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Tracking the Legacy of "Inner-City" Catholic Schools: An Analysis of U.S. Elementary Catholic School Organizational and Demographic Data

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Abstract: Over the past twenty years, Catholic elementary schools that self-identify as "inner-city" have closed at a higher rate than Catholic schools in other locations. These schools have also long been associated with a legacy of effectively serving low-income students, students of color, and recent immigrant students, suggesting that the persistent closure of these schools may have a negative impact on these communities. In this paper, we set out to assess the extent to which there have been demographic or organizational changes over the past twenty years in these "inner-city" schools. We found that while these schools do still serve higher proportions of students of color than Catholic schools nationally, there are distinct organizational and demographic trends that have developed in these schools that merit additional analysis or investigation. We conclude this paper with several suggestions for how to build a research agenda around this up-to-date demographic and organizational analysis of this segment of U.S. Catholic elementary schools.

Keywords: urban education, Catholic education, Catholic school demographics, organizational change

One of the most significant questions facing Catholic education in the United States today is whether or not (arch)dioceses can continue their tradition of sustaining the nation's urban Catholic schools. The general trend in Catholic schooling in the United States for the past forty years has been one of declining student enrollment and increasing school closures (Irwin et al., 2022;

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Wang et al., 2019), but these declines and closures have been more pronounced among the 40% of Catholic schools located in urban areas (National Catholic Educational Association [NCEA], n.d.). According to recent national estimates, as many as half of all urban Catholic schools that were open in 1960 were closed as of 2010 (Smarick, 2018) and from 2000 to the present the relative proportion of urban elementary Catholic schools that self-identify as inner-city has decreased from 30% (919 inner-city, 3096 urban and inner-city) to 22% (396 inner-city, 1835 urban and inner-city; NCEA, n.d.).

Since the emergence of these trends in the late 20th century, Catholic school practitioners and advocates have worried about the sector's capacity to continue providing educational opportunities to historically marginalized student populations (e.g., Hamilton, 2008; Saroki & Levenick, 2009; U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2008). After the movement of middle class, ethnically European, White Catholic communities away from densely populated city centers over the course of the latter 20th century (Cattaro & Cooper, 2007; D'Antonio et al., 2013), urban Catholic schools came to be associated with the education of lower-income communities, communities of color, and recent immigrant communities, particularly those urban schools that NCEA designates as "inner-city," or schools in urban centers located in areas where 40% of the population lives at or below the poverty line. After Coleman et al. (1982) and Bryk et al. (1993) found more equitable levels of academic achievement among students from different racial and socioeconomic groups attending Catholic secondary schools than the achievement of comparable groups attending public schools, urban Catholic schools also came to be associated with generating a "Catholic school advantage" (e.g., Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Miserandino, 2019; Staud, 2008). While significant contemporary research has questioned the validity and stability of the "Catholic school advantage" (e.g., Altonji et al., 2005a, 2005b), empirical evidence collected in urban Catholic schools continues to suggest some urban Catholic schools, under certain conditions, contribute to positive academic and nonacademic outcomes for certain historically marginalized student groups (e.g., Berends & Waddington, 2018). Therefore, the educational policy and reform discourse around urban Catholic schooling has continued to focus on "sustaining the legacy" of urban Catholic schools (O'Keefe et al., 2004).

Yet, there have been few systematic, national studies of the extent to which, if at all, urban Catholic elementary schools as a group have continued to meet the academic and nonacademic needs of historically marginalized communities since the publication of O'Keefe et al.'s (2004) *Sustaining the Legacy: Urban Catholic Elementary Schools in the United States*. Most contemporary research in and about urban Catholic elementary schools has followed in a tradition of highlighting exemplary, individual urban Catholic schools serving historically marginalized students in U.S. cities (Haney & O'Keefe, 2007; O'Keefe & Scheopner, 2007). Catholic school practitioners have implemented reforms intended to increase student enrollment and to prevent further closure of urban Catholic schools (Garnett, 2020), designing new operational, management, and governance mechanisms for schools that had traditionally been managed using the traditional parish model

(e.g., O'Keefe & Goldschmidt, 2014; Porter-Magee, 2021). There is substantial contemporary research that has looked at recent urban Catholic education innovations in order to investigate the extent to which, if at all, these new models and reforms continue to generate desirable academic and nonacademic outcomes for students from historically marginalized communities in particular schools and networks (e.g., Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2013). Yet, this research has not systematically tracked representative or illustrative trends occurring across either urban or inner-city Catholic elementary schools nationally at a time when the proportion of these schools and the number of students in them are rapidly declining.

Simultaneously, the most recent national demographic evidence through the fall of 2019 has indicated the number of historically marginalized students and middle-class students attending private schools of all types has decreased over time across all regions (e.g., Murnane & Reardon, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], n.d.). Given that a plurality of private school students attend Catholic schools and almost half of Catholic schools are urban and inner-city (NCEA, n.d.), these national private school trends suggest the need to examine the relative demographic composition of this notable segment of the private school landscape.

