

LONG TERM TRENDS IN ENROLLMENT IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

*This note was written for NCEA (United States)
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Analytics series

KEY MESSAGES:

- In 2018-19, 1.8 million children were enrolled in Catholic schools. Enrollment peaked in 1965 and has been declining since. In recent decades, conservative Christian schools, other religious schools, and non-sectarian private schools have had more success in keeping or even growing their enrollment.
- As tuition has risen, Catholic schools have become less affordable for the poor and the middle class. In addition, the decline in enrollment may have been due in part to other factors including competition from charter schools, secularization, the sex abuse scandal, and a less salient Catholic school advantage.

Introduction

According to the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), 1.8 million children were enrolled in elementary and secondary Catholic schools in the United States in 2018-19. Enrollment has been declining for the last 50 years. To provide context for subsequent notes in this series devoted in part to market research on perceptions of Catholic schools in the population and among parents, this note documents trends in long-term enrollment.

After documenting trends in enrollment at the national level from the 1920s to today, the note explores whether the decline in enrollment has been specific to Catholic schools, or whether it has also affected other types of private schools, including other religious schools. Data are provided on trends in enrollment in various parts of the country. Tentative explanations are provided for the decline in enrollment. Rising tuition has clearly led to affordability issues among the poor and many in the middle class. But in addition, other factors are also likely to have played a role. The note finally points to new developments that may be beneficial for Catholic schools.

Box 1: Knowledge Notes

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Which topics are covered in the Knowledge Notes Series? The series explores achievements and challenges for Catholic schools globally, including in terms of enrollment, reach to the poor, academic performance, parental priorities, costs and affordability, and religious education. Interesting innovations are also featured.

What is the focus of this note? Two questions are asked: How has enrollment in Catholic elementary and secondary schools evolved over time? And what are some of the factors that may explain the decline in enrollment? The analysis is based on data from NCEA and a brief review of some of the literature.

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Trends in Enrollment

Catholic schools have a rich history in the United States. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops notes on its website that the first Catholic school was opened in 1606 by Franciscans in Florida. Schools were later opened in other states that had substantial Catholic populations, including Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New York State. Georgetown University was established in 1789 by Bishop John Carroll as the first Catholic University in the United states. But it is only in the middle of the 19th Century that the number of Catholic schools and universities grew faster, in part due to demand from Catholic immigrants.

The National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) represents and supports Catholic education at the elementary and secondary levels nationally. The association was founded in 1904. At the turn of the century, the number of parochial Catholic elementary schools was estimated at 3,500. Two decades later, by 1920, the number of Catholic schools had increased to 6,551. For secondary schools, growth was even more rapid from about 100 high schools in 1900 to more than 1,550 in 1920.

Growth continued until the mid-1960s, with a peak of 5.2 million children enrolled in close to 13,000 schools in 1965. Since then, despite comparatively good performance for students on measures of achievement (as discussed in Note 2 in this series), the number of children enrolled in Catholic schools has steadily declined for both elementary and secondary schools, with only one exception – a small increase in student enrollment during the 1990s.

At the tertiary level, enrollment in Catholic Universities continued to grow until a few years ago, but a slight decline has recently observed in part due to difficulties in maintaining enrollment and revenues in some comparatively smaller colleges and universities.

According to NCEA, 1.79 million children were enrolled Catholic schools in the 2018-19 school year, with 1.24 million enrolled in elementary schools, and 0.55 million in secondary schools. Enrollment reached a peak in 1965, after which it declined continuously for more than 50 years.

