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Stephen Kotok

*Saint John's University, Jamaica New York, kotoks@stjohns.edu*

Catherine DiMartino

*Saint John's University, dimartic@stjohns.edu*

Ceceilia Parnter

*Saint John's University, parnthec@stjohns.edu*

Mary Ellen Freeley

*Saint John's University, freeleym@stjohns.edu*

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## School Choice and Hope Interrupted: COVID-19 and the Case of Pre-K Programs Housed in Catholic Schools

Stephen Kotok, Catherine DiMartino,  
Ceceilia Parnther, and Mary Ellen Freeley  
Saint John's University

*Our essay examines the challenges and opportunities for the New York City Universal Pre-K program in Catholic Schools. We review the impact of the program before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. These Pre-K programs have brought much needed revenue for Catholic Schools and provide a pipeline for prospective Catholic K-12 school students. Specifically, we discuss the school choice context in New York City with attention to the Catholic school sector and how Universal Pre-K fits into it. We then make recommendations on how the Archdiocese of New York and the Diocese of Brooklyn can utilize their resources, maintain enrollment, and support the broader community during this challenging time. We base our recommendations on our various roles as researchers of school choice, professors of Catholic K-12 school faculty, and personal involvement of one of the authors on Catholic school boards. Although our essay focuses on New York City, the implications apply to the Catholic school sector in many metropolitan areas.*

### Keywords

School Choice, Pre-K, Enrollment, COVID-19, Community

For the past twenty years, Catholic school enrollment has been on the decline (Proehl, Starnes & Everett, 2015). In urban centers with a robust charter school presence, competition for students is fierce and charter schools, which are tuition-free since they are funded by public school dollars, attract parents seeking an alternative to traditional public education systems (McShane & Kelly, 2014). In New York City, one avenue for increasing enrollment and funding has been for Catholic schools to partner with the Department of Education (DOE) Universal 3-K and Pre-K initiative. In the upcoming 2020-2021 school year, the Archdiocese of New York will provide over 100 Pre K programs with 73 of those programs identified as universal Pre-K sites funded through public dollars (Archdiocese of New York, 2020); the Catholic Schools of Brooklyn and Queens oversee 45 universal Pre-K sites (Diocese of

Brooklyn, 2020). These programs bring much needed revenue and provide a pipeline for new Catholic school students.

COVID-19 adds additional challenges for the Catholic school sector in New York City. High unemployment rates now make the cost of Catholic schools inaccessible to many families (Wodon, 2020). Additionally, with school and church closures, Catholic schools lost key tools for recruiting new students and fundraising for their schools. On July 9th of this year, the Archdiocese of New York and Diocese of Brooklyn announced the closing of 26 schools, with the vast majority of closings occurring in New York City (Murn, 2020). With schools closing, we argue that Pre-K is more vital than ever. Pre-K programs housed in Catholic schools provide an essential entry point for families considering a Catholic education for elementary school and beyond. In many ways, Pre-K programs housed in Catholic schools are especially situated to support their local communities during this critical time. However, in order to attract families, these early childhood programs need to demonstrate great innovation and flexibility as they work to serve their students, fulfill their mission, and to maintain their market position in New York City as well as other contexts around the United States.

The following essay first broadly examines the school choice context in New York City and the logistical challenges faced by Catholic schools in the era of COVID-19. Then we consider the unique role that Pre-Ks housed in Catholic schools play in providing early childhood instruction and exposing families to the advantages of Catholic school education. Finally, we make Covid-related recommendations for Pre-K programs housed in Catholic schools for the upcoming school year. Although our essay is mostly theoretical in nature, we base many of our conclusions on: 1) empirical research on school choice in New York City (including interviews with Pre-K parents, Catholic school principals, and Catholic school superintendents); 2) our roles as professors working with many Catholic school leaders; and 3) one of the author's past roles as a former Board Chair for a Catholic elementary school, which housed a Pre-K program, as well as her present role as Board member for a Catholic high school.

### **Background on New York City Context**

New York City is characterized by a complex school choice system, where parents must frequently select and apply for schools from Pre-K to high school. In addition to the almost 2000 traditional public schools, there are hundreds of private religious and secular private schools, and over 250 char-

ter schools (Kotok, DiMartino, & DeMatthews, 2020). Since the opening of the first New York City charter school in 1998, Catholic schools and charter schools are increasingly competing for the same group of students, whose parents are looking for high-quality schooling, long associated with Catholic schools, without the cost (New York Independent Budget Office, 2015).

