



The Legacy of Educating  
the Marginalized and  
Excluded:

# Urban Catholic Education in 2020 and Beyond

By Charles Cownie, J.D., Ph.D.

Last summer we had the opportunity to teach 23 early-career Catholic school teachers in a Boston College graduate course entitled **Models of Teaching and Learning in Catholic Schools**. The realities of teaching online amidst the pandemic and a growing movement for racial justice undoubtedly impacted how these new teachers encountered the course materials. Despite the unusual context and students coming from a variety of schools throughout the Archdiocese of Boston, the students all brought a particular focus to our conversations around models of teaching and learning in urban Catholic schools serving marginalized and excluded students.



These teacher-students' analysis of the place of Seton Partner blended learning schools and NativityMiguel schools was both thoughtful and enthusiastic. The group critically analyzed the educational infrastructures of these schools and brought great focus to the mission of urban Catholic schools serving marginalized and excluded students. This group of early career teachers, despite having diverse professional experiences ranging from teaching in elementary schools serving marginalized and excluded communities to wealthy prep schools, all deeply connected with the idea that Catholic schools must serve the poor, disadvantaged and marginalized.

This group's conclusion that the Church, through Catholic education, has a responsibility to those individuals existing on the margins and excluded from society is not novel. Catholic education's commitment to those on the margins can be readily observed through present-day urban Catholic educational initiatives, in historical efforts by Catholic educators and in seminal Church documents on Catholic education. The NativityMiguel, Cristo Rey, Seton Partner and other innovative models all focus on serving communities of limited financial means. Historically, one can see this commitment to serving the marginalized in the education of Black students beginning in the 1720s in the Ursuline School of New Orleans, the early mission schools and the parish Catholic schools that served multiple waves of Catholic immigrants. Finally, one need look no further than *Consecrated Persons and Their Mission in Schools: Reflections and Guidelines* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2002) and *Gravissimum Educationis* (Pope Paul VI, 1965) to find that "The Church does, in fact, mean to offer its educational service in the first place to 'those who are poor in the goods of this world or who are deprived of the assistance and affection of a family or who are strangers to the gift of faith'" (Pope Paul VI, 1965, Section 70).

### **A faith-based mission**

In the United States, it is urban Catholic schools serving marginalized and excluded students that continue to carry forward this mission. As *Catholic*, these schools have a history of catechizing and evangelizing, while Catholic social justice demands these schools provide an equitable educational opportunity. This deep commitment to a faith that manifests justice has led to the formation of schools that serve marginalized



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individuals from a variety of religious backgrounds, providing an alternative to failing, underperforming public schools. Cattaro and Smith (2014, p. 75) have noted that these Catholic schools have been "transforming themselves from institutions that convert, assimilate and protect to institutions of integration and pluralistic complexity." These schools create opportunity, love and community; these schools are deeply Catholic. Yet, these schools also face tremendous challenges.

### **Financial challenges and school closures**

Three of the Catholic school teacher-students in our summer course had been, until just a week prior to the beginning of class, teaching at two urban Catholic schools serving marginalized and excluded communities in the Archdiocese of Boston. These schools faced financial challenges prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic, charging some of the most discounted tuition rates in the archdiocese, while situated in neighborhoods facing high poverty rates. Nonetheless, they are included in the number of Catholic schools closed since the beginning of the pandemic.

The pandemic and resulting economic uncertainty have exacerbated the precarious position of Catholic education in the United States. Currently, the Catholic school sector experiences an annual 1 to 2 percent decline in student enrollment and decrease in number of Catholic schools (MacDonald & Schultz, 2020). However, more than 150 schools have already closed since March 2020 (Crary, 2020; Gjelten, 2020), exceeding the 1 to 2 percent of anticipated annual closures, with more closures predicted in the coming months. There is also the differential impact of the virus on low-income communities of color, which experience higher incidents of economic uncertainty,

sickness, hospitalization and mortality as a result of the pandemic than richer, Whiter communities. Catholic schools serving these low-income, marginalized and excluded communities of color were much harder hit by the first wave of COVID-19-related closures. But the pandemic also provides an opportunity to better understand the landscape of urban Catholic education of the marginalized and excluded to better address the needs of what has often been heralded as the most successful part of the Catholic school sector in this country (Hamilton, 2008).

