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*World Bank*

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## Declining Enrollment in Catholic Schools in the West and Insights from the United States

Quentin Wodon<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** While enrollment in Catholic schools is rising in the global south, it is declining in many Western countries. Providing a quality and holistic education experience remains essential in both developed and developing countries, especially for disadvantaged groups. But in addition, in developed countries, trade-offs may have to be confronted to stem the decline in enrollment that affects the financial sustainability of schools. Building on a presentation made at the closing plenary of OIEC's World Congress in New York, this paper focuses on the United States where enrollment in Catholic schools has been dropping for more than 50 years. In the absence of state support for Catholic schools and in a context of rising operating costs and therefore tuition, the decline in enrollment is due in part to a lack of affordability of schools given high out-of-pocket costs paid by parents. But other factors related to perceptions about Catholic schools also play a role. To stem the decline in enrollment, market research can help, including to assess how favorably Catholic and other types of schools are perceived in the population. The paper relies on data collected for the National Catholic Education Association to compare favorability ratings by type of schools and assess factors associated with these perceptions.

While enrollment in Catholic schools has been rapidly growing in much of the global south as discussed in a separate paper in this symposium (Wodon, 2020a), the situation is different in developed countries where enrollment has remained flat, or has declined in many cases. In the United States in particular, enrollment has been declining for more than 50 years. According to McDonald & Schultz (2018), enrollment declined from 5.2 million students

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank and OIEC

in the mid 1960s to about 1.8 million today. This has put a strain on the financial sustainability of many schools (National Catholic Education Association, 2018). To put these numbers in global perspective, the share of students in Catholic schools globally who lived in the United States in 1973, the first year for which global data on enrollment in Catholic schools are available in the statistical yearbooks of the Church, was 13.6 percent for primary schools and 10.4 percent at the secondary level. By 2016, the United States accounted for only 3.4 percent and 2.9 percent of all students in Catholic primary and secondary schools respectively (estimates based on data from *Secretaria Status* (2019); see (Wodon, 2018b, 2019)).

Other developed countries have done better, but not necessarily great. This can be illustrated with data for Ireland and Great Britain<sup>1</sup> over the last three to four decades (Wodon, 2020b). In Ireland, enrollment in K-12 schools has been stable at 0.84 million students in 2016 versus 0.87 million in 1980. In Great Britain, it declined slightly from 0.88 million students in 1980 to 0.72 million in 2016 according to data from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church. Yet because of a rising number of students, in both countries the market share of Catholic schools declined. Considering statistics for Europe as a whole, enrollment in primary schools in 1980 stood at 4.0 million. By 2016, it had dropped by one fourth to 3.0 million. At the secondary level, enrollment increased only slightly from 3.4 million to 3.6 million, which suggests a lag in comparison to the overall increase in the number of students over that time.

Multiple factors may have led to the enrollment crisis in K-12 Catholic schools in many developed countries. In this paper, the focus is on the United States where the issue of affordability looms large. Federal support for Catholic schools is severely restricted under the Constitution. While some states have adopted voucher and other programs under school choice legislation that can help reduce out-of-pocket tuition costs for parents, revenue from these programs often account for just a few percent of schools' budgets. As parents foot most of the bill for their children's education in Catholic schools, rising tuition costs due to a growing reliance on lay teachers and staff have led many schools to be out of reach for the poor and the middle class. This is the case even though teachers in Catholic schools often work for lower pay than in public schools. This situation has contributed over time to an erosion in enrollment. In Great Britain, Ireland, and many other European countries, the decline in enrollment was less steep probably in part thanks to (at least some) state funding for Catholic schools, but other factors, including a process of secularization, have also led to worrying trends in enrollment.

In the United States itself, affordability is also not the sole reason why Catholic schools have lost ground. As noted by Murnane & Reardon (2018), enrollment actually increased over the last few decades in other types of private schools for which tuition also increased. The authors suggest

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<sup>1</sup> Given that the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church do not report enrollment specifically for England and Wales separately from Scotland, the unit of analysis for the quantitative analysis in this paper is Great Britain.

that three factors led Catholic schools to fare worse than other private schools. First, because many Catholic schools were located in urban areas, they were especially exposed to competition from new charter schools. Second, disaffection from the Church may have weakened the traditional bounds that existed between communities and their Catholic schools, especially in the Northeast where the sexual abuse scandal was particularly severe, as was the drop in enrollment. Third, the poor who tended to benefit the most from academic gains when enrolling in Catholic schools were hardest hit by rising tuition.

