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RURAL CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: CAN THEY BE SAVED?

By

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A Professional Project submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
Marquette University,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master in Leadership Studies

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ABSTRACT
RURAL CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: CAN THEY BE SAVED?

Chad Abler, M.B.A

Marquette University, 2013

This research project examined the numerous factors affecting rural Catholic grade schools in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and their ability to remain a viable educational option for families of rural communities in Southeastern Wisconsin. The literature review provides the history of Catholic education in the United States and details how changing demographics over the past 40 to 50 years within the Catholic population provides significant challenges for this educational model to continue in any geographic setting--inner city, urban, suburban, or rural. The use of interviews assisted with gathering qualitative data to understand the challenges facing the four rural Catholic grade schools participating in this research effort and how successful grade schools tackle these challenges. The findings indicate that while rural Catholic grade schools may have the support of their local parishes, the schools may not have the full support of parents of school-age children. So while the parish may support the school, there is simply no Catholic grade school without children. Thus, rural Catholic grade schools in the Milwaukee Archdiocese are left facing a path of strategic consolidation and regionalization in order for a chance to survive. More importantly, the local parishes of these communities are left with the overwhelming task of re-invigorating the parents of school-age children and infusing in the parents a willingness to accept Catholic culture for all that it is and has to offer. This entails a strong commitment and connection to parish life.

Keywords: rural schools, Catholic grade schools, Milwaukee Archdiocese

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Chad Abler, M.B.A

I need to extend a sincere “thank you” to those individuals who agreed to make the time to speak to me about this research effort. Our conversations made me realize the importance of pursuing truth and how important my Catholic faith is in this pursuit. The following quote from a 1990 Catholic Conference of Ohio report *Catholic Schools: Heritage and Legacy* embodies all that I am trying to convey with this research effort:

We recall that a young Church, growing rapidly with European ancestors more than a century ago, found the will and the dedication to build, out of their poverty, the Catholic Schools of the United States. The challenges our schools face now will require of us, as of our ancestors, sacrifice, competence and determination. Our schools are a heritage. We must make sure they remain a legacy for future generations. (p. 6)

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Introduction

Over the past 45 years, the Catholic population in the United States has increased from 45 million in 1965 to nearly 78 million in 2011, making it the largest Christian denomination in the country (Gautier, Gray, and Cidade, 2011). Over this same time period, however, the Catholic community in the United States appears to be presiding over the gradual dismantling of perhaps its greatest achievement--the creation and maintenance of an academically competitive school system geared towards the faith formation of children and young adults (Meyer, 2007). Despite recent notable growth of Catholic schools in some segments of the country, such as Arizona, Georgia, Minnesota, and Texas, there has also been a consistent, more troubling decline since the late 1960's in the overall number of Catholic schools, especially those in rural areas. From 1968 through 2011, shifting demographics and dwindling resources have forced the closure of many Catholic elementary schools. Large rural areas in the Northeast and Great Lakes regions experienced the greatest losses as Catholic families continued to move away from farms and small communities to suburbs (Bimonte, 2011). This has left rural parishes and their grade schools left facing the simple demographic fact that Catholic people move, schools do not. The Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Wisconsin finds itself in the midst this phenomenon.

While the challenges facing rural Catholic grade schools may appear simple to understand, they often prove difficult to solve. The purpose of this case study is to gather information from Milwaukee Archdiocese parish leaders in the effort to further explore why rural Catholic grade schools continue to close at such an alarming rate and examine the future viability of rural Catholic grade school education in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Interviewing will be one of the primary data collection tools, with the researcher interviewing four parish pastors. Two pastors are from two parishes that have a school closing. Two other

pastors are from other rural parishes where schools are thriving. The goal of these interviews is to obtain adequate insight as to why the two school closings are occurring and discover any cross-case themes. By interviewing the pastors of the parishes with the successful grade schools, the goal is to gain an understanding of what is necessary for a rural Catholic grade school to be successful.

Background

Near its peak in 1968, there were 12,814 Catholic schools in the United States. Of these, there were 3,895 rural elementary and 525 rural secondary schools. Contrast these numbers to 2007 when only 7,378 Catholic schools existed--a decrease of 5,436. Rural schools saw their numbers decrease to 1,358 elementary and 178 secondary locations (McDonald and Schultz, 2008). Thus, in less than 40 years, the number of rural elementary schools and secondary schools decreased by 65 percent and 66 percent respectively (see Table 1). In the Milwaukee Archdiocese, the overall number of schools declined from a peak of 397 in 1966 down to their current volume of 113 schools which are spread across 205 parishes in ten Southeastern Wisconsin counties (Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 2013).

Table 1

Locations of Catholic Schools (Nationwide)

Year	Total	Urban Elementary	Urban Secondary	Suburban Elementary	Suburban Secondary	Rural Elementary	Rural Secondary
1968	12,814	5,921	1,182	1,106	185	3,895	525
2007	7,378	2,574	583	2,233	452	1,358	178
Decrease:	5,436	3,347	599	-	-	2,537	347
Increase:	-	-	-	1,127	267	-	-

Coinciding with this decline is the fundamental change that Catholic parishes and their schools are no longer considered the anchors for their local communities as they once were. The decline in parish commitment is supported by Gray and Perl's 2008 study which denotes that while the Catholic population nearly doubled between 1955 and 2006, the estimated number of Mass attending Catholics per parish is nearly identical (1,534 in 1955 and 1,544 in 2006). Thus, even with the near doubling of the Catholic population, the estimated number of Catholics demonstrating a strong commitment to a parish has remained very similar to that of 1955 (Gray and Perl, p. 21-22).

