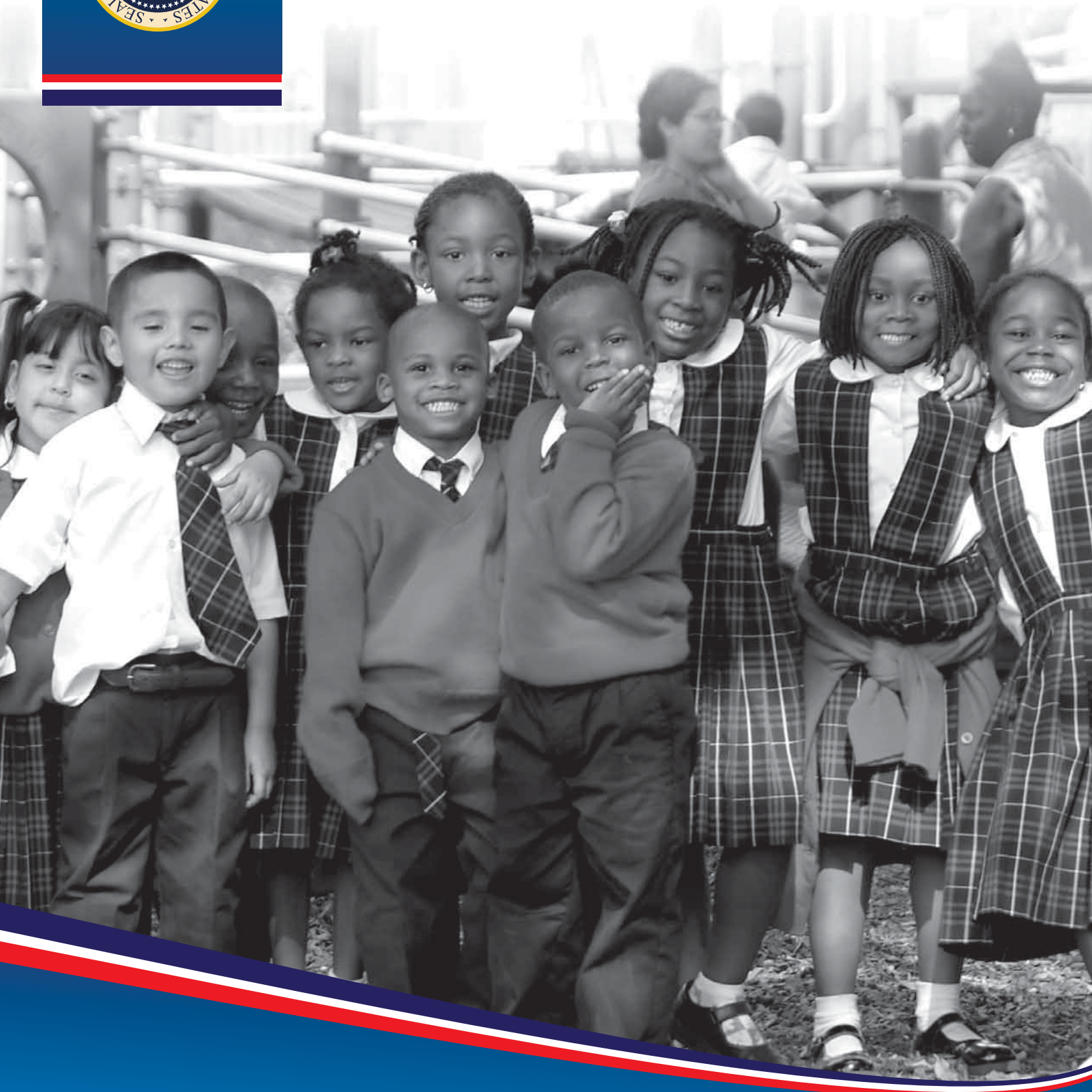




White House Summit on Inner-City Children and Faith-Based Schools

Proceedings



April 24, 2008 - Washington, DC

The content of this booklet was prepared by panelists and other contributors who participated in the White House Summit on Inner-City Children and Faith- Based Schools on April 24, 2008 in Washington, D.C. It is intended to highlight the contributions of faith-based urban schools in America, provide insight into the challenges these schools face, and generate discussion about possible solutions. The views expressed in this booklet are solely those of the authors and should not be construed as official White House positions.

Catholic Schools in the Inner City: A Time to Innovate or Perish

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From the mid-nineteenth century until the 1960s, Catholic schools provided excellent educational opportunities for Catholic immigrants from Europe. Most of the immigrants were non-English-speaking, and those communities had the largest percentage of parishes with schools. Irish immigrants, though English-speaking, also built parochial schools in large numbers. Many Catholic immigrants suffered from anti-Catholic sentiment and xenophobic sentiments of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority. In response, church leaders built what they considered “protective fortresses” to educate young Catholics. Due largely to the remarkable, life-long, pro bono contributions of women and men in religious communities, these schools provided a venue that affirmed religious belief and practice.

