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The Promise of Catholic Schools for Educating the Future of Los Angeles

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This study examined the impact of Catholic education on elementary and secondary students in Los Angeles. The study focused on the continuation and graduation rates of ethnic minority students who received special funding from the Catholic Education Foundation (CEF). Using qualitative and quantitative measures, the study revealed that students from ethnic minority and low-income communities enrolled in Catholic schools are graduating from secondary schools at a higher rate than their peers who are enrolled in public schools. Furthermore, survey data were collected from principals and parents of these students enrolled in Catholic schools. The study shows that a Catholic education has a major impact on the lives of these students, their parents, and their communities.

Ever since the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, educators have been concerned about the quality of our schools. Particular concern has focused on the school experience of ethnic minorities and students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds who do not succeed at school in alarming numbers. In large urban areas such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, there is special concern because these major regions are majority ethnic minority and the future viability of our major cities depends on the ability of Latino, African American, and low SES students to receive a quality education. Without such an education, the future generation of our major cities will not be prepared to function as part of an educated citizenry or in the workforce. Thus, during the past 30 years there have been numerous reform efforts in public and private education focused on closing the achievement gap and documenting best practices in urban education. Some of these efforts have focused on the unique ability of Catholic schools to provide a quality education for ethnic minorities and students from low SES backgrounds, often at much less cost than public schools.

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While there are studies from the 1980s and 1990s (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982) and much anecdotal evidence about the efficacy of Catholic education for ethnic minority and poor students, there are little recent data on this topic. In today's climate of assessment and accountability, there is a need to measure the success of Catholic schools, especially in the inner city. Such data could encourage continued support for the Catholic school system, and also provide an important dialogue with public educators as both systems look to best practices for educating students who have traditionally not done well in school. In this context, the Loyola Marymount University (LMU) School of Education engaged in a research initiative to examine the success factors of students attending inner-city Catholic schools in the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

This study focused only on a particular set of elementary and secondary students in Los Angeles Catholic schools that received funding from the Catholic Education Foundation (CEF) between the 2000 and 2005 academic years. The CEF was founded in 1987 to provide tuition assistance to students who would otherwise not be able to attend Catholic schools due to financial limitations. As of 2007, the CEF has provided about $80 million in tuition assistance to 88,000 students. The CEF primarily supports students in schools that receive a financial subsidy from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. The CEF supports students in 167 of the 225 elementary schools and 30 of the 50 high schools in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

The results of this study indicate that Catholic schools are making a major contribution to the lives of ethnic minority and low SES students in Los Angeles. More specifically, the study explored the continuation and graduation rates of students enrolled in Catholic elementary and secondary schools with CEF funding and the impact of Catholic education on the lives of the students and their families. The findings in this study offer a different lens in which to evaluate the success of Catholic schools in educating poor and ethnic minority students. Through quantitative and qualitative methods, this study will show that Catholic schools are keeping students in school longer, and, thus, giving them more opportunities to succeed in the future.

The Context for Catholic Education

From their foundations, Catholic schools were dedicated to teaching the poor and ethnic immigrant groups. Elizabeth Seton, for example, started one of the first Catholic schools in the United States in 1810, which had the mission of being a free common school for the poor. As Buetow (1985) indicated, many believe that she laid the foundation for the Catholic school pattern

as it eventually evolved in the United States. Buetow further notes that later Catholic schools served several minority groups of immigrants.