To thrive, or even to survive, Catholic schools in the United States, and to some extent in other developed countries as well, must adopt new strategies to stem the decline in enrollment. This means responding to parental priorities for their children. Yet simply focusing on those parents who already send their children to Catholic schools is not likely to stem the decline in enrollment. Catholic networks of schools should also try to understand the priorities of parents who would be willing to consider Catholic schools, but have not yet enrolled their children in those schools, since these parents would be a natural target to stem the decline in enrollment and ensure the sustainability of existing schools. This may in turn imply considering some changes to accommodate these parents' priorities. To think about those issues, there is value in conducting market research to inform school leaders about options.

The objective of this paper is to share a few preliminary results from such research, based on data recently collected by the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), in order to suggest how market research data can provide useful insights for Catholic school leaders. After a brief discussion of the literature on the Catholic school effect, the core of the paper consists in estimating favorability ratings among the US population by type of school and assessing how selected factors are associated with favorable or unfavorable perceptions. A brief conclusion follows.

### **Catholic School Advantage**

What is the perception of the population and parents about different types of schools? This question is fundamental for the future of Catholic schools today in the United States. Parental perceptions may relate in part to the quality of the education provided in the schools, and the available data indeed suggest that Catholic schools on average tend to provide a quality education, as discussed in Wodon (2018a). In particular, measures of student performance on standardized tests from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) suggest that average scores for students in Catholic schools tend to be higher than for students in public schools, whether one considers mathematics, reading, or other topics. This seems true in elementary as well as middle and high schools. Differences in student performance between Catholic and public schools are not large, but they are statistically significant.

Importantly, the higher average scores for students in Catholic schools seem to come in part from a smaller share of students performing at low levels. That is, the shares of students performing at or above the basic level but below proficiency are not very different between Catholic and public schools, but Catholic schools have more students performing above proficiency level, and fewer students performing below the base level, which matters for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

These simple comparisons of average student performance between Catholic and public schools may be encouraging for Catholic schools, but they do not imply that the schools themselves perform better than public schools, since differences in performance may be due instead to differences in the characteristics of students attending the two types of schools. Still, broadly speaking, the research literature dating back to pioneering work among others by Coleman et al. (1982); Jepsen (2003), Greeley (1982), Coleman & Hoffa (1987), and Bryk et al. (1993) suggests the possibility of a Catholic school effect linked to core values espoused by the schools such as those of community, high expectations for students, and a concern for social justice leading schools to reach out to low-income and minority students. Subsequent more technical work also found evidence of a potential Catholic school effect (Carbonaro, 2006; Evans & Schwab, 1995; Freeman & Berends, 2016; Hallinan & Kubitschek, 2013; Sander, 1996; Sander & Krautman, 1995). Some studies found no such effect after controlling for the characteristics of students enrolled in Catholic schools (Elder & Jepsen, 2014), but overall a majority of the available studies tend to suggest a positive effect. Note that this is a different issue from the question of whether the presence of Catholic schools may lead to system-wide gains in student learning, as argued for example by West and Woessmann (2010).

Yet, perceptions of Catholic and other types of schools do not depend solely on academic performance. Decisions made by parents to send their children to Catholic schools are based on a wider array of considerations. Beyond cognitive skills, even when keeping a focus on whether students are being equipped with the skills they will need in the labor market, schools should enable students to become team-oriented problem-solvers. Socio-emotional skills are also essential, and probably a larger driver to success in labor markets (and more generally in life) than cognitive skills. Finally, character education and grit must also be nurtured, as should civic values, with some tentative evidence that Catholic schools may also do relatively well in this area (Green et al., 2018a, 2018b)

### **Favorability Ratings for Catholic and Other Types of Schools**

Despite the likelihood of a Catholic school advantage, enrollment has been declining substantially for more than 50 years, as discussed earlier, in part due to rising tuition costs that make Catholic schools difficult to afford for low and middle income parents. In order to help Catholic school leaders understand parental perspectives on school choice, a market research survey

was implemented in 2017 by Mayhill Strategies LLC with funding from the Catholic Education Philanthropy Working Group and support from FADICA (Foundations and Donors interested in Catholic Activities) and the Philanthropy Roundtable. The research led to the publication of a report available online entitled *The Catholic School Choice: Understanding the Perspectives of Parents and Opportunities for More Engagement* (National Catholic Education Association and FADICA, 2018). The report is based on a mixed research methodology with both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. This paper conducts more detailed analysis of the quantitative data collected for the report. The survey sample is nationally representative and was collected online in March-April 2017 with a total of 1,403 adult respondents. As several target groups were oversampled (including Hispanic parents), sample weights based on the U.S. Census and findings from the Pew Research Foundation were used to adjust population shares to reflect the demographic profile of the adult American population.

