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Policy Dialogue: The Rise and Decline of Catholic Education, 1500–Present

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Abstract

Catholic schools have faced a number of hurdles in recent decades, including the sharp decline of vocations among religious sisters who have worked in schools (as much as 90 percent in the last four decades), rising tuition prices for families, the sexual abuse crisis, and questions about institutional commitment to maintaining schools in light of these challenges. These changes affect all students and families, but have special significance for those of lower socioeconomic status, who historically used Catholic schools as an engine of upward mobility.

For this policy dialogue, the editors of *HEQ* asked Paul Grendler and Carol Ann MacGregor to reflect on the benefits, challenges, and turning points of Catholic-sponsored education from the sixteenth century to the present. Grendler is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Toronto, the former president of the Renaissance Society of America and the American Catholic Historical Association, and a recipient of the Galileo Galilei Prize. The author of eleven books, he has published widely on education in the Renaissance. His recent work concentrates on Jesuit universities and Jesuit schools, especially in Italy. MacGregor is Associate Professor of Sociology and current Vice Provost at Loyola University New Orleans. She has also been named an Associate Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia. Her publications, which have appeared in *American Catholic Studies* and *American Sociological Review* (among others), focus on Catholic education policy and practice, and religion and public life.

HEQ Policy Dialogues are, by design, intended to promote an informal, free exchange of ideas between scholars. At the end of the exchange, we offer a list of references to readers who wish to follow up on sources relevant to the discussion.

Keywords: Catholic education; church and state; Jesuit schools; moral education; sexual abuse

Carol Ann MacGregor: Catholic schools are closing at a rapid rate, from more than thirteen thousand elementary and secondary schools in the mid-1960s (12 percent of school-age children) to just over six thousand schools (approximately 5 percent of children) in 2020. For Catholic K-12 schools, the challenge of the twenty-first century will be that they have increased bureaucratic demands and growing pressures to meet

consumer preferences as they attempt to keep up with state and regional accreditation requirements, testing regimes, and desire from parents for advanced coursework.

Much would be lost if more Catholic schools were to not survive into the next century. In the American context, the public sector seems unlikely to be able to support reabsorbing two million students and educating them with the same care and quality as existing Catholic schools. Scholars, including Margaret Brining and Nicole Stelle Garnett at Notre Dame, have documented that a closed school has a negative impact on the surrounding community. In addition, the church would lose a valuable agent of socialization and intergenerational transmission of religious values.


Paul Grendler: From a historical perspective, the magnitude of this shift is astonishing. The most influential Catholic educators in the past five hundred years have been the Jesuits, who founded their first school in Messina, Sicily, in 1548. Jesuit schools were popular because they met a huge need in European society at that time: they provided a free, high-quality education to many boys and young men.

Free instruction, as envisioned by Ignatius Loyola, was a radical idea at the time. Before the Jesuits, a town typically paid the salaries of one or two teachers to teach a limited number of boys the Latin curriculum. In addition, the students were required to pay the schoolmaster small fees to supplement his salary. Some other children attended independent schools; sponsored neither by the church nor by the town, these schools were run by men (and a handful of women who taught girls) who were paid by parents for their services. The majority of the boys and almost all girls received no formal education beyond what their parents or relatives could give them.

Although the Jesuits taught for free and did not receive salaries, Jesuit schools still had heavy expenses. Who paid the bills? The surprising answer was that local civil governments, meaning the city council or the prince, covered the costs. The Jesuits stated their requirements: their own church, a residence, and a school building. Above all, they needed enough funding to support all of the Jesuits in the town, because some of them preached, assisted the sick and poor, and engaged in other ministries. So the town and the Jesuits negotiated a school contract. The town agreed to pay the local Jesuit college a fixed annual amount from tax revenues. In return, the Jesuits promised to teach a specific number and level of classes. Such contracts meant that Jesuit schools were semi-public schools.

Carol Ann MacGregor: I'm intrigued by your discussion of funding from town councils via contracts. I grew up in Canada experiencing the benefit of state-funded religious schools in Ontario, but have now spent years studying the precarious financial position of contemporary American schools. In addition to local civic support, what else made these Jesuit schools attractive?

