

# Catholic Schools Become Charter Schools

Lessons from the Washington experience

By andy smarick



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# Foreword

**BY Scott W. Hamilton and Stephanie Saroki**

We are pleased to share with you *Catholic Schools Become Charter Schools: Lessons from the Washington Experience*, the story of the conversion of seven inner-city Catholic schools into non-sectarian public charter schools.

Seton Education Partners is committed to reviving and expanding opportunities for disadvantaged children in America to receive an academically excellent and vibrantly Catholic education. Despite their well-established “brand name” and demonstrated success building the knowledge, skills, and character of children in America’s poorest neighborhoods for more than a century, Catholic schools have seen enrollment plummet by more than 50 percent over the last four decades. Since 2000, over 1,400 Catholic schools in America have shut down, accelerating a school closure rate of about 1,000 per decade since 1960. Most of these were elementary schools in our inner cities.

If this trend continues over the next two decades, most of the remaining 3,000 Catholic schools in our urban areas will cease to exist, leaving over 900,000 children with few if any options beyond the failing public schools in their neighborhoods (and providing urban public schools substantially less competition). This is, of course, not just a “Catholic” problem. Students attending Catholic schools now are much more likely than in the past to be non-Catholic and more likely to be minority.

Declining enrollment and rising operating costs are the main causes for this extraordinary collapse of urban Catholic education—a faith-building, Americanizing, opportunity-equalizing force. As urban Catholic schools have struggled to survive, a new, often competitive, opportunity has emerged: public charter schools. Since the early 1990s, 40 states and the District of Columbia have passed charter school laws, allowing educators and nonprofit organizations to start new public schools. Today, more than 1.4 million students now attend over 4,600 charter schools.

While many charter schools have been launched and still operate in former parish school facilities, these lease arrangements have mostly been random one-off deals. Washington, D.C., has recently become the exception; seven parochial schools were converted into charter schools there and opened last September. Many diocesan leaders are now considering—and wrestling with—questions related to proactive and cooperative leasing to charter school operators, and converting some existing parochial schools into charters.

To help address these questions, Seton Education Partners commissioned this case study, the first in a series of reports to provide credible information to Catholic leaders, educators, and lay supporters about charter school and other public financing options to serve the poor. We are extremely grateful that Andy Smarick, a former White House Fellow and leading thinker in the world of urban school reform, was able to undertake this study. His respect, insights, and focus on what is right for disadvantaged children make this report something we are proud to share.

Seton Education Partners gratefully acknowledges the generous support and trust of the Bodman Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation for making this study possible. We acknowledge that the conclusions presented here do not necessarily reflect the opinions of these organizations.

# Introduction

Twice in the span of 10 years, the Archdiocese of Washington summoned help from an array of leaders in the nation's capital to preserve its struggling inner-city Catholic schools. The similarities between these two efforts were striking. Both were instigated by serious financial challenges and both were led by archbishops committed to serving disadvantaged children. One significant difference, however, distinguished the two efforts: the first maintained the schools' affiliation with the Catholic Church; the second resulted in seven schools converting into secular public charter schools.

This study chronicles and analyzes the second experience, the best known and recent example of a Catholic diocese using the chartering mechanism to save a set of its schools from closure. But an appreciation of the first effort is necessary to fully understand the second; the decision to pursue the charter option, and a number of the successes associated with implementing the conversion, were a result of the experience a decade earlier.

But on a number of other fronts, those involved were blazing a new trail, facing novel questions and challenges. They would have to work their way through these without a map.

Though this caused high hurdles and long hours for the Archdiocese of Washington and the charter school group that ultimately spun off from it, their collective experiences provide invaluable lessons for other cities and religious communities contemplating the future of their financially struggling inner-city faith-based schools. This story also has much to offer policymakers, philanthropists, educators, and others interested in the preservation of high-quality schools in America's urban neighborhoods.

