lofty vision of education. But for whom is this kind of integral, holistic education intended? Is it only for those who come from pious or upright families? Or is it for those students whose parents can afford to pay for schooling not provided for by the state?

On this, the Church is quite clear: “All men of every race, condition and age, since they have the dignity of a human being, have an inalienable right to an education that is in keeping with their ultimate goal.”⁸ Pope Benedict XVI rearticulated this expansive conviction in a 2008 address to U.S. Catholic educators: “No child should be denied his or her right to an education in faith, which in turn nurtures the soul of a nation.”⁹

The Church emphasizes that the right to education in its fullest, most authentic form—consistent with the Catholic vision of education—is a *universal* right, a right belonging to all children. This is worth repeating: The Catholic Church believes that the robust approach to education that it champions is not only for those who are already Catholic or can afford to attend Catholic schools, *but is an inalienable right of all men and women on the basis of their humanity*. Based on what we have already seen about the connection between education and the ultimate end of each and every person—union with God—this should not surprise us. Because *all* children are made for union with God, *all* children have the right to an education that will lead them toward this ultimate purpose.

⁸ *Gravissimum Educationis*, 1.

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, “Meeting with Catholic Educators” (2008 Apostolic Visit to the United States).

Furthermore, given that rights only exist where there are corresponding responsibilities, we can be even more emphatic: all children *ought* to receive an education that leads them to integral, holistic human development and into relationship with God, their ultimate end. In fact, claiming anything else would be a denial of the truth that God “desires that all men be saved”¹⁰ and a betrayal of Christ’s instruction to His Church to “make disciples of all nations.”¹¹ The Catholic vision of education is for everyone, precisely because the salvation offered by Christ is for all people.

THE GIFT OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

This conviction about education is noble and inspiring, but it may seem jarring, even foolhardy, for those of us who live in a cultural context seemingly not conducive to its achievement. The secular pluralism that marks most Western societies today, in which the public square and public institutions are intentionally deprived of any reference to the divine and humanity’s ultimate end, makes providing all children with an education that leads to God and to integral development exceptionally challenging.

Responsive to this reality, the Church has encouraged creative efforts to supplement the inadequate education on offer from secular institutions. For instance, for students who attend public schools where religious instruction is not allowed or where a plurality of religious traditions are presented, the Church calls for additional forms of education and religious instruction.

In his apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, St. John Paul II spoke about the need for the Church and public authorities to coordinate in order to help Catholic pupils attending government schools “advance in their spiritual formation.”¹² Relatedly, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council stated that the Church “esteems highly those civil authorities and societies which, bearing in mind the pluralism of contemporary society and respecting religious freedom, assist families so that the

education of their children can be imparted in all schools according to the individual moral and religious principles of the families.”¹³

Clearly, the Church is not hesitant to engage with conditions as they are, seeking the good of all in a non-burdensome way, amid circumstances that are often less than ideal.

At the same time, however, the Church also recognizes the limitations and imperfections of piecemeal approaches to a comprehensive education that attempt to combine secular education with religious catechesis in a necessarily non-integrated fashion. In fact, Church leaders have even warned about the potential pitfalls of depending upon public schools constrained by secularism to provide the brunt of a child’s education. As Pope Leo XIII said in *Spectata Fides* (1885), his encyclical on Christian education:

“It is by these schools that the Catholic faith, our greatest and best inheritance, is preserved whole and entire.”



Pope Leo XIII by Philip de Laszlo.

“The wisdom of our forefathers, and the very foundations of the State, are ruined by the destructive error of those who would have children brought up without religious education. You see, therefore Venerable Brethren, with what earnest forethought parents must beware of entrusting their children to schools in which they cannot receive religious teaching.”¹⁴

On the flipside of the Church’s wariness about secular education is its strong preference for an alternative aid to educating our children: the Catholic school. We might forget it, but the existence of distinctively Catholic schools is a response to the rise of secularism and pluralism; in previous centuries, when the primacy of the Catholic faith was recognized by temporal authorities, there would have been no need for distinctively Catholic schools, because any education provided by the state would have been imbued with the Catholic worldview.

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 2:4.

¹¹ Matthew 28:19.

¹² Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* (1979), 69.

¹³ *Gravissimum Educationis*, 7.

¹⁴ *Spectata Fides* (1885), 4.

The development of Catholic schools in Europe and the Americas, for instance, was encouraged by the Church. As Pope Leo XIII said: “It is by these schools that the Catholic faith, our greatest and best inheritance, is preserved whole and entire.”¹⁵ The right of the Church to freely establish such educational institutions in secular or non-Catholic contexts has also been consistently affirmed. *Gravissimum Educationis* maintains that the Catholic school “retains even in our present circumstances the utmost importance” because of its unique capacity to offer a comprehensive education in the context of a pluralistic, secular culture.¹⁶ Therefore, the Council Fathers go on to remind Catholic parents “of the duty of entrusting their children to Catholic schools wherever and whenever it is possible and of supporting these schools to the best of their ability and of cooperating with them for the education of their children.”¹⁷

Thus, while it is possible for the student attending a non-Catholic school to receive elements of a Catholic education in other ways, the Church always reiterates its strong preference that students attend Catholic schools—not for sectarian reasons, but because such a holistic and heaven-oriented educational approach is best suited to meet the requirements of education to which every person is rightfully entitled, which in turn leads to full flourishing.

FIVE MARKS OF A CATHOLIC SCHOOL

We must acknowledge, however, that simply having the label “Catholic” is no guarantee that a school is providing an education consistent with the Church’s vision. Some Catholic schools in contemporary society are influenced by the same partial, inadequate approaches to education found in the culture at large. Whether they emphasize academic excellence and earthly success outside the framework of the human person’s ultimate purpose, or promote a brand of social activism not rooted deeply in the Gospel, these schools fall short of fulfilling the incredible mission for which they exist.

¹⁵ *Spectata Fides* (1885), 4.

¹⁶ *Gravissimum Educationis*, 8.

¹⁷ *Gravissimum Educationis*, 9.

What does a Catholic school worthy of the name look like? In his 2006 book *The Holy See’s Teaching on Catholic Schools*, Archbishop J. Michael Miller, former Secretary of the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, synthesizes recent Magisterial documents on education and articulates five essential “marks” of Catholic schools.

1. **Inspired by a Supernatural Vision.**

Catholic schools should foster the growth of students “who love God and neighbor, and thus fulfill their destiny of becoming saints.” The specific purpose of a Catholic education “is the formation of boys and girls who will be good citizens of this world, enriching society with the leaven of the Gospel, but who will also be citizens of the world to come.” Without this supernatural orientation, a Catholic school will fail to provide its students with a complete education, no matter how exceptional its academics or commitment to civic engagement.



