

# Turning Loss into Renewal

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS, CHARTER SCHOOLS,  
AND THE MIAMI EXPERIENCE

By Dana Brinson, Public Impact



**SETON**

EDUCATION PARTNERS



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# Foreword

BY SCOTT W. HAMILTON AND STEPHANIE SAROKI

This Spring, there have been more headlines like the ones we have seen too often in the past about inner-city Catholic schools being closed due to lack of finances.

Just over a year ago, Father Jose Luis Menendez of Miami's Corpus Christi parish was facing the bleak prospect of generating one of these school closure headlines—or worse, the closure of his entire parish—because of depleted finances. Yet Father Menendez, together with Miami's Archbishop Favalora and Catholic Schools Superintendent Richard DeMaria, found a creative and practical solution. By turning the parish school into a secular public charter school, they saved the parish, while continuing to offer a valuable alternative to the district public schools that are often not a good option for children.

What transpired in Miami last year is worth noting, not because charter schools are using former Catholic school facilities. This is hardly a new thing; hundreds of today's 5,000 charter schools are currently housed in former Catholic school facilities. Miami is worth noting because:

- The creation of eight charter schools in the ashes of Catholic schools was done in a methodical yet brisk way, with the inspiration of Fr. Menendez and other parish priests and the leadership of the Archdiocese.
- Most of the students at these schools are Catholic, unlike those at the Washington, D.C., schools that recently converted to charter, or many of the hundreds of other former inner-city Catholic schools that have been shuttered, where a majority of the students were poor and minority, but not Catholic.
- Most of the students are Latino, a group of special significance for both the Catholic Church in America and K-12 education. Over one-third of all American Catholics are Hispanic, and the crisis in Catholic education is underway at precisely the moment when the nation's public schools are struggling to serve Hispanics. Only 58 percent of Hispanic girls—and less than half of Hispanic boys—graduate from high school. At a time when many marginalized immigrant families need them most, Catholic schools are shutting their doors. What's more, the U.S. Census Bureau projects the Latino population in the United States will continue to grow rapidly, reaching 66.4 million by the year 2020. The Church, and our country, have a vested interest in ensuring that our growing Hispanic population has access to strong educational options.
- The eight new Miami charter schools are serving twice as many students as the Catholic schools they replaced. Some former Catholic school families chose to move their children to a surviving Catholic school, while many chose to stick with the school despite it becoming a charter. New families also enrolled their children. To date, there are no signs of any ill effects on the Archdiocese's other schools.
- Rather than just leasing building space to any charter school, the Archdiocese helped parishes assess potential tenants and make quality choices that will yield academic and other results that are consistent with some of the goals of Catholic education.
- The implementation of very good shared-use agreements for building space gives the charter full use of the facility during school hours, allows the parish to use the facility during non-school hours, and offers good accountability measures if the charter school is not doing well by its students.

Seton Education Partners applauds the leadership of Father Menendez, Brother DeMaria, and Archbishop Favalora, because we believe that there are alternatives to simply accepting what has been the steady and accelerating demise of inner-city Catholic education—even more so when, as was going to be the case in Miami, it would also be accompanied by the closure of inner-city parishes themselves.

We are extremely grateful to Dana Brinson and Public Impact for the careful work that went into the preparation of this case study, and to Fernando Zulueta, Victor Barroso, and their colleagues at Academica, who helped us get the story right. We are also grateful to the Bodman, Calder, Cassin Educational Initiative, Chiaroscuro, and Walton Family Foundations for making this study possible.

# Executive Summary

In November 2008, the Catholic Archdiocese of Miami notified its pastors that it would suspend all parish subsidies at the end of the year and require pastors to sign promissory notes to repay all subsidies received since the parishes first opened. With the economic crisis and changing demographics in southern Florida straining Church coffers, the Archdiocese could not continue spending \$3 million a year to maintain Catholic schools in its poorest parishes or provide millions more to subsidize the parishes in other ways. While severe, the Archdiocese's dire straits mirrored the situation facing Catholic communities across the country.

In response to the loss of the subsidy, several pastors and Archdiocesan officials undertook a process to close seven Catholic schools and allow eight public charter schools<sup>1</sup> to open in the newly empty buildings and an additional school building in a previously closed parish. Supported by the unique vision of one priest, the dedication of the facilities manager at the Archdiocese, and the organizational strength of a charter school support services company, these pastors turned the tragic loss of Catholic schools serving low-income neighborhoods into an opportunity for renewal.

Prior to the transition to charter, stakeholders expressed several concerns:

- Parents and teachers were apprehensive about the loss of a sense of close-knit family in the schools.
- Archdiocesan leaders feared that allowing charter schools to open in parish buildings would further weaken remaining Catholic schools if students chose to leave their parochial schools and enroll in the tuition-free charters.
- For many—from Archdiocesan leaders to parents—the greatest concern about the closure of Catholic schools and the opening of charters was the loss of religious education during the school day and how to effectively compensate for it.

Despite these concerns, many had hope that charters would be an answer to some vexing problems. They hoped that charters would:

- Provide a source of income to help the parish pay off past debts, avoid parish closure, and plan for the future;
- Maintain the school buildings and provide insurance coverage on the property; and
- Create a “public school with a private school feel” that would give former parochial students a better option than district public schools that are often academically failing or unsafe.

The pastors involved in this process believe the decision to share their buildings with charters saved their parishes. The full results of these actions are not yet known, but the Miami experience provides important insight into how one Archdiocese responded to the financial crisis facing inner-city Catholic schools in a way that strengthened struggling parishes and continues to provide an educational benefit to underserved communities.

These are some early lessons:

- Archbishop Favalora's decision to permit parish priests to gather information and feedback on charter schools created an opportunity for parish-driven solutions to long-standing financial challenges.
- With support from Archdiocesan officials, the parishes negotiated fair facilities agreements with charter schools that provide a source of income for parishes to pay off debts and address any canonical concerns posed by public schools on church property.
- Working with established, successful charter school networks removed some of the guesswork in identifying schools that would provide a strong education for students.
- The process worked well when open lines of communication were developed between the Archdiocesan central office and parishes; between parishes and the teachers, students, and families from the closing Catholic schools; and between Church representatives and charter school operators. When these lines of communication broke down—or were never developed—misinformation, feelings of abandonment, and misplaced anger resulted.
- The loss of a Catholic school requires new thinking and action on the part of pastors and Archdiocesan officials to ensure the Church meets the religious education needs of children through other avenues. Failure to address this need can result in a missed opportunity.

This case study, commissioned by Seton Education Partners, explores the hopes, concerns, missteps, and early benefits of Miami's endeavor, and distills important lessons for other dioceses facing similar challenges.

# Introduction

In November of 2008, the Archdiocese of Miami shared some distressing news with the poorest of its 110 parishes: the Archdiocese was suspending all parish subsidies at the end of the year. With the economic crisis and changing demographics in southern Florida badly straining Church coffers, Archdiocesan leaders could no longer spend millions of dollars each year, including \$3 million a year specifically to maintain Catholic schools for its poorest parishes. In addition to halting future subsidies, the Archdiocese required repayment of any money loaned to the parishes since they had opened, sometimes decades earlier. Some pastors signed promissory notes for millions of dollars.

