The Invisible Miracle of Catholic Schools
Sol Stern

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Over the past several years, Cardinal John J. O'Connor has repeatedly made New York City an extraordinary offer: send me the lowest-performing 5 percent of children presently in the public schools, and I will put them in Catholic schools-where they will succeed. Last August the Cardinal sweetened the offer. He invited city officials to come study the Catholic school system, "to make available to public schools whatever of worth in our Catholic schools is constitutionally usable. The doors are open. Our books are open. Our hearts are open. No charge."

The city's response: almost total silence.

In a more rational world, city officials would have jumped at the cardinal's offer. It might, first of all, have been a huge financial plus for the city. The annual per-pupil cost of Catholic elementary schools is $2,500 per year, about a third of what taxpayers now spend for the city's public schools. Assuming that the Catholic schools really did absorb 50,000 more students (roughly 5 percent of the 1 million now enrolled in public schools), the city might save over a quarter billion dollars a year.

But the city would gain a still greater benefit from having thousands more of its disadvantaged children finish school and become productive citizens. For O'Connor's claim that Catholic schools would do a better job than public schools is no idle boast. Catholic schools are already transforming the lives of thousands of poor black and Hispanic children, many of whom are not Catholic. Unlike the public schools, which have trivialized their curriculum and abandoned their standards in the name of multiculturalism, Catholic educators have remained committed to the ideal that minority children can share in, and master, our civilization's intellectual and spiritual heritage. Indeed, Catholic schools are among the last bastions in American education of the idea of a common civic culture.

This makes for a supreme historical irony. When America erected the "iron wall" of separation between church schools and government schools more than a century ago, the public school system seemed the best instrument for educating poor immigrants and assimilating them into the nation's mainstream culture and shared civic ideals. The separatist Catholic schools, on the other hand, saw themselves as a bastion against an attempt by the public schools to impose first Protestantism and, later, secularism on Catholic children.

But beginning in the 1970s, as public schools were deteriorating, urban parish schools, inspired by Vatican II's universalism and by its call for an end to racism and social injus-

tice, opened their doors to the new poor, mostly minority and non-Catholic. Minority enrollment in New York State's Catholic schools shot up-from 12 percent in 1970 to 36 percent in 1991. In New York City the figure is almost 60 percent; in Manhattan and the Bronx, 85 percent.

It turned out that Catholic schools were superb at this new mission. Mountains of data make the case conclusively. A landmark 1982 study by education scholars James Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore, for instance, demonstrated that Catholic school students were one grade level ahead of their public school counterparts in mathematics, reading, and vocabulary. A study by Andrew Greeley revealed that the differences between Catholic school and public school performance were greatest among students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

The early scholarship attributed Catholic schools' superior performance to their more rigorous academic curriculum and their greater degree of discipline. Researchers also credited the distinctive organization of Catholic schools. Free from the central bureaucratic controls that weigh down public schools, they seemed more like autonomous communities, yet were accountable to their students' families. Coleman observed that whereas the public school system had become an arena for the clash of political and economic interests, Catholic schools were infused with an atmosphere of trust and cooperation between teachers, administrators, and parents, based on a shared moral vision.

During the next decade, a growing body of research confirmed the Catholic schools' advantage. In 1990 the RAND Corporation compared the performance of children from New York City's public and Catholic high schools. Only 25 percent of the public school students graduated at all, and only 16 percent took the Scholastic Aptitude Test. By contrast, over 95 percent of the Catholic school students graduated, and 75 percent took the SAT. Catholic school students scored an average of 815 on the SAT. By shameful contrast, the small "elite" of public school students who graduated and took the SAT averaged only 642 for those in neighborhood schools and 715 for those in magnet schools. The national average, heavily dominated by white middle class pupils, is 900.

A 1993 New York State Department of Education report compared New York City schools with the highest levels of minority enrollment. The conclusions were striking: "Catholic schools with 81 to 100 percent minority composition outscored New York City public schools with the same percentage of minority enrollment in Grade 3 reading (+17 percent), Grade 3 mathematics (+10 percent), Grade 5 writing (+6 percent), Grade 6 reading (+10 percent), and Grade 6 mathematics (+11 percent)." And a seminal study by Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland, based on a national database of student performance, found that Catholic schools succeed in reducing by almost half the impact of a student's minority background on academic achievement.