Paul Grendler: Jesuit schools were popular because they provided high-quality, useful education. The lower school curriculum gave students a thorough Latin education, a prerequisite for most civil and ecclesiastical occupations and for university study. The Jesuits were quite explicit about the importance of Latin enabling students to earn a living. In addition, the Latin humanities curriculum was intended to train students to be virtuous, morally responsible, and wise adult leaders of their families, of the town,



LIBRORUM ELENCHUS
 IN ROMANO SOC. JESU GYMNASIO EXPLICANDORVM
 EX NONIS NOVE MBRIBVS ANNI VERTENTIS
 IN MDCXCVII. PROXIME INSEQVENTEM.
 Moderatoris ejusdem Gymnasij auctoritate propofitus.

<p style="text-align: center;">IN CLASSE THEOLOGICÆ.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Ex Sacris Litteris.</i></p> <p>De Expositiōe Sacre Genesios. hora xxij + HORIS ANTEMERIDIANIS. <i>In 1. 2. D. Thome.</i> De Ultimo Fine, Beatitudine, & Añibus Humanis. hora xvi. <i>In 3. Partem.</i></p> <p>De Sacrificij Missæ. hora xvij: POMERIDIANIS HORIS. <i>In 3. Partem D. Thome.</i> EX HEBRAICIS. Traditio primò Instituto Hebraicæ lingue Roberti Card. Bellarmini. Deinde explicabitur aliquis ex Prophetis Minoribus. hora xxi. De Controuersis Fidei. hora xxi.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IN CLASSE JURIS CANONICI.</p> <p>Ex Libris Decretalium Tituli scelerij explicabuntur. hora xvij. IN CLASSE CASUVM CONSCIENTIÆ. HORIS MATVTINIS. De Censuris in genere, & in specie, & de Irregulari- tate. hora xvi.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">VESPERTINIS HORIS.</p> <p>Disputationes in Precepta Decalogi. hora xxij +</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IN CLASSE METAPHYSICÆ.</p> <p>Libri Metaphysici, & de Anima dispositionibus il- lustrabuntur. hora xvi. & xxi +</p> <p>De Virtutibus in genere. hora xxij +</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IN CLASSE PHYSICÆ.</p> <p>Aristotelis de Physico Audiu lib. VIII. eiusdem de Cielo lib. II. lib. 1. de Generatione. hora xvi. & xxi. +</p> <p style="text-align: center;">EX MATHÊMATICIS.</p> <p>Præter Geometriam, atque Arithmetica speculati- uæ, & practicæ Elementa, traduntur ex nouissima Mathesi, Problemata, & Theoremata. hora xx +</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IN CLASSE LOGICÆ.</p> <p>Introductio ad Logicam primùm, deinde Organum Aristotelis traditur. hora xvi. & xxi +</p> <p>Præter hæc, audita quotidianis repetitionibus reco- lectur, & per uariis disputationibus acutentur inge- nia. De propofitis Philosophiæ capitibus, oñibus quoque die publicè discipulis; eadem diligenti- ter, & copiosè mentis exercitacionibus agi- tabuntur. In anni cætu de uniuersa Theologia, & Philosophia Theses disputandæ proponuntur celsi iustitiam. exercitacione contentu.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">IN CLASSE RHETORICÆ. MATVTINIS HORIS.</p> <p>M. Tull. Cic. Oratio pro lege Manilia multiplici gra- didio explicabitur. hora xv + A MERIDIE. Selecta Martialis Epigrammata explicabuntur. hora xxi. De Sertuis Metastus de Arte Poetica. hora xx. Ex Græc. Orat. SS. PP. Tom. I. & Homerj Odyssæ. hora xxi. +</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IN CLASSE HUMANITATIS.</p> <p>Elucidabitur M. Tull. Cæ. pro Marcello. hora xvi. + Ars Metrica Interlor. hora xxi. + Ex Poetis Virgiliannæ Bucolicis Lib. VII. Ex Græcæ Orat. SS. PP. Tom. II. Jacobi Grætzherzi Institutio. Gram. Lib. II. hora xv. Diebus Pomeridianæ Vacationis Senecæ Tragedia. hora xv. Die Saturni Salustius. Senis posterioris mensibus Cic. pro Archia Poeta. hora xv. Cypriani Socris de Arte Rhetorica, & Horat. Car. Lib. II. hora xxi.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IN SUPREMA CLASSE GRAMMATICÆ.</p> <p>Pelori Semetri Cic. de Senectute. hora xvi. Emanuelis Appud. 2. generis, deinde signata con- structio, & præcepta Metricæ Aræ, & Pæro- nymica. hora xxi. Ex Poetis Ouid. Fastorum. hora xxi. Ex Græcæ Grætzherzi Institutio. Lib. I. Posteriori Semetri Cic. Epist. ad Quintum Fratrem, & Marcum Brutum. hora xvi. Virgiliannæ Aeneidos Lib. II. hora xxi. Diebus Pomeridianæ Vacationis Quirinus Curtius. hora xv.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IN MEDIA CLASSE GRAMMATICÆ.</p> <p>M. Tull. Epist. Fam. Lib. II. hora xvi. Emanuel Lib. II. ad figuratam usque constructio- nem, & Appendices pro media. hora xxi. + Græcæ linguæ rudimenta. hora xxi. + Secundo Semetri, Ouid. de Trifibus Lib. I. hora xxi.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IN INFIMA GRAMMATICÆ CLASSE.</p> <p>M. Tull. Select. Epist. Lib. IV. hora xvi. Emanuel lib. 1. de Generibus, & Declinationibus no- minum, deque Præteritis, & Supinis. hora xvii. Introductio ad Syntaxin Lib. II. Emanuel sine Ap- pendicibus. Rudimenta Græcæ Grætzherzi. hora xxi. Præterea lege præscriptum est, memoriam libris ad uerbum additen- dis excolere, Quosidie prosa oratione, aut carmine stylum exercere, præcæta recollere, decoris conuentionibus alere profectum, & iudicium Ad modestam uerè pronuntiationem frequentè ab Humanitatis Rhetoricæque studiis haberi declamationes, & in aula maiore men- struo festè intervallo Rhetorem dicere ad conferam superiorum & inferiorum classum coronam.</p>
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*Ad hæc, ut diuina gloria seruiatur (quod præcipuum omnibus esse debet) imbuetur nulli sapientia mentibus, summa Deuina Christiæ
 capita meminit reddentur, pili seruiantur, ac religiose obediunt; Panis uicinis, atque Eucharistia Sacramentis,
 Juuener ad studium uirtutis excitabuntur.*