Foundational Catholic education documents have indicated the importance of Catholic schools and the type of Catholic school system that would best serve the mission of the Church. Since the time of the Second Vatican Council in particular, a number of Church documents have been written on the subject of education. Several of these documents contain sections that discuss and build upon the ideas of inculturation as articulated in Vatican II and afterwards in *To Teach as Jesus Did* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1972), *The Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1977), and *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (CCE, 1982). These documents help give an understanding of the relationship between faith and culture in Catholic schools. Faith becomes concrete in a particular culture and it is as cultural beings that we each experience our sense of the sacred. By emphasizing the importance of honoring culture and working with culture, these Church documents reveal one of the unique characteristics of Catholic schools and one that is a basis for their success in educating students from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Taken as a whole, the Church documents from Vatican II on Catholic education give the impetus for a Catholic approach to cultural diversity. The key elements of Catholic education are the openness to educational change and to new pedagogical styles, a desire to infuse the Gospel message in all settings, and openness to culture and to a plurality of perspectives (Martin & Litton, 2004). Public schools are struggling to meet the challenge imposed by the changing demographics in the United States. Many public school administrators are at a loss as how to form a cohesive school-wide community in the face of so much diversity. Although the issues and the demographics are similar for both public and Catholic schools, research indicates that Catholic schools are better able to respond than public schools due to their flexibility, local control, ability to function as a community, and their tradition of educating the poor and immigrant children (Bryk et al., 1993; Martin & Litton, 2004).

The work of Andrew Greeley and James S. Coleman and his associates strongly suggests that Catholic and other private schools are far better equipped to meet the educational needs of poor and ethnic minority students than the public schools. Greeley (2002) reported that ethnic minority Catholic school students were twice as likely to have more than 5 hours of homework a week, and were nearly a third more likely to say that they were confident they could graduate from college when compared to public minority students from similar family backgrounds. He further reported that Catholic school

minority students were half a standard deviation above their public school counterparts in standardized achievement tests.

Coleman and Hoffer's (1987) report (commonly referred to as the third Coleman Report) indicated that "the achievement growth benefits of Catholic school attendance are especially strong for students who are one way or another disadvantaged: lower socioeconomic status, Black or Hispanic" (p. 213). They further reported that

> the dropout rates from Catholic schools are strikingly lower than those from public schools. The reduced dropout rate holds both for those who show no signs of problems as sophomores and for those who as sophomores are academically or disciplinarily at risk of dropping out. (p. 212)

Coleman tried to explain the results of his 1987 study as well as of a previous study (Coleman et al., 1982) that indicated the superior academic quality of private schools for all students, most notably for minorities. He concluded that what is unique in a religiously based private school is that it acts as a functioning community for the student. This sense of community is so strong that it can help a student overcome deficiencies in the home environment and help boost academic achievement (Hallinan, 2000).

As stated above, Catholic schools have had a tradition of educating poor and ethnic minority school children. Research shows that Catholic schools provide a better education to minority and at-risk students than public schools (Bempechat, Boulay, Piergross, & Wenk, 2008; Bryk et al., 1993; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Coleman et al., 1982; Convey & Youniss, 2000; Greeley, 2002). Research indicates that it is the ability of the Catholic school to form a sense of community that makes the difference for disadvantaged students.

Ouchi (2003) found that Catholic schools in his study operate on one-half to one-fourth the budget per student than public schools yet consistently outperform public schools. Some have commented that this difference in academic performance is accounted for by the "selection factor": that Catholic schools only select top-performing students from families devoted to education. Ouchi concluded that the performance in Catholic schools was attributed to the characteristics of Catholic education rather than the selection factor. In particular, he cited that Catholic education's commitment to the idea of school as a community makes a key difference, a finding supported by previous research (Bryk et al., 1993; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Additionally, Ouchi found that there were other keys to school success that were exemplified by the Catholic school structure: Schools that were the most successful were those with a strong, entrepreneurial principal, where budget and

educational decisions were controlled locally, where teachers and principals were accountable for performance, where decision-making was decentralized, and where student achievement was a burning focus.

Bempechat et al. (2008) conducted research on low-income students enrolled in Catholic schools. One of the main goals of the research was to refute the common belief that students in Catholic schools are successful because "Catholic schools are schools of choice, students who enroll may be smarter, be better off materially, and have parents who are themselves better educated" (p. 168). Bempechat and her colleauges worked with students in urban Catholic secondary schools where the students were either African American or Dominican. One factor that led to success for these students was the presence of a culture of caring in the Catholic schools. In these schools "teachers take a deep interest in both their [students'] academic and psychosocial well-being" (p. 171). These students also had a personal responsibility for their learning. This personal responsibility motivated students to work hard and set goals. This research, therefore, shows that Catholic schools have created a culture where students from low-income communities are able to thrive.