This new financial reality left poor parishes in a bind. If the parishes wanted to remain open at all, they would have to drastically cut expenditures. After meetings, brainstorming, and soul-searching, some parishes determined they could remain open and continue to operate their parochial school through donations, tuition increases, or redoubled efforts to recruit new students. For seven parishes, however, the loss of an Archdiocesan subsidy meant certain school closure.

Pastors in these parishes had known for some time that the schools could not survive without significant outside funding—up to \$350,000 per year for a 200-student school. Facing new loan payments to the Archdiocese, priests in the poorest parishes knew that if they did not close their schools and find new sources of income, the parishes themselves would close. One pastor, Father Jose Luis Menendez at Corpus Christi parish—a community of transient, largely Latino, immigrant families who typically move away once they establish themselves in the country—said of the situation, “I wanted both of my hands, but I had to cut off one to save my body.” Parish closure was a reality; one parish had already closed along with its school the year before.

In 2009, seven pastors and the Archdiocese of Miami undertook a process to close Catholic schools and allow public charter schools to operate in the empty facilities of eight former parish schools. This study details Miami’s experience, from the decision to close the Catholic schools to the opening of public charter schools in their place. Exploring the hopes, concerns, missteps, and early benefits of this endeavor, the study provides important early lessons for other dioceses facing similar challenges.

As dioceses nationwide face economic hardship and consider options for their poorest parishes, Church leaders, educators, pastors, and parishioners face difficult choices about what to do with their schools. Potential outcomes include:

1. Catholic schools close by the hundreds with buildings remaining vacant or rented out to community organizations;
2. Parishes and dioceses rush to convert these schools to secular public charter schools or lease facilities to them, but quick, ill-informed action jeopardizes this work; or
3. Dioceses undertake a hybrid model of converting some Catholic schools to charter schools (or leasing their facilities to public charter schools), infusing the facility proceeds into the parishes and remaining diocese schools, and strengthening other venues for religious formation to counter the loss of the faith-forming component of Catholic schooling.

Seton Education Partners commissioned a 2009 case study on the process of converting several District of Columbia Catholic schools into charter schools.<sup>2</sup> This current case study builds on the knowledge gathered about the D.C. experience and provides new insights as well. In some ways, this case study revealed common feelings of disappointment and loss, hope for parish renewal, and a commitment to provide an educational service to the community true to many of the valued characteristics of strong Catholic schools. Miami, unlike D.C., did not have a single operator for the schools that became charters, and most of the students in Miami’s struggling Catholic schools were Catholic. These two characteristics, combined with other differences, shaped the Miami process in a direction wholly different from the D.C. endeavor.

# Background

The Diocese of Miami was founded in 1958 and, at the time, covered half the state of Florida and included only 200,000 Catholics. After only 10 years, the Diocese of Miami became an Archdiocese and, today, includes over one million members. This growth is largely due to immigration from Central America and the island nations of the Caribbean. In 2010, the Archdiocese's Department of Schools oversees more than 60 schools in Broward, Miami-Dade, and Monroe counties, serving about 34,000 students. The head of the Department of Schools, Brother Richard DeMaria—a man who has dedicated his life to the education of the urban poor—believes deeply in the role of Catholic education as a resource for underserved communities. As he explains, quoting a line attributed to Cardinal James Hickey of Washington, D.C., “We don’t educate poor children because *they* are Catholic, we educate them because *we* are Catholic.”

Florida operates two publicly funded voucher programs that provide students with tuition to attend private schools, boosting enrollment for some of the Archdiocese's schools. The McKay Scholarship Program provides vouchers for students with disabilities to attend private schools. Brother DeMaria reported that his Catholic schools serve 635 students on these vouchers, which range in amount from \$6,000 to \$17,000, depending on the severity of the recipient's disability. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program, a second voucher program, allows businesses to pay up to half of their corporate taxes into a fund to provide scholarships for low-income students to attend private schools. The program provides vouchers worth almost \$4,000 each, and about 1,400 students attend Catholic schools in Miami under that system. Brother DeMaria reported that some schools in poorer parishes kept tuition low—below the actual cost of educating a child—so at least some families could afford the school. As a result, the Tax Credit Scholarship, which could pay tuition in full, usually did not cover the true cost of running the school. In Catholic schools serving poor communities, accepting lower tuition fees than better-off parishes further limited school resources.

In the Archdiocese of Miami, as in many dioceses across the country, the Catholic education system is decentralized with each parish priest in charge of his own school. This local control may provide agility in developing schools that respond to a particular community's needs, but it also places poor parishes in difficult positions of providing a school on very limited budgets. Parishes in wealthy communities, in contrast, serve families able to pay full tuition prices as well as make substantial donations to parishes and their schools. These parishes may have waiting lists of students ready to enroll.

For parishes operating schools in the poorest Miami-area communities, the Archdiocese served as the recourse to budget shortfalls. Collecting income from the wealthy and poor parishes alike, the Archdiocese central office redistributed some of those resources from rich communities to poor—a long-standing tradition of the Church. As low-income immigrants moved in from the islands and Central America and the financial crisis hit especially hard in southern Florida, the Archdiocese became unable to continue redistributing this income.

## DECLINING ENROLLMENT AND RISING COSTS: A COMMON PROBLEM

Many Catholic parishes and schools across the country are facing similar challenges to Miami. Since the mid-1960s when Catholic school enrollment reached its zenith of 5.5 million students,<sup>3</sup> enrollment has declined dramatically to about 2.1 million in 2009-10.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the 1968 Vatican II decision to drop the requirement that Catholics send their children to Catholic schools, changing demographics and economic hardships straining families' ability to pay tuition have also contributed to this decline. The rising costs of providing a Catholic education exacerbated dwindling enrollment, as nuns who once provided the low-cost teaching staff in most of the schools left and were replaced with lay teachers who earn a higher wage.

In the wake of such drastic changes, the Catholic Church continues to stress the responsibility of parents to “look after the Christian education of their children . . . and entrust their children to those schools which provide a Catholic education” whenever possible.<sup>5</sup> In several of the seven Miami parishes that closed their schools in 2009, priests and others reported that their Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) classes boasted 400 or 500 students on the weekends, while fewer than half that many students attended the school during the day.



In these parishes serving low-income communities, priests reported that their schools had sapped limited resources and hindered both the routine maintenance of the entire parish and the development of outreach and education methods that could bring the Church's message to the community. "I was, in fact, neglecting things that needed to be done in our parish for years in order to provide a subsidy to our school," said Father James McCreanor at Sacred Heart. "With our parish funds and the Archdiocese subsidy, we were spending \$300,000 a year on top of tuition on a school with only 185 students. In a parish of nearly 3,000 families, it became more and more difficult to justify that." For most of these parishes, the subsidy did not even cover routine maintenance of the school buildings. Unable to spare the funds, some parishes left damage from hurricanes unrepaired, grounds unkempt, and updates undone.