# Key Lessons

From the Washington  
experience

- 1. converting multiple schools to charter status is not for the faint of heart.** It requires an extraordinary amount of work, and if the schools are to avoid even a temporary period of closure, that work must be compressed into a short window.
- 2. the pre-existing network of schools smoothed the transition.** The schools' unique, independent organizational arrangement prior to conversion greatly facilitated the transition process and provided the framework for an appropriate organization to run the schools as a network post-conversion.
- 3. engaging the charter authorizer early and often was a key to success.** Early and consistent communications with the authorizing body is absolutely essential.
- 4. conversion led to significant changes in the student body of each school.** Converted schools saw a significant increase in enrollment, and, on average, new students were further behind academically and had greater special needs.
- 5. conversion also brought staff-related changes.** Conversion raises many issues related to staff, including changes in salary, the need for more and different positions, the importance of continuity to families, and new certification requirements.
- 6. Using the same building post-conversion requires time, careful planning, and smart negotiations.** Many issues will be of great importance to both sides, including cost, lease length, permitted uses, and shared space.
- 7. a demonstrable commitment to student achievement and standards helps win charter approval.** The schools' previous charter-like focus on measurable academic gains, transparency, and accountability was not only good for kids, it was a big asset in getting a charter from the government authorizer.
- 8. "Start-up" funding is needed to cover costs associated with the conversion process.** Though state and district per-pupil funding will cover costs associated with operating the schools once opened, the conversion process has non-trivial up-front costs such as student recruitment, the cost of supplies, and salaries for staff and consultants.
- 9. conversion also brings more funding.** Conversion resulted in significantly more funding for the schools, and it seems to be bolstering the sustainability of the archdiocese's other schools.
- 10. the decision to convert created some local storms.** The conversion decision was opposed, in some cases vigorously, by a few local groups who resented the archdiocese's decision-making process and the changes required in the schools.

# Background

the Center City Consortium  
1997 – 2007

## “I Won’t abandon this City”

In the mid-1990s, a number of the Archdiocese of Washington’s inner-city schools were in peril, facing the regrettable but common afflictions of urban America’s Catholic education: declining enrollments, budget shortfalls, and deteriorating facilities. Even worse, falling test scores indicated that one of Catholic schools’ traditional strengths—academic achievement—had weakened as well.

Archbishop James Cardinal Hickey assembled a committee to find the best strategy for addressing the needs of the Archdiocese’s 16 highest-poverty urban schools. Located in some of the most distressed neighborhoods in a poor and shrinking city, and serving almost entirely low-income and minority student bodies, the schools faced serious challenges. The committee ultimately made a recommendation all too familiar in many American dioceses: close a number of schools and consolidate the rest.

Replying “I won’t abandon this city,” Cardinal Hickey charged the team with developing a new plan, one that would preserve Catholic education for Washington’s poorest children. The team came back with an innovative proposal: the creation of a new central office that would handle many of the schools’ most time-consuming administrative tasks and provide needed services, thereby freeing principals to focus on pressing day-to-day school operations and pastors to focus on other parish needs.<sup>i</sup> The plan was embraced, and in 1997, eight of the Archdiocese’s struggling inner-city schools joined the “Center City Consortium.”

The Consortium was notable in that it was a new administrative unit affiliated with, but independent from, the Archdiocese’s established education system. The schools developed common systems and practices and were removed from the standard governance structure of Catholic education, reporting directly to the Consortium leadership, not to pastors or the superintendent’s office. Ten years later during the conversion process, the decision to create this semi-autonomous network of schools would prove to be advantageous. The Consortium’s original goal was to dramatically improve

member schools’ finances and academic quality. Administratively, the Consortium developed student and staff policies and a centralized tuition-collection system, assisted with facilities management, and analyzed school needs. Academically, the changes were even more substantial.

Mary Anne Stanton, who became the Consortium’s executive director in 1999, has said that what made the Consortium wholly different from previous efforts was “our absolutely razor-sharp focus on academic outcomes.”<sup>ii</sup> Upon taking leadership, Stanton, a former Catholic school teacher, principal, and professor, quickly moved to improve teacher quality and school leadership and instill a sense of urgency about raising student achievement.

