



Examining the Legacy of Urban Catholic Schooling in the U.S.: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Research conducted in the twentieth century found urban Catholic schools in the U.S. had a legacy of providing high quality educational opportunities for low-income students and students of color. In an era of declining Catholic school enrollments, urban Catholic school advocates have argued that urban Catholic school closures would deny these students one of the best educational opportunities available to them. However, there have been few attempts in recent years to synthesize research in, on, and about urban Catholic schools to see if the sector's historical legacy is still present. In this article, we systematically reviewed 80 recently published empirical research studies focused at some level on the effects, operations, and reforms currently present in urban Catholic education. We found that while positive effects of urban Catholic schools on student outcomes can still be identified, these effects are not consistently present in all urban Catholic schools and there is little evidence to suggest that the sector as a whole has enacted the social justice mission for which it is best known. In light of these findings, we conclude our review with suggestions for future research that connects urban Catholic schooling to contemporary issues present across all U.S. urban education.

Keywords Urban Catholic schools · Sector effects · Urban school reform · Historically marginalized student groups

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Introduction

In the intensely competitive inter-sector school choice environments in many U.S. cities, school and sector leaders are encouraged to find more efficient, effective ways to meet the educational needs of the low-income communities of color living in these cities (Berends, 2020; Jabbar et al., 2019). Individual schools and sectors that are perceived as better meeting these communities' needs are championed while schools and sectors perceived as failing to meet these communities' needs are often forced to initiate system-level reforms (Mehta, 2013). While only currently serving about 900,000 students, compared to the 12.5 million students in urban public district schools and the 1.68 million students in urban public charter schools (Irwin et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019), urban Catholic schools in the U.S. comprise the third largest single sector of urban schools and have vied to remain a legitimate, high quality choice for parents in this market-oriented era (Garnett, 2020; Hamilton, 2008; Saroki & Levenick, 2009). Yet the urban Catholic school sector continues to suffer from a decades-long trend in enrollment declines and school closures which threaten the sector's survival (Cattaro & Cooper, 2007; McDonald & Schultz, 2021; National Catholic Educational Association [NCEA], n.d.).

According to market logics embedded in the choice-oriented, outcomes-driven policy contexts of contemporary U.S. elementary and secondary schooling, urban Catholic schools should not be closing as frequently as they do. Building on the Coleman report's findings about school effects on student achievement, research conducted at the end of the twentieth century found consistently high student achievement equitably distributed across racial and socioeconomic student groups in urban Catholic secondary schools, a "common school effect" not found in most urban public secondary schools (Bryk et al., 1993). Informed by this research, advocates across Catholic and public policy networks have continually argued that urban Catholic schools have helped create a more socially just society by sustaining their historical legacy of serving students of color, students from low-income families, and students from recent immigrant communities (O'Keefe & Scheopner, 2007; O'Keefe et al., 2004). These advocates have assumed that these schools have continually generated a "Catholic school advantage" providing low-income students and students of color living in cities high quality academic and nonacademic opportunities they would be otherwise denied were these schools to close (Hamilton, 2008; Saroki & Levenick, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Motivated by this "Catholic school advantage" discourse, urban Catholic school advocates have in the past thirty years sought to reverse declining enrollment trends by pursuing sector-level policy responses designed to eliminate barriers preventing parents and students from accessing these schools (Miserandino, 2019). Examples of these policies include: public voucher, tax credit, and education savings account programs (Brinig & Garnett, 2014); increases in public funding to private schools under statutes like IDEA and ESEA (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016); and the creation of new educational non-profits designed to enhance

schools' operational vitality (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2013; Miserandino, 2019; O'Keefe & Goldschmidt, 2014). Despite the alignment of some of these initiatives with an agenda seeking to privatize public education (Burke, 2012; Schneider & Berkshire, 2020), urban Catholic school advocates have justified their pursuit of these access-oriented policies by claiming these policies are the most effective means to help urban Catholic schools sustain their historical, social justice legacy (Brinig & Garnett, 2014).

However, this access-oriented policy response has significantly differed from contemporary system-level reform responses in the public sector designed to improve the educational opportunities afforded low-income students and students of color. Catalyzed by an increasing awareness of the persistent academic achievement gaps between and within different racial and socioeconomic groups, public school policy responses in the U.S. shifted in the 1980s to emphasize standards and accountability (Mehta, 2013). Rather than advocate for increased access to schools that already produced desirable academic outcomes, the public sector ushered in what Peurach et al. (2019) have referred to as an era of "instructionally-focused systemic reform" in which public school leaders attempted to maximize the number of high-quality schools in their districts by building instructionally-focused school systems with cultures of continuous improvement.

While in part attributable to the assumption that the "Catholic school advantage" is generated when urban Catholic schools remain open (Brinig & Garnett, 2014), the Catholic sector's choice to pursue an access-oriented policy response during this contemporary reform era instead of the instructional quality-oriented policy response found in the public sector has received little attention. In addition, despite multiple decades of pursuing an access-oriented policy response, urban Catholic schools continue to close at the same rates they have been closing since the sector's enrollment peaks in the mid-twentieth century. And though there has always been a significant research tradition investigating the students, staffing, and structures of urban Catholic schooling (Cordasco, 1971; O'Keefe & Scheopner, 2007), there have been few attempts since 2007 to synthesize current research trends to evaluate the state of this segment of the Catholic sector in the hyper-competitive school choice environments in which they exist (O'Keefe & Goldschmidt, 2014). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to systematically review recently published empirical research conducted in, on, and about urban Catholic schools in the U.S., to synthesize what has been learned about the ways, if at all, these schools have sustained their historical social justice legacy, and to assess the merits of the Catholic sector's access-oriented policy response in light of this examination of the sector's legacy.

This literature review was guided by the following three research questions: (1) what is known about who currently attends urban Catholic schools and the effects these schools have on these students, if any?; (2) what is known about the ways urban Catholic schools have operated during the current phase of the neoliberal education reform era?; and (3) what is known about the urban Catholic schools that have intentionally worked to sustain the historical legacy of supporting the education of students of color and students from low-income communities? In the pages that follow, we first present the search methods, criteria, and data analysis procedures we used to conduct the review. Next, we present the findings of our analysis

of the studies we collected, organized as responses to each of our three research questions. We conclude this paper with a call for a new research agenda in urban Catholic education informed by the results of our review.

Methods

This systematic literature review (Fink, 2005; Okoli & Schabrum, 2010; Xiao & Watson, 2019) focused on recent peer-reviewed empirical research on urban Catholic elementary and secondary (PreK-12) schools. In this section, we briefly describe the way we defined the review's primary construct of interest (urban Catholic education in the U.S.) and detail both the search methods and data analysis procedures we used to conduct our analysis of this literature.

