Catholic Education

Peter Meyer (“Can Catholic Schools Be Saved?” features, Spring 2007) left us with plenty of challenging questions about the future of Catholic schools. At their peak in 1964, Catholic schools enrolled approximately 5 million students and served about 52 percent of Catholic school-age children. Currently, about 2.5 million are enrolled, including less than 18 percent of Catholic school-age children. Private education enrollment as a whole increased by 18 percent from 1988 to 2001 and is predicted to grow another 7 percent by 2013. Public school enrollment increased by 19 percent during the same period and will rise another 4 percent by 2013. Just what are most Catholic families telling us?

Should we accept the “simple” answer that it is all about the cost? Consider that in 1960 Catholic elementary schools enrolled 89 percent of the private school students in the United States. By 2000 that number had slipped to 49 percent! By contrast, comparably priced conservative Christian schools had a 46 percent increase in enrollment between 1989 and 2003. This represents 75 percent of the total private school increase during that period. Why are Christian-school parents making this commitment for their children while most Catholic parents are not?

What are our prospects? Catholic school tuition rates skyrocket, aging buildings require major repair, and parish subsidies shrink (from 63 percent in 1969 to 28 percent in 1994). Meanwhile, Catholics migrate farther from the city and build their new “villages” complete with well-resourced but free public schools. We need to collaborate on a bold transition to more affordable and better resourced Catholic schools supported in large part by those who have benefited from their own Catholic-school experience.

We are running out of time for many Catholic schools. Judging by the past 40 years, we can realistically conclude that Catholic schools in the United States are indeed reaching their “twilight” as Andrew Greeley said a decade ago. Can the Church agree on a more-focused mission and collaborative strategy for Catholic schools especially regarding whom we wish to serve? Unless we do, Catholic schools are destined to complete their journey to a slow death.

Theodore J. Wallace
Career educator and Catholic schools consultant

P
eter Meyer’s article invoked vivid memories of my own high school days in northern Michigan, where I attended a very small K–12 Catholic school. After a recent teachers’ meeting on how the new student handbook should address plagiarism and cheating, I was reminded that “back in the day” there were few problems with this issue. Administrators and school boards were adamant: “You cheat, you’re done!”

Another reason there was little “copying” was the ever-vigilant eyes of the nuns, who seemed to be right there, always, looking for cheaters and sinners. They really did have rulers and other weapons of mass humiliation tucked under the folds of their black habits, believe me. If a student’s eyes roamed for any reason away from the paper being used, one of the weapons was smacked firmly on the desk as a reminder and, if a second reminder was needed, squarely on the hand.

The other deterrent to cheating was the demerit card. Roughly the size of a credit card, it had numbers up to 50 on one side and rules and demeritable offenses on the other. Tardy to class, 3 demerits; not having your homework, 5 demerits; not wearing the proper attire, 3 demerits; swearing (depending on the choice word or phrase), 5 to 7 demerits; teasing classmates, 2 demerits; pranks, 7 to 15 demerits (depending if they were meant to hurt someone or not); and cheating, 10 to 50 demerits. Accumulating 51 demerits meant you were expelled, no questions asked.

A few years ago I wrote to my English instructor, Sister Joan (now retired), that I too had become an English teacher, and although I might have complained and was probably a pain in the neck, I really had a marvelous language arts background due to the days spent in her class. She wrote back a couple of days later: “Dear Richard: God does have a sense of humor, doesn’t he? God bless you.”

Rick Fowler
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Teacher Dispositions

Laurie Moses Hines (“Return of the Thought Police?” features, Spring 2007) is surely right: present-day “dispositions” standards have their roots in much earlier efforts to measure and mold the “personality” of the American teacher. But Hines’s otherwise superb analysis misses one very important difference between the two campaigns. During the Cold War period, personality testing aimed quite explicitly at locating and even at cultivating Americans who stood near the “average” in every respect, especially in their politics. Social
critic William H. Whyte captured this cautious, middle-of-the-road spirit in his 1956 classic, *The Organization Man*, which contained a semisatirical set of instructions for “How to Cheat on a Personality Test.” When in doubt, Whyte advised, test-takers should say or write, “I like things pretty well the way they are.” And whenever a political question arose, they should seek to sound “conservative,” but not too much so. “To go to either extreme earns you a bad score,” Whyte cautioned, “but in most situations you should resolve any doubts...by deciding in favor of the accepted.”