Though she was dedicated to keeping these schools open, Stanton was determined to make sure they were preserved not just as Catholic schools but as *excellent* Catholic schools. “Catholic Charities doesn’t hand out bad food,” she explained.<sup>iii</sup>

First, Stanton improved professional development opportunities and required all the schools to adopt the same research-based instructional programs in reading and math. Later she had the Consortium follow established academic content standards and align instruction and assessments with the new standards. Eventually, the schools made use of interim assessments as well. Though adopted to help drive student learning, years later these reforms, which increased the schools’ academic rigor, transparency, and focus on measurable results, would help smooth the Consortium’s transition to public charter status. But in the near-term, this academic work paid significant dividends as well. By 2005, approximately four out of five



Consortium students were proficient in reading and math, according to the Terra Nova, a national standardized assessment. Annual teacher attrition fell from 50 to 8 percent.<sup>iv</sup>

The Consortium also saw substantial improvement in its bottom line. In its first five years, the Consortium raised \$30 million from the Archdiocese and outside donors, which was used primarily for classroom materials, building improvements, and student scholarships.<sup>v</sup>

The passage of the federal D.C. School Choice Incentive Act of 2003 also had the potential, many believed, to help the Consortium's finances. The Act created the first federally funded school voucher program, providing aid to low-income students seeking a private school education. The program would enable more students to attend these schools (potentially backfilling previous enrollment losses) and provide a reliable stream of tuition income.

By 2006, the academic accomplishments of the Consortium schools, and the public service they provided, were undeniable. Not only were they reporting strong achievement and impressive progress, they were doing so with some of the city's most underserved students. Sixty percent lived at or below the poverty line; 70 percent were from single-parent homes; and nearly 90 percent were African-American. The Consortium had also enrolled 764 low-income students from the recently enacted federal voucher program.<sup>vi</sup> In total, fewer than one in three Consortium students were Catholic.

In June 2006, Stanton retired, praised by the Archdiocese's superintendent of schools as "a great leader who put together a team of professionals committed to changing the lives of children in our nation's capital for the better."<sup>vii</sup> Theodore Cardinal McCarrick, Hickey's successor as Archbishop of Washington, spoke glowingly of the Consortium and its tight alignment with the fundamental purpose of the Church. "There are a lot of poor people in our diocese. We have to help them whether they are Catholic or not Catholic . . . that's what it's all about, that's what the Church is about.

That's what our life is about."<sup>viii</sup> This conviction would prove portentous in the years to come.

### **t He Struggle continues**

Between 1997 and 2007, the Consortium raised a total of \$60 million from the Archdiocese and donors, a staggering total for financially struggling schools in low-income communities. Nevertheless, their financial challenges remained. According to the Archdiocese, this was due to growing costs, declining enrollments (attributable to the city's ongoing population loss and the rapid expansion of charter schools, the "free" alternative to the failing district schools), and the Consortium's quick expansion (growing from eight schools to 14 in only three years).<sup>ix</sup>

In 2005, Consortium leaders began to realize that their financial model was unsustainable.<sup>x</sup> Two of the Consortium's 14 schools were closed in 2006. In the 2007-08 school year, the Consortium faced a \$7 million deficit and projected a \$56 million cumulative shortfall over the next five years. The schools also continued to lose students—suffering a 19 percent decline—mostly to the city's expanding charter sector, which was approaching 30 percent of the public school market.<sup>xi</sup>

The Archdiocese was told in March that "the Consortium's outside funding sources had been exhausted," so the previous practice of depending on philanthropy to cover structural deficits ceased to be an option.<sup>xii</sup> One Consortium board member explained that donors, though generous, had become "fatigued" after being asked continuously to support schools that showed no signs of becoming financially sustainable. "You can't just keep going to them year after year."<sup>xiii</sup> With the schools' finances appearing unsustainable, the Archdiocese began an extensively collaborative effort to find a solution.

In the spring of 2007, Archbishop Donald Wuerl assembled a team of 40 individuals; it included parents, principals, pastors, and experts from the worlds of business, education, and finance.<sup>xiv</sup> In time, input would be collected from



## Donors had become “fatigued” after being asked continuously to support schools that showed no signs of becoming financially sustainable.

six archdiocesan advisory boards and more than 1,300 people from the affected parishes.

