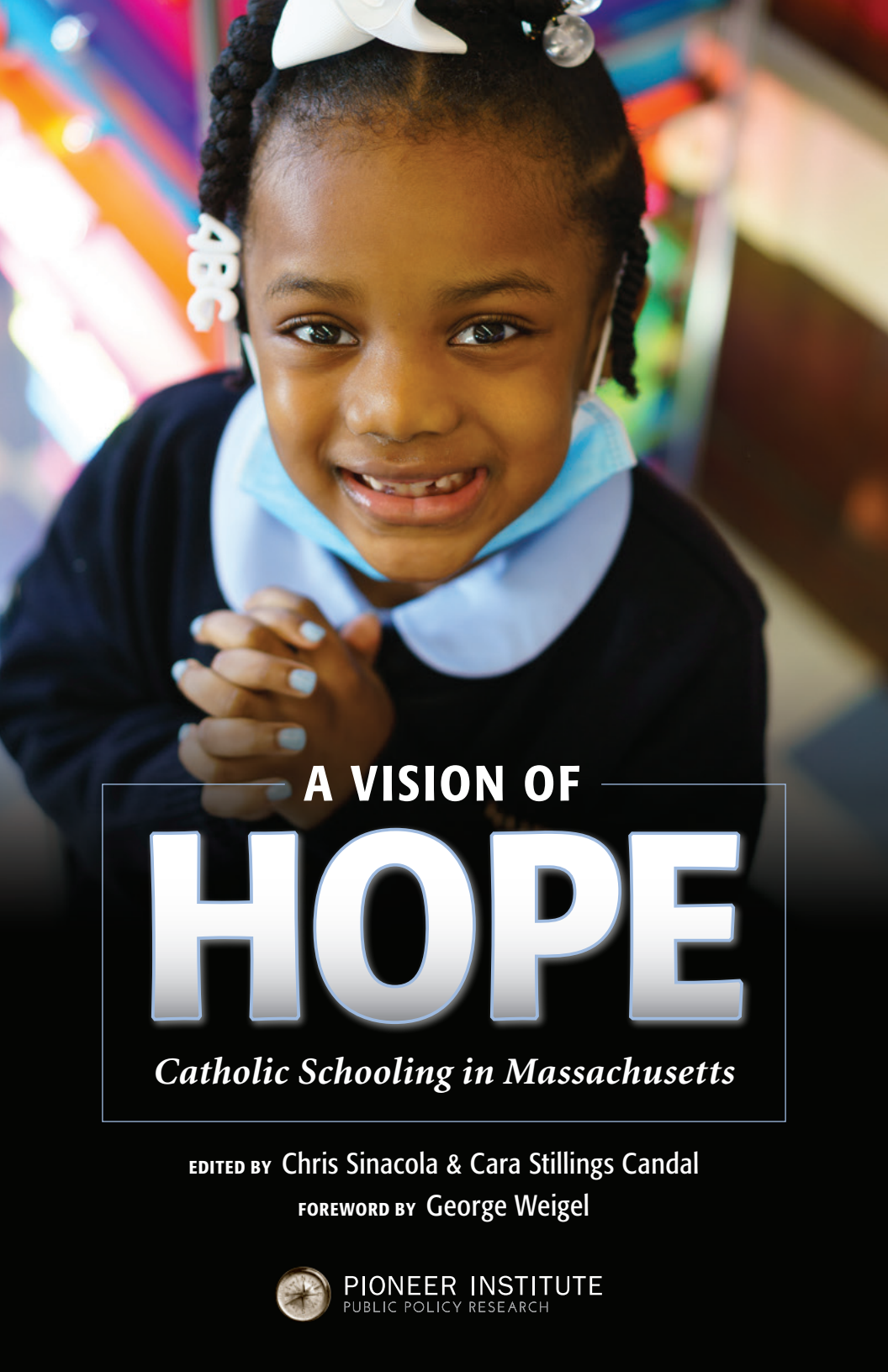

A VISION OF HOPE

Catholic Schooling in Massachusetts

EDITED BY Chris Sinacola & Cara Stillings Candal

FOREWORD BY George Weigel

PIONEER INSTITUTE
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH

"Pioneer's book *A Vision of Hope: Catholic Schooling in Massachusetts* highlights why K–12 Catholic education is the crown jewel in a state long known for academic excellence. This is a must read for those who care about the future of Catholic schools in the Commonwealth, while also offering key lessons for policy makers across the country."

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By Cara Stillings Candal, Ed.D.

