



Dumping the Know-Nothing Amendments: Church, State, and School Reform

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featuring Raymond L. Flynn



RAYMOND L. FLYNN: I'm pleased to be here this morning. I'd like to thank Pioneer Institute for hosting this event, as well as the co-sponsors, including the Parents Alliance for Catholic Education, the Becket Fund, the Black Alliance for Educational Options, and Harvard's Program on Education Policy and Governance. I'd especially like to acknowledge the leadership of Cardinal Sean O'Malley, Mary Grassa O'Neill, my old friend who is superintendent for education

in the Archdiocese of Boston, as well as Jack Connors, and Peter and Caroline Lynch—who are among Boston's best civic and philanthropic leaders.

Few issues are more central to the American Dream of opportunity for all than giving poor and working class kids the chance to get an education. I've been passionate about educational opportunity for a very long time. I remember debating it as a graduate student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and later on the floor of the Massachusetts House of Representatives. As Mayor of Boston, I testified before Congress on behalf working families to give them more educational options.

There's no more appropriate time than the eve of St. Patrick's Day to continue this policy discussion about finally discarding the infamous and bigoted legacy of the Know-Nothings in Massachusetts, which stands as a barrier to opportunity.

I'd like to start by talking a bit about the important role Catholic education plays in providing opportunity to those who wouldn't otherwise have meaningful choices, and the difficult challenges it currently faces. Catholic schools, like the one my grandchildren attend in South Boston, are disproportionately located in urban areas. I recently spent some time there reading to a class.

Few of their students come from families that can actually afford to cover the full cost of their education and many can't afford to pay anything at all. Catholic schooling receives no state funding and only a small amount

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of federal money, yet the schools have held fast to their mission of providing high-quality education to those who need it most.

Boston's Catholic schools reflect the city's demographic makeup. Almost 90 percent of the students at Cristo Rey High School are African American or Hispanic and all of them qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. More than half the students at Roslindale's Sacred Heart Elementary School are African American. In fact, among the African American students who don't attend Boston Public Schools, the majority choose parochial schools.

The percentage of Hispanic students in Catholic schools is increasing and we're seeing more interest among immigrants who aren't from Catholic backgrounds. As a result, almost 20 percent of students currently enrolled in the Archdiocese of Boston's schools – which include both city and suburban schools – aren't Catholics.

And Catholic schools continue to provide a lifeline to white, working-class families whose struggles are too often overlooked.

Part of what draws a diverse population to Catholic schools is the moral – as well as religious – education Catholic schooling provides. Catholic schools also offer discipline and a safe environment that can be a refuge for children coming from homes and neighborhoods that are sometimes chaotic and even downright violent.

Perhaps an even bigger draw for parents is that Catholic schools offer an educational culture which holds all students to the same high standards, regardless of their background.

The academic success of Catholic schools is clear. Although direct comparisons with MA public schools are complicated by the fact that parochial school students don't take MCAS, on other standardized tests administered each year by both Catholic and public schools, the Archdiocese of Boston's schools outperform state and national averages.

On SATs they also beat national averages and dramatically outperform the Boston Public Schools. This is especially impressive when we consider the high quality of the Commonwealth's schools in general. Massachusetts has the nation's highest performing public schools, but Archdiocesan schools even score above statewide averages. They also have very high graduation rates and a 96 percent college matriculation rate. The Boston Public Schools' graduation rate is below 80 percent, and of those who graduate, many do not continue or complete higher education.

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Catholic schools achieve all this while spending far less than public schools do. On a per-student basis, Catholic elementary schools in Massachusetts generally spend \$6,000 annually. Compare that to Boston, where the annual per-pupil cost is approximately \$14,000.

Despite this impressive record, Catholic education is experiencing trying times. According to a recent Fordham Institute report, 300,000 students have been displaced from their Catholic schools since 1990, and another 300,000 could lose their schools over the next two decades. About 5.2 million American students attended Catholic schools in 1965; today it's closer to 2 million.

The story is similar in Massachusetts where, due to larger demographic shifts, the public system has lost 24,000 students since FY2003 and is projected to lose another 60,000 students—that's nearly three districts the size of Worcester—over the next decade. This broader population loss is especially acute in cities like Boston, Cambridge, Brockton, Holyoke, and Fall River. Recently, it resulted in Massachusetts losing another congressional seat. As the *Boston Globe* recently noted and Pioneer's own student enrollment research data illustrates, families are leaving the

cities to access better education for their children. That needs to be reversed.