Defining Urban Catholic Schooling in the United States

In order to begin our review, we first had to operationalize what we mean when we refer to “urban Catholic schools.”

It is generally understood that “Catholic schools” in the U.S. are privately funded and governed schools operated by various regional dioceses and private boards of limited jurisdiction associated with the Roman Catholic Church (McDonald & Schultz, 2021). A distinct organizational feature of Catholic schools in the U.S. has been the way these schools have intentionally blended academics with religious and character education (Bryk et al., 1993). Given that instruction in the Catholic religion is a central element of Catholic schooling in the U.S., it is unsurprising that U.S. Catholic schools have tended to serve an overwhelmingly Catholic-identifying population (D’Antonio et al., 2013), though it is important to note that the percentage of non-Catholic students in Catholic schools nationwide has increased from 13.5% in 2000 to 19.7% in 2020 (NCEA, n.d.). In addition, recent market research surveys have suggested that Catholic schools in the U.S. have come to be identified among Catholic and non-Catholic parents alike by their reputation for providing safe learning environments for students and offering ample opportunities for moral and character development (Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities & National Catholic Educational Association, 2018). Yet the research we reviewed below suggests that these school qualities are not universally found in all Catholic schools. Therefore, though the religious and affective dimensions of what occurs inside a Catholic school matter significantly for how Catholic or non-Catholic parents determine the quality of an individual Catholic school, for the purposes of this review we have chosen to define a “Catholic” school as any private school in the U.S. that is organizationally or operationally associated with the Roman Catholic Church.

In order to define “urban,” we first had to confront the fact that in several of the reviewed studies researchers used the signifier “urban” without explicitly defining this term. Despite this lack of clarity, we identified three common patterns in the way “urban” is used by people investigating the phenomenon of urban Catholic schools.

First, given the historical legacy of urban Catholic schools in the U.S. serving low-income students, students of color, and students from recent migrant communities (O’Keefe et al., 2004), some researchers have used the term “urban” in relationship to the population the school serves. This expansive definition tends to include any Catholic school serving these student populations that experiences the structural resource disparities schools serving these populations tend to experience (Fenzel & Helfenbein, 2019).

Other scholars have defined “urban” based on geographical census designations found in state and federal data sets. For example, the federal Private School Universe Survey (PSS) uses a school’s physical location and mailing address to sort schools into one of four locale categories based on population density: rural, town, suburban, city (Geverdt, 2015). According to federal data, an urban Catholic school is limited to one that has a “city” designation. As of the most recently released 2017–2018 PSS results, there were approximately 910,000 students in Catholic schools with “city” designations, or 47% of students attending elementary and secondary U.S. Catholic schools (Broughman et al., 2019).

Finally, scholars within the Catholic education community have used the students and staffing data collected annually by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) to determine whether schools being investigated consider themselves “urban.” This database includes four geographic categories—rural, suburban, urban, inner-city—that it allows leaders to choose from when identifying school location. We found that researchers have tended to combine urban and inner-city self-reported NCEA designations when considering “urban” Catholic schools. As of the most recent NCEA annual survey, there were 2335 self-identified “urban” and “inner-city” Catholic schools, which is just under 40% of all Catholic schools (McDonald & Schultz, 2021).

None of these three common definitions is comprehensive, indicating that some studies of urban Catholic education could include schools that would hypothetically be excluded in other studies. For example, a school that might self-identify as urban in NCEA data, might not serve racially or socioeconomically marginalized student populations or be geographically located within a city setting. However, to best reflect the way researchers and practitioners in the field have used the signifier “urban,” we chose to include all studies on urban Catholic schools in our review that defined “urban” in any one of these three common ways.

Search Process, Review Inclusion Criteria, and Data Analysis

The search process for contemporary urban Catholic education literature was conducted primarily in the Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC) database due to its comprehensive aggregation of empirical research published in refereed journals. We limited the search to articles published from 2007 to the present, as 2007 was when the last published systematic review of urban Catholic education research was completed (O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2007). Key search terms included combinations of: (a) *Catholic school*, *parochial school*, and *private school* to account for all designations of Catholic schools; (b) *urban*, *inner-city*, and *city* to

account for all designations of where the school is located; and (c) *elementary* and *secondary* to account for all PreK-12 school grade formations. Secondary searches using these keywords were conducted in the internal journal databases of the *Journal of Catholic Education* and *International Studies in Catholic Education*, the two English-language academic journals that focus specifically on Catholic education research. These keyword searches yielded 136 distinct English-language articles, reports, book chapters, and dissertations. A separate search resulting in 25 additional unique studies was conducted with specific keywords focusing on Cristo Rey and Nativity Miguel schools, networks of urban Catholic schools that are often more associated with their network type than with the word “urban” (Fenzel & Wyttenbach, 2019). Across all searches, 161 unique studies were assessed for inclusion.

To be included, studies had to be published in peer-reviewed academic journals, define “urban” in one of the three ways described in the previous section, and have either the students, staff, or structures of urban Catholic schools as their unit of analysis. These criteria, consistent with O’Keefe and Scheopner’s (2007) classification system, were designed to uncover what has been learned about what occurs inside urban Catholic school communities. For example, we excluded some studies that focused primarily on initiatives that intersected with, but remained tangential to urban Catholic schools, such as Tamir’s (2014) study of preservice, university-based teacher preparation for urban Catholic schools. Finally, consistent with our attempt to track what has been learned about urban Catholic education via empirical quantitative and qualitative investigation, we excluded all conceptual research that did not contain empirical data analysis. A total of 80 studies remained after the sorting protocol was applied.

Our analysis of these 80 studies proceeded in three stages. First, all abstracts of studies were read and coded as having a primary emphasis on either urban Catholic school students, staffing, or structures. If a study had more than one emphasis, a secondary code was assigned to that study. Studies were initially categorized using the primary codes and all studies were carefully re-read; a table of research methods, research questions, major findings, and implications was created to help in synthesizing themes across studies. Analytical memos and summaries were written to make sense of the identified trends across the students, staffing, and structures categories. However, given the number of studies that received both a primary and secondary code, studies were re-categorized based on the extent to which each study’s research questions aligned with one of our three research questions. Table 1 presents the studies in this re-categorized format. Additional analytical memos and summaries were written to track the trends revealed after this recategorization, which informed the summary findings presented below.

