

# An Update on Vernon C. Polite's: The Future Viability of Catholic High Schools that Serve Predominately Black Student Populations

By Wanda E. Gill

The March 16, 2005 edition of the Detroit Free Press featured a story entitled *Catholic Schools to Close: Former gems in archdiocese's crown have become drains on its resources*. The impact of the eight Detroit area high schools slated for closing is felt by 181 or approximately 6.8% of the 2,662 teachers and 2,241 or approximately 5.4% of the 41,752 students in Catholic schools throughout the six-county archdiocese. According to the article, enrollment in Catholic schools in the city of Detroit has declined 47% in the past five years and represents running operating deficits of over \$3 million for the last five years, with accumulated debts of over \$16 million. These closings follow the closing of 20 schools from 2002 to 2004. Many of these Catholic high schools, slated for closing, are serving predominately Black student populations. Some are affiliated with parishes with diminishing numbers of congregation members who have fewer resources to support these schools. As urban predominantly white populations moved to the suburbs, so, too, did prospective Catholic students. In some of these schools, large percentages of the students are not Catholic. As a result of these population and resource shifts, the archdiocese has been challenged to maintain its mission of providing high quality educational options to children of the poor.

In a March 15, 2005 article, reproduced on the Web entitled *Catholic School Closings Spark Student Protest*, Cardinal Maida and his staff said declining enrollments, massive operating deficits, and unpaid bills led to the decision to close the schools. The archdiocese's position is that the closings are final and there is no appeal process. The students who assembled outside of Notre Dame High School protested because of the swift action, without time to consider other options. In many cases, these schools represent family traditions, with reputations for fine scholarship, outstanding sports programs and religious training that prepare young scholars for the spiritual trials and ethical tribulations that accompany life.

Other cities have experienced of Catholic schools for many of the same reasons. New York has indicated several closings that were reportedly studied and planned over a two year period.

## **Catholic Schools Closing in Brooklyn**

According to an announcement made Feb 9, 2005, the following Catholic schools in Brooklyn will close at the end of the 2005 school year:

- St. Finbar's School, 1825 Bath Av., Bath Beach
- Sacred Hearts-St. Stephen's School, 135 Summit St., Carroll Gardens
- St. Michael's School, 4222 Fourth Ave., Sunset Park
- St. Thomas Aquinas, 211 Eighth St., Park Slope
- St. Catharine of Alexandria School, 1053 41st St., Borough Park

- Resurrection School, 2335 Gerritsen Ave., Gerritsen Beach
- St. John Cantius School, 692 Blake Ave, East New York
- Our Lady of Lourdes School, 11 DeSales Pl, Bushwick

***Brooklyn Diocese To Close 26 Schools in Brooklyn and Queens***

The following is a press release from the Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn:

“Msgr. Michael J. Hardiman, Vicar for Education in the Diocese of Brooklyn, has announced that Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio has "reluctantly" accepted proposals presented to him by the Office of the Superintendent of Catholic School Support Services, the regional vicars and the Parish Fiscal Management Office, calling for a consolidation that will affect 26 parish elementary schools at the end of the school year.

In an announcement issued today (Feb. 9), Msgr. Hardiman cited declining enrollment caused by increasing demographic shifts in Brooklyn and Queens, coupled with a constantly rising cost of operating the schools, as the major factors leading to the reorganization.

Four of the schools will reopen as regional schools in September, guided by a board of pastors and employing a new faculty and staff, he said.”

"Our goal is to continue to have a parochial school presence in every part of the Diocese, if it is at all possible," Msgr. Hardiman said. "This is the best reconfiguration of the schools at this time."

He said: "It is important to note that a seat in a Catholic elementary school will still be available to any student whose current school is affected by the reorganization."

“Seventeen of the 26 schools are in Brooklyn and nine are in Queens, he said. They fall into three categories:

---Nine schools whose students will attend one of the four new regional schools, all in Brooklyn, one each in Williamsburg and Midwood and two in East Flatbush;

---Eight schools whose students will attend a neighboring parish school with which it will formally affiliate, one each in East New York and Bushwick in Brooklyn and one each in Woodside, Sunnyside, Winfield, Maspeth, Elmhurst and Ozone Park in Queens, and

---Nine schools that will not reopen nor affiliate with another school, but whose students will be welcomed at neighboring parish schools, and the sending parishes will retain some financial and pastoral responsibilities for the students in those schools. They are in Gerritsen Beach, Carroll Gardens, Borough Park, Sunset Park,

Park Slope and Bath Beach in Brooklyn, and Astoria, Broad Channel and Rosedale in Queens.”

