

## RESPONSES FROM THE FIELD

*In an effort to encourage dialogue and reflection on matters of common concern and interest, we invite responses on selected articles from other educators, who engage the text critically and offer some reflections about its utility and validity.*

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The accessibility of Catholic education at the secondary level is an important issue to consider. As a parent of a Catholic high school student, I experience firsthand the reality of rising tuition costs. The high school, like many schools, struggles to provide Catholic education to as many students as possible, while meeting the daily operating costs of providing a high quality Gospel-based Catholic education. I hear the parent conversations at the soccer games and in the church parking lot about the rumors of tuition increases, the loss of a good teacher to the public school because of salary, and the strains on the family budget. The benefits of a Catholic education are becoming less affordable, and, perhaps, less valuable, to more and more families.

Parents have identified the cost of secondary Catholic education as the primary factor in choosing public over Catholic schools. The problem will require the resources and commitment of the local churches and the dioceses to fund Catholic education for all children. In *Renewing our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2005) acknowledges the responsibility of the entire Catholic community to support Catholic education financially. The Catholic high school in our area is an interparish school, staffed by the Christian Brothers and the School Sisters of Notre Dame. The school draws students from approximately 16 parishes in the area. Each local church contributes a per capita amount for each of its parishioners who attend the high school. With this arrangement, the local churches affirm their role and responsibility in the mission of Catholic education. Sadly, many parishes and dioceses place the burden of Catholic education on the shoulders of the parents and ignore the critical role Catholic schools play in the future of the Church. The bishops need to move beyond the rhetoric of their

statement and lead the charge in implementing their recommendations. Educating the clergy and the laity about their roles as stewards of Catholic education would be a worthy starting point.

While parents may say that money is a key factor, it would be interesting to study the value they place on Catholic education. Does the presence of a strong Catholic identity inspire them to make Catholic education a high priority? If the climate of the Catholic school is indistinguishable from a good public school, parents may be less motivated to make sacrifices, seek financial aid, or pay tuition. Some of the problem may be traced back to administrators and teachers who are strong educators, but lack knowledge of the mission of Catholic education. The schools in which they work are well managed, but Catholic identity and spiritual leadership are weak. Parents may also fail to appreciate how the culture of a Catholic school, with its access to sacraments, religious instruction, prayer, Scripture, and faith-filled role models can transform their children's lives. As one mother remarked about a small public high school, "Most of the kids who attend the school are Catholic, so it's just like going to a Catholic school." If our schools are viewed as a location where Catholics learn the three R's together, small wonder that people opt to spend their money differently. If a school has a strong Catholic identity, it can promote the value of Catholic education to conflicted parents. If it does not, the choice for free public education becomes that much easier.

While applauding the efforts of the Church to offer its educational services to the poor, it is important not to dismiss the impact that Catholic secondary education can have on the middle and upper class students it serves. While vigorously fighting the trend of Catholic schools becoming the havens of the well-to-do, the children of wealthy families are likely to become influential leaders in government, science, medicine, education, and business. These future policymakers stand in need of an education grounded in social justice, Catholic values, and ethics. The rich also have a need to hear the Gospel; sometimes their need is even greater. While aggressively searching for ways to make Catholic education accessible to all socioeconomic classes, we can capitalize on the opportunity to make a difference in the world through shaping individuals whose actions and decisions may ultimately lead to a more ethical and just society.

## REFERENCE

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I wish to express my gratitude for the research project of John Huber, C.S.B. It affirms what seems to be the attitude and trend in Catholic secondary schools as well as elementary and middle schools.

I am a product of Catholic school education—kindergarten through graduate school—and was influenced by the educational mission and core values of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (Mequon Wisconsin Province) and the Franciscan Friars (Assumption BVM Province) which established a culture of learning. I attribute three of my Catholic education core values to these cultures.

First, as teachers, they indicated that it is in the questions that we ask that we expand our understanding of the mysteries of life which we are called to live—not necessarily in the answers to these questions. Maybe that is why I am attracted to *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998), asking the essential questions and understanding the key concepts. So, I probably will raise more questions in this response than provide answers. The second gift I received from my teachers in Catholic school is the ability to clarify language which we use to describe these mysteries of life. Finally, the third relates to the first two—in asking the questions and clarifying the language, we continue to keep the conversations going which assists in living the mysteries of life.

