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The era of the parochial school is over. Meet the Catholic educators searching for what's next.

Betsy Shirley
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Abigail Akano was not sure she wanted to be principal. For 10 years she had been a teacher, then assistant principal at Sacred Heart, a pre-K through eighth grade parochial school in the Highbridge section of the Bronx. The building was beautiful: a

four-story, Gothic-style schoolhouse built in 1926 with separate arched entrances for boys and girls. But the neighborhood—part of the poorest congressional district in the United States—was struggling. The median household income was \$28,042; more than 40 percent of families with kids under 18 lived in poverty.

Yet it was not the poverty that made Ms. Akano think twice about the job; it was the paperwork. Shortly into her first year as principal, her fears were confirmed. “I spent a lot of time learning to do tasks that, quite frankly, I was not educated for,” she recalled.

There were budgets to make, payrolls to process, teacher contracts to negotiate, candy-bar fundraisers to run, and that bathroom on the first floor was not going to fix itself. When she met with her supervisor, the parish pastor, they focused on whatever was urgent (like that bathroom) and seldom on what they cared about most: ensuring that every student at Sacred Heart was getting a character-shaping, life-changing education rooted in the Catholic faith. Plus, Ms. Akano felt disconnected from her teachers and students. She rarely visited classrooms except to tally up data points for various forms she needed to complete.

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She knew it was not an efficient way to run a school, but there was no time to think of a better system. In a crisis, she could call the diocesan superintendent or make a “mayday” call to a nearby principal, but for the most part, “the expectation was that you would figure stuff out on your own.”

‘All the Best!’

Multiply stories like Ms. Akano’s across the United States and you are looking at one of the major challenges Catholic primary education currently faces: Running a parish school has become too much for one pastor and one principal to handle.

“For so long, we’ve held up independence and site-based management as the hallmarks of good Catholic schools,” said Tim Uhl, who is superintendent of Montana Catholic schools and host of the [podcast](#), [newsletter](#) and [blog](#) “Catholic School Matters.” “But what we’re seeing today is that leaving someone alone to run their school and saying, ‘All the best! Hope you can do it!’ doesn’t always show excellence or progress.”

Mr. Uhl belongs to a movement of administrators, philanthropists, diocesan leaders and education experts who are rethinking the parochial, or parish-based, model of Catholic education. Traditionally, the pastor of St. Mary’s Church governed St. Mary’s School, providing the high-level, big-picture decisions about mission and vision and money, and often hiring a principal to implement day-to-day school management. But today Catholic schools are shifting some of that authority from pastors and principals to other sources. According to Mr. Uhl and his colleagues, these changes let principals focus on coaching teachers, free up pastors to focus on the school’s spiritual life, offer the laity more robust opportunities for leadership, and—crucially—ensure that Catholic schools maximize educational quality and financial sustainability.

Today Catholic schools are shifting authority from pastors and principals to other sources.

These alternative models—and there are many—do not offer a single vision for the future of Catholic schools. Embedded in these approaches are different answers to the big questions of Catholic education: How much power should be given to the laity and how much retained by the hierarchy? How do we balance independence with the call to be in solidarity with each other? What is the primary mission of Catholic education? And how do we pay for it?

Yet on one topic, there is agreement: The era of the parochial school—at least in the form that has dominated Catholic education in recent memory—is over.

Perishing Schools

For a quick study of the past several decades of parochial education, consider the following lines from the 1993 film starring Whoopi Goldberg, “Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit.” Nun: “St. Francis has been a beacon of hope to people here for many years. To close the school like that would be a disaster. You’re sure there’s nothing to be done?” Archdiocese Person No. 1: “We’re afraid not.”

For extra credit, here is a primer. Though some parish schools existed during the colonial era, today’s parochial system was shaped by the anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic spirit of the early 1800s. Justifiably fearing that public schools aimed to Americanize (read: Protestant-ize) Catholic children, U.S. bishops wrote increasingly stern pastoral letters that culminated in a letter issued in 1884 by the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore: “Pastors and parents should not rest,” insisted the bishops, until every parish “has schools adequate to the needs of its children.”