Public education interest groups-of which the most powerful by far are the teachers' unions-argue that a "self-selection" bias distorts the survey data. While public schools must take all children, they claim, Catholic schools allegedly can screen out those from

troubled backgrounds. What's more, the poor minority children whose parents choose to pay Catholic school tuition are more motivated.

Yet the 1993 State Education Department study found that Catholic and public schools had similar percentages of students from troubled families with low incomes. And the experience of a wealthy New Yorker named Charles Benenson dramatically demonstrates how negligible a part self-selection plays in Catholic schools' success with inner city pupils.

As part of the I Have A Dream program, which pays college tuition for minority children who finish high school, Benenson adopted several classes at P.S. 44 in the South Bronx. Disappointed by how few students even made it through high school, Benenson began offering to pay the tuition for any of the eighth-graders who wished to attend Catholic high schools. Results for his first adopted graduating class: of the 38 students who stayed in public high schools, only two made it to college; of the 22 who attended Catholic high schools, only two failed to go to college.

"They were the same kids from the same families and the same housing projects," says Benenson, a non-Catholic. "In fact, sometimes one child went to public school and a sibling went to Catholic school. We even gave money to the public school kids for tutoring and after-school programs. It's just that the Catholic schools worked, and the others didn't."

Most of New York's elite is resolutely uninterested in the Catholic schools' success. Last August, when Mayor Giuliani extolled the Catholic schools for their success in educating minority children and suggested they held important lessons for public schools, most of the city's education reporters were mystified. Catholic schools? They wouldn't have known where to find one. The New York Times carried extensive quotes from public school teachers and principals angry at the mayor's comparison. The Times editorialized that "the two systems are simply not comparable," repeating the old canard about self-selection. The paper didn't publish a word about the large body of scholarly literature on Catholic schools' success.

Mayor Giuliani was right: educating the public about how consistently well Catholic schools have done with New York's inner city pupils would help pave the way for the kind of radical reforms public schools desperately need. Such kids are eminently educable, Catholic schools show-and here's how to educate them, for a mere third of the public schools' per-pupil cost. In the face of this fine performance, public schools can have no excuse for not doing as well. Nor can the public schools claim that lack of money accounts for their dismal record: as the Catholic schools show, something other than money is the key to success.

Consider Manhattan's Community School District 3, where my own children have gone to school. In some respects this district, which includes most of the Upper West Side and a large chunk of Central Harlem, typifies the city school system. At its southern end

it serves a racially mixed, largely middle-class student population. In Harlem, a broad swath of schools with 100 percent minority enrollment have remained dismal failures.

During the past decade, the district has been a laboratory for each new trend in public school reform. After taking root in East Harlem's District 4, a program of choice was instituted for our district's middle schools. Parents can select among the various schools in the district, instead of having their child automatically assigned to the nearest one, on the theory that the need to compete for pupils will force individual schools to improve. At the same time, some of the existing large schools were reconfigured into smaller, supposedly more autonomous units. All of our schools have planning councils of parents and teachers.

The total impact of these reforms has been negligible. Overall student performance hasn't improved. And although choice is supposed to be for everyone, middle-class students always somehow find their way into the limited number of academically acceptable schools. Some of these schools are performing well, but it could just be that they're getting the best, most motivated students. Sound familiar? It's called "self-selection." For the poor black and Hispanic children trapped in the northern part of the district, the reforms have been irrelevant.

Even the best public schools remain in the stranglehold of the system's special interests. There is not a "choice" school, an "alternative" school, or a "new vision" school that doesn't continue to suffer from incompetent and nonperforming teachers who can't be fired, whose principal isn't hamstrung by union work rules, where learning doesn't suffer from onerous regulations and mindless bureaucracy.

But if the public schools in our district are not yet free from these imprisoning fetters, the Catholic schools are.

Free Catholic schools? Isn't that an oxymoron? Complacent behind the iron wall of separation, enlightened West Siders know that Catholic schools are run by a rigid, regressive church hierarchy.

I have been walking past some of those Catholic schools for the past ten years. One of New York City's 325 such schools, which serve a total of 150,000 pupils, is Saint Gregory the Great, an elementary school on West 90th Street. Every morning, as I accompanied my children to their public school, I couldn't help noticing the well-behaved black and Hispanic children in their neat uniforms entering the drab-looking parish building. Yet my curiosity never led me past the imposing crucifix looking down from the roof, which evoked childhood images of Catholic anti-Semitism and clerical obscurantism. Finally, earlier this year, I visited this underfunded Catholic school and learned why it outperforms many of the public schools in our very progressive district.