This demographic phenomenon is naturally impacting Catholic schooling in Massachusetts. In 1942, Boston alone was home to 225 parish grammar and high schools. Just between 1965 and 1973, archdiocesan school enrollment fell by more than 40 percent. Today, there are 124 schools in the Archdiocese of Boston.

Why is this happening? The schools aren't closing because of a lack of demand. To the contrary, polls show that parents love them. Several factors have combined to cause this situation.

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An important part of Catholic schools' recipe for success was the highly qualified free (or very inexpensive) labor priests and nuns provided. But with far fewer people entering the seminary or convent, that pool is declining. Nationally, almost three-quarters of Catholic school staff were religious in 1960. Today it's less than 4 percent.

I talk with teachers every week when I pick up my grandchildren at South Boston Catholic Academy, and I can tell you the lay people who have taken the places of nuns and priests do incredible work for far less than they would earn in public schools. But they still need salaries to live.

Many of the families who traditionally sent their kids to Catholic schools have moved to the suburbs. Some were pushed by the busing crisis that gripped Boston during the 1970s; for others it was just the normal process of immigrant families making their way up the social ladder. Once in the suburbs, those families often found public schools they perceived to be quite good, so that's where they sent their children.

This so-called white flight has created a disconnect. While a majority of students who would be likely to

attend Catholic schools now live in the suburbs, two-thirds of the schools remain in Boston.

All this has put increasing pressure on philanthropy to fill ever-larger gaps. The families most likely to use Catholic schools today cannot afford to pay the full per-pupil cost of tuition, even though that tuition is comparatively very low. As a result, Catholic schools often charge families much less than the actual cost of education and then work to make up the difference in school operating costs elsewhere. In large part, Catholic schools rely on the generosity of donors. And while organizations like the Catholic Schools Foundation, the Lynch Foundation, and the Campaign for Catholic Schools have done amazing work, such heavy reliance on philanthropy raises long-term fears about donor fatigue.

The problems Catholic schools in Massachusetts face are exacerbated by the existence of so-called anti-aid, Know-Nothing or Blaine amendments to the state's constitution. The 1854 Know-Nothing amendment is a relic of the anti-Catholic bigotry that arose in the mid-19th century after the Irish potato famine brought a wave of immigration to our shores. In brief, it prohibits state funds from being directed to sectarian schools, closing off one of the options for helping Catholic schools carry out their mission of providing needy students with a quality education.

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In 1917, a second anti-aid amendment was added to the Massachusetts Constitution, which prevents the 1854 amendment from being repealed via the initiative petition process or statewide ballot initiative. In recent years, a statewide ballot initiative banned greyhounds racing in the state. I'd like to think our children's education is a bit more important than dog racing.

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The Anti-Aid Amendments also thwart other forms of school choice in Massachusetts, most notably voucher programs, which offer parents a lump sum they can use toward the public, private, or parochial school of their choice. This approach has been used for decades in higher education, where state and federal grants and scholarships can be applied to the school of a student's choice. Nobody in their right mind would ever dream of denying a college student a state or federal grant, scholarship, or loan to attend the College of the Holy Cross, Boston College, Notre Dame, or Brandeis. Then why would we tolerate this in our K-12 system?

One way to potentially enhance educational choice even with the Anti-Aid Amendments in place is through education tax credits. Under these programs, funds for private school tuition come from credits granted to corporations and/or individuals who choose to donate, not from a line item in the state budget. Non-profit organizations – not the state – award the money corporations and individuals donate. The funds are directed to religious and private schools as a result of the independent choices of parents, not government. Nationwide, far more students attend private schools under tax credit programs, and we need look no farther than Rhode Island to find a successful one.

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Rhode Island gives businesses state tax credits (not deductions) equal to 75-90 percent for money the businesses donate to a Scholarship Granting Organization. Each organization then distributes the money to needy students based on its own criteria. Some base their decisions on need, others on academic potential, and still others distribute the funds evenly. The credits, which are capped at \$1 million annually, help more than 500 students attend private schools.

The state doesn't distribute the money, but it does provide appropriate oversight. Each Scholarship Granting Organization must distribute at least 90 percent of the money it takes in each year and must represent at least two private schools. The program is only open to families whose income is at or below 250 percent of the federal poverty level.