Findings

Effects of Urban Catholic Schools for the Students Who Attend Them

In response to research question one, the first cluster of reviewed studies contained analyses of urban Catholic school demographics and the effects urban Catholic

Table 1 Articles Reviewed by Findings Category

Author(s) (Year)	Level of school	Findings category
Reardon et al. (2009)	Elementary	Effects (RQ1)
Hallinan and Kubitschek (2010)	Elementary	Effects (RQ1)
Hallinan and Kubitschek (2012)	Elementary	Effects (RQ1)
Shields et al. (2016)	Elementary	Effects (RQ1)
Lore et al. (2016)	Elementary	Effects (RQ1)
Berends and Waddington (2018)	Elementary	Effects (RQ1)
Hallinan et al. (2009)	Elementary/Secondary	Effects (RQ1)
Kelly and Majerus (2011)	Elementary/Secondary	Effects (RQ1)
Murnane and Reardon (2018)	Elementary/Secondary	Effects (RQ1)
Robey and Helfenbein (2018)	Elementary/Secondary	Effects (RQ1)
Barrueco et al. (2016)	Early Childhood	Effects (RQ1)
Louie and Holdaway (2009)	Secondary	Effects (RQ1)
Morgan and Todd (2009)	Secondary	Effects (RQ1)
Carbonaro and Covay (2010)	Secondary	Effects (RQ1)
Simmons (2012)	Secondary	Effects (RQ1)
Chen and Pong (2014)	Secondary	Effects (RQ1)
Freeman and Berends (2016)	Secondary	Effects (RQ1)
Lee et al. (2017)	Secondary	Effects (RQ1)
Fleming et al. (2018)	Secondary	Effects (RQ1)
Scanlan (2008)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Scanlan (2010)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Dallavis (2011)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Dorner et al. (2011)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Holmes (2012)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Dallavis (2014)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Fenzel et al. (2014)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Smetana and Coleman (2015)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Bradley-Levine and Carr (2015)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
LeBlanc (2015)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Kershner and McQuillan (2016)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Joseph et al. (2017)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
LeBlanc (2017)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Woodrow (2018)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Spillane et al. (2019)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Neumerski and Cohen (2019)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Burns (2019)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Neugebauer and Blair (2020)	Elementary	Operations (RQ2)
Buck (2016)	Elementary/Secondary	Operations (RQ2)
Burke and Gilbert (2016)	N/A	Operations (RQ2)
Merritt (2008)	Secondary	Operations (RQ2)
Candal and Glenn (2012)	Secondary	Operations (RQ2)
Fuller and Johnson (2014)	Secondary	Operations (RQ2)

Table 1 (continued)

Author(s) (Year)	Level of school	Findings category
Aldana (2015)	Secondary	Operations (RQ2)
Crea et al. (2015)	Secondary	Operations (RQ2)
Aldana (2016)	Secondary	Operations (RQ2)
Hooker (2019)	Secondary	Operations (RQ2)
Rodriguez and Briscoe (2019)	Secondary	Operations (RQ2)
Thomas et al. (2020)	Secondary	Operations (RQ2)
Crowley and Wall (2007)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
James et al. (2008)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Fenzel and Monteith (2008)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Gibbs et al. (2009)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Fenzel and Domingues (2009)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Dallavis and Johnstone (2009)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Fenzel (2009)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Borrero (2010)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Shriberg et al. (2012)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Beltramo (2012)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Suh (2012)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Proehl et al. (2013)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Proehl et al. (2015)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Proehl et al. (2017)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Huchting et al. (2017)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Scanlan (2017)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Fenzel and Richardson (2018)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Fenzel and Richardson (2019)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Anguiano et al. (2020)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
Jabbari and Duncan (2021)	Elementary	Reforms (RQ3)
McCloskey (2010)	Elementary/Secondary	Reforms (RQ3)
Horning (2013)	Elementary/Secondary	Reforms (RQ3)
Tamir (2013)	Elementary/Secondary	Reforms (RQ3)
Rieckhoff (2014)	Elementary/Secondary	Reforms (RQ3)
Carr and Decker (2015)	Elementary/Secondary	Reforms (RQ3)
Bempechat et al. (2008)	Secondary	Reforms (RQ3)
Thielman (2012)	Secondary	Reforms (RQ3)
Aldana (2014)	Secondary	Reforms (RQ3)
Kabadi (2015)	Secondary	Reforms (RQ3)
Garcia-Tunon et al. (2016)	Secondary	Reforms (RQ3)
Palomino-Bach and Fisher, J. (2017)	Secondary	Reforms (RQ3)
Madden (2017)	Secondary	Reforms (RQ3)

schools have had on student outcomes (Table 1). The 18 studies we sorted into this category each identified representative trends present in urban Catholic schools; in order to do so, 14 of the 18 studies contained secondary analyses of large regional, state, or federal data sets (e.g., NAEP, PSS, ECLS-K). Across these studies, three main findings emerged: (1) the composition of urban private schooling has shifted considerably in the past twenty years, however there is not yet consensus about why these trends have emerged; (2) a Catholic school advantage may exist for some populations who currently attend urban Catholic schools but this effect is not universally present; and (3) the positive effects generated in urban Catholic schools as measured in large-scale data sets tend to not be associated with in-school characteristics unique to urban Catholic schools.

Attending to Demographic Shifts within Urban Catholic Schools

We found only three studies that primarily focused on empirically analyzing or comparing demographic trends among student populations in urban Catholic schools and other settings (Barrueco et al., 2016; Louie & Holdaway, 2009; Murnane & Reardon, 2018). Only one of these three (Louie & Holdaway, 2009) focused its analysis exclusively on students attending urban Catholic schools. There has been a tradition of Catholic education scholarship asserting that student population patterns in urban Catholic schools have followed U.S. migration patterns, noting that as European immigrant communities left cities and new non-white populations entered cities in the latter twentieth century, urban Catholic schools in those cities became much more racially and socioeconomically diverse (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; York, 1996; Youniss, 1998). Louie and Holdaway's (2009) analysis of immigrant student populations attending Catholic schools in New York City and Barrueco et al.'s (2016) more recent analysis of the demographic composition of children enrolled in Catholic preschool and daycare programs confirmed that urban Catholic schools have at times continued to serve these populations. Further, both studies suggested that urban Catholic schools often attract low-income communities of color living in cities because of the perception that these schools are well-suited to meet the needs of these communities. However, Louie and Holdaway (2009) drew on data collected from New York adults who had attended Catholic schools through the early 2000s and Barrueco et al. (2016) only focused on early childhood educational services.

