

## **The Closing of Brooklyn Catholic Schools and the Financial Issues of Urban Catholic Schools (2005)**

**The Diocese of Brooklyn recently announced the closing of twenty two Catholic Schools due to declining enrollment and increased costs.** Parochial school consolidations are typical of what has been happening for the last thirty years. Catholic schools have been expanding in suburban areas and are quite healthy. However, in the inner-city the following conditions have plagued the Catholic schools:

- General economic support has declined as neighborhoods become poorer and as some parishes lose Catholic residents who are moving to the suburbs. The result is that weekly financial contributions and collections have declined. Moreover, Catholics moving into these neighborhoods, usually poor Hispanics, do not have the incomes to support the parishes. Moreover, other sources of support have declined. Bingo attracts an older and financially-pressed audience, and Off-Track betting and the lottery have undermined bingo participation and revenues.
- As the Church experiences general declines in and aging of priests, nuns, and brothers, the decline of the teaching orders has followed. This means that very low-cost (because of the low incomes and the fact that the orders or diocese subsidized their upkeep) church personnel are scarcer and scarcer in the schools. More regular faculty and administrators at much higher salaries and benefits must be paid for.
- Church attendance in inner-city parishes has not kept pace with the influx of Hispanic Catholics in many parishes, nor has the spirit of giving been as traditional to these immigrants. Further, they are less likely to volunteer or provide other assistance to the schools because of language and other challenges as well as their own economic struggles.
- The Dioceses have not taken much responsibility for the financial burden of the parish schools. In the Brooklyn Diocese there are about 45,000 students and about \$ 7 million in scholarships and other assistance from the Diocese. This amounts to less than \$ 200 per student in schools where the real cost is probably about \$ 4,000 per student, an average of about 5 percent of the cost.

**In the present and perhaps in the future, financial support from: parishioners, alumni, or the city are all potential sources of funds that could be exploited to save other inner-city Catholic schools from closing.** Alumni, in particular, have been less supportive than they have been at other independent schools. The city has a range of options for providing more assistance in terms of funds for Title I, bi-lingual, textbooks, and special education help. The issue of tuition tax credits and vouchers is a more contentious one that would require much more exploration\*.

**A recent New York Times article cited a 50% drop in US Catholic school enrollment in past fifty years, and an even greater rate of attrition in New York City and Brooklyn schools over the past decade. How can this rate be slowed?**

A major way of stemming this decline of enrollments is to make it possible through greater subsidies from the Diocese and through strong marketing to gain the “new

immigrants.” The subsidies are necessary because these families do not have the means to pay all the costs of a Catholic education (they should pay part of them for purposes of dignity, ownership, and commitment). Where parishes do not have the means, perhaps the overall Diocese should make a much bigger contribution to support parish education and consider education which supports the Catholic faith to be in the interest of the entire Diocese rather than individual parishes. The Diocese already provides a very large subsidy to the diocesan high schools as do the Catholic Orders for their high schools. Why doesn’t this logic carry over to parish schools in poverty areas?

**The most important financing innovations that US Catholic schools can undertake is the notion of placing these schools in a strategy that is Diocesan-wide in terms of finance.** This would mean that the larger mission is embraced in its school finance policies across parishes.

**How might fund-raising in Catholic schools affect the curriculum and the schools’ relationship with the community?**

Increasing responsibility in the community financially may have beneficial effects on the Catholic schools’ relations with the community. Catholic education is based upon a mission that needs to receive wide support in the Catholic community. Schools need to do more marketing and fundraising in the Catholic community and in the philanthropic community more generally. But, it is the Catholic community that has the most to gain.

**How viable is a school voucher program, for the Diocese of Brooklyn in particular and US private schools in general?**

The major challenge about the viability of a school voucher program is that when government gives funding, it sets out requirements and regulations. The issue for the Diocese is whether these will conflict with the mission of Catholic schools. For example, vouchers are likely to be attached to regulations which may or may not interfere. One example is that it is likely that a general voucher plan would require that schools admit all applicants or admit them by lottery if applications exceed spaces. There may be other requirements such as the retention of disruptive students for at least the remainder of the year. Typically the first provisions will be less restrictive, but government has a way of increasing restrictions and regulations over time as problems arise and legislation is used to resolve them. This will not be a “free-ride” by any means where schools can continue to function without change while getting government funding.

**While some members of the church and the community have said that better financing Catholic inner-city schools is a matter of letting the community, the neighborhood, and the city know of their dire financial straits, this alone may not resolve the serious problems of rising costs and diminishing resources at the Parish level.**

*This briefing was adapted from an interview of **Professor Henry M. Levin**, Director of the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education at Teachers College, Columbia University given by **David Lepaska**.*

\* For more information on tuition tax credits and vouchers visit us online at [www.ncspe.org](http://www.ncspe.org) and go to the Frequently Asked Questions section of our website.