Executive Summary

Catholic schools in Massachusetts have long been important to families of diverse backgrounds and faiths, as evidenced by the numbers of non-Catholics who seek the high-quality academic and values-based education they provide. As Dr. Mary Grassa O'Neill, former secretary of education and superintendent of the Archdiocese of Boston notes, "Catholic education is a vital and important part of society … Catholic schools achieve excellence in education and Catholic identity, and our schools form good, caring people every day."[8]

In the fall of 2020, there are 183 Catholic schools in Massachusetts, 100 in the Archdiocese of Boston.[9] Their success is manifest in high test scores and high graduation and college attendance rates. Archdiocese elementary Catholic schools educate students at an average per-pupil tuition of $6,583[10] versus the nearly $16,500 per-pupil average for Massachusetts public schools.[11] Catholic school tuitions are often *lower* than the average per-pupil cost to the schools because many serve working- and middle-class families who cannot afford to pay more. Catholic schools also provide generous financial aid to families who cannot afford the average cost of tuition.[12]

Despite their success, Catholic schools are in crisis: In the past five years, 20 schools in the Archdiocese of Boston have closed. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, despite providing an initial enrollment boost for schools that survived the spring of 2020 and chose to provide live instruction in the fall, could have long-term detrimental consequences for Catholic schools everywhere.[13]

In this chapter we:

- Explore the history of Catholic education in Massachusetts and the Archdiocese, how the Church's educational mission has changed, and factors contributing to financial and enrollment crises.
- Show why Catholic schools should be considered essential partners in education by illustrating their success vis-à-vis public schools.
- Outline efforts by the Catholic community and the Archdiocese to reverse the discouraging trend of Catholic school closures.
- Provide recommendations for the perpetuation of Catholic schools in Massachusetts.

Catholic Schooling in Massachusetts and Boston: A Brief History

The history of Catholic education in Massachusetts traces the city's immigrant, political, and broader public education histories. Catholic schools here embody the educational values of a state that was the first to recognize education as a public good.

In 1825, only one Catholic school existed within what is today the Archdiocese of Boston. Despite an influx of Catholics after 1846, the growth of Catholic schools was slow, in part because of a public-school system viewed by Horace Mann as "an engine of social reform" to help acculturate immigrants.[14] In greater part, however, slow growth was due to anti-Catholic sentiment.[15]

From less than 10 percent Catholic in 1825, Boston was 40 percent Irish by 1850 as immigrants fled famine.[16] These largely

poor, Catholic immigrants were seen as problematic by the ruling Protestant elite.

Anti-Catholic sentiment peaked in the 1850s with the formation of political and social groups aimed at preserving Protestant supremacy.[17] The "Know-Nothing" Party supported the 1855 Anti-Aid Amendment[18] that prohibited state monies from flowing to sectarian schools. A 1917 nativist amendment prohibited aid to any institution "not publicly owned and under the exclusive control, order and superintendence" of the state or federal government.[19]

Despite these amendments, between 1900 and the 1940s, Catholic parish schools grew steadily.[20] By 1940, it was clear the parish system needed outside support to meet demand in Boston, then the third largest diocese in the nation, with 158 parish grammar schools and 67 high schools in 1942.[21]

In the 1960s, Archbishop Richard Cushing encouraged "the development of multi-parish diocesan high schools"[22] to lower costs, meet the needs of working-class and poor families, and allow parish priests to continue teaching. *New York Times* columnist John H. Fenton wrote Boston was one of the most well-equipped Catholic parochial school systems in the country.[23]

The 1960s also saw the beginning of a crisis in Catholic education as, with the decline in vocations and the number of priests and nuns available to teach in Catholic schools, the schools increasingly turned to laity who require living wages.[24]

In the 1970s, desegregation of Boston's schools outraged inner-city residents, including many Catholics who questioned the leadership of Archbishop Cardinal Medeiros.[25] Moreover, many Irish and Italian immigrants had moved to the suburbs, where quality public schools lowered demand for Catholic schools.[26]

Between 1965 and 1973, total enrollment in Archdiocese schools fell from 151,562 to 84,769, and many Catholic schools closed.[27] Still, Catholic schools continued to fulfill their mission, serving increasing numbers of African American families[28] and Asian and Caribbean immigrants into the 1980s.[29]

