



**“All Kids Matter”?  
Catholic Institutional Advocacy for Federal COVID Relief  
Funding for Non-Public Schools**

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**Citation:** Sellers, K. (2021). “All kids matter”? Catholic institutional advocacy for federal COVID relief funding for non-public schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 29(131).  
<https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.29.6201>

**Abstract:** This article explores the policy interests expressed by the largest private educational system in the United States, American Catholic schools, during the first four months of the COVID-19 crisis. Critical discourse analysis is applied to public texts produced by the Catholic Church between March 1 and July 1, 2020, in order to understand the discursive strategies through which this institution constructs meaning in the policy arena. This analysis illustrates how Catholic leaders use language to make racialized and low-income students “discursively invisible.” The author documents a significant change in policy discourse, from neoconservative logics to neoliberal ones, which corresponds directly to political signaling from the Trump Administration. Drawing on critical race theory, the author suggests implications for policymakers and stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Catholic schools; private schools; school choice; education policy; critical discourse analysis; CARES Act; COVID-19; interest convergence; critical race theory; neoliberalism; neoconservatism

### **¿“Todos los niños importan”? Defensa institucional católica para financiar el alivio federal contra COVID en escuelas privadas**

**Resumen:** Este artículo explora los intereses políticos expresados por el sistema educativo privado más grande de los Estados Unidos, la American Catholic School Network, durante los primeros cuatro meses de la crisis del COVID-19. Se aplica un análisis crítico del discurso sobre el tema a los textos públicos producidos por la Iglesia Católica entre el 1 de marzo y el 1 de julio de 2020, con el fin de comprender las estrategias discursivas a través de las cuales esta institución construye sentido en la arena política. Este análisis ilustra cómo los líderes católicos usan el lenguaje para hacer que los estudiantes racializados y de bajos ingresos sean “discursivamente invisibles”. El autor documenta un cambio significativo en el discurso político, de la lógica neoconservadora a la neoliberal, que corresponde directamente a la señalización política de la administración Trump. Basándose en la teoría crítica de la raza, el autor sugiere implicaciones para los responsables políticos y las partes interesadas.

**Palabras-clave:** escuelas católicas; escuelas privadas; elección de escuela; política educativa; análisis crítico del discurso; Ley CARES; COVID-19; convergencia de intereses; neoliberalismo; neoconservadurismo

### **“Todas as crianças importam”? Advocacia institucional Católica para financiamento de alívio federal contra COVID nas escolas privadas**

**Resumo:** Este artigo explora os interesses políticos expressos pelo maior sistema educacional privado dos Estados Unidos, a rede de escolas católicas americanas, durante os primeiros quatro meses da crise do COVID-19. Uma análise crítica do discurso sobre o tema é aplicada a textos públicos produzidos pela Igreja Católica entre o 1º de março e o 1º de julho de 2020, a fim de compreender as estratégias discursivas por meio das quais essa instituição constrói sentido na arena política. Esta análise ilustra como os líderes católicos usam a linguagem para tornar os alunos racializados e de baixa renda “discursivamente invisíveis”. O autor documenta uma mudança significativa no discurso político, das lógicas neoconservadoras às neoliberais, à qual corresponde diretamente à sinalização política da administração Trump. Baseando-se na teoria da raça crítica, o autor sugere implicações para os formuladores de políticas e as partes interessadas.

**Palavras-chave:** Escolas católicas; escolas privadas; escolha escolar; política educacional; análise crítica do discurso; CARES Act; COVID-19; convergência de interesses; neoliberalismo; neoconservadorismo

## **"All Kids Matter"? Catholic Institutional Advocacy for Federal COVID Relief Funding for Non-Public Schools**

The Roman Catholic Church is responsible for the largest private education system in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a). As such, it has a strategic interest in the direction of U.S. education policy. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools across the country to transition to remote and socially-distanced learning in early 2020 (EducationWeek, 2020), most schools were not prepared for the costs this change would incur. This was especially true for Catholic schools, which primarily rely on tuition and philanthropy for funding (Gomez, 2020) and which have experienced significant declines in enrollment and concomitant school closures, during the past 50 years. Indeed, more than 200 Catholic K-12 schools closed permanently in 2020, a number more than twice the average closure rate in the five years previous (Thompson, 2021). While this trend has long troubled the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), the leadership body responsible for overseeing the work of Catholic schools in the United States, the conditions created by COVID marked a worrisome escalation of this trend. As the executive director of the USCCB Education Secretariat, Mary Pat Donoghue, asserted, "the COVID crisis acted as an accelerant," (Thompson, 2021). To overcome the financial obstacles created by the COVID crisis, Catholic schools, like most schools in the United States, would need help.

That help seemed imminent on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, when the U.S. Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. This bill allotted \$13.2 Billion to emergency relief funding for K-12 schools, and it included provisions for some of that funding to go to private schools, as indicated in Section 18005, "Assistance to Non-Public Schools," (Congressional Research Service, 2020; United States, 2020). However, the exact amount of funding allotted for private schools was immediately contested by educational stakeholders, one of which was the USCCB.

This article explores the policy interests expressed by the USCCB during the first four months of the COVID-19 crisis, while the CARES Act policy was being contested and Black Lives Matter protests happened across the United States and world. Critical discourse analysis is applied to public texts produced by the USCCB and its leaders between March 1 and July 1, 2020, to reveal the discursive strategies through which this institution constructed meaning of education policy during this time of crisis. According to Carol Mullet (2018), a scholar of critical discourse analysis in education, "critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a qualitative analytical approach for critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities" (p. 116). This critical lens is especially appropriate for analyzing the USCCB's education policy discourse because private schools have long been critiqued as institutions that serve the privileged, while impacting, often negatively, more vulnerable students who are likelier to attend public schools (Crain, 1984; Hadderman, 2002; B. Levin, 1999; H. Levin, 1998).

Deconstructing the USCCB's use of language in the earliest months of the COVID pandemic, a global event which more adversely affected poor and racially marginalized communities (CDC, 2021; Maciolek, 2020), reveals the un/conscious interests of this education policy stakeholder. Thus, a key question animating this analysis concerns the discursive functions of the USCCB. Did their discourse work to meet the immediate needs of the vulnerable, like funding high quality education for marginalized students, or did it operate to change the system that actively reproduces economic and racial inequality affecting those same students? "CDA operates under the assumption that institutions act as gatekeepers to discursive resources; power and resource imbalances between 'speakers' and 'listeners' are linked to their unequal access to those resources," (Mullet, 2018, p. 117). Likewise, the language the USCCB employed to advocate for its

policy interests had, and may continue to have, impact on the access the most marginalized students in American schools, both public and private, are permitted to the resources provided by the CARES Act. Accordingly, in this analysis I seek to answer the following research questions: In what discursive strategies did the Catholic Church engage regarding education policy and the CARES Act? How was meaning constructed by education policy actors, in the midst of the COVID-Crisis? What does this crisis-induced discourse reveal about the policy interests of American Catholic school leaders?

In order to interpret the USCCB discourse, it is first necessary to understand three factors operative on and through their speech: decades of economic challenges for Catholic schools, federal legislative precedent and the novel way the Trump Administration interpreted that precedent in the CARES Act, and the ideological differences between the USCCB and Trump Administration. I explore these factors at length in the section that follows. I then detail the CDA method used to analyze the political discourse taking place in this landscape during the early months of the COVID crisis and Black Lives Matter protests. Next, I identify the discursive patterns this analysis revealed and discuss the way power and policy interests converged through the discourse. I conclude with some comments on the implications of this discourse for American education policy and key stakeholders.

## Discursive Landscapes

### The American K-12 Education: Differentiating Public from Private

The American educational landscape has been characterized by a variety of public and private K-12 schooling options, amongst which are private religious schools. Since at least the 1950s, when economist Milton Friedman introduced the concept of school vouchers, “school choice” has been a prominent feature of public policy discourse (Apple, 2006). Public schools are typically funded, in greatest part, through state sales- and local property taxes. This funding mechanism is utilized in most states in the country, though it is frequently critiqued for its reproduction of social inequality. By linking property taxes to school funding, wealthier communities tend to generate more per pupil funding than poorer communities with lower property values. State and federal funding seeks to shrink this funding gap, but educational funding inequities persist in districts across the country (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018). However unevenly funded, this system provides families a tuition-free means of educating their children, which largely explains why ninety percent of K-12 students attend public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a).

Private Catholic schools, on the other hand, are primarily funded through family tuition payments and philanthropy (Gomez, 2020). Many state laws restrict the use of public funds at non-public schools. This is especially true at religiously-affiliated schools, which have been bound by laws that maintain the separation of Church and State.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, families who send their children to

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<sup>1</sup> The Supreme Court of the United States made a ruling on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2020 which narrowed this division between Church and State. In *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, a family claimed that its right to religious freedom was violated by the State of Montana Constitution, which prohibited the use a state scholarship fund from being used to pay tuition at religious schools. This rule was based on a so-called “Blaine Amendment” which exists in some manner in 37 U.S. State Constitutions. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Espinoza family, on grounds that the Montana Constitution violated their first Amendment right to religious freedom. Accordingly, religious schools cannot be excluded from state funding for private schools, a ruling that calls into question Blaine Amendments in all 37 states (*Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, 2020; Howe, 2020).

private schools typically pay private school tuition *in addition* to taxes that support public schools (Gomez, 2020). Here, we see that “school choice,” when it involves a private school, especially a private religious school, has economic implications for families. In order for families to be able to afford this choice, they must either (1) have sufficient income to pay tuition out of pocket; (2) depend on scholarships, which require the generosity of philanthropists; or (3) some combination thereof. Indeed, over the past 50 years, the cost of sending a child to a Catholic elementary school has increased six-fold, while household income for middleclass families has increased only 23% and for lower-class families has decreased 22% (Murnane et al., 2018). This may explain why enrollment has decreased in Catholic schools over these same decades that tuition has increased. The need for Catholic schools to be financed through tuition has impacted the demographics of enrolled students.

