

# *Urban Catholic Education: The Best of Times, the Worst of Times*

Thomas C. Hunt, David J. O'Brien, and Timothy Walch, eds.

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**U**rban Catholic Education: The Best of Times, the Worst of Times (2013) serves as a sequel to *Urban Catholic Education: A Tale of Twelve American Cities* (2010), which chronicled the rise in Catholic education in a dozen American cities from colonial times to the end of the Vatican II era. This second installment tells the remaining history from Vatican II to the present, again looking at efforts to support Catholic education. The book is also based in part on a 2008 report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute entitled *Who Will Save America's Catholic Schools?*, which provided statistics on the number of Catholic school closings since 1990. In response to these statistics on declining funding and enrollment and increasing school closings, the editors ask, "If these [Catholic] schools have been so effective, why are they being closed?" (p. v). To answer this question, the editors examine the recent history of Catholic schools and Catholic communities within ten cities, arguing that the story of Catholic education, "is a story worth telling and a story that Catholic parents should not overlook in the day-to-day effort to support Catholic education" (p. x).

It is important to note that the editors, each either a professor at a Catholic institution or a Catholic researcher, recruited Catholic educators to author the ten case studies. Both the focus of the argument—that despite adversity, Catholic schools can continue to survive and thrive with support—and the histories of the authors suggest that this is a book about Catholic education for Catholic parents, educators, and community members.

As both a public school advocate and self-identified Catholic, I approached this book looking for an argument about what makes Catholic schools an important part of the current urban educational landscape. While the book included examples of innovative funding strategies and efforts towards community engagement, it largely detailed the overwhelming challenges facing Catholic education. An analysis of the strengths of the argument and the organization of the book reveals highs and lows similar to those described in the book title. Ultimately, *Urban Catholic Education: The Best of Times, the Worst of Times*, may rally those "who love and believe in Catholic education," but may not prove convincing enough to garner more widespread support (p. 201).

In the introduction, the book sets out merely to present a variety of responses in urban communities to declining support for Catholic schools. However, it is the examples of responses that created self-sufficiency and community support that are most engaging and universally applicable. In the face of the multiple challenges that each chapter describes, including a decline in religious faculty members, increased operating expenses, neighborhood and demographic changes, declining enrollment, and dissatisfaction with the Catholic church, it is clear that organized responses which take these factors into account are necessary to sustain Catholic schools. Examples of these efforts are included in some form in Chapter 6 on St. Louis and Chapter 8 on San Antonio. They are most clearly examined and explained in Chapter 5, "A Tale of Two

Schools: Catholic Education in Chicago,” and Chapter 9, “Diversity, Opportunity, Challenge: Parochial Education in Los Angeles.”

Chapter 5 provides a salient example of change strategies towards cultural relevance and financial viability in the case studies of Holy Angels School and Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago. Both schools demonstrate a commitment to serving a high-poverty population, respond specifically to community needs, including social and cultural aspects, and also utilize various forms of fundraising to support the school and its students. As a result of the commitment to community needs and unique fundraising strategies such as Cristo Rey’s work-study program, which utilizes private donations, fundraising, and corporate sponsorship to provide tuition for low-income students, Holy Angels and Cristo Rey serve students who would not have otherwise been served by Catholic schools. In this case, defining a mission and engaging a variety of stakeholders in support of that mission helped Holy Angels and Cristo Rey to remain financially and culturally viable.

Chapter 9 successfully engages in a discussion of citywide decision-making by Catholic leaders in Los Angeles, detailing periods of growth under individual leaders in the period 1948-1985. Each time period was marked by challenges to staffing, funding, and responding to student diversity. However, the story of how each leader managed these challenges reveals important insights about both managing change and garnering community support. While previous leadership had failed to consider changing demographics and the need to respond to increasing diversity, in the 1980s Archbishop Mahoney articulated a vision for the schools that focused on social justice and allowed fewer schools to close than in

comparable urban areas. He accomplished this through the creation of the Catholic Education Foundation, which maintains an endowment for tuition assistance. This example illustrates the impact of local leadership, decision-making, and commitment to social justice on the ability to sustain financial and political support.

In detailing the challenges facing Catholic schools, Chapter 5 and Chapter 9 provide a balanced and well-organized analysis of the issues facing Catholic schools and the local responses to those challenges. However, there were inconsistencies within the other chapters and within the book as a whole. Organized into regional sections, each chapter presents a slightly different story of the church history and educational history, never conveying a clear overall picture. While cited within most chapters, it is only within the discussion of Cincinnati’s Catholic schools in Chapter 4 that the Vatican II Council, which significantly altered Church doctrine, and its effects are described in detail. Similarly, the Plenary Council of Baltimore, despite shaping Catholic doctrine leading up to the Vatican II Council in the 1960s, is given only a piecemeal explanation within Chapters 2 and 4.

Some of the most interesting and compelling funding strategies are discussed only in the book’s conclusion. Within the final pages of the book, Walch lays out various funding strategies including vouchers, public aid, and private philanthropy, and the possibilities for collaboration with Catholic universities in way that is both reflective and instructive. This discussion was needed much earlier. Perhaps the book may have been better served through an introduction which clarified the historical, social, and economic factors contributing to the decline in support for Catholic education, followed by chapters which more purposefully illustrated

possibilities for the future as exemplified by the cities included in the study.

As evidenced by a few select chapters, some Catholic schools are making innovative changes around fundraising and culturally relevant, community based instruction. An examination of these strategies proves useful to educational leaders working in diverse urban contexts. However, the litany of challenges presented in most chapters seems insurmountable as described by the authors. Missing from the book is a clear argument for what makes Catholic schools in distinctly unique, valuable, and worth saving in comparison to their private, public, and charter school counterparts. In the end, the book is what its authors intended, a chronicle of the history of Catholic schools for better or worse.

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## References

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