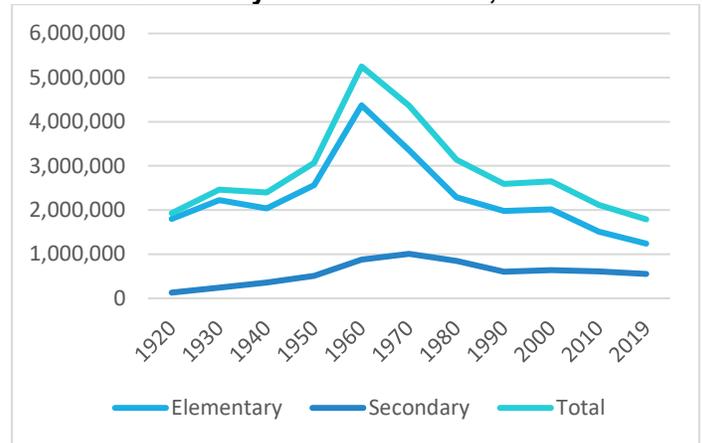
Table 1 provides trends in enrollment and in the number of schools by decade since 1920. The data can also be used to compute the average size of schools by dividing total enrollment by the number of schools. Figures 1 to 3 visualize these various trends. The data are reproduced from the latest annual statistical report from NCEA on schools, enrollment, and staffing available for the school year 2018-19. The report indicates that in 2018-19, 1,239,449 students were enrolled in elementary and middle schools with an additional 549,914 students in secondary schools. This leads to a combined enrollment of almost 1.8 million children in close to 6,300 schools.

Table 1: Number of Schools and Enrollment, 1920-2019

	Elementary		Secondary	
	Schools	Students	Schools	Students
1920	6,551	1,796,000	1,552	130,000
1930	7,923	2,223,000	2,123	242,000
1940	7,944	2,035,000	2,105	361,000
1950	8,589	2,561,000	2,189	506,000
1960	10,501	4,373,000	2,392	880,000
1970	9,366	3,359,000	1,986	1,008,000
1980	8,100	2,293,000	1,540	846,000
1990	7,395	1,983,000	1,324	606,000
2000	6,923	2,013,084	1,221	639,954
2010	5,889	1,507,618	1,205	611,723
2019	5,092	1,239,449	1,197	549,914

Source: McDonald and Schultz (2019).

Figure 1: Trends in Student Enrollment in Elementary and Secondary Catholic Schools, 1920-2019



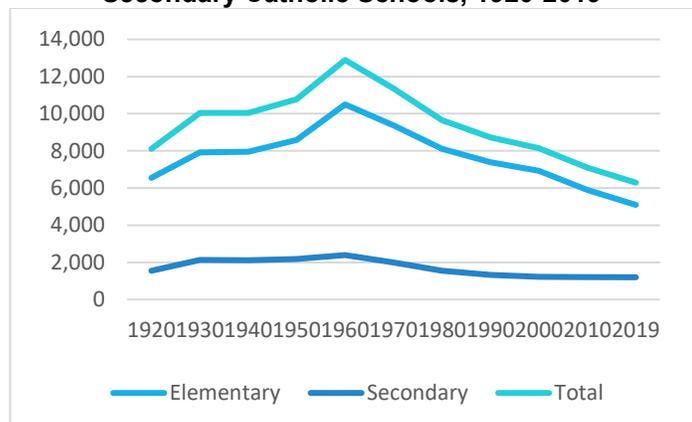
Source: McDonald and Schultz (2019).

In a context of declining student enrollment, one might expect a reduction in both the number of schools (because of school closures as well as schools being merged) and the average size of schools. This is indeed the case, as shown in Figure 2 for the number of schools, and Figure 3 for the average size of schools. The Figures show however that the decline in the number of the schools was steeper than the decline in the average size of the schools. This makes sense given that when several schools operate in the same area, schools with dropping enrollment can be merged with other schools. Still, the long-term decline in enrollment has also led to slightly smaller schools on average, especially for elementary schools.