As indicated in Table 1 below, private school students tend to be wealthier and Whiter (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a, 2017b, 2019, 2020). Catholic schools, specifically, tend to serve slightly larger numbers of near-poor/poor and minoritized students, than private schools generally. This may be because Catholic schools tend to be the most affordable non-public school option in most regions of the United States (Hartney & Finger, 2020). However, Catholic schools are comprised of significantly larger numbers of White and economically-privileged students than public schools of any type. These same Catholic Schools have a long track record of promoting economic mobility of students from lower to middle classes (White, 2020), and some studies suggest minoritized students who attend Catholic schools tend to perform better on standard assessments and matriculate into college at higher rates than their public school counterparts, a phenomenon dubbed “the Catholic school effect,” (Currance, 1984).

**Table 1**  
*Characteristics of Private and Public Schools*

| Type of School           | % Poor or Near-Poor | % White-Identifying |
|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Private Schools</b>   |                     |                     |
| Private School (general) | 21                  | 69                  |
| Catholic School          | <30 <sup>2</sup>    | 65                  |
| <b>Public Schools</b>    |                     |                     |
| Charter                  | -                   | 33                  |
| Chosen                   | 45                  | 50                  |
| Assigned                 | 39                  | 50                  |

*Sources:* National Center for Education Statistics (2017a, 2017b, 2019, 2020); Federal COVID Response Coalition, (2020)

Despite such virtues, Catholic schools have experienced difficult changes in recent decades. Relative costs of Catholic schools have increased significantly over the past 50 years, as large portions of teaching staff have transitioned from non-salaried religious workers to salaried lay workers (Murnane, Reardon, Mbekeani, & Lamb, 2018). As costs have increased, so have the relative household incomes of students enrolling in these schools, a trend which suggests many

<sup>2</sup> This number is derived from data provided by the Federal COVID Response Coalition, May 2020 letter, which indicates that 30% of Catholic students come from households earning less than \$75,000 a year. This value is significantly higher than what qualifies as “poor” and “near-poor,” in most regions, according to the NCES. So, it is reasonable to conclude the number of near-/poor students is less than 30% of enrolled students. An exact percentage, however, is undetermined as of date of writing.

families, who were previously served by Catholic schools, may have been priced out of the market. During this same period, many Catholic schools, especially elementary schools, have been forced to close or consolidate as a result of decreasing revenues. This has created immense pressure on Catholic school leaders to find new sources of revenue, leading many to turn their advocacy efforts from private funding, on which they've historically relied, toward forms of public funding, which some states have gradually-expanded to include private religious schools. As one report on urban Catholic elementary schools advised, "relentless advocacy for public funding and resources is critical for sustaining these schools," (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2011, p. 4). Until recently, such advocacy focused on state-level changes, and was grounded in the language and logics of neoconservatism, as I will detail below, typical of the Roman Catholic Church in recent decades (Scribner, 2015). The COVID crisis, however, shifted the USCCB's policy gaze from state- to federal-level advocacy and with it, I will show, from neoconservative to neoliberal logics.

### The COVID Effect

The policy actions set in motion in response to the COVID-19 pandemic—shutting down the economy, closing schools and businesses, limiting mobility and access to healthcare, etc.—accelerated movement along preexisting fault lines in American society. Already marginalized groups suffered the most from this COVID effect: service-economy workers lost jobs in greater numbers; women were forced to take on greater childcare responsibilities; minoritized communities experienced higher incidence of COVID transmission, and the list goes on (Weber, 2020; Wheeler, 2020). Schools were especially hard hit, as they were forced to transition to remote instruction, regardless of the pedagogical preparedness of teachers or families to provide remote instruction. Natural disasters have often surfaced such intersecting challenges in a *localized* way – e.g., Hurricane Katrina flooding New Orleans or a severe tornado flattening Joplin, Missouri. These natural disasters merited some federal funding support, but, consistent with FEMA policy, (Department of Homeland Security, 2019) a great deal of the response was funded and managed at a local and state level (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.; Congressional Research Service, 2019). What makes COVID-19 different from such regional emergencies is that the *entire country* was affected and for a prolonged period of time. During the spring of 2020, school buildings were closed in 48 states (EducationWeek, 2020). Office buildings and manufacturers closed, and the service sector was shuttered. Because state-level school funding is directly tied to sales tax revenues, and because state budgets must be balanced year to year, this created a catch-22 for school funding: increased costs for schools, and decreased state revenue to fund school expenses. Only the Federal government, which does not need to balance its budget year to year, was in a position to provide emergency relief needed by schools across the country, and it used existing Federal education legislation as a model for how to meet this urgent need.

While education policy has historically operated at the state and local level (Mitra, 2018), the Federal government began significant direct investments in education with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Though state and local governments continue to provide the majority of public school district funding, the ESEA has appropriated significant funds each year since its passing, currently about 8.5% of K-12 expenses, constituting about 6% of the total federal budget (Congressional Budget Office, n.d.). Title I of ESEA (1965) allots funds based on the number of school-age children in a district who are low-income or economically marginalized (Sparks, 2019). These funds are then distributed to both public and private schools to provide so-called "equitable services" to four vulnerable groups, "Children who are economically disadvantaged, children with disabilities, migrant children or English learners," (ESEA, 1115(c)(2)(A)). This legislation also provides funding to limit barriers to parental engagement in their

child’s education, “with particular attention to parents who are economically disadvantaged, are disabled, have limited English proficiency...or are of any racial or ethnic minority background,” (ESEA, 1116(2)(D)(i)). This precedent, that children and families be provided funding to help the most vulnerable students achieve equitable learning outcomes with their more privileged peers, was maintained through over half a century of federal education legislation (United States, 1965, 2015).

This education funding program distributes federal grants to states based on the number of students who fit these vulnerable categories in each state, whether they attend public or private schools. By tying funds to students, not school systems, the ESEA ensured that marginalized students at private schools could receive “equitable services” relative to their peers at public schools. Since this act was passed, additional Federal legislation, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), have reinforced this commitment to marginalized students. Curiously, since the ESEA was passed over fifty years ago, each year, Congress has typically appropriated only a *portion* of the funds deemed necessary for student services under this law (Congressional Research Service, 2017). This chronic underfunding of education, especially for the vulnerable, has contributed directly to the persistent inequality in educational outcomes seen for generations in lower-resourced schools across the United States. And further, it has contributed to a culture of school funding which accepts and reproduces schools and school districts that survive hand-to-mouth. However underfunded, the spirit of these Federal laws and their targeted funding formula have been to promote equity between privileged and marginalized students, whether they attend public or private schools, a fact underscored by the USCCB in their April 9<sup>th</sup> letter to Congress. “We ask that language in any additional stimulus proposals ensure that education-directed funds are shared equitably with the non-public school community, similar to the function of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* and *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*,” (Barber et al., 2020).

When the COVID crisis hit, Congress immediately began work on emergency relief. By March 27, 2020, they passed the CARES Act, the largest emergency appropriations bill in American history. It provided \$13.2B in aid to K-12 schools, including “equitable services” for non-public (read: private) schools. The CARES Act linked this “equitable services” funding directly to Section 1117 of the ESEA, in which is enumerated those vulnerable groups, previously mentioned (United States, 2020). The implication is that Congress meant this emergency relief funding to serve the most vulnerable. Many private school advocates were relieved to be included in the CARES Act. However, as noted above, this promised-infusion of funds was not enough to keep some Catholic schools open. Out of 6,000 Catholic schools in the United States, at least 100 announced permanent closures by the end of the 2019-2020 school year, and more followed (Candal, 2020; Hasson & Farnan, 2020). Soon, the Trump Administration took notice. On April 25<sup>th</sup> 2020, President Trump, with Secretary DeVos in attendance, held a conference call with a group of more than 600 Catholic leaders and educators to whom he committed his support for Catholic schools, in light of the COVID crisis (White, 2020).

On April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Department of Education, under the direction of Secretary Betsy DeVos, published an FAQ about equitable services for non-public schools. This document provided tentative policy guidance for public and private school leaders, about how they could plan to use CARES Act funding. According to this document, public school districts had a choice. Either they could follow the Title-1 precedent, detailed above, and apportion funding to private schools according to the portion of vulnerable students enrolled in a given private school. If this option were chosen, both public *and* private schools would need to use funds for *only* those students who would qualify for Title-1 supports (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Under this option, if there were 100 students in a district, 20 of which were in a qualifying vulnerable population but only one

of which attended a private school, that private school would get 5% of the CARES Act funding allotted that district, because all funds would be allotted to serve the needs of those twenty vulnerable students. Importantly, the guidance was specific to limit who could lawfully benefit from these funds if this first option was chosen: only those students who were in qualifying vulnerable populations. Yet, given the nature of the pandemic needs, such as providing personal protective equipment (PPE) and hand sanitizer for students, delimiting the use of funds so strictly would not only be administratively onerous, at best, but also potentially counterproductive for public health.