“For the schools entering the affiliation process, both the parish that will send its students to a nearby school and the receiving school will provide financial and spiritual assistance. The latter will include celebrating Mass, conducting other liturgical services and visiting classrooms for religious instruction and formation.”

Bishop DiMarzio reviewed and analyzed the list of recommendations he received "carefully and with respect for everyone affected" before granting his approval, Msgr. Hardiman said.

"Many of these proposals were developed by parishes and clusters of parishes with the assistance of the superintendent and his staff," he said. "Others, deemed to be less than realistic, were modified by the staff, in consultation with the Vicar for Education, the regional vicars and the Parish Fiscal Management Office, before being presented to the Bishop."

“The proposals were submitted after many months---in some instances, after nearly two years---of consultations involving regional vicars, pastors and principals in clusters of parishes, meetings with parents, and after the gathering of statistical data referring to the long-term viability of schools, specifically over three to five years, he said.”

“Noting that diocesan education officials consider a kindergarten-to-eighth-grade school with 220 students or fewer to be "at-risk" of surviving three-to-five years, Msgr. Hardiman said the schools affected fell under that standard. The 1993 Catholic Education Strategic Planning Project conducted by the Diocese, with the assistance of educators from The Catholic University of America in Washington, established that enrollment benchmark.”

He said the study of the schools "was long and difficult, but it was a road that had to be traveled in order to strengthen schools in Brooklyn and Queens, so that they will be stronger as we move into the future."

"It is regrettable that to date no relief has been available to parents, especially in low-income areas, in the form of tuition tax credits, a fair and equitable plan that would benefit students and their parents," he said. "It is something that we must continually work toward."

“In releasing the names of the schools involved in the transition, Msgr. Hardiman said the new regional school that will open in Williamsburg in the Fall will draw students from three schools: Most Holy Trinity, 140 Montrose Ave., All Saints, 113 Throop Ave., and Transfiguration, 250 Hooper St. It will be located in Most Holy Trinity's building, which was renovated after a 2003 fire.”

“The pastors of the three parishes will serve as a governing board for the school, which is expected to have a new name.”

“Together, the Williamsburg schools have lost 83 students in five years, from 577 to 494, about a 15 percent drop. Located in an area with many low-income families, the schools collectively are receiving \$495,000 in subsidies from the Diocese this year, and the new school will continue to need diocesan funding, in addition to tuition income, to meet operating costs, Msgr. Hardiman said.”

“Two regional schools will open in East Flatbush, at Holy Cross School, 2520 Church Ave., and at St. Rose of Lima School, 259 Parkville Ave. Two other schools will be affected by the regionalization plan: Holy Innocents School, 249 E. 17th St., and Our Lady of Refuge School, 1087 Ocean Ave. Each new school will have a separate and new administration, faculty and staff.”

“Reflecting the pattern of enrollment decline, the four schools enrolled 1,213 students five years ago. This year, they have 726, a loss of 487 students, or about 40 percent. The schools are currently receiving \$305,000 in diocesan support.”

“The fourth regional school will be located at Our Lady Help of Christians School, 1340 E. 29th St., Midwood, which will enroll students from St. Thomas Aquinas School, 1501 Hendrickson St., Flatlands, whose enrollment has declined from 344 five years ago to 200 today. As at the other regional schools, it will have a separate and new administration, faculty and staff.”

“Schools in eight parishes---two in Brooklyn and six in Queens---will formally affiliate with schools that operate in nearby parishes.”

“In Brooklyn's East New York community, St. John Cantius School, 692 Blake Ave., will affiliate with St. Michael's School, 237 Jerome St. In Bushwick, Our Lady of Lourdes School, 11 DeSales Pl., will affiliate with St. Elizabeth Seton School, 751 Knickerbocker Ave., located in St. Martin of Tours-Fourteen Holy Martyrs parish.”

“Over the past five years, the student population at St. John Cantius has dropped by 93, from 285 to 192. While Our Lady of Lourdes' enrollment has remained stable at about 175, it has been "at-risk" because of a low enrollment for more than a decade.

