

BOISI CENTER

INTERVIEWS



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PATRICIA WEITZEL-O'NEILL is executive director of the Roche Center for Catholic Education at Boston College, and former superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. She spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before her presentation on Catholic education reform at the Boisi Center.

OWENS: How are Catholic primary and secondary schools doing today?

WEITZEL-O'NEILL: Thank you for posing probably one of the most difficult questions facing those of us who are committed to Catholic education. Catholic schools today are holding their own. There are people who would like to say that there is a crisis in Catholic education because of the decline in the number of Catholic schools and the decline in the number of students in our schools over the past 20 years.

For example, in 2009-2010 there were 7,094 Catholic elementary and secondary schools while in 2011-2012 there are 6,841—a decline of about 3.5% in three years.

What people are not paying attention to is the difference between elementary and secondary school student enrollment. In 2009, there were 2,119,000 students enrolled in Catholic elementary schools while today we have 2,031,000, a decline of 4.1%.

The fact that there is a greater decline in students than in schools is important. You have to pay attention to where all of this is happening. When you see the data aggregated for the United States rather than by region or state, it makes sense why people would think that we have a serious problem on our hands.

In reality, there is a larger societal shift going on. The population is migrating to the South and to the West Coast, where there are tech jobs. As the demography changes, schools are being built in these areas. Raleigh, North Carolina is opening new Catholic schools. Houston is build-



ing schools. In the meantime, the economies in New England and the Rust Belt are transitioning from manufacturing to think-tanks. Young people are postponing marriage and childbirth in addition to having fewer children overall.

The problem is that there aren't as many school-aged kids in the same places where there used to be many, many children. At the end of the day it's not

just Catholic schools that are closing. It's all schools.

The real challenge we're facing in Catholic education is creating and expanding a funding model that will sustain Catholic schools beyond the next five years. This is a political statement, but the best solution to that is for Catholic education to receive its fair share of the tax dollar.

OWENS: So, vouchers?

WEITZEL-O'NEILL: It could be vouchers, it could be tax credits. It could be any number of creative solutions that other countries, for some reason, have been able to figure out. In Canada, you don't have to pay tuition for Catholic school. It's the same story for Australia and England. They even give aid to Catholic schools in South Africa, where they have hardly any schools. Because of continuing arguments in the Supreme Court, this is one of the only countries where aid largely is not given to Catholic education.

Interestingly, this varies from state to state. In Massachusetts, Catholic schools are struggling. In Maryland, they're struggling. Yet these are two very Catholic states. Virginia, a very Protestant state, passed legislation in less than a year to allow people to receive a tax credit for donations that go to non-profits. This in turn provides tuition assistance for children attending Catholic schools.

OWENS: Is this a red state/blue state issue?

WEITZEL-O'NEILL: I would like to think that it is, but it isn't. Indiana just began giving vouchers to Catholic schools. Pennsylvania did the same and then moved to tax credits.

OWENS: Returning to demographics, what are the changes in the number of Catholic students who attend Catholic schools? What do the numbers look like over the past 20 years and how are they changing?

WEITZEL-O'NEILL: That's a good question. I don't have the numbers on the top of my head, but I can speak to Catholic schools with inner city populations. The majority of inner city students attending Catholic schools are not Catholic, particularly among the black student population.

It's important to understand that we believe in Catholic education because we're Catholic, not because the students are Catholic. Sometimes we worry about the children being Catholic and passing on the faith instead of focusing on evangelizing and finding Jesus among all of us. The latter, ultimately, was originally the mission of Catholic education and still is in many parts of the country.

We also have a very large Catholic population that we're not serving: the Hispanic population. These numbers are increasing continuously. In fact, the majority of school-aged children in this country will soon be Hispanic. Already, the majority of Catholic school-aged children are Hispanic. Yet we're only serving about 1.7% of those students now.

The reason for this is complex. There's a cultural piece in that Hispanic immigrants tend to believe that private schools are for the wealthy, and Catholic schools are private schools in the United States. In most places where they emigrated from, all public schools are in essence Catholic schools. Everyone in these populations is Catholic, so of course Catholicism is taken for granted.