Wuerl had been installed as Archbishop of Washington in the summer of 2006. He had served as the Bishop of Pittsburgh, where he earned a reputation as an effective, tough-minded administrator. While he oversaw the closure of many financially distressed parishes and schools, he also encouraged the business community to establish an endowment for the city’s needy Catholic schools. When he arrived in Washington, the city’s Catholic education officials informed him that their inner-city schools had become financially unviable.<sup>xv</sup>

While the Archdiocese’s leadership remained committed to Catholic education for underserved students, the dozen Consortium schools were not their only responsibility. The Archdiocese of Washington also operates schools outside of inner-city Washington, D.C., including ones in more affluent neighborhoods in the nation’s capital and rural, suburban, and urban counties in Maryland.

In the 2006-07 school year, the Archdiocese, though supporting more than 70 elementary schools, earmarked more than half of its education funds for the 12 Consortium schools. Despite this investment and nearly \$4 million in private donations, the Consortium amassed a \$1.7 million deficit, which the Archdiocese covered with its own operating funds.<sup>xvi</sup> Furthermore, the Archdiocese had to remain mindful of its responsibility to educate Catholic children. More than 70 percent of Consortium students were not Catholic.<sup>xvii</sup>

The 40-member team began by thoroughly investigating the financial viability of the Consortium schools and whether anything could be done to maintain them as Catholic schools. At this point, the Consortium’s 10 years of experience proved invaluable to the deliberations. A decade earlier, the Archdiocese had been in the same position and developed the best plan possible. Despite its conscientious implementation, leading to improved student achievement and significantly increased fundraising, the Consortium still

couldn’t solve the underlying financial dilemma: if heavily dependent on tuition, Catholic schools in low-income areas will continuously accrue deficits.

Though this implied an unfortunate conclusion—that it might not be possible to keep the schools open and Catholic—it suggested that the committee investigate other options. Accordingly, early in the process, two additional committees were assembled; their work took on additional importance when the schools’ financial prospects under the existing arrangements were confirmed to be untenable.

One committee studied whether the schools’ facilities could be used for any other purposes (e.g., rented to outside non-profits) should the schools be closed. The committee determined this was an undesirable option since current students would be adversely affected by closures and finding suitable tenants might not be possible.

The other committee considered the possibility of converting the schools into charter schools, a new breed of public schools that are independently operated, exempt from many of the regulations and collective bargaining agreements that constrict traditional district schools, and responsible for producing student achievement results and adhering to a charter contract. The committee initiated a study of the D.C. charter law, the practices of the D.C. charter school authorizer, local politics, and more. On this front, there appeared to be room for optimism.

### **a dr aFt Fr ameWo r k**

On September 7, 2007, after determining that “the financial challenges were overwhelming,” the Archdiocese made a public announcement: “The current 12-school Consortium is not sustainable.”<sup>xviii</sup> As such, it intended to implement a “new framework” for its inner-city schools. “The priority,” said an Archdiocese statement, “was to develop a plan so no school would close.”<sup>xix</sup>

That draft plan called for four schools to remain Catholic and participate in a smaller Consortium, and for eight

1. *Journal of Management Studies*, 1995, 32, 1031-1044.

Though the Archdiocese's vision was clear—a smaller Consortium and some number of charter conversions—the particulars weren't yet set in stone. The Archdiocese decided to fully engage schools and parishes as it had done with its study group. "Before any decision is made, this proposal will undergo further consultation with as many people as possible."<sup>xxiii</sup>

1. Percentage of Catholic students  
(a high proportion would weigh against conversion)
2. Projected enrollment
3. Percentage of students from Washington, D.C.  
(some students commuted from Maryland, making enrollment less stable; a high proportion of students from Washington would weigh against conversion)
4. Projected operating loss for the current school year
5. Percentage of students in the federal voucher program
6. Available charter school seats in a one-mile radius.

Groups associated with four schools originally slated for conversion began developing proposals to show that their schools could become financially sustainable and therefore should remain Catholic.<sup>xxvi</sup> The hurdle was high, however; each school had an annual structural deficit of approximately \$500,000. It would be difficult to demonstrate that a parish would be able to raise that amount every year.

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# Charter Conversions

2007 – 2008

## **t He neW cat Hol ic Fr ameWor k For edUcation in t He center cit Y**

On November 5, 2007, a final decision was made. The Archdiocese announced that it was officially breaking up the 12-school Consortium and undertaking a new strategy to preserve good education options for the city's students. It was called the "New Catholic Framework for Education in the Center City."