Ad initia studiorum repetenda à Nouembribus in Aula Gymnasij maxima, auditorium frequentiore conuentu
 de more perorabitur, & ostendet Orator:

Nullum à Sapientia sperari emolumentum posse, si quod præter Sapientiam speratur.

ROMÆ, Typis Joannis Jacobi Komarek Bohemi propi SS. Vincentium, & Anastasium in Trivio, MDCXCVII.
SUPERIORUM PERMISSU.

Figure 1. List of the courses offered and hours when they met for the Roman College of the Society of Jesus for the academic year 1696–1697 that began about November 3, 1696. Archivio di Stato di Roma, Università 195, carta 23. With permission of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Archivio di Stato di Roma.

and of society. Additionally, the Jesuits were perceived as dedicated teachers—even by their enemies. A major reason is that the Society of Jesus was the best-educated religious order during a time when most people did not have access to formal education.

Carol Ann MacGregor: Modern Catholic schools certainly seek to train students in similar ways, although Latin is taught less frequently than in the past. What did the Jesuits see as special or distinctive about the education that they were offering?

Paul Grendler: Jesuit education was strongly and distinctly Catholic, but not through the teaching of doctrine. It may surprise modern educators to learn that there was very little catechetical instruction in these early Jesuit schools: ninety minutes on Saturday for the Latin grammar classes, thirty minutes for the humanities class, and none for the rhetoric and philosophy classes. Instead, Catholicism permeated Jesuit schools through sacramental, liturgical, and cultural practices and events. Students attended Mass daily, and they were expected to receive Holy Communion and confess their sins (to Jesuit confessors) regularly. Jesuit schools celebrated important days in the Catholic calendar and some saints' days by suspending classes in favor of special events such as processions, pageants, and sermons, which probably pleased students. Theatrical productions, in which students played roles, offered real or fictionalized accounts of Christian history, or the history of the ruling family of the city or state in which the school was located. This created a model for Catholic education. Other religious orders founded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—such as the Barnabites, Somaschans, Theatines, and Piarists—largely followed the Jesuit model. The biggest difference was that other religious orders emphasized vernacular languages in addition to, or in place of, Latin.