In order to assess whether contemporary efforts to sustain the historical legacy of urban Catholic schools have been successful during a time when educational reform movements have called on all urban schools and systems to enhance educational equity and excellence (Mehta, 2013; Peurach et al., 2019; Scott & Holme, 2016), researchers, practitioners, and advocates within the field of urban Catholic education need to have a sufficiently disaggregated picture of contemporary trends in the organizational structures, student demographics, and staffing patterns of urban Catholic schools. Therefore, we set out in this paper to collect, disaggregate, and analyze more accurate data about the landscape of urban Catholic elementary schooling in answer to the following research questions:

(1) What changes, if any, have there been to the demographic composition and organizational structure of inner-city Catholic elementary schools since the early 2000s?
(2) Based on these organizational and demographic trends, what are the salient differences between inner-city Catholic elementary schools and Catholic elementary schools nationally (rural, suburban, urban, and inner-city combined)?

To answer these questions, this paper presents updated secondary analyses of pre-existing urban Catholic education datasets to identify disaggregated national trends among urban Catholic student, school, and staff populations and school infrastructure/capacity. As discussed in more detail in the following sections, we specifically focused in this analysis on school-level trends among the "inner-city" sub-group of urban Catholic elementary schools to produce a new baseline understanding for how these Catholic elementary schools designated as "inner-city" are organized and who they serve. While our findings and analyses illustrate many similarities

between the past and present landscape of inner-city Catholic schools, we found several notable ways organizational and demographic trends have shifted in recent years among these schools. In this paper, we highlight the most significant of these shifts and what the data we analyzed seem to suggest about the potential reasons behind these shifts. We conclude with recommendations for the utility and importance of this contemporary baseline organizational and demographic description of inner-city Catholic schools and suggest how it can help the field reconsider some of its foundational assumptions about the function of urban Catholic schools compared to Catholic schools nationally and urban schools across the public and private sectors broadly.

Review of Relevant Literature

Contemporary research on urban Catholic education and the developments within the broader field of urban education inform the analyses of inner-city Catholic school data presented in this paper. This literature review briefly summarizes current knowledge about the organization and effects of urban Catholic elementary and secondary schools in the United States and illustrates how this paper directly addresses several current gaps in this field of scholarship.

The State of Empirical Urban Catholic School Scholarship

In a recently published review of empirical and conceptual research about urban Catholic schools conducted by members of this research team, we found that although the idea of the "Catholic school advantage" shapes the field's conceptual assumptions, empirical research tends to reveal a different story (Miller et al., 2022). While certain desirable academic outcomes have consistently been measured in urban Catholic secondary schools over time, our review's findings suggested that the "Catholic school advantage" is not an inherent feature of urban Catholic schooling broadly speaking. In fact, quantitative researchers who study sector effects have identified a consistent trend: the students from historically marginalized communities in cities whose academic and nonacademic outcomes would be hypothetically positively impacted by attending Catholic schools are far more likely to attend non-Catholic schools (e.g., Davies, 2013; Davies & Quirke, 2007; Freeman & Berends, 2016). In addition, the "Catholic school advantage" has never been consistently or reliably measured in urban Catholic elementary schools (e.g., Morgan & Todd, 2009; Hallinan & Kubitschek, 2012).

Other findings of this review suggested that urban Catholic education research has tended to focus solely on the concerns of urban Catholic schools rather than look comparatively at what is happening in urban schools across sectors. Informed by the work of O'Keefe and Goldschmidt (2014), researchers investigating urban Catholic schools have tended to examine rather narrowly what it will take for particular urban Catholic schools to survive in their immediate context. This research has failed to place urban Catholic school reform within the context of urban school reforms in the United States that resulted in widespread systemic changes to how urban schools function and to how researchers make sense of issues that urban schools confront (Milner & Lomotey, 2021).

Our review concluded that even though urban Catholic schools have theoretically retained the capacity to meet the academic and nonacademic needs of students of color, low-income students, and recent immigrant students, there has been limited current research that has established the contemporary nature of urban Catholic schools, the differences among school, system, and sector options that exist in cities where urban Catholic schools are located (e.g., public district schools, charter schools, non-Catholic private schools), or the extent to which these differences are salient to researchers, practitioners, policymakers, communities or students. A primary goal of the analyses presented in this paper is to address this gap in empirical scholarship on inner-city Catholic elementary schools where the concentration of poverty is highest by establishing both what it actually means to be a contemporary inner-city Catholic elementary school and if that designation has any normative or descriptive value to practitioners within or outside the field.