A holistic and heaven-oriented educational approach is best suited to meet the requirements of education to which every person is rightfully entitled, which in turn leads to full flourishing. *Mary, Queen of Heaven* by Master of the Legend of Saint Lucy.

2. **Founded on a Christian Anthropology.** In order to perfect children “in all their dimensions as images of God,” those involved in the educational enterprise must be grounded in and guided by a correct vision of the human person. As the Church has continuously taught, Christ, as the perfect man, is both the model and means of achieving human flourishing. “Christ is not an after-thought or an add-on to Catholic educational philosophy but the center and fulcrum of the entire enterprise, the light enlightening every pupil who comes into our schools.” The gospel of Christ should inspire and guide every dimension of a Catholic school: “its philosophy of education, its curriculum, its community life, its selection of teachers, and its physical environment.”

3. Animated by Communion and Community. A Catholic school is not a collection of individuals, but rather “a genuine community of faith.” In fact, the Church has taught that the community of a Catholic school should resemble the “intimate atmosphere of family life.” Furthermore, to provide a truly formative experience to their students, teachers should not merely focus on discipline and instruction, but must be intent on developing personal relationships with every boy and girl under their charge. And because both the mind and the senses require formation, Catholic schools “should try to suffuse their environment with this delight in the sacramental” through “images, signs, symbols, icons, and other objects of traditional devotion.”



The Church firmly teaches that we have the capacity to come to knowledge of the truth. *Saint Thomas Aquinas* by Carlo Crivelli.

4. Imbued with a Catholic Worldview. The Catholic vision “should permeate not just the class period of catechism or religious education, or the school’s pastoral activities, but the entire curriculum.” While the Church might not teach on the value of different pedagogies or dictate the order of teaching the various subjects, the Holy See does provide principles to guide the content of curriculum toward the end of providing students with an integral education. Archbishop Miller considers two:

Search for Wisdom and Truth. The Church firmly teaches that we have the capacity to come to knowledge of the truth. “Unlike skeptics and relativists, Catholic teachers share a specific conviction about truth, that they can pursue, and, to a limited but real extent, attain and communicate it to others.” Convictions about truth must “be at home in authentically Catholic schools,” and students must be given the formation needed to maintain fidelity to the truth in a culture that increasingly denies its existence or knowability.

Faith, Culture and Life. Catholic schools must “prepare students to relate the Catholic faith to their particular culture and to live that faith in practice.” Integration in a Catholic school is not only about uniting the various academic disciplines in a Catholic vision; it is about connecting the education received to the rest of a student’s life. The synthesis of culture and faith is a significant element of the Catholic school’s project, as is the intentional development of personal virtue.

5. Sustained by the Witness of Teaching. Teachers have the “primary responsibility for creating a unique Christian school climate.” They must serve not only as instructors in the faith, but as witnesses to its truth, goodness, and beauty. Therefore, Catholic schools achieve their particular mission best when their teachers are faithful, practicing Catholics. “If teachers fail to model fidelity to the truth and virtuous behavior, then even the best of curricula cannot successfully embody a Catholic school’s distinctive ethos.” On the other hand, if boys and girls do experience the splendor of the Church and the love of God through their Catholic education, the example of their teachers likely will have played a crucial role.

As Pope Francis noted in a February 2020 address to the Congregation for Catholic Education, given that Catholic schools often serve those from other religious traditions, they “offer everyone an education aimed at the integral development of the person that responds to the right of all people to have access to knowledge and understanding.” However, the openness of Catholic schools to all peoples can never be an excuse for neglecting the rest of their mission. As Francis notes, Catholic schools are “equally called to offer to all the Christian message—respecting fully the freedom of all and the proper methods of each specific scholastic environment—namely that Jesus Christ is the meaning of life, of the cosmos and of history.”

Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI told American Catholic educators during his apostolic visit in 2008 that the primary mission of the Catholic school is to allow students “to encounter the living God, who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Catholic Educators (2008).

Given this essential and nonnegotiable duty, we can say that the Catholic school plays a central role in the Church’s mission to evangelize the world. This is especially true when we remember that evangelization is not only a matter of bringing the Catholic message to geographical locations where it has never before been heard, but also to new generations that have yet to accept it. Recent popes, for instance, have likened the youth of every era to a newly discovered continent, in need of receiving the Gospel in a way that is responsive to their cultural context and lived experience. And this is why Catholic schools will always have a mission “from the heart of the Church,” as John Paul II said in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.¹⁹ As the Congregation for Catholic Education has taught, “It is precisely in the Gospel of Christ, taking root in the minds and lives of the faithful, that the Catholic school finds its definition as it comes to terms with the cultural conditions of the times...The absence of the Catholic school would be a great loss for civilization and for the natural and supernatural destiny of man.”²⁰

PARENTAL RIGHTS AND THE DUTY OF THE STATE

Every child has a right to be educated in a way that leads them to holistic human flourishing, which, by definition, includes relationship with God. Catholic schools offer a preferential model for receiving this education. But how should this kind of education be provided? Who is ultimately responsible for ensuring every child has access to it?



The educative dimension lies at the very heart of family life. Painting by Franz von Defregger.

In fact, a child’s right to receive such an education is so fundamental, so important to his or her well-being, that the Church recognizes that the primary responsibility for fulfilling it must belong to those closest to the child in terms of both origin and affection: his or her family.

Indeed, the educative dimension lies at the very heart of family life. As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church* reminds us, marriage is itself ordered towards the procreation and education of children. St. John Paul II says in his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* that the right and duty of parents to educate their children is “essential, since it is connected with the transmission of human life; it is original and primary with regard to the educational role of others, on account of the uniqueness of the loving relationship between parents and children; and it is *irreplaceable* and *inalienable*, and therefore incapable of being entirely delegated to others or usurped by others [emphasis added].”²¹ He adds that the parents’ love is both the source and also the animating principle and norm “inspiring and guiding all concrete educational activity.”

In other words, 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 supersede them in this responsibility. In fact, as the *Compendium* states, “parents have the rights to choose the formative tools that respond to their convictions and to seek those means that will help them best to fulfill their duty as educators, in the spiritual and religious sphere also.”²² Parents have the duty and a right to impart a religious education and moral formation to their children—a right the State cannot annul, but which it must respect and promote.



Education according to the vision of the Church is an endeavor in which parents must play the primary role. *La Sagrada Familia del pajarito* by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo.

Because many are so used to education being provided by the state, this ecclesial emphasis on the family may seem out of place. But if we see education according to the vision of the Church, as not just a preparation for the workforce or citizenship but as a process of leading someone towards their ultimate purpose, we realize that it is an endeavor in

¹⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1.

²⁰ Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (1977), 15.