There is opportunity to counter this movement in Southeastern Wisconsin. By overseeing the second-largest school system in Wisconsin (smaller only than Milwaukee Public Schools), the Archdiocese of Milwaukee has an established platform from which to disseminate the needed message of a return to parish life and encourage its ideal of local Catholic communities serving as centers of faith, hope, and charity by providing quality Catholic education to all people (Taymans & Connors, 2011). In all, the Milwaukee Archdiocese serves over 32,000 students in 113 schools; 6,500 of these are Choice students in 35 Choice schools (Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 2013). No matter the school's geographic setting (inner city, urban, suburban, or rural), its identity has long been rooted in the Catholic faith's tradition of service to the poor and emphasis on high academic standards.

Students undoubtedly benefit from the emphasis on superior academics. In Milwaukee Archdiocesan grade schools, the average student performed at or above the 70th national percentile in grade 3 (2003) on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and maintained this high performance over five years to grade 7 (2007) across all subject areas (Milwaukee Archdiocese, 2013). Furthermore, local Catholic elementary and high schools lay a solid foundation for

continuing education. The average 2007 composite ACT score in southeastern Wisconsin Catholic high schools was 23.3--higher than the state average of 22.3 and the national average of 21.2. Between 2001 and 2006, an average of 84.5% Catholic high school graduates entered a four-year college, 10% went on to a technical school, and 0.9% went into the military (Aud, Bielick, and Grady 2010).

Even with their emphasis on academic excellence, Christian service, and ethical leadership, Catholic schools in the Milwaukee Archdiocese continue to face an unceasing enrollment struggle. This struggle is detailed in the following statistics from the Faith in Our Future Campaign for Catholic Education and Faith Formation that the Milwaukee Archdiocese launched in 2007. For the 2007-08 school year, 26,308 children were enrolled in the Archdiocese's elementary schools--a drop of nearly 400 from the preceding year. Secondary school enrollment rose from 6,783 to 6,864, just over a 1 percent increase during the same timeframe. School finances and tuition rates appear to play a significant role in these humbling enrollment figures. In 2005-06, annual tuition rates at elementary schools in the Archdiocese were in the following ranges: 18% between \$900 and \$1,499; 32% between \$1,500 and \$1,999; 38% between \$2,000 and \$2,499; and 12% charged more than \$2,500. In the same academic year, high school tuition rates ranged from \$4,500 to \$8,095. With 2007-08 elementary school tuition averaging more than \$2,200 and high school tuition more than \$8,000 in the Milwaukee Archdiocese, sending one child, let alone an entire family, to a Catholic school often proves strenuous for families. This becomes apparent by 63% percent of the Milwaukee Archdiocesan elementary and high schools reporting nearly 1,800 families requested financial aid for the 2006-07 school year. While the Archdiocese was able to award \$3,880,000 in tuition assistance and scholarships to those families, this amount only totaled 45 percent of the estimated need, leaving

an unmet hardship of \$4.6 million for that school year alone. Being unable to bridge that financial gap has contributed to the closing of 22 Catholic grade schools in the Archdiocese since the end of the 2007-2008 academic school year (Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 2013).

Literature Review

Numerous research studies have been conducted to investigate the declining number of rural Catholic schools. These include both quantitative and qualitative studies that identify the various contributing factors as well as potential solutions to the current crisis facing Catholic education. The following selected studies discuss these factors and also detail some critical issues about the unique dilemmas rural Catholic schools must address.

A synopsis of the history and roots of Catholic schools in the United States is shared in *Small Catholic Elementary Schools: An Endangered Species* (Reck, 1997). The author details how large numbers of Catholic schools were built in the older industrial cities of this country to serve the children of immigrants. Initially, these schools were sustained through the generosity of parishioners, but the succeeding generations of Catholics moved out of the neighborhoods into the suburbs. Parishes, with financial support from the dioceses and other donors, made efforts to keep the schools open to serve other arriving immigrants, despite the parish populations declining. At the same time parish populations were declining, Reck notes that many of the new students were not Catholic (Reck, p. 5).

Reck goes on to describe how it has become increasingly more difficult for dioceses to continue to provide the significant financial assistance required to keep the schools open with modest tuition and reasonable compensation packages for teachers. While private philanthropy has enabled many poorer families to meet some of the rising tuition costs, it has not been enough

to sustain many Catholic grade schools. However, where public and privately funded scholarship funding is available, waiting lists for lottery-like selection processes have resulted, indicating the demand for Catholic schools is still high. This demand appears to reside in suburban areas and is even returning to some inner-city schools (Reck, p. 9). Despite this glimpse of renewed momentum, rural Catholic grade schools appear to be left struggling.

Further details of today's Catholic schools' struggles are shared in *U. S. Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2007-2008* where McDonald and Schultz (2008) provide a statistical report detailing information gathered nationwide about Catholic school enrollment and staffing patterns for grades pre-kindergarten (PK) through twelfth grade. Their summary provides insight into the data along with highlights of the statistics and a historical perspective for comparison of past years. For the 2007-2008 school year, enrollment figures for U.S. Catholic schools indicated that there were 49,738 fewer students enrolled, a 2.1 percent decrease from the 2006-2007 academic year. Furthermore, the national data numbers reflect a continued decline in the elementary school population and a very slight decrease in secondary school enrollment.

With enrollment declining in nearly all regions of the country (14.4 percent since 2000), the largest decreases have been centered in the Mideast (Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania) and Great Lakes (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin) areas (McDonald and Schultz, 2008). While these regions were populated by high concentrations of Catholic immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, significant demographic changes have occurred in these areas over the past forty to fifty years.

The analysis provided by the authors also details just how dependent Catholic grade schools were upon religious orders for staffing the schools. This dependence coincides with the

initiative put forth by Church leaders in 1884 of establishing a Catholic school in every parish in the United States. Since the 1970's, however, dramatic changes have taken place in the staffing of Catholic schools as depicted in Table 2 (below). The data indicates a shift from an almost entirely religious staff (sisters, brothers, priests) of 90.1 percent in 1950, to 48.4 percent in the 1970's, to a primarily lay staff now at 95.9 percent. These drastic changes have been attributed to the decline in the number of women and men entering the religious orders, the retirement of religious men and women, the large numbers of religious who left their orders, and the change of ministry directions for many congregations from schools to other forms of social and pastoral ministries. Over the past decade alone, the lay faculty percentages increased from 85.4 percent to the current 95.9 percent, with the remaining 4.1 percent consisting of religious and clergy (McDonald and Schultz, p. 3).