Therefore, we attempted in our analyses to more precisely account for complex and dynamic demographic and organizational conditions in urban Catholic elementary schools rather than be limited by traditional assumptions about the assumed legacy of these schools. This goal is also consistent with recent theoretical and conceptual trends in urban education research broadly speaking, in which leading scholars of urban schools and communities have encouraged their colleagues to define and theorize more precisely how their research contributes to an increasingly robust understanding of complex political economic shifts in cities over the course of different political eras and the impacts these shifts have had on the purposes, goals, and capacities of urban schools and educators (e.g., Diamond et al., 2021; Scott & Holme, 2016; Welsh & Swain, 2020).

Yet, as explained in more detail below, we encountered several limits when attempting to access reliable, nationally representative demographic and organizational data from urban and inner-city Catholic schools. For example, while urban Catholic elementary schools have been coded by schools and dioceses in national Catholic school datasets as either "urban" (a Catholic school located in a city with 50,000+ people) or "inner-city" (a Catholic school located in a city with 50,000+ people with a 40%+ concentration of residents designated as low-income), these Catholic schools have only been coded as "city" in national private school databases. In addition, the way a school or diocese's decision to report a school as "urban" or "inner-city" can change from year to year (NCEA, n.d.). We subsequently chose in this paper to focus our analyses on inner-city Catholic elementary schools mainly because these schools have experienced more pronounced enrollment declines and school closures than urban schools broadly (NCEA, n.d.), which suggested to us that demographic and organizational changes were more pronounced in these schools. This decision limited our ability to draw conclusions about the experience of urban Catholic education in cities where poverty is less concentrated, but it allowed us to draw more precise conclusions about a particular subset of schools that has long been associated with the "Catholic school advantage" and the "legacy" of urban Catholic education.

Methods

This article presents findings from the first phase of a comprehensive national study of urban Catholic elementary schools in the United States investigating whether and how these schools have sustained their historical legacy providing low-income students, students of color, and recent immigrant students a high quality, formative, and holistic educational experience. As part of this larger study, our research team first had to determine whether urban Catholic schools are still the primary places within the Catholic sector where low-income students, students of color, and other socially marginalized students are educated by analyzing historical and contemporary student demographic, staff demographic, and school organizational trends. In this section, we present a detailed accounting of the data collection and analysis procedures used to provide initial answers to the two research questions that framed our inquiry into these trends across inner-city, Catholic elementary schools.

Description of Data Sources, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

In order to answer our first research question, we set out to replicate the design of the O'Keefe et al. (2004) *Sustaining the Legacy* study for the 2021–2022 academic year. Since this study's primary analytical strategy was to report out general demographic and organizational trends using both diocesan-level statistics from the annual NCEA database and school-level data collected from a survey distributed to a geographically representative sample of self-identified inner-city elementary schools, our primary analytical strategy in this replication of that study was two-fold: (1) produce a disaggregated and descriptive account of the student, staff, and organizational landscape of urban Catholic schools; and (2) identify ways this landscape has changed over time using direct comparisons to previously collected student, staff, and school organizational statistics.

We began our analyses by accessing the following three datasets: (a) a database of 384 responses to the original survey designed by O'Keefe et al. (2004) for the initial *Sustaining the Legacy* study in the early 2000s; (b) a database of 55 responses to a replicated version of that survey our research team distributed from February 2021 through January 2022 to all urban and inner-city Catholic schools in the United States, including all still-open, participating schools from the original study; and (c) the database of aggregate/diocesan-level demographic and organizational statistics collected each year by NCEA, containing disaggregated statistics for all urban and inner-city schools. Because of the low response rate on the replicated survey, though, we did not have sufficient or representative school-level demographic and organizational data that allowed us to compare several of the student, staff, and school organization categories and items from the original O'Keefe et al. (2004) analyses. Subsequently, we accessed a fourth data source, a database of school-level enrollment, staffing, and governance program data from a geographically representative sample of 1,302 schools (558 urban; 89 inner-city) collected from September 2021 through January 2022 by a private entity that provides schools with financial and administrative tools (e.g., student

information systems, tuition aid management tools) on behalf of NCEA to complete our school-level comparisons.

Our research team then assessed the construct validity of this fourth data source to verify whether the items that were asked of this sample of schools were comparable to the school-level items asked of the original O'Keefe et al. (2004) sample. We also engaged in a series of coding and sorting conversations across the various items found in all four sources of data to ensure that the statistics we compared and reported accurately spoke to the student demographic, staff demographic, and school organizational structure categories we chose to employ in our analysis of these statistics.