In their edited book examining African American students in Catholic schools, Irvine and Foster (1996) note several common themes that ran across the chapters: a commitment to high academic achievement that was held by teachers, administrators, and parents; a rigorous academic curriculum; and the importance of a nurturing community. While there were a variety of experiences of school presented in the book, the overwhelming sense was that Catholic schools provided a solid educational framework for African American students, many of whom cited their experience in Catholic education as the academic foundation of their future success.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact that Catholic schools have on students who are ethnic minorities and from low-income communities. The study focuses on the students who have been supported by the CEF in the 2000-2005 academic years. This group of students was selected for the study primarily because they represent the most underserved students in the Catholic school system in the Los Angeles region and more closely resemble the economic, ethnic, and personal backgrounds of their peers in the schools they would attend if their Catholic schools were not available to them. Other reasons for selecting this group include: (a) multiple years of data available through the CEF on each student, (b) the sample size could be tracked according to each student's record, and (c) the students were attending Archdiocesan

schools (as opposed to private Catholic schools), which serve the poor in the poorest neighborhoods. Data from students who were not supported by the CEF are not part of this study because there is no reliable data management system in place to gather longitudinal data.

The following research questions were the focus of the study:

1. What are the continuation rates for CEF-supported students?
2. What is the high school graduation rate for CEF-supported students?
3. What is the long-term impact of Catholic schools on students and their families?

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the study were collected from various stakeholders and participants of Catholic schools in Los Angeles. All participants and respondents had a connection or were impacted by the CEF at some point in their lives. Some of the data sources include information directly from student records from the Catholic schools and records from the CEF. Data were gathered under an agreement providing for the confidentiality of the students by using only a CEF-created student ID tracking number. Student data were gathered to investigate the first two research questions that studied continuation and graduation rates. Parents and principals were surveyed in order to address the third research question on Catholic school impact. This provided families and principals the opportunity to voice their assessment on the long-term impact of Catholic schools.

To answer the first research question, "What are the continuation rates for CEF-supported students?" a sample of eighth grade CEF-supported students was selected. Continuation rate was defined as the percentage of students who completed the eighth grade in Spring 2001 and continued on to ninth grade in fall 2001. Students in this sample were enrolled in eighth grade during the 2000-2001 academic year, supported by the CEF, and attended a Catholic school. Based on these criteria for sample selection and after accounting for missing data (36 of the student data were excluded and this issue of missing data will be addressed in a later section of this paper), the sample size consisted of 567 students. Continuation rates were calculated by dividing the number of students that continued onto ninth grade in fall of 2001 by the sample size of 567.

For the second research question, "What is the high school graduation rate of CEF-supported students?" a sample of ninth grade CEF-supported students was selected. Graduation rate in this study was defined as the percentage

of students who were enrolled in the ninth grade in fall 2001 and graduated with a high school diploma in June 2005. Students enrolled in a Catholic high school in ninth grade in fall 2001 and supported by the CEF were the criteria used to select this sample. Based on these criteria for sample selection and after accounting for missing data (36 of the student data were excluded), the sample size consisted of 205 students. Graduation rates were calculated by dividing the number of students who graduated with a high school diploma by the sample size of 205.

To answer the third research question, "What is the long-term impact of the CEF and Catholic schools on students and their families?" data from surveys to parents and principals were analyzed. The parent surveys were completed by 1,808 parents out of a total mailing of 9,833, reflecting an 18.39% response rate. Thirty percent of the surveys were returned as undeliverable. Thus, if only surveys that were actually delivered are considered, the response rate would be 35%. The children of these parents all received funding from the CEF for at least one semester. Some of the parent respondents had children who had already graduated from high school, while other parents still had children who were enrolled in either elementary school or high school. Each parent received the survey in English and Spanish and was asked to complete whichever version he or she felt comfortable completing.

Descriptive statistics were used on survey questions that focused on demographic information and Likert scale items that addressed perceptions of the effectiveness of Catholic schools for college preparation, faith development, and personal development. Qualitative methods were used to extract themes from answers to survey questions that were more open-ended in nature. These questions asked parents to describe their involvement with Catholic schools and the difference that Catholic schools made in the lives of their children.

