

9-1-1997

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Bruno V. Manno  
*Hudson Institute*

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## Recommended Citation

Manno, B. V. (1997). The Catholic High School and American Educational Reform: Challenges and Opportunities. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 1 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0101021997>

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## ARTICLES

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# THE CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL AND AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL REFORM: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

BRUNO V. MANNO

*Hudson Institute*

*This paper provides answers to two questions. First, what challenges and opportunities does the movement to reform American public education, and to make it more accountable, raise for Catholic high schools? Second, what challenges and opportunities does the effectiveness of Catholic high schools in educating disadvantaged students raise for American public education?*

Since the early 1980s, two simultaneous but usually separate discussions have been underway in American education. The first discussion has been on the issue of quality and accountability in American public education. The second discussion has been on the unusual effectiveness of Catholic high schools in educating disadvantaged students.

In what follows, I will try to draw these two conversations together by answering the following questions. First, what challenges and opportunities does the movement to reform American public education, and to make it more accountable, raise for Catholic high schools? Second, what challenges and opportunities does the effectiveness of Catholic high schools in educating disadvantaged students raise for American public education?

The first section of this paper describes a shift that has occurred over the last 30 years in American educational circles on how quality in education is evaluated. This shift has led to the notion of the grammar of accountability. This section concludes with a set of questions delineating both opportunities and challenges for the Catholic high school that flow from this discussion.

The second section presents an overview of what Catholic secondary schools do to create an advantaged educational opportunity for the most disadvantaged who attend these schools. The crucial elements that help create this advantaged educational setting are the school's educational or curricular

requirements as well as the school's communal organization. This section concludes with a set of opportunities and challenges for American public education that flow from this discussion.

The final section discusses the Catholic high school's role and contribution in revitalizing our communities and in promoting virtue and sound character. In this sense, the school serves as one of the most fundamental institutions that communities have at their disposal to help in the task of developing a sociology of virtue.

## **JUDGING EDUCATIONAL QUALITY AND EFFECTIVENESS**

Over the last third of this century, a radical shift has occurred in the way educational quality is judged, a shift from inputs to outcomes. Previously, the conventional wisdom judged quality in terms of inputs: intentions and efforts, institutions and services, resources and spending. The shift began in the mid-1960s, when the U.S. Office of Education asked the late James S. Coleman to conduct a major study of the equality of educational opportunity in America. His report, released in 1966, was a radical challenge to the conventional wisdom. It suggested that inputs might not have a strong effect on equality of student achievement. Reflecting on this study, Coleman (1972) wrote the following:

The major virtue of the study as conceived and executed lay in the fact that it did not accept [the input] definition, and by refusing to do so, has had its major impact on shifting policy attention from its traditional focus on comparison of inputs (the traditional measure of school quality used by school administrators: per-pupil expenditure, class size, teacher salaries, age of building and equipment, and so on) to a focus on output. (pp. 149-150)

When judging educational quality prior to the Coleman report, the focus of policy makers was almost exclusively on what schools spent. After the Coleman report, increasing numbers of policy makers began to place primary emphasis in judging quality on what students achieved academically. Those who advocate this focus on outcomes in judging educational quality hold one common belief: Specify what all our children are expected to learn, and test them to determine whether they have learned it.

In the outcome approach, success is measured by the extent to which inputs raise educational achievement. Changes are worth making if there is some assurance that they will produce the expected outcomes. The first question asked is less likely to be "How much are we spending?" and more likely to be "What are our children learning, and how well are they learning it?" The focus on outcomes won some converts in the years after the Coleman

report. Nonetheless, the resource or input approach continued to dominate American education.

## WIDESPREAD ATTENTION

The event that galvanized the nation's attention and began a more widespread call for fundamental reforms that improve student achievement was the April 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE). This study declared America to be a "nation at risk...[whose] educational foundations...are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (NCEE, 1983, p. 5). The report's main criticism was that America's young people were not learning enough and the input-focused, resource-based strategies in place since the mid-1960s had failed to improve education outcomes significantly. Weak academic achievement, therefore, was the key education problem.