The national financial crisis and its impact on Miami Archdiocesan investments laid bare the dire situation. "Financially, the school was a disaster, but the teachers and families with children in the school were reluctant to change things—to increase tuition or cut jobs—because the school was like a family," said Father McCreanor. "Over time, a myth had developed that the Archdiocese would never close Sacred Heart's school. It took the financial crisis and the Archdiocese's decision to end the subsidy to really force everyone to face the reality that our parish could no longer afford to operate a school."

**“We must make courageous decisions for the future to provide education to people in poor parishes, and I don’t believe we can do that by looking at the way we have done things in the past.”**



# A Regrettable Situation, A Creative Solution

In February 2009, seven Miami parishes announced they would close their schools.<sup>6</sup> The decision left pastors, Catholic school leaders, teachers, and families reeling. They had unanswered questions: What would happen to the students and the teachers? How would the parishes—financially weak already—pay for maintenance and insurance on empty school buildings? Didn't the parish have an obligation to the community to provide an alternative to the local public schools that many parents felt were large, lousy, and unsafe? With the forethought, planning, and determination of one parish priest, the pastors found an answer to these questions and a solution to their financial challenge: arranging for their soon-to-be empty school buildings to become public charter schools.

The road ahead—from identifying strong charter operators and negotiating facilities agreements to preparing the buildings for the new charter schools to open—required the coordinated work of several organizations, a relentless focus on finding solutions that worked for everyone involved, and a commitment to developing strong lines of communication.

## **FATHER MENENDEZ AT CORPUS CHRISTI: A TRAILBLAZER**

One forward-thinking pastor, Father Menendez of Corpus Christi Church, knew for a few years that his parish could not continue to provide a school and still serve the parishioners and community well. He realized, as the leader of an inner-city parish, that the source of his greatest financial burden—the school and its facilities—was also his greatest asset. Father Menendez began doing research and learned about charter schools and the charter organizations in the Miami area. He had approached Archdiocesan leaders in 2007 about the possibility of closing his school and leasing the facility to a charter—before the Archbishop had even decided to end the subsidy—saying he had a way to save the Archdiocese \$700,000 a year. “With a charter school in my facility, I could stop requesting a subsidy of \$350,000 a year and start repaying my debts with the new rental income,” Father Menendez said.

Father Menendez did not get a warm response to the idea initially. For many Catholic leaders, charter schools are part of the problem—draining students and funds from Catholic schools—not part of the solution. Father Menendez continued to do his research, however, convinced it could be the answer to his parish's difficulties. As a potential partner, he identified Academica, a charter school support organization that provided an array of business services to many strong charter schools in Florida.

When Father Menendez received a certified letter in November 2008 from the Archdiocese informing him of the loss of the

subsidy and the size of the loan he had to repay (\$3.3 million), he knew immediately what he had to do. He went to Archdiocesan leaders and again requested permission to share his facilities with a charter school, using the proceeds to pay back his loan. The Archbishop agreed, on a one-year trial basis, to permit a single parish—Corpus Christi—to allow a charter school to operate on its grounds. “‘Charter’ was a dirty word when I made the request before,” Father Menendez noted. “It was the financial crisis that created the opportunity for this to happen.”

Despite having permission to pursue the charter school option, Father Menendez did not necessarily receive strong support from elsewhere in the Archdiocese. “Some people from wealthier parishes told me I should not allow a charter in my school building because I would have to remove the crosses—and Jesus—from the classrooms. But if I did not allow a charter in my building, I'd have empty classrooms full of crosses. What purpose would that serve?” Father Menendez asked. “I believe, as a Church, we lack creativity in this moment. We must make courageous decisions for the future to provide education to people in poor parishes, and I don't believe we can do that by looking at the way we have done things in the past. I believe I have found a new way forward in charter schools.”

Father Menendez chose the Mater Academy network to place a charter school in his parish facilities because of the network's reputation for strong academic programs, and because Mater's affiliation with Academica assured Father Menendez that the school would have the support it needed to thrive. In addition, Mater Academy, with its school uniforms, safe and disciplined learning environment, and focus on character development, would provide an atmosphere that was similar to the school Father Menendez was closing. These components eased the transition and helped more families trust the pastor's leadership in bringing a public school onto Church property.

**“Many traditions of Catholic education that we grew up with informed our charter school models, including the codes of conduct, use of school uniforms, and the creation of a disciplined and supportive academic environment.”**

### **LICENSING ARCHDIOCESE FACILITIES TO PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS**

Canon lawyers and legal counsel for the Archdiocese worked diligently to develop a legal agreement between the Archdiocese and the Mater Academy Network to place a charter in the Corpus Christi school facilities. The Archdiocese required three components in the agreement to allow the public school to operate on Church property. First, the agreement had to provide protections for the Archdiocese in the event that charter leaders or teachers acted in ways contrary to Canon Law<sup>7</sup> on Church land. Second, the agreement had to allow the parish to truly share the facilities, including the classrooms, after school and on the weekends so the church could continue to provide religious education classes and other services to their communities. Finally, the agreement had to provide a base market rate for use of the entire school facility, regardless of whether the charter school met its enrollment goals.

#### ***A 30-day Out Clause Solves a Complicated Problem***

During the initial negotiating process, the Church lawyers and officials wanted to implement a morality clause in the facilities license specifically noting that the school would not do anything against Canon Law and enumerating what those issues may include. A morality clause, they hoped, would protect the Church and its parishes from housing a school that was acting in ways that went against Church teachings. Developing such a clause in an agreement with a public school, however, risked potential legal complications and lawsuits from organizations devoted to advocating an extreme separation of church and state. “The consequences of doing it wrong, of layering on too many Church requirements in the agreement, could jeopardize the public school and make the relationship unmanageable,” said Fernando Zulueta, president of Academica. “It was important to recognize the separate and independent roles of the public charter school and the Church.” Further, Zulueta noted, “Church officials were adamant that it be abundantly clear to everyone that the charter schools were independent public schools and not affiliated in any way with the Church. Among other things, they have their own brand to protect—the Catholic schools—and wished to ensure that education consumers not confuse them in any way with the public charter schools. We agreed entirely with that.”

To meet the needs of the Church while avoiding any potential complications with the secular legal system, the lawyers for both sides agreed to develop an academic facilities license rather than a traditional lease. The primary difference between the two is that a license, unlike a lease, can be terminated without going through the court system. This enabled the

Church to include an eviction clause allowing the Church to request the school vacate for any reason with 30 days’ notice. This clause, as part of the agreement, provided the Church with the protection it desired to meet its obligations to Canon Law. For the schools, however, the potential risk of eviction loomed large. To ensure Archdiocesan officials did not act upon this clause hastily, the Church agreed to couple the 30-day out clause with a repayment of six months of fees. “Six months penalty was enough to deter the Archdiocese from haphazardly exercising that option and would also give the charter operator enough money to secure new school facilities quickly,” noted J. Patrick Fitzgerald, a lawyer for the Archdiocese. “I don’t know how other dioceses have met their canonical concerns when they leased facilities to charter schools, but for us, the license agreement was the right option,” he said.

