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# Responses From the Field

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## RESPONSES FROM THE FIELD

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

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J. CHRISTIAN BERETTA, O.S.F.S.

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Cieslak's research produces data from a handful of suburban parishes, the results of which are hardly surprising to those currently engaged in the struggle to keep Catholic schools alive. The conclusions: suburban parishes considering building a school can expect mild support from parishioners that are parents of school-aged children and stinginess from parishioners 45 and older, with somewhat better forecasts on both fronts with the vocal enthusiasm of the pastor.

This is not news for most Catholic school administrators, challenged for decades by trends they know all too well. Rehashing the gloomy statistics about declining enrollment and school closings since the mid-1960s, Cieslak offers the usual suspects: parents seeking academics and safety at the expense of religious indoctrination; principals eager to meet parent expectations and keep schools afloat by admitting scores of non-Catholic students; and schools with a not-so-surprising fluid sense of mission. The results are evident: a growing Catholic population in which less than one-fifth of elementary-aged students attend Catholic school.

There is much to be said for each of these observations. Indeed, within Catholic schools today, there is a renewal of emphasis on the religious mission and Catholic identity of schools from kindergarten to university levels. And there is no doubt that schools have attempted to adapt and survive in a changing world.

But the changing world is precisely what the current crisis in Catholic schools is all about. Cieslak's data alone make the point to the experienced eye, but the discussion falls short of providing the additional context and commentary needed to drive home the message to those that would criticize Catholic schools and administrators. The fact that we live in a 21st century American Church in which tuition-paying parents have a decreasing enthusiasm for religious formation, older parishioners demonstrate less interest in

educating children other than their own, other parish ministries might be wary of competing with schools, and pastors might manifest skepticism regarding the effectiveness of the school apostolate all demonstrate the monumental, seismic shifts that are forcing Catholic schools to adapt and survive in a changing religious and cultural landscape, and with little help from anyone.

Matters related to a massive cultural and religious shift since the 1960s have formed a perfect storm of sorts that threaten the future of Catholic schools, a domino effect of change that might have annihilated a less inspired enterprise. Consider the drastic changes in Western culture and Catholicism in the same time period discussed by Cieslak. Changes in attitudes toward institutions, traditions, and authority created shock waves still being felt in the larger Church and world. Changes in the priesthood and the religious life alone can explain much of the challenge to schools. The sudden departure of thousands of men and women that had been a source of competent but cheap labor with an unquestioned sense of mission and spirituality cannot be measured. The subsequent hiring of lay men and women changed the face of Catholic schools, thrusting faithful Catholics into administrative roles which had until then been maintained almost exclusively by nuns or priests.

Of course, this new workforce must be paid a fair and decent wage, and an expense previously absorbed by parishes or dioceses for women and men with vows of poverty now must compete with salaries paid to public school teachers and administrators, a spiraling financial battle that is usually passed on to parents. Most parishes prior to 1965 charged little or no tuition; in 2006, tuition threatens to make Catholic schools the home of the economically elite. Many parents cannot afford tuition; those that can approach schools as consumers more than parishioners, weighing their options carefully.

The bishops and pastors that once championed the schools to their flocks now mirror their uncertainty and skepticism. Most are vocally supportive, but less likely than ever to provide the necessary financial commitment; Catholic schools, once thought indispensable, are now one ministry among many, but one of the few for which church members must pay. For those parents that can afford it, fine; for those schools that can remain solvent, so be it.

There are exceptions, of course, to all of the above: pastors that expend incredible resources to keep schools alive, bishops that understand the unique effectiveness of schools and deploy resources accordingly, religious men and women that remain in Catholic schools, lay leadership that is mission-driven and unquestionably Catholic in identity, parents that put religious formation first on their list of priorities, and older parishioners that support Catholic schools to the hilt. But what was once an unquestioned and unified effort behind our schools is now sporadic and all too frequently left to someone else. As Cieslak observed, the shift in parishes has been from “serving

all parishioner children” to “serving my children” (p. 154). Whatever else Catholic schools may be rightly criticized for, such a shift alone says everything, and it is a legacy shared by all Catholics—parents, pastors, and bishops alike. Such have we made the world.

