

Book Review

Lost Classroom, Lost Community: Catholic Schools' Importance in Urban America

Margaret F. Brinig and Nicole Stelle Garnett
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Lost Classroom, Lost Community: Catholic Schools' Importance in Urban America continues a line of scholarly work that calls attention to the invaluable effects of Catholic schools in the United States, in light of Catholic school closures and the rise of charter schools. It is unique in that it underlines the role of Catholic schools as institutions that contribute to the stability and health of the broader community in which they are located. Catholic schools make this contribution, the authors argue, through the generation of social capital, or “networks that make urban neighborhoods function smoothly” (p. 113). The authors build on research about the educational benefits of social capital within a school (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1992), and the benefit for schools of social capital in the surrounding neighbourhood (Coleman, 1988), to propose that the social capital generated by Catholic schools extends well beyond the walls of the classroom.

The authors highlight a statistically significant relationship between Catholic school closures and crime rates, drawing from survey data collected by the Project on Human Development in Chicago, Illinois, and neighbourhood police beat data. Between 1999 and 2005, Chicago experienced a significant decrease in crime, but the decrease was more pronounced in those neighbourhoods with open Catholic schools. Brinig and Garnett were able to successfully replicate their study in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. However, they could not establish a similar pattern in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, California, where very few Catholic schools have been closed. An open Catholic school there does not appear to affect crime rates. Los Angeles is unique because its Catholic schools were systematically established between 1948 and 1970 in a centralized manner to provide space for the tens of thousands of children who were annually denied entrance. As a result, the authors suggest that the impact of Catholic schools on crime is more evident in dense urban neighbourhoods and in neighbourhoods where schools emerged amid unplanned urban development, like Chicago and Philadelphia.

Brinig and Garnett understand and do not equivocate on the limitations of their statistical analysis. They acknowledge the lack of uniformity in results, possible discrepancies related to limited and/or skewed statistical data, and the strong correlation of demographic and economic variables (such as a rise in poverty, escalation of the minority population, or overall decline in population) with social stability in a cityscape. Despite these limitations, the authors strive to isolate the effects of more pertinent factors to ascertain the value created by open Catholic schools in a community. While this weakens the strength of their findings, making it impossible

to demonstrate causation, the authors nonetheless make a compelling case for the social value of functional Catholic schools. Employing a two-stage regression analysis, they seek variables affecting school closures that do not directly affect neighbourhood health. Surprisingly, while the poverty rate in a neighbourhood is correlated strongly with school closures, they suggest that it is not the most important determinant. By tracking pastoral assignments, they find that school closures depend largely upon the dedication exhibited by the pastor of the parish. Pastoral variables that affect school closures include: the age of the pastor, his affiliation to a religious order, and, the most predictive, the presence of an irregularity in leadership, such as a sexual abuse charge involving the pastor.

To investigate whether or not charter schools exhibit similar social capital effects, the authors include them in their analysis. This is particularly appropriate considering that charter schools compete with Catholic schools for students, and that many Catholic schools have been reorganized as charter schools that operate out of the same building with, for the most part, the same students and teachers. Crime rates were found to be consistently lower on police beats with Catholic schools. In contrast, charter schools did not affect crime rates in a statistically significant way, not even when operating out of closed Catholic schools. Perhaps indicative of their position on school choice, Brinig and Garnett do not eliminate the possibility that charter schools, with time, will become rooted in the community and bear similar positive neighbourhood effects as Catholic schools. However, their explanation for the impact of Catholic schools ultimately includes the religious component, which is unique to Catholic schools. Expanding on literature that links faith communities with social capital and, more specifically, literature that recognizes churches as stabilizing institutions in inner city communities, the authors conclude that practicing religion increases the frequency of social interactions among residents in a community and thereby generates social capital. In other words, the civic engagement, service, and tolerance found in Catholic schools are likely to extend beyond academic achievement to affect the broader community.

The authors situate their argument for Catholic schools in the context of increasing choice-based educational reforms and debate about the use of public funds for private schools. This discussion takes on a unique relevance in the Canadian context, where public funding for Catholic schools varies by province, and proponents of public schooling regularly question public funding for separate and independent schools. Presenting both social justice arguments in favour of school choice and arguments of opponents in favour of protecting and promoting public education, the authors argue that financial support for poor students to attend Catholic schools might help slow the closure of Catholic schools that benefit communities often in need of stabilization. In a debate that typically centers on test scores, parental and religious liberties, and public school reform, Brinig and Garnett make an important contribution to educational research by highlighting the societal contribution of Catholic schools. *Lost Classroom, Lost Community* serves as a needed reminder of the comparable value of Catholic schools: "Catholic schools have long exhibited faith in the ability of all children to learn regardless of circumstance and apparently have also fostered community in neighbourhoods where social ties are frayed by poverty, disorder, and violence" (p. 135).

References

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