Four of the 12 schools would join together and comprise a new smaller Catholic schools consortium. One school, St. Augustine, which had crafted an approved sustainability plan, would become a stand-alone parish-sponsored Catholic school. The remaining seven schools would convert into public charter schools.<sup>xxxiii</sup> They would stay in their current locations, leasing their buildings from the Church (for more, see page 14, "Negotiating Leases").

Of the Consortium's 2,100 students, approximately 1,100 attended the five schools that would remain Catholic, and 1,000 attended the seven schools slated for charter conversion. After the conversion process, the city would have 21 Catholic schools educating approximately 6,500 students.<sup>xxix</sup> In the words of Archbishop Wuerl, this was the best possible plan for "sustaining a number of Catholic schools in the city and, where we cannot, providing excellent educational opportunities for the students."<sup>xxx</sup>

The rationale for charter conversions was straightforward. As charters, the schools would be public and therefore receive government funding. These dollars would be reliable—not contingent on the ability of hard-pressed low-income families to make tuition payments. The funding would also be substantial. The Archdiocese's superintendent of schools, Patricia Weitzel-O'Neill, estimated that the schools would receive thousands of dollars more per student.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Her estimate proved to be extremely conservative. Though the official tuition at Consortium schools was several thousand dollars, few students paid the full amount, the rest being covered by scholarships, parishes, or the Archdiocese. In the 2008-09 school year, the city would allocate at least \$11,400 for each charter school student.<sup>xxxii</sup>

While helpful, the D.C. voucher program was not a solution for the financial challenges facing Consortium schools. The program did not cover the full cost of a child's education; a provision in the law limited the voucher amount to a school's customary tuition rate plus fees, which Consortium schools had set as low as possible to remain within the reach of needy families.<sup>xxxiii</sup> So even though Consortium schools had per-pupil costs of over \$7,500, they could only receive approximately \$4,500 in federal funds for each student participating in the program.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

In 2007, 811 of the Consortium's 2,100 students were receiving these federal scholarships. Providing seats for the federal voucher program assisted the city's disadvantaged students who could now enroll in a Catholic school, but the Archdiocese of Washington and the Center City Consortium were left to subsidize the difference between cost and tuition for these students, which added to the deficit.<sup>xxxv</sup>

In addition to helping alleviate financial pressure, charter conversion also held the promise of providing current students with "consistency, predictability, and stability." Though the schools' Catholicity would be lost, the schools would remain open and in their same locations. Furthermore, Weitzel-O'Neill anticipated that staff would remain in place. "We don't expect many principals or teachers to transfer. They are dedicated to their schools, students, and families."

Though the situation was not ideal, there was agreement, said Weitzel-O'Neill, that "this is the best thing we could do for our children."<sup>xxxvi</sup>

## **BeSt t Hing For oUr c Hil dr en**

Those most affected by the plan expressed remarkably similar sentiments. They were deeply dismayed by the

## The pastor of a church affiliated with one school marked for conversion said, “I received the proposal with sadness but with understanding.”

loss of more Catholic schools but believed that the new framework was the best choice available. The pastor of a church affiliated with one school marked for conversion said, “I received the proposal with sadness but with understanding . . . because things are unsustainable in their current form.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

A principal said, “It was a little sad to say goodbye to what we knew as Catholic education, but we didn’t dwell on it. It was what it was and we were given this wonderful opportunity.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> One teacher said the conversion news “hit me like a Mack truck.” But she decided to continue teaching in the school because it was her way of continuing to follow God’s instruction to “feed my sheep.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

Archbishop Wuerl said, “It’s a heartache to know that we wouldn’t have these schools any longer. But the sadness is sweetened by the fact that these students would continue to have an education.”<sup>xl</sup> Though the solution was not ideal, Stanton gives Wuerl great credit for making the difficult decision. “He went out on a limb to save these schools.”<sup>xli</sup>

This convergence of stakeholders’ opinions is instructive. Should another diocese be hesitant to pursue charter conversion out of concern that it would inevitably lead to a massive loss of teachers and principals and extensive bitterness among those remaining, these statements provide some comfort. A deliberative and transparent decision-making process appears to have generated support—despite sorrow—among a broad array of stakeholders.

