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Lessons From Catholic Schools for Public Educators

By **SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN**

Within the 242 pages of Diane Ravitch's lightning rod of a book, "[The Death and Life of the Great American School System](#)," there appear exactly three references to Catholic education. Which makes sense, given that Ms. Ravitch is addressing and deploring recent efforts to reform public schools with extensive testing and increasing privatization.

Yet what subtly informs both her critique and her recommendations for improving public schools is, in significant measure, her long study of and admiration for Roman Catholic education, especially in serving low-income black and Hispanic students.

In that respect, Ms. Ravitch and her book offer evidence of how some public-education scholars and reformers have been learning from what Catholic education is doing right. What one might call the Catholic-school model is perhaps the most unappreciated influence on the nation's public-education debate.

"If you're serious about education reform, you have to pay attention to what Catholic schools are doing," said Joseph P. Viteritti, a professor of public policy at [Hunter College](#) who has edited four books with Ms. Ravitch. "The fact of the matter is that they've been educating urban kids better than they're being educated elsewhere."

When Ms. Ravitch assails the emphasis on standardized testing, particularly under the [No Child Left Behind](#) law, and when she exhorts schools to use a content-rich core curriculum and emphasize character and build ties to parents and neighborhoods, she is, without overtly saying so, extolling the essential traits of Catholic education.

The message, in turn, may be reaching a larger audience than ever through the book. With 50,000 copies in print, "[The Death and Life of the Great American School System](#)" has put Ms. Ravitch on The New York Times best-seller list for the first time in her 36-year, 24-book [career as an author](#) on education history and policy.

Part of the buzz has to do with the perception — actually, the misperception — that Ms. Ravitch has disavowed her previous dogma. While she does admit to "having fallen for the latest panaceas and miracle cures," like [charter schools](#) and the No Child law, she also espouses positions that have

been in her educational platform for decades. And many of them reflect the influence of Catholic education.

That influence decidedly did not come as a matriculant. Ms. Ravitch, who is Jewish, attended public school in Houston. She had already written a masterly history of public education in New York City (“The Great School Wars”) and battled against the educational left wing before starting to take notice of Catholic schools in the early 1980s.

Her interest was initially piqued by the work of [James S. Coleman](#), a sociologist of education and fellow apostate. Despite his roots in civil rights liberalism, Coleman began arguing in the 1970s and early 1980s that segregation alone could not explain the achievement gap between black and white students. His research into various types of high schools — tens of thousands of students’ records — convinced him that the same kind of poor, inner-city black student performed markedly better in a Catholic school than in a public one.

In books like “High School Achievement” and “Public and Private High Schools,” Coleman particularly singled out Catholic schools for their core curriculum that embodied the “common school ideal” and for the “social capital” they built by involving parents and parishioners.

Ultimately, Coleman gave Ms. Ravitch all of his data, so she could inspect it herself. Not only did she concur with his conclusions, but she began to visit urban Catholic schools on her own, from Brooklyn to London. “They reminded me of my own public schooling in the 1950s,” Ms. Ravitch recalled in an interview this week. “The halls were quiet. It was orderly. And there was this commitment from the teachers.”

More than nostalgia, though, commended the schools to Ms. Ravitch. On the one flank, they never gave over to the obsession with standardized tests. On the other, they never conceded their curriculum to progressive trends like whole language, constructivist math and relativistic history. As a result, black and Hispanic students in Catholic schools did not necessarily score higher than those in public schools on standardized tests like the SAT, but they were far more likely to take rigorous classes, graduate on time and attend college.

At a personal level, Ms. Ravitch paid tuition for two students at Bishop Loughlin Memorial High School in Brooklyn under the Student Sponsor Partners program. She even talked [Suze Orman](#) into picking up the bill for eight girls at St. Joseph High School in Brooklyn.

In terms of policy, Ms. Ravitch had her dalliance with the concept of giving publicly financed vouchers to low-income students. The idea was that they could attend private schools, including Catholic ones, rather than being consigned to abysmal public schools in their neighborhoods.

By now, vouchers qualify as yet another intellectual romance gone sour for Ms. Ravitch. The track record in Milwaukee, which has had vouchers and a school-choice program for upward of a

decade, has shown her no substantial improvement for low-income, nonwhite students.

Her criticism of charter schools, though, arises partly from a desire to protect Catholic ones. Already reeling from a shortage of priests and members of religious orders as teachers, already losing enrollment because of rising tuition and falling aid from parishes, urban Catholic schools face direct competition from charters, which as public entities are free.

“Where charter schools are expanding, Catholic schools are dying,” Ms. Ravitch said. “But charter schools can’t do the same things. The Catholic schools have a well-established record of being effective, and they’re being replaced by schools that have no track record.”

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