The fact that the average size of schools is declining may be a concern for the future given that it is difficult to keep schools financially sustainable when they are too small for tuition and other revenues to cover the cost of operating the schools. At the same time, Catholic schools tend to be larger than other faith-based schools, at least at the elementary level. This could be because many Catholic schools are located in cities which allows for larger schools to operate since population density is higher. But lessons

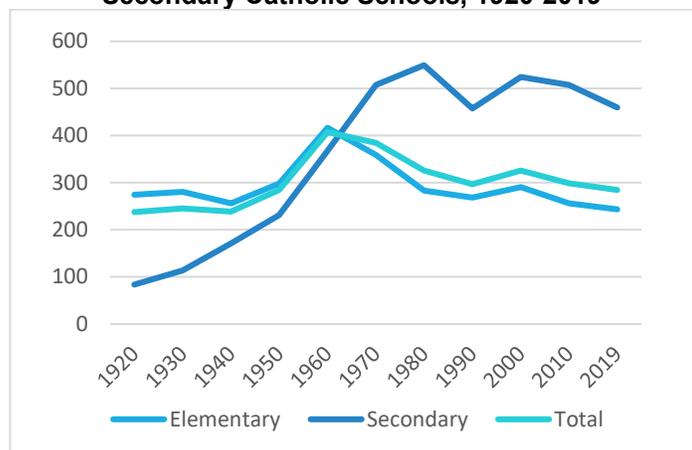
could perhaps be learned from the ability of other religious schools to function with often substantially smaller number of students on average per school.

Figure 2: Trends in the Number of Elementary and Secondary Catholic Schools, 1920-2019



Source: McDonald and Schultz (2019).

Figure 3: Trend in the Average Size of Elementary and Secondary Catholic Schools, 1920-2019



Source: Based on McDonald and Schultz (2019).

NCEA does not collect data separately on enrollment in Catholic nurseries and preschools, but data at that level are available for the United States and almost all countries in the world from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Office of Church Statistics (see Box 2). The 2018 edition of the yearbook provides data up to 2016. At the preschool level, there was an increase in the number of nurseries and preschools and the number of children enrolled until the mid-1990s, but thereafter the trends are similar to what is observed at the elementary and secondary levels.

For elementary and secondary education, data from NCEA are broadly consistent with estimates from the Office of Church Statistics, although the Office of Church Statistics provides statistics for primary and secondary enrollment, while NCEA reports elementary and secondary enrollment.

While elementary education consists of the first eight years of schooling before high school in the United States, primary education typically consists only of the first six years of education in most countries.

Table 2 provides the annual (mostly negative) growth rates for student enrollment and the number of schools by decade since the 1970s based on NCEA data. While there are changes from one decade to the next in growth rates, for example with gains in enrollment in the 1990s at both the elementary and the secondary levels, there are few salient patterns over time apart from the gradual decline in enrollment and the number of schools over time. This suggests that unless conditions change, the decline in enrollment may continue, at least in the near future.

For the 49 years from 1970 to 2019, Catholic schools lost on average 2.0 percent of their enrollment each year at the elementary level and 1.2 percent at the secondary level. Trends since 2010 are similar to this long-term decline.

For the 49 years from 1970 to 2019, the (negative) annual growth rate for student enrollment at the elementary level was -2.0 percent per year, while it was -1.2 percent per year at the secondary level. The trends from 2010 to 2019 (the 2010s in Table 2) are similar to this long term decline, suggesting no stabilization in recent years.

Table 2: Annual Compounded Growth Rates in Student Enrollment and the Number of Schools (%)

	Elementary		Secondary	
	Schools	Students	Schools	Students
1970s	-1.4%	-3.7%	-2.5%	-1.7%
1980s	-0.9%	-1.4%	-1.5%	-3.3%
1990s	-0.7%	0.2%	-0.8%	0.5%
2000s	-1.6%	-2.8%	-0.1%	-0.5%
2010s	-1.6%	-2.2%	-0.1%	-1.2%
All	-1.2%	-2.0%	-1.0%	-1.2%

Source: Based on McDonald and Schultz (2019).

Catholic schools account today for 30 percent of students in elementary and secondary private schools, and 3.5 percent of students in all public and private schools.

What is today the market share of Catholic schools? Estimates can be obtained by comparing data from NCEA with data from the Digest of Education Statistics published annually by the National Center for Education Statistics. The data available from the latest Digest for the 2018-19 school year are estimates based on projections, but they are reliable. The estimation suggests that Catholic schools account today for approximately 30 percent of all students in elementary and secondary private schools, and 3.5 percent of all students in public and private schools combined. Catholic schools used to have a substantially larger market share, but given the decline in enrollment in

the schools and the increase in enrollment nationally, this market share has decreased over time.