#### ***Sharing Facilities to Meet School and Parish Needs***

Another component of a facilities license that differs from a lease is that the license does not give exclusive possession to the school, but only provides use during certain periods of time. The agreement between the Archdiocese and the schools allows the charter to operate during typical school hours and then places the property back under parish control after school and on weekends. This allows the parish to provide CCD classes and other programs to the community during the evenings and on weekends. The school leaders and parish priests can negotiate occasional changes to this schedule—during carnivals held by the parish or for extra study sessions by the school, for example—but establishes legally that both parties have a legitimate claim to the facilities during different portions of the day.

### **CHOOSING THE RIGHT CHARTER SCHOOL**

When looking for a charter school to operate in our facilities, we chose a proven program with:

1. Strong academic performance,
2. Solid financial viability, and
3. A focus on character development, discipline, and creating a school environment that works well with the values and goals of the parish.

– Father Menendez, Corpus Christi Church

### **Establishing License Fee Rates that Protect the Parish**

Charter schools, as schools of choice, must recruit parents and students to enroll. While Corpus Christi chose to work with an established charter network that had a track record of strong academic performance and growing schools, it was still possible that the charter school might not meet its enrollment goals in the first year. To protect the parish and ensure a minimum source of income, the facilities license agreement based first-year payment on the school's "break even" enrollment—the number of students necessary for the school to remain open—regardless of whether or not the school met that goal. For subsequent years, the school would pay the base amount plus \$700 per student per year for every student above the minimum enrollment. This allowed the parish to benefit as the school grew and remunerated the parish for increasing use of the facilities and grounds.

### **OTHER PARISHES FOLLOW IN THE PATH OF CORPUS CHRISTI**

As Corpus Christi moved forward with its charter plan, six other parishes planned their school closures, unsure of next steps. Brother DeMaria, as head of the Department of Schools for the Archdiocese, requested that Bob Brown, the facilities manager for the Archdiocese, take over decisions related to the buildings that were closing. "They were not going to be Catholic schools any longer, so the Archdiocese needed to determine what to do with the buildings and figure out how to provide the insurance and maintenance necessary to keep the buildings from falling asunder," noted Brother DeMaria.

Bob Brown took action to encourage other pastors to consider the charter option. Brown, others have noted, recognized the benefits of a charter school operating in a parish school building, and believed it was the best option in a difficult situation. In all, the Archbishop allowed eight parish school buildings to house charter schools beginning in the 2009-10 school year. What began as a single-school experiment in Miami grew to eight schools in a matter of weeks.

When the parishes initially decided to close their schools, the Archdiocese did not immediately allow the parish to let students or parishioners know a charter school would be opening on the site. Some pastors and teachers believed this was an effort to encourage enrollment of students from closing schools into some of the remaining Catholic schools. Others thought that negotiations were likely still ongoing at that point and it was not certain the charters would open. Despite the official silence about the arrival of charters, "word got out," said Father Menendez. "A pastor in a neighboring parish told his parishioners during Sunday services one day, 'Corpus Christi may be going charter, but we will not close our school here!'"

For some teachers and parents, lack of communication from the Archdiocese and from the parish priests about what was going to happen next—if a charter would open or not—only fueled their feelings of abandonment and added to the confusion. One teacher said she fought to keep the Catholic school open and actively worked against the charter option because she wanted to see the Catholic school tradition live on in the

parish. Not knowing where to direct their anger, many people focused on the charter organizations when the charter decision was announced. Victor Barroso of Academica said he became the target of both praise and anger from various priests and parish staff:

One priest said I was the Devil; two others said I was sent by God to save their parishes. People felt a lot of anger and anxiety about losing their schools. What I saw as an obvious win-win situation—with the parish gaining much-needed rent for an empty building and our schools accessing good facilities—was not as obvious to some of the parish staff. If I did this again, I would work harder to communicate with more people in the parish—especially parish staff—to help everyone understand what we wanted to bring to the parish and dispel any fears they may have had. This was a big change and I didn't realize exactly how tough it was for them until after the fact.

### **WORKING WITH AN ESTABLISHED CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK**

The Miami Archdiocese selected several suitable charter schools and charter networks from which parish priests could choose. Six of the eight schools chosen were affiliated with Academica, a charter support services organization. Another school was part of the Charter School of Excellence group. Only one of the eight charters, Excelsior, was a single school unaffiliated with a management or support services network. Interviews revealed that Archdiocesan representatives, priests, family members, and others felt reassured working with established schools that had a demonstrated history of success.

Archdiocesan officials agreed that having a single point of contact—through Academica—for multiple charter schools streamlined negotiations, planning, and the overall transition process. When undertaking a similar process with multiple diocesan facilities, working with a charter network rather than several individual charter schools may provide similar benefits.

However, it is more important to choose charter schools with strong academic histories, demonstrated financial viability, and program components that are complementary to the parish environment than to simply choose an established program. (See Appendix C for more information on this topic.)

## QUICK ACTION FROM DECISION TO CLOSE TO OPENING CHARTER DOORS

By February 2009, the Archdiocese was working with seven parishes to identify charter school operators and sign facilities license agreements with charter schools. Interviewees reported that Archbishop John Clement Favalora and Brother Richard DeMaria—committed educators by vocation—were devastated by the loss of the Catholic schools, but had remained open to the idea of sharing parish facilities with charter schools. DeMaria explained:

I worked very hard to find a solution to keep the inner-city Catholic schools open, but when I finally came to the conclusion that I couldn't save them, I chose to help save inner-city parishes through the charter school process. At the time, Archdiocesan officials were against it. No one wanted public schools in our parishes. But those buildings were built by the parishioners to provide education to the neighborhood. If we can no longer do that, it seems only right to use those buildings to allow someone to provide that education. It's still a major contribution that the Church of Miami is making to the poor.

With decisions in February to allow charters to open in parish buildings in August, there was no time for organizations to apply for new charters from local school districts. Rather, Archdiocesan leaders and pastors chose to work with charter operators that either 1) already held charters and were seeking facilities in which to open the schools, or 2) had already opened newly chartered schools inside existing charter schools—a process called “nesting”—and were ready to move those “nested” schools into their own school buildings. In the Miami area, there is no shortage of potential operators with charters in hand who are looking for a facility in which to open or grow. “I have about 15 groups this year who hold a charter but had to defer opening because they have not yet accessed facilities,” said Tiffanie Pauline, executive director of the Miami-Dade Charter Schools Office. “We have a lot of groups that would love to access Archdiocesan facilities.” Pauline stated that some stand-alone charter school leaders expressed regret that the network-affiliated charter schools edged out smaller charters in need of facilities, but pastors—seeking to place programs with a proven track record in their parishes—felt most comfortable with schools that had a history of success.

Once Archdiocesan officials had identified suitable charter networks, pastors and other stakeholders toured some of the schools those charter networks operated. The parish priests witnessed ordered, disciplined, safe learning environments in the charter schools they visited and saw how much some of the programs looked like Catholic schools. Fernando Zulueta of Academica noted that some of the charter schools’ similarities to Catholic schools were not a coincidence. “Many of our teachers and principals were educated in local Catholic schools, and I hadn’t been inside a public school myself until I opened a charter school. As a result, many traditions of Catholic education that we grew up with informed our charter school models, including the codes of conduct, use of school uniforms, and the creation of a disciplined and supportive academic environment,” he said.