St Mary of the Lake School in Chicago, Ill., circa 1960. By 1960, nationwide enrollment in Catholic schools had peaked, with more than 5.2 million students. (Photo: Authenticated News/Archive Photos/Getty Images)

By 1960, nationwide enrollment in Catholic schools had peaked, with more than 5.2 million students. “Then change roared across the nation,” the Catholic education experts Andy Smarick and Kelly Robson write in “Catholic School Renaissance,” their 2015 report for the Philanthropy Roundtable. “White Catholic families departed cities in droves. Church membership and Catholic observance declined, and the flow of new nuns

and priests”—who had provided a steady supply of low-cost teachers—“shrunk to a trickle.” Plus, the threat of anti-Catholic bigotry was no longer on parents’ minds. All this spelled trouble: declining enrollment and rising costs. Despite the odds, some schools pulled through—even thrived—but the trend was clear: From 1966 to 2014, the number of Catholic schools was cut in half. Today, enrollment in Catholic schools hovers around 1.8 million.

Adding fresh urgency to this challenge is the sharp decline in elementary enrollment just within the past decade. According to the National Catholic Education Association, “elementary school enrollment has declined by 27.5 percent in the 12 urban dioceses and 19.4 percent in the rest of the U.S.”—one reason why innovation in Catholic schools has zeroed in on elementary campuses, especially in urban areas.

School Governance 101

Catholic schools are usually governed by a pastor, a bishop (or his diocesan staff) or a board, explained a 2015 report from Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (Fadica), but “because canon law allows ecclesial officials to delegate responsibilities at their discretion, infinite configurations of authority are possible.” This makes the current landscape of Catholic elementary schools complicated. Survey Catholic school websites and you will see a jumble of terms like *consortium*, *limited jurisdiction*, *nonprofit network*, *local autonomy*, *two-tier boards* and *central governing entity*.

Despite these infinite possibilities, when it comes to decision-making, there is a clear pattern. Most schools today are shifting power from a single person (the pastor) to a board of directors that includes a combination of members of the clergy, laypersons and diocesan leaders. Driving this shift toward more collaborative styles of decision-making is a twofold recognition. First, with a limited number of new ordinations, priests need to focus on the church’s sacramental life; and second, schools benefit from the specialized skills lay leaders can offer.



The Healey Foundation is a New Jersey-based nonprofit that provides training and funding to Catholic schools like St.

“The church can no longer do it,” said Christine Healey, president of the Healey Education Foundation, a New Jersey-based nonprofit organization that provides training and funding to Catholic schools. “And if we believe we want to invite the laity to help solve the equation, do we only want them to

Mary Magdalen School in North Wilmington, De. (Picture: The Healey Foundation)

raise money for us? Or will we also give them some operating control to

be part of the solution?"

Of course, how much control a board has—and who is a voting board member—varies considerably among schools. In some models, for example, parish pastors can appeal decisions made by the school board to the archdiocese; in others, the scope of a board's authority is limited to a narrow set of decisions—differences that reflect a range of approaches to balancing the leadership of clergy and laity. Yet the emphasis remains on empowering boards to act rather than just offer advice.

"Funders are really looking for models with a board of directors that has real authority to make decisions, like hiring and firing the principal, determining the education model, and making financial and operating decisions," said Alicia Simon of Fadica and one of the co-authors of the 2015 report.

A New York Story

Which brings us back to Abigail Akano. In 2010, the Archdiocese of New York announced a plan to reorganize 92 parish schools into nine regions. The schools in each new region switched from being individually governed by their parish pastor to being collectively governed by a centralized board.

This plan was already a significant shift, but a group of philanthropists committed to Catholic education had a further idea: What if the diocese outsourced the management and financial responsibility for some of these regionalized schools to an independent, nonprofit, nonecclesiastical organization?

"Our donors were weary of funding around the edges instead of funding for big impact," explained Jill Kafka, who formerly directed the Patrons Program, a philanthropic organization that later merged with the Endowment for Inner City Education to become Partnership Schools.

"They can hire us and they can fire us at any time if they don't feel like we're doing good by these schools."

In 2013 the Archdiocese of New York agreed, granting Partnership Schools “full operational control” of six pre-K through eighth grade schools in Harlem and the Bronx. It was not a new model of governance per se; the diocese retains ownership and ultimate governance of Partnership Schools. But through a memo of understanding, the operation of these schools—creating an academic vision, maintaining the buildings, fundraising, hiring, finances—is turned over to the board of Partnership Schools, which has full authority to make decisions on behalf of the diocese.

“We’re basically an outsourced management contract with the diocese,” said Ms. Kafka, who is now Partnership Schools’s executive director. “They can hire us and they can fire us at any time if they don’t feel like we’re doing good by these schools.”

When Sacred Heart joined Partnership Schools, Ms. Akano was relieved. With the central office of Partnership Schools responsible for many of the tasks that once consumed her day, she could get back to what she was best at: ensuring teachers were providing instructional excellence.