St. Teresa's School, 50-15 44th St., Woodside, will affiliate with St. Raphael's School, 48-25 37th St., Long Island City. St. Teresa's enrollment decline has been from 266 students in 1999-2000 to 151 currently, reflecting sharp demographic changes in the local community.

Queen of Angels School, 41-12 44th St., Sunnyside, and Blessed Virgin Mary Help of Christians School, 70-31 48th Ave., Winfield, will affiliate with St. Sebastian's School, 39-76 58th St., Woodside. The five-year enrollment decline for the Sunnyside school has been 81, from 230 to 149, and 58 for the Winfield school, from 190 to 132.”

“Ascension School, 86-37 53rd Ave., Elmhurst, will affiliate with St. Adalbert's School, 52-29 83rd St., Elmhurst. Ascension has witnessed a five-year enrollment decline of 77 students, from 222 to 145.”

“In Ozone Park, St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr School, 90-01 101st Ave., will affiliate with nearby Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary School, 101-60 92nd St. St. Stanislaus has had an enrollment reduction of 57, from 224 to 167, in five years.”

“Two neighboring schools in Maspeth will enter into an affiliation. Holy Cross School, 56-01 61st St., will affiliate with St. Stanislaus Kostka School, 61-17 Grand Ave. Holy Cross has had a decline in enrolled students of more than 100 since 1999, from 259 to 151.”

“The following schools will not reopen, but neighboring schools will accept students choosing to transfer there. There will be a financial and spiritual component of support in each case. Receiving schools will schedule an "open house" to assist parents in the transfer process.”

“---St. Finbar's School, 1825 Bath Av., Bath Beach. Its student population of 164 is marginally smaller than the 173 it enrolled five years ago, but with a consistent enrollment under 200 it has been an "at-risk" school for more than ten years. The nearby schools are St. Frances Cabrini and St. Mary Mother of Jesus.

---Sacred Hearts-St. Stephen's School, 135 Summit St., Carroll Gardens. In the last four years, its enrollment has dropped by 75 students, from 225 to 150. St. Saviour's is a nearby school.

---St. Michael's School, 4222 Fourth Ave., Sunset Park. The student population has declined by 42, from 189 to 147, in five years. St. Agatha and Our Lady of Perpetual Help Schools are nearby.

---St. Thomas Aquinas, 211 Eighth St., Park Slope. It has seen an enrollment drop of 80 students in five years, from 243 to 163. Nearby is Holy Name School.

---St. Catharine of Alexandria School, 1053 41st St., Borough Park, has experienced an enrollment decrease of 93 from five years ago, from 221 to 128. St. Agatha's, Our Lady of Perpetual Help and Immaculate Heart of Mary are neighboring schools.

---Resurrection School, 2335 Gerritsen Ave., Gerritsen Beach, has seen its student population drop from 241 to 132 in five years. Good Shepherd, St. Edmund's and St. Mark's Schools are nearby.

---St. Pius X School, 147-65 249th St. Rosedale, has lost 134 students in five years, from 281 to 147. St. Clare's School is also located in Rosedale.

---St. Virgilius School, 16 Noel Rd., Broad Channel, with 115 students, had 142 students in 1999-2000, a loss of 27 students. Schools in the Rockaways are St. Camillus, Rockaway Park, and St. Rose of Lima, Rockaway Beach. St. Helen's, Howard Beach, is also in the geographic area.”

Msgr. Hardiman said the superintendent's office "will make every effort" to assist principals, teachers and office staff affected by the reconfiguration who will be seeking employment in other parish schools.

A review and analysis of the viability of other schools in future years is ongoing, directed by Dr. Thomas Chadzutko, Superintendent of Catholic School Support Services, and his professional staff, according to the education vicar.

Statistical information that has guided the continuing study includes an 11,000-student enrollment falloff among all parish schools in Brooklyn and Queens in five years and direct assistance of \$7 million by the Diocese last year to schools whose revenues could not meet expenses.

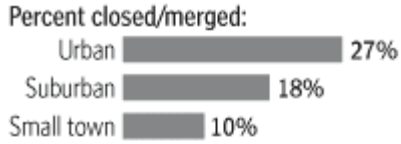
**In the Boston Globe, 5/29/04, the web headline about the closing of selected parishes read**

**[Closings spur O'Malley, Menino to vow joint effort](#)**

(Boston Globe, 5/29/04)

Fearing that the closing of more than a dozen Catholic parishes in Boston will terminate essential social services that have operated for years in those churches, Mayor Thomas M. Menino and Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley have pledged to find new homes for the programs, the mayor said yesterday.