Not one of Saint Gregory's 280 students is white, almost all are poor, and some come to school from Harlem and Washington Heights. If Saint Gregory's didn't exist, they would likely be attending failing public schools like P.S. 180 or P.S. 76. Year after year, educa-

tion officials put these two Harlem elementary schools on notice that they are performing below the minimum academic standard. In 1995, for example, only 33 percent of P.S. 180's third-graders scored above the state's minimum standard in reading; 69 percent in mathematics. P.S. 76's scores were even worse: 18 percent and 58 percent, respectively. By contrast, 62 percent of Saint Gregory's third-graders were reading above the minimum standard, and 92 percent were above the standard in math.

In fact, Saint Gregory's holds its own even when compared to some of District 3's more middle-class schools. P.S. 75, five blocks north of Saint Gregory's, has received considerable media attention as an innovative school. Incorporating all the new reforms, and with a dynamic new principal, active parents, and a student body more than 40 percent white, P.S. 75 was only six percentage points higher than Saint Gregory's in reading, and five points below the Catholic school in math.

When I finally stepped inside the parish doors, I realized that Saint Gregory's resembles an education reform many of us have been calling for in New York-the charter school. Public charter schools, now legal in 21 states, receive varying degrees of relief from constricting regulations and teacher contract rules. The group holding the charter-it may be a consortium of parents or a university or a non-profit organization-is accountable for the school's performance: if a school fails, it can be closed. In theory, such freedom will lead to better performance.

That's almost exactly what's been happening in Catholic schools like Saint Gregory's. Four years ago it was in dire financial straits, with enrollment down to 209 from a high of over 300 a decade ago. The Archdiocese was getting ready to close it down. In a last-ditch effort to save the school, the parish hired a determined African-American woman named Deborah Hurd as the new principal.

Hurd exemplifies the new generation of lay educators replacing the priests and nuns who used to staff Catholic schools. Herself a Catholic school graduate, Hurd had no intention of pursuing a teaching career: she took her first job, as a substitute teacher in a Catholic school, while attending business college. But one day she got a desperate call from a nun at the Saint Joseph's school in Harlem. "I didn't want to teach," recalls Hurd, "but she kept asking me to 'just take this class.'" That was more than a quarter century ago. She remains in the system because she believes in the moral and academic structure that Catholic schools provide.

Hurd's own seven-year-old daughter is a case in point. "I had her in a progressive kindergarten run by the Quakers, but she was floundering. So I moved her to Saint Gregory's. Now she's learning how to study and concentrate. What we do in first grade is set the tone. The children learn to sit in a chair, to put their coats away, to raise their hand when they want to be called on, to understand when an assignment begins and ends. These things, and the uniforms they wear: they are all signs-and our kids are decoding them. So right from the start they are learning structure and skills."

When Hurd became principal of Saint Gregory, the parish gave her five years to turn the school around. She did it in less then three. Taking charge right away, she did some fund raising and found a few patrons who helped her add new programs, including pre-school and kindergarten classes. To build enrollment to its current 280, she advertised in local newspapers.

During her first summer, Hurd had the school painted and the rest rooms renovated. She cut the auditorium in half to make space for more classrooms. Unlike a public school principal, she didn't have to wait years for a central building maintenance office to approve her renovation requests. "I just went out and found a contractor and a plumber, who gave me a good price" she says. "There's no magic to it. It can all be done if you have half a brain and you don't have a bureaucracy breathing down your neck."

The school must pass the test of the market: it will survive only if it meets the needs of its students, whose parents pay up to $1,700 in tuition. (The rest of the school's $2,500 per pupil budget comes from the Archdiocese, private donors, and government grants for books, transportation, and school lunches.) Catholic schools are "called into being by the community," as principal Pat Kelley of Saint Angela Morrici school in the South Bronx puts it. "The community comes. The community pays. And the school goes. If the people didn't want to come, it would be closed." In return for the $100 per pupil subsidy Saint Gregory's receives from the Archdiocese's scholarship fund, the only requirements are that all students study religion for one period a day (though non-Catholics aren't required to perform the sacraments) and that the school follow a standard curriculum, which parallels the state curriculum.

