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For Catholic Schools, Crisis and Catharsis

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It is a familiar drill in nearly all of the nation's Roman Catholic school systems: a new alarm every few years over falling enrollment; church leaders huddling over what to do; parents rallying to save their schools. And then the bad news.

When the Diocese of Brooklyn last week [proposed closing 14 more elementary schools](#), it was not the deepest but only the latest of a thousand cuts suffered, one tearful closing announcement at a time, as enrollment in the nation's Catholic schools has steadily dropped by more than half from its peak of five million 40 years ago.

But recently, after years of what frustrated parents describe as inertia in the church hierarchy, a sense of urgency seems to be gripping many Catholics who suddenly see in the shrinking enrollment a once unimaginable prospect: a country without Catholic schools.

From the ranks of national church leaders to the faithful in the pews, there are dozens of local efforts to forge a new future for parochial education by rescuing the remaining schools or, if need be, reinventing them. The efforts are all being driven, in one way or another, by a question in a [University of Notre Dame task force report](#) in 2006: "Will it be said of our generation that we presided over the demise" of Catholic schools?

The Archdiocese of Chicago and dioceses in Memphis and Wichita, Kan., have begun or expanded radical experiments in recruiting new students and financing their educations. Administrators in a dozen dioceses, including Brooklyn's, are rethinking the century-old norms of parish-run schools, where overworked priests have until recently been the single-handed bosses. These dioceses are now recruiting parents and alumni to play a bigger decision-making role.

A series of major studies in the past few years, including [one by the White House Domestic Policy Council](#), have described the dwindling presence of parochial schools as a crisis not just for Catholics but for society.

The losses have already been deeply felt in impoverished urban neighborhoods, where parochial schools have attracted poor and minority students — including non-Catholics — seeking havens of safety and order from troubled public schools. Roughly 20 percent of parochial school students are not Catholic, according to experts.

The Archdiocese of Washington was so desperate to save seven struggling parochial schools last year that it opted for a solution that shook Catholic educators to the core. It took down the crucifixes, hauled away the statues of the Virgin Mary, and — in its own word — "converted" the schools in the nation's capital into city [charter schools](#).

[The Washington choice](#) seemed to limn in its most extreme form the predicament facing Catholic education: How to maintain a Catholic school tradition of no-frills educational rigor, religious teaching and character-building — a system that has helped shape generations of America's striving classes since the turn of the last century — when Catholics are no longer signing up their children.

"It was taken for granted for a long time that Catholic schools would always be there," said Dr. Karen M. Ristau, president of the National Catholic Educational Association, a lobbying group. "People are beginning to realize that this is a false assumption."

The Rev. Timothy R. Scully, who led the Notre Dame task force study widely credited with igniting the current self-examination, was more blunt.

"There is a window open, and we may have a chance to reverse the trend of decline," he said. "But I'm not sure how long it will remain open."

Why this matters deeply to committed Catholics has been articulated repeatedly by parents, students and alumni of the nation's roughly 2,000 parochial schools shuttered since 1990, a majority in just the last eight years.

Parents in Brooklyn last week, echoing those before them, said it was about bonds of faith, place and time.

“My grandmother and grandfather, my aunts and uncles, both my parents, my wife and I and now our kids have gone to Holy Name,” said Martin J. Cottingham, 38, a member of the class of 1984 of Holy Name of Jesus elementary school in Brooklyn, which would merge with a neighboring school under the Brooklyn Diocese’s reorganization plan. “The world can change, but if you got your school, your church, your sports all within a couple of blocks, you’re safe.”

At its peak in 1965, the church’s network of parochial schools numbered more than 12,000 in the United States. The bulk of those were built starting at the turn of the century, when Catholic bishops commanded every parish to build one, largely from concern that waves of Catholic immigrants then arriving from Ireland and Italy would be lost in a public school system that was openly hostile to their beliefs.

The goal set by the bishops in 1884 — “every Catholic child in a Catholic school” — was never quite met. But by 1965, roughly half of all Catholic children in America attended Catholic elementary schools, according to the National Catholic Educational Association.

The number today is about 15 percent. Among Latinos, the fastest-growing church group — soon to comprise a majority of Catholics in the United States — it is only 3 percent.