## QUICK ACTION SUMMARY

A busy six months ensued after the announcement in February 2009 that seven Catholic schools in Miami would close and eight new charter schools would open their doors that August. Once the Archdiocese gave pastors approval to pursue the charter school option, the following steps were taken:

1. Pastors worked at the parish level to determine if there was sufficient demand in the community and buy-in from parishioners to make a charter school a realistic option. Some pastors held town meetings and asked parishioners what they wanted the parish to do; others gathered less formal feedback.
2. The Archdiocese requested information on charter school performance, financial histories, and other program components from several charter schools and charter networks, to develop a list of strong charter models from which the parishes could choose.
3. The Archdiocese lawyers, facilities director, and other leaders negotiated with charter school operators to use the educational facilities license agreement that provided a 30-day out clause with 6-month penalty, a provision for the school to share the facilities with the parish, and a guaranteed minimum market-rate payment to the parish, regardless of charter enrollment.
4. In spring and summer of 2009, the charter operators cleaned, painted, and landscaped the parishes’ school facilities and grounds, updated the wiring and made other cosmetic changes in classrooms, and purchased new technology to prepare for the charters to open. Academica invested about \$50,000 into repairs at each school. The company had secured \$200,000 lines of credit per school from Building Hope in Washington, D.C., to cover any unforeseen renovations, but did not need to access those funds.
5. Charter operators enrolled students and hired the new teaching and leadership staff (including some former Catholic school teachers and staff), nearly doubling, or in some cases more than tripling, the size of the former Catholic school.
6. Academica and the charter operators worked with Archdiocesan representatives, fire and safety officials, and building inspectors to obtain the necessary certificates of use—an unusually complicated task in some municipalities (see Appendix B for more details).
7. The local school districts (which were also the charter school authorizers) oversaw the transition process and ensured that schools met necessary legal requirements.
8. The charter schools opened their doors in August 2009.



## HOPES AND CONCERNS IN UNCHARTED TERRITORY

In Miami, allowing public charter schools to use Catholic Church facilities was a new experience for everyone involved. While charter schools have been operating on property belonging to various religious organizations for years across the country, the Miami Archdiocese had never been involved in such a process. The scale of allowing eight charters to open at once in parish school buildings across the Archdiocese raised several concerns among parents, parishioners, and pastors:

- Parents and teachers were apprehensive about the loss of a sense of close-knit family in the schools, fearing that charters—as public schools—would bring a less personal approach to education.
- Archdiocese leaders feared that allowing charter schools to open in parish buildings would further weaken remaining Catholic schools if students chose to leave the parochial schools and enroll in the tuition-free charters.
- For many stakeholders—from the Archdiocese to parents—the greatest concern was the loss of an opportunity for a religious education during the school day. “People did not want to lose the religious component of the school day; they did not want to take Jesus out of the classroom,” noted one teacher.

Despite the valid concerns and a general unease about moving in an unknown direction, pastors, parishioners, and others associated with the schools had hope that allowing charters to use their school facilities would be an answer to many of their problems. In particular, they hoped that charters would:

- provide a source of income to help the parish pay off past debts and plan for the future,
- maintain the school buildings and provide insurance coverage on the property, and
- create for children “a public school with a private school feel,” and spare the former Catholic school students from attending large district schools, which many families concluded were unsafe, and which, in some parishes like Corpus Christi or Sacred Heart, earned a “C” or worse on state academic measurements.

In addition, many hoped that the increased attendance in parish school buildings might breathe life into the parish itself. Some thought if more parents and students came for the school, they may stay for the religious services. In any case, allowing former parochial students to continue attending a school in the same place would allow them to participate in optional religious education programs after school. Learning from the experience of other denominations that had taken on a similar process also encouraged these hopes (see sidebar).

## A LESSON FROM THE PRESBYTERIAN EXPERIENCE

In fall of 2008, Presbyterian City Church’s empty school facilities came to life with the opening of Somerset City Arts Conservatory, a charter elementary school. City Church had closed its private school due to low enrollment, but wanted to continue to provide an educational option to the community. Pastor Chris Coppolo worked with Academica and Somerset Academy charter network to develop an arts-focused curriculum that capitalized on the rich visual and performing arts resources on the church grounds.

In its second year of operation, City Arts has brought new life to the church. Pastor Coppolo noted, “Because I do not have to run a school and we receive rent from the school, I’m free to focus on building my congregation and doing community outreach. I’ve had parents of students come to me for marriage counseling; others have begun attending Sunday services. I believe coming to the school has made them more comfortable with coming to the church.”

The transition of closing one school and opening another in its place did create some confusion for parishioners and families. Brother DeMaria said, “People would say to me, ‘I understand Corpus Christi is going to be a charter school,’ and I would have to clarify that Corpus Christi school has closed, there will be—in the same building—a new entity called Mater Academy, a public charter school.” Brother DeMaria stressed this detail numerous times until it was clear to parents and the community that the Catholic schools were closed and the Church was not involved in operating the charter schools.

To support the transition process and confirm Brother DeMaria’s message that the charters were new schools, Academica and the charter school operators held a series of public meetings to explain what their schools had to offer, listen to questions and concerns of parents with children in the closing Catholic schools, and try to open lines of communication. “We didn’t know how people would react,” said Lynn Norman-Teck of the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools. She said:

The more meetings we held, the more parents and the community were on board with the plan. They were obviously very disappointed that the Catholic schools were closing, and some were angry with the charter schools because they somehow saw [them] as the drivers behind their parochial schools closing. But over time, parents realized that the options were for their school to close and remain empty or for us to fill that space and provide their children with a free public education. The parents were certainly interested in options other than sending their children to the [traditional] district schools.

# Early Results

While still in the first year of operation, and with much in a state of transition, these charter schools have had some early results that illuminate what has gone well in the process and where continued work may be necessary.

## FORMER CATHOLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS

Brother Richard DeMaria of the Archdiocese Department of Schools said almost 300 students—about a quarter of the students from the closed Catholic schools—chose to enroll in other Catholic schools rather than attend the charter schools. This indicated to him the continued importance of the traditional Catholic model for many families. A smaller trend occurred in the other direction, as DeMaria noted: “Charter schools are certainly a source of competition for our programs, but we only lost 15 students from our remaining Catholic schools to the 8 charter schools that opened on Church land.”

School leaders estimated that the large majority—three quarters or more—of students who attended the closed Catholic schools chose to enroll in the charter schools that replaced them. This high percentage stands in contrast to the recent conversion of Catholic schools in Washington, D.C., where only about 30 percent of students attended the new charters. There, many of the Catholic school students lived in Maryland or Virginia and were ineligible to attend D.C. charter schools. The Miami experience suggests that many families in low-income communities may choose a tuition-free, quality public charter school option that is safe and focuses on academic and character development when a Catholic school must close.