Murnane and Reardon (2018) addressed broader demographic trends in more recent urban Catholic elementary and secondary school settings. This study of private school enrollment used longitudinal data trends from the federal Private School Universe Survey (PSS) to describe how the composition of different private school segments has shifted in recent years. Confirming the negative enrollment trends found in research on urban Catholic schools prior to 2007 (O'Keefe & Scheopner, 2007), Murnane and Reardon (2018) identified consistent declines in urban Catholic school enrollment specifically among middle- and low-income students. However, countering the assumption in the field that urban Catholic schools primarily serve low-income students and students of color, Murnane and Reardon (2018) suggested

that the result of the demographic trends they found has been that this segment of schools is now relatively wealthier and whiter than it had previously been. Outside of Murnane and Reardon's (2018) speculations that these trends have been caused by rising tuition and declining access to scholarship dollars, though, we did not find other empirical research that attempted to make sense of how and why these demographic shifts have led to this result.

Measuring Student Outcomes in Urban Catholic Schools

The majority of studies in this category conducted quantitative analyses of large-scale student outcome data to draw conclusions about any sector effects that exist for students attending urban Catholic schools (Berends & Waddington, 2018; Chen & Pong, 2014; Fleming et al., 2018; Freeman & Berends, 2016; Hallinan & Kubitschek, 2010, 2012; Hallinan et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2017; Morgan & Todd, 2009; Reardon et al., 2009). Though, as mentioned in the introduction, previous research had long suggested urban Catholic secondary schools produced both a "common school effect" and "Catholic school advantage" (e.g., Altonji et al., 2005; Bryk et al., 1993; Grogger & Neal, 2000; Neal, 1997), these 10 studies of more recent student outcome data presented a more complex, less consistent portrait of urban Catholic elementary and secondary schools.

For example, in their comparisons of data from middle school students in the Chicago School Study and the Chicago Catholic School Study (longitudinal data sets of Chicago middle school students), Hallinan and Kubitschek (2012) ultimately found no significant differences in reading or math achievement when comparing Catholic and public student performance. Similarly, using data from the federal Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Class of 1998–1999 (ECLS-K), a nationally representative sample of kindergarten students, Reardon et al. (2009) found no observable differences in reading scores among public and Catholic elementary school students regardless of race and/or urbanicity and strong evidence suggesting that Catholic schools were less successful at generating high math outcomes than public schools. Hallinan and Kubitschek (2010) did find in another comparison of Chicago School Study and Chicago Catholic School Study data that urban Catholic schools were still associated with smaller student achievement gaps between racial and socioeconomic status student groups. However, the evidence across studies reviewed in this paper suggested a Catholic school *advantage* related to student achievement at the elementary level appears to be minimal, nonexistent, or inconclusive.

Evidence across studies reviewed in this paper did still point to the existence of a Catholic school advantage in relation to post-secondary outcomes. Drawing on data from nine different freshman cohorts at one of the largest public universities in the U.S., Fleming et al. (2018) found that students across a wide range of demographics who attended urban Catholic high schools had higher college grade-point averages and were more likely to complete college. Similarly, in their analysis of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), a longitudinal, nationally representative data set initiated in the fall of 2001, Freeman and Berends (2016) found that students

who attend any Catholic high school (including urban Catholic high schools) were more likely to continue onto college than students who did not attend Catholic high schools.

Despite this postsecondary outcome evidence, most of these 10 studies raise significant questions about the use of the term “Catholic school advantage,” particularly in light of Murnane and Reardon’s (2018) findings about the demographic trends occurring in urban Catholic schools. These studies noted that a student outcome advantage may be measurable in urban Catholic elementary or secondary schools in certain cases or among postsecondary populations, but attempts to assess urban Catholic schools’ capacity to measurably raise student achievement for the students currently attending urban Catholic schools have to this point produced inconclusive results. These studies, though, were only designed to measure discrete effects; each concluded with a call for more in-depth research to explain how or why any actual measured effects they found had been generated.

Explaining Student Outcomes in Urban Catholic Schools

Several studies included in this review did attempt to account for and explain urban Catholic school sector effects on student outcomes (Carbonaro & Covay, 2010; Kelly & Majerus, 2011; Lore et al., 2016; Robey & Helfenbein, 2018; Shields et al., 2016). Previous research had established that urban Catholic secondary schools have distinct organizational structures—a core academic curriculum that all students take, a decentralized form of governance that allows for local decision-making, a mission-driven sense of community solidarity—that directly contribute to the “common school effect” (Bryk et al., 1993). Across these studies, researchers found that what was most often associated with positive student outcomes within urban Catholic schools could not be uniquely attributed to how contemporary urban Catholic schools are organized. For example, in their analysis of the 2002 federal Education Longitudinal Study (ELS) data, Carbonaro and Covay (2010) concluded that race, ethnicity, and poverty level had more effect on student academic achievement than the specific type of school attended. While they found that students in Catholic schools did experience greater math gains between the 10th and 12th grade than students in public schools, these differences were associated with the level of student achievement prior to entering a particular school than with what the school itself did.

Across studies that associated student learning gains with in-school practices, there is no evidence that contemporary urban Catholic schools employed these practices in distinct ways. For example, Kelly and Majerus (2011) found in their analysis of Chicago School Study data that classrooms implementing rigorous, problem-based instructional techniques tended to generate higher student achievement, but found these techniques to be no more or less prevalent in Catholic schools than other schools. Shields et al. (2016), in their evaluation of a comprehensive student support and wrap-around service program, and Lore et al. (2016), in their evaluation of an early mathematics learning intervention, found that students in Catholic schools receiving these interventions tended to have higher achievement. While these studies found Catholic schools

had made space to implement these interventions, neither study described these interventions as necessitating Catholic school environments to be successful.

Therefore, contemporary explanations for the existence of measurable positive effects occurring in urban Catholic schools did not tend to support the existence of any unique practice generating these effects within the sector, a finding consistent with sociological research that called into question late-twentieth century “Catholic school advantage” findings (e.g., Davies & Quirke, 2007). Rather these studies found that, agnostic of sector, positive student outcomes tended to be generated to different extents by particular curricular and instructional choices and pre-existing within and between sub-group differences of particular student populations. These findings suggest that the “Catholic school advantage” discourse is not a sufficient explanatory mechanism for why certain effects are present in urban Catholic schools, particularly since there has not been sufficient analytical comparison between members within demographic sub-groups attending urban public, charter, and Catholic schools (Freeman & Berends, 2016). Furthermore, given the demographic trends that have taken place in the field in recent years (Murnane & Reardon, 2018), more research needs to be conducted to establish what in-school features or practices are associated with positive measurable student outcomes for different demographic sub-groups who currently attend urban Catholic schools. We return to this point in our discussion.