²¹ *Familiaris Consortio*, 36.

²² *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, 243-248.

which parents must play the primary role. Parents, at a fundamentally more profound and intimate level than the state, have been given the responsibility of providing for the well-being of their children. They name their children, feed them, dress them, read stories to them, take them to the park, help them pick extracurricular activities, determine what television shows or movies they can and cannot watch, and help shape their friendships and relationships. And at an even more fundamental level, parents love their children unconditionally, shaping their identity and their sense of self in an irreplaceable way.

We all recognize these as fundamental rights of the parents, whom God in His Providence explicitly chooses for each child as the fruit of their love. We would be appropriately aghast if the government tried to intervene and, for instance, name children or set itself up as a primary source of their existence and identity. If we do not see that education without the direct control and determination of parents is required, it may be an indication that we do not value education or parenthood enough. The Church holds both in extraordinary esteem, and thus recognizes the inherent link between them.

Parents are the primary educators of their kids, but they need not educate them alone. Parents *collaborate* with academic and ecclesial entities to provide for the comprehensive education—they must not abdicate their duty or completely offload it to another. Because they have the duty to educate their children in accord with their religious convictions, they also have the right to access educational opportunities consistent with these beliefs where they exist—they must enjoy “true liberty in their choice of schools,” in the words of *Gravissimum Educationis*.²³

Correspondingly, public authorities have the duty to guarantee this right and to ensure the concrete conditions necessary for it to be exercised. It is not enough, as *Gravissimum Educationis* teaches, for the state to merely refrain from exercising an educational monopoly, which “is opposed to the native rights of the human person.”²⁴ The state must promote conditions, so “that parents are truly free to choose according to their

²³ *Gravissimum Educationis*, 6.

²⁴ *Gravissimum Educationis*, 6.

conscience the schools they want for their children,” including, but not limited to, providing public subsidies to parents to assist toward this end. In fact, the “State cannot without injustice merely tolerate so-called private schools,” says the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in *Libertatis Conscientia*. On the contrary, because these schools render a public service and contribute to the common good, they “have a right to financial assistance.”²⁵

Again, this teaching may seem jarring to American ears, but it flows logically from the Church’s more fundamental understanding of the human person and the role of society. As the Second Vatican Council taught, “the social order and its development must invariably work to the benefit of the human person, since the order of things is to be subordinate to the order of persons and not the other way around.”²⁶ Since all people are made for relationship with God, and education is an intrinsic dimension of leading them toward God, the state and society must be oriented toward providing students and their parents with the possibility of pursuing this fuller and more authentic form of education. A family’s limited economic means, for instance, might provide a practical challenge to providing their students with an education that conforms to their religious and moral convictions, but their right to access this kind of education still remains, and the state should help them overcome these difficulties as a matter of justice.



The primary purpose of Catholic education is to lead children to Christ.
Let the Little Children Come to Me by Fritz von Uhde.

²⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Libertatis Conscientia* (1986), 94.

²⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, 26.

III

A Vision in Action: *The History of Catholic Education in the United States*

“THE BEST SUCCESS STORY IN AMERICAN EDUCATION”

Because it is rooted in the unchanging truth of who the human person is, the Catholic vision of education has been true everywhere, at all times. Created for union with God and endowed with gifts with which to serve their communities in love, every person has a right to receive a holistic and integral education, a process that begins within and is always done in coordination with the family. The state and society, similarly, have the duty to aid parents in this task, as a matter consistent with justice and the principle of subsidiarity.

The Church has sought to put these universal truths into action in different times and places, necessitating different practical approaches and forms. This has certainly been the case in the United States, a nation with a unique colonial and immigrant history, and also a decidedly non-Catholic, Protestant character. Catholic education, by necessity, has looked different here than in Catholic cultures as one finds in Ireland or Poland. But in the unique and challenging context of the United States of America, Catholic schooling has at times truly flourished and thrived, animated by the creativity and conviction of its proponents and practitioners.

Catholic school educators and advocates strive to build upon this incredible legacy today. As Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, the Board Chairman of Catholic Education Partners, noted, “We answer Jesus’ call to cast our nets into the deep by offering all children the opportunity to experience the best success story in American education.”

EDUCATING AGAINST OPPOSITION

That story began as early as the Catholic faith arrived on the shores of North America, with Catholic clergy and religious providing instruction in the faith and letters to both native inhabitants and the children of newly-arrived immigrants. In fact, the first school within what today is the U.S. was a Catholic school established by Spanish Franciscans in Florida in 1606. The pattern of opening schools in colonial settlements continued throughout the next two centuries, with Catholics establishing educational institutions in places like New Orleans, Maryland, and towns along the St. Lawrence River.

However, the expansive network of parochial schools that came to characterize Catholic education in America and with which we are familiar today began to emerge in the early 1800s, within decades of the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. In many ways, the Catholic school system began in the United States in reaction to an attempt to compel Catholic students to attend government-funded public schools where the students' Catholic faith and identity would be challenged.

The movement for universal education was gaining ground, and, unlike our understanding of “public education” today, the public schools of that time were not devoid of religious instruction. In fact, the King James Bible—a translation which is not accepted by the Catholic Church and contains underlying Protestant assumptions—was to serve as the foundation of the public school system as envisioned by Horace Mann, the “father” of the American public school system. In other words, the state was trying to ensure that Catholic students would receive a Protestant education. There was widespread sentiment that Catholic children at the time, many of them included among the five million Catholic immigrants to the U.S. during the nineteenth century, would need to attend these public schools in order to be properly assimilated into American culture.

Recognizing the threat posed by this form of compulsory public education, the First Provincial Council of Baltimore in 1829 asserted: “We judge it absolutely necessary that schools be established in which the [Catholic] young may be taught the principles of faith and morality,

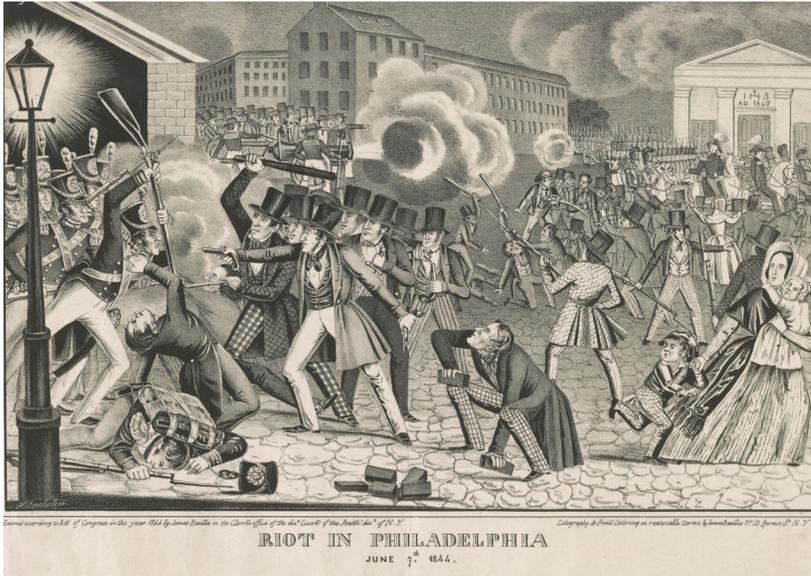
while being instructed in letters.”²⁷ Leaders like John Carroll, the first Roman Catholic bishop in the United States, recognized the importance of establishing Catholic schools as a means of providing the influx of Catholic immigrants with both practical training and skills and also an articulate, firmly-rooted understanding of the faith they professed—both invaluable assets in a largely Protestant environment.

