

Catholic schooling in America: Drawing New Maps of Hope by Michael McShane.

The gist of Dr. McShane's article is that public money in support of private religious schools is helping to bail out the declining Catholic system schools' enrollment. He uses, as an example, the Florida experience that "while the total U.S. Catholic school population declined by 14.2% over that period of time, Florida Catholic school enrollment grew 9.2%."

Dr. McShane, in the attached article, refers to quotes from some recent writings of Pope Leo about the importance of Catholic education to highlight his argument that "Educational choice puts parents in a place of prominence" that Pope Leo describes.

Public funds should not be used to subsidize any religious faith.

Catholic Schooling in America: Drawing New Maps of Hope

Michael Q. McShane

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Last year, the College of Cardinals elected a new pope to lead the Catholic Church. Leo XIV, born Robert Prevost in Chicago, Illinois, was installed on May 18th in St. Peter's Square.

Just six months later, he published an Apostolic Letter titled "[Drawing New Maps of Hope](#)" outlining his vision for Catholic education. It is a fascinating document, because it comes at a time of change in Catholic education in America. Emphasizing the idea of hope is an appropriate one, because I think today is one of the most hopeful times for Catholic education, certainly in my lifetime, and perhaps stretching back even farther.

The story of Catholic schooling in America is well trod ground for those in the education policy world. Anti-Catholic bigotry in the mid-19th Century drove Catholics to create an expansive, parallel education system to public schools. [Enrollment in that system](#) peaked in the early 1960s at more than 5.2 million students in almost 13,000 schools. By the year 2000, the number had been cut in half, to 2.6 million students attending 8,146 schools. By 2020, it had fallen to 1.6 million students in 5,981 schools.

Why did this happen? There were a lot of reasons. A few, in no particular order:

- Explicit anti-Catholicism decreased in public schools
- The numbers of priests, nuns, and religious sisters declined, ruining the human capital model
- Other free options like charter schools emerged (often explicitly copying traits of Catholic schools).

Catholic schools closing has been a terrible thing. Nicolle Stelle Garnett and Margaret Brinig wrote a fantastic, if depressing, book a little more than a decade ago called [Lost Classroom, Lost Community](#), that documented the cost to the social fabric of communities when Catholic schools closed. Crime goes up, disorder goes up, and communities become less cohesive.

But it isn't just communities that are hurt, students are hurt as well. [Recent research](#) by David Figlio dug into the different types of schools that participate in Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship Program and found that students who attend Catholic schools perform better than students who attend other, non-Catholic, private schools. This remains even after controlling for demographic characteristics that might explain the variation in performance. In fact, Figlio writes, "I found similar patterns—a consistent apparent Catholic school advantage—across every other dimension I investigated: household size, parental marital status, racial and ethnic identification, and student gender identification." Closing Catholic schools means narrowing opportunity for students.

If you've gotten this far, you might be wondering, "Hey didn't this guy start by saying this is a *hopeful* time for Catholic education in America?"

Correct. This is a hopeful time in Catholic education in America, and we can look to Florida to see why.

As [Ron Matus and Lauren May have documented](#), after long periods of decline, enrollment in Florida Catholic schools is on the rise, and substantially. Using data from the National Catholic Education Association and looking at the top ten states by Catholic school enrollment over the decade from 2013-14, they found that Florida was the only state to see an increase in enrollment. While the total US Catholic school population declined by 14.2% over that time period, Florida's Catholic school enrollment grew 9.2%.

Florida is not alone. Iowa Catholic schools [saw an enrollment increase](#) around 4% from 2023-24 to 2024-25.

What do these two states have in common? If you're reading this, you've probably already figured it out: robust educational choice.

Families want Catholic education, but they can't afford it. Private school choice programs solve that problem.

It is important that leaders in Catholic education and in the church more broadly understand both the incredible opportunity that choice provides as well as its consonance with the vision that Pope Leo lays out in "Drawing New Maps of Hope."

As he writes:

"The educational community is a 'we' where teachers, students, families, administrative and service staff, pastors and civil society converge to generate life. This 'we' prevents water from stagnating in the swamp of 'it has always been done this way' and forces it to flow, to nourish, to irrigate."

Educational choice programs are one source of water into the swamp of "it has always been done this way." Rather than relying on financial models that are no longer fit for purpose, Catholic schools can benefit from the flows of public dollars, via families, into their schools.

Now, they might need to make some changes. Schools might need to invest in communicating their culture to integrate new students and families into their community. They might finally be able to build out their infrastructure for students with special needs that they have been hoping to serve but have been unable to do so due to cost. They also might need to fight for students in a more competitive environment than they were used to. But the Pope is encouraging them to do so!

For those skeptical, it is important to also see how choice is complementary to the values and charisms Pope Leo shared. He writes:

"The family remains the first place of education. Catholic schools collaborate with parents; they do not substitute them, because the 'duty ... devolves primarily on them'. The educational alliance requires intentionality, listening and co-responsibility. It is built with processes, tools, shared assessments. It is both hard work and a blessing: when it works, it inspires trust; when it fails, everything becomes more fragile."

Educational choice puts parents in the place of prominence that Pope Leo describes. Choice sees parents as their child's primary educators and welcomes schools to collaborate with them to teach and form their child. It is not easy, as the Pope recognizes. It takes communication, compromise, and maturity. But when it works, it creates incredible institutions where the whole of a child can flourish.

There is an old joke about the non-Catholic kid who enrolled in a Catholic school who went home after the first day and when his mother asked how it went replied, “man, these people take math seriously, they’ve got a guy nailed to a plus sign in every classroom!”

But that ubiquitous image in the Catholic classroom is perfect for thinking about Catholic schools in America today. At first glance, we see suffering, hopeless, and a figure stripped and bleeding. But we all know that isn’t the end of the story. It is actually a symbol of new life and new hope.

It is my hope that Catholic school leaders embrace Pope Leo’s exhortation to be bold and embrace the challenges and opportunities to provide a life-changing education for the millions of students who desperately need it.

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