Setting the Context for the Diocese of San Diego Catholic Schools: A Review of the History and Trends in Catholic Schools across the Nation
A non-partisan, university-based research center.

This study was conducted by the Center for Education Policy and Law (CEPAL), a research entity operating under the auspices of the School of Leadership and Education Sciences and the School of Law at the University of San Diego. Established by a grant from the William D. Lynch Foundation in 2007, CEPAL’s mission is to foster better linkage between educational research, policymaking, and practice. To this end, CEPAL undertakes empirical and legal research on educational policy issues, enhances communication between education leaders and state-level policymakers, and facilitates understanding among USD law students and education graduate students about the policymaking process through courses, internships, and research opportunities. Additional information about CEPAL is available at www.sandiego.edu/cepal.

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This document is an excerpt from the Center for Education Policy and Law’s full report: Strengthening Catholic Schools in the Diocese of San Diego (2014). This excerpt includes the first chapter of the full report which focuses on the national trends in and history of Catholic schools across the nation. It is meant to serve as a context for what is occurring locally in Diocese of San Diego. The majority of issues and challenges that exist throughout the Diocese of San Diego school system follow national patterns that exist in other dioceses. Developing a better understanding of the national context and the history of the original mission of Catholic schools provides a foundation for local growth and change.

National Trends in Catholic Schools

The troubling issues Catholic schools in the Diocese of San Diego face do not occur ‘in a vacuum,’ but are instead a small piece of a larger national framework of similar trends. As a part of this research process, the CEPAL research team conducted a thorough review of the literature on the history and current state of Catholic education across the nation. This review of the literature uncovered the fact that dioceses across the nation are struggling with major issues that are significantly changing Catholic school education. This section of the report delves into Catholic education at the national level so as to place the issues of the Diocese of San Diego into the larger context.

The History of Catholic Schools

Catholic schools were first founded in the United States to protect Catholic immigrant children from the harsh realities of public schools in America. According to Cattaro (2002), in the 1800’s, “the educational needs of Catholic children were often overlooked in public schools that were frequently indifferent, if not hostile, to them” (p. 203). Hunt (2005) extends this point: “Catholic elementary schools were established at great cost, usually under parish auspices, to protect the faith of the children of an immigrant, poor population” (p. 163). Catholic schools, from the very beginning, were focused on carrying out the mission of the Church through service to the poor, less privileged, disadvantaged, and minority populations (Sabatino & Montejano, 2012). The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Education (2006) states: “Catholic schools are often the Church’s most effective contribution to those families who are poor and disadvantaged, especially in poor inner city neighborhoods and rural areas” (p. 268). To this day, as Higadera, Martin, Chavez, and Holyk-Casey (2011) suggest, “Catholic schools are viewed as the pillars of the local communities because they provide a quality education in a safe, drug, and gang-free environment” (p. 10). Catholic schools have had an incredible impact throughout history in inner-city, urban, ethnic communities by providing a safe haven for children in these communities.
The parochial system, where each parish operates its own Catholic school, was the approach the Catholic Church felt was most effective to carry out the mission of the Church. The parochial system is founded on the local parish community, which in the early years of the Church in America, were developed to serve as a home to ethnic immigrant communities of Catholics. The parochial model was not only advised, it was mandated through the Third Plenary Council of Catholic Bishops that met in Baltimore in 1884 (Hunt, 2005). According to Hunt (2005), this council “legislated that every Catholic parish had to establish a school within 2 years unless exempted by the local bishop, and all Catholic parents had to send their children there unless the bishop of the Diocese granted them permission to do otherwise” (p. 164). However, as Hunt points out, the goals of this council never met reality as at no time in the history of Catholic schools did more than 50% of Catholic children attend Catholic schools.

In the early years of Catholic schools, the non-Catholic population in America struggled with the concept of Catholicism and Catholic schools. Hunt (2005) points to the notion:

“The [public] school was seen as the “American” institution, and Catholics as “foreigners,” beholden to a foreign potentate (the Pope), with Catholic parochial schools being regarded as a “foreign” institution, one aimed at maintaining old world ways, and being hostile to things American (p. 163).

As the American public became more tolerant of the large Catholic population in the 20th Century, Catholic school education built a strong foundation in the American educational system. Staffed by priests and religious brothers and sisters, Catholic school enrollment was growing annually. The staffing of schools with religious personnel not only kept operational costs extremely low, but provided the religious traditions and commitment to the development of Catholic identity and faith formation for students. For Martin (2012), the focus on the development of Catholic identity “is what sets [Catholic schools] apart from other types of schools; it is what makes Catholic schools unique” (p. 49). This was the mission of the early Catholic schools and the religious sisters and priests that staffed them. Additionally, as Baker and Riordan (1998) state, the fact that most religious sisters “came from the same stock as the waves of Catholic immigrants who sent their children to the schools” (p. 20) was an incredible boon to the foundation of the parish community in ethnic neighborhoods.