Fast-forward to our current emphasis upon “dispositions,” and you’ll see how much things have changed. As Hines deftly shows, we continue to focus on the psychic interior of the prospective teacher. But the traits that we expect, indeed, that we demand, are completely different. Whereas the midcentury teacher was asked to hew closely to a happily patriotic version of America, the present-day instructor must critique its “racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism,” to quote one ed school web site. And if you think the students aren’t listening, come visit during my office hours one day. A few years ago, a student strolled in and asked, quite casually, if I “buy” the “NYU line on bilingual education.” Unaware that universities took official stances on contentious political questions, I asked what that “line” might be. But we both knew, “Bilingual education is a good thing,” the student said, smiling. “And people who oppose it are racists.” During the Cold War, especially, we promoted a bland, flag-waving nationalism; today, we emphasize “power” and “privilege” and “oppression.” But it’s still indoctrination, not education, because we continue to judge students based on how well they echo our own political dispositions. Talk about an abuse of power and privilege!

**JONATHAN ZIMMERMAN**
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In her excellent essay, Laurie Moses Hines raises some provocative questions about the current use of disposition assessments in schools of education. Yet despite Hines’s careful attention to historical antecedents, her examination of origins remains incomplete.

First, Hines locates the origins of personality testing in the immediate post–World War II era. While it is true that *Life* magazine declared the 1950s the “age of psychology,” the genesis of mass psychological testing dated back to World War I and the 1920s. The main driver behind the spread of personality tests was bureaucratization: of American business firms; of the modern military; and, most germane to this discussion, of the American public school. Like business and military leaders, school officials turned to the new science of psychology to bring order to their rapidly expanding institutions. Testing teachers and students using psychological tools proved indispensable in an organizational culture that no longer lent itself to face-to-face contact and interactions.

Hines also argues that it was the ideology of educational progressivism that fueled the spread of personality assessments throughout the education profession. But to suggest that “the policing of teacher personality” stemmed solely from educational progressivism is to obscure the more complex origins and outcomes of personality testing in modern American life. Personality assessments have been, and continue to be, administered to millions of Americans each year. Future doctors, lawyers, firefighters, service industry employees, Catholic priests, and even professional athletes are routinely subjected to personality tests as a condition of their employment. To capture the historical significance of disposition assessment requires a broader worldview.

Over the course of the 20th century, some of the most persistent challenges in public education—from the dropout problem in the 1950s, to educational disadvantage in the 1960s, to school discipline in recent years—have been reframed in psychological terms. The current trend of reducing the complex inner lives of potential teachers to a number, a score, indeed a “disposition,” perhaps demands the strictest scrutiny of all.

**CATHERINE GAVIN LOSS**
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Laurie Moses Hines explores one of the most sensitive issues facing teacher educators today. She is absolutely right: “those committed to academic freedom [and I assume that this includes both conservatives and liberals] in higher education should be concerned when professional socialization trumps freedom of conscience in teacher education programs.” At a time when civil liberties are too easily trampled, educators need to be vigilant. While I applaud her for wading in where others have not, I want to ask her some questions:

• Why is an emphasis on “social justice” evidence of a left-leaning perspective? I have assumed that my conservative colleagues are equally concerned about justice; we simply disagree about the best way to achieve justice in today’s complex world.

