Measuring Catholic school performance

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IN 1980, the late James S. Coleman, a prominent, University of Chicago sociologist, conducted a comprehensive study of student performance in secondary schools. This study was commissioned by the Department of Education, and many expected it simply to detail what types of school characteristics are associated with student success. Most observers were surprised when Coleman focused on the importance of a single school characteristic: whether schools are public or private. Further, because Catholic schools constitute a large and relatively homogenous group in the private-school sector, Coleman and his two co-authors, Thomas Hoffer and Sally Kilgore, directed most of their attention to differences between Catholic and public schools. They examined achievement test data and concluded that students in Catholic schools learn more than students in public schools. Moreover, Coleman rejected the claim that Catholic school students perform better on achievement tests simply because they are more talented or come from better families.
He argued that the achievement differences between public and Catholic school students are, in significant measure, attributable to the different schools they attend.

This study sparked significant controversy, and, over the next 15 years, numerous studies addressed the issues that Coleman raised. Coleman also continued working on the topic, and, in 1987, he and Hoffer published a book that dealt with both their original data and follow-up data collected after 1980. Taken as a whole, Coleman's work, and subsequent research by other scholars, indicates that, on average, Catholic high-school students learn more than public-school students of similar backgrounds and ability levels. It was also found that Catholic schooling lowers high-school dropout rates.

Schooling in the inner city

I recently completed a new study of the effects of Catholic schooling on high-school graduation rates.1 My work contains an important qualification, one that is missing from most previous studies of Catholic schooling, but that has important public-policy implications concerning the use of public funds in private schools. In estimating the effects of Catholic schooling on various outcomes, Coleman and others compare the average outcome for all public-school students with the average outcome for Catholic school students. In some instances, they compare average outcomes in the two sectors by race, but they almost never make an attempt to define the effects of Catholic schooling with reference to a particular set of public-school alternatives.

For several reasons, I have adopted a different approach. To begin with, a disproportionate share of Catholic school students live in large cities. In addition, available data suggest that public schools in large cities perform poorly compared to other public schools. Finally, this urban-school performance deficit appears to be most acute in minority neighborhoods. So I set out to determine how differences in Catholic and public-school performance vary across different types of communities, with special attention paid to the experience of Catho-

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lic school students in large cities. I divided students into four groups: urban minorities, urban whites, non-urban minorities, and non-urban whites. This allows me to compare Catholic schools and public schools serving similar populations of students.

My data, gathered from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), demonstrate that Catholic schools succeed in communities where public schools fail miserably. The public-school graduation rate for urban minorities is quite low, but the Catholic school graduation rate for urban minorities is actually higher than any of the graduation rates for white students. Ninety-one percent of blacks and Hispanics who attend Catholic secondary schools in urban counties graduate from high school. This figure does not include General Equivalence Diplomas (GED). In contrast, only 62 percent of blacks and Hispanics who attend urban public schools graduate. For urban whites, the Catholic school graduation rate is 87 percent while the public-school graduation rate is 75 percent.

The 26 percent effect

However, critics of Catholic schools are quick to argue that Catholic as well as other private schools do not educate a random sample of students, that Catholic school students are, on average, from better educated and more stable families than public-school students. Therefore, high graduation rates in Catholic schools may arise because Catholic schools select good students, not because Catholic schools offer a better education.

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2 The NLSY is a panel data set that follows over 10,000 young persons from 1979 to the present. These young people were born between 1957 and 1964. Therefore, they attended high school during the 1970s and early 1980s. For each respondent, I calculated detailed measures of family background and home environment. I also determined the population of the student's county of residence. If a county contains more than 250,000 persons, I designated the county as an urban county. I tried more restrictive definitions: However, the benefits of Catholic schooling appear to be greater when the urban sample is restricted to even larger counties.

3 Because the NLSY contains a supplemental sample of economically disadvantaged white students, both of these numbers understate graduation rates for the typical white student. If we remove the economically disadvantaged whites from the urban sample, the public-school graduation rate is 79 percent and the Catholic school graduation rate is 90 percent.
To address this issue, I constructed a statistical model of the determinants of high-school graduation. According to the model, the probability that a student graduates from high school is a function both of his individual characteristics and whether he attends a public or Catholic school. Students who report attending a private school that is not Catholic are eliminated from the sample. I applied this model to all four subsamples of students: urban minorities, urban whites, non-urban minorities, and non-urban whites.

The results are striking. Consider a representative minority student in an urban public school. The student is representative in the following sense: Based on his observed characteristics, his predicted probability of graduating equals the overall graduation rate for urban minorities in public schools, 62 percent. Now consider an urban, Catholic school student with the same observed characteristics (namely, parent’s education, parent’s occupation, family structure, and reading materials at home). The predicted graduation rate for this student is 88 percent. This is below the actual Catholic school graduation rate of 91 percent, but far above the public-school graduation rate of 62 percent. For students who are typical of urban minorities in public schools, Catholic schooling increases the probability of graduating from high school by 26 percent. This is an enormous effect. In today’s labor market, young adults who finish high school, but not college, earn at least 15 percent more than high-school dropouts. Those who finish college earn even more.