### “Unacceptabl e and oUtr ageoUS”

There were others, however, who were far less sanguine about the conversion decision. One parent who sat on the parish council of a school marked for conversion said, “The fact that they are even considering doing this is not only unacceptable, it’s outrageous.”<sup>xlii</sup>

Many parents were deeply distressed in particular about the loss of religion in the converted schools. As one parent said, “If we wanted our kids to go to public school, we

would have sent them there.” One parent explained that her son was attending a school now slated for conversion only because the Catholic school he had attended the year before had closed. “Now this option is being taken away . . . I don’t want it to switch [to charter status].”<sup>xliii</sup>

Another parent reacting to the possible removal of faith from her daughter’s school said, “That’s why I brought her here. I would be much happier if they kept [religion].”<sup>xliiv</sup> Said another parent, “When there’s not God in it, the devil gets in it.”<sup>xliv</sup>

The archbishop conceded that the removal of religion would weaken the schools. “These schools will not have the same strength as they would as a Catholic school. When based on a faith conviction, you can accomplish so much more than you can in a system that excludes the relationship with God.”<sup>xlvi</sup>

To give voice to such concerns, a new local advocacy organization emerged. Black Catholics United, and its Committee to Save Black Catholic Schools, protested the conversion proposal, charging the Archdiocese with “backing away from providing a Catholic education to African-American children.”<sup>xlvii</sup> The organization said that the plan “raised questions as to whether there remains a place in the Archdiocese of Washington for African-American Catholics.”<sup>xlviii</sup>

“The Archdiocese is turning its back on the parents who want a Catholic education for their children and the students who are thriving in this environment,” said the organization’s leader.<sup>xlix</sup>

Another complaint was that the process was conducted unfairly. When the original conversion plan was unveiled in September, parishes were given only six weeks—until October 20—to either accept the charter route or submit five-year plans showing financial sustainability was possible. “The deficit came about in more than a matter of weeks,” said one parish member. “So we should get more than a few weeks to come up with a plan to get out of the deficit.”<sup>l</sup>

One parent said the short timeline resulted in a rushed proposal.<sup>li</sup> Black Catholics United accused the Archdiocese of “giving little time for the parishes to come up with viable plans to keep their schools open,” and went further, charging Archdiocese leaders with employing “strong-arm tactics” to implement their conversion plans.<sup>lii</sup>

Some outside observers were concerned about the cost to taxpayers of supporting seven additional public schools. The director of a local advocacy organization said, “I wish that we had just been able to invite all of those children into the existing set of public schools and not take on the responsibility of financing so many new schools.”<sup>liii</sup>

Finally, even some leaders within the Church expressed concern with the implications of the conversion plan. The president of the National Catholic Education Association said, “I am concerned about the ripple effect of people thinking that when their Catholic school is in trouble either for enrollment or financial reasons, charter schools are the automatic solution.”<sup>liiv</sup>

Despite these concerns, the fear of losing the schools outright took precedence in the minds of most families. In the end, 97 percent of parents approved of the conversion.<sup>liv</sup>

### **Finding a cHarter oper ator**

If these conversions were to happen, the schools would need to be wholly secular, so neither the Archdiocese nor the Consortium could continue to operate them in any manner. Accordingly, some other entity had to be found to run the schools on a day-to-day basis and to hold the charter.

Since a charter school contract is an official, legal agreement between a government body (with the authority to charter new schools) and an organization responsible for operating a school, the Archdiocese needed to identify and engage an organization that met the legal criteria established for charter operators and showed the capacity to run high-performing schools.