Alternatively, districts could use funds for *all* students, public and private, according to the portion of students enrolled in each type of school. This option was inconsistent with the legislative precedent set by previous education appropriations, including the ESEA (1965), ADA (1990), and ESSA (1990), but it did resemble certain emergency appropriations made during previous national disasters (Congressional Research Service, 2019; Department of Homeland Security, 2019). Under this second option, if there were 100 students in a district, and twenty of them attended a private school, that private school would be eligible for twenty percent of CARES Act funds (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Because this option would allow funds to benefit all students, it was administratively simpler and more aligned with public health needs. This second option would result in significantly more CARES Act funds going to private schools. Unsurprisingly, the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), a professional organization affiliated with the USCCB, was supportive of the Department of Education guidance and claimed that such a per-pupil allotment would be consistent with a precedent set by other emergency relief bills, like those passed after Hurricane Katrina (National Catholic Education Association, 2020). Conversely, public education advocates, including the School Superintendents Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, expressed deep opposition to this Department of Education interpretation, suggesting Congress intended funds to be allotted according to existing equitable services precedent, but with flexibility appropriate for the public health needs of the time (AASA, 2020; Federal Register, 2020). Nonetheless, on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Department of Education published a Final Interim Rule, which reaffirmed this April 30<sup>th</sup> guidance. This rule had the immediate force of law (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020), though legal actions were swiftly taken to countermand this rule. These disparate views reflect ideological differences that are deeply-rooted in American society. It is to these ideologies that I turn next.

## Theoretical Framework

Two ideologies of the American Right shaped the USCCB's discursive landscape between March 1<sup>st</sup> and July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020: neoliberalism and neoconservatism. (See Table 2 below for details.) Both of these ideologies took root in different U.S. institutions during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neoliberalism was presented as a kind of business-minded common sense; institutions that invested, both literally and figuratively, in this ideology adhered to a simple logic, "the whole point of neo-liberalism is that the market mechanism should be allowed to direct the fate of human beings," (George, 1999) whether in business transactions, public policies, or personal choice. From its emergence after WWII, neoliberalism promoted free markets, individual choice, and proliferating economic options. Indeed, many today read such language as part of the common-sense of capitalism, an indicator of neoliberalism's ideological hegemony (Foucault, 1975; Gramsci, 1995).



**Table 2**  
*Characteristics of Neoconservative and Neoliberal Ideologies*

| <b>Domains</b>                   | <b>Neoconservatism</b>   | <b>Neoliberalism</b>   |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Economic</b>                  | Private property viewed as sacred (“thou shall not steal”); hard work valued; claims of meritocracy; denial of class and obstruction of class consciousness; uncomfortable with language of social justice because of implication that future could be more moral than idealized past  | Markets serve as sociopolitical imaginary and economic necessity; individualistic; personal freedom is expressed through individual choice (e.g., school choice, schooling options); personal freedom is enabled through creation of markets, income-tax relief, privatization, deregulation, anti-unionism, share-ownership, free exchange, entrepreneurship, capital accumulation, voluntary savings, private inheritance, maximized shareholder profits, legal protection of private goods, individual initiative, private associations, private insurance; short-term profit motives |
| <b>Political / Public Policy</b> | Emphasis on institutional authority, clear hierarchy, and strong leadership in government and other traditional institutions; patriotic; strong commitment to religious values fosters support for religious institutions (e.g., religious non-public schools) and religiously inspired policies (e.g., prayer in schools, character education); support for national and statewide curriculum and testing regimes; fear of the “Other” manifests in support for raising academic standards and against multiculturalism and bilingual education | Reduced social expenditures; “workfare” over welfare; political freedom is enhanced through redistribution of public funds to individuals and families for private use (e.g., school vouchers, scholarship, tuition tax-credits); privatization of public goods (e.g., charter schools); value for negative rights; emphasis on weak state with restrained democratic rule; schooling serves economic end  |
| <b>Social / Civic</b>            | Good citizen practices traditional virtues and embodies Western cultural norms; desire for social and cultural stability; nostalgia for mythologized, more-virtuous past; traditional family and religious values center of society; tradition holds moral authority; meritocratic; permeated by “sense of loss—a loss of faith, of imagined communities, of a nearly pastoral vision” of a morally virtuous Western cultural world (Apple, 2006, p. 48)   | Citizen seen as a consumer within individualistic market society; democratic action reconceived as economic action; personal responsibility, self-reliance, and individual freedom seen as virtuous; bottom-line individualism   |

*Sources:* Apple (2006); J. Scott (2013), Turner (2008)

This “common-sense” of neoliberalism, according to Apple (2006), is “deeply committed to markets and to freedom as ‘individual choice,’” (p. 11). In such a mindset, the citizen becomes a consumer, *homo economicus*. Freedom is no longer imagined as a public good for a social aim but a negative right in a market that serves individuals’ interests. In an educational arena, this manifests in public discourse around “school choice.” Families are led to believe it is their right, an expression of personal freedom, to choose where their children go to school, and the more choices the better. While the neoliberal believes that government should generally stay out of this market decision, government can enhance personal freedom through redistribution of state funds to individual families, who can then use those funds, for example, to pay tuition at a private school (Scott J. , 2013). Many types of state-run programs have grown from the neoliberal imagination and include but are not limited to: state-funded scholarship programs for private schools, tuition tax-credits for “donations” (read: tuition) to non-profit educational organizations, school vouchers, and charter schools. Each of these state-run programs redistribute educational funding from school system-level investments to more student-level investments. Curiously, though, while they are billed as serving student interests, these public policies also tend to bolster the interests of private philanthropies and business leaders (Ravitch, 2010; Reckhow & Tompkins-Strange, 2018). Indeed, this so-called “choice” consistently invests government funds in educational programs other than traditional public education. This neoliberal logic is so pervasive in contemporary politics that, according to Michael Apple (2006), neoliberalism is the “one specific defining political/economic paradigm of the age in which we live,” (p. 17), evidence of which can be seen in remarks by Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, who, when speaking to a Congressional subcommittee, referred to students and families as “customers,” (DeVos, 2020), a view reflective of the Trump administration generally. Invisible to most, yet wielded with measured efficacy by the political Right, this ideology has eroded our “very idea of democracy, making it only an economic concept, not a political one,” (Apple, 2006, p. 18).

By contrast, neoconservatives imagine the good citizen as culturally Western and traditionally virtuous, an imaginary which political entrepreneurs used to target the Christian Right, including Roman Catholics (Ray, 1983). This ideology took shape in the United States during the social unrest of the 1960s and 70s (High, 2009), and by the early 1980s it was a dominant ideology in American Catholicism, evident among the laity and patriarchal hierarchy of the USCCB (Ray, 1983; Scribner, 2015). Indeed, neoconservative longing for traditional morality and its rose-colored view of cultural history makes sense as a reaction to the unrest of its formative decades. Apple (2006) observes, “that in times of insecurity and fragmentation, there is a concomitant rise in longings for social and cultural stability and an increased emphasis on the authority of basic institutions,” (p. 21). The Appeals to this way of thinking can be heard in political slogans like, “Make America great again!” or the Clintonian aphorism, “Democrats fall in love, while Republicans fall in line.”

An ideological eccentricity of neoconservatism, according to Brandon High (2009) is that its deep moral commitments for society, combined with nostalgia for the (Western cultural) past and longing for social stability, supports the “claim that, although their hearts [are] still liberal, their heads [are] now conservative,” (p. 478). Simply put, neoconservative morality may look and act progressive at times, but its policies and logics are conservative. For an organization like the USCCB, which has a strong tradition of supporting liberal moral commitments through its catholic social teaching (see Mich, 1998; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004; USCCB, 1986) and incorporating this teaching into its curricular practices (USCCB, 2007), this helps explain why its political discourse can be tenuous in its commitment to social justice. Neoconservatives are generally uncomfortable with the language of social justice, because it implies that society was not more virtuous in the past and so cannot return to what is known but rather, must forge a new and

unknown moral future. Language that neoconservatives prefer tends to glorify “family and tradition, patriotism, Victorian values, hard work, and the maintenance of cultural order,” (Apple, 2006, p. 21), priorities we can see reflected in education policies which support character education, Eurocentric curriculum, and state- and national standards.