• Does Hines really want future teachers to be judged only on the basis of skill and mastery of content knowledge? Can we ethically give our support to someone who may have great skill and knowledge but who believes that, based on their race or gender, some children are inferior? Hines says that she wants to be sure that we do not support teachers who will do harm to children but she lists drug dealers and child abusers and not people who fundamentally dislike children or do not expect them to succeed.

• Why can’t Hines embrace Susan Fuhrman’s belief that “responsiveness to the diversity of students’ backgrounds and previous experiences” is essential? Skill and content knowledge without this responsiveness is destructive. This is quite a different matter from judging future teachers by whether they agree or disagree with us regarding a particular multicultural curriculum or progressivism in education.

In the end, we teacher educators must balance a deep commitment to the academic freedom of our students, especially students with whom we may profoundly disagree, with an equally deep commitment that those whom we certify will, at minimum, “do no harm.” Perhaps this is a topic where nuance is better than absolutism.

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Hines responds:
As Professor Loss notes, broader psychological contexts exist and testing predated 1940. My intention, however, was a comparison with current dispositions practice. In the post-1940 era, teacher education attempted to use psychological assessments to police teacher personality and to substitute those for local school administrators’ judgments about teacher selection and behavior.

Teacher education cannot preserve freedom of conscience and speech while at the same time assessing students on their beliefs. As ugly as some beliefs are, in this country individuals have a right to hold them. Because teacher education is not an unbiased adjudicator, it should not police beliefs or behaviors. Character is certainly important, and local school administrators can consider it when making decisions about teacher employment; unlike teacher education faculty, they are accountable to a local community.

I agree with Professor Fraser that liberals and conservatives are “equally concerned” but “simply disagree about the best way to achieve justice.” For this reason, teacher education should abandon dispositions assessment.

As to “Why can’t [I] embrace Susan Fuhrman’s belief,” I do embrace diversity, including diversity of belief. I don’t embrace institutional demands on students to adhere to ideological positions or control mechanisms that are no guarantee of teacher quality, are not openly or fairly adjudicated, and do not reflect moral consensus.

Private Placements
The authors of “Debunking a Special Education Myth” (check the facts, Spring 2007) appear to misinterpret what school officials and education policymakers are saying about the cost of educating all children. Without question, school districts are committed to providing appropriate educational services to all children, including private placements when services cannot be provided by the local schools.

Local school officials aren’t blaming students with disabilities for the need to provide appropriate educational services. They are simply advocating that the real costs of educating all children far exceed the funding that is made available to most local school districts, forcing school officials to make difficult and sometimes unfair choices. After all, it is not unusual for some private placements to cost $100,000 or more. For most any local school district, that’s significant.

At the local level, gaps between what resources are needed and what resources are available are real, and the only options for local school officials are to reduce needed educational
programs or needed staff or both. However, given the bittersweet fact that parents of students with disabilities have access to the courts should appropriate educational services not be offered, it seems fairly easy to understand why so many school officials are frustrated and often feel abandoned.

If there is any blame, it is typically directed toward the federal government for reneging on its promises to fund 40 percent of the cost of the average per pupil expenditure; such failed federal promises now total more than $40 billion over the past six years.

Imagine what additional improvements could be made in closing the achievement gap if Congress would close the significant federal funding gap that has existed far too long. We agree that the overall cost of private placement, on average, nationwide constitutes a tiny proportion of the overall cost of public school spending, but that’s not the point.

National School Boards Association Alexandria, VA

Greene and Winters respond:
The National School Boards Association (NSBA) begins its letter by denying that school officials blame special education and private placement for draining resources from general education and then proceed to repeat the very argument that they deny making. The NSBA letter emphasizes that the cost of special education forces “difficult choices” and compels districts to “reduce needed educational programs.” But the authors provide no data to refute our findings that private placement imposes a trivial financial burden on public schools or that the overall financial burden of special education has not increased over the last three decades. And to blame the federal government for not providing as large a subsidy as they would like. As we documented, expensive private placements are extremely “unusual.” And an increase in the federal subsidy cannot be supported by claiming that special education places a greater financial strain on schools, as the percentage of school revenue devoted to special education has not increased in the last three decades.