Catholic schools reached their peak of enrollment in the middle of the 1960’s (Gautier, 2011; Hunt, 2005; Owens, 2005; Saroki & Levinick, 2009). Hunt (2005) explains this peak further in that “Catholic K-12 enrollment reached an all-time high in 1965-1966 at 5.6 million pupils, a figure that represented 87% of nonpublic school enrollment and accounted for 12% of all K-12 pupils in the United States” (p. 166). At that time, there were few other options for families to escape poor education in their local neighborhood public school. At that time, there were no transfers to schools in other neighborhoods and charter schools did not yet exist. In many ways, Catholic schools were the original charter schools, offering both a way out of poorly performing public schools and a focus on excellent academics, values, and character development.

Since the peak of Catholic school enrollment in the 1960’s, the story of Catholic schools has been drastically different. The national narrative of today’s Catholic education is one of school closures, declining enrollment, changes in staffing, changing demographics, and financial strife. Holter and
Frabutt (2012) suggest Catholic schools “have arguably never been more vulnerable as an institution since their founding in the United States nearly 200 years ago” (p. 253). Baker and Riordan (1998) theorize that modern Catholic schools “are on the verge of becoming a system of proprietary schools that educate growing numbers of non-Catholics, children from the wealthiest strata of the society, and increasing numbers of children who do not consider themselves religious at all” (p. 17). The closure of Catholic schools, particularly in urban, low-socioeconomic communities, and the national trend of declining enrollment have garnered significant attention in recent years. These issues and challenges, and the factors that produce these trends, warrant further examination so as to better understand the situation in the Diocese of San Diego Catholic schools.

**Issues and Challenges in Modern Catholic Schools**

Declining enrollment and school closures are major issues facing Catholic schools across the nation (Borrero, 2010; Cieslak, 2006; Gautier, 2011; Owens, 2005; Reidy, 2004; Roewe, 2012; Saroki & Levinick, 2009). Enrollment has declined in each decade since the 1960’s, with drastic drops occurring since the start of the 21st Century. Declining enrollment is seen as the key challenge currently facing Catholic schools in America (Cieslak, 2006; Gautier, 2011; Owens, 2005; Reidy, 2004; Roewe, 2012). Gautier (2011) found evidence of this enrollment decline through the generational attendance percentages. Gautier states 44% of the Pre-Vatican II generation, 54% of the Vatican II generation, 40% of the Post-Vatican II generation, and 39% of the millennial generation attended a Catholic K-8 school. According to Gautier, the percentages of Hispanic/Latino Catholics attending a Catholic K-8 school are consistently 20% lower in each of these generations. O’Keefe (2012) points out “nearly one-third of all Catholics self-identify as Hispanic/Latino, and that number is over fifty percent for Catholics under the age of twenty-five... yet only thirteen percent of the children in Catholic schools nationwide are Hispanic/Latino” (p. 104). For Saroki and Levenick (2009), the trends in Catholic school education are greatly troubling for the Catholic church in America as the fastest growing population, Hispanics, are the least enrolled in Catholic schools. According to Saroki and Levenick (2009), at the peak of Catholic schools in the 1960’s, there were 5.5 million students enrolled in 13,000 Catholic schools across the nation, but this number dropped to 2.5 million in 9,000 schools by the 1990’s, and 2.1 million in 7,000 schools by the 2009-10 school year. Cieslak (2006) reports a decline in enrollment of 44% between 1970 and 2000. Owens (2005) states an enrollment drop of 55% between 1965 and 2004. Coday (2010) found a decline of 17% since the beginning of the 21st Century.

Declining enrollment in Catholic schools is attributed to a series of factors including the changing demographics of families and children (Baker & Riordan, 1998; Cieslak, 2006; Coday, 2010; Defiore, Convey, & Schuttloffel, 2009; James, 2007; O’Keefe, 2012; Schuttloffel, 2012), limited and weak leadership (Defiore et al., 2009; Holter & Frabutt, 2012; Schuttloffel, 2012), barriers to access for low socioeconomic families (Schuttloffel, 2012), perception that Catholic identity development and academics are not high quality (O’Keefe, 2012), financial strains on families, schools, and parishes (Defiore, 2009; Holter & Frabutt, 2012; O’Keefe, 2012; Schuttloffel, 2012), changes to the staffing (Baker & Riordan, 1998; Gary, 2003; Hunt, 2005; James, 2007; Meyer, 2007; Owens, 2005; Reidy, 2004; Saroki & Levinick, 2009), competition from public charter schools (Defiore et al, 2009; Horning, 2013; O’Keefe, 2012; Saroki & Levinick, 2009), rising tuition rates (Coday, 2010; Defiore et al., 2009; James, 2007; O’Keefe, 2012; Scheiber, 2008), parents not valuing Catholic schools (Schuttloffel, 2012), old
buildings and facilities that cost a lot to maintain and repair (Defiore et al., 2009; Gary, 2003), and ineffective governance models (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2011; Saroki & Levinick, 2009).