How does the United States compare to other countries? Estimated by Wodon (2018) based on data from the Office of Church Statistics suggest that globally, the market share of Catholic schools is at 4.8 percent for primary schools and 3.5 percent for secondary schools (see Table 3). In Africa, the market shares of Catholic schools are estimated at 10.7 percent for primary schools and 7.4 percent for secondary schools, but in countries such as China and Russia, the role played by Catholic schools is minimal or non-existent. Overall, in the Americas (which also include Central America and South America) and in Europe, the market share of Catholic schools has declined over time. By contrast, in Africa and in Oceania, there has been an increase. In Asia, there has been a gain in market share at the primary level, and a loss at the secondary level. It can be shown (as expected) that market shares for Catholic schools tend to be significantly higher in countries where the schools benefit from public spending, but other religious, cultural, and historical factors also play a role.

Table 3: Market Shares of Catholic Schools in Total Enrollment by Level and by Region, 1980-2016 (%)

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2016
Primary schools					
Africa	9.9	11.2	9.1	10.1	10.7
Americas	8.8	8.4	7.9	7.4	7.0
Asia	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.4
Europe	8.0	7.5	7.0	7.2	7.1
Oceania	17.9	19.5	19.5	21.3	21.8
World	4.0	4.2	4.1	4.5	4.8
Secondary schools					
Africa	7.0	5.1	5.8	7.4	7.4
Americas	6.9	6.3	5.1	4.5	4.5
Asia	2.2	2.2	1.6	1.6	1.8
Europe	4.9	4.8	5.2	5.9	6.0
Oceania	11.0	12.1	11.4	12.1	12.6
World	4.0	3.8	3.2	3.3	3.5

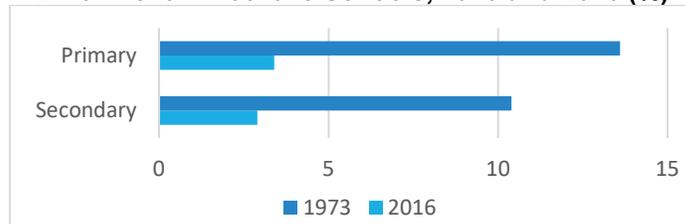
Source: Wodon (2018).

Share of Global Enrollment in Catholic Schools

Since enrollment in Catholic schools has dropped in the United States while it has increased in many other countries, especially in the developing world, the share of students in Catholic schools globally that live in the United States has dropped substantially. Data on enrollment in Catholic schools from the statistical yearbooks of the Church go back to 1973. As shown in Figure 4, the United States accounted that year for 13.6 percent and 10.4 percent of global enrollment in Catholic elementary and secondary schools, respectively. By 2016, these shares had dropped to 3.4 percent and 2.9 percent.

For nurseries and preschools, the decline in the share of enrollment in Catholic schools accounted for by the United States has been smaller, but the end value is of a similar order of magnitude with 2.2 percent of all students in Catholic nurseries or preschools living in the United States.

Figure 4: Share of the United States in Global Enrollment in Catholic Schools, 1973 and 2016 (%)



Source: Annual statistical yearbooks of the Church.

In 1973, the United States accounted for 13.6 percent of global enrollment in Catholic elementary schools, and 10.4 percent of global enrollment in secondary schools. In 2016, these shares were at 3.4 percent and 2.9 percent.

Box 2: Statistical Yearbooks of the Church

Every year, the Central Statistics Office of the Catholic Church publishes the Statistical Yearbook of the Church. The latest edition provides data for 2016 on a wide range of Church activities (Secretaria Status, 2018). For K12 education, data are available for most countries and territories on the number of the schools managed by the Church and the number of students at three levels: nurseries and preschools, primary schools, and secondary schools.