Family members interviewed stated that the familiarity of the building, the academic focus, the orderly atmosphere, the retention of some teachers from the Catholic schools, and the small school size encouraged them to try the charter option. “If the charter school had not opened here, my seven grandchildren would have had to go to different schools. Instead, all of them were able to enroll here at Somerset,” commented Maria Noa, a grandmother at Somerset South Homestead. “My grandchildren are very happy to be here.”

## FORMER CATHOLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS

Many of the teachers in the closing Catholic schools had devoted their lives to parochial education and the closure came as a shock to all and, to some, as a “slap in the face.” Despite the surprise of the closing and, for many, a commitment to a school providing religious education, some teachers sought employment with the new charter schools.

Lynn Norman-Teck of the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools noted, “The charter operators interviewed any former teachers from the closed Catholic schools who had state certification and wanted to be part of the new schools.” The extent to which former Catholic school teachers were rehired varied across the charters: some hired half of the former Catholic school teachers, and others hired only a couple. Only one former Catholic school principal made the transition to lead a charter school. Susan Chandler and Ellen Wood, former teachers at Sacred Heart, said that once they were certain the school would close, they decided to be part of the charter to keep a school in the community serving many of the same children. Both teachers admitted that losing the religious aspects of the school was particularly difficult, but also agreed that their fears that the public school might feel “sterile or distant” never materialized. “I appreciate that the charter school is still small and still focused on feeling like a family,” Chandler said.

The three principals interviewed noted that some of the former Catholic school teachers hired by the charter schools chose to leave, and a couple were let go, during the first semester of the charter schools’ operation. Interviewees attributed the teacher departures to the significant differences in approach to education and accountability regimes between the parochial and public schools. For example, the large classroom spaces in the Catholic school buildings required the charter school leaders to implement a co-teacher model to meet the state class-size requirements. Former Catholic school teachers had been used to having their own classrooms. Class size for some teachers more than doubled. In addition, adherence to state and federal accountability systems and a close focus on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) were new responsibilities for former Catholic school teachers. Finally, charter principals admitted their programs involved a high level of principal involvement in the classroom with routine observation and feedback. For some teachers, the transition simply required too much change, too quickly.

## EIGHT NEW CHARTER SCHOOLS

The eight charter schools using Archdiocese facilities roughly doubled the overall school enrollment of the former Catholic schools and have plans to grow next year. Because the Catholic schools were underenrolled and operating in large classrooms,

“If the charter school had not opened here, my seven grandchildren would have had to go to different schools. Instead, all of them were able to enroll here at Somerset. My grandchildren are very happy to be here.”

there was room for growth in the new charters—allowing the charters to enroll students from the closed parochial schools and many other new students from the surrounding area seeking to attend a school of choice. The charter schools have provided additional academic resources and brought with them a commitment to strengthening student academic performance.

The new charter schools promised to provide the best education materials available to students. At Mater Academy of International Studies, for example, the school boasts laptops for every student, Promethean boards in each classroom, and new books and materials. Principal Beatriz Morris smiled while describing the resources available to her students at Mater Academy. When she led Corpus Christi school, she said, “I wanted to provide these resources to my students, but we were getting by on the bare necessities. We did not have resources for ongoing teacher training, new books, or technology. Now that we are a charter, we have all that.”

While the charters brought a new education option for families, the Archdiocese is providing charters with a great opportunity as well. As students practiced soccer in a large field at Charter School of Excellence at St. Malachy’s parish, Victor Barroso observed, “Charter schools could never afford to buy this much land for a school. In Miami, we have playgrounds on top of our school buildings. Because of these agreements to use parish properties, the charters have been able to provide a wonderful space for students to play.”

The new charter schools have focused much of the school year on preparing students for the state-mandated FCAT. For many of the students who had attended the Catholic schools, the FCAT will be a new experience. The Catholic system administered the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, but did not always use that information to drive instruction, according to teachers and principals interviewed. To familiarize students with the testing process and determine where students needed help, the charters provided pretests for the FCAT. “There were a lot of former Catholic school students who scored below basic at the beginning of the year,” noted one assistant principal, “but we monitor their growth closely and we’ve seen many students go from below basic to proficient or better over the course of the year so far.”

CHARTER SCHOOLS OPEN IN AUGUST 2009 ON MIAMI ARCHDIOCESE PARISH PROPERTIES

CHARTER SCHOOL	ACADEMICA AFFILIATED	CATHOLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT*	CHARTER ENROLLMENT	PARISH & PASTOR
Charter School of Excellence, Tamarac Campus		109	347	St. Malachy Fr. Dominick O'Dwyer
Excelsior Charter School		199	165	St. Monica (parish and school closed 2008)
Mater Academy of International Studies	✓	216	371	Corpus Christi Fr. Jose Luis Menendez
Pinecrest North Campus	✓	103	257	Our Lady of Divine Providence Fr. Manuel Soler
Somerset East Miramar	✓	158	239	St. Stephen Fr. Alejandro Roque
Somerset South Homestead	✓	193	373	Sacred Heart Fr. Jim McCreanor
Somerset Wilton Manors	✓	111	170	St. Clement Fr. Robes Charles
Thelma and Theodore Gibson Charter School	✓	108	216	St. Francis Xavier (parish merged with Gesu Parish in 2009)

\* Catholic school enrollment includes pre-Kindergarten through, in some cases, eighth grade. The charter schools that replaced the Catholic schools enroll only grades K through 5.

## RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CHARTER SCHOOL STAFF AND PARISH STAFF

Parish priests made the ultimate decision about which charter operators to license their facilities to, but did not have input on who those operators hired to lead the schools. For the most part, the priests and the new principals quickly established good working relationships. “It’s been wonderful from the beginning,” noted St. Malachy’s Father O’Dwyer of his relationship with the Charter School of Excellence team. Because the academic facilities license allows parishes to use facilities during non-school hours, however, a few pastors and principals faced some challenges in negotiating that relationship effectively.

“In the Archdiocese, individual parishes are fairly autonomous,” noted Eric Weiner, who oversees all Archdiocese facilities, “so on the parish level it is very important for the priest and charter school administrator to foster good communication.” A couple times in the fall of 2009, Archdiocesan and charter representatives called meetings to iron out the details between priests and principals. Weiner described one situation:

One priest did not feel he was adequately involved in some of the decisions made about the property and did not have access to the facilities as agreed. The principal was protective of her school’s classroom property, such as the computers. It was really a communication issue. Initially, the priest and principal didn’t have a regularly scheduled time to meet and discuss any issues that arose, and they needed that, at least in the beginning.

Six months into the process, priests, school leaders, and representatives of the Archdiocese and charter organizations all agree that the relationships have been forged and are now working well. Maintaining open lines of communication has been central to strengthening those working relationships.

## IMPACT ON THE PARISHES

Several months after the charter schools opened, Brother DeMaria called together the pastors with charter schools to learn about their experiences and see if there were any lingering issues to resolve. “Every priest said, ‘The charter school saved my parish,’” DeMaria recalled. Each priest interviewed commented on the joy of having a school full of life on parish grounds, the relief of having a source of income to pay back old debts, and the peace of mind that their buildings were maintained, insured, and still available for the parish to use. “We can plan for the future,” said Father Menendez. “Once we pay off our debts, I will be able to use the income from our school building to fund religious education programs for the youth and other evangelizing efforts I couldn’t do before. I know how hard it is to close a school, but I can tell you now I am very happy. Now that I do not have to spend so much of my time overseeing the operation of a school, I can focus more on community outreach and other parish needs. I am free.”