While both neoliberalism and neoconservatism align strongly to the political Right, Apple (2006) points out that these ideologies are not always harmonious:

The bottom-line individualism of neoliberals conflicts with the organic society united by the strong moral authority of tradition envisioned by neoconservatives.... This is one of the defining tensions of conservative movements today, a tension that must be resolved if conservative movements are to move society in the direction they ardently desire to go. (p. 16)

Critical race theory is particularly helpful for analyzing how such tensions are resolved, especially the concept of “interest convergence.” This concept was first described by legal scholar and father of critical race studies, Derrick Bell, Jr., when writing about *Brown v. Board of Education* (Bell, 1980). He asserted, “the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interest of whites,” (Bell, p. 523). Put differently, “whites will allow and support racial justice/progress to the extent that there is something positive in it for them,” (Hartlep, 2009). Bell was unconvinced that desegregation of America’s schools was a product of a moral conversion, as neoconservatives might have us believe. Rather, he claimed this case “cannot be understood without some consideration of the decision’s value to whites....in policymaking positions able to see the economic and political advances at home and abroad that would follow abandonment of segregation,” (Bell, p. 524). In this reasoning about “value” and “economic and political advances,” we can hear faint echoes of neoliberal calculations, a logic which make sense within Bell’s larger assertion about the interests of Black stakeholders, generally. For our specific analysis of the USCCB policy discourse, the concept of interest convergence is helpful for two reasons.

First, interest convergence points us toward a landmark for our discourse analysis: moments when policy or discursive practices changed. Interest convergence suggests that when we see these landmark shifts in policy, particularly between groups of disparate power, we should read the interests of these actors and events critically, within the context of the broader culture (Bell, 1980). Second, it underscores the need for truth in democratic reasoning and discourse (Lee et al., 2021), specifically those truths which concern race, power, and oppression and which are only revealed through critical analysis. Such truths are necessary for democracy inasmuch as democracy, operating in a world where race and racism are normal (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), aims for equal participation and representation of the people in civic and political life, regardless of their personal or economic characteristics (Lee et al., 2021). Bell’s insights about interest convergence, inasmuch as they help us read the world and make meaning of the power and politics at play within it, will help us to make meaning of the critical discourse analysis employed below.

## Methodology

This study draws on the public texts produced by the USCCB and certain affiliates between March 1, 2020 and July 1, 2020. This timeframe was chosen because it bounds a policy arc related to the CARES Act— including rising action (passing of CARES Act in response to COVID-crisis), crisis (Department of Education interpretation of “equitable services” for non-public schools), climax (publication of Final Interim Rule on Equitable Services), and falling action (SCOTUS decision regarding Blaine Amendment)—which in turn, bounds a discursive arc of the USCCB and

its interlocutors. In short, during these four months the USCCB tells a clear story, and through their discourse, discursive strategies of the USCCB were “both generated...and revealed by the language of the institution and its participants,” (Mehan, 1993, p. 243).

Six key texts from the USCCB were analyzed to reveal these discursive patterns: the Twitter account postings of the USCCB and the USCCB Secretariat of Education; an April 9<sup>th</sup> letter from three USCCB leaders to a U.S. Senate and House Committee; a June 16<sup>th</sup> blog post by the president of the USCCB, Archbishop José H. Gomez; and two letters, sent in May and June, from the USCCB and affiliate organizations to the leaders of the U.S. House and Senate. (See Table 3, below, for a summary of USCCB texts.) The Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, was a primary, public interlocutor and leader in education policy, with whom the USCCB had an interest in communicating. So, I chose to also read and analyze texts which she generated, including: Twitter account postings of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos; Secretary DeVos’ Prepared Remarks to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on March 5<sup>th</sup>; and her remarks at the White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing on March 27, 2020, the day the CARES Act was passed. To support this analysis, I referred to the CARES Act and related legal statutes and memos; articles from nationally and internationally-syndicated Catholic and secular periodicals; podcast interviews with Secretary DeVos; and blog posts from education policy analysts.

**Table 3***Characteristics of USCCB Texts*

| <b>Text</b>   | <b>Author(s)</b>   | <b>Social Context</b>   | <b>Audience/<br/>Recipient</b>  |
|---|--|---|---|
| <b>Public Twitter Account</b>   |  |   |   |
| @USCCB<br>(All posts March 1-<br>July 1)  | U.S. Conference of<br>Catholic Bishops   | The leadership body of<br>U.S. Catholic Church,<br>responsible for guiding<br>Church in faith and morals,<br>including educational<br>oversight   | Twitter users,<br>especially tagged<br>accounts   |
| @USCCBCatholicEd<br>(All posts March 1-<br>July 1)  | USCCB Secretariat of<br>Education  | Office supporting bishops<br>on the USCCB Committee<br>on Education, overseeing<br>Catholic schools   | Twitter users,<br>especially tagged<br>accounts   |
| <b>Open Letter</b>  |  |   |   |
| USCCB Letter to Help<br>Education, Labor<br>(April 9 <sup>th</sup> )                                    | Bishop Michael C.<br>Barber, SJ; Archbishop<br>Paul S. Coakley; and<br>Auxiliary Bishop Mario<br>E. Dorsonville                        | Chairmen (respectively) of<br>the USCCB Committees on<br>Catholic Education; on<br>Domestic Justice and<br>Human Development; and<br>on Migration | U.S. Congressional<br>Committee on<br>Health, Education,<br>Labor and Pensions<br>(USCCHELP)                      |
| Federal COVID<br>Response Coalition<br>Letter to Congressional<br>Leadership<br>(May 13 <sup>th</sup> ) | USCCB, Committee on<br>Education and<br>signatories from dozens<br>of interest groups and<br>advocacy organizations<br>from across USA | Signatories represent<br>organizations committed to<br>non-public schooling,<br>especially religiously<br>affiliated schools across the<br>USA    | Majority Leaders of<br>the U.S. Senate,<br>Speaker of the<br>House, and House<br>Minority Leader;<br>CC: USCCHELP |

**Table 3**  
*Characteristics of USCCB Texts (Continued)*

| Text   | Author(s)  | Social Context  | Audience / Recipient  |
|--|--|---|---|
| Federal COVID Response Coalition Letter to Congressional Leadership (June 25 <sup>th</sup> ) | USCCB, Committee on Education and signatories from dozens of interest groups and advocacy organizations across USA | Signatories represent organizations committed to non-public schooling, especially religiously affiliated schools across the USA | Majority Leaders of the U.S. Senate, Speaker of the House, and House Minority Leader  |
| <b>Public Blog</b><br>Catholic Schools and America’s Future (June 16 <sup>th</sup> )         | Archbishop of Los Angeles, José H. Gomez   | President of USCCB and leader of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the largest Catholic community in the USA                      | Readers of <i>Angelus</i> , Newspaper of the L.A. Catholic Church, and general public |

I drew on the work of Hugh Mehan (1993) and Jennifer Cohen (2010) to design an analytical framework that would help illuminate both the discursive strategies employed by the USCCB and related policy actors and the way that meaning was constructed by these actors, in the midst of the COVID crisis. Like Cohen (2010), I utilized a four-pronged approach to textual analysis, focused on:

*syntactical* strategies that signal the relative importance of the various actors and practices (e.g., indexicalization); *lexical* strategies that signal contested ideological dimensions of the language (e.g., the repetition of particular words or phrases); *stylistic* strategies that foreground or background social context (e.g., the use of descriptive words and phrases); and *rhetorical* strategies employed to ground knowledge claims (e.g., the use of anecdote and statistics). (p. 109)

Each text was read twice and coded for these four discursive practices (Jones et al., 2014). As I coded, I also created two memo charts—one for texts from the Catholic Church and the other for texts from Secretary DeVos. On these charts I recorded observations, examples, and ideas related to each of the four discursive strategies. By organizing data in this way, I could more easily visualize and identify discursive patterns across texts. Ultimately, I was able to identify four themes, which ran through these USCCB texts: patriotism, virtue signaling, funding, and school choice. Table 4, below, summarizes themes and subthemes and provides examples of each. Through these themes, I was able to identify links between discursive strategies, ideologies, and political interests. As noted above, one key aim of this analysis is to understand how meaning is constructed through discursive strategies related to education policy. This aim, and critical discourse analysis generally, is premised on the understanding that texts are a reflection of ideas already operative in a specific cultural milieu (Mullet, 2018). When ideas are made into texts, they take on a life of their own (Cohen, 2010; Foucault, 1972; Kumashiro, 2012; Mehan, 1993). This is especially true in the case of

**Table 4***Key Themes Across USCCB Texts*

| Theme                   | Subthemes                | Summary Description   | Example  |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Patriotism</b>       | America                  | Language demonstrates devotion and vigorous support for America,  | America: “The loss of Catholic schools would be an American tragedy.” (Gomez, June 16 <sup>th</sup> blog post)   |
|                         | National leadership      | especially nostalgic, and sometimes distorted, ideas of country and community   | National leadership: “We...commend you on the swift and bipartisan action you have already taken to respond to the health and economic crisis our nation is facing as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic.” (USCCB, April 9 <sup>th</sup> letter to congressional committee)                    |
|                         | Sacrifice                |   | Sacrifice: “We should honor the sacrifice of his (#GeorgeFloyd’s) life by removing racism and hate from our hearts and renewing our commitment to fulfill our nation’s sacred promise—to be a beloved community of life, liberty, and equality for all.” (@USCCB Twitter, May 31 <sup>st</sup> ) |
| <b>Virtue Signaling</b> | Invocation of prayer     | Language expresses opinions or sentiments indented to demonstrate the good character or moral correctness of one’s position on a particular issue, especially in line with the Church’s | Invocation of prayer: “May all educators be blessed with patience, perseverance, and creativity as they learn new ways to teach. #calltoprayer” (@USCCB Twitter, March 27 <sup>th</sup> )  |
|                         | Condemning individualism | policy interests &/or moral teachings   | Condemning individualism: “In a cultural climate in which moral norms are often thought to be matters of personal preference, Catholic schools have a crucial role to play” (@USCCBCatholicEd Twitter, June 5 <sup>th</sup> )  |
|                         | Catholic social teaching |   | Catholic social teaching: “we stand ready to work with you to advance the common good .... by protecting poor and vulnerable people who are most at risk.” (USCCB, April 9 <sup>th</sup> letter to congressional committee)  |
|                         | Family                   |   | Family: “Many private schools are committed to serving these families” (Federal COVID Response Coalition Letter to Congressional Leadership, May 13 <sup>th</sup> )  |