While the establishment of Catholic schools was permitted, a significant outstanding question at the time was whether they could receive public funding. Schools where students received a general Protestant education were publicly funded, after all, so why could not Catholic schools also receive this vital support? This question came to a head in New York City in the 1840s. At the time, the city's schools received financial support from the Public School Society, which would not offer support to Catholic schools on the grounds that they offered a “sectarian,” as opposed to a “common” (Protestant), religious education, often with subtle and not so subtle attacks on Catholic beliefs and practices. New York's Catholic schools had developed to serve 5,000 children in 1840, but 12,000 more Catholic children were either not attending school or were enrolled in the “common” schools, where their faith was often insulted, if it was even taught.²⁸

New York's Bishop “Dagger” John Hughes pointed out the injustice of this situation, and in 1840 called for Catholics to receive a portion of the state funds for schooling. His petition was rejected the next year, largely on the basis of anti-Catholic rhetoric that equated Catholicism with sectarianism superstition, and called it a threat to the unity and harmony of American culture. Attempts to excuse Catholic students from receiving the King James-based education were violently resisted, and Bishop Hughes's residence was attacked. In Philadelphia, however, things were even more explosive, as nativist groups responded with bloodshed and destruction to efforts to allow Catholic students to study out of their own translation of the Bible. Riots forced Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick to flee the city in 1844, as thirteen people were killed and five Catholic churches were burned to the ground.²⁹

²⁷ Father Peter J. Stravinskias, *Education, Catholic: Elementary and Secondary in U.S.*

²⁸ <https://www.catholicleague.org/anti-catholicism-and-the-history-of-catholic-school-funding/>
²⁹ For more see “Nativist Riots of 1844” by Zachary M. Schrag, *The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*. Accessed on July 29, 2021 at <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/nativ->



In the mid-1800s, there was a fixation on denying any government role in support of Catholic schools. Riot in Philadelphia, June [i.e. July] 7th 1844 / H. Bucholzer.

The same fixation on denying any governmental role in and support of Catholic schools carried on in the following decades. For instance, in 1854 an amendment was added to the Massachusetts state constitution that barred any part of the common school fund from being “appropriated to any religious sect for the maintenance exclusively of its own school.”³⁰ Lawmakers also passed legislation that required students to read the King James Bible every day, another not-so-subtle attempt to use the public school system to dilute Catholic beliefs and identity. Massachusetts also passed “nunnery inspection” laws that gave the state broad and invasive power to intervene in the educational operations of Catholic schools.

In the years after the Civil War, various state-level efforts to suppress and deny support to Catholic schools became formalized at the national level. In 1874, Senator James G. Blaine of Maine proposed an amendment that read, in part, “No money raised by taxation in any State for the support of public schools, or derived from any public

source, nor any public lands devoted thereto, shall ever be under the control of any religious sect, nor shall any money so raised or land so devoted be divided between the religious sects or denominations.” The so-called Blaine Amendment was defeated at the federal level in 1875, but it was a pyrrhic victory for advocates of Catholic education. Most states adopted the language of the amendment into their state constitutions over the following three decades. More than thirty states maintain this stance today, forbidding any public aid to Catholic schools.

It is true that, today, these laws are read to also apply to any form of explicitly religious education, but it is important to remember that these laws came about at a time when “religious sect” meant Catholic, and Protestantism was generally considered “public” or “common.” The fact that there is a widespread conviction today that the state has no role whatsoever in supporting the religious education of students can hardly be seen as a positive development, even if it means Protestantism is not unduly advantaged. What the government should have pursued was a more expansive vision of support for parents and the religious and moral formation of their children, not the type of spiritual sterility we have adopted today. In fact, most developed countries around the world provide some form of public funding for religious education, making the United States a disappointing outlier.³¹

THE CATHOLIC PAROCHIAL SCHOOL SYSTEM

The resistance to Catholic education experienced in the 1800s shaped the Catholic school system profoundly, with at least two demonstrable effects: because Catholics could not expect any allowance of Catholic education within public schools, they would need to build a parallel system. And because Catholics could not access the same resources available to “common schools,” they would need to support their schools through alternative sources.

Regarding the former, Catholic schools began to organize into more tightly united networks, usually governed and coordinated by

³¹ National Center for Education Statistics, “Indicator 45: Source of Funds for Education.” Accessed on July 29, 2021 at <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/eiip/eiip45s1.asp>.

³⁰ [ist-riots-of-1844/](#).

³⁰ Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, *Bloom vs. School Committee of Springfield*, footnote 9.

centralized diocesan leadership. In Philadelphia, for instance, St. John Henry Neumann, the city's fourth bishop, established a diocesan board of education with clerical and lay representatives from every parish, an approach that allowed parochial schools in the City of Brotherly Love to flourish, and also provided an inspiring model for other dioceses.³² Eventually, the Catholic Educational Association (later adding the word "National" to its title) was established in 1904, to coordinate Catholic school efforts across the country. The number of parochial schools grew from 3,500 in 1900 to 6,551 in 1920, with 1.8 million pupils being educated by 42,000 teachers. Secondary education likewise experienced a boom, as the number of Catholic high schools exponentially expanded from 100 to 1,500 in the same time period.³³

A major driving factor in this expansion was the widespread commitment of the Church hierarchy to Catholic education. Pope Pius IX, who was pope from 1846 to 1878, declared that "every effort must be made to increase the number and quality of parochial schools."³⁴ The Third Plenary Council of Baltimore of 1884 took this message to heart. The assembled bishops decreed that, wherever possible, there was to be a parochial school near every Catholic church to serve the children of the parish; in fact, pastors who resisted this charge were to be removed. It was even common during this era for a new parish to build a school before a church building—Mass would be celebrated in the gymnasium until funding could be secured to construct a dedicated sanctuary and nave. The sentiment of John Lancaster Spalding, Bishop of Peoria from 1877 to 1908, captures why the expansion of the parochial system was such a priority: "Without parish schools, there is no hope that the Church will be able to maintain itself in America."³⁵ Canon law also came to emphasize the parents' duties to provide their children with a Catholic education, as the 1917 code actually forbade Catholic children from attending "non-Catholic, neutral, or mixed schools."³⁶

