

Catholics Schools, Racial Change, and Suburbanization, 1930-2000

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The twentieth century marked a drastic new change in the nation's demographic geography, but also its religious demography. During twentieth century, Catholic schools opened in suburbs and closed in cities. This paper examines this historical shift through a case study of one location: the metropolitan Hartford region of Connecticut. In this paper I will examine how the Archdiocese of Hartford's educational policy has changed in the face of suburbanization. The Catholic Church was often late in responding to city and suburban enrollment shifts. When Catholic parishioners left Hartford for the suburbs, they took students and money with them, leaving city parochial schools to fend for themselves. Yet the Archdiocese did not subsidize the city schools at all, resulting in a high level of financial distress, which disproportionately affected Black and Latino Catholics who remained behind.

Catholic Schools Across the Nation

Catholic schooling has been spatially reorganized in the United States as the racial, socio-economic, and religious composition of cities and suburbs has evolved

during the twentieth century¹. Nationwide trends on Catholic schooling are most evident in major Northeastern metropolitan areas. During the past decade, over 500 (out of 8,000) Catholic schools have closed across the United States, many of them in central-city parishes that historically served immigrant families. Last year alone, 140 Catholic schools closed or consolidated, with the greatest losses in Chicago, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Boston, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh. But during this same ten-year time span, the growing number of Catholic schools in suburban and rural areas has nearly made up for the urban loss, holding the national enrollment total steady at 2.5 million students².

Catholic School Openings and Closings in Metropolitan Hartford

During this historical study I have found that many sources were needed and relevant. The Archdiocese of Hartford Chancery was useful in providing me with transcripts of the Archbishop's correspondence, parish school reports and back issues of the Catholic Transcript. The Catholic Transcript is the Archdiocesan wide newspaper sent out to its parishioners. The Hartford Courant Office in Downtown Hartford allowed access to their archives; this was useful in gathering a wider scope of how Catholic schools affected Metropolitan Hartford. The Office of Catholic Schools in Bloomfield provided comprehensive enrollment data which I was able to discern and use to show changes over time.

May 5th 1843 marked the formation of the Archdiocese of Hartford with the Rev. William Tyler taking the reins as the Bishop of the territory that stretched throughout Connecticut and Rhode Island. As per a request of Bishop Fenwick of Boston to serve the state of Connecticut he advocated the division of his jurisdiction. Prior to this, the Archdiocese of Boston's territory overarched through Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island. The appeal was decreed by Pope Gregory XVI, and the Archdiocese of

¹ John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996)

² John Augenstein, *One Hundred Years of Catholic Education* (Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association, 2003)

Hartford was organized to serve the needs of all the Catholics living in and around the state of Connecticut. In 1870 the Archdiocese was split along state lines, The Archdiocese of Hartford oversaw the state of Connecticut, while a new Archdiocese of Providence controlled Rhode Island.

The Archdiocese of Hartford opened its first school in the Hartford area, St. Peter opened in 1859, about the time where ant-Catholic sentiment was at its height. The St. Peter School was opened in the St. Peter parish located on Main Street. The school was not only opened to allow Catholic children to gain a Catholic education, but interestingly enough the school was incorporated into the Hartford Public School system in order to alleviate the congestion in the system. Lay people were the staff and their salaries were paid by the city. This provision came to a halt in 1866, after that the school became exclusively parochial³.