On a typical school day, you will find Ms. Akano in the classroom, listening in on lessons from a student-sized desk, or working with the dean of students to plan the next professional development session—something that now happens weekly for all teachers. As a result, Ms. Akano sees teachers taking more ownership for their students’ academic achievement.

Ms. Kafka is also pleased. Since 2014, the six Partnership Schools have more than doubled the number of their students who pass the New York State language and math assessments. And while local public and charter schools spent an estimated \$19,000 to \$20,000 per student in 2016-17, the annual cost of educating a student at Partnership Schools was \$9,700. (But thanks to philanthropic funding, 82 percent of students receive a scholarship; the average amount collected from each family is \$2,700.)

Better Together

Partnership Schools shows what can happen when parochial schools are united by a strong central office: greater accountability to academic goals, more opportunities for leadership and professional development, resource sharing and cost savings through economies of scale.

For example, several years after the Archdiocese of Milwaukee approved the formation of Seton Catholic Schools, the network of 11 parochial schools reported saving \$735,000 on operational costs. “Different schools had different vendors and they were paying different levels of fees,” said Don Drees, the president of the Seton network. “We were able to consolidate all of our schools under one vendor and then renegotiate what that contract looks like for a lower cost and higher quality.” Seton was also able to hire a director of talent development to ensure its schools had a “big picture” plan to grow and to retain high-quality leaders—something that would never have been possible for stand-alone schools.

The advantage of a centralized model is simply the ability to spread a good idea across a greater number of schools.

Leadership development is also an advantage of the network created by the Notre Dame ACE Academies, a partnership between the University of Notre Dame and clusters of schools in Indiana, Arizona and two different cities in Florida. For each of these clusters, ACE set up a board of limited jurisdiction with the power to make decisions on hiring and evaluating the principals in that region—a change that makes principals more accountable but also provides them with greater opportunities for professional development. ACE teachers visit each other’s campuses, take immersion trips to observe high-performing schools and gather at the University of Notre Dame in the summer to share best practices.

Sometimes, the advantage of a centralized model is simply the ability to spread a good idea across a greater number of schools. When Partnership Schools realized that their schools often pulled substandard math curricula from the internet, they switched to the widely used Eureka Math program. It was not a particularly expensive change, but it had a big impact, said Ms. Kafka. “Just by changing our curriculum, we were able to

move our test scores 20 points higher.... It's one of those untapped levers for change." When the diocese saw those results, it implemented Eureka Math throughout the rest of its schools.

"We consider ourselves a laboratory," said Ms. Kafka. "You do something in six schools; and if it works, then you can broaden it to the rest of the system."

Solidarity, Subsidiarity

Centralized models of Catholic school governance, which usually serve students in poor, urban communities, model the principle of solidarity: working together to create systemic change for the common good, with special attention to those who lack resources. But Catholic social teaching also emphasizes the importance of subsidiarity: allowing local groups to make their own decisions whenever possible. This principle is rooted in the belief that all communities—including those that lack other resources—have wisdom in solving their own problems. And as the traditional parish model demonstrated, local decision-making has real advantages: "When the parish model works, it's a powerhouse," said William Hughes, who is chief academic officer for Seton Catholic Schools. "You've got family support, you might have a food pantry or activities for cross-generational work, and it becomes like a community center—something charter schools are constantly striving to create."

Some centralized models try to address the tension between localized and centralized decision-making by inviting local pastors to serve on the network's board or ensuring that staff from the central office meet regularly with on-site school leaders. In Seton Catholic Schools, the central network is given authority to operate not by the archdiocese but through voluntary—and revocable—agreements with individual schools. "We didn't 'take over' the schools," explained Don Drees. "We're collaborating with parishes and the things that parishes have traditionally done—and continue to do—and we're adding the expertise and leadership to drive results within the school."

Still, a centralized model is not always the right move. “We started to see this collapse in urban settings with lower-income communities, so a lot of the passion around the work has tried to create centralized models to help these mission communities,” said Ms. Healey. “But we took the view that all schools are at risk of closure, not just the ones serving lower-income communities.”

Creating a network is great at saving on costs and driving a rigorous academic model that attracts funders.