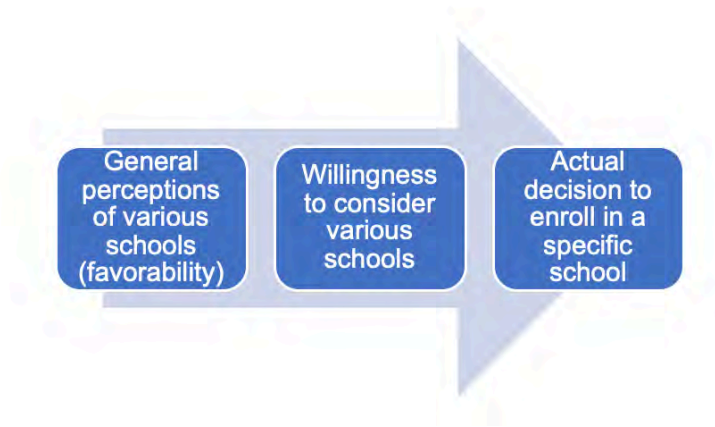
The dataset is rich, and the analysis in this paper is but a first “installment” in a broader program of work to look at factors leading parents to chose Catholic schools for their children. Specifically, the focus for this paper is on favorability ratings for various types of schools. Understanding whether the population as a whole, and parents in particular, views Catholic schools favorably matters not only for whether Catholic schools are likely to benefit from partial support for some of their students through school choice legislation at the state level, but also to find ways to stem the decline in enrollment.

While there is no magic bullet to solve the challenges faced by Catholic schools, market research can help to understand the strengths and vulnerabilities of the schools. Conceptually, as shown in Figure 1, the issue of how favorably the population sees Catholic and other schools can be considered as the first step in a three step process where the second step is whether parents are willing to consider the schools for their children, and the third step is the actual decision to enroll their children in a specific school. Clearly, parents who do not see a specific type of schools favorably are not likely to consider this type of schools for their children, which in turn would not lead to actual enrollment.

The survey identifies six different types of schools. The first three are public schools. Traditional public schools are owned, operated, and funded by government agencies, typically at the state level. Charter schools are owned and funded by the state, but operated by private entities under a contract with the government entity. Magnet schools are public schools that aim to attract highly talented students, often with a focus on technology, science or the arts. The next three types of schools are owned and operated by private entities, typically with no or only limited funding from local, state, or federal governments. The first of these modalities in the survey corresponds to secular (non-religious) private schools. The other two correspond to Catholic schools and other (non-Catholic) religious schools.

**Figure 1**

***Thought Process for the Decision to Enroll One's Children in a Specific Type of School***



The survey asked a wide range of questions to respondents to assess the perceptions of Catholic schools, but the most general question, which is the focus of this paper, reads as follows: “Below is a list of the different types of schools that students might attend in this country for grades K-12. Please indicate how favorable you feel toward each.” Respondents rated the various types of schools on a four-point scale from very favorable to very unfavorable, with an additional modality if they never heard about the schools or did not feel that they knew enough to provide an assessment.

Table 1 provides the shares of respondents rating the various types of schools by degree of favorability. Public schools have higher proportions of very favorable ratings (33.5 percent of the sample) and a large share as well of favorable ratings (37.6 percent). They also have lower proportions of respondents stating that they do not know enough to rate the schools. All five other types of schools have somewhat similar high favorability ratings, with just above one fifth or respondents perceiving the schools very favorably, and two fifths perceiving them favorably, although that specific proportion is higher for private non-religious schools (50.0 percent). However, Catholic schools have a higher proportion of very unfavorable ratings (11.8 percent) and somewhat unfavorable ratings (17.1 percent) and a smaller proportion of respondents not expressing a view than is the case for the four other types of non-public schools. Similar results are observed for other religious schools, suggesting that some unfavorable ratings may not be specific to Catholic schools, but applicable to many religious schools.

