TO THE POINT

► New York has experienced a dramatic 75 percent decline in Catholic school enrollment since 1970, creating a Catholic school closure crisis that continues today.

► While there are multiple causes for the decline in Catholic school enrollment, a major factor has been families increasingly unable to afford tuition.

► New York’s Catholic schools have a long history of providing quality educational opportunities to students from immigrant, low-income and minority families. The Catholic school closure crisis threatens the future of this tradition.

► The purpose of this report is to familiarize the reader with the long history of Catholic schools in New York, the ongoing Catholic school closure crisis, and the resulting decline of educational opportunities they provide for students.
The Catholic School Closure Crisis and Declining Educational Opportunity in New York

INTRODUCTION

New York’s long history of Catholic schools providing quality educational opportunity to diverse student populations, including low-income, immigrant, and minority students, faces an uncertain future. Due in part to families increasingly unable to afford tuition, New York has experienced a dramatic decline in Catholic school enrollment since the 1970s, creating a Catholic school closure crisis that continues today.1

The Catholic school closure crisis is even more devastating due to the fact that these educational opportunities have a long history of success in preparing New York’s low-income, immigrant, and minority student populations for college and careers. Students in New York’s Catholic schools today are benefitting from quality elementary and secondary education coupled with strong character development programs unavailable in many public schools. These educational opportunities provide the hope of a brighter future and should be saved.

THE HISTORY OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN NEW YORK

Catholic education has a long history of serving the needs of low-income, immigrant, and minority students that dates back to 1800 in New York City with St. Peter’s Parish founding a Catholic school on Barclay Street in lower Manhattan to serve 100 Irish and German immigrants students.2 Because New York City was home to so many new immigrants, the demand for and growth of Catholic schools in New York was centered there.

During the early 19th century, the New York City public school system failed to meet the needs of the poor and immigrant Catholic populations (mostly from Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Poland), instead offering the Protestant establishment “a model of order and efficiency, embodying the virtues of good habits, cleanliness, thrift, and industry.”3 As education historian Diane Ravitch detailed in The Great School Wars, New York City, 1805-1973: A History of the Public Schools as Battlefields of Social Change, the failure of the public school system to accommodate the needs of the poor immigrant populations led the Catholic Church to establish its own system of schools:

The clergy [were] champions of the most depressed class in the city...The clergy comprehended the trials of the poor and believed that what they most needed was the succor of faith...To the Catholic poor, the Church was accepting. But their public schools were reproachful, disapproving of their habits and their morality, disparaging their family, their religion, and their culture...The Public School Society [or public school system] failed to recognize that its version of nonsectarianism was sectless Protestantism.4

From 1800 to the 1960s, Catholic schools flourished. More than two dozen Catholic schools were operating in New York City by the mid-1800s, growing to 22,000 students or nearly a fifth (19 percent) of all New York City students by 1870.5 Growth continued as each parish sought to open its own school, making education what the American bishops considered “an empire of charity” that grew to more than 55,000 New York City students by 1900.6 New York City Catholic school enrollment grew even more dramatically from 1930 to 1960, increasing by an additional 300,000 students, with Catholic schools serving a quarter (25 percent) of all city students.7 Enrollment reached a pinnacle in 1967 with 360,200 students enrolled in 488 schools.8
Nearly 80 percent of the New York City Catholic parishes were operating a school at that time.\(^9\)

While Catholic school enrollment was reaching an all time high in the 1960s, the schools also went through a significant transition. Following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the mission of Catholic education changed from primarily educating Catholic children of local parish families to one more ecumenical focusing on “mainstream education, and equipping disadvantaged children to participate fully in American economic and political life.”\(^10\) The increasing influence of liberation theology in the Catholic Church since Vatican II has encouraged schools to be more concerned with social justice and working to help create a humane and compassionate society.\(^11\) Highlighting the significant shift that started in the 1960s, a 2014 report by Niagara University’s Stephen J. Denig noted the following:

The mission of Catholic schools has changed as the population it serves has changed. Especially in the cities, and New York City in particular…Today, many of the students in the Catholic schools of New York are from Central America, Africa, the American South, Asia, the Caribbean, and the former republics of the Soviet Union.\(^12\)

While the 1960s saw a significant shift in the mission of Catholic schools and a change in some of the student populations they serve, these schools have retained their mission of providing educational opportunity to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the 2013-14 school year, black, Hispanic and multi-racial students made up a majority (56 percent) of students enrolled in New York City Catholic schools and more than a third (38 percent) of Catholic schools statewide.\(^13\)

### ENROLLMENT DECLINE AND SCHOOL CLOSURES

As the data below demonstrate, Catholic schools in New York City and statewide have experienced a significant decline in enrollment since 1970.\(^14\)

#### NYC CATHOLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT (1970-2014)\(^15\)

Catholic school enrollment in New York City has fallen from 325,620 students in 1970 to just 83,075 in 2014, a reduction of 242,545 students or 75 percent. Since 2011, more than 30 Catholic schools in the five boroughs have been shuttered.\(^16\)

#### NON-NYC CATHOLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT IN NYS (1970-2014)\(^17\)

Non-New York City Catholic school enrollment in New York State has seen a similar dramatic decline, falling from 338,397 students in 1970 to just 80,124 in 2014, a reduction of 258,273 students or 76 percent. Like New York City, Catholic school closures in other areas of the state continue. For example, the Diocese of Buffalo closed more than half (45 of 81 schools) of its schools in the ten-year period ending in 2014.\(^18\)
The dramatic decline in Catholic school enrollment and widespread closure of hundreds of Catholic schools in New York since the 1970s has brought about a Catholic school closure crisis that continues today.