Operations of Urban Catholic Schools within Contemporary Policy Environments

In response to research question two, the second cluster of reviewed studies contained investigations of the ways urban Catholic schools function in the contemporary policy environment and the lived experiences of the students, families, and staff who participate in urban Catholic schooling (Table 1). Unlike the nearly exclusive use of quantitative methods used to measure the effectiveness of urban Catholic schools in the previous cluster, all but two of these studies relied exclusively on qualitative or ethnographic data collection methods in order to highlight stakeholders’ perceptions as they navigated distinct organizational contexts. Across these studies, three main findings emerged: (1) as a result of the current policy moment and by nature of serving similar populations, urban Catholic schools and urban public schools tended to confront similar organizational challenges and responded to those challenges in similar ways; (2) despite having access to a distinct social justice-informed organizational identity, only some urban Catholic schools consistently enacted this identity; and (3) the extent to which a school enacted the sector’s social justice organizational identity contributed to the extent students, staff, and family positively perceived their lived experience with the school.

Similarities in Organizational Challenges and Responses

Several studies included in our review investigated the organizational challenges confronted by urban Catholic schools and the organizational responses of these schools.

Four studies directly compared the organizational responses of Catholic schools to those of neighboring district schools, charter schools, and other private schools in a specific geographical region (Dorner et al., 2011; Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Neumerski & Cohen, 2019; Spillane et al., 2019). Best exemplified in findings from cross-case analyses of multiple school systems attempting large-scale instructional reforms in a city in the Midwest, Dorner et al. (2011), Neumerski and Cohen (2019), and Spillane et al. (2019) found that the contemporary standards-based reform movement has created an environment in which all PreK-12 urban schools have had to shift their organizational work to be more aligned to the movement's outcomes-driven policy priorities. These studies highlighted the ways all types of urban schools have confronted the problem of how best to enhance their school's instructional quality and how they have responded by attempting to improve their instructional core in order to generate better student outcomes. In their cross-case analysis of an urban Catholic and an urban public school in a large northeastern city, Kershner and McQuillan (2016) similarly found that the Catholic school was engaged in the same instructionally-focused, complex decision-making processes as the public school as both schools understood their primary organizational responsibility to be continuous instructional improvement. The findings in these studies suggest that most practitioners in urban Catholic schools have aligned their organizational practices to the public sector's contemporary instructionally-focused policy priorities in order to increase their school's capacity to contribute to higher student outcomes.

Several other studies asserted that all urban schools that serve a higher percentage of low-income students of color require different organizational responses to confront these organizational challenges than their within-sector, non-urban peers (Crea et al., 2015; Fenzel et al., 2014; Rodriguez & Briscoe, 2019; Smetana & Coleman, 2015). These studies intentionally investigated how particular urban Catholic schools serving these populations have responded to communities' needs by reforming particular aspects of the school's educational infrastructure: new programs to help prepare low-income students of color to attend college (Rodriguez & Briscoe, 2019), new models for parent engagement given the time and economic pressures faced by low-income families (Crea et al., 2015), new hiring policies to ensure students have enough academic support to close academic achievement gaps (Fenzel et al., 2014), and new cost-effective curricular infrastructure to ensure rigorous academic work can occur even when a school lacks financial resources (Smetana & Coleman, 2015). Yet each study found that these urban Catholic schools' organizational responses were determined by the particular needs of the communities served rather than the organizational priorities of their sector.

The accumulated evidence across these studies suggest that across all sectors urban schools have responded to the contemporary standards and accountability reform movement by enacting some form of instructionally-focused organizational reforms. These studies all found that urban Catholic school educators, like their urban public school peers, spent most of their organizational time finding ways to continuously improve their academic operations and considered this work essential to meet the diverse needs of the students attending their schools. Unlike the core assumptions built into the Catholic sector access-oriented policy response that assumes Catholic schools are already high quality, the Catholic school educators

highlighted in these studies were all equally concerned about improving within school offerings and services for students as their public school counterparts. Furthermore, there was little evidence across these studies that any contemporary urban school leader in one of the three dominant sectors was willing to pursue a different organizational response other than instructionally-focused reform. The only major difference in response, as noted by Dorner et al. (2011), Kershner and McQuillan (2016), and Neumerski and Cohen (2019), was that Catholic schools framed their rationale for pursuing this instructionally-focused work in terms of a distinct social justice organizational identity.

Enactment of an Organizational Identity Rooted in Catholic Social Teaching

As mentioned in this article's introduction, Catholic school advocates frequently refer to the Catholic Church's specific orientation toward social justice (known as Catholic social teaching, or CST) to justify its mission of serving historically marginalized student populations in urban Catholic schools (O'Keefe & Goldschmidt, 2014). Though this understanding of social justice has evolved over time and has always been contested within the Catholic community, the general precepts of CST as articulated by leaders within the institutional Church have helped Catholic school educators connect their professional practice to a communal organizational identity (Miller, 2007). Several of the reviewed studies in this cluster assessed the ways Catholic educators have made sense of this CST-informed identity and evaluated the limits of the enactment of CST in their practice serving low-income students, students of color, and other students from historically marginalized communities (Aldana, 2015; Bradley-Levine & Carr, 2015; Buck, 2016; Dallavis, 2011, 2014; Fuller & Johnson, 2014; Scanlan, 2008; Woodrow, 2018).

Three particular studies highlighted a central tension: educators identified what enacting CST should look like in practice but often felt incapable of enacting CST when confronted by common organizational challenges faced in urban education. Dallavis (2011, 2014) found in a case study of a single urban Catholic elementary school in a midwestern city that educators used the language of CST in order to justify their use of culturally responsive practices they believed their students deserved, like setting high expectations and creating caring environments. His case study evidence suggested that urban Catholic educators when asked why they engage in certain equitable pedagogical practices could demonstrate alignment between their practices and CST principles. Yet Scanlan's (2008) cross-case comparison of three urban elementary schools in a different midwestern city found that the organizational challenges confronted by educators in under-resourced and financially-burdened urban Catholic schools serving low-income students of color more frequently resulted in those schools enacting exclusionary practices that limited educators' capacity to serve these students.

Consistent with Dallavis's (2011, 2014) findings, Buck (2016), Woodrow (2018), and Bradley-Levine and Carr (2015) each studied single urban Catholic schools or programs in schools that intentionally enacted CST-aligned pedagogy, yet found that these schools and programs succeeded largely in part due to specific organizational

support for these practices. Consistent with Scanlan's (2008) findings, Aldana (2015) and Fuller and Johnson (2014) in their case studies of urban Catholic high schools found that inequitable and exclusionary pedagogical practices became harder to subvert when certain organizational demands took precedence over enacting mission-aligned practice.

The findings from these studies suggest that it remains commonplace for urban Catholic educators to describe the work they do in light of CST and social justice. This core organizational identity of urban Catholic schooling can still be found in educators describing their use of professional practices intended to generate equitable outcomes for the historically marginalized populations attending these schools. However, as Scanlan (2008) noted, contemporary urban Catholic educators have struggled to effectively enact CST while continuing to intentionally serve low-income students and students of color because of the increasingly complex work it takes to meet these communities' needs in contemporary urban educational settings.