Should Catholic schools in urban areas serving low-income, marginalized and excluded communities continue to close at their current rate, a crucial social good — contributing to equity and justice for these communities — will be lost. There is a long history of research identifying associations between Catholic school attendance by students of color living in poverty or lower-income environments and the development of certain positive student outcomes such as high school graduation rates, college admission and civic engagement (Garnett, 2020; O’Keefe & Goldschmidt, 2014; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2007; Figlio & Stone, 1997; Neal, 1997; Evans & Schwab, 1995; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Coleman, 1982). This past research has clearly demonstrated that these schools serve the mission of the Church to serve the marginalized and excluded, which also serves the public interest of breaking the legacy of poverty in these communities.

### Sustaining the legacy

Taking seriously both the decreasing student enrollment and the increasing school closures that began to cause concern in the field at the end of the 20th century, Fr. Joseph O’Keefe, SJ and a team of researchers at Boston College and NCEA collaborated to study the specific trajectories of these urban Catholic schools and to identify what it means to, in their words, “sustain the legacy” of these schools (Haney & O’Keefe, 2007; O’Keefe et al., 2004; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2007).

Nearly 20 years after this study was conducted, those urban Catholic schools serving the marginalized and excluded that have remained open have found innovative ways to sustain themselves in both individual and collective circumstances (Porter-Magee, 2019). But in this era of Catholic school closures, the question is not whether urban Catholic schools serving the marginalized and excluded *can* produce or contribute to these effects, but *how to ensure* that these schools can remain open. It is only through figuring out the operational



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vitality of these schools that they can continue to contribute to educational justice for their students.

Since 2005, there has not been sufficient evidence or a comprehensive attempt through research to demonstrate how the legacy of urban Catholic schooling for students of color living in poverty and lower-income environments has been continued, enhanced or adapted to the changing contexts and times. In this unprecedented COVID-19 era, new research in the spirit of the Sustaining the Legacy study is necessary to make sense of the complex student, staffing and structural issues confronted by these urban Catholic schools. Gathering these data will allow us to accurately tell the story of these remarkable, mission-driven schools. Additionally, a new framework available to researchers today will offer the opportunity to conduct analysis that can support identifying how these schools have stood against the tide of closures and succeeded in cultivating healthy, vibrant, faith-filled and effective schools. This essential tool is the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS)*. Utilizing the framework provided by the NSBECS will allow for deep analysis of these schools and ready identification of how and why they have succeeded. This work will provide a roadmap for the future of urban Catholic schools serving the marginalized and excluded.

### Courageous, comprehensive and collaborative change

Last fall, we launched Sustaining the Legacy 2020. This study of urban Catholic education will allow us to utilize the NSBECS to interrogate the way that this specific segment of Catholic schooling has been sustained, enhanced and adapted over the past 20 years. O’Keefe and Goldschmidt (2014), reflecting on the work of the original Sustaining the Legacy research study, called for a “courageous, comprehensive, and collaborative



vision” for urban Catholic education going forward.

Updating practices requires an honest appraisal of current practices and an openness to explore alternative models being implemented in Catholic, other private and public schools. Simply preserving the status quo would be irresponsible. Catholic educators, researchers and administrators must, therefore, adopt a courageous stance to explore, develop and implement new approaches of renewal to ensure that Catholic education will thrive across the country. Innovative growth is healthy for all organizations. Catholic schools are learning that if they do not evolve, they will become irrelevant in a rapidly changing world. (p. 239)

This study will lay the groundwork for a broader understanding of what is necessary to lead this “courageous, comprehensive, and collaborative” change in urban Catholic schooling of the marginalized and excluded over the next 20 years. Our update of the Sustaining the Legacy research, together with NCEA, will provide researchers, practitioners and policymakers in Catholic education with a more robust and complex way to make sense of the current challenges and needs

of these schools. Concurrently, the NSBECS offers a tool for analysis that has a strength and weight that we have never had before. Together these data and the framework offered by the NSBECS will make a bright and *sustainable* future possible.

### How you can help

To accomplish this research, we will need the support of the Catholic education community across this country. When we contact you, we ask that you both respond to the survey and choose to participate in follow-up interviews. It is only through the participation of school leaders in urban Catholic schools serving marginalized and excluded communities that this research is possible. Together, we can support this legacy of commitment to serving those on the margins and to living our mission in Catholic education.

*Please see Resources and References on page 52 for further reading and reference citations.*

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