A principal survey was distributed to the 197 principals of CEF-supported schools. The principal survey was completed by 136 Catholic school principals, or 70% of the principals. Descriptive statistics were used to study data on questions that were answered using a Likert scale. These questions focused on the effect of Catholic education on the development of students' sense of morality and faith, critical thinking, and sense of social justice. Demographic information on the principals was also collected. Qualitative methodologies were used to extract themes from the question that asked, "What difference has financial support from the CEF made to the lives of the students in your school?" and to analyze the responses to the question that asked principals to share stories of individual students who received financial support from the CEF.

Missing Data

Data is considered "missing" when there is not enough information in the database to determine whether a student continued her or his education. Missing data can be due to several factors, such as mobility. For instance, if a student and her family moved to another state, student contact information on the CEF database is no longer reliable. In addition to the contact information stored at the CEF, personnel from elementary and secondary schools were contacted to gather the most updated contact information on students with missing data. Phone calls and mail delivery attempts were carried out in order to update the enrollment and graduation status for students with missing data.

Once it was established that students had missing data and they were no longer able to be reached due to outdated contact information, a statistical analysis using the chi-square statistic was performed to analyze dependency of the missing data with that of complete data. Chi-square analysis on the student sample for continuation rates indicates that missing data ($n = 36$) are not dependent on gender ($p = .89$) or ethnicity ($p = .19$) when compared to non-missing data ($n = 567$), supporting the exclusion of missing data from this analysis. A separate chi-square analysis on the student sample for graduation rates similarly indicates that missing data ($n = 36$) are not dependent on gender ($p = .77$) or ethnicity ($p = .71$) when compared to non-missing data ($n = 205$); therefore, missing data were excluded.

Setting

The study was conducted in one of the most ethnically and economically diverse Catholic school systems in the United States. The elementary and secondary schools of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles are located in three counties in Southern California: Los Angeles, Ventura, and Santa Barbara counties. Catholic schools are located as far north as Santa Maria and as far south as Long Beach. In the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, there are 28 diocesan and parish secondary schools, 22 private secondary schools, 9 private elementary schools, and 216 diocesan and parish elementary schools. For 2007-2008, according to data from the Department of Catholic Schools of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, these schools enrolled close to 88,000 students.

An overwhelming majority of the students the CEF supports are ethnic minorities. Since 2001, 80-90% of the students the CEF has supported were ethnic minorities. An overwhelming number of these students were Hispanic/Latino. Table 1 presents information on the ethnic background of CEF students from 2001–2005, the time period of this study.

Table 1

Ethnic Background of CEF Students

Ethnicity	2001		2002		2003		2004		2005	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Hispanic/Latino	3,621	73.76	3,723	74.86	4,382	76.66	4,439	77.96	4,706	80.31
Black/African American	426	8.68	409	8.22	457	8.00	432	7.59	457	7.80
White/Other	548	11.16	485	9.75	389	6.81	351	6.16	322	5.49
Asian	155	3.16	170	3.42	200	3.50	219	3.85	215	3.67
Declined to State	109	2.22	146	2.94	241	4.22	186	3.27	83	1.42
Pacific Islander	50	1.02	39	0.78	44	0.77	40	0.70	54	0.92
Native American	-	0.00	1	0.02	3	0.05	27	0.47	23	0.39

By definition of its mission, the CEF supports families who are living in or at the threshold of poverty. In order to qualify for tuition assistance from the CEF, parents of scholarship recipients must have an income that is at or below the federal poverty guidelines. For example, in 2008, a household of four must have had an income at or below $31,922. A two-person household could not have an income greater than $21,060.

Participants in the Study

To investigate the first research question, one cohort of participants in the study were students composed of the population of CEF-funded students who were eighth grade students in 2000-2001. Five hundred and sixty-seven student records were examined to answer the first research question on continuation rates. Of these, 42.3% of the students were male, and 57.5% were female. Table 2 presents the ethnic background of these students.