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Cieslak (2006) places the question of opening a parish school in the context of the dramatic changes taking place in Catholic education and the Church. The surveys used to gather data and the methodology used to examine that data produce several insights applicable to all parishes—those with or without schools. Cieslak highlights the difficulties facing the Church in this era of transition as Catholic education seeks to find its footing in the third millennium. While reducing Kollar's (2003) 15 examples to four provides a background for analysis, I believe there are other forces working against and for the future of Catholic education that could assist those exploring the establishment of a Catholic school.

Cieslak's four examples of radical change are both blessings and curses. I think parents have always sent their children to Catholic schools for safety, education, formation, and discipline. We must be wary of those who do so to avoid the developing multicultural nature of the U.S. Church and society. The social mobility and exodus from the Catholic ghetto of the last few centuries is a good thing. The experience provides a chance for the American Church to see beyond, not abandon, the ethnic identities that built a strong Church and school system. Even a cursory reading of the history of Catholic education describes a continued trajectory and identity. Again, this presents a challenge to the Church to allow the mystery of God and the revelation of Jesus to be revealed in new and exciting ways. The strong stance of Vatican II to embrace ecumenism affects the presence of non-Catholics in our schools, not discounting the challenge identified by Baker and Riordan (1998). This should be seen as a call to deepen our witness to the faith. Our tradition reminds us that Catholic schools are not places where we proselytize but where we witness to the power of the salvific acts of Jesus.

The author understates the difficulties arising from parents and faculty not understanding the mission of Catholic education. The Church continual-

ly adapts its understanding of its educational mission. Methods, foci, and structures always change. Catholic schools need to continue exploring how they fulfill this mission in the early years of the third millennium in continuity with its past. As described in the article, demographic changes—lower birth rates among post-baby boom generations; population shifts from urban to suburban settings; improvement in the quality of public education—especially in affluent suburban areas, all generate great pressure on Catholic education. Cieslak may be adding to the difficulty by seemingly providing an option for schools to excel either in academics or to provide spiritual formation. In the Catholic intellectual tradition, all aspects of the schools, especially the academic and spiritual, create a symbiotic relationship to achieve the educational mission of the Church—the salvation of the participants and preparation for their participation in the common good.

Catholic schools must provide excellent academic preparation and dynamic programs of spiritual formation. This is not an either/or situation. Helping all aspects of the Church understand or, in some cases, re-appropriate this understanding, would halt the phenomenon of Catholic schools slipping down the private school path. Most people working in Catholic schools are faith-filled people. Our professional preparation and on-going development programs must assist teachers and administrators in understanding their role in achieving the mission of the school. The better our students think—critically, strategically, creatively, and any other way humans can—the greater chance they can give the assent of heart of mind to the truths of the faith and find ways to live and to act on them in the world. As we engage students in the Catholic intellectual tradition at all levels of education, we invite them to journey with us as we explore the world around us, work toward the common good, and extend God's reign.

Several challenges face parishes regarding Catholic education. Cieslak correctly describes the confusion concerning the educational mission of the parish. The analysis of the diocesan and parish surveys used in the article did not reveal any unexpected issues. The American Church must explore the natural tension that exists among the myriad ministries in a parish community. Realizing the limited resources in any parish, believers committed to education can work to provide for the needs of all. A relatively recent question has evolved as schools located in the geographical boundaries of one parish draw students from many areas of the (arch)diocese. Reframing the question in terms of the educational mission of the Church and the role schools play focuses the discussion on the complementary nature of the ministries.

Catholic schools provide not only a safe and academically challenging environment in which education occurs, but also a transformative vision of

reality that forms a young person with a broad view of the universe and our relationship to God. This requires students to understand and act, according to their God-given gifts, the truths of science and theology. Elemental catechesis and basic skills taught at the elementary and middle school levels lay a strong foundation for the theological reflection and advanced studies possible during the high school and university experiences and beyond. Cieslak describes several areas for future research. These are important questions. We must continue to educate our constituents about the nature and purpose of Catholic education. What we have done for 2,000 years we should continue to do, adapting our methods to the signs of the times and pushing ourselves to spread the Gospel message in new and challenging endeavors.

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