The data are collected through a questionnaire sent to the chancery offices of ecclesiastical jurisdictions worldwide. The data are self-reported and may not always be fully accurate, especially in countries where local conditions are not favorable to data collection. In addition, not all ecclesiastical jurisdictions fill the questionnaire every year. For the 2016 edition, 3,016 out of 3,162 jurisdictions filled the questionnaire. Yet because the jurisdictions that are not able to provide data tend to be small, missing data do not affect estimates substantially.

The share of students enrolled in Catholic schools globally who live in the United States will probably continue to decline in the future since enrollment is rising in the developing world and especially in Africa due to both high rates of population growth leading to larger cohorts of students and gains in educational attainment with progressively larger shares of students completing their primary education and continuing at the secondary level.

Shifts among Private Schools

Enrollment in Catholic schools in the United States has been declining for the last 50 years. Has this trend also been observed for other private schools? Or are losses in Catholic schools due to a loss of market share for Catholic schools in comparison to other private schools?

Recent analysis by Murnane and Reardon (2018) with the Private School Universe Surveys provides useful insights on this question (see also Murnane et al., 2018, for a summary of the authors' analysis). The authors show that between 1989 and 2013, private schools lost ground, but that among private schools, losses were concentrated for the most part in Catholic schools.

Using the Private School Universe Surveys, Murnane and Reardon estimate that there was a decline in enrollment in private schools overall from 3.15 million students in 1989 to 2.77 million in 2013, but with markedly different trends depending on the type of school being considered. In 1989, 1.77 million students were enrolled in Catholic elementary schools according to the survey. This was more than all other private schools combined, since 0.36 million students were enrolled in conservative Christian schools, 0.70 million in other religious schools, and 0.33 million in non-sectarian private schools.

Enrollment in Catholic schools has been declining. Yet enrollment in other types of private schools, including conservative Christian schools, other religious schools and non-sectarian private schools, has not declined. In some cases, enrollment even increased between 1989 and 2013.

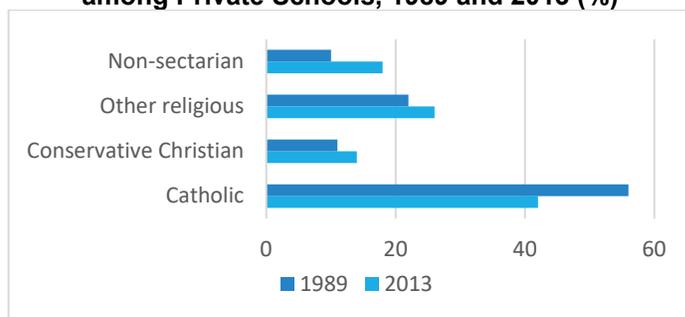
By 2013, the number of students enrolled in Catholic elementary schools had dropped to 1.15 million according to the survey for that year. By contrast, conservative Christian schools and other religious schools increased their enrollment slightly to 0.39 million students and 0.72 million students respectively. Non-sectarian private schools had a larger gain with 0.50 million students enrolled in 2013.

As a result, while 56 percent of all children enrolled in private elementary schools were in Catholic schools in 1983 according to the analysis by Murnane and Reardon, the Catholic market share among all private schools dropped to 42 percent in 2013. As shown in Figure 5, the market shares of the three other types of private schools among students enrolled in private schools all increased over the same period.

It should be noted that estimates of enrollment in Murnane and Reardon differ from estimates based on the Digest of Education Statistics. This is in part because of the use of different data sources, but also because different calendar

years are used for the comparisons. For example, the market share of Catholic schools among all private schools is higher in the analysis by Murnane and Reardon for 2013 than what is obtained using the latest data from NCES for the school year 2018-19, but this is in part due to losses in enrollment in Catholic schools between 2013 and 2019. Still, the analysis by Murnane and Reardon provides useful insights because different types of private schools are considered. The contrast between the trends in enrollment for Catholic schools, and those observed for conservative Christian and other religious schools, is particularly striking.