**Changing demographics.** The change in demographics across the nation is having a lasting impact on the current state of Catholic schools. One of the most influential aspects of the changing demographics is the movement of affluent Catholics out of the ethnic, inner-city, urban communities (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2011; James, 2007; O’Keefe, 2012; Rahn, Butler, & Quezada, 2012; Saroki & Levinick, 2009). This affluent migration from urban to suburban has left parishes in urban settings with a population that is according to James (2007), “considerably smaller, and less affluent” (p. 292). With a smaller population of Catholic families in the urban parish communities, Catholic schools have turned to admitting more non-Catholic families into their classrooms in order to cover operating costs and fill classrooms. Cieslak (2006) posits that students now enrolling in Catholic schools “are increasingly non-Catholic, non-religious, non-white, and solidly middle-class” (p. 141). To this point, Cieslak notes the change in the percentage of non-Catholic students in Catholic secondary school students changing from 2% in 1972 to 20% as of 2005. Owens (2005) and Meyer (2007) each note an 11% growth in non-Catholics in Catholic schools since the 1960’s.

**Staffing changes from religious to lay.** Faculty and administrative staffing changes have significantly changed Catholic schools forever. The number of religious brothers, sisters, and priests working in Catholic schools has dropped from over 95% in the 1960’s to less than 5% currently (Hunt, 2005; Meyer, 2007; Saroki & Levinick, 2009). The change in staffing at Catholic schools from religious to lay is a major reason for the troubling trends in the modern Catholic school system (Baker & Riordan, 1998; Gary, 2003; Hunt, 2005; James, 2007; Meyer, 2007; Owens, 2005; Reidy, 2004; Saroki & Levinick, 2009). The reason for this change according to Rahn et al. (2012), is that Vatican II called for the laity of the church to have a more active role in the parish, which meant “many of the religiously ordained persons running Catholic schools left their orders and continued their service as lay individuals” (p. 5). The significant change in staffing caused major financial strains on the schools and parishes who had relied on minimal or no salary costs for their religious faculty and administrators. Saroki & Levinick (2009) argue that “the vocational crisis has rendered the traditional business model for Catholic schools inoperative; personnel costs are simply too high to sustain” (p. 18). Despite the fact that lay teachers in Catholic schools earn on average half of the salary of their public school counterparts (Reidy, 2004), the modern day Catholic school teachers earn significantly more than the religious brothers and sisters.

**Issues with financial stability.** The staffing transition from religious to lay personnel put a significant strain on the financial stability of Catholic parishes and schools. The financial issues of these entities are directly related to the declining enrollment and school closure trends (Defiore, 2009; Holter & Frabutt, 2012; O’Keefe, 2012; Reidy, 2009; Schuttloffel, 2012). According to Goldschmidt and Walsh (2011), it is not just schools struggling to find financial stability, but parishes as well who are seeing drops in the weekly contributions. These drops are particularly prevalent in low-socioeconomic communities and due in large part to the American economic recessions of the last decade, in both 2001-03 and 2008-09, which have upset the financial stability of American families (Defiore et al., 2009; O’Keefe, 2012; Rahn et al., 2012). According to O’Keefe (2012), “government data indicate that the average American households’ net worth plummeted twenty-three percent between 2007 and 2009” (p. 105). Defiore et al. (2009) note that the recessions affected the “ability of families to afford rising tuitions and the ability
of dioceses and parishes to provide adequate support” (p. 9). In addition to the financial issues of American families, the Catholic Church in America is burdened by the financial strains from the “remuneration to those who were abused” (O’Keefe, 2012, p. 106). As O’Keefe explains, dioceses across the nation are pouring finances into this situation, which leaves them unable to finance other ministries.