**Table 4**  
*Key Themes Across USCCB Texts (Continued)*

| Theme                | Subthemes            | Summary Description   | Example  |
|----------------------|----------------------|---|--|
| <b>Funding</b>       | Cost-savings         | Language appeals to economic logic for support of private schools, including financial data, district budgeting, public expenses and household income           | Cost-savings: “Private schools are currently saving the public school system \$75.3 billion annually” (Federal COVID Response Coalition Letter to Congressional Leadership, May 13 <sup>th</sup> )   |
|                      | Financial burden     |   | Financial burden: “If Catholic schools are allowed to fail...it would cost public schools about \$20 billion to absorb their students,” (@USCCBCatholicEd Twitter, June 19 <sup>th</sup> )   |
|                      | Business jargon      |   | Business jargon: “Reality Check: #USA’s #Catholic schools is the only private system that serves poor students & communities at scale. & the potential that #CV19 could almost wipe out that sector is real.” (@USCCBCatholicEd Twitter, June 4 <sup>th</sup> )                          |
| <b>School Choice</b> | Individual rights    | Language elevates the importance of personal choice in selecting a school, including creating and protecting a marketplace of public and private school options | Individual rights: “Education reform in #USA: @POTUS ‘school choice is a civil right’ Zip codes don’t dictate what grocery store one goes to -nor should it dictate what school one attends! #SaveCatholicSchools save all schools!” (@USCCBCatholic Ed Twitter, June 22 <sup>nd</sup> ) |
|                      | Diversity of options |   | Diversity of options: “states should be encouraged to immediately broaden educational options for families” (Federal COVID Response Coalition Letter to Congressional Leadership, June 25 <sup>th</sup> )  |

legal statutes, such as the CARES Act, because in the American legal system Congressional statutes must be interpreted by executive officers before they are implemented as policy for the public (Mitra, 2018). This process creates many points – drafting the law, interpreting the law, drafting the policy guidance, etc.—at which discourse about the law can influence policy outcomes. Hugh Mehan’s work is especially helpful in understanding this process.

In Mehan’s (1993) famous case study, he illustrates how texts written and then spoken about a student, led to that student’s diagnosis with a learning disability. This case demonstrates how savvy policy actors, a school administrator and school psychologist, can be effective in influencing the trajectory of discourse, and with it, policy, by interpreting written texts in specific ways. As the following data bear out, Mehan’s case mirrors the policymaking process, in which legislation is translated by executive offices into policy memos and executive action. Savvy policy actors, like the USCCB, can impact federal policy if they influence the executive interpretation of legislation.

The findings below are presented in two distinct sections, one illustrating the USCCB’s discursive strategies of neoconservatism and the other of neoliberalism. Subsections detail specific themes these discursive strategies illustrate, the logics used to validate claims, as well as the subjects they de/center. (See Table 5 in Appendix A for a complete list of the discursive strategies employed across the USCCB’s documents.) Data is presented with special attention to the chronology of public statements by the USCCB and its affiliates, drawing distinctions between discourse before and after April 25<sup>th</sup>, the date when President Trump held a conference call with Catholic educational leaders across the United States and signaled to them the administration’s specific policy interests.

## **Discursive Strategies of Neoconservatism**

### **Virtue Signaling and Patriotism**

The USCCB expresses neoconservatism in its social language through appeals to God and country. Through this language it reinforces traditional Christian religious norms, while appealing to the ideal and identity of strong moral leaders. Throughout these texts, the Church speaks about itself with active verbs, leading by praying, teaching, serving, and advocating. The USCCB shows deference to Church hierarchy, with Pope Francis and Archbishop Gomez, President of the USCCB, quoted and retweeted more than any other figures in the @USCCB Twitter posts. USCCB leaders assert agency during the COVID Crisis by communicating to Congress, “as the Catholic Church at the service of all God’s people, we stand ready to work with you to advance the common good,” (Barber et al., 2020). So too, Government officials are said to be doing “important work” in the USCCB’s April 9<sup>th</sup> letter to Congress, and those powerful figures in federal government are specifically praised in @USCCB Twitter post, quoting a USCCB public statement on March 28<sup>th</sup>, “Our government has been hard at work...Members of Congress and the President are to be commended for working together through long hours and late nights to...[provide] emergency relief to millions of Americans.” This neoconservative deference to strong leadership is echoed on April 9<sup>th</sup>, two weeks after the passing of the CARES Act, when USCCB leaders wrote to Congressional Committees, “to commend [them] on the swift and bipartisan action... to respond to the health and economic crisis our nation is facing...We express our appreciation for the helpful provisions that were included in the legislative packages enacted so far,” (Barber et al., 2020). Such commendations are given because Government was “swift and bipartisan” and “helpful” in the midst of national “crisis.” This language illustrates the neoconservative disposition toward patriotism and deference to strong, moral leadership.



Both Twitter accounts of the USCCB use prayer, or mandates to pray, to signal social priorities to its audience. Praying for America during the COVID crisis is an especially common practice, suggesting an ideological commitment to God and country. Prayer further serves to underscore hierarchical identity, through use of passive or active voice. For example, when communicating that Twitter followers should pray or will pray for a community, both @USCCBCatholicEd and @USCCB use active voice, signaling their role as a moral authority. But when invoking a prayer, passive voice is employed, indicating deference to a higher authority.

While that deference is most often shown to God or the Church, syntax sometimes suggests a greater deference to country. For example, on June 10<sup>th</sup> @USCCBCatholicEd retweeted @nceakpmears, “We will continue to work to prevent closures. Our schools are a gift to the nation and the Church.” Though the Church is mentioned, the nation comes first. Similarly, in his June 16<sup>th</sup> blog post, Archbishop Gomez writes “the loss of Catholic schools would be an *American tragedy*. It would set back opportunities for generations of children living in low-income and inner-city neighborhoods. We cannot accept this outcome for *America’s children*,” (Gomez, 2020, emphasis added). Here, we are reminded of the Catholic history of inner-city ministry, which dates back, significantly, to waves of European immigrants in the 1800’s. Today though, “inner-city” serves as coded language for Black and Latinx communities. This legacy is threatened by the specter of school closures, but Archbishop Gomez is clear, to the point of redundancy, that more than the Church ministry is threatened; *America’s children* are at risk. By appealing to this idealized European past, such neoconservative discourse underscores for members of the Catholic Church the severity of the threat not just to current Catholic schools of diverse demographics but the Whiter legacy of American Catholic education, while also signaling to federal leaders that coming to the aid of these private institutions would be a moral act of heroic patriotism.

### **Validating Claims with Virtue and Patriotism**

This neoconservative logic validates claims through virtue signaling and patriotic appeals. For example, Archbishop Gomez reminds us, “America’s 6,000 Catholic schools play a vital role in our national education infrastructure, giving young people the chance to realize the American dream,” (Gomez, 2020). Not only do they make America vital now, but he claims that Catholic schools have, “always been a source of American vitality.” By linking this vitality to patriotic ideals, it creates the impression that being a good American means upholding this historic institution. Thus, a good citizen or politician could validate their love for country by voting to support Catholic schools.

Within this framework, appeals to traditional virtue indicate the worthiness of a potential political ally. In their first letter to Congress, for example, the USCCB asserts, “As the Catholic Church at the service of all God’s people, we stand ready to work with you to advance the common good during this global and national health emergency, including by promoting the dignity and value of all human life, and by protecting poor and vulnerable people who are most at risk,” (Barber et al., 2020). The Bishops signal their virtue to Congress by declaring their commitment to “all God’s people,” “to advance the common good, “promoting the dignity and value of all human life,” and “protecting the poor and vulnerable.” We can see here the USCCB’s emphasis on supporting marginalized people.

However, within the Catholic Church, this statement is doing more work than generic virtue signaling. The phrase “poor and vulnerable” is direct reference to modern Catholic social teachings (Mich, 1998; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004), core moral principles of the Roman Catholic Church used to assess the morality of social and political life. By invoking the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable the bishops are making explicit commitment to advocate *preferentially* for the most marginalized in American society. Simply put, in this first letter to Congress

they are advocating for Congress to support, first and foremost, the economically poor and racially marginalized, who are most at risk in the pandemic. Notably, this commitment was made before the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed.