Perceptions of Students, Parents, and Staff in Urban Catholic Schools

The remaining studies reviewed in this cluster focused on the lived experience of students (Aldana, 2016; Candal & Glenn, 2012; LeBlanc, 2015, 2017; Merritt, 2008; Neugebauer & Blair, 2020), parents/families (Joseph et al., 2017), and faculty/staff (Burns, 2019; Hooker, 2019) in urban Catholic schools. These studies provided some evidence about how urban Catholic school stakeholders perceived the effectiveness and quality of these schools for particular communities.

Some studies examined the way stakeholders navigated experiences in individual school contexts that reflected distinct organizational forms commonly found in urban Catholic education, including single-sex college preparatory secondary schools (Aldana, 2016; Merritt, 2008; Thomas et al., 2020) and neighborhood elementary schools serving multi-racial low-income communities (LeBlanc, 2015, 2017). These studies tended to suggest that certain Catholic school cultures were more conducive to low-income communities of color feeling a sense of ownership and value in the school than others. For example, LeBlanc (2015, 2017) found in his ethnographic investigation of an elementary school that students from diverse racial backgrounds in the school community tended to enact the inequitable racial hierarchies in school that they saw modeled in their community without much intentional interruption from the staff. Alternatively, Merritt (2008), Aldana (2016), and Thomas et al. (2020) each found students of color at individual urban Catholic high schools discovered ways inside their school communities to mitigate the negative effects of social marginalization present outside of those communities through intentional advocacy and support structures the schools provided them. Similarly, Joseph et al. (2017) and Burns (2019) investigated the ways a Latino parent community in an elementary school and a white principal of a racially diverse dual-language elementary school, respectively, intentionally confronted racially unjust conditions outside of school by establishing concrete equity goals that could be achieved inside the school environments. These findings suggest that stakeholders from historically

marginalized communities tended to perceive the presence of CST-aligned work in urban Catholic schools the more they felt the community cared for them.

Other studies that attempted to draw comparisons between particular stakeholder communities navigating different school settings tended to support this conclusion. For example, Neugebauer and Blair (2020) compared the literacy experiences of low-income middle schoolers of color attending multiple different Catholic schools. They found that middle schoolers felt less valued in Catholic school environments where their home literacy skills weren't valued. Similarly, Hooker (2019) compared the experiences of LGBTQ+ teachers in urban Catholic and public schools and found that teachers struggled to feel valued in any school that did not intentionally embrace teachers' identities. Their teacher participants in Catholic schools identified this as a common occurrence.

Though the experiences analyzed in these studies cannot be viewed as wholly representative of all urban Catholic education or all urban Catholic school stakeholders because of the methodological particularities of these studies, these studies do suggest that there is no common universal experience in urban Catholic education in the U.S. These studies demonstrated the complexity of different stakeholder groups' emic perspectives and challenged the notion that stakeholder experiences would be positive simply by nature of being involved in urban Catholic schools. Rather, the findings of these studies indicated that complex, intentional work was necessary in urban Catholic schools in order to enact CST principles and to provide formative experiences to historically marginalized communities. These studies, consistent with the other studies in this cluster and the studies investigating the effects of urban Catholic schools, point toward the developing understanding, explored in more detail in the next section, that if the legacy of urban Catholic schooling has been sustained it has only been sustained in qualified and inconsistent ways.

Contemporary Urban Catholic Schools Attempting to Sustain the Sector's Legacy

In response to our final research question, the third cluster of reviewed studies contained assessments of intentional reform efforts made by urban Catholic educators to revitalize these schools and to more effectively serve low-income students and students of color (Table 1). Since there have been consistent national calls since 2007 to save urban Catholic schools from closure (Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Hamilton, 2008; Saroki & Levenick, 2009; USDOE, 2008), it was not surprising that these studies represented the largest cluster of reviewed studies. These studies addressed a wide range of attempted reforms within and across schools, ranging from the implementation of curricular interventions in already existing schools to the creation of new organizational networks of schools. Compared to the other clusters, this last category also contained more diverse types of empirical research, including literature reviews (e.g., Horning, 2013) and practitioner-initiated action research studies (e.g., Madden, 2017; Palomino-Bach & Fisher, 2017; Thielman, 2012). Across these studies, two main findings emerged: (1) multiple efforts have been made within urban Catholic schools that have improved the education offered low-income students and students of color in these schools; (2) however, there is not yet consensus

about which of these efforts is best positioned to help the sector as a whole sustain its legacy given the sector's numerous organizational challenges.

Categories of Reform Efforts Designed to Sustain the Legacy of Urban Catholic Schooling

The overwhelming majority of studies reviewed in this cluster investigated different categories of reform efforts framed as necessary to help both individual schools and the sector at large respond to the common organizational challenges urban Catholic schools confront. These studies demonstrated both the way these categories of reforms emerged in response to particular organizational challenges and the extent to which these responses generated positive outcomes for certain communities.

Some studies investigated curricular, community-based, or organizational interventions and programs designed to enhance the experiences of stakeholder groups in current Catholic schools (Beltramo, 2012; Gibbs et al., 2009; Madden, 2017; Palomino-Bach & Fisher, 2017; Proehl et al., 2013; Rieckhoff, 2014; Scanlan, 2017; Suhy, 2012). As established in previous sections, urban Catholic educators are very aware their schools have not consistently provided stakeholders supportive or educative environments, particularly the low-income communities and communities of color these schools consider themselves mission-bound to serve. Findings across these particular studies indicated that students and other community stakeholders tended to benefit when intentional efforts were made to address their needs. However, these studies were methodologically limited to particular local contexts that had already self-identified the need for the efforts being investigated. For example, Beltramo (2012), Madden (2017), Proehl et al. (2013), and Suhy (2012) conducted action research within their own school communities to design more effective service delivery models for individualized student intervention, rigorous mathematics instruction, enhanced social-emotional support, and linguistically responsive parent engagement, respectively. These studies persuasively demonstrated the actions taken by the practitioner researchers conducting the studies enhanced the experiences of the stakeholder groups receiving the intervention, but their privileged position as school practitioners meant they were uniquely positioned to offer this support in this way.

Other studies investigated the development of university-school partnerships or multi-school consortia that were designed to eliminate organizational problems caused by schools' independence and isolation (Borrero, 2010; Crowley & Wall, 2007; Dallavis & Johnstone, 2009; Huchting et al., 2017; Shriberg et al., 2012). As discussed in this paper's introduction, urban Catholic schools have lacked the level of intentional systemic reform that has existed in the public sector (Peurach et al., 2019), forcing most urban Catholic schools to navigate their organizational challenges independently (O'Keefe & Goldschmidt, 2014). This particular group of studies revealed how urban Catholic schools have tended to join networks both by choice and by necessity when a network has offered to take responsibility for operational, organizational, and financial tasks an individual school lacked the capacity to accomplish on its own.