A second cohort of students was studied to answer the second research question on graduation rates. These were CEF-funded secondary school students. This cohort contained 205 student records and was examined in order to analyze the students' individual progress and graduation from Grade 12. Of these students, 40% were male and 59.5% were female (0.5% declined to state their gender). Table 3 presents the ethnic background of these students.

To answer the third research question on the impact of Catholic education on the lives of students and their families, parents of students who received a CEF scholarship were asked to complete a survey about their experience of having a child in a Catholic school. The 1,808 parents who completed the survey were diverse in ethnic background and levels of education. Table 4 presents the demographic information of the parents who completed the survey.

The parent surveys were complemented with data from Catholic school principals in the 197 schools with students receiving CEF funding. The 136 principals who completed the survey were all serving as principals of Catholic

Table 2

Student Ethnic Background of Continuation Rate Sample (n = 567)

Ethnicity	*n*	%
Asian	19	3.40
Black/African American	37	6.50
Declined to State	3	0.50
Hispanic/Latino	432	76.20
Pacific Islander	6	1.10
White/Other	70	12.30

Table 3

Student Ethnic Background of Graduation Rate Sample (n = 205)

Ethnicity	*n*	%
Asian	6	2.93
Black/African American	9	4.39
Declined to State	2	0.98
Hispanic/Latino	163	79.51
Pacific Islander	1	0.49
White/Other	24	11.70

Table 4

Parent Ethnic Background (n = 1,808)

Ethnicity	*n*	%
Asian	66	3.65
Black/African American	131	7.25
Declined to State	10	0.55
Hispanic/Latino	1417	78.37
Pacific Islander	17	0.94
White	92	5.09
Other	75	4.15

elementary or secondary schools. On average, the principals in the study had served Catholic schools as teachers or administrators for 23 years. During that time, the average length of service as a principal was 6 years.

Findings and Discussion

The students supported by the CEF have overwhelmingly benefited from a Catholic school education; they are continuing and graduating at rates that far exceed their peers in public schools. Their families and communities are also benefiting and Catholic schools have clearly made a difference in educating low-income students.

An analysis of the continuation and graduation rates shows that these students are staying in school at rates higher than their counterparts enrolled in public schools in the Los Angeles region. The Catholic school students are staying in school despite many personal difficulties. The findings in this study show that Catholic schools kept "at risk" students in a safe, respectful, and trusting environment where they could learn. Furthermore, the study confirms that parents play an important role in the education of children enrolled in Catholic schools. The parents in this study have trust and faith in the educators of Catholic schools that is hard to replicate in public school settings. The

principals confirm support from the CEF plays an important role in recruiting and retaining students, allowing Catholic schools to impact urban education in Los Angeles. More detailed results on continuation rates, graduation rates, and parent and principal perspectives will be presented in the following sections.

Continuation Rates

CEF-supported students are graduating and moving on to Catholic high schools at an impressive rate. An analysis of the data revealed that 100% of the CEF-supported students who completed eighth grade at an elementary school enrolled in ninth grade the following year.

The 100% continuation rate is an important statistic. Catholic schools are able to keep students in a safe place where learning can take place. The longer these students stay in school, the better their chances for graduating high school, entering college, and having a successful life. Coleman and Hoffer (1987) stated that students in Catholic schools were more disciplined than their counterparts in public schools. Consistent attendance at a Catholic school is also important because students in Catholic schools focus more on academic courses than students in non-Catholic schools (Hoffer, 2000). Thus, the longer these students are enrolled in Catholic schools, the more likely they are to develop work habits and study skills that will help them in their future education and become contributing members of our society and economy.

Graduation Rates

Students who are supported by the CEF are graduating from high school at an extraordinary rate, particularly compared to their counterparts in local public schools. Of the 205 students who were part of the cohort enrolled in the fall of 2001 as first-year students, 97.5% (200 students) graduated from high school with a diploma in June 2005. Of these 200 students, 85.4% (171 students) remained in a Catholic high school from grades 9 through 12 continuously. Twenty-nine students graduated from high school but did not complete their high school education in a Catholic school. Of the remaining 5 students who did not complete high school in either a Catholic high school or non-Catholic high school, one earned a high school diploma through a General Education Development (GED) test, 2 students dropped out of school and did not complete high school, and 2 students declined to provide information on completion of their high school diploma. It is important to note that the 2 students who dropped out did so under severe circumstances. One student was a young man with severe learning disabilities and left in the tenth grade and the other, a young woman, suffered severe depression when her family moved out of

state in her senior year and she was unable to adjust to public school in her new environment.