Catholic schools not only served a religious purpose, they functioned as remarkably effective instruments of upward mobility for Catholics of European descent. By the end of the 20th century Catholics had surpassed the mainstream of the American population as measured by income, educational attainment and professional status. The upward mobility was coupled with an outward mobility, a movement from urban ethnic enclaves to the suburbs and the exurbs, and from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and West. The Catholic population moved but, for the most part, the schools did not. Because of their commitment to the disadvantaged, many of the schools remained open, serving the new residents of urban neighborhoods, most of whom were low-income members of minority groups, and many of whom were not Catholic. These inner-city schools provided an important option for excellent education in a nurturing, values-based community.

Over the past decade, it has become increasingly clear that the proud legacy of Catholic inner-city schools is threatened. In the 2000-2001 academic year, I led a team of researchers at Boston College in the study of a nationally representative sample of these schools (n=384). In fact, until this study was undertaken, no authenticated list of the nation’s inner-city Catholic elementary schools existed. Analyses were conducted with respect to a variety of school types, such as minority composition and poverty status. We examined school characteristics, student body demographics, teacher and principal characteristics, student family information, the school’s community involvement, curriculum and instruction, school finances and development, and religious identity. The study formed the basis of a book published by the National Catholic Educational Association in 2004 under the title *Sustaining the Legacy: Inner-city Catholic Elementary Schools in the United States*.

We reported findings under the heading of students, staffing, and structure. Contrary to popular perception, these schools did not cater to an inner-city elite. The students came from low-income, minority families, many with single parents. A significant number were immigrants. Most schools had open enrollment and the retention rate was very high. The student body was marked by religious diversity; 34 percent were non-Catholic, mostly African-American Protestants. Principals reported that all students, despite family background, had high educational aspirations.

However, recruiting and retaining teaching and administrative staff was a challenge. Not surprisingly, comparatively low salaries led to a revolving door of younger teachers. Highly qualified, experienced and aging religious sisters, most of whom worked for small stipends, made up 40 percent of the principals. Given the demographics of religious life in the United States, who would replace them?

Unlike their public-school counterparts, these schools had few non-teaching professional staff such as nurses, psychologists, or speech therapists. While volunteer professionals provided some of these services, the increasingly complex and diverse needs of inner-city children and families require more attention. In terms of curriculum and instruction, the schools were traditional. This was due in part to a lack of resources for technology and staff development. The most prominent innovations were extended day and year programs and early childhood education. Physical plant issues were a cause for concern; over half of the schools were founded before 1926 and most of them were in their original buildings.

Finally, the schools that served the neediest children and showed the most measures of success were those that formed collaborative relationships with other Catholic or public schools, with Catholic universities, with health-care providers, with social-service agencies, and with the business community.

Sadly, 25 percent of the schools studied in 2000-2001 for Sustaining the Legacy had closed as of April 2008. This is reflective of national trends. Elementary-school enrollment has declined by 24.7 percent in the twelve largest urban dioceses, as opposed to 15.8 percent in all of the other dioceses. In regard to all Catholic schools nationally, 1,267 schools (15.5 percent) have closed and total enrollment has declined by 382,125 (14.4 percent). The picture is bleak indeed.

There are signs of hope, however, in the midst of the crisis besetting inner-city Catholic schools. The Nativity-San Miguel Network, with its innovative tuition-free middle-school model, began in 1971 in New York City and was first replicated in 1990. There are now 64 such schools nationwide. The Cristo Rey Network, with its innovative work-study secondary-school model, began in Chicago in 1996. The network now has 19 schools. Dioceses around the country are engaging in significant restructuring projects. For many, this entails a decoupling of the school from the administrative structures of barely functioning parishes. For many others, it is the formation of consortia of schools that share administrative services, staff development opportunities, development projects, technical assistance for grant writing and management, and common purchasing. These innovations are providing a level of professional competence that any single school could not afford. Enterprising principals are forming creative, collaborative arrangements with a wide array of organizations to support and enhance the school. Finally, mechanisms are being put into place to replicate best practices across the country.

It is only with bold and creative leadership that the signs of hope can become a reality. The slogan for Catholic schools in the coming years is “innovate or perish”. And innovation cannot be in isolation, but must be in collaboration with a wide range of individuals and institutions that value the legacy of Catholic education. Philanthropic efforts must be enhanced and sustained but the private sector cannot stand alone. As a nation, we must consider anew ways to imagine public support for faith-based schools that serve the common good.

For more information on faith-based education in America, please visit the Office of Non-Public Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education at <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oii/nonpublic/index.html>.