Crowley and Wall (2007), Dallavis and Johnstone (2009), and Shriberg et al. (2012) each found that urban Catholic schools established university-based partnerships when partnering universities offered schools access to more robust institutional resources. For example, Dallavis and Johnstone's (2009) evaluation of the University of Notre Dame's at-the-time successful Magnificat Schools detailed the ways the university helped the schools create data-driven decision-making processes resulting in teacher retention, higher student achievement, and stable school finances. Similarly, Borrero (2010) and Huchting et al. (2017) found, in their evaluations of new urban Catholic school consortia, that formerly independent schools entered these consortia to make operational and organizational decision-making more efficient and less burdensome on individual school leaders. These studies all identified the supports and resources these new networks relied on to become and remain successful, solving the short-term operational and organizational inefficiencies school leaders had previously experienced. Yet they also demonstrated the extent to which these partnerships, networks, and consortia relied on the existence and continued benefaction of well-resourced external institutional partners who maintained an interest in the success of the networks, partnerships, or consortia.

One notable trend among the studies we reviewed in this cluster was the number of specific investigations of two innovative urban Catholic school networks: the Cristo Rey high school model (Kabadi, 2015; Thielman, 2012) and the Nativity Miguel middle school model (Anguiano et al., 2020; Fenzel, 2009; Fenzel & Domingues, 2009; Fenzel & Monteith, 2008; Fenzel & Richardson, 2018, 2019; Jabbari & Duncan, 2021; Proehl et al., 2017). Both networks, established to exclusively serve low-income students of color, were created in response to the sector's historical legacy of serving the socially marginalized and designed distinct curricular and instructional programs intended to more effectively meet these students' academic and social needs.

Some of the Cristo Rey and Nativity Miguel studies we reviewed evaluated how these networks operate by assessing the ways schools within these networks enacted the models' design principles. Examples include: Thielman's (2012) case study of a single Cristo Rey school attempting to achieve operational stability after the school joined the network; Kabadi's (2015) analysis of a single Cristo Rey school enacting a specific social justice approach to the corporate work study model used in Cristo Rey schools; and Anguiano et al.'s (2020) case study of a single Nativity Miguel middle school examining how family-school trust was created amid the extended-day/extended-year calendar used in Nativity Miguel schools.

Other Cristo Rey and Nativity Miguel studies focused on particular outcomes generated by these networks to demonstrate the relative effectiveness of the curricular and instructional choices these networks have made to serve the low-income students of color who attend them. For example, three different studies found that the academic model offered by Nativity Miguel schools (e.g., smaller class size, single-sex environments, intensive academic support and coaching) were all positively associated with students' perceptions of the school's ability to meet their needs (Fenzel & Domingues, 2009; Fenzel & Monteith, 2008; Fenzel & Richardson, 2019).

Looking across these studies' findings, there is evidence that Nativity Miguel and Cristo Rey model schools have successfully supported low-income students of color when the models have been implemented with fidelity. Yet these studies also noted the significant social and financial resources required to operate these network models with fidelity, which is an organizational and operational deterrent for many urban Catholic schools seeking to intentionally serve these communities in more effective ways.

The final category of urban Catholic school reform we encountered in this review was the development of Catholic charter schools, or urban Catholic schools that have been converted into charter schools but maintain some level of affiliation with the Catholic Church. Three studies, despite this reform effort still being quite rare in the contemporary educational reform landscape, considered the contours of these religiously-operated charter schools that seek to combine the mission-driven CST principles of urban Catholic education with the organizational efficiency found in many charter management organizations (Carr & Decker, 2015; Horning, 2013; Proehl et al., 2015). These studies all viewed religious charter schools somewhat skeptically, though, mainly because of the lack of certainty in most states around the legality of having religiously-affiliated charter operators even in a post-*Espinoza* environment (Barnum, 2020). At this time, primarily due to the lack of empirical analysis of religiously-affiliated charter schools that have already been established, it is premature to draw any conclusions about the merits of this particular reform effort as a response to urban Catholic schools' organizational challenges.

Assessing Reform Efforts across Urban Catholic Schools

The evidence collected across these studies of four common reform efforts reveals a consistent trend: intentional urban Catholic school reforms tended to be designed to only address a single organizational challenge rather than a systemic reform of the entire sector. Curricular and community interventions were attempted when schools recognized they lacked the capacity to provide their communities some important educational service. University partnerships, the formation of multi-school consortia, and the development of religious charter schools were attempted when schools recognized they lacked the capacity to create effective organizational and operational systems. Cristo Rey or Nativity Miguel model schools were established when particular urban Catholic schools serving low-income students of color recognized that a different organizational form was necessary in order to continue to effectively serve this population. And while these studies suggest that structural innovations have been sustained across the field of urban Catholic education since 2007, there is not yet an evidence-based consensus about the relative merits of pursuing any one of these different paths over another. Furthermore, a final group of reviewed studies revealed the insufficiency of implementing reforms that only address single organizational challenges.

For example, McCloskey (2010) examined attempts at systemic reform among Memphis Catholic schools, reforms framed as necessary because of the widespread operational failures in the multiple urban schools in the city, and determined that

nothing less than system redesign was sufficient for the level of enhancement these schools required. Similarly, in their analysis of St. Louis school closure data James et al. (2008) determined that using metrics for the percent change in enrollment over multiple years and the ratio of tuition charged to median household income could successfully predict school closures in a given year. Yet they also found these predictive capacities were not useful unless used in a cross-school, systemic way. In addition, while there is some emerging evidence that urban Catholic school students (Aldana, 2014; Bempechat et al., 2008) and staff (Tamir, 2013) associated their personal motivation and success in school with environments that holistically supported them, there is not yet evidence that any one reform initiative comprehensively provided these supports absent broader systemic reforms. Rather, consistent with Garcia-Tuñón et al.'s (2016) findings from a single urban Catholic high school in Miami, successful urban Catholic schools that sustained the legacy were much more likely to rely on the work of exceptional, dedicated individual practitioners than they were to have access to systems of sector-wide reforms that could help address multiple complex organizational challenges simultaneously.