We have examples of this even in the United States. In southern Maryland, the population is almost entirely Catholic. It is where the Jesuits landed and where John Carroll started his parish; Catholicism in the United States was effectively founded there. During my tenure as superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Archdiocese of Washington, a recent superintendent for public schools, in southern Maryland said to me one day, "Patty, when I first came here I didn't

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quite know what to do. When I walked into some of my public schools they behaved as if it were a Catholic school because they're all Catholic. The way everybody acts," he said, "it could be viewed as against the law." Well, that's a whole new problem I don't think anybody else has ever had before. There, the population doesn't feel as strong a need to go to a Catholic school to affirm their faith because they do it among their community in their local public schools.

OWENS: The *New York Times* recently published an interesting article about how comfortable American Muslims frequently feel in American Catholic colleges. I read it as an example of how

Catholic schools can serve a wider audience by being a place of moral integrity, even when cultural and religious differences are present. Do the standards and benchmarks that you are working toward have an impact on the kind of students Catholic schools serve? Is this distinct from the standards of academic rigor you propose?

WEITZEL-O'NEILL: The two are inseparable. Catholic identity and mission are fundamental to the standards for an effective Catholic school with regard to academic excellence.

In the *National Standards and Benchmarks* document, there is continuous reference both to the Catholic mission and to academic excellence. Catholic schools must have the highest expectations for their students and believe that every student will excel.

With that belief in mind, everyone is welcome. Of course, participation in prayer and in liturgical services is still required, but this has been implemented beautifully in school after school.

In the Archdiocese of Washington, we had some schools where 80% of the students were not Catholic, yet loved mass. In fact, at Saint Thomas Moore, in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in D.C., the students were so disappointed when mass was not included in the summer school program that they went to Father and demanded mass. Although the children had different faiths, mass was a peaceful, prayerful time for them.

OWENS: Can you tell me more about the national standards and benchmarks that you've been working on with different umbrella groups? Who needs to adopt these standards and how?

WEITZEL-O'NEILL: The good news is that it's been extremely well-received. Lorraine Ozar and I now have many speaking engagements from local schools and school boards to dioceses to present, explain, and demonstrate how to use and implement these standards. We have a

few bishops who adopted them, handed them to superintendents and said, “Do it.”

My concern is that we have to move very quickly in higher education to create a template for implementation that can be shared and used by different centers and schools for Catholic education. In the meantime, we are recommending that everybody take a long look at the rubrics and surveys posted on the website www.catholicstandards.org

Advanced Ed, the agency that accredits most of the Catholic schools in the South and West, has supported the work on the development of the rubrics and the surveys. These tools are now being used in Baltimore, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C. among many other places, to accredit and assess whole dioceses based on the new standards.

In addition to regional uses there are also local uses of the standards, as in Fontbonne Academy in Milton, Massachusetts, which is using them as the basis for their strategic planning and as a means to methodically assess where they are, where they want to be, and how to work toward that.

OWENS: It sounds like a big endeavor at all levels—accrediting at the diocese or archdiocese level as well as the parishes and schools. You earlier expressed the importance of conveying the relevance of these standards for Catholic schools. What would you like to convey to the leaders of Catholic education?

WEITZEL-O’NEILL: There are a few things that are really important. First of all, Catholic schools need to be part of the conversation. We are serving a good percentage of kids in this country and every young person pursuing a degree in education, for example, should know what it would look like if they went to teach in a Catholic school. You know what it looks like in a public school. Charter schools, like Catholic schools, have not had national standards in place in the past.



Taking this to a really practical level, we’re hoping that those who teach courses on leadership and the management of schools will take these standards for effective schools and implement them so that it is clear what is expected at all Catholic schools. It should be the same as public schools, except for the aspects relating to Catholicism and the emphasis on excellence. If we could see a universal adoption of these standards at all levels, then the ideal would be for all Catholic schools to be effective and have a clear brand for all to aspire to.

We have a history of excellence. We have a history of being the change agent in the lives of kids who would otherwise never have access to good high school education, let alone outstanding college education. Ninety-nine percent of kids who go to Catholic high schools in this country graduate, and nearly all of them are accepted to colleges and universities. They may not all go on to enroll in undergraduate education because of life circumstances, but they are prepared.

There are standards that already exist in most of our religious order-based schools, such as the Salesians, the Cristo Rey network, the Jesuits, and we can look to those as an example. The problem is that Catholic elementary schools that are parish-based, have stood alone and have not

had any source or sense of community or one document to look to.

With the Jesuit school experience, you could have one student from Africa and another from Buffalo, New York and they’re both talking about the same thing. They know what an excellent Catholic school is supposed to be if it’s Jesuit. I watched it happen at the International Jesuit Conference. It is this commonality of experience that we aspire to for all Catholic schools.

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