Sociologist James Coleman described how Catholic schooling's culture of high academic expectations served poor and minority students well.[30] Coleman, and later Bryk, Lee, and Holland, in *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, illustrated how inner-city Catholic schools served all, regardless of ability to pay.[31] Both studies suggested how public schools could learn from Catholic schools how to close achievement gaps between white, middle-class pupils and poor and minority ones.[32]

Some public schools, including charter public schools,[33] emphasize high expectations and accept no excuses for failure.[34] This model, as Bryk, Lee, and Holland note, derives from the Catholic school idea that students can achieve the same academic results regardless of background.[35]

Despite their successes, many Catholic schools are struggling to attract students and funding. In 2010, the Fordham Institute captured the national picture of the Catholic school struggle, finding that since 1990, 300,000 students nationally, most of them residents of inner cities, saw their Catholic schools close for lack of funding.[36] Since that report, another 1,191 schools have closed or consolidated nationwide. While 244 new schools opened prior to 2020,[37] closures after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic have nearly eradicated that gain, with Catholic elementary schools most impacted.[38]

Massachusetts's Catholic school crisis mirrors the national experience. In Boston alone, 20 Catholic schools have closed since 2015.[39] Since the spring of 2020, 10 Catholic schools have closed across the Commonwealth — victims of enrollment declines exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, when parents who lost jobs were unable to make final tuition payments. Closures are occurring in poor, working-class, and immigrant communities such as Chelsea, Boston, and Lowell.[40] These are places where families feel the loss of their local Catholic school acutely, because the district schools have long struggled to provide families with high-quality educational options.[41]

In the past decade, the Archdiocese of Boston has made several attempts to stem school closures. Leaders say that schools

have remained focused on providing an excellent education to the "kids who need it most,"[42] and have revitalized and reinvigorated Catholic education.[43] Efforts have included aligning curricula with Massachusetts's nationally renowned standards and making better use of norm-referenced tests to track achievement.[44]

The Archdiocese has also placed a renewed emphasis on the importance of faith, as exemplified by the Cristo Rey model of high-quality academics with very low tuitions.

While new models are necessary, existing ones also need to be sustained. Catholic schools in Boston enjoy a generous donor community, but relying on philanthropy isn't a sustainable model. Absent a revision to the Anti-Aid Amendment, Catholic school students can only hope politicians understand the import of what Catholic schools offer to communities, both academically and culturally.

The Opportunities and Outcomes of Catholic Education in Massachusetts

Despite considerable challenges and a relatively unchanged[45] education policy environment in Massachusetts, Catholic schools have persisted in providing all students with access to high-quality education thanks to an unrelenting focus on achievement.[46]

The academic success of Catholic schools is manifest in high test scores, high graduation and college attendance rates, low per-pupil costs, and taxpayer savings. In urban centers, Catholic schools provide for populations that are disproportionately poor, minority, lack early childhood education programs, and lack family structures that promote success in school.[47]

Across the Commonwealth, over half of archdiocesan elementary schools are in urban settings. According to Boston Public Schools, of the 29 percent of students living in Boston who choose not to attend the city's public schools, 64 percent are black or Hispanic and roughly 30 percent are enrolled in private and parochial schools inside and outside of Boston (the majority of the rest attend charter public schools).[48]

Catholic schools in Massachusetts do not participate in the

Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), but results from norm-referenced[49] assessments that Catholic schools use, along with SAT results, are useful (See Figures 1 and 2). And the Archdiocese has a 96 percent college enrollment rate,[50] compared to 79 percent in the Boston Public Schools.[51]

Academics are not the only basis on which families and students choose schools. Even those families who do not identify as Catholic (18 percent of enrollment) are attracted by the moral and character education. As Principal Monica Haldiman of Sacred Heart Elementary School in Roslindale says, "we are expected to provide a value-laden education," and parents appreciate that we can easily say to students "this is right, and this is wrong."

Figure 1. Stanford 10 Scores, Archdiocese of Boston/Nation (Average All Subjects)[52]

