

Education Week

Catholic School Closures Rise in Wake of COVID-19, Recession



Parents at the Academy of Our Lady of Peace in New Providence, N.J., organized to raise money to reopen the elementary school last month, after it and seven other Roman Catholic schools in the Newark area were slated for permanent closure. —Courtesy of Kimberly Johnston

By **Sarah D. Sparks**

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While public school districts struggle with shrinking budgets, dozens of Roman Catholic schools already have permanently shuttered this spring, nearly all for reasons directly related to the coronavirus pandemic and its resulting campus and economic shutdowns.

The loss of those schools could narrow the education market, particularly in low-income and high-minority communities. But the fate of all Catholic schools post-COVID-19 could also prove a bellwether for their public-school peers next fall, as they rethink how to approach instruction and keep students safe with shrinking budgets.

“There have been falling enrollments [in many Catholic schools] so maybe we're just seeing an acceleration of schools going out of business, but in terms of next year, the timing is particularly bad,” said Neal McCluskey, the director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, which has been tracking the closure of private schools in the wake of COVID-19. “The same thing that is causing private schools to go out of business—a bad economy driven by COVID-19—is also going to really take a shot at public school budgets. With all these closures, we'll have a whole bunch of kids the [public schools] now need to educate ... so it's going to **stretch resources even thinner.**”

Of the 52 private schools documented as permanently closed as of June 8, McCluskey found 43 are Catholic, representing more than 6,700 students. While students left behind may choose other parochial schools where available, if districts have to take on those students, he estimated, they will cost more than \$108 million to educate.

Fewer Resources for Families

On average, the schools that have closed so far served higher percentages of black and Hispanic students than do **private schools on average**: 19 percent black students and 17 percent Hispanic students in the closed schools, compared to only 9 percent black and 11 percent Hispanic students in average private elementary and secondary schools, based on federal estimates.

Kathy Mears, the interim president of the National Catholic Educational Association, said it's not yet clear how many total schools will close, but her group has been consulting with many schools trying to regroup after dramatic budget cuts.

"This recession or depression, whatever you want to call it, it's hitting those with fewer financial resources harder. [The schools'] parents are maybe out of work or underemployed right now, and so they simply don't have money for tuition," Mears said. From 70 percent to 95 percent of Mears' member schools' operating budgets come from tuition, and the rest is from fundraising.

"Many schools could not have their fundraisers this spring, or they had to have them virtually and donations were down—again, not because people don't want to donate, but maybe they don't have a job or they're, you know, worried about their future employment," she added.

Many Catholic schools have received federal Paycheck Protection Program loans, and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos earmarked a portion of the funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act for private schools, but that move has **received congressional pushback**.

The pandemic also has left parochial schools without their usual safety net.

"Normally, if a school couldn't make payroll, they could go to their parish or to the diocese, but they are down on income too, because we haven't had Mass, so it's like not having income for three or four months. It's just impacting everything," Mears said.

In Sacramento, Calif., for example, parishes lost 25 percent to 75 percent of their annual income during the closures, having missed some of the most heavily attended Masses of the year on Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, and through the Easter weekend. Lincoln Snyder, the executive director of schools for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Sacramento, which includes 44 schools in 21 California counties, said the diocese has had to announce the closure of two schools already, and is considering closing a third.

About a quarter of Snyder's schools in Sacramento receive subsidies from their parishes or archdiocese to support tuition for low-income students that will be more difficult to fund. So while Snyder said a massive outreach effort has meant that the schools will retain 96 percent of their students next school year, "We're being very careful because we know family circumstances change over the summer. We know that many of them are going to be asking for financial assistance or more financial assistance."

Consolidation and Community

Several dioceses were already planning or starting parish consolidations. Pittsburgh, for example, has collapsed 61 parishes into 15. Many Catholic schools operate in conjunction with a parish church, so consolidations may mean individual schools see a sudden loss of priests or staff, or the influx of more schools that also need financial supports.

"School leaders have been taking 20 percent, 25 percent pay cuts to try to keep their schools going," Mears said. "So, if a school was vulnerable, COVID kind of pushed them over the edge, and we come to a place where people are like, you can't do this anymore."

In New Jersey, the Blue Ribbon-award-winning Academy of Our Lady of Peace was in such a position last month, when the Archdiocese of Newark announced it and seven other elementary schools would be permanently closed.

"I was floored," said Suzanne Fahy, the president of the school's Home School Association (similar to a parent-teacher association) and mother of three students and one former student of the pre-K-8 school. "I couldn't believe that we were closing and in the middle of a pandemic, no less. It was devastating, and we were already so kind of beaten down from the quarantine at that point."

Our Lady of Peace had been receiving about \$277,000 a year in subsidies from the diocese to offset tuition. Fahy and other parents collected nearly 1,500 signatures in a petition to reopen the school and raised \$413,000 to support operations this fall. The archdiocese agreed to transfer authority and financial responsibility for the school back to the local parish, which will reopen the campus this fall.

Such a literal Hail Mary effort hasn't been enough to save other schools, though. In Braintree, Mass., parents collected more than 2,000 signatures to save the nearly 60-year-old St. Francis of Assisi school after the Boston archdiocese announced it would shutter the school, which had its last day June 3.

"While we acknowledge that the current state of the world has affected our school—and every other private school—it is not the reason for this," parents wrote in a petition, arguing that they had only learned that the school faced financial trouble three weeks before the end of the year. "To have neglected to allow us the opportunity to salvage our school and our community is a dereliction of duties and a complete failure to the children who should be shepherded through SFA. ... Decisions have been made for our community despite a total failure to engage with families or focus on school finances and enrollment."

Archdioceses are starting to look for creative ways to save schools on the chopping block this year. For example, Snyder said his schools are trying to reboot Mercy High School, which was slated for closure, as a remote-learning school enrolling from 10 rural counties. Students would use computers in learning centers located in their individual parish churches, where they would be able to use video conferencing to participate in live classes in other Catholic high schools with a college-prep curriculum in the archdiocese. The teachers in the hosting schools would teach both live and virtually at the same time.

"In many ways, it has been a really good training for us," Snyder said. "Our teachers and families are going to have to keep a foot in on the distance education. We don't want to be exchanging a lot of paper or books during the pandemic anyway. And regardless of how we open, we also know we have some families or some students who may not want to take the risk of coming to school, and, and we're trying to work with those families to ensure that they are still part of the community and have access to the curriculum. So I think a lot of our schools are going to be doing dual delivery for next year."

Mears said NCEA has started to work with other dioceses interested in creating virtual schools and hybrid-homeschooling options, in which buildings would be available a few days a week for labs, while other classes would be held by parents or remote teachers.

Yet Snyder and other school leaders are still concerned about the cost of preparing their classes and buildings for sanitation and social distancing come fall. Sacramento Catholic schools are ordering a 55-gallon drum of hand sanitizer for every 20 students, just to start the first month of school. That's nearly three gallons a student, but Snyder expects teachers and students to go through the supply long before the end of the year, if not the semester.

"It's going to be thousands per school," Snyder said of the costs.

Mears agreed. Nationwide, she estimates additional cleaning and supplies overall will cost \$15,000 to \$25,000 per school.

"That's an added expense that schools don't necessarily have in their budget," she said. "You cannot raise tuition where you're doing online learning and you're going to have to pay for the school to be clean anyway. It's just a big vicious circle for a Catholic school."

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