**Table 1**  
**Favorability Ratings by Type of School (%)**

	Public Schools		
	Public	Charter	Magnet
Very favorable	33.4	22.5	21.3
Somewhat favorable	37.6	44.0	37.9
Somewhat unfavorable	19.3	14.1	11.0
Very unfavorable	8.8	6.1	6.1
Never heard/don't know	0.9	13.3	23.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Private Schools		
	Private	Catholic	Other Rel.
Very favorable	24.7	22.1	20.2
Somewhat favorable	50.0	40.5	39.8
Somewhat unfavorable	11.2	17.1	17.7
Very unfavorable	4.8	11.8	10.6
Never heard/don't know	9.4	8.5	11.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's estimation with FADICA 2017 survey.

Just under two thirds (62.6 percent) of respondents have a favorable or very favorable perception of Catholic schools. This is encouraging given that that share is more than ten times higher than the market share of catholic schools in the country, suggesting potential for growth. Yet more than a fourth (28.9 percent) has a somewhat or very unfavorable view of the schools. Table 2 provides odds of a favorable versus non-favorable perception of the various types of schools. This is done by dividing the share of respondents with a very or somewhat favorable perception by the share of those with a very or somewhat unfavorable perception. For Catholic and other religious schools, the odds of a favorable perception are respectively at 2.2 and 2.1. For all other types of schools the odds are higher, with the highest odds observed for private non-religious schools (at 4.7), followed by charter and magnet schools (at respectively 3.3 and 3.4). Public schools with odds at 2.5 fare slightly better than Catholic and non-religious schools, but less well than private non-religious, charter, and magnet schools.

There are, not surprisingly, differences in perceptions of the different types of schools according to the characteristics of respondents. For example, statistical analysis by faith affiliation suggests a positive correlation between religious beliefs for respondents and how favorably they perceive Catholic schools. But there is also a lot of variability in ratings within respondents from any given faith affiliation. For example, among Catholic respondents, only 4.0 percent rate Catholic schools very unfavorably. This proportion increases to 8.2 percent among other Christians, 13.3 percent



**Table 2**  
**Odds of a Favorable Rating (Ratio)**

	Public Schools		
	Public	Charter	Magnet
Favorable vs. not	2.5	3.3	3.4
	Private Schools		
	Private	Catholic	Other Rel.
Favorable vs. not	4.7	2.2	2.1

Source: Author's estimation with FADICA 2017 survey.

among believers in other religions, and 27.6 percent among non-affiliated individuals (this atheist, agnostics, and those not identifying with a religion). At the same time, even among non-affiliated individuals, 8.7 percent view Catholic schools very favorably, and 29.7 percent view the schools favorably. Regression analysis can be used to assess in more details the factors that appear to be associated with favorable or unfavorable perceptions of Catholic and other types of schools. This is done in the next section.

### Correlates of Favorability Ratings

The objective of the regression analysis is to look at associations between various characteristics of respondents and their perception of various types of schools while controlling for the potential effect on these perceptions of the respondents' other characteristics. The analysis is tentative in that alternative model specifications could yield different results. For ease of interpretation, marginal effects (dF/dX) are reported at the mean of the sample. The effects should not be interpreted as implying causality. They are simply indicative of a potential association between specific characteristics of respondents and their perceptions. The idea is to identify marginal effects controlling for other variables. For example, assume that Hispanic or African American respondents are less favorable towards one type of school than another. This could be related to race, but it could also be related to other factors correlated with race such as income or education level. Regression analysis helps in disentangling these various potential effects and capture associations controlling for other factors.

To keep the analysis as simple as possible, the outcome (dependent variable) is binary, with the positive category corresponding to very favorable or somewhat favorable ratings, and the comparison category combining the three other three potential responses (somewhat unfavorable, very unfavorable, or does not know/does not have enough knowledge). A wide range of individual characteristics are used as independent variables in the regressions. For demographic and socio-economic variables, this includes (1) Gender: male or female; (2) Age: Baby boomer or born earlier (born in or before 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1976), or Generation Y

(born after 1977); (3) Race: White, Hispanic or Latino, African American, or other races/biracial or multiracial/other; (4) Location: Urban, suburban, or rural; Parental Status: Parent or not a parent of a child; Political affiliation: Republican, Democrat, or independent/something else/not registered; (5) Household yearly income: Low (below \$50,000), middle (between \$50,000 and \$100,000), high (above \$100,000), or no response; (6) Education level: High school or below (some high school, high school graduate, vocational/technical school, or other), undergraduate, or graduate; and (7) Employment: Working full-time or part time, or not working (full-time student, unemployed, stay-at-home parent or retired).