Table 2
School Staffing History

Year	RELIGIOUS		LAY		TOTAL
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	
1950	84,925	90.1%	9,370	9.9%	94,295
1960	112,029	73.8%	39,873	26.2%	151,902
1970	80,615	48.4%	85,873	51.6%	166,488
1980	42,732	29.0%	104,562	71.0%	147,294
1990	20,020	14.6%	116,880	85.4%	136,900
2000	11,011	7.0%	146,123	93.0%	157,134
2008	6,594	4.1%	153,481	95.9%	160,075

Source: U. S. Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2007-2008, McDonald and Schultz (2008), p.3.

Additional statistical findings regarding the current status of Catholic education are detailed in *Financing the Mission: A Profile of Catholic Elementary Schools in the United States* authored by Bimonte (2011). Bimonte's research efforts focus on the results of an online, national survey of Catholic elementary schools for the 2009-2010 school year. The data

collected provides descriptive (as opposed to prescriptive) benchmarks for schools and dioceses throughout the country (Bimonte, p. 14). Overall, the information collected by the author assists schools in detecting trends and determining which areas need to be addressed for the continued financial viability of Catholic schools.

What made this study unique was that all 5,255 Catholic elementary schools were invited to participate in the survey. Previous attempts to gather similar information relied on only a sample of Catholic elementary schools. A total of 1,594 schools completed the surveys for a response rate of 31 percent. Four key sections were denoted in the survey: School Demographics and Enrollment, Finance and Development, Compensation and Benefits, and Other Issues. Some of the major findings for those schools responding to the survey include the discovery that the national average tuition charges for the first child of a family in the parish increased to \$3,673. This was up from the 2004-2005 school year average of \$2,607, representing an increase of 41 percent. From a cost perspective, the average salary for a lay principal was \$59,805 while the average salary for a beginning teacher with a bachelor's degree was \$27,805. Lastly, roughly 72 percent of students come from parishioner families, 15 percent of students are not parishioners but still Catholic, and 13 percent of students attending Catholic elementary schools are non-Catholic (Bimonte, p. 14-15).

In *Who Will Save America's Catholic Schools*, Hamilton (2008) shares the results of the 2008 Glover Park Group national survey of the attitudes of U.S. Catholics and the broader public toward Catholic schools. Some of the key findings described by Hamilton include the fact that Catholic schools are viewed positively (66 percent favorable overall, 88 percent favorable among Catholics), and more positively than the Church itself. Furthermore, Catholic schools have a clear, but narrow brand identity--they are credited for instilling discipline and moral values.

Contrary to their original intent, Catholic schools are now less likely to be associated with disadvantaged students and providing these students the tools for success. Instead, public opinion indicates that this responsibility has shifted to the domain of the public schools (Hamilton, p. 13).

Hamilton also provides further analysis by examining seven case studies where Catholic education is making a comeback. Hamilton's first conclusion from these studies concurs with what other studies have put forth--the primary causes of massive Catholic school closures have been demographic and economic (Hamilton, p. 19). More importantly, Hamilton concludes that those Catholic schools that have survived this stage and are now thriving possess strong diocesan leadership, a strong commitment by parishioners to tithing, and have relationships with philanthropists to underwrite their educational revival. The results denoted in the case studies also indicate that networks of schools run by independent religious orders such as the Franciscans or Christian Brothers, and those that have local Catholic colleges which have developed programs to support Catholic elementary education demonstrate real energy and potential for the future (Hamilton, p. 34).

An effective depiction of the realities and challenges inherent in the present landscape of Catholic education are detailed in *Endangered Species: Urban and Rural Catholic Schools* (Haney and O'Keefe, 2007). The authors also describe examples where teams of educators, administrators, parents, school boards, and civic and business leaders have joined together to tackle current challenges and save Catholic education in their communities. Specifically, Haney and O'Keefe showcase programs that provide replicable models for preserving urban and rural schools. The initiatives highlighted in these selected programs include creative staffing,

sustained fundraising and philanthropy, and advocacy programs to secure state and federal funds to assist parents in being able to access Catholic schools.

Lastly, in their workings with Catholic school leaders, Haney and O’Keefe identify major components in keeping a Catholic elementary school strong and secure. These “Factors of Viability” assist in charting a course of action where the school leadership takes proactive measures to fend off those challenges that can negatively affect the school’s stability (Haney and O’Keefe, p. 11). Those factors include Catholic Identity, Development and Planning, Diversity, Educational Programs, Facilities, Family Involvement, Finances, Governance, Leadership, and Technology. Each factor is labeled with identifying elements that are specifically defined and serves as the catalyst for serious dialogue and collaboration. Each step in the process is replicable by any school looking to assess its own viability. Furthermore, Haney and O’Keefe believe that by using the Factors of Viability in pragmatic and realistic terms, serious thought and consideration around strategic planning can occur (p. 14).