**CAUSES OF DECLINE**

While there are multiple causes for the decline in Catholic school enrollment – including upwardly mobile immigrant populations moving to suburban communities, changing attitudes among Catholics regarding public schooling, fewer clergy and members of religious communities to staff schools, increased Catholic school operation costs, and an increase in tuition-free alternatives such as the growth of tuition-free public charter schools – a major factor in the decline has been lower- and middle-income households increasingly unable to afford tuition.  

The 1993 New York State Education Department report Catholic Schools in New York State: A Comprehensive Report examined the first two decades (1970-1990) of declining enrollment in New York’s Catholic schools and found that tuition and fees were “major factors” in the enrollment decline, noting that “[m]any poor and low income parents cannot afford to send their children to Catholic schools.”

In recent years, many New York families have faced great financial woes caused by the financial crisis and “Great Recession” that began in 2007, damage caused by Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and stagnant incomes coupled with rising living costs. For too many families, these challenges have made even New York City’s modest Catholic school tuition rates – approximately $3,500 for kindergarten through eighth grade and $6,000 to $8,000 for high school – unaffordable.

**THE DISAPPEARING “SPRINGBOARD” OF OPPORTUNITY**

The Catholic school closure crisis is even more concerning given the populations of students for whom these schools have successfully provided long-term life-changing educational opportunities. While Catholic schools have a long history of providing quality educational opportunities to students from immigrant, low-income, and minority families, the shrinking number of Catholic schools and challenges with affording tuition threatens the future of this tradition.

During a round of Catholic school closures in 2013, a feature New York Times story by David Gonzalez drew attention to how prominent minority officials and parents were increasingly concerned over the disappearing “springboard” of opportunity that they fear won’t be available to future generations due to the dwindling number of Catholic schools.

Gonzalez wrote that a “generation of accomplished Latino and black professionals and public servants” from poverty have attended New York Catholic schools and went on to have successful, influential careers. Those he cited include: Cesar A. Perales (New York secretary of state); Fernando Ferrer (former Bronx borough president); Bobby Sanabria (Grammy-nominated musician and educator); Theodore M. Shaw (former head of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund); and, Julissa Reynoso (United States ambassador to Uruguay). Additional examples include Jennifer Lopez (performer) and Carmen Fariña (New York City schools chancellor).

One of the most notable New York City Catholic school alumnae, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, noted that the “Catholic schools have been a pipeline to opportunity for generations...It gave people like me the chance to be successful.” Justice Sotomayor’s Catholic elementary school in the Bronx was closed in 2013.
Gonzalez highlighted the fact that “minority alumni are increasingly alarmed that New York will be deprived of a future generation of professionals – like lawyers, doctors and executives – to contribute economic and cultural vitality.”

Going a step further, the future of Catholic schools in impoverished neighborhoods will play a major factor in how the communities function decades from now because public schools “do not have the same values and culture,” according to New York University education professor Pedro Noguera.

**CATHOLIC SCHOOL SUCCESS**

Despite a significant share of students enrolled in Catholic school in New York coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, they have a long track record of achieving strong academic results. New York Post columnist Michael Goodwin rightly claimed in 2012 that “New York’s Catholic schools are the little engine that could. Their success doesn’t make news because there’s nothing shocking about it. It happens routinely, year after year, student after student.”

While remaining true to their mission to serve diverse student populations, Catholic schools achieve remarkable academic results. A strong 80 percent of students graduate on time, Catholic school SAT scores are higher than their public school peers, and 96 percent go to college. Black and Hispanic students who attended a Catholic high school are two and a half times more likely to graduate from college.

Given these results, it’s no surprise that New York families are concerned about the Catholic school closure crisis.

**CONCLUSION**

Catholics schools are becoming an increasingly endangered species in the education landscape. Although the rich tradition of New York’s Catholic schools serving a significant share of students from disadvantaged backgrounds continues, fewer Catholic schools are available and fewer families are able to afford tuition, resulting in a Catholic school closure crisis that continues today. These all-too-rare educational opportunities need to be saved and expanded in order to benefit more students for future generations.
NOTES AND SOURCES


10 Paul T. Hill and Mary Beth Celio, “Catholic Schools” in Diane Ravitch and Joe Viteritti (Eds.), City Schools: Lessons From New York, (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 239.


14 Catholic schools in the five boroughs of New York City are operated by the Archdiocese of New York (three boroughs, Staten Island boroughs) and the Brooklyn Diocese (Brooklyn and Queens boroughs). The two diocese are run separately, but the data concerning New York City Catholic schools includes all of the Catholic schools operated by both within the five boroughs.


NOTES AND SOURCES


ABOUT THE INVEST IN EDUCATION FOUNDATION

The Invest in Education Foundation is a research and policy not-for-profit 501(C)(3) and publicly-supported organization with a mission of promoting improvement in K-12 education, increasing educational choice, and working to close gaps in educational achievement. Our work is focused on New York State and our activities include research and events to educate the public and advocacy (under the “h” election) in support of legislation consistent with our mission.