The explosion of the parochial Catholic school system was also only possible due to a unique source of teachers: religious orders, and more



The cultural circumstances today are far different than they were at the inception of Catholic education in the United States. A group of religious sisters.

often than not, religious sisters. The historian Timothy Walch argues that "sister-teachers were the single most important element in the Catholic educational establishment." These women, who dedicated their lives to Christ and service within his Church, had always played an important role in U.S. Catholic education, from St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and the schools she and her order founded, to the Sisters of the Holy Family, who educated enslaved children and other Black students who otherwise were not allowed to be taught. But in the late 1800s and early 1900s, their significance reached new heights, with more than 50,000 religious sisters from 170 different orders staffing parish schools. The relative affordability of religious sisters as teachers, coupled with the financial support of parishes and benefactors, made Catholic education widely available, especially to the poor and the immigrant, who benefited immensely from the holistic education on offer. The early 1900s also saw increased dedication to teacher training programs. Several teaching orders, groups of religious sisters (and brothers) dedicated to staffing Catholic schools and educating Catholic children, also were established or continued to thrive during this era.

With a system in place and a source of dedicated personnel, Catholic education grew steadily over the following decades; between 1920

32 Fr. Peter J. Stravinskias, *Education, Catholic: Elementary and Secondary in U.S.*

33 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Catholic_education_in_the_United_States

34 Pius IX

35 Father Peter J. Stravinskias, *Education, Catholic: Elementary and Secondary in U.S.*

36 1917 Code of Canon Law

and 1965 alone, 5,189 new elementary and secondary schools were established.³⁷ The growth of the Catholic school system paralleled the steady expansion of the Catholic presence in the United States. By 1965, nearly 150,000 teachers in 13,292 Catholic schools were serving an all-time high of over 5.5 million students. In other words, more than twelve percent of all children in the United States were being educated at Catholic schools.

NEW CHALLENGES AND REAFFIRMATION

The Catholic school system has always faced difficult circumstances in the United States. In fact, its growth was in large part a response to the restrictions and barriers placed in front of Catholic education.

But Catholic education in the U.S. faced unprecedented challenges soon after 1965, the year the Second Vatican Council closed. Secularizing tendencies along with misinterpretations of the Council's teaching combined to rock American Catholic culture, with schools in particular experiencing significant challenges. Tens of thousands of religious sisters left their orders, creating a dramatic shortage of teachers in Catholic schools. In many cases, administrators responded by closing schools; in 1971 alone, Catholic schools were closed at the rate of one per day. Schools that stayed open increasingly relied upon lay teachers to educate their students. As these teachers, often with kids of their own, required greater salaries than members of religious communities, parochial schools and Catholic high schools increasingly charged higher tuitions to offset these new costs. Many students from middle- and lower-income families, in many ways the demographic that the parochial school system in the U.S. originally developed to serve, could no longer access a Catholic education.

Other societal changes also took their toll on Catholic schools. U.S. Catholics, long a marginalized group in the mostly Protestant America, had reached new levels of societal acceptance in the years following World War II, perhaps culminating with the 1960 election of John F. Kennedy, the first Catholic president. With this achievement of

³⁷ Data from the National Catholic Education Association.



In 1971, Catholic schools were closed at the rate of one per day. Abandoned East Catholic High School. Detroit, Michigan (formerly St. Anthony High School, closed in 2006, demolished 2016). Credit: Detroiturbex.com

mainstream approbation, the need to send Catholic students to dedicated Catholic schools was not felt as acutely. Relatedly, increases in secularization and a decline in religious practice among U.S. Catholics contributed to a deprioritization of Catholic education for school-aged children.

Cumulatively, these factors have seriously challenged Catholic schools, a reality reflected in the number of students and schools. Enrollment figures dipped beneath 2 million in the 2010s.³⁸ Today, about 1.6 million students are served by Catholic schools, only twenty-nine percent of the number of students served at the peak of Catholic education in 1965. In fact, the 6.4 percent decline in enrollment reported by NCEA this past academic year—a loss of more than 110,000 students—was the largest drop in enrollment in fifty years. A significant factor of this overall decline has been the failure of Catholic schools to adequately reach out to recent Catholic immigrants. In fact, fewer than four percent of Hispanic Catholic children attend Catholic schools, an especially troubling trend given the outsized significance this group of people will increasingly play in the life of the U.S. Church and the nation in coming generations.³⁹

³⁸ Data from the National Catholic Education Association.

³⁹ "Catholic schools need the vibrancy of the Latino community," *American Magazine* unsigned

Despite the challenges U.S. Catholic schools have faced over the past half century, their importance has been repeatedly affirmed by Church leadership. Pope Paul VI stated that “the strength of the Church in America is in the Catholic schools,” and recognized this pivotal legacy when he canonized the “parents” of U.S. Catholic education, John Neumann and Elizabeth Ann Seton.⁴⁰ Likewise, John Paul II reaffirmed in his 1979 visit to the United States that “the Catholic school must remain a privileged means of Catholic education in America.”⁴¹ And Pope Benedict XVI told U.S. Catholic educators that “everything possible must be done, in cooperation with the wider community, to ensure that [Catholic schools] are accessible to people of all social and economic strata.”⁴²

This is the challenge to which those committed to support the Catholic vision of education must devote themselves today.



Pope Paul VI stated that “the strength of the Church in America is in the Catholic schools”
St. Jean Baptist de La Salle, Patron Saint of School Teachers.

editorial, September 17, 2018. Accessed on July 29, 2021 at <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/09/17/catholic-schools-need-vibrancy-latino-community>.

⁴⁰ Pope Paul VI, Address to the U.S. Catholic hierarchy, June 24, 1976. Accessed on July 29, 2021 at <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/06/25/archives/pope-praises-catholic-education-in-us.html>.

⁴¹ Pope John Paul II, Address to the NCEA, April 16, 1979.

⁴² Pope Benedict XVI, Meeting with Catholic Educators (April 17, 2008), Catholic University of America.

IV

Making Catholic Education Accessible Today: *The Role of School Choice*

AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH

The traditional parochial model of Catholic education has experienced significant challenges over the past several decades, particularly with regard to providing an affordable, accessible education. But as was also the case in previous periods of adversity, great ingenuity and creativity have flourished among those eager to surmount our present-day obstacles and continue providing a quality Catholic education to any boy or girl who seeks one.