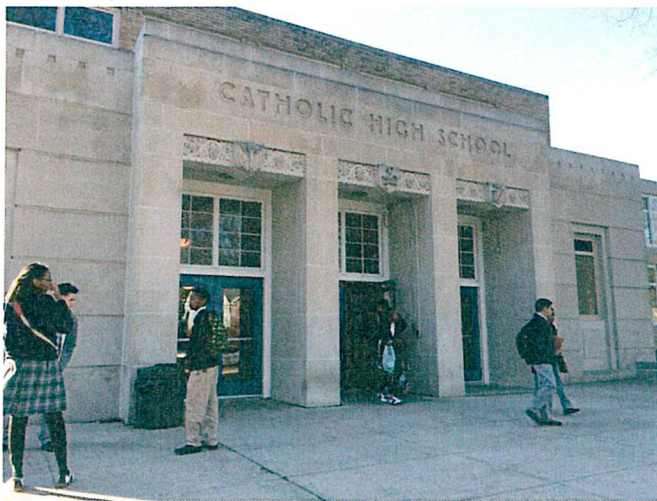
So in addition to co-founding Catholic Partnership Schools—a network of five schools serving low-income communities in Camden, N.J.—the Healey Education Foundation created a local model that has been adopted by nearly 80 parish schools in dioceses across Delaware, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The Healey Advancement Methodology, as it is called, is aimed at middle-income communities where the challenge confronting Catholic schools is not tuition affordability but rather declining interest in enrollment. The solution? “Somebody needs to get out and pound the pavement to get people to send kids to your school,” said Ms. Healey.

Creating a network is great at saving on costs and driving a rigorous academic model that attracts funders, explained Ms. Healey, but if your aim is to drive enrollment and parent engagement, joining with other schools does not help much. So schools using the Healey method also form a board that is empowered to make decisions that were formerly made by the parish, but just for that school. The foundation also helps elementary schools hire full-time directors of advancement, who become responsible for the two revenue drivers: enrollment and fundraising. Paired with a dynamic principal, Ms. Healey explained, the result can be a local school that offers parents a compelling reason to enroll their children.

Built to Last?

Until recently, if you wanted a success story of innovation in parochial education, Jubilee Catholic Schools Network in Memphis was an obvious choice.

In 2000—the Catholic Church’s jubilee year—the Diocese of Memphis shocked Catholic educators by reopening nine Catholic schools, some of which had been closed for 50 years, in some of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. Part of the “Memphis miracle” was that, thanks to generous funding from anonymous donors, the diocese promised that no family would be turned away if they could not afford tuition. Equally innovative was the structure. For efficiency, Mary McDonald, the Memphis Catholic schools superintendent, centralized some decision-making for the nine schools within the diocesan offices. The Jubilee School Network thrived, and its success inspired much of the innovation in Catholic schools today.



The Diocese of Memphis shocked educators when it announced that all schools in its Jubilee Network would close at the end of the 2018-19 school year. (Photo: Chalkbeat)

But in January 2018, the diocese of Memphis again shocked Catholic educators, this time with an announcement that all Jubilee schools would close at the end of the 2018-19 school year. Funding the schools had been a “challenge,” said [the diocesan website](#), and despite annual fundraising efforts, the generous trust fund from donors was “nearly depleted.”

The news sent shockwaves through the world of Catholic education. “This is an inflection point in the history of Catholic schools,” wrote Tim Uhl in [his newsletter](#). “It might be a harbinger of more closures to come. Or we might learn from this event and improve the landscape.”

For Mary McDonald, who retired from her role as superintendent in 2012, Jubilee’s impending closure is a lesson in why schools need greater independence from the diocese. In her work today as an education consultant, Ms. McDonald advises other school networks to be more like independent Catholic schools, which remain under

the authority of the bishop in terms of Catholic identity but are owned and operated independently of a parish or diocese. As she put it: “With anything that’s owned and operated by the diocese, there’s only one vote that counts—and that’s the bishop.”

The collapse of a celebrated school network pointed to the importance of passing legislation that allows parents to use public money to help fund their child’s private schools.

The importance of Ms. McDonald’s observation became clear last October, when Bishop Martin D. Holley, who had made the decision to close Jubilee Schools and also had controversially reassigned two-thirds of the diocese’s priests to new parishes, was removed from pastoral leadership for reasons related to “management of the diocese.”

For Jill Kafka, the news about the Jubilee closures was “a wake-up call about sustainability.” The central office of Partnership Schools still has to raise \$6,400 per pupil every year to cover operating expenses—more than \$14.2 million annually. And as Jubilee demonstrated, a model that relies heavily on donors to cover its operating expenses is risky.