This conclusion was repeated in dozens of other reports that soon followed, which helped put pressure on politicians and policy makers to improve educational performance. This led to a development unprecedented in the history of U.S. education reform: The nation's states became hotbeds of education reform. Elected officials (governors, state legislators, and mayors) and lay people (parents, business leaders, and newspaper editors) set out to wrest control of education from the education experts (school superintendents, school boards, and other members of the education establishment). Thus "civilians"—the consumers of education—began to demand that the "education experts"—the producers of education—make themselves accountable to the public.

Coleman's early work was very important in placing the focus on outcomes, as were the later efforts of elected policy makers and other civilians seeking to make educators more accountable for results. At the time, even some educators agreed with the need to focus on results. For example, in the 1970s the move to establish minimum competency tests for students reflected a focus on results. In the 1980s, this competency focus spread to other areas such as the preparation of teachers and administrators.

The "mastery learning" movement which was popularized by Benjamin Bloom in the late 1960s and which became widespread beginning in the early 1980s is further evidence of the shift. In Bloom's words, "Given sufficient time (and appropriate types of help), 95 percent of students (the top five percent and the next 90 percent) can learn a subject to high levels of mastery" (1973, p. 10). In other words, outcomes—or the ends of education—are primary and should be held constant, and instruction—or the methods or the means of education, especially the time used to master outcomes—should vary. This approach reversed the usual practice of allowing for little or no

day-to-day variation in time used for teaching different subjects. These and other such efforts set the stage for the watershed events that would soon follow.

## **NEW MOMENTUM, NATIONAL GOALS**

Perhaps the single most important effort to turn the focus toward outcomes was that of the National Governors' Association (NGA). In the mid-1980s, the NGA gave the outcome approach far-reaching policy attention when they decided to devote 12 months to investigate and report on the condition of education in the states, with follow-up activities and reports for an additional four years. They focused on education for one reason. In the words of the then-NGA Chair and Governor of Tennessee Lamar Alexander: "Better schools mean better jobs. To meet stiff competition from workers in the rest of the world, we must educate ourselves and our children as we never have before.... Schools ... must produce better results" (NGA, 1986, p. 2). In short, the governors cast their lot with those arguing that the time had come to place primary emphasis on what students learn, the outcomes they achieve.

The approach endorsed by the governors gathered further momentum in 1989, when President George Bush convened an Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia. The president and the governors agreed to set six ambitious national education goals—outcomes—from early childhood through lifelong learning that they would work to achieve by the year 2000. One fundamental idea underlay these goals: "We want to swap red tape for results...[build] a system of accountability that focuses on results...and issue annual Report Cards on progress" (Statement by the President and Governors, 1989). Building on this idea, it is not difficult to imagine the general outlines of a school accountability system, one that is applicable to both government and non-government schools.

### **The accountability triad**

An accountability system must, at a minimum, have these three parts: clear expectations, tests to measure achievement, and real consequences for failure to meet the expectations. I have come to think of this as the grammar of accountability.

Any well-functioning enterprise begins with a clear set of expectations. In education, these expectations were defined for many years by the Carnegie unit—i.e., a uniform measure of course-taking. This "input" or "seat time" definition has begun to give way to the results-oriented approach that spells out standards of student achievement, of demonstrable knowledge and skills. This means setting forth what students should know and be able to demonstrate at various checkpoints if the school does its job properly.

For standards to have an impact, good tests and other assessments of stu-

dent and school performance are needed. Good information is also required about how the education system is doing at the various levels that matter: the individual child, the school as a whole, the state, etc. Finally, accountability mechanisms must have consequences for everyone involved. This implies that students should be promoted and graduate only when they have met the required standards; that universities should admit students only when they meet college-level entry norms; and that employers will do likewise. Consequences should not apply only to students. Teachers, principals, superintendents, and other responsible adults should also be rewarded for success, penalized for failure, and perhaps even dismissed if they or their institutions can't get the job done. Standards, testing, and consequences—these are the three crucial parts of speech in the grammar of accountability.

### **An accountability system**

More specifically, an accountability system has several aspects to it. There are clearly delineated content standards defining what students should know and be able to do. There also are performance standards—some call these achievement levels—that specify what depth of knowledge is “good enough.” There also are exams that mirror those standards and report whether students are learning what they are taught. These tests include a blend of teacher-designated assessments of various types for classroom diagnosis as well as external tests—independent audits, really—prepared and administered by people other than the school's own managers. Finally, the results must be reported in a timely and understandable manner that allows for comparison over time with other schools, across jurisdictions, and even internationally. Additional indicators of school success should also be gathered and reported—information such as attendance, graduation rates, incidence of discipline problems, advanced placement results, etc.