The graduation rate for Catholic schools represents a significant difference from graduation rates of pubic high schools. According to data in the California Department of Education website (2009a), in the 2004-2005 school year, the graduation year of this study, only 66.4% of students enrolled in Grade 12 in the Los Angeles Unified School District graduated from high school. Forty-three percent of the CEF students who graduated from Catholic high schools are in schools located within the area served by the Los Angeles Unified School District. For comparison, the graduation rate for all of Los Angeles County high schools is 79.5% while the California state-wide graduation rate is 85% (California Department of Education, 2009b). The CEF student's Catholic school graduation rate of 97.5% is especially important when one remembers that the sample consisted of students who are traditionally labeled at risk for dropping out of high school. Catholic schools are retaining ethnic minority students in high school at a much higher rate than the public schools. Almost 90% of the students in this study identified themselves as ethnic minorities.

Parent Voices: The Effect of Catholic Education on their Children

Analyses of 1,808 parent surveys provide evidence that Catholic schools are able to engage parents in meaningful partnerships as co-educators. An analysis of survey data shows that parents believe Catholic schools provide a safe haven for their children from the violence in their neighborhood. Parents have a bond of trust with the school, the principal, and the teachers in educating and doing what is best for their children. Regardless of their financial resources, CEF parents saw the value in contributing whatever they could, and often at great sacrifice, toward the tuition for their children. One parent stated,

> I am a single mother with five children, and without the spiritual guidance from Catholic schools, I would not have been able to do it alone. One daughter graduated from a university, two are in college, and one will begin college this year. We are very united. Without God, nothing can be accomplished.

Parents believed that Catholic schools prepared their children for a better life.

Answers to the open-ended questions also illustrate this point. One parent stated,

> [My child] is being geared towards the right direction. He will succeed in life and not have to struggle as I have for many years. I would like to thank [the CEF] for giving my children the opportunity for a better life style.

Another parent reported, "I always wanted my daughter to have a good education and a better opportunity for the future. I saw the difference between kids attending public school and Catholic school." However, a better life is not only equated with success. To many parents, a better life for their children includes being able to care for others as illustrated in this quote: "All my daughters have lived a better life because of their Catholic education. They know how to respect adults and they really know God."

When asked to evaluate the statement on the effectiveness of influencing the development of their children, 93.4% of the respondents stated that Catholic schools made their children better people. Many parents associated faith development with becoming a better person. One parent stated, "[Catholic education] made [my son] a better person who understands God… he impacts those around him in a positive way." Another parent stated, "We feel that [our children] receive more because of the religious aspects integrated with the educational learning they receive. This teaches them early on about being good Christians and learning how to love all of God's people." When asked if they agreed or disagreed on whether Catholic education brought their children closer to God and the Church, 90.5% of the parents responded that they agreed. Due to the perceptions gathered in the parent surveys, it was not surprising to learn that parents reported very high satisfaction with the education their children received. On the surface, it may seem that parent satisfaction with Catholic schools may not be a significant finding. One may argue that these parents are making the conscious decision and financial sacrifice to send their children to Catholic schools, and, thus, one should not be surprised that these parents express high satisfaction with Catholic schools. However, when one remembers that these parents are mostly poor and ethnic minorities, it becomes significant that Catholic schools are able to engage these parents. Tuition assistance from the CEF averages $1,000 for elementary school scholarships and $2,000 for secondary school scholarships. These scholarships do not cover the full cost of tuition in either an elementary or secondary school, yet parents are willing to make the necessary sacrifice to send their children to Catholic schools.