While the future of Catholic education is dependent upon understanding the factors that contributed to the current dilemma, it is also reliant upon effectively relaying the message detailing the benefits associated with small Catholic schools and the strategies for maintaining and growing such schools. In *The Small Catholic Elementary School: Advantages and Opportunities* Reck (1988) describes what she believes is the essence of Catholic education and why it should be saved. Furthermore, Reck notes that to be financially viable, Catholic elementary schools with enrollments of under 100 students need to recognize their smallness and seek structures and methods appropriate to their size. The author addresses the needs of very small schools with current or potential multi-grade classrooms, and describes organizational and instructional approaches proven effective in such settings. Reck was able to obtain information

from a variety of sources which included questionnaire responses of 164 of the 462 U.S. Catholic elementary schools with enrollments under 100 and meetings with 34 principals of very small schools judged to be effective academic or financial models. Reck effectively details such factors as: (1) advantages related to academic success, personal development, and community climate in the small Catholic elementary school; (2) key elements in organizing the school program, including school leadership, financial considerations, curriculum, supportive technology, community learning climate, and recruitment of qualified teachers; (3) fourteen steps for effectively teaching in the multi-grade classroom, including consideration of school-wide priorities and resources, classroom arrangement, planning, and professional growth; and (4) compensation for limitations of size and resources through involvement of community members and collaboration with other institutions and agencies (Reck, p. 81).

While other studies referenced in this research effort focused on the struggles facing small Catholic schools, Kealy (1998) was able to effectively relay the advantages of such schools in her work *Why Small Catholic Schools Succeed*. This research points out that ten percent of Catholic grade schools in the U.S. have fewer than 100 students and nearly one third of all these schools have less than 200 students (Kealy, p. 6). As a result, the per-pupil costs are higher since there are fewer students to spread the fixed expenses over. In addition, the author describes how instructional resources are often more limited in these type of smaller schools. Despite these challenges, Kealy's research finds strong support for the idea that teachers and principals in smaller schools more easily know each child and family attending the school. In addition, students and parents feel a deeper sense of belonging and commitment in a small Catholic school. From here, Kealy also references other studies that found that students in small Catholic grade schools more frequently outperform students in large Catholic schools.

The most interesting portion of Kealy's efforts deals with a summary of numerous factors that allow small Catholic grade schools to be successful. The author denotes key advantages such as students' self-esteem being enhanced and self-discipline and leadership skills being more opportune since there is no place to hide in a small Catholic school. Increased student participation and increased amounts of attention ultimately allow for students' self-esteem to grow. Cooperative learning, peer-teaching, and tutoring activities are also more inherent to the nature of the small school. Lastly, the author goes on to describe how teachers are more apt to give higher level learning and thinking assignments simply because the class size is smaller. From a sheer numbers standpoint, it is easy to understand how teachers with 8-10 students in a class can more frequently assign open-ended, problem-solving, and essay-type projects that challenge students' critical thinking skills than can teachers with 20-25 students in a class. Ultimately, Kealy is keen on forgoing the trend that "bigger is better" when it comes to education (Kealy, p. 15).

Lay and pastoral leadership as well as organizational structure are also factors that need to be reviewed when determining a Catholic grade school's ability to survive. In *A Step-by-Step Guide to Creating a School Board to Ensure a Catholic School's Viability* (2009), Snapka provides a descriptive case study denoting the organizational structure of Incarnate Word Academy, a Catholic campus which provides education at the pre-school, grade school, middle school, and high school levels to over 900 students in Corpus Christi, Texas. Snapka's efforts speak to the evolvement of governance and policy making at Incarnate Word Academy. From 1871 to 1975, the responsibility of governance rested solely with the Incarnate Word Sisters. With Vatican II's calling for collaboration and lay participation, a transformation of governance began to take shape (p. 53).

Snapka's work documents a number of critical decision points that were arrived at by having five key committees in place (finance, fundraising, long-range planning, mission effectiveness, and buildings and grounds) and the checks and balances established as a result of the new governance strategy that was implemented as a result of the Vatican's directive. The analysis referenced a variety of past and present challenges specifically facing Incarnate Word Academy. Six key objectives were listed in the study as pillars for Incarnate Word Academy's success and stability. These included:

- Promote Catholic identity and ensure excellence in academics through values-based teaching;
- Demonstrate effective strategic planning;
- Utilize a comprehensive marketing plan;
- Articulate a common vision for the future;
- Give witness of Christian leadership and encourage students and parents to make a difference in their homes and communities;
- Practice wise stewardship of resources (p. 56).

Incarnate Word Academy addresses the three key issues facing Catholic education of viability, visibility, and solvency through an organizational structure that is dedicated to its mission, devoted to excellence in education, and competent in the area of strategic planning. The church and school engage the educational staff and include their development as part of the strategic plan. This also includes annual merit salary increases for educational staff. Snapka denotes that the level of collaboration between religious and lay personnel and the type of organizational structure in place at Incarnate Word Academy serves as an example for all Catholic grade schools to review and potentially assess themselves against (p. 58).

Catholic grade school leadership is further discussed by Hobbie, Convey, and Schuttloffel (2010) in their work *The Impact of Catholic School Identity and Organizational Leadership on the Vitality of Catholic Elementary Schools*. The major question that this study addresses is the extent to which a school's Catholic school identity, in conjunction with the leadership of the principal, contributes to the vitality of a Catholic elementary school. The authors go on to denote the specific purpose of the research is to "(1) examine the relationship between Catholic school identity and the organizational leadership of a Catholic elementary school and (2) determine the extent to which Catholic school identity and the school's organizational leadership predict certain aspects of school vitality" (p. 7). The participants for this study were 1,225 teachers from 142 Catholic elementary schools in the United States for the 2007-2008 school year. Hobbie, et al., believed teachers were considered best suited to evaluate the climate of a school and the effectiveness of its leadership. However, the school, not the teacher, was used as the unit of analysis, so the data analyses were performed on the means of the schools (p. 13). Ultimately, the researchers felt examining these questions may prove useful in evaluating and assisting a Catholic school in its realization of its educational mission.

A stratified random sample of Catholic elementary schools for the 2007-2008 school year was used for this study. Stratification was based upon National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) geographic regions. Urban, suburban, and rural schools from each of the twelve NCEA regions were randomly selected in proportion to the total number of schools in that region. It was noted that teachers from 58 percent of the schools returned a completed survey (Hobbie et al., p. 12).