### **Rhetorical In/Visibility of Immigrant and Minoritized Students**

This rhetorical strategy of virtue signaling, viz-a-viz the principle of the preferential option, has the effect of simultaneously making marginalized communities an essential and visible feature of USCCB discourse, without giving any specificity to their context, needs, or internal diversity. The marginalized are simultaneously visible and invisible in these grammars of policy discourse. For example, in May, the USCCB wrote Congress that “approximately 30% of families with students enrolled in private school have an income of less than \$75,000. Many private schools are committed to serving these families and keep tuition low by streamlining operations and relying upon donations,” (Federal COVID Response Coalition, 2020). Without directly saying families are poor and vulnerable, they imply such by measuring their services against a bar of vulnerability set by Congress itself, when it provided, through the CARES Act, stimulus checks directly to households with annual income less than \$75,000. Private schools, however, “are committed to serving these families,” even though it means “relying on donations.” This statement simultaneously signals the virtuousness of the Church, by virtue of its service to families, and the means by which Congress can be likewise virtuous: committing itself further to supporting these poor private school students. However, despite the centrality of these students to the claims made, the only empirical data provided to detail their condition is a recycling of numbers Congress has already used in CARES Act legislation, thus signaling Congressional power and the USCCB’s worthiness as a political ally, rather than a meaningful indicator of the lived reality of Catholic students who might qualify as “poor” or “near-poor”, or sociopolitical reasons for such inequity existing in the first place.

This invocation of poverty to signal virtuousness is evident not only through repetition of common language and marginalizing grammars, but it also can be seen through appeals to racist stereotypes. The USCCB and its affiliates warn Congress in June that, “*migration* of students from private schools to *over-crowded* public schools will . . . directly impact any re-opening of public schools and their capacity to maintain social distancing. Such a prospect is all the more *ominous* given the higher than average *spread of the contagion in minority communities*,” (Federal COVID Response Coalition, 2020, emphasis added). Characterizing migrants and racialized minorities as dirty and diseased is an insidious trope that White nationalists have long used to advocate for changes to public policy (Liu, 2020). Here, we see that same language of “migration” and “disease” applied directly to “students” and “minority communities.” This language not only stokes White fear, which can be a useful political emotion, but it does so by targeting vulnerable, minoritized children. And yet, we still do not see, through this particular language, who those vulnerable really are, what they need, or what social contexts contribute to their struggle. Indeed, neoconservative political discourse does not need, or perhaps even want, such specificity to distract from the larger narrative being woven: politicians can show their patriotism and virtue by ensuring the in/visible poor can continue attending Catholic schools.

## **Discursive Strategies of Neoliberalism**

### **Funding and School Choice**

The USCCB expresses neoliberalism when it centers personal choice, freedom, economic calculations, and market deregulation in its social language. Tweets, letters and blogs, especially those written after April 25<sup>th</sup>, use this language to draw attention to actions that impact the economy or

empower students and families to choose the school they see fit. Verbs like “saving,” “paying,” and “cost” are ascribed to schools, characterizing their work as a service to economic aims. Likewise, the grammars are much more individualistic, directing actions away from school systems and democratic institutions and toward families, children, and private schools. The result is that schools are recast as economic agents, serving at the discretion and business interest of individual students and families.

Language about the “poor and vulnerable” is used as a rhetorical device to emphasize the need for personal freedom and choice. The same language which signals moral truth to the neoconservative can signal to the neoliberal reader an individual, economic claim to public funds. For example, Archbishop Gomez writes in June, that government policies which limit state funding to religious schools have, “resulted in an unfair situation for poor and middle-class families. They are forced to pay tuition for their children’s education while at the same time also paying taxes to support children enrolled in the public school system,” (Gomez, 2020). This situation is unfair because Government has “forced” families to pay tuition for their children to attend a private Catholic school of their choice *and* taxes to support other people’s children to attend public schools. The solution Archbishop Gomez proposes is not to focus investments on economically marginalized communities but “to provide immediate relief to help families handle their education expenses and also to expand nationwide school-choice opportunities for poor and middle-class families,” (Gomez, 2020). This call for “immediate relief” may sound appropriate, given the economic burdens that have just been described. However, this prescription does not consider the relative advantage of middle-class families, who are likelier than poor families to be able to send their children to private schools. Rather, the neoliberal language advocates for equal benefits for all families, regardless of socioeconomic context. As Secretary DeVos aptly put it in her March 5<sup>th</sup> statement to Congress, “I like to picture kids with backpacks representing funding for their education following them wherever they go to learn,” (DeVos, 2020). While this policy vision may be idyllic for the privileged, what it implies for public education systems, on which so many lower-income and non-White students depend, is an increasingly unreliable source of funding and concomitant inability to plan for and invest in their education future.

### **Economic Validation for School Choice**

Neoliberal logic reasons that a good person, and likewise a good citizen, contributes to society through support of economic freedom and personal choice in all facets of life. To be human is to serve the market wherein economic choices are made. Thus, school systems are reimagined as marketplaces. Threats to that marketplace are imagined as burdensome regulations, excessive taxes, and restrictions on choice. Likewise, the USCCB writes in a letter to Congress in June that public schools are “ominous,” “over-crowded,” and face “unbearable financial burden,” (Federal COVID Response Coalition, 2020). At the same time that this letter denigrates public schools, it never mentions them without linking them to Catholic schools, a discursive strategy that reinforces the imaginary of a shared marketplace, wherein Catholic schools are the best market choice.

Archbishop Gomez, in his June blogpost, also plays with the imagination, but through redefining meaning. “The presence of diverse educational options — a thriving public school system along with a strong network of independent schools, including religious schools — has always been a source of American vitality. We need to act now to ensure that educational diversity survives this pandemic,” (Gomez, 2020). Writing in the midst of Black Lives Matter protests and nationwide discussions of diversity in education, Archbishop Gomez shifts the meaning of “diversity” in education from cultural identity to market options. Indeed, the real life-or-death option, suggested by such descriptive language, is not the protection of Black lives, but the survival of school choice.

In May, the USCCB intensifies its use of the language of school choice. After only a handful of posts in April, most of which concerned prayer, the @USCCBCatholicEd Twitter account begins posting daily in May, sometimes as many as six times a day. These posts are often retweets or retweets with comments from think tanks, journalists, school leaders, and advocacy organizations all of which support school choice. For example, on May 19<sup>th</sup> @USCCBCatholicEd retweets without comment Thomas W. Carroll @BostonCathSupt as he quotes a National Review article, *It's Time for a Federal Voucher Program*, “No reason why a financial crisis should spur the federal government to pour billions of dollars into public schools while ignoring the millions of parents who believe a private education is best for their children.” #SaveCatholicSchools @POTUS” Other posts call faithful Catholics to act in support of school choice, like a May 20<sup>th</sup> comment on the Huffington Post article *At Least 100 Catholic Schools Across the Country May not Reopen this Fall*, “Catholic Schools need your help! Please see our action alert above and contact your Members of Congress today.”

The starkest shift in school choice language is between the USCCB’s April 9<sup>th</sup> letter to Congress, and their later letters and blog post. While the April 9<sup>th</sup> letter, authored solely by the USCCB, validates claims strictly on moral grounds, as explained above, Archbishop Gomez’s June blog post and the USCCB letters sent in May and June to Congress use economic and statistical data to validate their primary claims. These later documents make new reference to economic savings, something absent from the April 9<sup>th</sup> letter. The USCCB claims it saves the Federal government billions of dollars each year, a figure repeated across these later texts. Further, references to poor and marginalized groups become tokenized in these later texts, implying a lack of value to the marketplace. The lexical choices expressed in these later texts rely so strongly on economic and legal jargon as to make their policy suggestions nearly unintelligible to lay readers. For example, the May letter to Congress references more than ten different legal statutes and policies. While this jargon is simplified in the text published in June, the rhetorical style of that letter still privileges the economic technician over the lay or socially critical reader, a pattern similar to Mehan (1993) case study.

Likewise, much of the descriptive language in these texts draws directly on jargon more typical of a corporate boardroom than a classroom, like the @USCCBCatholicEd retweet of @moblum on June 4<sup>th</sup> “Reality Check: #USA’s #Catholic schools is the only private system that serves poor students & communities at scale. & the potential that #CV19 could almost wipe out that sector is real.” While at first, this tweet may appear to express social concern, it sterilizes the plight of “poor students & communities” through technical language: “private system,” “at scale,” and “that sector.” This language quantifies suffering in a way that decenters the poor over profits.

The use of technical language signals those aligned with neoliberal ideology, including administration officials like Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. She also employs business language to discuss education, even referring to students and families as “customers” in prepared public remarks in March (DeVos, 2020). Indeed, sometimes the USCCB signals political figures directly, like the retweet of @moblum’s June 22<sup>nd</sup> post. In this tweet, we see President Trump, @POTUS, tagged, along with his quote, “School choice is a civil right.” While this is not legally accurate, the language of “rights” suggests a neoliberal commitment to personal choice and freedom. The tweet goes further, though, to claim, “#SaveCatholicSchools save all schools!” These side-by-side mandates function as a rhetorical shift, wherein public schools, and those lower income, Black and Latinx students who attend them, are made invisible in the service of Catholic school choice.