Limitations of Data Sources and Additional Data Use Considerations

As one of our co-authors has previously written (Smith & Huber, 2022), there is not currently a comprehensive national database containing reliable school-level data that can be disaggregated by both school location and level. Researchers attempting to analyze demographic and organizational trends in Catholic schooling have therefore had to acknowledge the methodological limitations of available datasets and the conclusions they have drawn from their analyses. Two key limitations of our four datasets were: (a) the original O'Keefe et al. (2004) data source had a relative overrepresentation of schools that are located in NCEA's Mideast region and a relative underrepresentation of schools in New England; and (b) the NCEA national database reflects self-reported designations of whether a school self-identifies as urban or inner-city, meaning that the number of inner-city and urban schools NCEA reports may not directly align to how these schools would be designated by geography or socioeconomic status using national census data. For the purposes of the present study, then, specific procedures were used to ensure that to the best of our knowledge the two school-level samples (the original O'Keefe et al. (2004) data from 2000–2001 and the sample collected for NCEA in 2021–2022) were comparable to each other and each comparable to the national-level inner-city NCEA data from 2000–present. The O'Keefe et al. (2004) data are a natural baseline point of comparison for tracking trends in urban Catholic elementary schools because there are no other accurate, national-in-scope assessments of student, staff, and school organization patterns in these schools since that study was published. But the use of these data and the procedures we used to compare current datasets with these baseline data also contributed to our methodological choice to only draw conclusions about organizational and demographic trends in inner-city Catholic schools in this paper.

Findings

In response to our research questions, our analyses of these national Catholic school datasets indicated inner-city elementary schools are similar in many ways to the inner-city Catholic elementary schools of the early 2000s. For example, there is still more racial and socioeconomic diversity in inner-city Catholic education than in Catholic education nationally. Consistent

with O'Keefe et al.'s (2004) descriptive analyses, our findings suggested the demographic and organizational make-up of inner-city Catholic elementary schooling remains different enough from both urban Catholic schools and Catholic schools nationally to merit separate, differentiated analytical treatment. Yet despite these consistencies, descriptive analysis of these datasets revealed several notable shifts over the past twenty years. In this section, we highlight the most salient student, staff, and structural differences between current inner-city Catholic elementary school trends and trends O'Keefe et al. (2004) found in the early 2000s, as well as the most salient differences between contemporary inner-city Catholic elementary schools and their national Catholic elementary school peers.

School Structures and Organizational Conditions

Our analyses of national and school-level data indicated, there have not been many significant changes to the organizational conditions in inner-city elementary schools that have not also been experienced by Catholic schools nationally. For example, declining enrollment trends have contributed to declining student-teacher ratios in all Catholic schools over the past twenty years. The data analyzed, however, did suggest three major differences that have occurred over time between inner-city schools and Catholic schools nationally that speak to notable shifts in how inner-city schools are structured and where they are located.

First, school-level data from the 2000–2001 and 2021–2022 samples show inner-city Catholic schools are considerably smaller than they were previously. Table 1 shows that since 2000–2001, inner-city school size has decreased by an average of 100 students and by over 100 students in schools serving larger concentrations of low-income students and families. This phenomenon of decreasing average student enrollment is also far more pronounced in inner-city schools than in other geographical locations. Table 1 shows that nearly two-thirds of inner-city schools in 2021–2022 had under 200 students enrolled compared to half of schools nationally in 2021–2022.

Table 1

Average Total Student Enrollment by Inner-city Catholic School Type 2000–01 and 2021–22

	2000–01	2021–22
	Mean	Mean
All Elementary Inner-City Schools	281	180
Majority[a] White	310	186
Majority[a] Black	230	148
Majority[a] Hispanic	261	186
60% FRLP[b]	326	166
90% FRLP[b]	299	174

[a] Majority refers to greater than 75%.

[b] FRLP refers to students that are eligible for the Free or Reduced Lunch Program.

Data Source(s): Private entity data collected on behalf of NCEA (n.d.) and O'Keefe et al. (2004)

There has long been a consensus among many in Catholic school research circles that Catholic schools are less fiscally or operationally sustainable once enrollment falls below 200 students (James et al., 2008; NCEA NSBECS Advisory Council, 2023). This consensus has increasingly been called into question by innovations in "microschool" models among Catholic schools that are now likelier than 20 years ago to serve fewer than 150 students (e.g., Annable & Baxter, 2021). Yet much of this emphasis on "microschool" models discusses the existence of these schools in less densely populated areas rather than urban and inner-city contexts. Our analyses would seem to encourage the field of Catholic school practitioners to reconsider the need to identify new staffing, resource allocation, and student support models in inner-city schools as well given the relatively more pronounced financial and operational constraints that have been imposed on inner-city schools facing the kinds of average student enrollment decrease these geographical areas have experienced.