Regulating Software

The marketing and procurement practices Todd Oppenheimer describes (“Selling Software,” features, Spring 2007) were in place decades before NCLB. Even 10 years ago, the largest school contracts were with multinational publishers for textbooks. States either made approval a political process or delegated the function to districts. The discretion that legislation granted to districts for purchasing reflected beliefs that administrators would honor their fiduciary obligations to students and that educators were the real experts on curriculum. Student outcomes did not matter quite enough to districts that providers had to demonstrate results.

Now that educational outcomes matter, procurement decisions are critical to school success. Unfortunately, the market is unprepared. Market leaders’ programs lack evidence of efficacy. Administrators lack the capacity to deal with the vast array of providers, products, and services now available. State and local agency heads have not kept up with the state of the art of education science. Evaluation methodology has not advanced far beyond considering whether an intervention will have some effect on some students. Above all, the federal government has neither defined nor enforced NCLB’s requirements that federal funds only be used to purchase programs proven effective through scientifically based research.

But there is good news. Several hundred firms and nonprofits grew up in the last decade because entrepreneurs and venture investors believed that the standards and accountability movement would apply to products and services as well as teachers and administrators. Research and evaluation is built into their offerings. But if they are to compete with entrenched multinational publishers, these emerging school improvement providers will
need institutional capital. These funds will flow only when investors see movement to a regulatory environment that rewards program efficacy.

When educators demand better products the market will respond, but government must help. Federal policymakers need to establish a regulatory regime that sets a standard for quality, encourages innovative firms to compete against the historic market leaders, and gives administrators leeway to determine programmatic fit. The secretary of education has the authority to approve the clear, workable definition for scientifically based research that is needed. The real question raised by the Oppenheimer article is why she hasn’t already acted.

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Preschool Curriculum
While Dr. Pianta makes some excellent points (“Preschool Is School, Sometimes,” features, Winter 2007), especially related to teacher training and classroom behaviors, I am concerned by his lack of focus on curriculum development and planning. Many excellent teachers have found it difficult to find appropriate materials to teach four-year-olds. I have used a comprehensive planning template to develop most of the materials I use with my four-year-old students from low socioeconomic backgrounds because there are limited “appropriate and challenging” materials available, especially in math, science, and social studies.

While there are a growing number of “comprehensive” curricula, they are often adapted from kindergarten curricula or are built by pulling together components from various companies. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, “The National Research Council (2001) warns that such a piecemeal approach can result in a disconnected conglomerate of activities and teaching methods, lacking focus, coherence, or comprehensiveness.” An appropriate planning template can help ensure that preschool curricula align with

While, as Pianta writes, “the science of early education holds considerable promise for further development of effective approaches,” curriculum development should not be left out of the discussion.

Teacher Preparation
Authors Kane, Rockoff, and Staiger (“Photo Finish,” research, Winter 2007) did not account for the difference that high-quality teacher preparation makes in teacher performance. They found that alternatively certified and uncertified teachers did less well in producing student achievement initially than did certified teachers, but that most of the differences disappeared by the third year of teaching. As a result, the authors conclude that teacher preparation does not matter. However, most of those uncertified teachers who made it to year three had by then completed their training in a master’s degree program. The authors do not account for the teachers receiving and benefiting from this education and ongoing mentoring. Most of the uncertified teachers in the study who did not enroll in the master’s degree program left after the first or second year of teaching; indeed, only 18 percent remained by year five.

More fine-grained research on the effects of teacher education and certification needs to be conducted. However, there is no evidence to suggest that teachers do not need to be prepared to teach before they begin to teach. Students deserve teachers who know content, how to teach it using different approaches and training and support- ing the teachers of our youngest,” curriculum development should be left out of the discussion. Appropriate planning can enable programs to offer a wide variety of activities to incorporate all the learning domains and take into account appropriate learning theories.

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