Rev. William J. Byron, S.J. (1998) wrote an article on Catholic Social Teaching which was published in *America*. He indicated that he preferred the language of a preferential “protection” of the poor rather than an “option” for the poor. In Catholic education, we have an obligation to educate all who come and make an investment in the person’s development—spiritually, physically, intellectually, and emotionally. I have always believed that my teachers invested their time, talent, and treasure in my life so that one day, I would invest in the lives of the young because it is an investment in their lives—not a handout I was giving them. When we conceive our vision, mission, and core values as investment in the lives of the young, we want all to have accessibility to Catholic school education, and invite others to make that same investment with their time, talent, and treasure. Therefore, parishioners should be encouraged to make a financial investment in the lives of the young rather than offer a subsidy, financial aid, or grant to the families. A Catholic school is not a welfare state we are undertaking but a ministry of

the Church to educate the young as part of building the Kingdom of God here on earth as it is in the heavens. Clarifying our language is important in this regard so that we can invite others to invest rather than subsidize the education of the next generation. And the question might be—in what way are we able to change the paradigm to explain this reality—the preferential investment in the formation and education of the young rather than the subsidizing of Catholic schools.

Another idea which has influenced my thinking is one from Roger Cardinal Mahony of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. He once said that the Church does not need a mission—the mission of Jesus needs a Church.

Clarifying the language in what we want people to invest is paramount and when we do this, the questions will ignite the conversations—the third lesson of my own formation and education. The formational and educational mission of the Church; namely, message, community, service, and prayer-worship, needs an educational system, not necessarily a school building, in order to provide for the future of our Church.

## REFERENCES

- Byron, W. J. (1998, October 31). Ten building blocks of Catholic social teaching. *America*, 179, 9-12.
- Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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Huber's (2007) findings are a restatement of the major financial challenge facing all Catholic school administrators. Absent free or low cost labor, how can Catholic schools maintain financial self-sufficiency while serving students from lower to middle income families? As the development director of a diocesan Catholic high school, I found two main issues in this article particularly relevant to the challenges facing Catholic schools.

First, Huber recommends the need for new and creative ways to raise funds in order to build endowments restricted for financial assistance. I believe the solution to this dilemma is more complex than simply creating endowments. Endowments are a solution for future need, but are limited in their ability to help the students of today. For example, an endowment gift of \$200,000 on average would result in only \$10,000 of assistance per year for

current students. Considering the average tuition rate of \$6,413 and the average financial aid grant of \$1,882 (Huber, 2007), this sizeable gift would impact only a few students per year. If our goal is to make Catholic education available to as many students as possible sooner rather than later, building an endowment will need to be accompanied by a strategy that has a more immediate impact.

Huber's second recommendation for increasing financial assistance is to strive for public funds in support of Catholic schools. While Huber does not specify the type of public funding schools should seek out, it seems that he is advocating that the Catholic Church do what it can to encourage support for school choice legislation. While these types of programs will undoubtedly benefit Catholic schools, there is no guarantee that these types of programs will become a reality in all parts of the country.

As Catholic high schools work to address their needs for financial aid, I believe a multi-faceted approach that involves both short- and long-term solutions is necessary. In the short term, Catholic schools need to work harder to encourage current parents, parents of alumni, and their alumni to allocate a percentage of their annual giving toward financial assistance. Another short-term solution is for schools to seek matching funds for the aid that they currently offer via foundations or corporations. In the Diocese of Fort Wayne/South Bend, we have identified and partnered with a number of foundations that are dedicated to helping students from low and middle income families take advantage of Catholic education. The matching gift effect of these groups has allowed some of our schools to almost double their annual available financial assistance.

In the long term, Catholic schools need to establish endowments specifically dedicated toward financial assistance without adversely impacting current annual giving. One particularly effective method for building endowments is for schools to allocate all memorial and planned giving donations toward financial assistance. These gifts are usually given in honor or remembrance of specific individuals after their death; therefore these gifts should not be relied upon for any annual fund raising efforts. The permanent nature of an endowment usually aligns well with the intentions behind these types of gifts.

By combining development strategies that have both a long- and short-term outlook, I believe that Catholic schools can effectively increase their available financial assistance both now and in the future, and open the doors of Catholic education to families of all economic backgrounds.

## REFERENCE

- Huber, J. B. (2007). The accessibility of Catholic secondary schools to the various socioeconomic classes of Catholic families. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice*, 10(3), 271-287.