School vitality, viewed as a combination of student and teacher characteristics and behaviors, is the major outcome variable for the study. Additionally, the inclusion of variables

measuring Catholic school identity and school climate support the purpose of this study to examine the Catholic elementary school from a perspective of organizational processes and relationships (Hobbie et al., p. 11).

The 29-item instrument created to measure Catholic school identity was named the Catholic School Identity Inventory. The items had an internal consistency reliability with a coefficient alpha of .93 respectively. A 4-step Likert scale with responses of rarely occurs, sometimes occurs, often occurs, and very frequently occurs was used in the survey (Hobbie et al., p. 12).

The 30-item instrument that measured organizational leadership was composed of items from the Organizational Health Inventory (23 items) and the Principal Mindfulness Scale (7 items). The reliability coefficient for the Organizational Health Inventory was .91 respectively. A 4-step Likert scale with responses of rarely occurs, sometimes occurs, often occurs, and very frequently occurs was utilized. The reliability coefficient for the Principal Mindfulness Scale was .91 respectively. It utilized a 6-step Likert scale with responses from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Hobbie et al., p. 13).

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated by the researchers to examine patterns among the variables and their relationships. Multiple regression analyses were employed to examine the predictive relationships of Catholic school identity and organization leadership with school vitality. A series of one-way analyses of variance were also calculated to determine if differences occurred by location of the school (urban, suburban, rural) on the measures of Catholic school identity, organizational leadership, and school vitality (Hobbie et al., p. 13).

The results of the analyses point to the significant predictive relationship of Catholic school identity on each subscale of school vitality, at least one subscale of organizational leadership, and on three of the four subscales of school vitality. Additionally, years of teaching in Catholic schools and percentage of Catholic students demonstrated to be significant predictors of Catholic school identity. Teachers who perceived that their schools have a strong Catholic school identity and a principal who safeguards the school's mission, supports the staff, secures need resources, and solicits feedback from staff also saw their schools as having a high level of vitality as measured by the teachers' positive relationships, the students' cooperation in learning, potential and the teachers' ability to function effectively. Along these same lines, the teachers in this study perceived that a school with good leadership also had strong Catholic school identity. The significant relationship of Catholic identity to a principal's character illustrates a principal who fosters Catholic rational thinking and is open to new information and points of view. Accordingly, teachers believe that principals who promote wisdom and unite the theoretical with everyday living also foster Catholic qualities (Hobbie et al., p. 25).

The mission of Catholic schools is related to the perception of the teachers on how often the attributes of Catholic school identity occur in their school, the fulfillment of its mission, a respectful relationship with the principal, the availability of resources, and the principal's ability to solve problems. In addition, these factors, taken together, demonstrate a predictive relationship with the teachers' perceptions of their caring relationships, ability to improve, and effective instruction as well as the students' focus on learning. This result is important since the purpose of Catholic schools is to excel in both religious and academic education in order to advance as educational institutions that exhibit school vitality. In the end, the measurement of school vitality via the School Identity Inventory tool developed for this study could prove a

powerful tool in assessing a Catholic school's ability to survive and/or thrive. The challenge is making school and church leaders aware of its existence.

Research Purpose and Method

Design and Methodological Choice

For this qualitative research project, a collective case study approach was chosen since it allows the researcher to focus on one issue while at the same time gathering multiple perspectives on this subject (Creswell, 2007). The primary focus for this particular research effort was exploring why rural Catholic grade schools in the Milwaukee Archdiocese are closing at such a rapid rate. Given the fact that no two parishes are exactly alike, there is a level of complexity involved when attempting to accurately portray each parish's unique reality while at the same time relaying generalized findings that can apply to other rural Catholic parishes supporting a school. Thus, pursuing the collective case study approach and then selecting representative cases to obtain multiple viewpoints as to why rural Catholic schools in the Milwaukee Archdiocese are closing proved critical to the success of this research effort. These viewpoints included perspectives from pastors of rural parishes that have schools closing as well as perspectives from pastors of rural parishes where schools are currently thriving. Ultimately, selecting a more purposeful sample assisted in documenting unique variations that emerged as well as important common patterns that cut across variations (Patton, 2001).

Furthermore, case study research is part of the social-science research tradition that stresses observation as a primary mode of inquiry. It is the study of real-life contemporary phenomena such as interactions, policies, and meanings within a particular setting. The case-study researcher becomes an observer of interactions within a particular context over which the

researcher has limited or little control (Flick, 1998). Despite the feeling of having little control at times during the research and data collection processes, the collective case study approach proved an overall effective method for the purposes of this research project. The process allowed for obtaining details that were not otherwise effectively conveyed through the literature review. An example of this would be the details shared during the interviews regarding Vatican II and its effects on those who had already chosen religious life and for those considering it. It would appear that the teachings of Vatican II (1965) and the transition from Catholic schools being staffed by almost entirely religious order members (sisters, brothers, priests) to a primarily lay staff would be more than coincidental. Thus, the information shared during the interviews provided a future opportunity to explore how the effects of Vatican II contributed to current dilemma facing Catholic education.

Sample and Data Collection

The viewpoints of this criterion-based sample were collected via four semi-structured interviews of individuals experienced and knowledgeable in the area of rural Catholic education. A criterion sampling approach was chosen since the researcher was in search of a group of exclusive participants (priests) having first-hand experiences with the challenges facing rural Catholic schools. Specifically, two interviews were conducted with pastors from two different parishes that have schools closing. The remaining two interviews were with pastors from other rural parishes where schools are currently experiencing high enrollment numbers. The goal of these interviews was to obtain insight as to why the two school closings are occurring and discover any cross-case themes. By interviewing the pastors of the parishes with the successful grade schools, the researcher gained an understanding of what is necessary for a rural Catholic grade school to be successful. In the end, interviewing allowed for the respondents to share

personal views and experiences with rural Catholic education that could then be compared to the experiences of other interviewees.