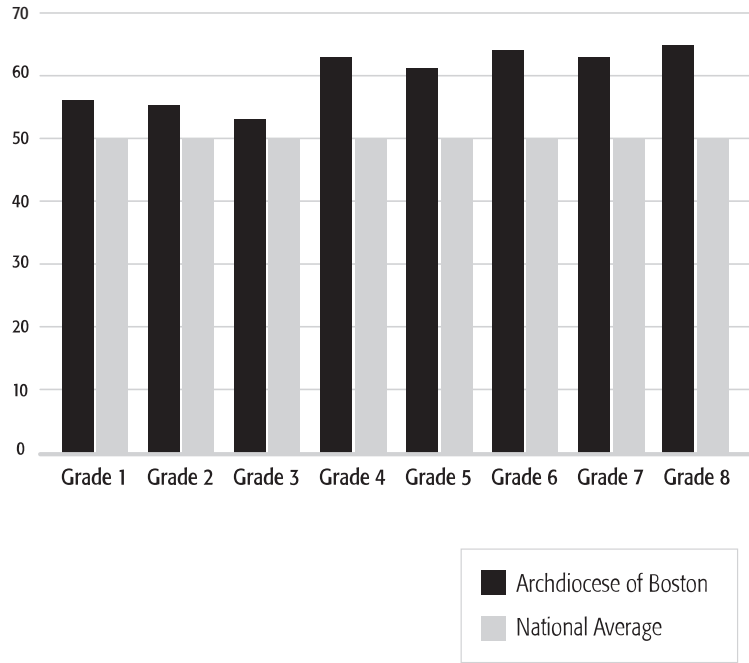
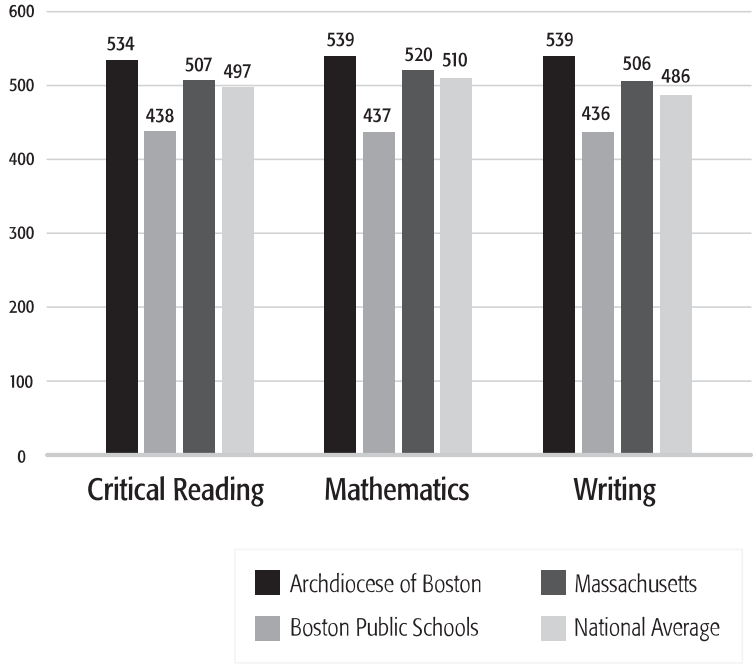


Figure 2. SAT Scores, 2010, Archdiocese of Boston, Boston Public, Massachusetts (public), the Nation[53]



Boston's Catholic elementary schools achieve their mission at an average tuition of just $6,583 per student.[54] But this cost to families doesn't reflect the real per-pupil cost of education, which can be up to $2,000 higher per student. The gap reflects the Archdiocese's commitment to educate students regardless of socioeconomic status, but also poses a financial challenge met in part with the help of private donors and philanthropic organizations.

In the past decade, average per-pupil expenditures in Catholic schools have compared favorably to the state as a whole ($16,500 per pupil) and districts such as Boston, Lawrence, and Quincy, all of which report 2020 expenditures of roughly $14,000 to $21,000 per student. Even after factoring out special education costs, general education in Boston Public Schools is more than $20,000 per pupil—much higher than in Catholic schools.[55]

Such comparisons are useful for understanding the taxpayer savings attributable to the tens of thousands of Massachusetts families choosing Catholic schools. When students enroll in Catholic schools, their families still pay taxes that benefit districts. When districts keep those tax dollars but don't have to educate students, they save hundreds of millions of dollars each year.[56]

Despite the high-quality, low-cost model, Catholic education is impacted by migration to suburbs, decreases in the number of priests and nuns, internal Church politics, and Massachusetts's bar on public assistance to sectarian schools. These and other factors have created a crisis in Catholic education. Father William Leahy, the current president of Boston College, contends Catholic schools in Massachusetts are "one step beyond crisis."[57]

The State of Things: Catholic Schools in Massachusetts

The crisis is most evident in declining enrollments and closed schools, mostly in the state's urban centers, where tuitions range from just 50 percent to about 85 percent of actual per-pupil costs.[58]