These standards and tests, however, should not be higher hurdles for fewer to jump. They must raise expectations and let all students know what to aim for. High standards should be the primary way to boost the academic achievement of all children and provide them with an equal opportunity to learn. Widespread access to high standards that reflect a rich and challenging curriculum advances the twin goals of education excellence and equity. Finally, standards need not lead to uniformity, standardization, or a national curriculum. The means to achieving them can and should be left to individual schools, teachers, parents, and communities.

### **National policy and public opinion today**

This grammar of accountability—standards, testing, and consequences—is standard rhetoric today at the highest national policy levels. For example, President Bill Clinton and U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley endorse the standards and testing model as a way to achieve fundamental education

reform. The administration's 1997 education budget places standards and testing at the heart of its K-12 agenda. (Ironically, George Bush and his Secretary of Education, Lamar Alexander, proposed a nearly similar approach for congressional consideration and enactment about seven years ago, only to have outraged Democrats crush the plan.)

Moreover, there is broad-based public support for efforts to make the accountability triad of standards, testing, and consequences the cornerstone of America's efforts to transform its schools. In recent years, surveys by the Gallup Organization and Public Agenda (among others) show a public focused on common-sense steps to improve the schools: safe and disciplined learning environments with high standards for student behavior; schools that build on the "basics" and have high standards of student achievement; and tests that matter, that have consequences for promotion, graduation, and employment. (And one could add two other items: radically deregulated schools that no longer are hamstrung by bureaucratic red tape and that place more control in the hands of local educators and more choices of many different kinds of schools.) Unfortunately, these same surveys also show school "experts"—the education establishment types—to be out of touch with these main concerns of the public.

### **Implications for the Catholic high school**

What opportunities and challenges does the grammar of accountability present to the Catholic high school? Here are some questions flowing from this discussion that Catholic high schools might benefit from asking themselves regarding their academic programs:

- Does the school have a clear set of content standards defining what students should know and be able to do?
- Does the school have a clear set of performance standards and achievement levels specifying what depth of knowledge is "good enough"?
- Does the school have in place a system or repertoire of examinations that test to those standards and report whether students are learning what they are being taught?
- Which of these exams are teacher designed and which serve as an external audit—a truth teller of sorts?
- How are results reported?
- Can academic progress be tracked against baseline data?
- What comparisons can—and should—be made?
- What additional indicators of student academic success are gathered and reported?

Accountability questions like these must also be asked of the Catholic high school's other dimensions—e.g., its religious program and activities, its fiscal dimension, any unique mission or activities a school undertakes, etc.

## **CREATING AN ADVANTAGED EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY**

The other question I propose to answer comes from the perspective of what public schools might learn from Catholic schools: What do Catholic secondary schools do to create an advantaged educational opportunity for the most disadvantaged who attend these schools?

Beginning with the work of Peter Rossi and Andrew Greeley in the early 1960s, through the recent work of Anthony Bryk and his colleagues, rigorous empirical research has documented the extraordinary effectiveness of Catholic schools on a variety of fronts, particularly the academic and religious domains. Academic success in the Catholic high school is particularly apparent when one views the evidence for disadvantaged and minority youngsters whose persistently low achievement levels—especially in urban America—are probably the most pressing and serious problem confronting American public education today. In mathematics, for example, the average test scores for black and Hispanic public school students in the 12th grade are about the same as for white and Asian public school students in the eighth grade.

Moreover, the success of Catholic high schools is especially evident among those who have multiple disadvantages—for example, educational, emotional, social, and economic. Here is one piece of evidence. Children from single-parent families in public schools are twice as likely to drop out as students from two-parent families. But in Catholic schools, dropout rates are about the same, which in this case means the dropout rate is nearly nonexistent.

Why do Catholic high schools succeed so well academically? What do they do to be effective? How do they create advantaged educational opportunity for many of the most disadvantaged in our society? One of the answers to these questions is curricular. Another is communal.