In New York City, where large charter management organizations (CMOs) dominate the charter school market, brands such as Achievement First, KIPP, and Success Academy all tout high academic standards, a strong school culture and clear disciplinary practices, all hallmarks of Catholic education. As McShane & Kelly (2014) explain,

Catholic schools have an identifiable and respected brand. They are known for their discipline, high expectations, and formation of moral values in students. Thus, schools that are able to mimic some of those characteristics without bringing along the financial issues that have plagued Catholic schools are in a position to take over some of the Catholic school market share, absent any mechanisms to lower the cost of Catholic schools to potential consumers (p. 6).

As families struggle with the economic impact of COVID-19, these financial issues have become even more paramount.

For parents, navigating all of these choices requires them to learn about all of their educational options. Parents learn about schools through their social networks, district and school fairs and open houses, online school websites, and advertisements (Author 2020, Bell, 2009, Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Teske et al., 2007). With the wide-scale closure of New York City due to COVID-19 traditional information gathering practices, such as school visits and informal parental conversations, for example, at church, became much more limited. In this environment, parents rely more heavily on online materials and advertisements, such as direct mailers, to influence their decision-making. In a recent study of marketing practices in New York City, our research found the CMOs dominated the direct-mailer market with traditional public schools and Catholic schools having much less representation (Authors, 2020). Embracing Universal Pre-K is one mechanism Catholic Schools can use to access public dollars, increase enrollment, and ultimately, make them more competitive in these robust school choice markets. In the next section, we delve deeper into the importance of Pre-K programs housed in Catholic schools as well as the obstacles they face, followed by specific recommendations for the next school year.

### **How Universal Pre-K Fits into the School Choice Landscape**

In 2014, Mayor Bill DeBlasio launched the Pre-K for All program dedicated to providing free full-day early childhood education. As part of this, the DOE utilized space at some traditional public schools, but they also sought to work with community partners including the Archdiocese of New York and the Diocese of Brooklyn in order to provide tuition-free services for thousands of children. With the advent of school choice, the influx of money from the DOE and the exposure to parents served as a life line for Catholic schools to some extent. We visited a Pre-K site housed in a Catholic School in New York City this past year. The principal of the program explained that the school served Pre-K-8, but shrinking enrollment resulted in the merging of the K-8 program with a sister school and a reallocation of space to more Pre-K and the new 3-K program. The school now housed several Pre-K and 3-K classes and rented the remaining space to a charter high school. One of the regional superintendents told us that many Catholic schools held between 8 and 10 Pre-K classrooms.

Many of the students taking advantage of Universal Pre-K at Catholic schools qualify for free/reduced lunch, identify as Black or Latino, and many speak a language other than English. According to one official from the Dioceses,

The parents who perhaps would never have put their children in a Catholic school, because they didn't know anything about it, or they couldn't afford it. They now spend a year in the building and become part of the culture of a Catholic school environment, they also are welcomed, not forced, but welcomed to participate in any of the school and parish activities. So, it kind of enculturates them into Catholic education during the time they are in the building, and that's why it's so exciting to have three-year-olds now because they've probably gone through two years. (Diocese Official, Personal Correspondence)

Pre-K programs housed in Catholic schools as well as Catholic schools in general offer families many key amenities. Research indicates that parents often choose a Catholic education for perceived higher academic outcomes, religious structure, parental involvement, discipline, and a mission that lends itself well to educating a diverse group of students (Freeman & Berends, 2016; Gottfried & Kirksey, 2018, McShane & Kelly, 2014, Trivitt & Wolf, 2011). The official we spoke to explained,

Just like community, a sense of community is always a big thing...order, discipline, those are some of the things that they you know, it feels that their child is, more, receives more attention, because the schools tend to be in the 300 to 500 range. And they feel it's easier, you know, for their child to be noticed in a smaller school. (Diocese Official, Personal Correspondence)

Despite all of these selling points, the closure of physical Pre-Ks last spring made it extremely difficult to maintain these features. Recent guidelines allow Pre-Ks to open up this fall with limits such as groups of 15, health screenings, cleanings, and face coverings for adults (Veiga, 2020). In terms of reopening, Pre-K has some advantages over K-12 education since classes tend to be smaller with more educators in the classroom. As per State requirements, In New York City, there are two teachers in a classroom room; a lead and an assistant teacher, usually a paraprofessional, making it easier to manage smaller groups or pods of children (NYSED.gov, 2020). Additionally, space provided by parish churches and underenrolled schools potentially allows Catholic schools to have built-in space opportunities that can be used to follow Federal and State guidelines for opening safe schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we now turn to a discussion on this upcoming year with some analysis and recommendations.