Discussion and Implications for Future Research

This review was intended to provide an up-to-date analysis of research literature focused on urban Catholic PreK-12 schools to determine the extent to which the legacy of this school sector in serving low-income students and students of color has been sustained. The main results of this review, based on the methodologically diverse set of 80 studies we found that have been published since O'Keefe and Scheopner's (2007) previous review of urban Catholic education research, show that while academic and nonacademic effects of the Catholic school sector on its student population can still be identified these effects are not consistently present across all urban Catholic schools. There is evidence to suggest that some urban Catholic educators have successfully reformed some urban Catholic schools to more effectively meet the needs of low-income students and students of color. Yet our findings suggest there are more differences among particular urban Catholic schools engaged in this work than there are between the urban Catholic school sector and other urban school sectors.

These findings are consistent with findings from contemporary school choice and sector-comparison research (Berends, 2020; Davies, 2013; Davies & Quirke, 2007; Lareau & Goyette, 2014; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014), and are therefore to some extent unsurprising. It is striking, though, that there is still widespread reference to the sector's historical legacy across the research on contemporary urban Catholic schools despite there being no evidence to suggest that the sector as a whole has consistently implemented a uniform approach to enacting its social justice mission.

This review was also intended to help assess the merits of the Catholic sector's dominant policy response during the past several decades of school reform: advocating for increased access to urban Catholic schools for low-income students and students of color assuming these schools generate a "Catholic school advantage." In order for this policy response to have merit there would have to be consistent

evidence that a “Catholic school advantage” for low-income students and students of color reliably exists, yet we found that the in-school factors contributing to measured effects were not uniquely explained by distinct Catholic school organizational or academic features.

Though our review provides some evidence that urban Catholic educators at local levels have adopted instructionally-focused reforms to better live up to the promise of the “Catholic school advantage” (e.g., Dorner et al., 2011; Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Spillane et al., 2019), the findings also suggest that the choice to compete on the terms set by instructionally-focused public school reforms can come at the expense of urban Catholic schools enacting their distinct approach to social justice informed by Catholic social teaching (Neumerski & Cohen, 2019; Scanlan, 2008). The qualified and inconsistent presence of a measurable and distinct “Catholic school advantage” does not provide much support for the decision made by many urban Catholic school stakeholders to advocate for access-oriented policy implementation over other approaches to school reform. Meanwhile, this review also found that the pursuit of market-driven, access-oriented policy responses has resulted in the sector as a whole serving a relatively whiter and wealthier (Murnane & Reardon, 2018) and relatively more advantaged (Berends & Waddington, 2018) population. Consistent with findings from school choice research indicating market mechanisms in choice environments tend to benefit the already advantaged (e.g., Belfield & Levin, 2002; Coughlan et al., 2018; Jabbar et al., 2019), these findings suggest the access-oriented policy response of the Catholic school sector has not necessarily increased access to the students assumed to benefit most from the “Catholic school advantage.”

Ultimately, then, this review shows that research on urban Catholic PreK-12 schools since 2007 has not yet identified a sufficient research-informed explanatory mechanism for why the sector’s legacy continues to exist where and when it exists. While the studies we reviewed collectively describe a sector that has retained its *capacity* to sustain its legacy, our findings suggest there has not yet been enough research to determine *why* different groups currently attending urban Catholic schools benefit from their education in these settings or *how* certain organizational conditions have contributed to urban Catholic schools successfully enacting their CST-informed organizational identity where others have failed to do so. Furthermore, the sector’s dominant policy response intended to help Catholic schools stay competitive in contemporary school choice environments has yet to generate its intended outcomes and seems to further exacerbate the problem of the sector inconsistently enacting its distinct social justice organizational identity. Urban Catholic schools are still the third largest single sector in urban education in the U.S. and therefore remain an important part of the school choice landscape in U.S. cities even as additional urban Catholic schools close. Yet the findings reviewed in this article suggest that “urban Catholic school” is a more accurate signifier of the organizational and demographic make-up of particular Catholic schools in particular geographic locations than it is a signifier of the qualitative nature of how that school serves a particular student population.

Ultimately, our findings led us to conclude that the essential questions currently being asked in research on urban Catholic schools have been insufficient in helping

the field understand the complex qualities of these urban schools and the dynamic relationships these schools navigate in the broader urban education environment. Therefore, we propose the following three new directions for research in, on, and about contemporary urban Catholic schools.

First, one of the primary limitations of this review was that studies focused on urban Catholic schooling employ different definitions of what being an “urban” Catholic school means. While practitioners in the sector have tended to flatten the category to encompass all Catholic schools serving relatively disadvantaged student groups, some studies have started to challenge these assumptions about who is actually served in geographically urban Catholic schools (Berends & Waddington, 2018; Murnane & Reardon, 2018). Future research should begin to use a more geographically precise definition of urbanicity to better account for the internal diversity of populations served in geographically urban Catholic schools. A more geographically precise definition and more accurate student-level data disaggregated by race and socioeconomic status would allow the field to determine the relationship between the utility of the “urban” signifier by helping to identify where low-income students and students of color are actually being served in Catholic schools, how urban Catholic schools engage these student populations if at all, and what trends exist among the practices used within and between urban Catholic schools for the different demographic groups attending them.

Second, there has not been an adequate research-based explanatory mechanism for how urban Catholic schools work since Bryk et al.’s (1993) articulation of the theory of the “common school effect” generated by Catholic secondary schools. This review has demonstrated the insufficiency of that theory to explain contemporary urban Catholic elementary and secondary schools. But our review also shows that one of the reasons this theory has not been updated has been that most contemporary urban Catholic schools research has been methodologically limited to examining unrepresentative urban Catholic school practices that work in local contexts. Following Bryk et al.’s methodological approach, research should build on broader, sector-wide trends before examining local particularities. Urban Catholic schools research should look for regional and sector-wide analytical trends and then investigate how or why these trends occurred in order to work toward producing usable contemporary urban Catholic schools theory.

Finally, no review of published research can adequately account for all developments within a given field of practice, no matter how comprehensive the review. While this review has established that local reforms intended to increase the sustainability of urban Catholic education have been attempted by practitioners in the field, this conclusion opens the possibility that reforms have been attempted not accounted for in empirical research (e.g., Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2013). In addition, while this study reviewed articles that mostly dealt with the academic or educational outcomes generated in urban Catholic schools, the market research briefly described at the outset of this article has confirmed that academic outcomes are only one of many outcomes parents consider when thinking about choosing a Catholic school for their child. Therefore, more methodologically diverse research examining diverse effects, experiences, and stakeholder perceptions must be conducted in order to better assess

the current state of the field of urban Catholic education and the broad range of outcomes toward which the field seems to be working.

If the sector is going to sustain its legacy into and beyond the twenty-first century, this multi-pronged approach to research will be necessary to better make sense descriptively and analytically of how urban Catholic education works or not in contemporary U.S. educational policy contexts.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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*indicates a study included in the review, see Table 1

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