Second, we identified in the NCEA national database a distinct trend related to the four categories NCEA has long used to describe school governance and sponsorship (parish, interparish, diocesan, and private). While O'Keefe et al. (2004) had originally suggested inner-city Catholic schools in the 2000–2001 academic year were likelier to have diocesan or private governance than Catholic schools nationally, it was actually the case that inner-city schools in 2000–2001 mirrored national school sponsorship and governance trends (Table 2). Since 2000–2001, national Catholic parish trends suggest the stark decrease in the proportion of parish-governed elementary schools compared to other models may mostly be explained by parish and parish school closure rates (e.g., Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate [CARA], 2023, Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities [FADICA], 2020; NCEA, n.d.). But our analyses and comparisons indicate there has been a notable increase in the relative proportion of diocesan and private governance among inner-city elementary schools over time (32% up from 6% having diocesan governance, 10% up from 3% having private governance), suggesting these shifts cannot solely be explained by parish and parish school closure.

Table 2

Elementary School Type 2000–01 and 2021–22

Governance type	2000–01		2021–22	
	All Schools	Inner-City	All Schools	Inner-City
	%	%	%	%
Parish	79	79	64	49
Inter-parish	12	12	12	9
Diocesan	4	6	16	32
Private	5	3	7	10

Data Source(s): NCEA annual survey and O'Keefe et al. (2004)

These data suggest Catholic schools in cities with high/concentrated poverty have confronted parish closure, parish integration, and governance oversight reform in a different way than Catholic schools nationally. Taken alongside the data on average student enrollment, these data also seem to suggest that stakeholder groups in inner-city Catholic schools have been more willing than in urban, suburban, or rural Catholic schools to find new or different ways to address any potential organizational inefficiencies that coincide with underenrolled parish schools. This would be consistent with contemporary research and advocacy on governance reform in urban Catholic education (e.g., Smarick & Robson, 2015), which has argued that these shifts are evidence of mission-driven private or diocesan organizations deciding to keep inner-city schools open (e.g., Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2013). As discussed more at the end of this paper, it seems likely that shifts in school governance models among inner-city elementary schools may be one of the most notable things happening in this segment of the Catholic sector over the past twenty years, even if these analyses do not establish whether these shifts have been implemented in response to this organizational trend or in an attempt to shape it.

Finally, we found in the national NCEA database a distinct regional trend that has developed among inner-city schools over time. As presented in Table 3, since 2000 the largest growth in inner-city schools has occurred in NCEA's West/Far West (22% to 34%) region, while the Mideast (33% to 23%) and Great Lakes Regions (21% to 15%) have seen the sharpest declines in the relative proportion of inner-city schools. While Catholic school data have long tracked the relative shift in Catholic school presence away from the Mideast and toward the West/Far West, it is notable that inner-city Catholic schools seem to be experiencing these shifts in a more pronounced way. In addition, since the Great Lakes region has maintained its relative share of Catholic schools overall, these data suggest a much more pronounced decline in inner-city elementary schools in the Great Lakes than in other regions.

Table 3

Geographic Distribution by Region for All Catholic Elementary Schools 2000–01 and 2021–22

Region	2000–01		2021–22	
	All Schools %	Inner-City %	All Schools %	Inner-City %
New England	7	12	5	12
Mideast	27	33	19	23
Great Lakes	26	21	25	15
Plains	11	5	13	7
Southeast	12	7	15	9
West/Far West	18	22	23	34

Data Source(s): NCEA annual survey and O'Keefe et al. (2004)

The national NCEA data, however, cannot by themselves account for why these trends are occurring across the U.S. or whether these trends are consistent with national demographic trends across the country. More research is needed to unpack how and why these particular trends have happened in inner-city Catholic elementary schools in these particular regions.

Student Demographics

Our analyses of the national NCEA database and the two school-level samples have confirmed student demographics in inner-city elementary schools continue to represent a more racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse population than Catholic schools nationally, consistent with O'Keefe et al.'s (2004) findings (see Table 4). Yet we also found that student demographics have shifted since 2000 resulting in the increased segregation over time of White, Hispanic, and lower income communities in these schools.

Table 4

Student Enrollment by Race 2000–01and 2021–22

Students' Race[a,b]	2000–01	2021–22	
	Inner-City	All Schools	Inner-City
	%	%	%
White	27	73	60
Black	31	7	21
Asian	8	5	6
Native American/Alaskan	1	.7	2
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	-	.6	.3
Two or More Races	-	8	9
Unknown	-	7	3
Ethnicity			
Hispanic	33	19	47
Not Hispanic	-	81	53

[a] Race and ethnicity questions were separate in the 2021–22 instrument; however, in the 2000–01 instrument race and ethnicity questions were combined.

[b] Hispanic students may have been counted in any of the race categories (e.g., White and Hispanic).

Note: Race questions in 2000–01 instrument did not include the categories of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Two or More races, and Unknown.