But Catholic schools succeed where state schools fail because they have virtually no central office bureaucrats telling principals how to do their jobs. In public schools teachers almost automatically get tenure-a lifetime job guarantee-after three years. Most Catholic schools around the country have no tenure system whatsoever, though in New York City, where the teachers are represented by a union, many do get tenure after three years of successful teaching. But it is the principal who grants tenure, not some distant bureaucrat. And unlike in the public schools, tenured teachers have no claim on job openings in other schools. The labor contract imposes no work rules that tie a principal's hands in the area of teacher hiring and assignments. Even tenured teachers can be fired for incompetence or nonperformance far more easily than in the public schools. And there is no rigid credentialing system: principals can select teachers for their talent and commitment.

Consider how Hurd hired Susan Viti, Saint Gregory's fourth-grade teacher. Viti had been a public school teacher near Chicago when her fiancè was transferred to New York. The young couple found an apartment a few blocks from Saint Gregory's. While trying to decide what she wanted to do in New York, Viti befriended some of Saint Gregory's students, who played in a small playground next to the school. One day, on a whim, she walked in off the street in her tennis clothes to meet Deborah Hurd. Hurd was im-

pressed, and when a position opened up just before the first day of school, she offered it to Viti.

Only nominally Catholic, Viti took the job because she believed she could make a difference in the lives of some of the children she had met. She could not have been hired in a public school, for she lacked a city teaching credential, and, in any case, the central bureaucracy moves at a glacial pace. But at Saint Gregory's, Viti was in front of the classroom a few days after being offered the job.

Viti's fourth-grade classroom is nicely decorated with students' art work and writing samples. On one of the walls hangs a poster:

Classroom Rules
1. Follow directions.
2. Be prepared for class.
3. Respect others and their property.
4. Be a good citizen.

Consequences
1. Name written down.
2. No recess.
3. Discuss with parent.
4. A meeting with principal.

Viti's students, all black and Hispanic, project an admirable tone of civility and seriousness. The boys are dressed in gray slacks, light blue shirts, and ties; the girls all wear the same plaid jumpers and blue shirts. They sit in matched pairs of desks, their books and notebooks stacked under their chairs. It's a far cry from the worst public schools, where disorder prevails. Catholic schools, after all, never went through the rights revolution of the 1960s, which eroded the order-keeping authority of schools and discouraged teachers and principals from disciplining disruptive students by elaborate due process procedures.

When Viti asks a question, hands shoot up enthusiastically. When she returns graded assignments, each child says, "Thank you, Miss Viti." "You're welcome, darling," she answers cheerfully. I sat in as Viti conducted a review lesson on the geography of the western United States. All the children were completely engaged and had obviously done their homework. They were able to answer each of her questions about the principal cities and capitals of the western states-some of which I couldn't name-and the topography and natural resources of the region.

"Why do the Rocky Mountains have lower temperatures?" she asked. One of the children explained the relationship between altitude and temperatures.

"Which minerals would be found in the Rocky Mountains?" Eager hands shot up; Viti called on several children, each of whom contributed an answer. She used the lesson to

expand the students' vocabulary and understanding of concepts such as the differences between crops and minerals. When the children wrote things down, she insisted on proper grammar and spelling.

Without pausing for a break, Viti moved on to the day's math lesson. She had the children go to the blackboard in teams to do multiplication problems with fractions and decimals. She praised the students who solved the problems and gently corrected mistakes.

As I sat in that classroom, I found myself wishing that my own son's fourth-grade teachers at P.S. 87, reputedly one of the best public schools in the city, were anywhere near as productive and as focused on basic skills as Viti. Both my boys' teachers have wasted an enormous amount of their time with empty verbiage about the evils of racism and sexism. By contrast, in Viti's class and in all the other Catholic school classes I visited, it was taken for granted that a real education is the best antidote to prejudice.

I was amazed at the children's ability to endure more than two hours of learning without losing their concentration. The students at Saint Gregory's, as at most Catholic schools, have very few breaks. Saint Gregory's cannot afford art and music classes and only offers one gym period per week. From first grade on, children are expected to sit quietly and learn for most of the day.