**WHERE THEY ARE**

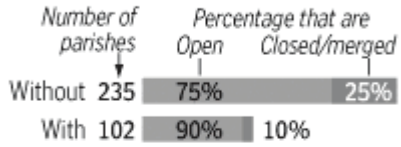


**AVERAGE ATTENDANCE\***

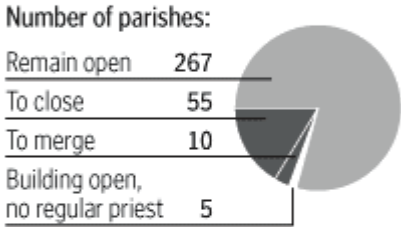


\* Monthlong Sunday Mass census, October 2003.

**PARISH SCHOOL**

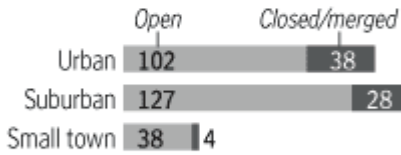


**THE DECISION**

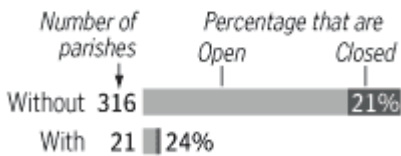


NOTE: Does not include 20 parishes in Lawrence and Lowell which will be decided later.

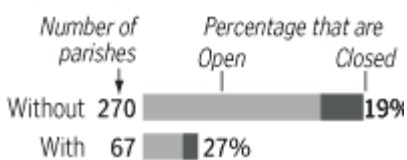
**WHERE THEY ARE**



**RELIGIOUS ORDER AFFILIATION**



**NON-ENGLISH MASS**



SOURCE: Data analysis by Bill Dedman

GLOBE STAFF GRAPHIC

And yet, in some areas of the country, like Drexel Hill, PA, parishioners themselves have made a strong case for support of Catholic schools. In the Catholic News Service, April 1, 2005, the headline read:

**“Tuition-free Catholic school thrives by emphasizing stewardship”**

DREXEL HILL, Pa. (CNS) -- In an era of school closings and consolidations, declining enrollment and skyrocketing costs, St. Andrew the Apostle School in Drexel Hill has made history as the only tuition-free parochial school in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. It's an achievement the parishioners attribute to trust in God and a parishwide commitment to stewardship. "Christian stewardship is not a tithing program," said Steve Litz of St. Andrew's stewardship committee. "It's a way of life. It means going beyond the minimum of weekly Mass and putting your envelope in the basket. "Really living the Gospel message means realizing that, opposed to what our culture says, we own nothing," he added. "Everything we have is a gift, and it's how we use those gifts that will determine the final outcome of our salvation. This is not a program designed to get a parish out of the red. It's about deepening our relationship with Christ."

When Dr. Polite completed his study of what he termed the Cornerstone schools, reported in chapter 7, “Cornerstones, Catholic High Schools That Serve Predominantly African American Student Populations” (see copy that was disseminated) in *Catholic Schools at the Crossroads: Survival and Transformation* edited by James Youniss and John J. Convey, published in 2000 by Teachers College, Columbia University, he was interested in studying high schools with majority African American populations. In the book chapter, Dr. Polite describes the social contexts of these schools with the question “What are the commonplace characteristics and practices of Catholic high schools that serve predominantly African American student populations? “

Dr. Polite refers to these schools as cornerstones and defines the term “Cornerstone” from Psalms 118:22-23, “*The stone that the builders rejected has become the Cornerstone. By the Lord has this been done, it is wonderful in our eyes.* “

Dr. Polite studied 31 Cornerstone schools, 26 of which are located in communities described as inner city or urban. Dr. Polite designed and administered the African American Catholic High School Survey, a 75-item instrument made up of multiple choice and descriptive items designed to provide school information on students, the principal, the curriculum and instruction, finances and development, Catholic identity, and African American cultural identify. Dr. Polite also conducted site visits to 22 of the identified schools to collect additional qualitative data, using procedures that he developed and implemented nationally with urban principals (Polite, McClure, & Rollie, 1997). Qualitative data was collected and analyzed and included an in-depth reflective 60 minute conversation with the principals; school building tours; examination of official and informal documents; and school and classroom observations. Each in-depth conversation provided both factual information regarding the principal’s perceptions, beliefs, and



values, and the school's historical and present operations; and also valuable, perception-based data needed to develop realistic frames of the schooling context.