The details associated with the interviews themselves are as follows.

- Initial contact was made with the potential participants via email at which time the research topic and the researcher were introduced. In addition, it was noted that all interviews would be audio recorded and would be treated as confidential.
- All four pastors responded to the email invitation and indicated their interest in assisting with the research effort. It is the researcher's belief that sharing his personal experiences with Catholic schools assisted with obtaining the prompt responses of the pastors. Sharing these experiences allowed the researcher to effectively convey his sincere interest in understanding what has been occurring with Catholic education in recent.
- Interviews were conducted during regular office hours of each parish with the head pastor.
- During the interviews, eight open-ended questions were asked. These questions can be found in the Appendix. The sequence of these questions was designed to encourage the participants to discuss thoughts and feelings related to the actual experiences associated with Catholic education. The initial questions were designed to promote open communication and assist in building the trust factor.

Limitations

Initially, there was concern about the willingness of the pastors with the schools closing to discuss the details surrounding the closings. Both closing announcements were relatively recent and there was discontent among the parish members. This displeasure was

understandable. After all, the rural communities were losing mainstays which had served the parishes and the surrounding areas for nearly 100 years. Both participants, however, were very upfront about their own parish's particular challenges as well as the challenges facing Catholic education in general. In addition, both demonstrated a genuine interest in this research effort by offering the names of other individuals (priests, principals, and teachers) to speak to about the state Catholic education.

Lastly, time constraints were realized with this research project. This is reflected in the fact that the minimal number of interviews (four) were conducted. The availability of additional time would have allowed for the scheduling of more interviews with pastors of rural parishes where the schools are struggling or succeeding. Doing so would assist in understanding and verifying the generalizations made about struggling rural Catholic schools.

Data Analysis

The transcription process proved invaluable during the data analysis effort since it required the researcher to devote great attention to detail in regards to what was relayed during the interviews by the participants. The interview data from all eight questions for each participant was summarized in Exhibit 1 in order to assist with effectively identifying reasons why the two schools were closing. In addition, Exhibit 1 was effective for identifying any cross-case themes for all four interviews. To accomplish this, coding also proved to be a critical component to this section of the research effort since it allowed for easier categorical aggregation to define themes, patterns, or generalizations (Rubin & Rubin, 2004).

Eventually this summary was shared with all participants to verify its content. No significant revisions were suggested by the participants. The confidentiality of the pastors' responses was again reiterated at this point in the process. Lastly, it is important to note that in

Exhibit 1, Respondents 1 and 2 refer to the pastors of parishes that have a school closing while Respondents 3 and 4 refer to pastors of parishes that have schools with increasing enrollments.

Table 1: Summary of Responses

	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3	Respondent 4
Experience leading parishes with a school	30+ years	4 years (1 st assignment)	40+ years	35+ years
Primary reason for attending	Reputation of structure and discipline	Parents past personal experiences of attending	Structure and opportunity for individual development	Strong Catholic family upbringing
Reason(s) for success	Staff’s willingness to sacrifice personal gain for the benefit of the students; parish commitment	Longstanding history with community	Strong parishioner commitment; expectations set by previous generations	Committed staff
What is lost	Opportunity to incorporate Catholic social teachings in daily learning.	A key component of the community’s identity is lost.	Failing Vatican II’s call to help Catholic schools fulfill their function.	Opportunity to instill Catholic practices that can always remain with an individual.
Reason(s) for closings	Small number of enrolled students has led to an environment where the development of social skills has become a significant concern.	Financial – rising salaries and benefit packages combined with lack of funds to improve conditions of deteriorating buildings.	Public schools are now considered equal to or better than Catholic schools. However, taxpayers need to realize just what they are funding Smaller Catholic family size.	Reduction in the number of practicing Catholics--some of this can be attributed to sex abuse and embezzlement scandals.
Parishioner commitment	Overwhelming parish support of the school. The challenge lies in the number of parents who choose to send their children to receive a Catholic education.	Must look beyond needs of own family and remember the Catholic church is universal. Concern over the general lack of stewardship. Also noted that CCD has become the norm instead of the exception.	Concerns over CCD becoming the predominate method for teaching young Catholics	Noticed a shift from focus on community to individual over the years. This is in contrast to a universal Catholic church.

Sharing of strategic practices	Adequate; noted that there are no specific diocesan resources dedicated to rural schools.	More national conferences are available than local sessions. Archdiocese was very supportive.	Yes from the Archdiocese. More limited locally due to view of competition.	Sufficient – schools/parishes need to have staff member(s) dedicated to this purpose.
Requirements for future success	Acknowledge the shortcomings that have occurred and look for recommitment by all involved. Have the Church act as the bridge to all, especially the disenfranchised, that Christ calls for.	Expanding school choice in order to relieve some of the financial burden faced by families is not the complete answer. Family life needs to be at the center of education.	Examine ways to have members of religious orders return to Catholic education.	Partnership with local Catholic colleges and universities.

Findings

This section develops and discusses generalizations about the case in terms of themes and how they compare and contrast with published literature on the challenges facing rural Catholic schools. It is interesting to note that the literature review findings consistently document the changing demographic and economic conditions over the past 40-50 years as key reasons for the current struggles facing Catholic education. The priests interviewed for this research effort discussed and confirmed facing these issues with their Catholic grade schools. However, all four cited what was best described by one interviewee as “tectonic shifts” in the changing priorities and commitments of parishioners in recent years. These shifts appear centered around the individualism of the secular world that has now seeped into the American Catholic community. Notions of stewardship, the common good, and the responsibility of all adults in a community to support efforts that develop the young have appeared to have significantly weakened. The respondents alluded to the fact that communities are left with Catholic adults who view

themselves as autonomous and who join and invest only in those groups that are a benefit to themselves. Sacrificing for others no longer seems a natural, to-be-expected response. The specific quotes of the respondents regarding the changing priorities and commitments, especially among parents of grade school-age children, are listed in the following table.