Significant change occurred after the mid-eighteenth century and into the modern world. Enlightenment thinkers, the rulers of most Catholic states, and leaders of the French Revolution decided that the state should be the directing force in education, and that church schools should be closed. The Jesuits were suppressed, initially by the monarchies of Portugal, Spain, and France in the 1760s and then by the papacy in 1773; Catholic governments seized the assets of other religious orders too, making it impossible for them to continue to teach. The Jesuits were restored by Pope Pius VII in 1814, but were unable to regain their prominent role in European education.

Nineteenth-century Catholic (and Protestant) national governments moved toward universal compulsory state education with limited religious content and without clergymen or nuns as teachers. Nevertheless, Catholic schools remained a vigorous part of the educational landscape in both Europe and the United States, especially at the elementary level. In the United States, Catholic schools grew from several hundred in 1860 to several thousand by World War I. The growth of Catholic education peaked in the United States around 1965 with perhaps five million students.

Carol Ann MacGregor: The rise of state-supported education certainly shaped Catholic schools in the United States, where Catholic schools have taken extraordinary care to show that they are no threat to the “public school ideal.” That is, they have from their beginnings sought to assure the public that they are capable not just of teaching students the basics of reading, writing, science, and math, but also

civics. While they were created in response to anti-Catholic bias, their ethos has never been to be countercultural, but rather to create positive contributors to neighborhoods and nation. In many cities, Catholic high school and college sports—particularly football and basketball—are additional ways schools impart lessons of character and solidify their place as contributors to the community. In recent years, Catholic schools have also been lauded for their accomplishments in serving racial minorities and students of limited financial means. One notable example of this is the Cristo Rey Network of schools that function on a novel work-study model, wherein businesses and nonprofits can subsidize student tuition in exchange for a day per week of work. Students in this model receive a traditional Catholic education while also gaining real-world work experience.

Paul Grendler: Although I have no personal knowledge of the Cristo Rey Network of schools, I have heard good reports of them from a former student who is a Jesuit.

Carol Ann MacGregor: Some contemporary studies have shown that graduates of Catholic schools vote and are active in their communities at higher levels than their public school counterparts. This is not to say that Catholic schools always prioritize service and citizenship over academic matters. Indeed, many Catholic schools have survived financially by functioning as elite academies where most graduates head off to top colleges. In my own interview research on Catholic high schools, I asked students which classes most conveyed morality or moral lessons. Interestingly, their responses rarely identified courses in religious studies or theology. Rather, they often emphasized English literature. As it happens, of course, this is a key course for college preparation. In spite of an increasing emphasis on college, many parents choosing K-12 schools are less concerned with academics and more concerned with safety, discipline, and shared values.

The emphasis on safety and shared values might lead one to hypothesize that the sexual abuse crisis in the church has led parents to remove their children from Catholic schools. The reality is more complex when it comes to how the crisis has impacted Catholic schools. There are two potential mechanisms by which the sexual abuse of children at the hands of clergy has negatively impacted Catholic schools. The first, a direct effect, which might be deemed *moral outrage*, has seen Catholics, disgusted by the church's actions and response, or fearful for their own children, refusing to patronize Catholic schools. The second, an indirect effect, saw the costs of litigating and paying out settlements deplete funds to subsidize Catholic education or otherwise draw resources—including personnel time and energy—away from schools. Nicolas Bottan and Ricardo Perez-Truglia found that a scandal causes a significant and long-lasting decline in religious participation in the zip code in which it occurs and also has a negative impact on charitable giving. In addition, Ali Moghtaderi found that *Boston Globe* coverage of the child abuse scandal in the church can explain two-thirds of the decline in Catholic school enrollment.

Paul Grendler: The sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy and the response of the Catholic hierarchy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries leads to the question about whether this happened in past centuries, and how church

authorities responded. The answer is that we know very little. I have not found any evidence of Jesuit child abuse in the documents I have examined. But I have not specifically looked for this kind of documentation. I know of a single case in seventeenth-century Italy in which there is reliable evidence that a priest in another teaching order, the Piarists of the Pious Schools, was creditably accused of sexual predation. He was a troublemaker whose actions created controversy everywhere he went. This produced an unusual amount of documentation, including credible accusations that he abused boys. It appears that he was moved from one Piarist house to a second, and then a third, for that reason. But he died in his early forties, so there was no resolution. To repeat, historians know very little, possibly because we have not searched for such material.