In addition, a number of additional controls are used for variables related to religious perceptions. These controls are: (1) Religious affiliation: Catholic, Other Christian (Protestant or other non-Catholic Christian), Other religious affiliations (Mormonism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, other), or no religious affiliation (atheist, agnostic, or not identifying with any religion); (2) Importance of religion: for those with a religious faith, whether they consider their faith as extremely or very important in shaping their daily life; (3) Practice of religion: for those with a religious faith, whether they attend services regularly (almost every week or more often); (4) Active or inactive Catholic: for those who are Catholic, whether they consider themselves to be a somewhat active or very active Catholic; and finally (5) Experience with Catholic schools as a child: Whether the respondent went to Catholic school at any level as a child and whether he/she had a poor experience while in Catholic school (only a small minority of adults who went to Catholic schools as children had a poor experience, but this tends to matter).

Table 3 provides results from regressions estimated separately for each of the six types of schools identified in the survey. The interpretation of marginal effects that are statistically significant is as follows: a value of 0.050 would indicate that controlling for other factors, the variable is associated with an increase of 5.0 percentage points in the likelihood of perceiving a type of school favorably. For example, the value of 0.078 for men for charter schools suggests that controlling for other factors, men are 7.8 percentage points more likely to have a favorable view of charter schools than women (the reference category for that variable). Note that the results from the analysis are tentative since they simply reflect associations between variables. These correlations need not imply causality.

The following observations can be made on results, focusing on coefficients that are statistically significant at least at the ten percent level. In terms of gender, apart from having more favorable perceptions of charter schools (+7.8 percentage points), men also tend to view private schools more favorably (+4.6 points) than women. In terms of age, in comparison to older respondents, younger respondents tend to have less favorable perceptions of Catholic schools (-7.5 points for Gen X and -10.0 points for Gen Y). This should be a concern for the future of Catholic schools as these respondents will be the parents of future students. Gen Y respondents also feel more negatively

towards other religious schools (-6.9 points), but they have more favorable perceptions of public schools (+8.3 points) than older respondents. In terms of race, in comparison to Caucasians/whites, respondent from most other races tend to have more favorable perceptions of charter and magnet schools (gains of +10.8 to +13.0 points), which is not surprising as these schools provide more options at no cost for them when public schools are underperforming. Effects associated with race are not statistically significant for private, Catholic, and other religious schools, which means that Catholic schools do not have a particular advantages with Hispanic populations when controlling for other variables including faith affiliations.

**Table 3**  
**Correlates of Favorable Perceptions by Type of School (Marginal Effects at the Mean  $dF/dX$ )**

Independent Variables	Public			Private		
	Public Standard	Charter Schools	Magnet Schools	Private Secular	Private Catholic	Private Other Rel.
<b>Gender (Ref. Female)</b>						
Male	0.004 (0.027)	0.078*** (0.028)	0.047 (0.030)	0.046* (0.026)	0.018 (0.029)	0.014 (0.031)
<b>Age (Ref. Older)</b>						
Generation X	0.028 (0.035)	-0.043 (0.039)	-0.042 (0.042)	-0.037 (0.037)	-0.075* (0.042)	-0.007 (0.042)
Generation Y	0.083** (0.034)	-0.038 (0.035)	-0.042 (0.038)	-0.032 (0.033)	-0.100*** (0.036)	-0.069* (0.039)
<b>Race (Ref. White)</b>						
Hispanic/Latino	-0.005 (0.037)	0.108*** (0.033)	0.090** (0.037)	0.037 (0.032)	-0.021 (0.039)	-0.051 (0.040)
African American	-0.035 (0.052)	0.117*** (0.043)	0.123** (0.049)	0.049 (0.045)	0.038 (0.049)	-0.015 (0.057)
Other races	0.053 (0.047)	0.130*** (0.043)	0.063 (0.053)	-0.074 (0.051)	-0.018 (0.055)	-0.004 (0.056)
<b>Location (Ref. Suburban)</b>						
Urban	0.071** (0.028)	0.105*** (0.029)	0.138*** (0.030)	0.019 (0.028)	0.007 (0.031)	0.029 (0.033)
Rural	0.016 (0.032)	-0.024 (0.034)	-0.086** (0.036)	-0.048 (0.032)	-0.038 (0.035)	-0.014 (0.037)
<b>Parent (Ref. Not a Parent)</b>						
Parent	-0.020 (0.036)	0.017 (0.038)	-0.021 (0.040)	-0.015 (0.034)	-0.038 (0.036)	-0.057 (0.039)

