



## Committee on Catholic Education

3211 Fourth Street, NE • Washington DC 20017 • 202-541-3132 • 202-541-3390

July 30, 2020

The Honorable Karen Bass  
Chairwoman  
Congressional Black Caucus  
2059 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Bass,

As you are certainly aware, the devastating economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have reached nearly every sector of American society. The Catholic schools in the United States have been severely impacted as well, and their centuries-long tradition of serving families from all walks of life is now imperiled. As the impact of the coronavirus has disproportionately affected the black community, the same is true for our Catholic schools that serve predominately black communities, and we are imploring your help for these families who have sought a Catholic education for their children.

**Catholic schools are facing a crisis at this very moment.** Over one hundred-thirty schools have already announced permanent closure, including schools in Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston, New Jersey, and New York. These closures are disproportionately harmful to low-income and black children that are educated in urban schools. A recent survey of Catholic school principals showed that currently 10% are uncertain about their ability to open in the fall; this equals over 500 Catholic schools and thousands of families in turmoil. Strong action from Congress could provide these families and schools the confidence they need to stay in the Catholic school of their choice.

**Catholic education has played a significant role in lifting many from poverty to a more hopeful future.** Research shows Catholic schools close the achievement gap in low-income neighborhoods. The poorer and more at-risk a student is, the greater the relative achievement gains in Catholic schools.<sup>1</sup> A black or Latino child is 42% more likely to graduate from high school and two-and-a-half times more likely to graduate from college if he or she attends a Catholic school.<sup>2</sup>

**Catholic schools bring cohesion to communities and increase family involvement in schools.** Inner-city Catholic school parents report taking an active role in their children's education, and they believe that participating in the Catholic school community presents an

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Jordan. Irvine and Foster Michèle, in *Growing up African American in Catholic Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> [Neal, Derek. "The Effects of Catholic Secondary Schooling on Educational Achievement." \*Journal of Labor Economics\* 15, no. 1 \(1997\): 108. Accessed July 16, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/2535316.](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2535316)

opportunity to break the cycle of poverty. Latino parents believe their children are more motivated, more focused, and working harder since enrolling them in a Catholic school.<sup>3</sup> One study suggests that following the closure of a Catholic elementary school, the local neighborhood's social cohesion decreases and disorder increases.<sup>4</sup>

For over 200 years, Catholic schools have prioritized serving the marginalized in our country. As the U.S. bishops' 2018 pastoral letter against racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, relates,

Following a directive from Pope Leo XIII in 1887, St. Katharine Drexel dedicated her life to working closely with Native Americans and African Americans, exhibiting genuine respect and concern. By the time of her death in 1955, St. Katharine had more than 500 sisters working in 63 schools and had established 50 missions for Native Americans in 16 states. She also founded 50 schools for African American students, including Xavier University of Louisiana, the first and only Catholic university in the United States established specifically for African Americans. Her motivation was clear. As she said, "If we wish to serve God and love our neighbor well, we must manifest our joy in the service we render to Him and them. Let us open wide our hearts. It is joy which invites us. Press forward and fear nothing," 19-20 (citations omitted).

This important work continues across the country today:

- The **Archdiocese of Los Angeles** is the largest Catholic school system in the United States. The diocese serves close to 74,000 students in 265 schools grades pre-kindergarten through twelve. 60% of schools are inner city/urban. 90% of eligible students participate in free/reduced lunch. 78% are under-represented minorities and 1 of 6 students are non-Catholic.
- In the **Archdiocese of New York**, 91% of students enrolled at inner-city Catholic schools are minorities. 73% of the students come from homes living at or below the federal poverty line.
- The Consortium of Catholic Academies, comprised of four inner-city Catholic schools in the **Archdiocese of Washington**, serves a population of 99.5% Latino and Black students.
- The **Archdiocese of Detroit** serves over 1,500 low income students in primary and secondary schools in City of Detroit. The students are 70% African American and 20% Latino.
- Four Catholic community schools (PreK-8) in **Baltimore City** served nearly 1,100 mostly African American students from low-income families.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Stewart, Ph.D. Patrick Wolf, Ph.D. Stephen Q. Cornman, Esq., MPA Kenann McKenzie-Thompson, M.Ed. Jonathan Butcher. (2009). Family Reflections on the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program Final Summary Report. University of Arkansas. Available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED508626.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Friedlander Brinig, Margaret and Garnett, Nicole Stelle, Catholic Schools, Urban Neighborhoods, and Education Reform (March 31, 2010). Notre Dame Law Review, Vol. 85, No. 3, 2010, Notre Dame Legal Studies Paper No. 09-16, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1395676> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1395676>.

We understand the public school community has requested another \$300 billion in the next Coronavirus aid package. We ask that families of non-public schools be considered as a part of the comprehensive needs of K12 education, since non-public students represent ten percent of the K12 student population. Therefore, 10% of what is made available to public schools should be directed specifically to the non-public school community to provide **direct aid to families** in the form of means-tested scholarships.


Black families attending Catholic schools are counting on you, as are families with children in public school. **Please do not leave them behind** just because they value the historical and time-tested benefit of our Catholic schools for their children.

Please be assured of our willingness to work with your office in efforts to realize these critical policy initiatives for families. Thank you for your service to the nation, especially during these difficult times.


Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Barber, S.J." with a small cross symbol above the first name.

Most Reverend Michael C. Barber, SJ  
Bishop of Oakland  
Chairman, Committee on Catholic  
Education

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shelton J. Fabre" with a small cross symbol above the first name.

Most Reverend Shelton J. Fabre  
Bishop of Houma-Thibodaux  
Chairman, Ad Hoc Committee Against  
Racism

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph N. Perry" with a small cross symbol above the first name.

Most Reverend Joseph N. Perry  
Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago  
Chairman, Subcommittee on African  
American Affairs