However, the Jesuits and their schools in the early modern era received considerable other criticism. When a city council invited the Jesuits to establish a free public school, the town's private teachers (who charged fees) were angry. The Jesuits were accused of being too much involved in politics. Some disliked their public forms of piety, which were often theatrical. A common accusation was that they were more loyal to the pope than to the ruler of the state in which they lived. And in the Republic of Venice, they were accused of being agents of Spain (the major geopolitical enemy of Venice) and using their schools to educate Venetians to be more loyal to the King of Spain than to Venice. By the way, this was not true; indeed, the Jesuits had their own difficulties with the Spanish monarchy. When Catholics were majorities, they did not encounter these problems. But when they were minorities, criticism was frequent.

Carol Ann MacGregor: Demography and culture will shape the future of Catholic education. In terms of demography, Catholic schools face challenges such as the increasing prevalence of those who identify with no particular religion (many of whom are lapsed Catholics). In addition, birth rates are generally declining among Catholics. All of this leaves fewer Catholics devout enough to prioritize Catholic education for religious reasons. This is in many ways simply a culmination of trends that began in the mid-1960s with the move of women out of religious vocations. This move changed the cost structure of Catholic education—what was once operated largely on free labor, now came with costs for lay staff. And it undermined the distinctiveness of Catholic schools relative to suburban public schools in areas with many Catholic families. Unlike Canadian and European Catholic schools, American Catholic schools receive no state support outside of limited voucher programs. The one population of Catholics that has been growing in recent decades in the United States is Hispanic Catholics. There are increasing concerns that this group is being ignored by the church when it comes to K-12 education, especially relative to historical efforts to incorporate Irish and Italian Americans.

The impact of the global pandemic of 2020 will also be interesting to watch. On the one hand, parents seem unlikely to want to shoulder the cost of “virtual” Catholic education, and this will put some American Catholic schools in financial jeopardy. This is a particular risk for K-12 schools that were already struggling with declining enrollments, but also some smaller Catholic colleges that rely on a residential model. On the other hand, the small size of many Catholic K-12 schools and colleges, and strong shared

community norms, may make them ideal environments to enforce new behaviors like social distancing and mask-wearing. Indeed, many Catholic schools are remaining open and even drawing students from closed public schools.

On cultural change, here again we must be sensitive to the role that declining vocations play in changing the character of Catholic schools. Parents value choice and the strict discipline, strong academic reputation, and values-based approach that Catholic schools offer. Increasingly, however, they have attractive options in public charter schools and in homeschool collectives. While these choices, to date, cannot explain all Catholic school enrollment declines, they are phenomena to watch. In order to survive in the United States context, Catholic schools will have to show their value both to Catholic families and to non-Catholics who stand to benefit from their approach. Catholic school leaders will also have to continue to advocate for streams of public funding to support their work.

Paul Grendler: There is no doubt that Catholic schools provide a service that many students and parents value. But there is also a question to be asked: “Does Catholic education or religious education in general, achieve its moral and religious goals?”

This is an old question. Earlier in our discussion, I mentioned that during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries Jesuit schools provided free public education to boys at a time when there was very little free education of any sort available. But then the Jesuits innovated again in education. Beginning around 1600, the Jesuits created a new kind of school: noble boarding schools limited to boys of documented noble birth whose parents paid substantial fees for their sons to attend. The noble boarding schools did two things. They offered religious instruction and exercises along with strict moral supervision of the students by means of the student residence. And they offered a rigorous curriculum under Jesuit teachers, as well as instruction by laymen in riding, fencing, music, dancing, and vernacular languages.

Hence, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Jesuits operated two different kinds of schools. The vast majority of Jesuit schools continued to be free day schools open to all boys. And that enabled many students of modest origins to rise in society. But they also operated boarding schools available only to nobles who could pay high fees.