## Recommendations

### 1. Make Effective Use of Existing Space

While the under enrollment and closing of Catholic schools is devastating, therein also lies tremendous opportunity for the Archdiocese of New York and Diocese of Brooklyn. The empty buildings and unused classrooms across the State could provide ample space to comply with Federal and State social distancing guidelines. This space can be used by existing Catholic schools and the general Catholic educational community to help them comply with the Center for Disease Control's school opening guidelines. This space could also be either rented out or donated to public school districts across the State to help them safely physically distance their students and faculty.

In a few urban centers outside of New York, local Catholic organizations have founded non-religious charter school organizations, such as the Catalyst Schools in Chicago and Austin, Texas (Goldsmith & Walsh, 2011; Proehl,



Starnes, & Everett, 2015). These charter school networks, based on religious values, allow for the Catholic school education model to be duplicated within the public school system. While such models do not currently exist in New York City, there may be a policy window to consider such schools or even other activities such as after-school and day care (Kingdon, 1995). As we mentioned, space may be crucial in the coming years as public health guidelines restrict class size. In this context lies opportunities for Catholic schools to leverage their space to run their own, physically distanced programs, or they will need to rent to their chief competitors, the charter schools as many already are doing.

## **2. Utilize Technology for Recruiting**

Even if schools remain open, it will be difficult to recruit. Physical visits and interactions with school staff are especially important to parents. Catholic schools in particular often rely on the sense of community built through face to face interactions found at church, in open houses and during scheduled visits. In lieu of these traditional opportunities, leaders may consider expanding the school's social media footprint by engaging with topics of interest to Pre K parents. Targeted engagement with community social media posts are also an excellent way to engage families. Revitalizing institutional web sites would socialize 3-K and Pre K students at the start of a student's educational journey and help parents feel like they have a place in the academic community.

As with face-to-face events, virtual tours and open houses are essential strategies to model social distancing practices and to help parents feel that classrooms are safe and nurturing environments. Video interviews with teachers, administrators, and current parents may enhance the sense of belonging needed to commit to a Pre K program. Virtual Admissions days where staff are available to assist with the application process are another valuable strategy that allows parents to commit in real-time. These events should have bilingual staff on hand to provide support to a diverse set of families. Showcasing curriculum plans, including innovative apps and technologies, will help prospective parents feel confident about their choices. In all of these strategies, it is essential to use best practices, such as those suggested by the National Catholic Education Association to recruit and retain underrepresented families.

### 3. Lean Into Role as Pillar of the Community.

Mission and community are foundational elements in Catholic faith and education. Catholic schools are community institutions. The Church continues to provide for community members experiencing housing and food insecurities and builds community through remote and in person programming and services. Catholic schools can benefit from the increased visibility of a parish's charitable endeavors to the community. Service is not only socially beneficial but serves as a cornerstone of Catholic social teaching. Making the philanthropic work of the school and the parish visible in school communications serves to connect the mission of the school to the community. Catholic schools also have the autonomy to create mission-centered protocols to manage health and safety. Demonstrating the school's commitment to the community through the NYC Universal Pre-K partnership provides an opportunity to engage current and prospective parents in collaborative decision making. Mobilizing parent volunteers to lead community-based initiatives will welcome prospective families and help to strengthen communication.

### Conclusion

Catholic schools in New York City, and other cities, already struggled with enrollment prior to COVID-19 as charter schools attracted some of the prospective students. As the new school year starts, Catholic schools are likely to face continued enrollment challenges on top of other COVID-19 related issues. We think Pre-K programs housed in Catholic schools in places such as New York have a unique opportunity to serve their communities during this time and leave a lasting impression of the families they serve. Targeted, community-centered approaches that embrace technology, and reaffirm the mission-centered, academically focused qualities of Catholic schools are necessary to sustain their role as a cornerstone of urban education.

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