For others, the collapse of a celebrated school network pointed to the importance of passing legislation that allows parents to use public money to help fund their child’s private schools. “Vouchers or other school choice programs, such as tax-credit scholarships, may be necessary to make Catholic schools affordable for low-income families,” wrote Seton’s William Hughes in a “post-mortem” analysis of Jubilee Schools.

Structure Versus Goals

The August following Jubilee’s startling announcement, a nonprofit formed by local Catholic leaders won approval to convert six of the former Jubilee schools into a network of charter schools, or schools that are independently operated but funded by taxpayers. If the appeal of this plan is obvious—a sustainable model for tuition-free, high-quality education in communities that need good schools—so is the downside:

The schools are no longer Catholic. Though charter schools are free from some regulations imposed on public schools, they are still bound by law to be religiously neutral.

Obviously, not everyone was pleased by this development. “I think pastors and bishops can be made to feel like this is a way to save the school,” said Christian Dallavis, the founder of Notre Dame ACE Academies. “But in reality, it closes the school and it eliminates the possibility of them being permitted to hire principals and teachers on the basis of whether they believe the children are made in the image and likeness of God.”

“You stop being yoked to a particular structure and start being focused on goals.”

No one hears these arguments more than Stephanie Saroki de García, co-founder and managing director of Seton Education Partners, a nonprofit organization on a mission to provide Catholic education to underserved communities (not to be confused with Seton Catholic Schools in Milwaukee). Like Mr. Dallavis, Ms. Saroki de García agrees that the ideal form of Catholic education is a school where the teachers can pray with students during the day and weave conversations about faith throughout the entire curriculum. But despite the efforts of her fellow education reformers, she knows that kind of Catholic education is not always an option. If parents cannot afford tuition and you do not have access to vouchers or donors with deep pockets, what are you supposed to do, especially in low-income communities where quality schools—Catholic or otherwise—are already in short supply?

To Ms. Saroki de García, the answer is clear: “You stop being yoked to a particular structure and start being focused on goals.” So in 2013 Seton founded Brilla College Prep, a public charter school that operates out of three former parish schools in the South Bronx. During the day, Brilla uses a rigorous curriculum with religiously neutral virtues and values. But after school, it offers optional (and privately funded) faith programming. Since 2014, the program has led to 99 students receiving the sacrament of baptism; and 53 percent of participating families report praying

together more. Brilla is not a Catholic school, but for the families who opt into the after-school program, it achieves the same goals of a Catholic education, said Ms. Saroki de García.

And the Mission Is...

The bottom line is: “The model of Catholic education we’ve relied on for a century is no longer working,” said Andy Smarick, one of the authors of “Catholic School Renaissance.” “Now there are people who think that old model is the only pure model and they don’t want to change it at all. And the question for those people is: ‘Would you rather continue to have that model and another 50 years of Catholic school loss, or are we going to be open to seeing some of these things different[ly] and try to preserve Catholic education, even though it may look different than in 1965?’”

Another question: What is the “pure” model of Catholic education? The first schools in North America were part of Spanish missions intended “to dominate, civilize, and educate” indigenous people, explains the historian Timothy Walch in *Parish Schools: A History of American Parochial Education From Colonial Times to the Present*. The earliest schools in the English colonies were not parochial, but rather independent schools supported and operated by the sisters and brothers of religious orders, including Elizabeth Ann Seton, whose early school-founding efforts led to her becoming the first American saint.

Even the parish model that peaked in the 1960s was the product of earlier experimentation. As leaders built schools in response to 19th-century anti-Catholicism, some emphasized instruction in students’ native languages to maintain their ethnic heritage; others wanted a more “American” curriculum. Leaders like Bishop John Neumann of Philadelphia created central boards to raise money, review the curriculum and supervise the construction of new schools; others tried to change laws to make public funding available for Catholic schools. And from 1831 through 1916, Catholic communities in at least 14 states allowed public school boards to

finance local Catholic schools, accepting the limitation that religious instruction would only take place after the school day had ended—a model similar to Ms. Saroki de García's charter schools.

During the current era of experimentation in Catholic education, Mr. Smarick sees the church wrestling with a variety of ways to understand the primary mission of Catholic education: Is it to keep Catholic families rooted in the faith? Or is to provide high-quality education to low-income communities? Or is it an evangelization tool to help bring new people to the faith? Of course, many schools share all those goals, said Mr. Smarick, “but which one you put at the top of the list is important.”

“We’re trying to figure out how to prioritize these things the right way and update these institutions,” he continued. “So the fact that there are different people approaching this in different ways is both natural and very exciting.”

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