The church has blamed a stew of confluent trends, including the shortage of nuns and priests who once ran the schools at no extra cost and have been replaced by lay staff with pension benefits; the post-[Vatican II](#) relaxation of religious obligations, which once included sending one’s children to the parish school; and the demographic shifts by which relatively well-paid working-class parishioners of a generation ago were replaced in the pews by Latinos and other immigrants who are part of the working poor.

Disappointed parents, as well as education professionals, cite rising tuition as another factor. But they also say the church hierarchy has been slow to react to societal change and unwilling to admit to problems, and is not especially well trained to run businesses — schools — in environments like New York, where charter schools and a generally improving public school system offer parents, Catholic or otherwise, options they have not always had.

“There is not a single seminary in the United States offering courses in finance, marketing, business management or long-term planning,” said Richard J. Burke, president of Catholic School Management, a consultancy firm in Connecticut that has provided those services to hundreds of parochial schools — most still open, he said — over the past 35 years. “Parish schools today simply cannot be operated by individual pastors.”

Recently, many Catholic leaders have come to agree.

In Brooklyn, the centerpiece of [the five-year plan](#) unveiled last week by Bishop Nicholas A. DiMarzio is a two-tiered school management structure, with parish priests left in charge of religious matters. A board of laypeople, selected by priests and diocesan officials, would handle just about everything else: marketing, recruitment, managing the finances, even hiring principals.

While reserving the parish priest’s right to veto his board’s decisions, the plan clearly sets a premium on collaboration and on what Bishop DiMarzio called a “communion” of schools and dedicated people. That communion would cut across parish lines, as well as the line of authority that once separated clergy and laity.

“This is a paradigm shift, a whole new way of thinking about our schools,” said Auxiliary Bishop Frank J. Caggiano of the Brooklyn Diocese, who spearheaded the six-month assessment behind the new plan.

In the Archdiocese of New York, which lost 5,000 parochial school pupils last year alone, plans are under way to adopt a similar approach, tapping into the administrative and business talents of parents, alumni and wealthy donors.

“Supporting Catholic schools is the obligation of the entire Catholic community,” said Timothy J. McNiff, the archdiocesan schools superintendent, adding that no decision had been made about further school closings. The diocese has closed 15 since the 2006-7 school year.

In Wichita and Memphis, where two of the earliest experiments in reinventing traditional parochial schools were started, Catholic educators see cause for optimism. The Wichita Diocese has mounted a campaign since 1985, asking its 120,000 Catholics to tithe as much as 8 percent of household income to its ministries, which include 39 schools.

The money was not earmarked solely for the schools, but it has allowed all of them to eliminate tuition starting in 2002, with enrollment approaching a 40-year high of 11,000.

In Memphis, with a small Catholic population, the diocese turned to private donors and philanthropic foundations to help support its 30 schools, particularly eight urban schools where only 10 percent of the pupils are Catholic. The diocese has since reopened those eight schools, which had closed because of budget problems, and added 1,500 students systemwide.

In the last few years, research papers published at Catholic universities like Notre Dame and Fordham and Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles have explored alternatives like dedicating church resources to educating only the poor, only the affluent or only children with disabilities.

What most proposals have in common is broadening the base of financial support. Some call for including all Catholics in the diocese; others focus on wealthy philanthropists; some use marketing campaigns aimed at filling empty seats with children, Catholic or not.

“The strength of parochial schools has always been the parish community,” Bishop Caggiano said. “But with the mobility of individuals today, that strength can also be a weakness, keeping people from looking beyond to the larger community.”

But it is that small community of family and friends that Catholics cite as the heart of the parochial school experience: looking around in church on Sunday and seeing one’s classmates, or knowing the names of the solemn young altar servers at the funeral Mass of one’s parent. It is the parochial in the parochial school.

Debbie DaGiau, mother of a seventh grader at Blessed Sacrament School in Queens, which is marked for closing this year, said that for the sake of that experience, some parents work two jobs to pay the \$3,600 tuition.

“I send Matthew to this particular Catholic school because the school and church and parish are together,” she said. Since the announcement of the school’s proposed closing, Ms. DaGiau said, parents have mobilized to fight, raising funds and marshaling alumni.

“We’ll do whatever it takes,” she said.