The Jesuit justification for their noble boarding schools was that they could improve all of society by training its future leaders to be virtuous, learned, wise, and religious. Did Jesuit noble schools of the past succeed in their religious and moral goals? Such a question is impossible to answer with certitude, but the available impressionistic evidence for early modern Italy suggests that the answer is no. The rulers and princes there in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries displayed an astonishing record of political ineptitude, which sometimes led to the loss of their own states. Their behavior often contradicted that of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Not only did they do little to help the poor or the vulnerable, they reinforced the hierarchical society in which they lived. And there was a final disappointment for the Jesuits: when Catholic states began to suppress the Society of Jesus at the end of the eighteenth century, graduates of Jesuit noble boarding schools did little, if anything, to defend the Jesuits.

This brings us to the present. Since the presidency of Ronald Reagan, we have seen Republican presidents nominating multiple Catholics to the Supreme Court, including Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas, Anthony Kennedy, John Roberts, Samuel Alito, Brett Kavanaugh, and now Amy Coney Barrett. In addition, President Trump's legal team was dominated by Catholics, including Attorney General William Barr and White House Counsel Pat Cipollone. Many of these justices attended Catholic elementary schools, high schools, and/or colleges, including Jesuit-sponsored schools such as St. Mary's Dominican High School in New York, Georgetown University and Georgetown Prep in Washington, DC, and College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts. We have to ask what impact, if any, Catholic education had on these and other public servants. If Catholic schools teach social justice and moral values, are these evident in the actions taken by such public officials? In my view, the Republican agenda on health care, immigration, voting rights, the environment, and so forth is not consistent with Catholic teaching. Nevertheless, Republican Catholic Supreme Court justices, other high-level appointees, and Catholic members of Congress strongly support the Republican agenda.

Carol Ann MacGregor: The issue of whether Catholic schools are “CINO” (Catholic in name only) is one that points to the tremendous polarization that exists within the American Catholic Church in particular. Indeed, Catholics on the left would note that they are troubled by a lack of inclusion of LGBTQ+ students, and they believe many schools are not consistent in their approach to the sanctity of human life—focusing intensively on efforts to ensure students are active in antiabortion efforts at the expense of an approach to the sanctity of life that was more inclusive of immigrants and the poor. On the right, we've seen a growth in the number of more conservative families who find their local Catholic school lacking in religious practices and offering insufficient engagement with the Catholic intellectual tradition. These families are turning to homeschooling options and starting their own private Catholic academies. It is difficult for a Catholic school to bridge this polarization. In some ways, then, the question is not “Do Catholic schools reach their religious/moral goals?” but “What are those goals and what is their alignment among various stakeholders?”

Paul Grendler: Earlier in our conversation, you alluded to the fact that Canadian and European Catholic schools receive some support from the state, but that American Catholic schools by and large do not, with the exception of vouchers. In the state of North Carolina, where I live, the Republican Party since 2011 has made it a very high priority to provide more public money for religious schooling through vouchers. And every year they increase the limit on charter schools. In the academic year 2019–2020 there were over 2,500 public schools and 751 private schools. Although Catholic schools benefit as well, the greatest number of private schools receiving state funding are Christian schools (*Christian* is often part of the names of these schools), usually meaning Evangelical Protestant schools. Private schools in North Carolina operate with little state regulation on anything, including curriculum. One by-product of the lack of state regulation is that private schools in North Carolina have a higher rate of COVID-19 cases than public schools. This may be

because the state can only recommend, not mandate, health guidelines for private schools regarding in-person and virtual learning, masks, and social distancing.

The expansion of private schools with limited public funding in North Carolina has also had a direct negative impact on public school funding, because the amount of state support that a public school receives depends on its enrollment. The Supreme Court's decision in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* (2020) declared that states that provide school choice vouchers may not disqualify some private schools because they are religious. This raises a large question: Do you think that the United States will move toward more public money for Catholic and other religious schools? Will Catholic schools accept this financial assistance, and might it have an impact upon the education that they offer? If it happens, what impact will it have on public schools?

Carol Ann MacGregor: The timing of this question is very interesting. Had President Trump won the election such that the Department of Education would have still been run by Secretary Betsy DeVos, I think faith-based schools, including Catholic schools, would have had an ally in public funding for private schools. In President Biden's administration we may see more emphasis placed on ensuring excellence in public education first. My own hope would be that federal policy follows the data and finds ways to support and grow educational models that produce the greatest outcomes for children—including both academic outcomes and civic outcomes like community engagement.

Additional Readings

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