Viti, too, has few breaks. On some days, other than a lunch period, she is on her feet in front of her class for almost six hours. Because she assigns considerable homework, Viti does a lot of grading at home. She is constantly on the phone or writing notes to parents. Four days a week she stays after school to do remedial work with some of her struggling students; twice a week she gives up her lunch hour to do extra work with her more advanced math students. On weekends she sometimes drops in on students' Little League games.

She earns just $21,000 a year, $8,000 less than a first-year teacher in a public school. "I've taught in an all-white, affluent suburban school, where I made over $40,000," she says. "This time I wanted to do something good for society, and I am lucky enough to be able to afford to do it. I am trying to instill in my students that whatever their life situation is now, they can succeed if they work hard and study. I involve the parents, and they know that I am serious about holding their children to a high standard." Saint Angela Morrici principal Pat Kelly echoes this sentiment: "Those of us who are doing the work do it not only for a paycheck. We're doing it because we get to practice a profession that we love."

Of course not all Catholic school teachers are as impressive as Viti. I visited some classes where the teachers overemphasized rote learning and focused too narrowly on the textbook. But in every classroom I visited, the teachers were deeply, personally engaged with their students. They were on top of them constantly, refusing to let them fall behind. It was inconceivable that I would see what I and other parents have witnessed in several junior high schools in our district-children literally asleep in the classroom. I

was reminded of an epigram of Bryk, Lee, and Holland: Catholic schools take the position that “no one who works hard will fail,” whereas the prevailing approach in too many public schools is that “no one who shows up will fail.”

On Amsterdam Avenue, six blocks north of Saint Gregory’s, sits the Holy Name of Jesus elementary school. It began serving the neighborhood’s Irish and Italian immigrants almost 100 years ago; today 99.5 percent of its 600 students are black or Hispanic. Thirty percent of the children are on welfare, 40 percent are from single-parent families, and 98 percent are poor enough to qualify for the federally funded school lunch program.

Holy Name’s principal is Brother Richard Griecko of the De La Salle Christian Brothers, one of the Catholic Church’s teaching orders. Griecko has managed to create a technological wonderland that would be the envy of the city’s best high schools-and on a budget of less than $1.5 million per year, or just $2,500 per student. The school has two computer labs, each with 30 state-of-the-art computers. Each classroom is also equipped with two computers, one for the students and one on the teacher’s desk. A satellite dish on the roof receives interactive programming: the seventh-grade English class can turn on the TV and receive a live lesson in poetry from a poet in Boston.

Some public schools have modern computer labs where the students play games while their teacher gets a period off. At Holy Name, by constast, the computers are an integral part of the curriculum. Students use them to write journals and reports, work with special educational programs, and learn computer languages. When I visited the school, I saw first-graders in the lab intently working on an IBM phonetics program called “Writing to Read.”

Some came from homes where no English was spoken. Unlike in the public schools, there’s no bilingual program here. “We believe it’s important as quickly as possible to have the children reading and speaking English,” Brother Griecko says. “Sometimes we take children from public school. The parents put them here because they want them to finally learn English.”

Sitting in an office cluttered with videotapes and papers, soft jazz playing in the background, Griecko explains how he managed to acquire the elaborate technology on a shoestring budget. “Its pretty simple: I have the freedom to control the budget and how our money is spent. I can see areas where we underspend, and I can transfer funds to another project-such as the computers.” He also applies for private grants. Griecko estimates that the technology cost about $250,000 over eight years. He was able to squirrel away $30,000 each year for his dream project-proving again that when educators with a vision have freedom and the support of a community of parents and teachers, anything becomes possible.

Like Hurd, Greicko is grateful for his freedom from bureaucratic regulation in the selection of staff. “Some of my best teachers don’t have an education degree, but they happen to be born teachers,” he says. “Then you have teachers with all the credentials, but

they can't manage a group of kids. Our curriculum is not that difficult to pick up. What can't be learned is self-assurance and classroom management."

One of the uncredentialed teachers Brother Griecko hired was Frances O'Shea, a striking young blonde woman born and raised in Limerick, Ireland. She arrived in America four years ago with a liberal arts degree from Dublin's University College. In O'Shea's seventh-grade life science class, I observed the same combination of academic rigor and personal engagement I had seen in Viti's classes at Saint Gregory's. Addressing the students in her rich brogue, O'Shea held forth on topics ranging from white and red blood cells to bacteria and infectious diseases. Her sense of humor livened up the proceedings: when a student got an answer completely wrong, she gently said, "Well, Steven, you are way out in the Wild West."