### **ACADEMIC ORGANIZATION**

The central principle organizing the academic program of the Catholic high school is a core curriculum for all students, regardless of where they are from (background) or where they are going (educational plans). The school has a widely shared academic assumption about what knowledge and skills students should acquire. Generally speaking, this means electives are limited and required courses predominate. This constrained structure of equally high expectations for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, or social status helps to minimize the social differences among students. This contrasts with the modern public comprehensive high school which has multiple tracks, offers many electives, and has a propensity to place minority students into less demanding courses.



The focused academic vision of Catholic high schools results in a more equal distribution of academic achievement, with the public school result being a less equitable distribution of achievement. Ironically, particularly for disadvantaged students, the Catholic school more nearly approximates what the founders of modern public education wanted for those who attend public schools—the so-called common school. For example, take the minority-versus-white achievement gap in Catholic and public high schools. At the sophomore year in high school, minority students are scoring behind white students in both Catholic and public schools, though the “gap” is about one-third less in Catholic schools than in public schools. Over the last two years of high school, the minority achievement gap for public school students grows larger; for Catholic school students it shrinks. In other words, Catholic schools more equally distribute academic achievement.

Here is a sampling of data on course-taking as this relates to academic expectations.

- Who takes college preparatory courses? In Catholic schools, 76% of all students take a college preparatory curriculum, compared to only 45% of public high school students. Moreover, poor, black, or Hispanic students are more likely to take advanced academic courses if they attend Catholic schools. In other words, an overwhelming majority of students take the same courses, regardless of background.
- Does a core curriculum requirement with higher academic demands lead to higher dropout rates (a fear that many educators raise when higher standards for students are suggested)? The evidence suggests this is not the case. For example, in one study, public school students had a 7.6% dropout rate between the eighth and 10th grades as compared to a Catholic school dropout rate of 1.3%.

Compare also the course-taking patterns of Catholic and public high school students who have parents with a college degree with those who do not.

- Who takes algebra? In Catholic schools, algebra II is studied by 62% of students whose parents have a college degree and 65% of students whose parents do not have a college degree. In public schools, algebra II is studied by 65% of students whose parents have a college degree but only 43% of students whose parents lack a college degree.
- Who takes geometry? In Catholic schools, 91% of students whose parents have a college degree and 92% of students whose parents do not. In public schools, 84% of students whose parents have a college degree and 59% of those whose parents do not.
- Who takes trigonometry? In Catholic schools, 42% of students whose parents have a college degree and 34% of those who do not. In public schools, 28% of students whose parents have a college degree and 14% of students whose

parents do not.

- What about the educational expectations of students who attend public and Catholic high schools? Two years after high school, 34% of those who attended a public school expected to earn a degree, compared to 59% of those who attended a Catholic school.
- What about college completion rates? Urban minority graduates of Catholic high schools finish college and receive degrees at more than twice the rate of their public school counterparts—27% versus only 11%.

Whether looking at academic organization or expectations, course-taking patterns, achievement scores, dropout rates, educational expectations, or college completion rates, Catholic high schools create advantaged educational opportunities for those who are disadvantaged, especially those who are multiply disadvantaged.

## COMMUNAL ORGANIZATION

The academic structure just discussed exists within the context of a communal organization that has four main features. First, the internal life of Catholic high schools is structured to promote many different opportunities for personal interactions and shared experiences among those who work in the school, attend it, and support it. A host of activities engage and bring together staff, students, and supporters—e.g., athletic events, fundraisers, rallies, school plays, alumni gatherings, retreats, liturgy, and other forms of religious ritual and prayer. On the academic side, the core curriculum plays this unifying role. These and other formal and informal events promote a commonality of purpose that supports the school's mission.

Second, teachers' roles are broadly defined to include more than being subject-matter or curriculum experts. Catholic educators view teaching as a vocation, as a ministry of service. Collegial working relationships among faculty within the school create and support a shared sense of purpose. This is reinforced by social interactions outside the school among themselves as well as students and their families. The effort to create social intimacy is helped greatly by the small size of the Catholic high school.

These features encourage a respectful personalism that guides behavior in the school and enables the school to function effectively as a moral community with norms of proper behavior. There are, then, two sets of complementary virtues at work here: care and concern as manifest in this personalism, combined with demands and expectations as manifest in norms. Larger public schools that require more formal and bureaucratic modes of communication make this personalism and the resulting moral community more difficult to achieve.