**Rising tuition rates.** Due to the change in staffing and rising operational costs for Catholic schools, schools have continued to raise tuition rates to make up for these financial gaps. The rise of tuition rates over the last several decades is one of the key factors in the national trends of declining enrollment and school closures (Coday, 2010; Defiore et al., 2009; James, 2007; O’Keefe, 2012; Scheiber, 2008). James (2007) found tuition costs in Catholic schools have increased an average of 7.5% annually since the 1990’s. According to Owens (2005), tuition rates have increased 135% between 1990 and 2004. Scheiber (2008) states that national tuition rates are often rising at a higher rate than the cost of living. The problem with raising tuition to cover the parish/school financial troubles is that the financial issues are placed on the shoulders of families who are under their own financial stress (Defiore et al., 2009). O’Keefe (2012) refers to the situation as:

> An all-too-familiar downward spiral; increase tuition to meet operating cost, experience loss of enrollment because people are unable or unwilling to pay that prices, increase tuition more because of enrollment declines, and on and on (p. 105).

This cycle eventually results in the closure of the school due to the financial stress and low enrollment.

**Changing mission of Catholic schools.** Earl (2012) posits that Catholic schools were founded on the ability to develop “the whole child, not only intellectually, physically, socially, and emotionally, but also spiritually” (p. 1). In particular, Catholic schools were focused on ministry to the poor, ethnic, immigrant populations. As Hunt (2005) suggests this “well earned heritage of educating the poor” (p. 170) is being lost as higher resource and income families are filling the seats in Catholic school classrooms. Due to the financial issues that families, parishes, and schools are facing, the mission of the Catholic schools seems to be changing. Baker and Riordan (1998) suggest Catholic education in America is “on the verge of a crisis of identity” (p. 17). To this point, families are questioning the Catholic identity of schools and student faith formation due to the loss of religious staffing (O’Keefe, 2012) and the change in demographics to include more non-Catholic students (Martin, 2012).

**More options for families who want to get out of bad neighborhood public schools.** For many decades in America, Catholic schools served as the only way out of a poor-performing or bad neighborhood public school. In this role, Catholic schools were the original ‘charter’ schools in America, offering not only a way out of public schools, but excellent academics, a values-based environment, strong discipline and limited behavior problems, opportunities for low-socioeconomic students, as well as opportunities to develop a child’s faith and identity as a Catholic. In the last several decades, families in public schools have been provided new options to escape the public schools, including inter-district transfers to public schools in other neighborhoods, non-religious private schools, and public charter schools. The charter school movement is considered a factor in the declining enrollment national trend (Defiore et al, 2009; Horning, 2013; O’Keefe, 2012; Saroki & Levinick, 2009). According to O’Keefe (2012), charter schools have grown by 128% over the last decade while Catholic schools have
experienced a 14% decline in the same time period. The key issue is that charter schools are offering the same experience as Catholic schools (minus the Catholic teachings) at no cost, thus competing directly with Catholic schools (Saroki & Levinick, 2009).

**Remedies and Modifications**

Defiore et al. (2009) argue “there is no ‘silver bullet’ that will assure the future viability of Catholic schools” (p. 22). However, they suggest there is a need for scalable strategies and remedies to address the issues and challenges of Catholic schools. Saroki and Levenick (2009) offer “six strategic priorities” for Catholic schools to address the negative trends. These priorities are: (1) funding private scholarships, (2) creating performance-driven schools, (3) developing and replicating new school models, (4) rethinking governance, (5) addressing the human capital challenge, and (6) changing public policy.

The acknowledgement of challenges and identification of individual priorities were followed up by a number of related articles that pushed the discussion further. These recent academic dialogues have resulted in two significant recommendations for improving Catholic schools’ viability. Moving to new governance models is a frequent recommendation in the literature on Catholic schools (Britt, 2013; Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2011; Haney, 2010; Saroki & Levinick, 2009). Goldschmidt and Walsh (2011) posit the parochial model is “no longer viable” (p. 4). They suggest moving to new models of governance that include: private schools, inter-parish schools, diocesan schools, consortium schools, private network schools, K-12 school systems, university partnership schools and faith-inspired charter schools. Haney (2010) points out that if new governance models are attempted, it “will require school communities to identify ways to ensure the schools’ continued connection to the parishes that give them their purpose for being, and connect school families back to their respective parishes” (p. 208).

The second major recommended change for Catholic schools is to concentrate on financing issues. Goldschmidt and Walsh (2011) offer 14 funding strategies used in Catholic schools across the nation including: tuition, parish subsidies, diocesan subsidies, large-scale scholarship funds, development programs, leveraging economies of scale, Catholic university outreach, school-community partnerships, niche programming, endowments, patrons programs, private philanthropy, federal funding and state/local government funding. Making Catholic schools affordable for the low-socioeconomic communities that Catholic schools were originally intended to support is an integral factor for the future sustainability of the national Catholic education system.
References


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