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FACT SHEET: THE VALUE OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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"Catholic schools provide hugely consequential oases of impact and hope. Their value is – literally and figuratively – beyond measure." – The late Malcolm Forbes, "What Big Cities Owe to Catholic Schools"

FACTS ABOUT CATHOLIC SCHOOLS (from 2006-07, the latest year for which data are available)

Enrollment:

- Total Catholic school student is 2,320,651
- 1,682,412 elementary/middle schools; 638,239 secondary schools.
- Minority student enrollment is 25.7% of the total enrollment.
- Non-Catholic enrollment is 13.8% of the total enrollment.

Schools:

- There are 7,498 Catholic schools: 6,288 elementary; 1,210 secondary
- 36 new schools opened; 212 consolidated or closed.
- 2,607 (34.8%) schools have a waiting list for admission.
- Coeducational schools comprise 99% of elementary and 66.9% of secondary schools. At the secondary level, 13.5% of the schools are male and 19.6% are female.

Professional Staff:

- Full-time equivalent professional staff numbered 159,135.
- The student/ teacher ratio is 15:1.

Academic excellence. Research on school effectiveness in the last 10 years has continued to focus on academic outcomes of students. The outcomes include standardized test scores, graduation rates, post-secondary aspirations, and college attendance. Catholic schools, while they aspire to academic success, include among their primary objectives an understanding of the Catholic faith, a commitment to the practice of religion and a strong set of values. These goals, along with academic achievement, are the key components of the Catholic school's effectiveness.

Catholic elementary and secondary school students, on average, outperform their public school counterparts. Catholic schools send a higher percentage of their students to college than do public schools and are more successful in preventing dropouts than are public schools. Catholic schools remain effective for minorities and disadvantaged youth as well.

In national and science achievement tests at both the elementary and secondary levels, Catholic school students outscored their public school counterparts; in all subjects, Catholic school students show greater academic achievement gains between tenth and twelfth grades than do public school students.

Community service. Prayer and mission are at the heart of Catholic schools. Community service is a priority. 94% of schools have service programs and the average number of service hours performed by students is 79.

The commitment of Catholic schools to the development of the whole person is a fundamental one that corresponds to the core Catholic sensibility that we should be “finding God in all things.”

Satisfied teachers. Catholic educators tend to enjoy high levels of job satisfaction. When teachers were asked to respond to the question, “if you could go back to college and start all over again, would you become a teacher or not?” More than 77% of Catholic school teachers responded yes, compared to 64% of public school teachers. Reasons for this job satisfaction include: a perception of doing meaningful work and professional growth and sense of service. With regard to satisfaction measures that are specifically related to Catholic schools, teachers point to the opportunity to work in a faith community as very important to job satisfaction.

Catholic schools and minority students. The percentage of minorities in all Catholic schools has more than doubled in the past 30 years. Reasons for this increase include a greater emphasis being placed on the needs for basic Christian values and religious instruction and the emergence of school choice. Catholic schools have a distinct climate: an atmosphere that encourages and supports the learning process among students of all types. This distinctive climate aids Catholic schools in providing a quality education for inner city and at-risk students, encouraging them to excel in academic pursuits and personal development. Consistent features of Catholic school climate include generally smaller enrollment; highly structured academic programs, devoted and loyal faculty, and the practice of regular religious experiences. Catholic schools attempt to promote complete intellectual, spiritual, athletic and social development of their students.

Catholic schools provide a setting where each child is valued. The schools are pleasant, supportive, and respectful and expect success from minority students. Environments are safe and teachers enforce the need for students to be well prepared for the future.

Catholic schools influence their students’ choices, which result in the more equitable distribution of course-taking among all social classes. Catholic school students take more advanced math courses and the schools influence their students to take more academically challenging and risky courses than do independent schools. They provide more equality and equitability in determining who completes advanced coursework.

The academic success of poor minority students is attained with significantly smaller financial resources than those spent by public schools. Latino and African American students in Catholic schools are encouraged to assume more personal responsibility for their intellectual development. The overall philosophy is one that leads children to believe in their intellectual abilities and to strive for academic excellence.

Catholic schools and selectivity. Catholic schools are not especially selective in admitting students, particularly with regard to academic ability. This finding works against the commonly held belief that Catholic schools are selective and therefore pick only the best students. In fact, they accept 88% of all students who apply.

Faith formation. Catholic schools provide faith formation and values. Teachers view the formation of Christian character as a non-negotiable, which is gospel centered, environmental, cross-curricular and essential in this society where values are lacking.

Catholic schools work at racial harmony, appreciate diversity, and enforce strong discipline. The commitment of parents and teachers helps build a supporting community with close friendships between students and teacher.

Catholic schools have a distinctive social environment that is highly regarded by both students and adults. Catholic schools, regardless of location, share major characteristics and an unwavering commitment to an academic program for all students regardless of background, race or life experiences. Catholic schools provide an academic organization designed to promote an atmosphere with a caring environment and a social organization deliberately structured to advance it.

Student performance. Typically Catholic high schools feature well-organized classes where students are kept on track, teachers are prepared and there is an expectation that all students can learn. High standards of homework, attention, discipline and production are required of all students. Data suggest a high level of student engagement in classroom instruction and a very small portion of students who are not engaged. There are six times fewer incidents of cutting class and refusing to obey a teacher; students are twice as likely not to talk back and half as likely to instigate attacks on teachers compared to public schools. Positive attitudes toward school and teachers are evident. A vast majority believes that the academic quality of the school they are in is either good or excellent.

Parental choice. Parents choose Catholic secondary schools for many reasons including attention to values, a sense of community, smaller class size, stronger teacher interest in students, emphasis on academic standards, discipline and order. Minority parents, 90% non-Catholic, cited the reinforcement of values emphasizing pride and respect instilled in students by the school and its teachers as very influential in selection. Virtually every Catholic school has a written code of conduct including dress code and standards for social behavior. Catholic high schools have shared organizational beliefs and articulate an explicit moral understanding of the purposes of education. They work at developing a sense of personal responsibility and commitment to hard work. They conscientiously seek to shape and engage students in character building.

Secondary schools. Catholic secondary schools utilize a set of shared activities having a direct bearing on climate. First among these activities is a core academic curriculum uniting students for the same purpose, providing equitable academic opportunities among social classes and resulting in a strong common school effect. They promote extensive extracurricular involvement and require students and faculty to engage in religious activities which strengthen a sense of community and relationship, including service programs in which students respond to the larger community.

Sources:

Window on Mission, a report on Catholic secondary schools, 2002.

Catholic Schools Still Make a Difference: Ten Years of Research, 2004.