Third, from a governance perspective, Catholic high schools are decentralized from centrally controlled bureaucracies, especially when compared

to public schools. Nearly all important decisions in Catholic high schools are made at the school site, under the leadership of the principal. This allows a school to develop a distinctive character and a local sensitivity to the unique needs of students and families. All this is based on the principle of subsidiarity, a way of ordering groups to pursue common purposes and objectives that maximizes local control. As an organizational principle, it seeks the lowest possible level of decision-making authority, thereby maximizing individual participation.

This market responsiveness to clients is moderated, though, by a philosophy of education, a set of fundamental beliefs and values that permeates the school. This is the fourth distinctive feature of the communal organization of Catholic schools. This unique educational philosophy affirms the ability of human reason to arrive at ethical truth. It also includes a special Catholic perspective on the dignity of each person and the sacredness of human community. Both are potential means to an evocative or symbolic encounter with the mystery of God. Ultimately, this perspective concerns itself not only with what students know, but also with the kind of moral persons they become and the kind of moral community created in the school.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION**

What might American education learn from the successes of Catholic schools? What opportunities and challenges, what lessons does this discussion of academic and communal organization of Catholic schools have for current efforts to transform public education? I will suggest five lessons.

First, course-taking makes a difference, particularly with disadvantaged students. The focused and constrained core curriculum of the Catholic high school is a counterpoint to the comprehensive public high school described so memorably in the phrase "shopping mall high school." It is also a bulwark against fads that sweep through the education world with frequency. Public school policy makers would do well to require more core academic coursework of their students, particularly urban disadvantaged students. Efforts currently underway to develop national performance and content standards in core subject areas can greatly assist this effort.

Second, schools that combine and communicate high levels of care and concern with demanding expectations create a genuine basis for the involvement and engagement of parents, teachers, and students. This is true because individuals experience a network of relationships that binds them to the school. While factors in public education like merit pay for teachers or withholding drivers licenses for students who do poorly—the proverbial carrots and sticks—have some role to play in motivating people and enhancing engagement, these must be placed within a broader, less utilitarian and instrumental, context to ultimately succeed. This context creates a network of caring and demanding relationships.

Third, school autonomy makes a difference. Effective Catholic schools have a great deal of site autonomy on educational, fiscal, and management issues. Most attempts in public education to foster site-based management have done little more than provide some small autonomy on program and fiscal matters, not fully exempting schools from district budget control or collective bargaining agreements. Charter schools—(mostly) independent public schools of choice that are accountable for the results of student learning—are a serious attempt by the public sector to reinvent education and provide public schools with full autonomy. But not all charter school laws are equal (there are now 30 jurisdictions with charter laws). Some are “Potemkin laws,” displaying the facade but not the reality of charter legislation, creating “Potemkin schools” that bear the charter label but enjoy little true autonomy. Policy makers must resist the effort to constrain charter operators with weak laws that lead to insufficient autonomy from state statutes, rules, collective bargaining agreements, and the like (Finn, Bierlein, & Manno, 1996).

Fourth, teaching involves knowledge as well as technical skill and expertise. But it also includes a sense of calling and obligation. Contemporary discussions about professional development that neglect the normative or evocative dimensions are not likely to improve or develop the teaching profession. Neither will ignoring this sense of calling provide most public school educators with that normative or moral dimension that is such a key element of a true profession. While reinstating this moral dimension into the discussion about teaching will lead to controversies and difficulties in public education, it must be done.

Fifth, an overriding and clear sense of mission guided by an educational philosophy shapes the organization of the Catholic high school. This philosophy includes an affirmation of human reason, moral knowledge, and respect for individual dignity combined with a responsiveness to markets. Thus, schools must attend to the comprehensive ideals that encourage students to advance beyond relativism and material self-interest. They must examine the ways in which they foster the interior life of their students.

## **THE SOCIOLOGY OF VIRTUE**

Schools are one of the primary institutions that communities have at their disposal to assist in the moral education of youth. In that way, schools educate not only a student’s mind but also a student’s character. Ultimately, this is one of the most important public functions that schools undertake—assisting in a community’s task of creating a more educated citizenry and a more vibrant civic life.

Some believe that civic life in America is collapsing or—worse yet—that it is no longer possible to have a healthy civil society. In fact, one could hardly kick over a rock during the last few years without uncovering a politician

or social theorist (liberal or conservative) dreaming about ways to reconstitute the institutions of American civil society—families, churches and synagogues, neighborhoods, community associations, voluntary and fraternal associations, and so on.