Principal Voices

The principals validated the parent data on the contribution of Catholic schools to the overall development of the lives of their students. The principals were asked to evaluate the effect of Catholic schools on student life, moral development, spiritual development, instilling a sense of social justice, development of critical thinking skills, and faith development. The data are illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5

Principal Responses: Significance of Catholic Education's Contribution

Item	Strongly Agree
The Catholic education experience contributes significantly to	
the lives of your students	97%
the moral development of your students	94%
the critical thinking of your students	85%
your students' perspectives of social justice	84%
your students' faith development	94%

Despite what they feel are successful aspects of Catholic schools, these principals acknowledged that many of their students are succeeding despite the great odds into which they were born. When asked to describe the family circumstances of one student, a principal stated, "Maria is an outstanding student. Unfortunately, she has witnessed her mother being physically abused and [this] has affected her emotional well-being. However, being in a Catholic environment has been a healing process for Maria." Another principal reported that her student

> is living with her grandmother. Jane's mother is a drug addict and a prostitute. Jane does not know who her father is. The biological mother has children from four different men. The children are being cared for by relatives. Jane has days when she is very emotional and days where she has a lot of trouble focusing.

The students in this study are graduating from high school despite difficult circumstances. Many of these students are able to succeed in situations that could have led to failure (Martin & Litton, 2004).

Catholic school principals confirm that CEF support is vital to keeping a school open. In some cases, the CEF provides tuition assistance to a third of the enrollment in a school. This support not only benefits individual

awardees, but also provides a critical tipping point in resources for keeping a school open. One principal stated, "CEF funding is why our school continues to exist."

Impact of Catholic Schools

Catholic schools have made an impact on the lives of families and communities. Parents attribute the success of their children to the Catholic education that they received. Principals also acknowledge the importance of Catholic schools in the moral development of the students they serve. Most importantly, principals stated the support they received from the CEF to help their most at-risk students allowed many urban Catholic schools to continue to serve the poorest of the poor.

Catholic schools are making a difference in the lives of CEF students, their families, and society. Sixty-eight percent of CEF graduates reported they agreed that "Catholic schools make a difference in society." One alumnus stated,

> Without my Catholic school education I would not be the person I am and have the knowledge I have about my religion and the world around me. My education has taught me to look at the world with my eyes wide open and to embrace everyday as if it were the last and to always keep God's love alive in my heart.

Conclusion

Catholic schools in the United States were created to educate the poor and immigrant children. Initial evidence from this study suggests that the CEF and the Los Angeles Archdiocesan Department of Catholic Schools continue to live up to this mission of providing hope to children who might not be able to dream of a future without this support. These students will be the future leaders of this three-county Archdiocesan region. Inspired by the values and support of a Catholic education, they will be well positioned to help build the Los Angeles of the future.

With a 97.5% high school graduation rate, what is it about Catholic schools that produce that result among the poorest and most marginalized students in the Los Angeles Archdiocese, when their public school peers are graduating at a rate of 66.4%? From the surveys, conclusions can be drawn as follows:

1. There are high levels of satisfaction among parents, students, and principals on the Catholic school experience.

2. By keeping students in school, Catholic schools provide more opportunities for at-risk students to learn and possibly improve their lives.
3. Students and their parents are grateful for tuition support and parents sacrifice to pay part of the tuition bill.

Future studies on the effectiveness of Catholic school education should focus on achievement data of Catholic schools versus alternative schools. Achievement data could include key data points such as standardized tests, college attendance, and college graduation rates. Future research on the cost/benefit analysis would include comparative data for the cost of educating a child, and the impact the educational experience has on ethical and leadership development. How does a Catholic education impact the lives of these students as they become adults?

The study results make the case for continued and increased investment in students attending Catholic schools, keeping all seats filled in Los Angeles Archdiocesan urban schools, and follow-up studies to analyze best practices in school leadership and operating models. The importance of our continued support of a Catholic education is powerfully illustrated by a female student who was able to graduate from a Catholic high school only because of a tuition award from the CEF and then went on to graduate from college: "I'm not dead, in jail, nor struggling to pay child support. In fact, I actually have a college degree. If you would have told me that at the age of 8, I would never have believed you."

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