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OPINION | COMMENTARY

The Catholic School Revival

Religious education is borrowing lessons—and leaders—from successful charters.



Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Pope Francis visit Our Lady Queen of Angels School in New York, Sept. 25. PHOTO: TONY GENTILE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By **KARL ZINSMEISTER**

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At first the rise of charter schools—to 7,000 today from 1,900 in 2000—was thought to be the nail in the coffin for Catholic education, which had been in decline for decades. Charters offer many of the same strengths as Catholic schools: order, kindness, discipline, high expectations (ideas initially borrowed from parochial institutions). But because charters are publicly funded, families don't have to pay tuition. How could

Catholic schools possibly compete with that?

Within the past few years, however, the borrowing has begun to go in the other direction, as Catholic schools poach staff from charter networks, draw from the same donors, and model their operations on charter successes. America's usual miracle-workers—competition, civil society, entrepreneurial wealth and philanthropy—have come to the rescue of religious education.

Consider the Partnership for Inner-city Education, a nonprofit formed in 2010 to take responsibility for six Catholic schools serving disadvantaged children in Harlem and the South Bronx. The chairman of the Partnership's board is Russ Carson, an equity-capital pioneer who also helped build KIPP charter schools in New York. Mr. Carson and fellow donors put millions of dollars into upgrading the campuses of these six Catholic schools.

More important, the schools' management was transferred from the archdiocese to the Partnership. Just as charter schools are public schools but privately managed, these are Catholic schools but privately managed. "We have effective control of the schools," Mr. Carson recently told supporters convened by Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities. "We have the right to hire and fire the principals, the right to change the academic components."

The Partnership hired both its superintendent and chief operating officer away from Achievement First, a charter chain. Like a top charter, the Partnership carefully tracks test scores, student retention, costs and other metrics. Copying another classic charter innovation, it brought on "operations managers" to handle business matters so that principals can focus on instruction. The Partnership brought in coaches to retrain teachers, and began recruiting brainy and passionate instructors from Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education, the religious counterpart to Teach for America. It recently purchased a set of instructional materials popular with charters.

The story is similar in Philadelphia, Camden, N.J., and other cities. Donor networks have brought modern management to Catholic schools. Social entrepreneurs have injected fresh ideas and energy. New technology, like the "blended learning" curriculum created specifically for Catholic schools by Seton Education Partners, has simultaneously raised the quality of instruction and cut costs. This year Rob Birdsell, B.J. Cassin and John Eriksen created the Drexel Fund, an investment pool to seed new Catholic schools across the country with \$85 million being raised from venture philanthropists. Donor and business support have expanded the Cristo Rey Network from one to 30 Catholic schools that mix academic study with work at real jobs.

At the same time, state and local school-choice programs are surging. In 2000 only 29,000 students attended a religious or private school with public support—typically through vouchers or tax credits. In 2014 nearly 354,000 did, according to the American Federation for Children. Even states like New York and Illinois are now considering programs to help parents afford nongovernmental schools.

This is quite a turnaround. Starting in the mid-1960s, 6,000 inner-city Catholic schools were closed, the National Catholic Educational Association reports, sealing off escape hatches for children in low-income neighborhoods. A panel on these closures that my former boss Pat Moynihan pulled together for President Nixon warned in 1972 that continued closures of Catholic schools would have “grievous consequences for poor and lower middle-class families in racially changing neighborhoods.”

Recent academic research, like the 2014 book “Lost Classroom, Lost Community” by two professors at the University of Notre Dame, has confirmed that Catholic schools help stabilize their communities. When President Bush asked me to help organize the 2008 White House summit on inner-city faith-based schooling, he characterized the situation as a “crisis.”

Less than a decade later, Catholic schools are budding for a renaissance. The roller-coaster ride that Catholic education has taken over 50 years is well illustrated by Our Lady Queen of Angels, the school in East Harlem that Pope Francis recently visited.

When that facility opened its doors in 1892 it served mostly middle-class German families; today 69% of its students are Hispanic, 22% are African-American, and nearly all are low-income. When the church next door was closed in 2007, the school nearly shut down. But the Partnership for Inner-city Education brought it back to life.

Faith-based schooling suddenly has a new cast of saints: the entrepreneurs who know that competition is the best route to success, and the donors who are willing to share their wealth with schools that improve lives. Catholics who are suspicious of America’s enterprising culture ought to take a look.

Mr. Zinsmeister is editor of “Catholic School Renaissance,” by Andy Smarick and Kelly Robson, out last month from the Philanthropy Roundtable.