One of the most important developments in this regard in recent decades is the increased prevalence of education choice. Also known as school choice, or most properly, parental choice in education, education choice refers to public policies that allow families to choose the best learning option for their children, regardless of income level, zip code, or other factors. In so doing, education choice can represent a powerful application of the Church's teaching that parents are the primary educators of their children, and that the state should support the right of parents to seek an education for their kids that includes moral and religious formation consistent with their convictions.

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.

- The **voucher** was first codified in Milwaukee, WI, in 1990, establishing the precedent of education choice. Similar to other publicly funded programs that assist the less fortunate, eligible families are given a “voucher” for a portion of

the funding that would have been used for their child to attend the local government school, to instead direct those dollars to an accredited nonpublic school that better fits their child's educational needs. While vouchers are the most straightforward and simple way to deliver education choice, constitutional barriers in some states, such as anti-religious Blaine amendments and compelled support clauses, make vouchers less attainable.

- Another policy option, **tax credit scholarships**, are an alternative choice program that are more often upheld in state courts. With a tax credit scholarship, individual or corporate taxpayers receive full or partial tax credit for their state tax liability when they donate to nonprofit scholarship granting organizations (SGO) that provide private school scholarships to qualifying students who may choose from a list of participating schools. No scholarship money ever enters the state treasury, and all participation is voluntary – from the donor to the non-profit organization, to students and parents, and the schools. However, the number of scholarships is limited by the amount of donations received per year.
- Similarly, but in a more limited manner, **individual tax credit and deduction programs** allow families to receive state income tax relief for approved educational expenses they pay out-of-pocket. While a valuable choice program, tax credit and deductions are often only accessible to families who have the means to front the education funding before receiving a tax benefit, and in some states non-public school tuition is only allowable as a deduction and not a credit.
- The newest and most innovative education choice programs are **education savings accounts** (ESA). ESAs allow parents to receive a deposit of public funds into parent-controlled savings accounts, which they can then direct to a variety of approved education tools and services for their children, including nonpublic school tuition, curriculum, textbooks, college courses, online learning, private tutoring, and education therapies. This means that with an ESA, parents no longer just

have a choice of schools, but they can fully customize their child's education to best fit their child's needs. ESAs, arguably the policy option most closely aligned with Catholic social teaching, have also been deemed constitutional in states with laws restricting public funding from going to a nonpublic school because these funds give families full control over their child's savings account and the destination of those funds.

PROMOTING THE COMMON GOOD AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The social teaching of the Catholic Church supports universal empowerment of parents in their role as the primary educators of their children. But it also calls for a preference toward aiding those most in need in the exercise of Christian charity. In fact, Pope John Paul II linked education to social justice when he stated that “it will never be possible to free the needy from their poverty unless they are first freed from the impoverishment arising from the lack of adequate education.”⁴³

Fortunately, parental choice programs provide invaluable assistance to those who struggle economically or in other ways in American society. For example, most ESA programs prioritize students with special needs—those who most benefit from the flexibility and tailoring inherent in these accounts. Vouchers and tax credit scholarships tend to be geared toward children from low- and middle-income families.

Florida, which has the largest tax credit scholarship program with nearly 100,000 students, sets an income cap at 260 percent of poverty levels (\$63,960 for a family of four), with priority given to students from families earning less than 185 percent of the figure. And in Tennessee, eligibility for the state's ESA is limited to those students who have an individualized education plan and have been diagnosed with one of nine categories of disabilities.

The limits on eligibility in state choice programs have allowed Catholic schools, which have a mission to be open for all, to have an outsize role

⁴³ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* (1990), 71.

in the success of these programs. Catholic schools serve a wide variety of students, including some who are not necessarily even Catholic. As Cardinal James Hickey, former Archbishop of Washington, is credited with saying, “We do not teach them because *they* are Catholic; we teach them because *we* are Catholic.”

True social justice demands that all parents, not only those with economic means, should have options for the education of their children. Parental choice programs level the playing field by providing the means for all parents to send their children to a school of their choice. A good education is one of the best ways to ensure that a person will have a good start in life and be able to contribute to society and the common good. And, in fact, there are many indications that Catholic schools are especially suited to provide students from underprivileged backgrounds with an exceptional education, an instance of the so-called “Catholic school advantage.” According to research conducted by the Alliance for Catholic Education at the University of Notre Dame:

- Students in Catholic schools demonstrate higher academic achievement than their public-school peers from similar socioeconomic backgrounds.
- The more disadvantaged a child is, the greater the relative achievement gains he or she experiences in a Catholic school.
- The achievement gap between students of different racial and/or socioeconomic backgrounds is significantly smaller in Catholic schools than public schools.
- A child who is black or Latino is 42% more likely to graduate from high school, and 2.5 times more likely to graduate from college if he or she attends a Catholic school.

Additionally, Catholic schools stimulate parental engagement, generate social cohesion and civic order in the local community, and educate students who grow up to be more civically engaged, likely to vote, tolerant of diverse views, and committed to service than their public school peers. Helping more students attend these schools is not a sectarian concern, but a genuine contribution to society’s common good.

Contrary to some misperceptions, school choice programs can coexist with robust and meaningful support for public education options. Legislation establishing choice programs is written with government-school funding needs in mind, in addition to the primary purpose of empowering parents. By reallocating only the state’s funding portion (as ESA bills do) or encouraging new charitable giving (as scholarship tax credits do), choice programs are not destructive to local school financing. In fact, there’s good evidence to think that making education choice available can actually improve a state’s public schools. Of the numerous academic studies that have looked at the effects of choice upon government schools, the majority of the research suggests a positive effect, a few find neutral results, and none find negative effects on the current public system.

We need to stop looking at American education as a system that needs protecting, and focus rather on children’s need to be well educated in whatever setting suits them best. Public education should be about the education of the public, not preserving government schools to the detriment of society.

PROVEN CONSTITUTIONAL

Policy solutions to practical problems are only valuable if they can be successfully implemented, withstanding not only political opposition but also challenges to their constitutionality. Fortunately, the United States Supreme Court and numerous state courts have consistently ruled that religiously neutral educational choice programs that give parents the opportunity to choose where their child attends school pass the constitutional test. In fact, these cases not only affirm the constitutionality of choice programs, but often mirror what the Church teaches regarding the rights and responsibilities of parents when it comes to their child’s education and the state’s duty to ensure parents have the means to do so.

In *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925), the Supreme Court of the United States recognized that choosing the education most appropriate for the child is both the right and responsibility of parents. Associate Justice James Clark McReynolds wrote that children were not “the mere

creature of the state,”⁴⁴ and that the child’s parents or guardians had the ultimate responsibility to provide instruction. In *Mueller v. Allen* (1982), the court held that states could constitutionally assist parents in defraying the costs associated with choosing a non-public school for their children.