A slightly built black boy named Jonathan read a report he had researched on cystic fibrosis. O'Shea frequently asked him to stop while she made sure the students understood such concepts as the difference between malignant and benign tumors. At one point the coed class had a mature and unembarrassed discussion of the female reproductive system.

Yudelka Martinez, a divorced mother raising four children on her wages as a day-care worker, enrolled her son Andres at Holy Name because he was learning very little in public school. "He couldn't understand the teacher, and the teacher would say, 'I don't have time for him; there are too many children.'" In contrast, O'Shea made her son work very hard, and at the beginning of the year called her several times a week. Martinez struggles to come up with $150 a month for Andres's tuition, but she is determined to keep doing it: "I have to make the best for my son."

O'Shea told me that even if she had the credentials, she wouldn't consider teaching in a public school. "I just can't accept the lack of discipline. I am a believer in structure and self-control. The idea of a 14-year-old wielding weapons-I just can't adapt to something like that. We have the same children. They are very poor and their parents are scrimping. But we think they will overcome their bad surroundings. In the public schools little is expected of the children, and they sense that."

The success of schools like Holy Name and Saint Gregory's, despite their penury, is no miracle. It's a matter of doing the right thing, the human thing: hiring teachers because they can teach, rather than for their credentials. It's also a matter of simple common sense. Catholic schools' strong discipline rests not on an authoritarian ideology, but rather on an age-old, well-tested understanding of human nature. "The discipline in our school comes down to one word: respect," says Brother Griecko. "It is respect by students for teachers and teachers for students. We expect the students to listen and be respectful in class, and if they can't do it we will call in the parents. And it really works."

What is common sense in a Catholic school is almost unthinkable in the public school system, with its crushing bureaucracy on one hand and its exaggerated ideology of individual rights on the other. Catholic schools have all the freedom they need to keep

things simple, to focus on the human encounter called teaching and learning. “We are here to educate and empower these kids, to do two things with them,” says principal Pat Kelley. “One is to make sure that they learn how to read, write, and do math-every day. The other is to form their character. We believe in the divinity of being; we believe in the holiness of our existence. That infuses the culture we’re in.”

You might expect that liberals, self-styled champions of disadvantaged children, would applaud the commitment and sacrifice of educators like Deborah Hurd, Richard Griecko, Susan Viti, Frances O’Shea, and Pat Kelley. You might even expect them to look for ways of getting government money to these underfunded schools. Instead, they have done their best to make sure the “iron wall” of separation between church and state remains impenetrable. Liberal child advocacy groups tout an endless array of “prevention programs” that are supposed to inoculate inner-city children against delinquency, dropping out of school, and teen pregnancy-yet they consistently ignore Catholic schools, which nearly always succeed in preventing these pathologies.

Read the chapter on education in Hillary Clinton’s It Takes a Village. The First Lady advocates an alphabet soup of education programs for poor children. She favors charter schools, public school choice, and of course her husband’s Goals 2000 legislation. But she says not one word about Catholic schools. Similarly, in his books on education and inner-city ghettoes, Jonathan Kozol offers vivid tours of decrepit public schools in places like the South Bronx, but he never stops at the many Catholic schools that are succeeding a few blocks away.

Why are Catholic schools taboo among those who talk loudest about compassion for the downtrodden? Certainly, the religious tradition of the Catholic schools stands against the liberal agenda on issues like abortion, feminism, and gay rights. And many liberal commentators may sincerely believe that the Constitution requires maintaining the “iron wall” of separation between any religious schools and government. Yet these explanations seem inadequate to explain the total silence, the refusal even to admit that something worthwhile is going on behind the parochial school gates, from which we can at least learn.

It’s hard to escape the conclusion that one of the most powerful reasons liberal opinion makers and policy makers ignore Catholic schools-and oppose government aid to them-is their alliance with the teachers’ unions, which have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the campaign coffers of liberal candidates around the country. Before the rise of the teachers’ unions to political power, it was not unusual to see urban Democrats such as Hugh Carey and Daniel Patrick Moynihan support government aid to Catholic schools. Mario Cuomo once supported it too, and his flip-flop on this issue makes especially clear that the teachers unions, rather than legal or philosophical objections, have been the chief barrier to government aid to Catholic schools.