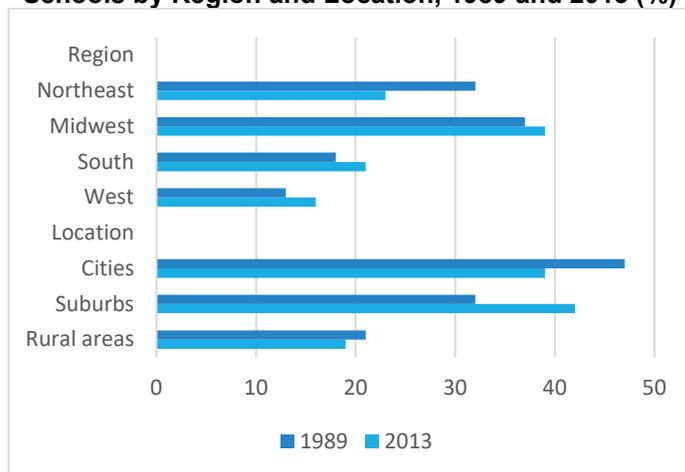
Figure 5: Market Shares of Various Types of Schools among Private Schools, 1989 and 2013 (%)



Source: Murnane and Reardon (2018).

Murnane and Reardon also provide data on enrollment by region and location for the various types of private schools. As shown in Figure 6, the market share of Catholic schools among private schools declined between 1989 and 2013 in the Northeast and in cities, but it held steady or even grew in the other regions and in suburbs and rural areas.

Figure 6: Catholic Market Share among Private Schools by Region and Location, 1989 and 2013 (%)



Source: Murnane and Reardon (2018).

This suggests that the factors leading to the decline in enrollment and market share for Catholic schools nationally are complex and depend on the area considered. Because Catholic schools have had a stronger presence in cities in comparison to other types of private schools, with typically larger schools in terms of enrollment in each school than for the other types of private schools, the decline in cities led to a national decline in market share. But Catholic schools have done well in comparison to other private schools in other parts of the country.

Affordability and the Decline in Enrollment

Several reasons may have led to the decline in enrollment in Catholic schools in the United States, but the rising cost of tuition for parents is probably one of the main factors. Historically, religious orders and parishes played a major role in operating Catholic schools. Out-of-pocket costs for parents of enrolling their children were low as priests, nuns, and brothers worked for low pay. The decline in vocations led to a massive change in staffing in the schools. Today, according to NCEA's latest annual statistical report, less than three percent of the teaching staff in Catholic schools is from the clergy or religious communities. This means that almost all teachers are lay. Even if teachers and principals may be willing to work for lower pay in Catholic schools than in private secular or public schools, operating costs are higher than they used to be. Combined with stagnant wages for much of the population for several decades, Catholic schools have become less affordable for the poor and many among the middle class.

Due in part to a decline in vocations, tuition has rapidly risen in Catholic schools over time and the schools have become less affordable for the poor and the middle class.

Cost and affordability concerns are likely to continue to be significant in the future. Data from NCEA suggest that since the early 2000s, the average annual tuition cost for students in Catholic schools has been rising continuously at a rate well above that of inflation. For example, in the 2017-18 academic year, tuition costs reached \$4,841 at the elementary level and \$11,239 at the secondary level, versus respectively \$1,787 and \$4,100 in 2000-01 (for data on the operating costs of Catholic schools and tuition, see NCEA, 2018). While children from disadvantaged families may receive tuition assistance from schools, the increase in tuition still threatens affordability for many families. The constraints that tuition costs generate for the ability of Catholic schools to reach the poor are not peculiar to the United States (see for example Wodon, 2019, on sub-Saharan Africa), but the decline in enrollment in the United States likely due in part to the rise in tuition costs has been much more pronounced than in most other countries.

One positive trend, however, is the increase in the number of states that have adopted school choice legislation. The American Federation for Children notes that today, 54 private school choice programs are in operation in 26 states plus the District of Columbia and Mexico. In 1996, only two such programs were in operation. While the programs currently fund only a very small part of the budgets of Catholic schools, this could change in the future and help reduce the average tuition costs paid by parents, at least for disadvantaged groups.