I also examined the determinants of graduation rates for urban whites. Here, the effects of Catholic schooling on graduation rates are positive but much smaller. The public-school graduation rate among whites in the NLSY sample is 75 percent. Consider a white student who has a 75 percent probability of graduating from public school based on his family background and other observed characteristics. If this student attends a Catholic school, his probability of graduating increases to 85 percent. I performed similar analyses for white students and minority students in suburban counties, where I found small, positive effects of Catholic schooling on graduation rates. (The estimates of these effects are imprecise, however; there
is the possibility that Catholic schooling has no effect on graduation rates for suburban students.)

The significance of higher graduation rates

Why do urban minorities in Catholic high schools graduate at such higher rates than their public-school counterparts? Like many decisions in life, the decision to finish high school is the result of a cost-benefit analysis. On the benefit side, most studies of test-score data find that students in Catholic schools learn more in a year than public-school students; and today, basic skills are an especially important determinant of labor-market success. In addition, Coleman and others have written about how Catholic schools create a sense of community and shared values that enhance the educational process. And the costs of public schools compared to urban Catholic schools are high. In many public schools, threats of physical violence or other forms of harassment greatly increase the cost of attending school.

Which of these factors contributes most to the astonishingly high graduation rate in urban Catholic schools is not entirely clear. However, it is clear that graduating matters for the economic futures of the young people involved. Even if we were willing to assume that Catholic school students learn at the same rate per year as public-school students, the fact that Catholic school students stay in school longer bodes well for their futures. Because they are more likely to finish high school, Catholic school students are more likely to attend and to complete college. This remains the case even when the effects of family background and home environment are removed.

Many scholars and commentators have recently noted the rising economic disparity between the well educated and the less educated in our country. Real wages for high-school dropouts have fallen substantially since 1980, and, given the changing nature of work in our economy, there is no reason to expect that the real wages of unskilled workers will rise significantly any time soon. If our cities continue to produce millions of young people who are not prepared for work, our cities will continue to be troubled places.
Voucher experiments

Many advocates of large-scale plans to provide public money for private schools through tuition vouchers may point to my study to support their position. However, I believe that my results do not speak directly to the potential consequences of such plans. My study demonstrates that the existing stock of Catholic schools manage to succeed in precisely the communities where public schools often fail. However, we have no idea how the quality of Catholic or other private schools might change if full-scale voucher plans dramatically increased the demand for their services. Can the Catholic schools of Chicago, New York, or other cities increase their enrollment ten-fold and still maintain quality without spending more per student than public schools currently spend? I am inclined to believe the answer is yes. Though no data exist to support my hunch.

But many experiments are underway with positive results. In Ohio, the state assembly has recently taken control of the Cleveland city schools, which were plagued by mismanagement and ineffectiveness. The reform plan, imposed on Cleveland by the state, includes a small voucher experiment. Only low-income families are eligible for the program, and the amount of the vouchers depends on family income. The maximum voucher is $2,250, and participating families are required to pay between 10 percent and 25 percent of tuition costs in the schools they choose.

One statistic provides the most compelling evidence that this program is needed in Cleveland. While the program provides vouchers for roughly 1,700 children, more than 6,000 families applied for the program. These families obviously believe that the public schools in their neighborhood are not serving their children well; they are so firm in this belief that they are willing to pay part of the tuition if the state will simply help them gain access to private education for their children.

Similar programs have been proposed, but not yet adopted, in both New York City and the District of Columbia. Over the past several years, Cardinal John O'Connor has repeatedly offered to educate the lowest performing 5 percent of children in the New York public schools. The Cardinal is offering to
educate these children for roughly $2,500 per student; the public schools currently spend more than twice this figure per student. (The offer has not yet been accepted.) Last spring, Representative Steve Gunderson, a Republican from Wisconsin, sponsored a bill to establish a small voucher program for low-income families in the District of Columbia. The measure was included in a larger bill that authorizes federal funds for the District. But President Clinton threatened a veto, and a group of Democratic senators filibustered the authorization bill, effectively killing the proposal.

In wealthy suburbs, the public provision of services often works quite well. As a rule, sanitation crews keep the streets clean, the police answer 911 calls, and public schools educate children. But in the low-income neighborhoods of our nation's capital and other cities, the streets are not clean, crime is rampant, and public schools are in disarray. Many politicians who oppose vouchers in any form portray themselves as the true friends of the urban poor. However, they offer no viable alternative to vouchers; and meanwhile, economically disadvantaged families in our cities continue to suffer.