## **Making Meaning of Discursive Practices and Education Policy Implications**

As Michael Apple (2006) theorized, and the discursive strategies of the USCCB bear out, one of the great struggles of the political Right is resolving the tensions between neoconservative and

neoliberal priorities. The ways in which the USCCB negotiated these claims during the early months of the COVID crisis illustrate not only that it is a savvy political actor, with clear and conscious interests in Catholic school vitality, but that it also understands how its interests may converge with that of policymakers, in particular, members of the Trump Administration. Though the language and logics of neoconservatism do not entirely disappear from the USCCB’s discourse after April 25<sup>th</sup>, it is strongly subordinated to the preferred ideological language of the Trump administration: neoliberalism. In so doing, the USCCB reduces the tension between these different right-leaning ideologies, making it possible “to move society in the direction they ardently desire to go,” (Apple, 2006, p. 16): thriving school marketplaces, full of private catholic schools, available especially to White and wealthy students.

On April 25<sup>th</sup> President Trump, and with him Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, held a conference call with 600 Catholic Church leaders and educators. Crux News reported that President Trump specifically, “asked that a national figure of what Catholic schools save the federal government in education be determined so that he could convince Congress for greater funding,” (White, 2020). Such economic data, while absent from USCCB discourse prior to April 25<sup>th</sup>, was present in *all subsequent public statements* regarding Catholic education and the CARES Act through July 1<sup>st</sup>. This marks a substantive change in discourse. Prior to this date, the public discursive strategies of the USCCB, regarding Catholic schools and the CARES Act, were clearly aligned with the neoconservative ideology typical of the institutional U.S. Catholic Church. This ideology positioned morality and the common good as a patriotic stance and signaled as virtuous a preferential option for poor and marginalized students. Maintaining the discursive in/visibility of these poor and marginalized students made it possible to pivot discursive logics quickly when, following the April 25<sup>th</sup> conference call, the USCCB shifted its language use to strongly align with the neoliberal ideology typical of the Trump administration. This ideology positioned economic value, personal choice, and individual rights to private schooling as central goods to be protected by government. This rhetorical shift—rather than a result of the Catholic Church loosening its public commitment to marginalized students—actually reveals an acceptance of the racial status quo, even in the midst of national Black Lives Matter protests. Through the lens of interest convergence, this makes sense as a choice to pursue White interests on a national scale, political allyship with the Trump Administration for the purpose of obtaining new federal funding for Catholic schools and, potentially, a new legal precedent that could have lasting, favorable effects on such funding.

Before April 25<sup>th</sup>, the discursive patterns of the USCCB signal a traditional neoconservative audience. Appeals to patriotism, moral character, and institutional power signal to Congress the virtue of ongoing support of Catholic schools, especially those schools which serve the most marginalized. While marginalized people are used in a discursively ambiguous manner, being both hyper-visible and invisible, their centrality to the moral life and work of the Church and Catholic schools is not feigned. Catholic schools have long served these communities, yet within the historical context of increasing costs of K-12 religious schooling, it has become increasingly difficult to do so well (USCCB, 1986).

When President Trump signaled, on April 25<sup>th</sup>, his willingness to alleviate this longstanding financial burden, if only the Catholic Church could prove it was a good deal for the federal government, the USCCB responded swiftly and affirmatively. Such a request from President Trump was underscored, less than a week later, by his Department of Education, when it published the FAQ regarding equitable services to non-public schools. This interpretation of the CARES Act was radically different from that intended by

Congress (B. Scott, 2020), yet Secretary DeVos, a longtime advocate of school choice, stood by her department's interpretation. This signaled to the USCCB that by shifting discursive practices to reflect the neoliberal reasoning of the executive branch, their interests might converge in real and permanent policy change. This potential permanence of school choice reforms would reflect a win-win situation for Secretary DeVos, President Trump, and the USCCB, and such a political win could be perceived by the USCCB as being worth the risk of new discursive practices, directed at executive branch interlocutors, rather than Congress.

What these discursive practices reveal about the USCCB is that during these early months of the pandemic, they had one conscious priority in regard to Catholic education. They wanted to save *all* Catholic schools, not just ones that were vulnerable to closure because of economic or racial marginality. This aligned with the views of Secretary of Education DeVos, who asserted in a June 23, 2020 retweet celebrating the anniversary of school voucher programs, "All kids matter." This position diverges from the USCCB's March and April discourse, which directed attention to the most vulnerable schools and common good being served during the COVID crisis, language consistent with Catholic social teaching (Mich, 1998; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004) and the moral priorities infused in recent decades of USCCB discourse (Scribner, 2015; USCCB, 1986). Indeed, in its April 9<sup>th</sup> letter to Congress, the USCCB explicitly advocated for "equity" in education funding, consistent with prior federal legislative precedent (Barber et al., 2020). Yet by June, the USCCB was willing to risk asking Congress, and through Congress signaling the President, for a permanent solution to Catholic school funding shortfalls. This solution looked like neoliberalism: rich with vouchers, scholarship funds, tax breaks for tuition-paying families, and a new legal precedent in federal educational funding formulas.

However admirable and urgent the need to #SaveCatholicSchools during the COVID crisis, the problem with such a new legal precedent in federal funding is that it would focus on equality rather than equity. Inasmuch as any Catholic school budget may have been impacted negatively, and therefore been made vulnerable by the COVID crisis, advocacy for a one-time infusion of federal funding from the CARES Act may serve the immediate need of educating vulnerable students. However, critical discourse analysis suggests that such "discourses contribute to the cultural reproduction of racism," and "power and resource imbalances between 'speakers' and 'listeners' are linked to their unequal access to those resources," (Mullet, 2018, p. 117). If successful, more than a one-time emergency infusion of funding, the USCCB's discursive strategy, accomplished largely through a shift from neoconservative to neoliberal ideological reasoning, could result in a new federal funding precedent in which each student at Catholic schools counts similarly in the allotment of funds, as opposed to the existing precedent wherein funds are allotted based on the needs of particularly vulnerable groups of students. Put simply, such a change would privilege equality over equity, and with it, the reproduction of racial and economic oppression. By advocating for a policy in which "all kids matter" equally for Catholic school funding, "the *preferential* option for the poor," (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, p. 79) disappears from USCCB discourse.

Such a discursive shift may have concerning implications for students, public and private, especially those who lack the protective factors of wealth and Whiteness. In purely economic terms, if the Catholic Church and the Trump administration were to prevail in their interpretation of the CARES Act minoritized students, especially those in public schools, would receive on the whole less funding from this particular emergency

appropriation.<sup>3</sup> Given the urgency of the need, such a policy outcome could have lasting negative impact on students already facing opportunity gaps. Further concerning, the strength of the USCCB’s support for permanent changes to federal education funding suggests that even with the transition to a new Presidential administration and the recovery of the U.S. economy, the USCCB and its allies may continue to advocate for years to come for the novel policy changes supported by the Trump administration. Going forward, advocates for equitable education funding should be prepared to respond to such policy initiatives, whether they come from factions within the U.S. government or institutions, like the USCCB, outside of it.

Institutional discourse is a central feature of democracy. Democracy benefits not simply from the voice and civic activity of individual citizens but from the collective voice and activity of free institutions (Murray, 1960). The Catholic Church is one such institution, which contributes to American society not just through religious ministry but through a variety of civically-meaningful activities including: healthcare, social services, and the largest private educational system in the country. The neoconservative ideology typical of contemporary Catholic Church discourse, which values collective moral aims above individualistic, economic ones, has implications for the kinds of work and advocacy enacted by this institution. Indeed, the marginalized students at the heart of this discussion should find an advocate in the institution of the neoconservative Catholic Church, which according to Catholic social teaching privileges their voice, over wealthier or Whiter ones, by virtue of their marginality (Mich, 1998; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). Whether the institution lives up to such core moral teachings, particularly for racially and economically minoritized people, is a topic needing further research. What is evident from this analysis, though, is that the subordination of the discursive norms of the USCCB to those of the Trump administration, particularly within the context of ongoing funding difficulties for Catholic schools, subtly blur the institutional distinctions between Church and State, a reality that calls into question the autonomy and moral authority of the institutional Catholic Church (Murray, 1960). Further, it reveals a troubling truth for low-income and racially marginalized students: they matter most to the USCCB when they serve this primary policy interest to keep all schools open.

If the USCCB can so easily discursively disappear marginalized students—despite the moral commitments of the Church to serving, preferentially, the poor and vulnerable (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004), especially marginalized students (USCCB, 1986), and in the midst of *both* the COVID pandemic that disproportionately harmed Black and Latinx people *and* Black Lives Matter protests in every state in the country—a reasonable person must wonder where else the USCCB is decentering and disappearing the interests of minoritized students and stakeholders. What is clear from this analysis is that if the USCCB seeks policy changes that serve the common good of *all* students, rather than reproducing the substantial economic and racial inequality revealed by the COVID crisis, then it needs to keep the interests and voices of the marginalized central in its public discourse and policy advocacy.