The issue of affordability affects the ability of Catholic and other private schools to serve the poor. This is one of the main points made by Murnane and Reardon in their analysis of trends in enrollment in private schools. The authors note that the decline in enrollment in Catholic elementary schools was concentrated among children from low- and middle-income families, probably in large part because of rising tuition costs. At the same time, the authors note that tuition costs also increased in many other types of private schools. Therefore the issue of affordability may not have been the sole reason for the decline in enrollment in Catholic schools in comparison to trends observed in other private schools. However, because middle-class families now tend to live in the suburbs more, the fact that many Catholic schools were located in cities may have led to a higher exposure of those schools to the lack of affordability of tuition costs for the poor.

Other Factors Leading to Declining Enrollment

Apart from affordability issues, other factors may have contributed to the decline in enrollment over time in Catholic schools. Several such factors are discussed here. The discussion is not meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive. Rather, a few commonly cited explanations for the decline in enrollment are provided.

First, Catholic schools have been exposed to more competition not only from other private schools, but also from the growth of charter schools which now enroll 3.3 million children nationally. While those schools are public and funded (mostly) by states, they are privately managed and thereby offer some of the advantages traditionally associated with private schools. Charter schools represent an attractive option for the poor in low-income urban areas, which is also where Catholic schools have experienced their losses in market share, as mentioned earlier.

Apart from affordability issues, other factors may have contributed to the decline in enrollment over time, including exposure to competition from public charter schools, a trend towards secularization, the sex abuse scandal that affected the Catholic Church, a possibly less salient Catholic advantage in terms of learning performance, and a weakening of the social fabric of communities.

Second, there has been a trend towards secularization in the United States, with a larger share of the adult population not affiliated with any religion. According to the Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study, the share of Catholics in the adult population declined from 24 percent in 2007 to 21 percent in 2014. Secularization may not affect all religions and all religious schools equally. It also does not mean that religion matters less for those who are affiliated with a particular faith. For example, in the South, conservative Christian schools gained market share among private schools. It has been suggested that this could be due in part to decisions by the Supreme Court to ban prayer in public schools, which may have made conservative Catholic schools more attractive to this particular segment of the population. Still overall, secularization may reduce the willingness of at least some parents to make the financial sacrifices necessary to send their children to a Catholic school.

Third, the sex abuse scandal that affected the Church especially in the Northeast may also have contributed to a decline in enrollment in Catholic schools. Boston was the epicenter of the crisis, but other areas were also affected. Various factors may have been at work. Parental preferences for Catholic schools may have been weakened by the crisis, but in addition the financial cost for the Church of settling cases may have reduced the ability of dioceses in the Northeast to subsidize their Catholic schools, possibly leading to a decrease in scholarships and a corresponding increase in out-of-pocket costs for families.

Fourth, while students in Catholic schools continue to perform better on national assessments than students in public schools as discussed in Note 2 in this series, the gap between students in Catholic schools and public schools is not necessarily large, or at least not large for all students. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Performance (NAEP) suggests that Catholic schools have fewer students failing to achieve basic thresholds of competency than public schools. This is good news for Catholic schools with respect to their mission towards the poor since on average, students who perform very poorly on assessments tend to come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Yet if fewer of those students enroll in Catholic schools due to affordability issues, the comparative advantage of Catholic schools may apply to a smaller share of students in the future. In addition, as public and other private schools improve their performance, the extent to which the population will continue to perceive Catholic schools as having an advantage may be reduced.

Furthermore, a more technical point must be made even if it may not affect perceptions of Catholic schools in the population at large. Even if students in Catholic schools do perform on average better than students in public schools on various assessments, this does not by itself imply that Catholic schools themselves perform better than public

schools. This is because differences in scores on assessments may be due to differences in the characteristics of the students who enroll in Catholic versus public schools, as opposed to differences in the characteristics of the schools. The literature does suggest a Catholic school advantage, but this advantage may not be large in absolute terms once controls for the characteristics of students enrolling in Catholic schools are accounted for in the analysis, and it may also not be as large as simple comparisons of test scores on national and other learning assessments may suggest.