When asked about the impact of the charter payments on St. Malachy’s parish, Father O’Dwyer’s eyes brightened. “Our parish doesn’t see a penny of that money yet. It’s going to pay our debts to the Archdiocese. But in just a few years, we will not owe any money to the Archdiocese, and that’s good.”

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY?

For the pastors, when deciding whether or not to allow a charter to use parish facilities, the biggest issue to consider was how best to provide religious education services to their former students and the new students who expressed an interest. Father McCreanor at Sacred Heart said, “We’re exploring that right now.”

Generally, the pastors had hoped that the influx of new students and their families to the school might spill over into parish programs; only a few have seen this occur so far. Father O’Dwyer at St. Malachy said he has seen his Sunday religion classes for children grow significantly—from about 10 to 40—over the course of the school year, but found that after-school programs have not been as popular. “I have seen parents drop their children off at school and then attend Mass,” he noted. “But most families find it more convenient for their children to attend religious education classes on the weekends.”

Parish priests expressed both hope and skepticism about future enrollment in religious education classes. Father Menendez at Corpus Christi, already operating a thriving religious education program before his school closed, added a two-hour optional religion class once a week after the charter school opened. Fifty of the charter school’s children are enrolled. Father Menendez also plans for future income from the charter school to go toward growing his religious education programs for the community. He said:

Before, when we ran Corpus Christi school, we subsidized it almost \$400,000 a year for only 220 students. But I have never had to subsidize my CCD classes that teach almost 500 students on the weekends. We have to evangelize and bring the Good News to the community, and Catholic schools are not necessarily serving that purpose in poor communities anymore. If one of the goals of Catholic schools is to provide a social service to the community, I have done that by bringing a strong charter school here. If it’s to evangelize and religiously educate children, I can do that for more children with less expense outside of a Catholic school.

Isn’t it wiser to make money from public charter schools operating in our facilities and use that money on more effective religious education programs that could reach many more young people? I cannot yet afford it, but I would like to provide after-school programs, from say 3 p.m. to 6, that would provide more religious education than I was able to provide even in the Catholic school when I taught religion only an hour a day to students. I think an after-school program like that would make good on the Church’s promise to provide robust religious education for the young.

Father Menendez and the director of Religious Formation for his parish, Sister Carmen Alvarez, have plans to increase CCD enrollment next school year. “We are going to advertise our after-school religious program in a different way,” noted Sister Alvarez. “We think many families did not register their children





for CCD this year because they did not recognize that term as a faith formation program.

Father McCreanor more cautiously observed, “Many of the current students in the charter school grew up steeped in the Sacred Heart culture and have returned this year for First Communion and the like. In a few years, when those students move on, I don’t know what the impact will be. We’ll have to wait and see.”

Pastors interviewed did not identify many new religious education programs or outreach efforts designed in response to the closure of their Catholic schools. They relied largely on existing programs, designed for students who had not attended the parish school, to absorb the former Catholic school students. Given the proximity of the charter schools to the parishes, the fact that most students attending the charters identify as Catholic, and the relationships developing between parish and charter school staff, some are wondering if the priests may be missing an opportunity to provide stronger religious education programming.

**“Every priest said, ‘The charter school saved my parish,’” DeMaria recalled. Each priest interviewed commented on the joy of having a school full of life on parish grounds, the relief of having a source of income to pay back old debts, and the peace of mind that their buildings were maintained, insured, and still available for the parish to use.**

# Looking to the Future

Having worked through the most difficult parts of the transition, the parishes and charter schools are looking toward the future. Bringing charter schools to parish school buildings began with the foresight of one pastor and extended to seven other parishes where, according to Father Menendez, “We did not close schools; we saved parishes.”

After seeing the early results with the new charter schools, several other parishes facing financial difficulties have expressed an interest in housing charters themselves. Archbishop Favalora, who recently retired, cautioned against allowing any more charters until the long-term impact on the remaining parochial schools is clear.

These are some early lessons from Miami’s experience:

- Pastors and parishioners in low-income communities had to face the reality that financially failing schools risked shuttering their parishes entirely.
- The Archbishop’s willingness to permit parish priests to gather information and feedback on charter schools created an opportunity for parish-driven solutions to long-standing financial challenges.
- Pastors of poor parishes felt burdened having to funnel limited resources into small schools, but wanted to find a way to continue serving the community and to provide a strong educational opportunity to children.
- Open lines of communication—between the Archdiocese and priests, priests and parishioners, and parish staff and charter school operators—was of central importance. The transition process was most difficult when lack of communication or spreading of misinformation occurred.
- With hundreds of charter schools already operating in parochial school buildings nationwide, much can be done to ensure the facility leases or use agreements provide fair market value to the parish and that the charter schools operate in ways consistent with the goals of Catholic education.
- With the loss of traditional parochial schools, parishes must be proactive in developing new opportunities for religious education and evangelization and continue new approaches to effectively respond to local needs.

- The short timeline—from closure decisions to charter openings—created feelings of discomfort for most people involved, but likely pushed through a difficult process that could have lost steam if more time for decision-making had been available.
- Working with an established charter network or support organization known for strong results provided some assurance that a quick process would not compromise positive outcomes for students.

The steps taken in the Miami Archdiocese to allow charter schools to operate on parish land provided an educational choice to children in underserved communities and may have saved some financially struggling parishes from closing altogether. These steps did not, however, include efforts to strengthen the Catholic schools that remained open but still face a vulnerable financial future. To prevent these at-risk Catholic schools from closure in the near future, the Archdiocese of Miami may need to do more. For example, the Archdiocese might set aside a portion of the proceeds from the charter facilities payments to subsidize the remaining Catholic schools. Or it might consolidate schools with low enrollment to create fewer shared schools among multiple parishes. Creative approaches are necessary to promote the long-term viability of Catholic education and parish viability; charter schools may be only one component of such efforts.

# Conclusion

Despite rising costs and the impact of the financial crisis, many families continue to choose Catholic schooling for their children. These schools provide an important educational choice to families, especially in low-income communities. Catholic schools serve not only as a source of faith formation for young children but have also earned a reputation for providing strong academic programs, a focus on moral and character development, a disciplined and safe learning environment, and—for many—a feeling of family and respite from struggling traditional public schools. If Catholic schools are going to survive, however, parishes and Church leaders will need to consider how to make an institution originally developed in the nineteenth century more viable today. For some dioceses, this may involve leveraging the valuable resource of school facilities by leasing them to good public charter schools and using the proceeds to support financially struggling parishes, bolster the remaining Catholic schools, and launching new efforts to evangelize the community and provide faith formation to the next generation of Catholics.

## Appendix A: Resources for Parishes Considering the Charter Option

### **ACADEMICA**

**[www.academicaschools.com](http://www.academicaschools.com)**

Academica is one of the nation's longest-serving charter school service and support organizations, and serves the largest number of high-performing schools of any charter school management organization in Florida. Academica's services include facilities, finance, staffing and human resource coordination, as well as bookkeeping, budgeting, regulatory compliance, and financial forecasting.