In Dr. Polite's description of the Cornerstone schools, he identifies three major categories for the book chapter:

- privately owned schools (16) supported primarily by Catholic religious communities of nuns, priests, or brothers that were established in the late 1800s and early 1900s;
- diocesan owned schools (15) formed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mainly in the 1950s and 1960s; and
- historically African American schools (10 including both privately owned and diocesan supported schools).

In the book chapter, Table 7.1 demonstrates the name, city, founding date, ownership, enrollment, tuition, graduates (%) and college attendance rates for the African American Cornerstones. For the purpose of this paper, I'm excluding the percentage of graduates, since all were from 96-100% for each school and the college attendance rates since all but two were in the 96-100% range. The two schools in the 91-100% range were Holy Family and St. Martin de Porres. I'm re-titling the table as Table 1.

**Table 1: African American Cornerstones: Founding, Enrollment, Tuition**

School	City	Founding	Ownership	Enrollment	Tuition
St. Frances Academy	Baltimore	1828	Private	240	3,500
St. Mary's Academy	New Orleans	1867	Private	627	1,400
Xavier Prep.	New Orleans	1915	Private	515	2,600
St. Jude	Montgomery	1934	Other	156	1,800
Holy Family	Birmingham	1943	Private	190	1,725
St. Augustine	New Orleans	1951	Private	680	2,700
Hales Franciscan	Chicago	1963	Private	334	3,100
St. Martin de Porres	Detroit	1967	Diocesan	700	3,100
Cardinal Ritter	St. Louis	1979	Diocesan	257	2,800
Loyola	Detroit	1993	Other	115	2,500

Among Dr. Polite's findings of interest to this session include the following facts reported by principals:

- the percentage of African American students attending the Cornerstone schools is increasing and the students represent lower-income families;

- Nearly half of the schools report that they are serving increasing numbers of students who are living in poverty, indicating that upper-middle income African American parents are not likely to select predominantly African American Catholic schools for their children.
- Increasing numbers of African American students matriculating in Cornerstone schools are perceived by their principals as having special needs.
- An increasing number of students are “affected” by human immunodeficiency virus or HIV.

Additionally, less significant trends reported by some principals include:

- Nine schools reported increasing numbers of students who are habitual behavior problems;
- The principals of 10 schools indicated that they are receiving increasing numbers of students who are living in abusive households.

With increasing student needs, few resources, low student enrollment, why, then, are Catholic high schools that serve predominantly African American students viable?

- ✚ The Catholic Church has, as one of its fundamental missions, the evangelical spreading of the gospel, conversion and education of the poor.
- ✚ Catholic schools instill the tenets of the church from grade school through high school. As parents can attest, there is no other more important age than high school to reinforce the values of the church and to promote the teachings of Christ. Children cannot get the same dose of morality in public high schools that they do in Catholic high schools.
- ✚ Instruction in Latin, common in many Catholic high schools, provides Catholic students with a definite advantage on SAT, ACT and other tests where vocabulary is critical.
- ✚ Catholic high schools sponsor open retreats where students and staff find a sense of belonging. These retreats serve a maintenance function, to keep students and staff affiliated and builds on the Catholic identity.
- ✚ Teachers in Catholic schools stay affiliated because they find the teaching fulfilling. They can see the results of their teaching. Teachers know whole families and students by names and personalities.
- ✚ Principals in Catholic schools provide leadership and believe in the Catholic identity of the schools and work to preserve the religious and spiritual nature of the schools. The Pope talks about Catholic institutions being proud of their identity. Every high school and every university has its identity. Catholic schools’ purpose and effectiveness is tied to their identity.
- ✚ Stakeholders in Catholic schools, like principals, teachers, parents and students, should be a part of the discussion on viability and school closings because they may be able to come up to alternatives to closings. When the decision makers leave these populations out of the decision making process, they open the door for less support from them in the future.