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## Appendix A

Table 5

*Language Use Related to Ideologies*

| Text  | Strategy Employed      | Example and Purpose   | Ideology / Theory                       |
|---|------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Public Twitter Account</b>                     |                        |   |   |
| @USCCB<br>(Pre-April 25 <sup>th</sup> )           | Rhetorical,<br>Lexical | Repeated use of prayers and mandates to pray signal social priorities of religion, god, and country, e.g., “Together, let us pray for an end to this pandemic as we seek Our Lady and St. Joseph’s intercession.” (March 19)  | Neoconservative                         |
|   | Syntactical            | Hierarchical identity is reinforced through use of active mandates to pray, e.g., “Offer Up Your New Daily Routine for Those Suffering From Coronavirus....Pray the Divine Office” (March 23) and passive invocations of prayer, e.g., “May all educators be blessed with patience, perseverance, and creativity as they learn new ways to teach. #calltoprayer” (March 27) | Neoconservative                         |
| (Post-April 25 <sup>th</sup> )                    | Lexical                | Word use suggests racism is not systemic but a choice, and to remove it at will is patriotic, e.g., “We should honor the sacrifice of his (#GeorgeFloyd’s) life by removing racism and hate from our hearts and renewing our commitment to fulfill our nation’s sacred promise—to be a beloved community of life, liberty, and equality for all.” (May 31)                  | Neoliberal /<br>Critical Race<br>Theory |
| @USCCBCatholicEd<br>(Pre-April 25 <sup>th</sup> ) | Rhetorical,<br>Lexical | Repeated use of prayers and mandates to pray signal social priorities of religious praxis, god, and country, e.g., “#PopeFrancis will impart a special blessing to the world tomorrow....in this time of the #coronavirus pandemic. The prayer and blessing will be broadcast by @VaticanNews on their website #PrayTogether” (March 26)                                    | Neoconservative                         |

**Table 5**

*Language Use Related to Ideologies (Continued)*

| Text   | Strategy Employed | Example and Purpose  | Ideology / Theory |
|--|-------------------|--|-------------------|
| <b>Public Twitter Account</b>                      |                   |  |                   |
| @USCCBCatholicEd<br>(Post-April 25 <sup>th</sup> ) | Lexical           | Denigration of individualism signals virtue of Catholic schools, e.g., “In a cultural climate in which moral norms are often thought to be matters of personal preference, Catholic schools have a crucial role to play” (@USCCBCatholicEd Twitter, June 5 <sup>th</sup> )   | Neoconservative   |
|  | Syntactical       | Hierarchical identity is reinforced through use of active mandates to pray, e.g., “don’t forget to join Pope Francis and Catholics around the world as they pray the rosary today” (March 19 <sup>th</sup> ), as well as deference to God, the Church, and nation, e.g., “We will continue to work to prevent closures. Our schools are a gift to the nation and the Church.” (June 10 <sup>th</sup> ) | Neoconservative   |
|  | Stylistic         | Use of technical jargon decenters the marginalized while emphasizing economics, e.g., “Reality Check: #USA’s #Catholic schools is the only private system that serves poor students & communities at scale. & the potential that #CV19 could almost wipe out that sector is real.” (June 4 <sup>th</sup> )   | Neoliberal        |
|  | Syntactical       | Tagging and quoting political leaders signals support for personal choice and freedom, e.g., “Education reform in #USA: @POTUS ‘school choice is a civil right’ Zip codes don’t dictate what grocery store one goes to -nor should it dictate what school one attends! #SaveCatholicSchools save all schools!” (June 22 <sup>nd</sup> )  | Neoliberal        |

**Table 5***Language Use Related to Ideologies (Continued)*

| Text   | Strategy Employed        | Example and Purpose   | Ideology / Theory |
|--|--------------------------|---|-------------------|
| <b>Open Letter</b><br>USCCB Letter to<br>Help Education,<br>Labor<br>(April 9 <sup>th</sup> )                                    | Stylistic,<br>Rhetorical | Use of economic language signals concern with school funding, e.g., “If Catholic schools are allowed to fail...it would cost public schools about \$20 billion to absorb their students,” (June 19 <sup>th</sup> )  | Neoliberal        |
|  | Stylistic                | Word choice signals commitment to patriotism and strong, centralized leadership, e.g., “commend” “swift and bipartisan” “our nation” “crisis”   | Neoconservative   |
| <b>Open Letter</b><br>Federal COVID<br>Response Coalition<br>Letter to<br>Congressional<br>Leadership<br>(May 13 <sup>th</sup> ) | Lexical, Stylistic       | Word choice and repetition signal virtuous commitments of Catholic Church, e.g., “all God’s people,” “common good,” “global and national...emergency,” “dignity and value of all human life,” “protecting poor and vulnerable people”   | Neoconservative   |
|  | Syntactical              | Grammars of policy discourse signal virtue by making marginalized vaguely visible but invisible in specific characteristics, e.g., “Many private schools are committed to serving these families”   | Neoconservative   |
|  | Lexical                  | Use of figures which repeat language and benchmarks in CARES Act signal how policymakers can act patriotically and virtuously, e.g., “students enrolled in private school have an income of less than \$75,000”   | Neoliberal        |
|  | Rhetorical               | Use of empirical data privileges utilitarian logics rather than deontological, e.g., “Approximately 30% of families with students enrolled in private school have an income of less than \$75,000. Many private schools.... keep tuition low by streamlining operations and relying upon donations” | Neoliberal        |

**Table 5**

*Language Use Related to Ideologies (Continued)*

| Text  | Strategy Employed  | Example and Purpose   | Ideology / Theory                      |
|---|--------------------|---|--|
| <p><b>Open Letter</b><br/>Federal COVID Response Coalition Letter to Congressional Leadership<br/>(May 13<sup>th</sup> Cont.)</p> | Rhetorical         | Use of statistical data communicates economic savings Catholic schools provide to government, e.g., “private schools are currently saving the public school system \$75.3 billion annually”   | Neoliberal                             |
| <p><b>Open Letter</b><br/>Federal COVID Response Coalition Letter to Congressional Leadership<br/>(June 25<sup>th</sup>)</p>      | Rhetorical         | Use of legalistic jargon privileges economic expertise over lay intelligibility, e.g., “The grant amount, per state, could be tied to ESEA Title IIA calculations.”   | Neoliberal                             |
|   | Lexical, Stylistic | Repetition of language invoking marginalized signals virtuous choice for policy actors, e.g., “those hardest hit by economic uncertainty,” “income loss,” “most vulnerable,” “poor and minority communities”  | Neoconservative / Neoliberal           |
|   | Lexical            | Use of numeric figures that repeat benchmarks in CARES Act signal how policymakers can act patriotically and virtuously, e.g., “students enrolled in private school have an income of less than \$75,000”   | Neoliberal                             |
|   | Stylistic          | Application of racialized language to economically marginalized virtue signals policymakers, e.g., “migration of students from private schools to over-crowded public schools will .... directly impact any re-opening of public schools and their capacity to maintain social distancing. Such a prospect is all the more ominous given the higher than average spread of the contagion in minority communities” | Neoconservative / Critical Race Theory |
|   | Lexical            | Public schools described in language emphasizing economic challenge, e.g., “ominous,” “over-crowded,” “unbearable financial burden”   | Neoliberal                             |
|   | Rhetorical         | Use of statistical data communicates economic costs to government of Catholic school closures, e.g., “Should 20 percent of private school students have to be reabsorbed into the public system, it will cost the public system roughly \$15 billion”   | Neoliberal                             |

**Table 5***Language Use Related to Ideologies (Continued)*

| Text  | Strategy Employed  | Example and Purpose  | Ideology / Theory   |
|---|--------------------|--|---|
| <b>Public Blog</b>  |                    |  |   |
| Catholic Schools and America's Future<br>(June 16 <sup>th</sup> ) | Syntactical        | Repeated invocations of the nation signal patriotism, e.g., “the loss of Catholic schools would be an American tragedy.”   | Neoconservative   |
|   | Stylistic          | Use of coded language simultaneously invokes racialized nature as well as idealized immigrant history of catholic schools, e.g., “low-income and inner-city neighborhoods”   | Neoconservative / Critical Race Theory – Interest Convergence |
|   | Rhetorical         | Use of quantitative data emphasizes magnitude of Catholic school impact on American schooling generally and signals patriotism, e.g., “America’s 6,000 Catholic schools play a vital role in our national education infrastructure”  | Neoconservative   |
|   | Stylistic          | Use of economic and individualistic language emphasizes school funding and family choice, e.g., “poor and middle-class families...are forced to pay tuition for their children’s education while at the same time also paying taxes to support children enrolled in the public school system” “help families handle their education expenses and also to expand nationwide school-choice opportunities for poor and middle-class families” | Neoliberal  |
|   | Stylistic, Lexical | Word choice and repetition recharacterizes “diversity” from racialized to patriotic and school choice concept, e.g., “The presence of diverse educational options — a thriving public school system along with a strong network of independent schools, including religious schools — has always been a source of American vitality. We need to act now to ensure that educational diversity survives this pandemic”                       | Neoliberal / Critical Race Theory – Interest Convergence      |



## About the Author

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Kathleen Sellers is a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership at Miami University. Her scholarship applies a critical lens to the policy impacts, pedagogy, and philosophy of American Catholic schools and school systems. She has worked in Catholic urban secondary education and immigration law.

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# education policy analysis archives

Volume 28 Number 131

October 11, 2021

ISSN 1068-2341

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