The national and school-level sample data presented in Table 4 indicate the overwhelming majority of students served in Catholic elementary schools in 2021–22 were White (73% coded as White, with an ethnicity break down of 19% Hispanic, 81% non-Hispanic). We make this observation with caution, however, as race and ethnicity data have been coded in inconsistent ways across the NCEA and school-level sample data. Although the percentage of white students

in inner-city schools appears to have increased substantially from 27% to 60% of all students since 2000–01, our analyses of national ethnicity data suggest it is probable that schools coded many Hispanic students as racially White in 2021–22. Therefore, our analyses suggest it is likely that a plurality of students served in inner-city Catholic elementary schools is White (60% coded as White, with an ethnicity break down of 47% Hispanic, 53% non-Hispanic), which is a relative increase in the White population in inner-city schools compared to the national and school-level sample data from 2000–2001.

Student race and ethnicity data (Table 4) also indicate the percentage of Black students served in inner-city schools in 2021–2022, while higher than the percentage of Black students served in Catholic schools nationally (21% compared to 7%), has decreased in the last decades (from 31% to 21%). Meanwhile, there has been an increase in the proportion of students in inner-city schools identifying as Hispanic (47%), compared to 19% in all schools and up from 33% in inner-city schools in 2000–2001.

Finally, the school-level sample data presented in Table 5 indicate concentrated poverty levels of students attending inner-city Catholic schools have increased over time alongside increases in the concentration of "majority" White and Hispanic student bodies (defined by O'Keefe et al. (2004) in their original study as 75%+ of the population sharing the particular demographic). To highlight this point, there are 16% fewer inner-city Catholic schools with 60% or more students eligible for free or reduced priced lunch, while there are 16% more schools with 90% or more students eligible for free or reduced priced lunch. Taken alongside the demographic and organizational trends presented above, these socioeconomic data seem to suggest the burden for funding the hypothetical inner-city school's capacity to sustain urban Catholic education's historical mission has significantly increased over time, which would also seem to justify the prevalence of interventions from independent nonprofit school management or tuition assistance organizations (e.g., Porter-Magee, 2018; Saroki de Garcia, 2018).

Table 5

School Descriptions 2000–01 and 2021–22

School student body description	2000–01	2021–22	
	Inner-City	All Schools	Inner-City
	%	%	%
Majority[a] White	11	71	46
Majority[a] Black	20	2	15
Majority[a] Hispanic	18	7	34
60% FRLP[b]	56	11	40
90% FRLP[b]	12	8	28

[a] Majority refers to greater than 75%.

[b] FRLP refers to students that are eligible for the Free or Reduced Lunch Program

Data Source(s): Private entity data collected on behalf of NCEA and O'Keefe et al. (2004)

It is clear from our analyses that inner-city Catholic schools have begun to educate a higher proportion of Hispanic and low-income students since the 2000–2001 academic year and have continued to educate a higher proportion of Hispanic, Black, and low-income students these past two decades than Catholic schools nationally. There are many possible explanations in the field for these trends. For example, it is possible that the decreasing proportion of Black students in inner-city schools is related to closures of parish schools serving the Black community (e.g., Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Miserandino, 2019; Smarick, 2018). It is also possible that the increasing proportion of Hispanic students in inner-city schools is related to calls within the Catholic community to reach out to and more effectively serve Hispanic school-aged children (e.g., Bell, 2007; Garcia et al., 2020; Golann et al., 2019; Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016). Yet, as discussed in more detail below, additional analyses are warranted to assess the extent to which inner-city Catholic schools have intentionally chosen to serve these populations or whether these populations happen to live where these schools remain.

Staff Demographics

Analyses of national and school-level data indicated the following two illustrative trends related to staff demographics in inner-city elementary schools. First, the school-level sample data presented in Table 6 indicate inner-city Catholic elementary school staff are overwhelmingly White (80%) up from 72% of staff in 2000–2001. This is a lower concentration of White faculty than national public school data, where 90% of teachers identify as White (Irwin et al., 2022), but a higher concentration of White faculty than urban public school data, which indicate only 69% of staff identify as White in those schools (Schaeffer, 2021). But it is notable that while the racial diversity of inner-city school staff has somewhat decreased over time, the concentration of Black

Table 6

Staff Race/Ethnicity by Percentages of Student Race/Ethnicity

	2000–01 Inner-City			2021–22 Inner-City		
	White staff %	Black staff %	Hispanic[b] staff %	White staff %	Black staff %	Hispanic[b] staff %
Majority[a] Black students	55	40	3	47	42	4
Majority[a] Hispanic[b] students	60	3	45	88	4	61
All Schools	72	12	13	80	10	26

[a] Majority refers to greater than 75%.

[b] Race and ethnicity data for students and staff were collected in a combined item for the 2000–01 instrument; however, separately for the 2021–22 instrument.