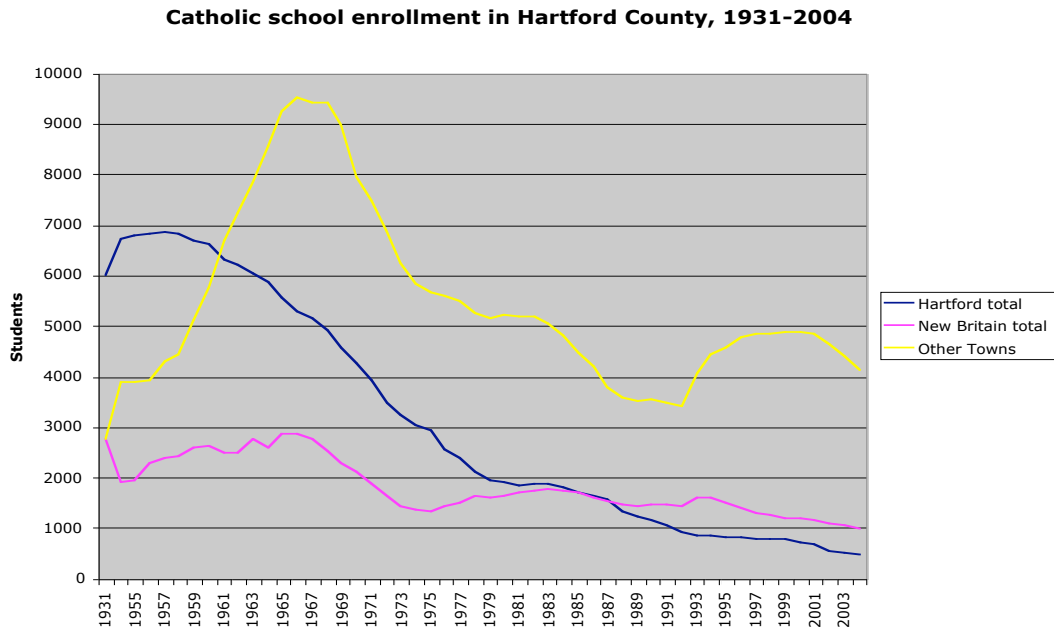
Teams of Catholic Schools in the state were opened and many of them failed for a number of reasons, staff shortages or low enrollments. Notably, in the early 20th Century two Catholic high schools closed. According to Alice Purcell the school that opened in Windsor Locks failed due to the Sisters of Joseph being recalled to Springfield and the other in Hartford, failed due to pitiful enrollment figures. In 1910 the Archdiocese of Hartford had 8 schools, 1930 had 15 schools, and by 1955, 21 schools were in operation In Hartford County there was 15 schools open serving the district, and eight of those schools were based in Hartford.⁴

School enrollment data from the 1930 until 2004 is used in the study, before the 1930's the Hartford Chancery did not keep centralized records of. Within Metropolitan Hartford it is important to note that there are two cities, Hartford and New Britain, therefore New Britain is viewed is neither clumped into Hartford, or with the suburban towns. In 1931 there was a total of 11,531 students within the Catholic School system, that compared

³ Joseph W. Duffy, *Hartford's Catholic Legacy-Parishes* (Archdiocese of Hartford 1994) pp.199-200

⁴ Alice Lane Purcell, "A History of Catholic Secondary and Collegiate Education in the County of Hartford" (Master thesis, Trinity College, 1941)

to a 12,491 of the 1954-55 school year. In the following graph we can begin to see the shifts in Catholic school enrollment from 1955 to 1965. The peak enrollment year was 1965 with a hefty 17,674 students being educated in Catholic Schools.⁵



Catholic School enrollment declined across Hartford County in the years 1965 through 1975. Yet in total, Hartford forfeited a larger percent of student that its counterparts. In the city of Hartford the most students were lost, a total of 2,730 students left, which dropped them 52 percentage points. New Britain lost half of their student population, and the suburbs lost 41 percentage points of their students during the same time period.

Viewing student enrollment numbers only paints a partial picture of the Catholic educational landscape. Next, school openings and closings were analyzed to show where the Archdiocese of Hartford was placing its resources. The only area to experience an expansion in Catholic Schools was the suburbs that had fifteen schools

⁵ Data for graph gathered from data received from the Office of Catholic Schools located 467 Bloomfield Ave in Bloomfield Connecticut. Enrollment data from 1955 of all schools that were ever opened under the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of Hartford were included in the raw data.

built in the 55-65 decade. With more than a school being built per year massive amounts of capital and resources were being moved from the cities into the suburbs. The Archdiocese tried to keep up with the growing pace of students that were abounding in the suburbs.

Openings	1955-65	1965-75	1975-Present	TOTAL
Hartford	0	0	0	0
Suburbs	15	1	0	16
New Britain	0	0	0	0

The other side of the coin is school closings. School closings were usually the result of a lack of funding, students, and/or will to keep the school running. During the general boom of the decade of 55-65, both Hartford and New Britain had closed down a school. During the decade of 65-75, two schools in the suburbs closed, signaling the then end of the boom era the eventual contraction of the Catholic School system in Metro Hartford.

Closings	1955-65	1965-75	1975-PRESENT	TOTAL
Hartford	1	0	5	6
Suburbs	0	2	4	6
New Britain	1	0	2	3

The Evolution of Archdiocese Policy

In wake of the growing division of the interests in 1965, Archbishop John F. Whealon created an archdiocesan school board, with representatives from both city and suburban parishes, in an attempt to further cooperation between different schools⁶. This Archdiocesan school board would consist of seats that were appointed by the Archbishop himself, and not elected by parishioners. Of those who were elected most tended to be clergy, yet the lay-members who were appointed were often very involved in the affairs of their parish. The intention this School Board was to conjoin the diverting

⁶ "Archdiocese to Establish Parochial School Board" *Hartford Courant*, 25 Jun. 1965

interests of suburban and city parishes, but we will see that the school board's hope of uniting the schools was blackened.