Continued on next page

Table 3 continued

Independent Variables	Public			Private		
	Public Standard	Charter Schools	Magnet Schools	Private Secular	Private Catholic	Private Other Rel.
<b>Political affiliation (Ref. Dem.)</b>						
Republican	-0.131*** (0.033)	-0.033 (0.034)	0.009 (0.035)	0.023 (0.030)	-0.030 (0.035)	0.077** (0.034)
Independent	-0.110*** (0.032)	-0.061* (0.032)	-0.051 (0.033)	-0.013 (0.029)	-0.050 (0.033)	-0.023 (0.034)
<b>Income (Ref. Low Income)</b>						
Medium income	0.071** (0.028)	0.061** (0.030)	0.087*** (0.031)	0.008 (0.028)	-0.001 (0.031)	0.016 (0.033)
High income	0.064* (0.036)	0.083** (0.039)	0.157*** (0.039)	0.037 (0.038)	0.069* (0.040)	0.079* (0.044)
Income not declared	-0.098 (0.108)	0.068 (0.093)	0.149 (0.113)	0.109 (0.086)	0.067 (0.120)	0.007 (0.115)
<b>Education (Ref. HS/Below)</b>						
College - Undergraduate	-0.029 (0.031)	-0.043 (0.033)	0.018 (0.035)	0.070** (0.031)	0.023 (0.032)	0.043 (0.035)
College – Graduate	0.017 (0.044)	-0.036 (0.048)	0.087* (0.047)	0.058 (0.039)	0.096** (0.042)	0.011 (0.050)
<b>Work (Ref. Not Employed)</b>						
Employed	0.014 (0.029)	0.007 (0.030)	0.041 (0.032)	0.050* (0.028)	0.059* (0.030)	-0.001 (0.032)
<b>Faith (Ref. Not Affiliated)</b>						
Catholic	0.060 (0.045)	0.019 (0.044)	-0.061 (0.047)	-0.032 (0.041)	0.250*** (0.040)	0.096** (0.047)
Christian	-0.015 (0.043)	0.084** (0.042)	0.012 (0.047)	-0.003 (0.040)	0.176*** (0.037)	0.190*** (0.043)
Other religion	-0.029 (0.060)	0.111** (0.052)	0.070 (0.061)	0.005 (0.055)	0.068 (0.051)	0.127** (0.055)
<b>Importance of Religion</b>						
Faith important	-0.047 (0.030)	0.026 (0.032)	0.005 (0.035)	0.045 (0.030)	0.099*** (0.033)	0.218*** (0.034)
Attending services regularly	0.033 (0.031)	0.082*** (0.032)	0.091*** (0.034)	0.043 (0.030)	0.036 (0.034)	0.105*** (0.035)
Active Catholic	-0.063	0.075*	0.117***	0.044	0.171***	0.067

Continued on next page

Table 3 continued

Independent Variables	Public			Private		
	Public Standard	Charter Schools	Magnet Schools	Private Secular	Private Catholic	Private Other Rel.
	(0.043)	(0.039)	(0.041)	(0.037)	(0.038)	(0.044)
<b>School in Childhood</b>						
Attended Catholic school	-0.070*	0.014	0.013	0.078**	0.240***	0.086**
	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.039)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.039)
Poor exp. in Catholic school	0.126***	-0.052	0.013	-0.007	-0.388***	-0.199***
	(0.049)	(0.072)	(0.073)	(0.066)	(0.080)	(0.074)
Observations	1,403	1,403	1,403	1,403	1,403	1,403
Pseudo R-squared	0.0427	0.0745	0.0977	0.0466	0.182	0.135
Log Likelihood	-799.2	-811.9	-839.7	-764.7	-727.5	-809.1

Source: Author's estimation with FADICA 2017 survey.

Note: Standard errors in parenthesis. Levels of statistical significance: \*\*\* for 0.001, \*\* for 0.05, \* for 0.1.