Enrollment trends in Catholic schools are part of an overall decline in enrollment in the state as a whole. Since the turn of the century, Massachusetts public schools have lost roughly 30,000 students, with enrollment hovering around 950,000 since 2015. The enrollment decline is more severe in lower-income areas than in middle- or upper-income areas."[59]

While schools across the state are losing enrollment, the numbers of Catholic elementary schools — the bulk of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese — reflect a national downward trend. According to the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), nationwide enrollment has fallen from 5.2 million in 1965 to about 1.7 million in 2020. Enrollment declines have led to the closure of thousands of schools, including 1,191 schools in the last 10 years alone, many of which were located in the nation's 12 major urban centers for Catholic education, including Boston.[60, 61]

How has this happened? For starters, an increase in numbers of white Catholics moving to the suburbs has left one-third of the overall Catholic population living in urban areas where two-thirds of Archdiocese schools are located — this helps explain why so many urban Catholic schools are under-enrolled or closed.[62] Moreover, many Catholics who left the city feel well served by suburban public schools.

Compounding the financial challenge is the decline in religious vocations. Prior to the 1960s, priests and nuns ran highly effective parish schools while drawing small stipends or no salaries. Over the past 40 years, the teaching burden has shifted dramatically to lay instructors: Religious accounted for 92 percent of Catholic school staff in 1920, 74 percent by 1960, and under 4 percent nationwide in 2010.[63] While many lay staff are outstanding educators and leaders, they do require a salary, even if it is often substantially less than in a public school.

Catholic schools in urban centers with great demand for educational alternatives thus confront the costs of paying faculty and staff while helping families who cannot pay full (or any) tuition. Catholic schools in Boston thus rely heavily on philanthropy, including the Catholic Schools Foundation, the Lynch Foundation, the Campaign for Catholic Schools, and private philanthropists. Many fear that overreliance on philanthropy could result in donor fatigue.[64]

President of Boston College Fr. Leahy admits the crisis reflects the Church's failure both to understand internal changes and plan to invest in education. With regard to high-quality lay teachers and leaders, he notes, "we didn't understand that quality costs."

The growth of charter public schools suggests the extent to which quality counts for parents. Boston-area charter public schools are concentrated in urban centers, attract the same students served by Catholic schools, and have records of success that make them an attractive, free option to families.[65]

Yet charter public schools are not exclusively responsible for enrollment problems in Catholic education. As Katie Everett,

executive director of the Lynch Foundation, points out, charter public schools account for only 15 percent of Catholic school attrition. Economist Ken Ardon estimates that, at most, only one-fifth of the decline in public school enrollments can be explained by increasing charter public school enrollments.[66]

However, since charter schools are an attractive alternative for black and Hispanic students,[67] Catholic schools should:

- Differentiate themselves from charters by reemphasizing the benefits of a Catholic education beyond academic excellence
- Look for opportunities to collaborate with charter public school counterparts to reach students.

One way to collaborate, suggests Fr. Leahy and Everett of the Lynch Foundation, is to lease vacant Catholic school buildings to charters, which receive state grants that cover only about 12 percent of building and renovation costs[68]—and reserve after-hours use of the buildings for activities related to Catholic education.[69]

In addition to building relationships with the wider education community, the Archdiocese has implemented financial, quality, and accountability initiatives, including:[70]

- Implementation of common standards based on the (former) Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks
- Standard use of Stanford 10 tests to track achievement
- More frequent and consistent use of assessment data to drive instruction
- Creation of an Elementary Schools Task Force to provide "a private, comprehensive analysis of the financial status of all elementary schools in the Archdiocese" and give each school "new financial management tools to serve as a road map to long-term financial stability."[71]

These initiatives are especially important in Boston, where the public schools are beginning to benefit from years of intense local reform and state policy initiatives. The Archdiocese is keen to ensure that schools and teachers view new academic standards as the "floor, not the ceiling."[72]

Additional initiatives have focused on teacher support and professional development, improving school facilities and access

to technology, and expanding academic programming. One professional development effort comes out of Boston College, home to the Urban Catholic Teachers' Corps, a program that recruits young teachers to spend two years in an inner-city Catholic school.[73]

The Archdiocese is merging small, struggling schools into regional academies that are governed by regional boards charged with making autonomous decisions about budgets, enrollment, and academics. Academies have been created in Dorchester, Brockton, Lawrence, Quincy, and South Boston, helping ensure Catholic schools remain open to those who need them most.[74]

For families who rely upon Catholic schools as a high-quality educational option, a broader political problem exists: Aside from modest federal support for early childhood education, they receive no government support. They must therefore pay both the cost of Catholic school and taxes to support the local public school. Moreover, Catholic schools continue to bear financial burdens as they commit to "serving the children most in need." As one Catholic school leader notes, "that is the mission-driven aspect of our work."[75]

Resolving the Crisis: Recommendations for the Perpetuation of Catholic Schools

Massachusetts policy makers have much to learn from Catholic schools, but adopting a Catholic school model in secular public schools will not confer the non-academic benefits that Catholic schools offer. Policy makers continue to ignore both the right of families to choose the schools they prefer and the excellence Catholic schools provide.