While students in Catholic schools perform on average better on national assessments than students in public schools, this does not imply that Catholic schools perform better than public schools since differences may be due to the characteristics of students rather than those of schools.

Finally, there has been a weakening of the social fabric of many communities, as noted among others by Putnam (2000). The loss of social capital in communities may have reduced the perceived role played by local parishes and Catholic schools. Said differently, the bond that used to tie families to Catholic schools may have been weakened over time, as has been observed for many other bonds with community institutions such as service clubs or volunteer organizations.

The above discussion is only tentative and the hypotheses advanced for the long-term decline in enrollment would need to be firmed up by more detailed research. Apart from the factor mentioned here, other factors may also have contributed to the decline in enrollment in Catholic schools. Assessing the extent to which various factors actually did contribute to declining enrollment would require advanced quantitative analysis that is beyond the scope of this note.

Before concluding, apart from the trend towards school choice legislation mentioned earlier that may reduce affordability constraints for at least some students, another sign of hope for future enrollment in Catholic schools should be mentioned. It is the fact that the share of the Hispanic or Latino population is increasing nationally. A majority of this population is Catholic, so this group represents a natural target group for enrollment. In some geographic areas, efforts targeted at this population have already led to gains in enrollment among the Latino community, but there is substantial additional potential for uptake. This shift in population shares may also be one of the reasons why in the West, Catholic schools apparently increased their market share among all private schools.

Conclusion

The analysis in this note was based for the most part on enrollment data from NCEA, with a few additional insights from the literature, relying especially on a recent article by Murnane and Reardon. Two main findings stand out.

First, probably due in large part to rising operating costs leading to higher average tuition and affordability issues for the poor and the middle class, enrollment in Catholic schools has declined almost continuously since the mid-1960s when it reached a peak of 5.2 million children.

Second, in comparison to Catholic schools, conservative Christian schools, other religious schools, and non-sectarian private schools have had more success in keeping or even growing their enrollment, at least since the late 1980s. This suggests that apart from issues of affordability that affect all private schools, the decline in enrollment in Catholic schools may have been due in part to other factors as well. These factors may include competition from charter schools in major cities where Catholic schools have traditionally had a strong presence, the pressure of secularization which may not affect all types of religious schools in the same way, the sex abuse scandal that affected the Catholic Church in the Northeast, a possibly less salient Catholic school advantage, and an erosion of the perception of this advantage. These are conjectures, and more detailed work would be needed to quantify the role of various factors in the decline in enrollment. Still, with 1.8 million students in elementary and secondary schools, Catholic schools continue to play a major role in the country's education system, with market shares of the order of 3.5 percent when considering all schools, and 30 percent among private schools.

How may enrollment in Catholic schools evolve in the future? While this is difficult to predict, some of the current difficulties are likely to persist. Pressures related to affordability are not likely to change in the near term even if a growing number of states are adopting school choice legislation that can help in providing vouchers for some students. Pressures related to secularization are also not likely to change in the near term and the deepening sex abuse crisis affecting the Catholic Church may have an additional negative effect on future enrollment. On the other hand, the fact that the (majority Catholic) Hispanic or Latino population is rapidly growing in the country represents an opportunity. Yet to build on this and other opportunities to stem the long-term decline in enrollment, Catholic schools need to do their homework to understand the forces shaping their local education market, and implement the interventions that can help them thrive.

While this introductory note for the NCEA Knowledge Notes series considered basic trends in enrollment, the next note in the series will consider basic trends in student achievement. Both notes are meant to provide a rapid overview of the landscape in which Catholic schools

operate today. Additional notes in the series will discuss in more details specific aspects of Catholic schools, including on the basis of market research about the factors that lead parents to choose a particular school for their children. Such market research can be invaluable to stem the long-term decline in enrollment and enable the schools to continue to perform their important role not only for Catholic families, but also for the large number of non-Catholic students who continue to enroll today in Catholic schools.

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