In the landmark 2002 case, *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that direct scholarships were indeed constitutional when it upheld the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program. The Court declared that voucher programs do not run afoul of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which bans the government from making any law “respecting an establishment of religion,” so long as the voucher programs satisfy at least three criteria: first, an educational choice program must be religiously neutral, neither favoring nor disfavoring religious options; second, a program must be driven by the free and independent choice of parents; and third, an educational choice program must avoid “excessive entanglement” between government and religion.

More recently, *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* (2020) established that a state-based scholarship program that provides public funds to allow students to attend non-public schools cannot discriminate against religious schools under the Free Exercise Clause of the Constitution. The decision challenged the state’s longstanding Blaine amendment, which is likely to impact the more than thirty other states with similar amendments on their books.



The *Espinoza* decision was an important step towards putting an end to anti-Catholic, bigoted Blaine amendments in the United States. Supreme court photo by Adam Szuscik via Unsplash.com.

Commenting on *Espinoza*, Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami and Bishop Michael Barber, SJ of Oakland, two prelates who lead the U.S. Church’s efforts on religious liberty and Catholic education, respectively, said:

⁴⁴ 268 U.S. 510, 535

The Court has rightly ruled that the U.S. Constitution does not permit states to discriminate against religion...The Court has also dealt a blow to the odious legacy of anti-Catholicism in America. Blaine Amendments, which are in 37 states’ constitutions, were the product of nativism and bigotry. They were never meant to ensure government neutrality towards religion but were expressions of hostility toward the Catholic Church. We are grateful that the Supreme Court has taken an important step that will help bring an end to this shameful legacy.

Catholics are not the only ones who see the logic of and need for school choice. According to March 2021 polling from Real Clear Opinion Research, seventy-one percent of voters back school choice, the highest level of support ever recorded by a major national poll.⁴⁵ The support was also largely bipartisan, with sixty-nine percent of Democrats and seventy-five percent of Republicans in favor of school choice. A majority of respondents also agreed that US taxpayer dollars set aside for education should go toward funding students, not systems.

Despite this widespread support, only twenty-seven states enjoy some form of nonpublic school choice option for families, as of 2020. 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 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 2012,⁴⁶ there is more work to be done. 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.

⁴⁵ <https://www.federationforchildren.org/real-clear-opinion-research-poll-school-choice-support-soars/>, accessed on July 29, 2021.

⁴⁶ <https://www.federationforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Updated-AFC-fact-sheet-2020.pdf>, accessed on July 29, 2021.

V

Be Not Afraid: *Embracing the Mission of Catholic Education Today*

AN URGENT NEED

The cultural circumstances of today are far different than they were in the 1800s, when widespread Catholic education in America began to take root out of necessity. A coordinated, national effort to “Protestantize” Catholic school children no longer exists. No one is being forced to read the King James Bible in public schools.

However, the need to offer every child a holistic, integrated education grounded in the truth of his or her identity as a beloved son or daughter of God is still present, and perhaps has never been greater. Contemporary American culture is awash in confusion and error far more fundamental than Protestantism. The given reality of maleness and femaleness is being actively denied in favor of an ideology of radical self-creation and individualism. The existence of objective truth, let alone God, is confidently denied, often as a mere cover for self-indulgence. In other cases, scientism and materialism are peddled as all-encompassing explanations, promoting a culture of moral indifference and incoherence. The ability to end an unborn human life is widely considered an inalienable right, and the value of the elderly, the sick, and the poor is calculated solely in terms of “productivity.”

These errors attack at the root of what it is to be a human person. Ultimately, they deny the very truth upon which the Catholic vision of education rests: that our ultimate purpose is relationship with the God Who lovingly created us, sustains us, and draws us to union with Him, and that we are called to share that same selfless love with others.

In too many instances today, our public schools have actually become the epicenters of these errors and mistruths. Children being schooled

by the state cannot expect a “neutral” education, let alone one that teaches them about their God-given human dignity. In fact, they are often subjected to agenda-driven, ideological programming designed and promoted by powerful interests with aims directly contrary to those of the Church. In some truly sickening cases, parents are even bypassed and excluded from critical decisions regarding the health and identity of their children, whose confusion about their own sexual identity is facilitated and even encouraged by agents of the state.



Catholic school leaders need to be prepared to push back against new cultural pressures. Photo by Christian Lue via Unsplash.com.

Catholics must oppose these campaigns and practices in our public schools whenever and wherever they can, be it at a school board meeting or at the ballot box. But simply as a matter of prudence, it is also fair to conclude that in many cases our public school system seems bent on malforming the hearts and minds of our children.

The effects of this malformation are evident throughout society. The rates of abandonment of religious identification and outright atheism are growing among our youth, with children cutting ties with their faith tradition at younger and younger ages. Basic truths about human sexuality, morality, and God and the cosmos are either neglected, or worse, considered harmful and oppressive.

The education offered by authentic Catholic schools is the antidote to the cultural poisons that harm our society so acutely. In fact, it may even be worth revisiting the Church’s strong preference and even insistence that parents send their students to Catholic schools when possible. Instead of leading children to the “false infinities” of self-indulgent consumerism or limitless and state-sanctioned self-expression, as Benedict XVI referred to them, a faithful and committed Catholic school can lead our students to the truth of who they are, why they exist, what the purpose of their life is, and how they can live accordingly.

The evidence suggests that this is not just a pious trope or nice

“In some truly sickening cases, parents are even bypassed and excluded from critical decisions regarding the health and identity of their children, whose confusion about their own sexual identity is facilitated and even encouraged by agents of the state.”



Photo by Magdiel Lacquis via Pixabay.com.

marketing material. According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, those who attend Catholic elementary school are four times more likely to be Catholic by the time they are thirty years old than those who do not. For those who attended a Catholic high school, the rate is eight times higher than those who did not. Clearly, ensuring and promoting accessibility to these schools is one of the paramount tasks of evangelization and moral rejuvenation available to us today.

EDUCATION CHOICE IS THE SOLUTION

Some dioceses have taken incredible steps to make a Catholic education available for any student who seeks one. The Diocese of Wichita, for instance, is able to provide tuition-free admission to their Catholic schools for practicing Catholic families, due to a diocesan-wide requirement that parishes provide direct support.

These efforts are laudable, but they are not necessarily replicable in every context. Furthermore, while they do help parents live out their responsibility to provide a Catholic education for their children, they do not necessarily address an important and consistent dimension of the Church’s teaching regarding education: the obligation of the state to support parents as the primary educators of their children as a matter of justice. For some parents, this may mean sending children to the best local Catholic school. For others it may mean homeschooling, or partnering with other families in “pods,” “micro schools,” or any number of creative options available.