In terms of location, in comparison with suburban respondents, urban respondents have more favorable perceptions of all three types of public schools (gains of +7.1 to +13.8 points), while rural respondents perceive magnet schools less favorably (-8.6 points). It should be noted here that few charter schools are located in rural areas since they tend to be concentrated in a few major cities such as New Orleans, New York, and Washington, DC. The corresponding effects for the various types of private schools, including Catholic and other religious schools, are again not statistically significant.

In terms of socio-economic characteristics, in comparison to individuals with low incomes, those with medium or high incomes view all three types of public schools more favorably (gains ranging from +6.1 points to +15.7 points), but most effects for private schools are not statistically significant except for non-Catholic religious schools (+7.9 points for high income respondents). For education levels, when effects are statistically significant, better educated individuals tend to have more favorable perceptions of magnet, private, and Catholic schools. Finally, employed individuals tend to view private and Catholic schools more favorably (gains of respectively +5.0 and +5.9 points). The overall effect of socio-economic variables thus seems not fully clear in terms of whether better off individuals (considering the combination of income, education, and employment) view Catholic schools more favorably or not. Indeed, on the one hand higher incomes are associated with more favorable perceptions of public schools, yet education and employment are associated with better perceptions of Catholic schools.

Being a parent does not seem to have an effect on favorability ratings, but most of the sample consists of parents, even if some respondents do not (yet) have children, especially among younger groups. On the other hand, political affiliations seem to matter, with results conforming expectations. In comparison to Democrats, Republicans tend to have a less favorable perception of public schools (-13.1 points), and a more favorable perception of non-Catholic religious schools (+7.7 points). Independents also have less favorable perceptions of public schools (-11.0 points) and charter schools (-6.1 points).

Information is available in the survey on faith affiliations and the practice of the faith. In comparison to respondents not affiliated with any religion, Christian respondents and those affiliated with other religions view charter schools more favorably (gains of +8.4 and +11.1 points). Catholics and Christians have substantially more favorable perceptions of Catholic schools (gains of +25.0 and +17.6 points, respectively), which is again not surprising. Respondents affiliated with a religion tend to view other religious schools more favorably than those without a faith affiliation (gains of +9.6 to +19.0 points). By and large, respondents who state that their faith is important in their daily life, who attend religious services regularly, and who describe themselves as active Catholics (among those who are Catholic) tend to have more favorable views of Catholic and other religious schools, but also of charter and magnet schools. Finally, respondents who attended Catholic schools as children tend to view public schools less favorably (-7.0 points) and all three types of private schools more favorably (gains ranging from +7.8 points to +24.0 points). However, again not surprisingly, the reverse is observed for those respondents who attended Catholic schools and had a poor experience in those schools, with the largest effect in being observed towards Catholic schools for that specific but fairly small group (-38.8 points).

### **Conclusion**

Considering the enrollment challenge faced by Catholic schools in many developed countries, and considering specifically the case of the United States, this paper explored the question of how favorably Catholic schools are perceived in comparison to other types of schools. Conceptually, favorability ratings matter since parents not perceiving Catholic schools favorably are not likely to consider the schools for their children. Catholic schools have important assets, not the least of which is a perception that students in these schools tend to do well academically. But the reasons for parents choosing Catholic schools may not be solely related to their academic quality, even if that factor matters. The survey on which analysis provided in this paper is based suggests that parents who enroll their children in Catholic schools have priorities for what their children should learn that differ from those of parents not interested in considering the schools for their children. For parents with children in Catholic schools, teaching of values and faith is valued more than for parents not interested in Catholic schools for which instead academic performance and skills for

college and labor markets matter most.

This appears as well indirectly in the analysis provided in this paper. Both statistical and regression analyses were used to assess favorability ratings for Catholic and other types of schools. While almost two thirds of the population has a favorable perception of Catholic schools, one fourth does not. The reasons for these perceptions are likely complex, but an important finding from the analysis is that the characteristics of respondents with the largest effects on how favorably Catholic schools are perceived tend to relate, not surprisingly, to their faith affiliation, how they practice their faith, and their own experience as children with Catholic schools. Other characteristics also matter, but typically less in terms of the magnitude of the effects observed. This is an important finding for thinking of how to think of the strengths of Catholic schools in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

The analysis provided in this paper, based on preliminary work conducted for the closing plenary of OIEC's World Congress in New York, is however just a first take at drawing insights from the rich data collected by FADICA and NCEA. More detailed research on parental willingness to consider Catholic schools for their children and on the priorities of parents for what their children should learn in school is planned, possibly for inclusion in a forthcoming special issue of this journal on some of those issues.

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