Many believe that this propensity of Americans to associate in order to pursue common interests makes us unique as a nation. We are a nation of joiners. As the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out in his early 19th-century analysis of American society, “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations” (Tocqueville, 1996, p. 2). These associational institutions of civil society cannot be established by government agencies or other bureaucracies. Moreover, they create “social capital,” a collection of social relationships and shared values that enable people to cooperate on a vast array of actions.

One recent discussion of the decline of civil society by political scientist Robert Putnam purported to present a significant amount of evidence documenting that Americans are not joining the groups and clubs that promote trust and cooperation as they once did. He used the phrase “bowling alone” as a metaphor to describe this disengagement, this decline in social capital, in his words, “[this] broad and continuing erosion of civic engagement that began a quarter century ago.” But there are data—much data—that contradict this argument (Public Perspective, 1996).

It is not necessary to resolve the ultimate question of whether there has been little, substantial, or irreversible decline in this country’s civic life to acknowledge that revitalizing our civic communities and the institutions that are part of these communities—especially in urban areas—is a task that we Americans desperately need to undertake. Religious institutions have a vital role to play in revitalizing our civic communities. Moreover, unlike many institutions—especially the bureaucratic institutions of government—religious institutions have the freedom and the other wherewithal to nurture and educate sound character, which is essential for the creation of a responsible citizenry. This task falls under the banner of fostering the sociology of virtue. In the words of one commentator:

Strengthening the institutions in civil society that attend to the character of the citizenry—this is the sociology of virtue. Today’s sociology of virtue...implies a thinking through of the way in which social institutions can be reinvented, restructured, or reformed to promote virtue and to foster sound character. (Kristol, 1992, pp. 32, 35)

Here we come full circle to the Catholic high school, an institution that builds and creates not only social capital but spiritual capital—a significant and trusting relationship not only with our fellow human beings but a relationship that purports to be with the ultimate source of all that is true, good, and beautiful.

The effectiveness of Catholic schools cannot be understood solely by taking into account academic requirements, communal organization, social behaviors, or other instrumental characteristics, as important as these are. Ultimately, it is the Catholic high school's fundamental beliefs and sentiments as embodied in its educators and its rituals—especially its religious rituals—that make it what it is, particularly in educating disadvantaged students. The advantaged educational opportunity the Catholic school provides supplies the social and religious capital that is often weak or non-existent in disadvantaged families and children. In other words, it substitutes for the weak or non-existent links between family and children as well as family, children, and community.

These observations are no doubt troubling in fundamental ways to American public educational policy where church and state are thought to be separate. They are troubling because they raise the question of the role of religious understanding in contemporary American schooling. Here I use the word “religious” to mean a set of beliefs, values, and fundamental sentiments that give meaning and purpose to life. In this sense, as Alfred North Whitehead observed, all education is religious. Within this context, the purpose of schooling is to foster in students an ethical sense and moral vision which support the common good. But in a pluralistic society there is bound to be some variation in what this means from a practical point of view.

The present system of American public education cannot adequately deal with this pluralistic situation. It has created a uniform, bureaucratic system where one size is meant to fit all and do all. My own sense is that public education policy in America must move in the direction of allowing families much more choice in schooling than is presently permitted. The charter school movement I referred to earlier is one example of this. So are the efforts to create privately and publicly financed scholarship programs for poor families that allow them to send their children to the school of their choice.

If we are to revitalize our communities, if we are to rebuild the social capital of our families and neighborhoods, if we are to educate our young people, especially those who are most disadvantaged, then we must have this conversation on schooling. At the center of this discussion will be questions about the role of religious understanding in schooling and the role of choice in education. Perhaps forcing that conversation is the ultimate contribution that Catholic high schools can make to contemporary American education reform.

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*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the opening session of the National Catholic Educational Association's Secondary Schools Department day-long convocation on American Educational Reform and the Catholic High School, April 3, 1997, held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Association in Minneapolis.*

*Bruno V. Manno is senior fellow in the Washington office of the Indianapolis-based Hudson Institute. He also serves as executive director of the National Commission on Philanthropy and Civic Renewal. He is former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education for Policy and Planning.*

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