Financial policy was one of the vulnerable points of the Archdiocesan School Board. In 1971, the Board, in an attempt at uniting the schools, comes up with a forward plan to ease the financial worries of parish school. The Board made a broad recommendation to centralize school funds where 25% of raised monies would go to the individual parish, and 75% to central fund⁷. The money would come from pew collections from parishioners and the annual school fund which was already in place. Yet the Archbishop stalls and substitutes a one-time special collection instead in 1974. Archbishop Whealon in opposition to the proposal states, "Catholic Elementary schools in the Archdiocese of Hartford are individual parish schools and their future depends on local parish support."⁸ With the Archbishop's opposition to the centralization of funds, the plan could never be realized.

Although there seems to be no proof of overtly racist tactics on the part of the archdiocesan leadership, Black and Latino students and parishioners were disproportionately affected by the evolution of the church's policy. In defense of these parishioners, in 1971 the Catholic Interracial Council's Board of Directors openly criticized then Archbishop Whealon for not enacting a central fund plan. The Board of Directors noted that without the plan many inner city parishes which served minority communities would perish. Yet in 1972, the Archdiocese was able to boast a 21 per cent enrollment of Black and Latino students, and 24.6 per cent from "disadvantaged backgrounds." With so many of these Black, Latino, and disadvantaged students in the system one must wonder why the church didn't do more to keep these students in the system. Yet by 1980 after the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled that public schools must do more to desegregate, Catholic schools were seen as a haven for whites to escape the school desegregation ruling. The then 18-member School Board transacted a policy that would not admit students whose schools were affected by plans to

⁷ "Board Suggests Actions To Save Catholic Schools," *Hartford Courant*, 9 Feb. 1971

⁸ Ann Hall, "Lay Group Attacks Archbishop's Stand," *Hartford Courant*, 29 Jan. 1971

desegregate their public schools. The Archdiocese of Hartford was plagued by the perception of being separatist which gave it the perception of being racist.

Changes in the Church's finances were due to three main reasons: inflation, nun shortage, and loss of government subsidies. The Church was dependent upon its members. If members stopped giving money, the church declined. This is exactly the case in with the Archdiocese of Hartford. Although the 1960's gave unprecedented prosperity to many Catholics who gave more to the Church, the proportion of money they gave dropped. Andrew Greeley supports this assertion when he stated, " There is more money being given to the Catholic Church today than there was ten years ago; but due to inflation, increasing Catholic population, and rising incomes, the church's real financial condition has worsened appreciably."⁹

Nuns were the backbone of the parochial school, coming from different parts of the country to teach, and taking a pittance in exchange for their long hours of dedication. Yet, as soon as 1958, The Hartford Courant reports of are indications of a nun-shortage as the Archdiocese expanded out into the suburbs of Hartford. The pace of expansion in Hartford was in contradictory timing to a decrease in the amount of nuns joining the ranks. This resulted in parishes recruiting lay teachers who often commanded a competitive salary to their public counterparts. The Archdiocese had to pay out more money in salaries which invariable led to the cost of education rising. A lot was done to keep the costs down, even keeping teachers' salaries to a minimum; this resulted in protests by the teacher unions. The backlash from these protests hurt the reputation of the Church and often disrupted schooling.

The loss of government grants did not help out the financial future of the parochial schools. In 1976, most schools' tuition costs only covered one third of the cost of education, leaving a big gap in the costs of schooling¹⁰. Catholic Schools did receive funds from the state that paid for services that did not deal with instruction, services

⁹ Greeley, Andrew *Catholic Schools in a Declining Church* (Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1976) p.245

¹⁰ Joel Lang, "Parochial Schools Learn Financial Facts" *Hartford Courant* 24 Sept. 1976

such as transportation and school nurses. In 1991, Governor Lowell P. Weicker cut funds to these services adding to the burden of Catholic schools during the 91-92 year¹¹.

FUTURE RESEARCH

For future research I would like to analyze how Catholic suburbanization compares to the general migration trends of metropolitan Hartford, especially when it comes to public schools versus Catholic schools. Also the rise and fall of Catholic schools should be analyzed as well, in particular why were Catholic schools so popular among Catholics. Did the placement of Catholic schools affect the movement Catholics? Does Metropolitan Hartford tell us anything about the national trend of Catholic schools? These questions are some that I hope to answer in researching the question further down the line.

¹¹ Lawrence Strauss, "Weickers' Proposal Opposed" *Hartford Courant* 11 Mar. 1991