Data Source(s): NCEA annual survey and O'Keefe et al. (2004)

or Hispanic teachers in schools serving 75%+ Black or Hispanic students has increased over time. Furthermore, the percentage of Hispanic staff has doubled in all Catholic inner-city elementary schools from 13% to 26% and given the race/ethnicity data discrepancy noted above, it is possible a non-negligible percentage of the 88% White staff in majority Hispanic schools identify as both White and Hispanic. Collectively, these data seem to suggest inner-city Catholic schools are moving toward employing faculty more reflective of student demographics served in these schools.

Second, the school-level sample data presented in Table 7 indicate the proportion of religious and lay teachers has changed in inner-city schools over time such that this proportion is now more closely aligned to the national Catholic school trends. The shift that seems to account for this alignment is the notable decrease in religious women in inner-city schools since 2000–2001.

Table 7

School Staffing Descriptors by Religious Status and Gender

	2000–01		2021–22	
	All Schools	Inner-City	All Schools	Inner-City
	%	%	%	%
Female Religious	5	8	2	3
Male Religious	.3	1	.6	1
Laywomen	85	78	85	79
Laymen	9	12	13	17

Data Source(s): Private entity data collected on behalf of NCEA (n.d.) and O'Keefe et al. (2004)

It is likely that these decreases have increased fiscal pressure on inner-city schools, a factor that seems to have not been as pronounced in other urban, suburban, and rural schools over these twenty years in the same way.

Discussion

We set out in this paper to track the changes that have occurred over time to the demographics and organizational structures of inner-city Catholic elementary schools and the differences between these schools and Catholic schools nationally. The ultimate purpose of this descriptive analysis of the landscape of urban Catholic schooling, in light of the declining proportion of inner-city Catholic schools nationally, was to assess whether it still made sense at the outset of the 2020s to treat inner-city Catholic schools as a distinct segment of the broader Catholic education landscape and to evaluate whether these elementary schools have continued to merit the outsized attention they have received within Catholic school reform conversations compared to other forms of Catholic schooling. Our analysis of nationally representative urban Catholic school data indicated the following trends: (a) they have experienced shifts away from parish governance at a more

pronounced rate while also experiencing more pronounced declines in average school size based on student enrollment; (b) they have remained more racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse than Catholic schools nationally; and (c) they have increased the racial and ethnic representation of their staff over time in schools serving Black and Hispanic populations.

With regard to what these demographic and organizational trends suggest about the sustainability of this distinct segment of the U.S. Catholic school sector, two additional themes emerged from our analyses: (a) while the proportion of historically marginalized student communities served in these schools suggests the legacy of inner-city Catholic schools has been demographically sustained, notable demographic similarities between inner-city Catholic schools and urban public schools suggest the location of these schools may better explain these trends than reform efforts that have occurred in the field; and (b) the field has not produced sufficient evidence to assert whether or not continuous improvement and reform efforts that have been undertaken in the field have necessarily contributed to the field's desire to sustain the historical legacy of these schools.

Our analyses suggest there is still demographic evidence of the persistence of the "historical legacy" of urban Catholic education. As stated throughout the findings, Catholic education researchers have previously offered explanations for how and why urban and inner-city Catholic schools have continued to support certain historically marginalized communities, including efforts within the U.S. Catholic Church broadly to embrace the growing Hispanic/Latino population (Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016). It also seems on the surface that inner-city Catholic schools have remained committed to these communities, suggesting an association between this "historical legacy" being sustained and certain sector-wide reform efforts. One clear example of this association is the way innovative governance, operational, and management models have been continually introduced in inner-city Catholic schools over the past twenty years at a higher rate than these models have been introduced in rural, suburban, or non inner-city urban elementary schools. Since research on Catholic school governance reform has suggested there may be a trend in individual schools moving away from a traditional parish model and finding ways to more intentionally support student enrollment and retention efforts (FADICA, 2020; Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2013; Smarick & Robson, 2015), it is unsurprising that major archdiocesan city systems have adopted these kinds of governance reforms in more intentional, system-wide ways (e.g., the Partnership Schools model in Cleveland and New York City, the Independence Mission School model in Philadelphia).

It is important to note, though, that our analyses of national inner-city Catholic school data do not suggest any causal relationship between intentional reform efforts and the demographic and organizational trends we identified. National statistical reports available from the U.S. Department of Education suggest that over the past two decades, inner-city Catholic schools have served historically marginalized populations in similar proportions to city public and charter schools

(e.g., Wang et al., 2019). These data seem to suggest that the contemporary demographic composition of inner-city Catholic schools may be more readily explained by the contemporary racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic composition of U.S cities (e.g., Irwin et al., 2022) than by intentional work done on the part of urban Catholic school reformers or practitioners to intentionally serve these populations. Our analyses leave open the possibility that lower-income students and students of color may still be served in inner-city Catholic schools because these are the populations that live most proximate to the 396 inner-city Catholic schools that have remained open.