Table 3: Parishioner Changing Commitments

Respondent	Quote
1	<p>Sports in general has now become the new civil religion--and that Sunday worship centers around the TV and the football times. Meals corresponded to that, masses, everything. And families are broken up by not having any time at home to spend with each other because their spending their time transporting their kids to and from games. One or two sports is not bad, but 3 or 4 and then times 2 or 3 kids. Where does that allow for anytime for you to sit down and to be with each other and talk to each other and really nurture each other with things besides food, like love, family, friendship, and all of those things? And then how in the world can the Eucharist mean anything at all because we don't even have the experience of an image of what it means to prepare a meal together. So how can we know there is sacrifice involved in sitting down at the table of alter? You know, because we can just go to McDonald's, where is the sacrifice in that? As much as that seems to be going off on a tangent, it really isn't. It's a stream that has subconsciously, if not unconsciously developed that most parents do not even realize. So what has happened here is that we no longer have the parent base to support the additional activities like sports and the rest because we are just too small of school.</p>
2	<p>The focus on self is particularly alarming. When young Catholics hear this message so often today and more importantly see it practiced by their parents and others in their immediate community, it is no wonder concern for others is an afterthought. In addition, with fewer parents not committed to their parish and not sending their children to Catholic schools, this means even fewer opportunities for children to interact on a regular basis with those who chose religious life. This means losing more opportunities for youth to see religious life as a viable vocation--something more real, something they can think about experiencing. More often than not, parents would much rather have their children in sports or dance because that is what they (the parents) like. Along these same lines, while the majority of Americans profess a belief in God, it is important to remember that religious belief is empty if it does not affect the way we live our lives.</p>
3	<p>I think to a certain extent, we've lost a lot of our Catholic culture. In the past, Catholic culture would have dictated that there was no other option for education except sending the kids to a Catholic school. You went and that was it. To some extent, my parents talked about this, if the kids didn't go, the pastor was at your door asking why are your kids going to the public school, and he had the paperwork along with him to get the kids signed up for the Catholic school. Their desk will be ready for them tomorrow. Especially in rural communities there was that Catholic culture mentality. Some of it went beyond just a Catholic culture but also more community (ethnic) experience. This is just not the case today. We are more mobile and all sorts of different factors. But I always</p>

	liked hearing the older members of the community reminding the younger people, “The village is named after the church, not the other way around. The village is here because the parish pre-existed the village by 4 years.”
4	Instilling the importance of living your faith and reinforcing each and everyday why God wants us to do this is critical to the development of young Catholics. This needs to occur in each generation and there needs to be a return to caring for you neighbor. People today are afraid to sacrifice since it cuts into their busy schedules. Failing to share the talents God has shared with you is like telling God, “thanks, but no thanks.” At what point is all of this activity proving to be negative or detrimental to the kids’ development. Kids today are just bombarded with activities or things they “should be” doing that they just do not take the time or even know how to complete a certain level of self-reflection every day.

A similar scenario can be found with growth of Confraternity of Christine Doctrine (CCD) classes over the past 30 years. These classes, which are conducted by religious and lay staff, provide religious education to Catholic children attending secular schools. During two of the interviews it was noted that in newer suburbs with large school-age populations, some parishes decide against building Catholic schools. Catholic parents instead choose to send their children to the local public school system. The apparent attitude of these parents is that CCD religious training is sufficient to form and inform their children’s Catholicism. This attitude demonstrates a certain naiveté about what constitutes adequate faith formation for youth. Respondent 3 effectively summarized the dilemma by noting, “Even an excellent CCD program, by design and definition, cannot do what a Catholic parish school was built to do which is to complete the circle of faith that starts in the home and lived out in the local parish community and surrounding neighborhood.” Furthermore, the relative silence by Catholic leadership on the merits of these two types of faith formation also contributes to the acceptance of the current trend that faith formation through CCD is a desirable alternative to a Catholic-school formation of faith. Parents, pastors, laymen and laywomen, and diocesan leaders all share in the responsibility

for this decline. None of these consequences associated with promotion of CCD classes were mentioned in any of the studies noted in the literature review.

Despite these disparities, the following themes were identified and compiled regarding the current state of Catholic education based on the information detailed in the literature review and the four interviews that were conducted:

- Traditionally, the Catholic parish and its school(s) have been the key components in identifying a rural community.
- Catholic schools are a critical element in completing the faith formation for youth. However, this faith formation needs to have its roots in the home.
- Similar to the advantages of the small class room sizes, rural Catholic schools offer more opportunities to reinforce the Catholic faith perspective.
- Parents chose Catholic schools because they want their children to be exposed to the same structure, discipline, and opportunity for attention they were afforded.
- The element of self-sacrifice by the teachers and staffs (both religious and lay) has been a constant in Catholic education and serves as a key reason for its success.
- The Catholic Church is universal which means that it has a commitment to the poor and marginalized and that all are welcome. Catholic schools follow this same doctrine and often provide positive and lasting impacts on the children they are entrusted with to educate.
- The funding of Catholic education always has and always will pose a significant risk to the initiative's future success. Whereas the Catholic Church alone undertook this responsibility up until the late 1970's, the difference today is that

church, educational, business, and community leaders are asked to collectively address the critical issues facing Catholic education.

Conclusion

Overall, the participants in this research effort confirmed the assertion that rural Catholic schools can and should be saved. While each pastor had a unique viewpoint to share, there were common themes shared across all interviews. The four interviews clearly noted that to sustain the legacy of Catholic schools requires efforts in strengthening support for Catholic schools. These efforts include superintendents and church leaders innovating and strategizing, pastors encouraging parish and school partnerships, principals engaging in active and creative leadership, and laypeople revitalizing these valued institutions. Otherwise, the gift of Catholic-school faith formation will continue to become more of a rarity, especially in the rural areas of the United States (Gray & Gautier, 2006).