In 1974, when he first ran for public office, Cuomo wrote a letter to potential supporters: “I’ve spent more than 15 years . . . arguing for aid to private schools,” he said. “Unfortunately, although there are millions of people in this nation who agree with this position,

they've been outmuscled politically to the point where the Supreme Court of the United States was persuaded in a series of cases to take hard positions against various forms of aid. This is regrettable but it's no reason to surrender. . . . If you believe aid is a good thing, then you are the good people. If you believe it, then it's your moral obligation, as it is my own, to do something about it. . . . Let's try tax credit plans and anything else that offers any help."

Cuomo soon learned his lesson. In his published diaries he wrote: "Teachers are perhaps the most effective of all the state's unions. If they go all-out, it will mean telephones and vigorous statewide support. It will also mean some money. I would have had them in 1977 [in his losing race for Mayor] if it had not been for a clumsy meeting I had with [union leader Albert] Shanker. I must see that I don't make that same mistake again."

He didn't. In his 1982 campaign for governor, Cuomo gave a speech trumpeting the primacy of public education and the rights of teachers. He won the union's enthusiastic endorsement against Ed Koch in the Democratic primary. Over the next 12 years, in private meetings with Catholic leaders, Governor Cuomo would declare that he still supported tax relief for parochial school parents. Then he would take a completely different position in public. For example, in 1984 he acknowledged that giving tax credits for parochial school tuition "is now clearly constitutional" under a recent Supreme Court decision-but he refused to support such a plan.

To take Catholic schools' success seriously is to expose the fatal moral flaw at the heart of public school reform efforts. Reformers in Albany and New York City talk as if all that's needed is a change in the balance of interests among those who control the school system. Some call for more mayoral power. Others draw up plans for school-based councils, assigning a prescribed number of seats to the various constituencies at the school-parents, teachers, supervisors, other school workers.

These plans miss the point. In all the Catholic schools I visited, there was a greater sense of community, of collaboration between teachers and parents, than in any public school I know of. Yet Saint Gregory's and Holy Name have no official school council or even a parents' association. What they have instead is a shared commitment that no interests matter but the children's. The idea that the interests of other "stakeholders" can supersede those of children-plainly immoral when stated so bluntly-has no force in these schools.

Catholic schools work because they focus on the basic human encounter that is at the heart of all good education. Says Pat Kelley, principal of Saint Angela Morrici: "Parents walk into my office once a week, twice a week, and I know they pay my salary. They say, 'I want to know why Junior failed this test. I want to know why Junior has detention.' So I spend a lot of time dealing with families, who are the backbone of the school. The school exists for their kids. There's no other reason this school exists. None."

Politically controlled schools are unlikely to improve much without strong pressure from outside. Thus the case for government aid to Catholic schools is now more compelling than ever, if only to provide the competitive pressure to force state schools to change. And the conventional wisdom that government is constitutionally prohibited from aiding Catholic schools has been undermined by Supreme Court decisions [[[CK]]] such as Mueller v. Allen, which approved tax deductions for tuition and other expenses in parochial schools.

Since the powerful teachers' unions vehemently oppose any form of government aid to Catholic schools, reformers are often skittish about advocating vouchers or tuition tax credits, fearing that will end the public school reform conversation before it begins. But trying to placate the unions is futile. When a New York City Council committee held a hearing recently on charter schools and other public school reforms, the United Federation of Teachers dispatched five people to rail against reform. Union officials said they were "troubled and disturbed that the hearing was held at all." So much for meaningful dialogue.

To abandon the idea of aid to Catholic schools in the name of public school reform is a sucker's trap. We have ended up with no aid to Catholic schools and no real public school reform either. Thus it's time to tear down the wall of separation, to accept Cardinal O'Connor's offer, and to help Catholic schools benefit as many of New York's children as possible. Government must rescue poor children from failing public schools. It can do so in a variety of ways: providing vouchers to a targeted student population that can be used in Catholic schools, allowing tuition tax credits for both secular and religious schools, establishing cooperative ventures between public and parochial schools, and encouraging more private money to flow to Catholic schools.

Catholic schools are a valuable public resource not merely because they so profoundly benefit the children who enroll in them. They also challenge the public school monopoly, constantly reminding us that the neediest kids are educable and that spending extravagant sums of money isn't the answer. No one who cares about reviving our failing public schools can afford to ignore this inspiring laboratory of reform.