- ✚ In third world countries, the impact of closings is much heavier because people are less mobile. Catholic schools are social institutions. These schools don't close without long term plans and projections. The criteria for closing are not based solely on financial viability alone.
- ✚ In some other countries, Catholic school closings through government takeover were a way to reduce the influence of the Church on society. When people have an opportunity to fight closings, they do. They immediately set up alternatives. In Nigeria, after the government takeover of Catholic schools, they've been trying to give the schools back to the Church. The Church now prefers getting money from the state for the schools that were taken over so that the Church can start new schools because what was being returned were not the same schools that were confiscated in Nigeria. Similarly, as schools are consolidated in the U.S., the identities of both schools being consolidated are lost. If school leadership is given responsibility for some of the debt, they may be able to find ways to liquidate that debt.
- ✚ Catholic identity is important to Catholic schools. Just as a corporation makes its name known through brands and commodities with value, so, too, do Catholic schools. That identity is not negotiable and is known by all. When schools stick to the Church's identity, they attract attention and respect. With identity on display, all call makes a clear decision. Religion is the underpinning of the schools. Preserving the Catholic identity doesn't mean active evangelism but experiencing church in the school (religious education and treatment) gives students and teachers options to choose from. The church insists on unity not uniformity. Unity of purpose, common principles are the same but opinions and methods may differ. The same goals may be achieved. The church emphasizes enculturation. Your reach culture (Catholic faith that you have). Faith comes through individual's cultural experiences and those cultural experiences can be different. We reach faith with culture and faith enriches one's culture. Faith enlightens you. The richness of culture coming into faith doesn't detract or reduce from the purity or authenticity of faith. This is the basis of Dr. Polite's analysis of the African American experience per Father Joseph Abba. For a long time, we've operated Catholic schools with a sense of independence when it's not necessarily so. An existing network between Catholic schools as a universal enterprise may be a viable option. The universal church doesn't believe the wealth of the rich alone should empower others. The faith of the poor should enrich the wealthy. Enrichment of your resources when there is a network – each one is struggling on its own. One perspective is that we may need to consider Catholic schools in a similar way that we view the education of priests and nuns.
- ✚ Catholic high schools increase the debate on morality, sex education including abstinence, and other topics at a time when there is little discussion and simplistic solutions to very complicated issues at a time when high school students are faced with the sexual mores of their cultures.
- ✚ The religious teachings of the church throughout history are as real now as they were in years past.
- ✚ Catholic high schools can be leaders of parents and other caregivers. Unlike public schools, Catholic schools promote programs and activities like fund raising

- events (and bingo), that include parents. Through these and other activities, Catholic schools promote a work ethic, perseverance, goal attainment through short term and long term goals, and other action oriented values that promote families, including children.
- ✚ Most of the religious orders are still interested in serving the poor, including African Americans, through Catholic schools.
  - ✚ Catholic high schools that serve predominantly African American students are viable because of the interest of the National Black Catholic Congress, as established through the high School Consortium, founded in 1995. (see Dr. Polite's Chapter) The overarching goal of the consortium is to put into place national strategies and support systems to ensure the survival of these schools and their service to African American communities (Dr. Polite reports from the African American Bishops of the United States, 1984.).
  - ✚ Catholic high schools that serve African American students can also be demonstration models of what works for Catholic high schools serving Hispanic and other minority populations.
  - ✚ The church's work in Africa, Asian and Latin America includes the provision of schools in areas where problems far exceed the resources to meet them. So why wouldn't the church continue high schools that are predominantly African American in America's inner cities? Resources from America at large support these schools in other countries. Why not here?
  - ✚ The Catholic high school students who graduate are the future contributors to the church. With improved earnings power due to a better education, African American graduates of Catholic high schools can contribute more to the church than undereducated and poor Catholics.
  - ✚ With the national educational focus on the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, with its provisions for more public funds for private schools, including Catholic schools, more educational options seem to fit the national trend, rather than fewer options.
  - ✚ In Washington, D.C., under the Washington Scholarship Fund, established through federal money to provide educational options to students in underperforming schools, the Archdiocese of Washington was called upon to provide spaces in Catholic high schools to public school students. The trend will continue for a need for more Catholic high school options in urban areas, as the choice provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* are made available in more cities to more predominantly African American populations.
  - ✚ As a nation, more is owed to African Americans than any other group, given the history of benign neglect.