Florida has a much larger education tax credit program. There the organizations that disburse the funds to low-income families to use at the school of their choice must separately raise all the necessary administrative funding to ensure that all tax credit contributions go directly to scholarships.

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Florida's year-to-year retention rate among corporate donors is about 90 percent. In 2005, 113 corporations made contributions totaling more than \$74 million. During the 2006-07 school year, just under 900 private schools educated 14,502 students through the tax credit scholarships.

Scholarships are limited to the lesser of \$3,750 or the cost of tuition, which in 2005-06 averaged \$4,341 among the participating schools. To be eligible, students must qualify for free or reduced-price lunch under the National School Lunch Act.

The Florida program is achieving its goal of providing educational opportunity to low-income families. In 2005, the average annual income for a household of four receiving scholarships was \$22,074. About 70 percent of scholarship recipients were non-white; 60 percent were from single-parent households.

Educational opportunity received a boost last month when the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved 16 new charter schools. President Obama deserves credit for making the elimination of arbitrary charter caps one of the criteria for states competing for federal education grant funding.

Massachusetts charter schools have been very successful at closing race- and poverty-based achievement gaps and they dramatically outperform traditional schools in the districts their students come from. According to a 2009 study conducted by Harvard and MIT researchers for the Boston Foundation, academic gains from a single year in a Boston charter school were equal to half the average gap between black and white students. They also found that a year in a Boston charter school has an academic impact similar to that of a year in one of the city's elite exam schools.

Regional vocational-technical schools provide another important source for choice. Since 2001, MCAS scores for the Commonwealth's regional vocational-technical schools have increased by over 40 percent.

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The one thing all these choice options have in common is their popularity. In Massachusetts, the demand for more choice is overwhelming. As I noted before, even Catholic schools forced to close by financial problems often had waiting lists. About 25,000 students are on charter school wait lists. Prior to the legislation that lifted the charter cap, it would have taken more than 80 years to clear that list at the pace at which charters were growing. More than 2,500 students are on waiting lists at Massachusetts voc-techs. If Massachusetts starts an education tax credit program, demand is sure to outstrip the number of scholarships available. Our school children desperately need these vitally important educational options and we need them now.

Education and political leaders want better educational outcomes for underprivileged children. Poor and minority parents in particular want their children to have more opportunities than they did.

Working class parents are no different. Every week I talk with parents at South Boston Catholic Academy who are making huge sacrifices to send their kids there because they know it's a lifeline; it gives their children a chance. Whether the goal is to eliminate achievement gaps, reduce dropouts, or to deliver on the uniquely American idea of equal opportunity, we need to expand the meaningful, affordable educational choices available to Massachusetts families.

Finally, economic experts have been saying the U.S. is losing its competitive advantage in the world. They are predicting that by the year 2050, both China and India are likely to far surpass us as the world's largest economies. That is, authors like Thomas Freidman, Mira Kamdar, Ted Fishman, and Clyde Prestowitz all discuss the "three billion new capitalists" in China, India and Russia and the urgent need for America to ratchet up our education achievement and get ready for serious competition in the 21st century.

We've got to convince our elected officials that what they do today, is going to determine our country's place in the world in the future. We must make our children's education America's number one priority.

When I was young we were in a race with Russia in space technology and the moon was the objective. We didn't quit. We were encouraged to be all we can be. Our leaders led the way and we maintained our greatness in the world. America faces those same challenges today. We have to do two things; first, encourage our young people that they can be anything they want to be, and second provide the opportunity for them to achieve their goal. We've got to convince our elected officials that what they do today, is going to determine our country's place in the world in the future. We must make our children's education America's number one priority. Frankly, you pay now, or you pay later.

The children that I read to the other day are the future of our nation. Based on what I saw in those

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young children, I can tell you the future is very promising. Let me tell you another thing. I pick up my grandchildren from school and listen to those parents and teachers in the school yard. They care; they're committed; and they know that their kids need a good education. Catholic schools can provide it, but the parents need some help. They can't do it alone. We have the children, the parents, and the teachers—all we need now is a little political courage and leadership.

About Pioneer

Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to improve the quality of life in Massachusetts through civic discourse and intellectually rigorous, data-driven public policy solutions based on free market principles, individual liberty and responsibility, and the ideal of effective, limited and accountable government.



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