Ultimately, the persistence of the legacy of inner-city Catholic schools or what this supposed legacy may or may not portend for the future of urban Catholic education remains an unsolved question ripe for additional empirical inquiry. The prioritization of "saving" inner-city Catholic schools among urban Catholic education reformers in the early 2000s was premised on these schools continuing to effectively serve historically marginalized student populations (e.g., O'Keefe & Goldschmidt, 2014; O'Keefe et al., 2004; O'Keefe & Scheopner, 2007). And, as confirmed in our analysis, this segment of elementary Catholic schools remains organizationally and demographically similar to what it was in the early 2000s, suggesting something sociologically or educationally distinct may still exist among these schools. Yet neither the demographic and organizational trends presented in this paper nor current empirical research trends synthesized in our recent review of contemporary urban Catholic education research (Miller et al., 2022) have established definitive evidence of what if anything contributes to or sustains this legacy. Therefore, in our final section of this paper, we briefly suggest a path forward for Catholic education research to better make sense of the role the 396 remaining inner-city Catholic elementary schools play in the U.S. Catholic school landscape.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusion

It is important to note that the nationally representative data we accessed, allowing us to disaggregate demographic and organizational trends among national, urban, and inner-city schools, has several limitations and therefore we have attempted to make all our analytical assertions with appropriate caution.

For example, since the O'Keefe et al. (2004) dataset that we initially used to draw change-over-time comparisons only included schools that self-designated as being "inner-city" and this work was seminal in the way the field defined what "counts" as the urban educational experience, we limited our analyses to comparisons of inner-city schools nationally. As previously noted, as of the 2021–2022 academic year there are 1,439 urban Catholic elementary schools serving students living in cities of at least 50,000 people, compared to 396 inner-city Catholic elementary schools. Though focused on inner-city schools only, our initial analyses suggested that there were few

distinctions to be made between the national Catholic school landscape and the urban Catholic school landscape when urban and inner-city school groupings were combined. This suggests that the untold analyses about non-inner-city urban Catholic elementary schools is far different than the inner-city story we have told in this paper. In addition, since the geographical distribution of Catholic schooling has shifted away from "Rust Belt" cities in the Northeast and Midwest toward "Sun Belt" cities in the Southwest and West Coast, it may very well be the case that macroeconomic trends in these cities may shape the experience of running an inner-city school in those cities more than whether or not the school is geographically or socioeconomically an "inner-city" school.

In light of these limitations, future urban Catholic education research should prioritize triangulating national NCEA data with reliable federal datasets containing disaggregated data about Catholic schools and the collection of national-in-scope, geographically representative data from currently open urban and inner-city Catholic schools.

In addition, our analyses have suggested to us that future assessments, evaluations, and investigations of the legacy of urban Catholic education should be framed in part by the following two questions: (1) to what extent, if at all, can intentional reform efforts in inner-city or urban Catholic schools explain organizational and demographic changes that have occurred over time?; and (2) given the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic similarities between urban public school students and inner-city Catholic school students, to what extent can meaningful similarities and differences in school experience and outcomes be explained by what occurs inside these geographically similar schools?

There remains ample opportunity to investigate whether innovations in the field of urban Catholic education are allowing urban Catholic schools to survive, thrive, or some kind of combination of both. These investigations must be grounded in qualitative and quantitative considerations of the extent to which these reform efforts accomplish their intended goals. In an effort to contribute to this work, our research team intends to move our study of urban Catholic education into more in-depth, qualitative investigations of the experience of urban and inner-city Catholic school reform efforts from the perspectives of system-level leaders (e.g., superintendents) and school-level educators (e.g., principals and teachers) to see how urban Catholic school reform has been perceived by those tasked with implementing it.

In addition, the consensus in quantitative sector-effects research is that selection bias has played a major role in explaining any actual differences in outcomes between sectors (e.g., Altonji et al., 2005a, 2005b; Berends & Waddington, 2018). It may be likely that even though our analyses suggest a demographic similarity between urban public school populations and inner-city Catholic school populations, these surface racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic similarities may mask some other difference in populations attending different kinds of schools. Additional quantitative and

qualitative research is necessary to identify salient differences between and among populations and to more rigorously understand what these differences mean about the experience of attending urban public schools or inner-city Catholic schools.

The analyses we have conducted in this paper have demonstrated that the demographic assumptions people hold about inner-city Catholic elementary schools are supported by the national and school-level data that we have been able to access. But in order to evaluate whether inner-city Catholic schools merit being considered a place where a historical legacy has been sustained will require the field to develop a new research agenda around urban and inner-city Catholic schools. Ultimately, we have attempted to demonstrate in this paper that a new 21st century research agenda around the two research questions we proposed in this conclusion would allow the field to more rigorously assess the historical and future legacy of these inner-city schools.

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