### **BECKET FUND FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY**

**[www.becketfund.org](http://www.becketfund.org)**

Becket Fund for Religious Liberty is a Washington, D.C.-based public interest law firm protecting the free expression of all religious traditions. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Becket Fund operates in three arenas: the courts of law (litigation), the court of public opinion (media), and in the academy (scholarship), at home and abroad.

### **BUILDING HOPE**

**[www.buildinghope.org](http://www.buildinghope.org)**

Building Hope supports high-quality public charter schools in Washington, D.C., and other U.S. cities by providing technical and financial assistance for educational facilities.

### **SETON EDUCATION PARTNERS**

**[www.setonpartners.org](http://www.setonpartners.org)**

Seton Education Partners is a national effort to mobilize innovation, entrepreneurship, talented leadership, and public dollars in response to the decline of urban Catholic education. Seton is working to help struggling urban Catholic schools explore alternatives to school closure—and to ensure that children in Catholic schools that close continue to have access to high-quality educational options.

## Appendix B: Preparing Parish Facilities for Public Charter Schools

While working across several municipalities to move six charter schools into Archdiocesan school buildings, the Academica team experienced a range of responses when seeking the necessary inspections from school district authorizers, fire and safety officials, and building inspectors. In some municipalities, the process went smoothly and the charter schools easily obtained the necessary documents to open. In others, the process was fraught with stumbling blocks only narrowly overcome the Friday before the first day of school.

While some problems may arise from circumstances outside of the diocese or charter operator's control, adequate preparation may make the facilities-sharing process much more manageable. Rolando Llanes, an architect who managed the facilities component for Academica's work to move the charter schools into parish buildings, listed several important steps for any charter operator and parish to take:

1. Know the building codes, laws, and regulations for your area.
2. Confirm that the charter operator knows the number of students allowed in the facility and that the building's size and the charter school's enrollment goals are a good fit.
3. Establish the history of the facility. Gather forms that demonstrate the building has always been a school (or was officially converted to operate as a school) to prevent the need for costly renovations to bring a formerly non-educational facility up to current building codes for educational facilities.
4. Gather the proper paperwork including updated fire inspections, other inspection reports, and certificates of occupancy or use that the diocese has for the building.
5. Tour the facility together. The charter operator should arrange for the creation of a new life-safety plan (including a map of the building). This shows good faith to the fire department and other inspectors that the charter operators are serious about meeting the necessary standards.

Once the diocese and charter operators have established a clear history through the necessary documents, the charter operator should meet with the authority that issues the occupancy certificate. This may trigger a cursory inspection. Those inspections should be consistent with the ones the building has received in the past. If they are not, it suggests the prior inspections were not thorough or the inspectors are attempting to hold a public school to a different standard than a private school.

## Appendix C: Finding the Right Charter School Fit for Your Parish

Charter school operators gain permission from charter authorizers to operate a school. Authorizers—sometimes local school districts, state education agencies, or nonprofit entities—can choose to close a charter school if it fails to effectively teach students or run a financially solvent program. Pastors seeking to share parish facilities with a charter school should mitigate the risk of that charter school being closed (and taking facilities funds with it) by choosing a charter school or charter network with an established history of strong academic results and financial viability. To improve the chances of a good “fit” between the school and the parish, pastors should learn about the school’s mission, character development programs, discipline policies, and other components that will affect school climate. Below, we provide an illustrative list of questions that parish leaders should consider when choosing a charter school or network.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ACADEMIC VIABILITY:

1. How does the charter school/network perform on state tests of student achievement? Does it serve sub-groups of students well (students from low-income families, minority students, students with disabilities, etc.)?
2. Is the school/network in good standing with its authorizer?
3. When is the school eligible for renewal of its charter? (Imminent renewal may not be a good time for a charter to move into a parish facility.)

### QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT FINANCIAL VIABILITY:

1. Does the school/network have an established history of meeting student enrollment goals?
2. Is there demand in the parish community for this type of school?
3. Is the school/network likely to enroll enough students to generate sufficient per-pupil funding to pay the fair market price for parish facilities?
4. Does the school/network have a waiting list of students who wish to enroll (in this location or another school location)?
5. Does the school/network have a plan for, and successful history of, engaging with parents and community members to encourage student enrollment?

### QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE COMPATIBILITY BETWEEN SCHOOL MODEL AND PARISH VALUES:

1. What is the school’s mission?
2. Does the school have an established character development program that is integrated throughout the day? Does that program generally align with Church values?
3. Does the school have an established discipline policy to effectively deal with student behavior issues?
4. Does the school require students to wear uniforms?
5. What is the school’s/network’s history of suspensions, expulsions, or other publicly reported student discipline efforts? (Public schools are required to report unsafe student activities—such as weapons and drug-related problems—to the state.)

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Charter schools are secular, publicly funded, privately run schools that typically operate free from many regulations that apply to district-operated schools. This autonomy comes in exchange for strong accountability; a charter school can be closed for low student performance or financial insolvency.
- <sup>2</sup> Andy Smarick, *Catholic Schools Become Charter Schools: Lessons from the Washington Experience* (Washington, D.C.: Seton Education Partners, 2009), <http://www.setonpartners.org/publications>.
- <sup>3</sup> National Catholic Educational Association, "A Brief Overview of Catholic Schools in America," <http://www.ncea.org/about/HistoricalOverviewofCatholicSchoolsInAmerica.asp>.
- <sup>4</sup> Dale McDonald and Margaret M. Schultz, *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2009-2010: The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing* (Arlington, VA: National Catholic Educational Association, 2010), <http://www.ncea.org/news/AnnualDataReport.asp>.
- <sup>5</sup> Letter from Zenon Cardinal Grocholewski and Jean-Louis Bruguès to the presidents of the bishops' conferences, Vatican Letter on Catholic Education, "Religious Education in Schools Fits Into the Evangelizing Mission of the Church," September 8, 2009, <http://www.zenit.org/article-26802?l=english>.
- <sup>6</sup> One parish, St. Monica, and its school had closed entirely in 2008.
- <sup>7</sup> Canon Law, the oldest continuously functioning legal system in the Western world, is the internal legal system of the Catholic Church. It affects virtually every aspect of the faith life of some one billion Catholic Christians throughout the world.



## **ABOUT SETON EDUCATION PARTNERS**

Seton Education Partners is committed to reviving and expanding opportunities for disadvantaged children in America to receive an academically excellent and vibrantly Catholic education. Seton was born of the belief that a tremendous opportunity exists to revitalize urban Catholic schools in America and strengthen the education they provide. The challenges are significant, to be sure, but with an entrepreneurial and innovative spirit, much can and should be done, not only to preserve this national treasure, but also to build upon its foundation for the benefit of thousands of children in America's poorest neighborhoods.

### **SETON EDUCATION PARTNERS**

1016 16th Street, NW, 8th Floor  
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*This case study is available at [SetonPartners.org](http://SetonPartners.org).*



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