

Catholic Schools and Educating the Whole Child

By Philip V. Robey

A recent study on the impact of Catholic schools in the lives of economically disadvantaged children found that 98 percent of a group of low-income students attending Catholic schools on tuition grants in Los Angeles graduated from high school. What's more, nearly 98 percent of them went on to pursue some sort of postsecondary education, the same study, by the school of education at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, reported.

Meanwhile, a *New York Times* article from May, lamenting the closing of Rice High School in New York City, a Catholic school for mostly minority students of modest means, noted that over the past four years, all of the school's graduates have been accepted to college. This is a remarkable figure when one considers the alternatives, but not so remarkable when considered against all of the nation's Catholic secondary schools, where 99.1 percent of students graduate from high school and 84.7 percent attend college. Whether in a tough, urban setting, or in wealthy suburbia, Catholic schools continue to contribute to the national landscape via educational successes mixed with the teaching of values.

The loose system of Catholic schools is the largest group of nonpublic schools in the country. Though some Catholic schools have closed or consolidated in economically difficult recent times, others have opened and, with roughly 6,000 Catholic elementary and secondary schools in operation nationwide, Catholic education remains an influential force. When we want to look at education without many of the political, legal, and distracting interferences, we can—and should—examine Catholic schools, which educate more than 2 million students in neighborhoods that range from economically challenged to very well off.

As someone who has taught and served as an administrator in both public and Catholic schools, I have come to think that the larger field of education could learn some things from Catholic education. When Catholic schools say they teach the whole child, they mean it. By nature and mission, these schools operate in such a way that moral choices and character values are just as strongly emphasized as educational performance. This emphasis contributes to a culture fostering the notion that it is important to use our gifts well, and be appreciative of them.

Over the past several decades, perceptions of inadequacy in many public schools have driven politicians (and even some academics) to insist on laws requiring school systems to focus on student testing and teaching based on data that indicate what students do and do not know. In

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theory, this sounds wonderful, for adults are held accountable for student learning in what seem like clearly defined ways. Teachers who show improved test scores get rewarded, those that don't get moved out, and public education improves. Throw in a few billion dollars in federal Race to the Top funds, and standardized tests become extremely important.

Unfortunately, in regular public and charter schools, where success has come to be almost totally defined by numbers, the notion of educating the whole child sometimes gets forgotten. Many school systems have to grapple with such a heavy

emphasis on standardized-test scores that they don't have time for much else. With politicians breathing down their necks, systems often base staff evaluations and pay increases on how well students perform on a single battery of exams.

When I was a public school teacher and principal, I grew familiar with the pressure put on adults with regard to standardized-test scores. To increase overall test results, a common scheme is to give special focus to students who score at percentages just above or below the passing rate on pretests. With a focus given to improving the numbers for these students, and by teaching to the upcoming standardized tests, teachers, instructional coaches, and school administrators do everything they can to coax and drill pupils to the passing point. Schools that show marked improvement are often held up as models of success, regardless of whether students retain the information they were tested on.

In high-stakes testing environments, the educational emphasis falls on adults and their ability to raise students' scores. The stakes are important enough that financial incentives are sometimes used as enticements. While, on the surface, this sort of rewarding may seem harmless, it can undermine the educational process by putting such a heavy emphasis on test scores that there is little energy for much else. And, as the recent testing scandal in Atlanta reveals, some adults are adept at producing scores that were not actually earned—a disastrous outcome for a school community.

While test scores are important in most Catholic schools, they often don't hold the same critical value that they do in schools that are state-run. I admit that as a Catholic elementary school principal, I used to hold a special "Meet the Principal" night where I enjoyed bragging to our parents that our school's annual scores were increasing. Still, I never dreamed of coaching certain kids to take a test, and testing remained only one measure of student performance. With an emphasis on the whole development of students along with high-quality teaching, and in an atmosphere that supported order and educational achievement, our scores rose the traditional



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way. And they were truly representative of what kids had actually mastered rather than what had been drilled into them during test-preparation sessions.

For Catholic schools, by their very nature, student assessment is not limited by test scores alone, but by the wide variety and unique skills that were given to each of us. Student behavior is important, as is the way students interact with and treat one another. Complementing a Catholic school's goal of educating the whole child is the emphasis that is placed on providing students with values and ethics. Regardless of what type of school they attend, students want and need good role models. They need to hear about right and wrong and, while in a religious school rights and wrongs are more defined by doctrine, there are values and standards that continue to be accepted in society as a whole. These include the wrongness of stealing, cheating, taking illegal drugs, and alcohol abuse, but they also include positives, such as upping one's sense of self-worth by mastering and achieving valuable goals and by making good decisions that will further one's options in life.

As our public schools become more data-oriented and the adults who work in them are held to standards mostly based on what data show, we need to be careful that we don't lose something in the quest to educate the whole child. The role of data is important, for data often show us how well students have mastered some information, but teaching that is planned and executed solely based on standardized assessments leaves out the uniqueness that is a part of every child and an important part of a well-rounded education.

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