If Catholic schools are to survive, change must come from within. The Archdiocese has made admirable strides in creating educational models that are more financially viable, but must consider additional ways to increase quality, control costs, and continue to serve families who seek Catholic schooling. The following recommendations are for policy makers and the Catholic schools community in Massachusetts.

Repeal Massachusetts's Two Anti-Aid Amendments

The 1855 and 1917 Anti-Aid Amendments to the Massachusetts Constitution are relics of a shameful time and should be repealed. While, as the Fordham Institute points out, "vouchers should not be viewed as a panacea,"[76] prohibiting families from exercising their rights hurts families, students, and taxpayers, who are forced to support an expensive public system that doesn't work for all students. It is not tenable for Catholic schools to continue providing a high-quality education to all without state support. Given that Massachusetts taxpayers save hundreds of millions due to children attending Catholic schools, they have an interest in seeing these schools survive and thrive.[77]

Enact Tuition Tax Credits for Families Using Religious and Independent Schools

Implementing tuition tax credits for families who choose private education is a just way to compensate families who opt out of the public system but pay taxes. Both Rhode Island and Florida give substantial tax breaks to corporations that support not-for-profit scholarship organizations that provide scholarships to private schools or transportation scholarships to out-of-district public schools.

Continue to Reach Out to the Catholic Community and Beyond

Beyond reengaging Catholics outside of the inner city, Catholic schools need to form relationships with non-Catholic and public schools. Charter public schools are both a model and potential partner, as they receive full per-pupil operational funding, but only small grants toward capital costs. Many charters reach out to corporations, private donors, and their communities. There is a sense in the Catholic community that if Catholic schools were to market themselves better, they could draw greater financial support and pressure policy makers for change.

In addition, the Archdiocese has many vacant buildings they could lease to charter public schools to raise funds for diocesan schools. Where there is not enough demand for a Catholic school

per se, buildings could be leased during the day, and space reserved for Catholic educational purposes after school hours.

Expand Relationships with University Partners

The Archdiocese could expand already the strong relationships it has with many area colleges[78] to assist in the creation and implementation of teacher and school leader programs, to gather and interpret data to assist in decision-making, and to reach out to students across the university who are future Catholic school teachers and leaders.

Continue to Emphasize the Importance of a High-Quality Education for All Students

Catholic schools should continue to pursue their mission to educate all children to the highest possible standard, regardless of family background or ability to pay. A continued emphasis on standards, accountability, and professional development coupled with a willingness to "sell" these aspects of Catholic education to the public will result in increased enrollments.

In this vein, the creation of a school system in which schools can be more easily tracked and compared to one another via a common set of standards and testing will establish a strong system of accountability, guiding decisions regarding school performance and closures.

Concentrate on the Provision of Distinctive Catholic School Options

As the public system in Boston earns a better reputation and as high-quality charter school options are expanded, Catholic schools in Boston and beyond should continue to offer the one thing public schools cannot—a Catholic education. Moreover, the Catholic community should continue to support innovation in Catholic schooling by fostering growth of the Cristo Rey and Nativity Miguel networks. By continuing to positively differentiate themselves from the public system, such Catholic schools will remain attractive to certain communities and students.

Cara Stillings Candal, Ed.D., serves as Director of Educational Opportunity, focusing on private school choice, for ExcelinEd. Candal has spent the last 10 years working in education policy as a Senior Fellow with both Pioneer Institute and the Center for Education Reform. She was also a founding team member of the National Academy of Advanced Teacher Education (NAATE) and a research assistant professor at Boston University in the Department of Educational Leadership and Development. Candal has authored/edited more than 25 papers and three books on education policy. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from Indiana University, a Master of Arts in Social Science from the University of Chicago, and a Doctor of Education from Boston University. Candal is the author most recently of Pioneer Institute's book *The Fight for the Best Charter Public Schools in the Nation*.