The path to maintaining an available and affordable parochial school system in a rural setting lies in addressing the financial challenges first created when parish schools lost most of their subsidy provided by the low cost labor nuns, brothers, and priests who have been replaced by more expensive lay teachers (but who should still be considered underpaid when compared to public school teachers). This factor, coupled with the substantial maintenance costs of buildings mostly built in the late 1940's, already high tuition rates, and smaller Catholic family sizes, virtually assures that Catholic schools will survive in the long term only through the development of an ambitious, long range, comprehensive financial strategy (Bimonte, 2011). Completing this task will require not only financial skills, but also a considerable commitment to a regional model. Involvement from lay Catholics in local business communities as well as local

Catholic high schools and universities will prove vital in the transition to a regional model. Finally, as the literature notes, these strategies need to be both collaborative in nature and replicable in order for rural Catholic grade schools to be successful in the Milwaukee Archdiocese.

Ultimately, today's Catholic community lacks a deep appreciation of what the Catholic school system in the United States has previously achieved in forming the faith of young Catholics. This legacy should not be squandered. The University of Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education suggests in their report *Making God Known, Loved, and Served: The Future of Catholic Primary and Secondary schools in the United States* (2006) the best way to appreciate the power of Catholic schools is to imagine churches and communities without them:

To those who wonder how we can afford to make the investment necessary to sustain, strengthen, and expand Catholic schools, we respond by turning the question on its head. How can we afford not to make this investment? Our future depends on it more than we may suspect. (p. 19)

Thus, allowing present trends to continue without reflection, discussion, and debate is irresponsible. Furthermore, the discussion of the future of Catholic faith formation should not be left solely to parish councils, diocesan commissions, or professional organizations operating under the auspices of the national hierarchy. Quite simply, Catholic education should be at the core of a Catholic community's development since it provides the best opportunity for young Catholics to learn about and live their faith. This leads to the most important transformation-- parents understanding the importance of their faith identity and allowing their parish to be an integral part of their social structure. After all, the family is where moral values are taught and

spiritual and cultural heritage are passed on. In this day and age of multi-tasking and multi-stimulation, such a change may prove more difficult than ever for families. One respondent denoted that, “People today want immediate gratification. People do not want to feel a sense of obligation. And people do not want to be told what to do because they believe they themselves are in control.” In the end, however, the Church can only return to the integrating force it once was by its members moving on from, “What am I getting out of it?” and instead looking at “What I am putting into it?”

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol Questions

1. How long have you been involved with Catholic schools? Can you share how you got started with Catholic schools?
2. What do you believe is the primary reason(s) why parents choose to send their children to Catholic grade schools?
3. What is it about Catholic schools that allow them to be successful?
4. What do you believe is the core reason why this school had to close? What do you think is lost when Catholic schools close?
5. What is your opinion as to why rural Catholic grade schools are closing at such a fast rate?
6. Do you believe the commitment to Catholic schools by the parishioners over the last 10 years has significantly changed at all? How so?
7. Are the strategies and frameworks utilized by successful grade schools effectively shared among all of the schools in the Milwaukee Archdiocese?
8. What do you think Catholic schools need to do in order to survive well into the future?

Appendix B: Consent Form**MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY
AGREEMENT OF CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

Rural Catholic Schools in the Milwaukee Archdiocese - Can They be Saved?
Chad W. Abler
College of Professional Studies – Marquette University

You have been invited to participate in this research study. Before you agree to participate, it is important that you read and understand the following information. Participation is completely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this research study is to gather information from Milwaukee Archdiocese school leaders and explore why rural Catholic grade schools are closing at such an alarming rate. The study will look to increase the knowledge of what types of issues face rural Catholic grade schools and how to address these issues. Documenting those actions, activities, or strategies that allow a Catholic grade school to survive and thrive may allow for these solutions to be replicated and assist other Catholic grade schools. You will be one of approximately four participants in this research study.

PROCEDURES: You will be asked a set of interview questions regarding Catholic grade school education in the Milwaukee Archdiocese. You will be audio taped during the interview portion of the study to ensure accuracy. The tapes will later be transcribed and destroyed after three years beyond the completion of the study. For confidentiality purposes, your name will not be recorded.

DURATION: Your participation will consist of one 60-minute interview conducted in a professional setting (office or conference room). An optional 30-minute follow-up discussion may also be scheduled to review the accuracy of the answers that were dictated.

RISKS: The risks associated with participation in this study are minimal and are no greater than those encountered in everyday life. Your participation in the study will be confidential and no names will be used. In addition, questions that make the participant uncomfortable may be skipped.

BENEFITS: There is no direct benefit to those participating in the study. However, participation may assist in providing a better understanding of the topic being researched.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All information you reveal in this study will be kept confidential. All your data will be assigned an arbitrary code number rather than using your name or other information that could identify you as an individual. When the results of the study are published, you will not be identified by name. The data will be destroyed by shredding paper documents and deleting electronic files three years after the completion of the study.

Your consent form will be kept by Chad W. Abler, the principal investigator. This form will be kept in a locked cabinet at his home. No one else will have access to the consent form.

The data collected during this interview will not be used for future research purposes.

Your research records may be inspected by the Marquette University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowable by law) state and federal agencies.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF PARTICIPATION: Participating in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can withdraw from the study after the interview by contacting the researcher. If you withdraw from the study within thirty days of the interview, the data collected about you will be destroyed. After thirty days, it may not be possible to remove your data from the research dataset.

CONTACT INFORMATION: If you have any questions about this research project, you can contact Chad W. Abler at 920-377-0144 or chad.abler@marquette.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact Marquette University's Office of Research Compliance at (414) 288-7570.

I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO READ THIS CONSENT FORM, ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND AM PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT.

Participant's Signature

Date

Participant's Name

Researcher's Signature

Date