Education choice programs in states throughout the country are

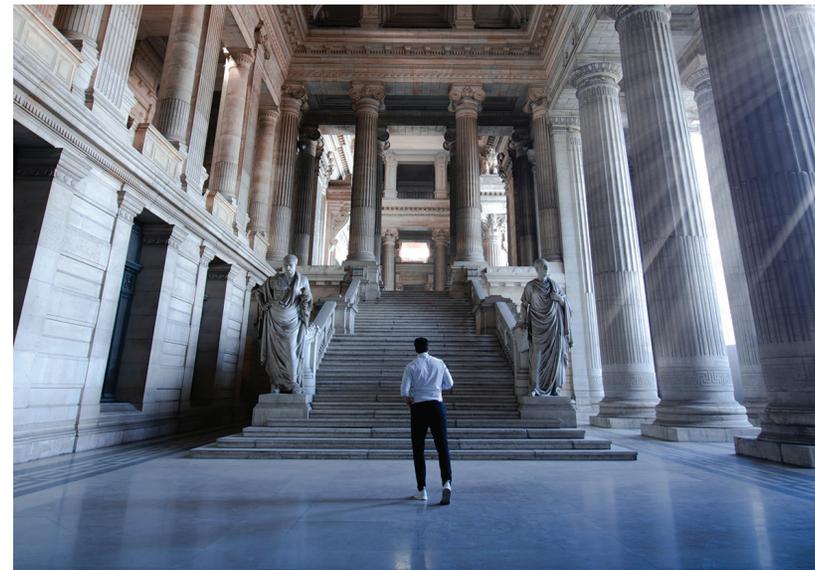
powerful and practical instances of not only aiding parents in providing for the educational needs of their kids, but in providing a legal mechanism for ensuring that the state performs its legitimate duty. For this reason, education choice may represent the most comprehensive and consistent application of the Church's teaching on the provision of education available to us today in the United States. While it is true that applying these teachings in the form of the concrete solutions presented in this paper is a matter not of doctrinal obedience, but "prudential judgement," supporting parental choice in education policies is the only prudent route to take.

KEEPING CATHOLIC IDENTITY STRONG

One concern that has been raised about education choice programs is the possibility that they could threaten the autonomy of Catholic schools by forcing them to comply with problematic standards in order to be eligible for education choice scholarships and funds. For instance, hypothetically, a state could pass a school choice program that requires eligible schools to adopt certain policies related to human sexuality that are wrong and contradict the Church's understanding of the human person.

But provided that choice or aid legislation is crafted properly to include protections for religious liberty that allow schools to retain the tenets that are essential to their character and mission, Catholic schools can benefit from education choice without fear of compromising. For instance, there is already precedent for thinking that some degree of cooperation with public programming need not lead to compromised Catholic identity. In many states, Catholic schools already participate in a variety of government programs that supply textbooks, counseling and nursing services, transportation services, and tuition on behalf of students. While some schools have faltered in their Catholic identity, many have remained fully Catholic while fulfilling their mission of being open to all.

If anything, the need for education choice programs that allow Catholic schools to thrive is a call for all Catholics—advocates, lawmakers, and ordinary citizens—to be actively involved in promoting and



It is every Catholic's right and duty to engage in the public square. Photo by Dan Asaki via Unsplash.com.

crafting education choice in their communities, not simply being passive beneficiaries. In 2005, the U.S. bishops asked for nothing less: "Advocacy is not just the responsibility of parents and teachers, but of all members of the Catholic community... the entire Catholic community should be encouraged to advocate for parent school choice and personal and corporate tax credits, which will help parents to fulfill their responsibility in educating their children."⁴⁷

There are many ways that Catholics of all walks of life can appropriately advocate for education choice in their state or community. Bishops can put school choice initiatives at the top of their state Catholic conference's legislative agendas. Priests can preach on the beauty of the Church's vision of education, the parents' status as the primary educators of their children, and the importance of supporting this duty by advocating for school choice initiatives. Catholic school principals and administrators can be generous in their support for school choice efforts, whether or not their school is likely to benefit

⁴⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium* (2005).

from education choice measures going into effect. Parents of students in Catholic schools can share their positive experiences with friends and neighbors, but also with their legislators. And our Catholic school teachers can continue providing the exceptional, holistic education that makes our schools such an irreplaceable treasure in life of the American Church.

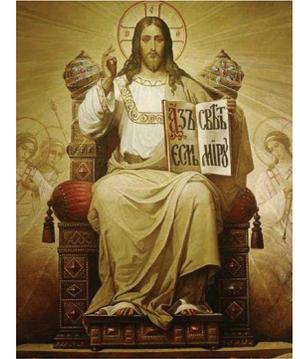
KEEPING OUR EYES ON CHRIST

Efforts to make a Catholic education more widely accessible through education choice programs are being advanced throughout the country. But making progress on this front will not necessarily be without its challenges. Although the days of the Know Nothing Party and other anti-Catholic nativist groups are no more, Catholics and our faith are still the subject of mockery, misunderstanding, and even intentional discrimination. Just like in the 1800s, attempts to derail efforts to equip parents with the ability to educate their children in accord with their religious and moral convictions are often grounded in anti-Catholic biases and rhetoric. Efforts to expand education choice run afoul of the priorities of powerful interests, who benefit from the status quo and prioritize preserving systems over educating our children. If we are going to publicly advocate for education choice, we can expect resistance.

But when have efforts to promote justice in society not faced pushback from worldly powers? In seeking what is owed to parents and their children, we can be in solidarity with the prophets of the Old Testament, who confronted the wayward kings and people of ancient Israel. We can be inspired by and seek the intercession of saints like Oscar Romero and Giuseppe Moscato, who faced great opposition due to their commitment to the poor and vulnerable. And most importantly, we can draw close to Jesus Christ and be strengthened by His words: “In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world.”⁴⁸

⁴⁸ John 16:33

Indeed, Christ must be the constant dynamic of our efforts to advance parental choice in education, because He is ultimately the One to whom we hope to lead our children, and it is for Him that we engage in this task at all. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and the work of making the path to Him more accessible is primarily His work and the work of the Spirit. Because education is part of His salvific mission, it is impossible for us to accomplish it on our own. “But for God all things are possible.”⁴⁹



Christ must be the constant dynamic of our efforts to advance parental choice in education. Christ on the Throne.

The fact that this is Christ’s work allows us to engage in our work for parental choice in education with confidence and serenity. If He wills it, He will bring it to fruition. Let us never forget this, and let us never forget to entrust ourselves to Jesus—in prayer, the sacraments, and Christian communion—as we boldly advocate for the Catholic vision of education to be a reality experienced by all.



⁴⁹ Matthew 19:26

The Catholic Vision of Education

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