When the final charter conversion process was presented to the public in November, the Archdiocese announced that it had already begun considering possible operators. Weitzel-O'Neill, the Catholic schools superintendent, said, “We have been talking to four or five charter school operators, and now we will proceed to have more in-depth conversations.”<sup>livi</sup>

It was important to the Archdiocese that the schools maintain their focus on character development and moral instruction even though this had to be accomplished in a non-religious manner. Weitzel-O'Neill explained, “We are seeking an operator that is committed to running a values-based charter school where they can continue to talk about those things that make you a good person.”<sup>li vii</sup>

On December 6, 2007, the Archdiocese announced that it had selected Center City Public Charter Schools as the new operator for the converted schools. Mary Anne Stanton, who had retired 18 months earlier as head of the Consortium, would serve as the executive director of the new organization. “We’re thrilled to have the opportunity to continue to serve these kids in the city,” said Stanton. “Our goal is to keep the academic excellence of these schools.”<sup>li viii</sup>

Center City incorporated in November 2007 and assembled an expert board of directors, many of whom had experience with the Consortium and/or the city’s charter school sector. For example, three had been board members for the Consortium and four were currently members of other D.C.-based charter schools.<sup>li x</sup> Though the overlap in personnel between the new charter school network and the previous Catholic organization was significant, the Archdiocese made clear that Center City “is and will continue to be independent of the Archdiocese.” The overlap, however, would enable a level of continuity of management and operations that would serve the new entity well.<sup>li x</sup>

Center City was chosen from among four interested operators who had been considered by the Archdiocese. This RFP-like competitive bidding process not only enabled the Archdiocese to consider a range of options, it indicated an early willingness to adhere to public rules of transparency that would be necessary after conversion.<sup>li xi</sup>

Providers were evaluated in a number of areas, including educational philosophy, school leadership, and financial viability. Weitzel-O'Neill said that the Archdiocese was “very impressed by the quality of the charter operators with whom we met.” In the end, Center City had clear advantages; the Archdiocese noted that its “familiarity with and commitment to the academic programming will be significant in maintaining continuity for the families and the staff who chose to continue with the charter group.”<sup>li xii</sup>



## Center City's small staff would have to work nearly around the clock to prepare for the re-opening of the converted schools.

Stanton's decision to return was "all about the kids." She praised the Archdiocese's innovative strategy for keeping the schools open and was committed to helping make the transition a success. "It was courageous of the archbishop to find a unique and new way to serve the children of the District of Columbia," Stanton said. "Look what these schools have accomplished—we couldn't let them close."<sup>lxiii</sup>

Though they entered this uncharted territory with the best of intentions and great energy, the amount of work lying ahead of Center City was staggering. Planning had to take place on a dizzying list of fronts, including facilities, curriculum, recruitment, training, and much more. Over the next number of months, Stanton and Center City's small staff would have to work nearly around the clock to prepare for the re-opening of the converted schools in September 2008. Juana Brown, who had been the Consortium's Head of Schools and would hold a similar position for Center City, recounted countless days working in the office until midnight.<sup>lxiv</sup> In addition to the work of paid staff members, a number of others contributed enormously—and *gratis*. Joe Bruno, a Consortium and Center City board member, who played an instrumental role throughout the transition process, estimated that over six months, he dedicated up to 75 percent of his time to ensuring a successful conversion.<sup>lxv</sup>

### Working With the Charter Board

In Washington, D.C., the only entity empowered to authorize charter schools is the D.C. Public Charter Schools Board (PCSB).<sup>lxvi</sup> Its sole purpose is chartering public schools. It approves the opening of new schools, monitors performance, and, when necessary, forces closures.

If Catholic schools in the nation's capital were to convert to charter status, the plan would need to be approved by the PCSB. Since church-state issues made this new and potentially controversial ground, great care was required. But possibly an even more pressing issue was whether there was sufficient time to process the conversion so that the schools would not be out of operation. The Archdiocese

hoped to close the Catholic schools in the summer of 2008 and have them re-open as charters in the fall. A new charter school often takes two or more years to go from conception to planning to authorization to opening. The Archdiocese hoped to accomplish this in a matter of months.

Had the PCSB expressed hostility or even hesitation at the conversion idea, the entire plan would have been cast in doubt. From the beginning, however, its leadership was open, responsive, and helpful. Members of the Consortium's board began preliminary discussions with the chairman of the PCSB, Tom Nida, approximately six to nine months before the first public announcement in September 2007. Over the next year, Consortium board chair Jack Griffin and Nida had frequent conversations—a practice that Nida believes contributed greatly to the effort's ultimate success.<sup>lxvii</sup> Just before the public announcement in September was made, Archbishop Wuerl called Nida to formally discuss the Archdiocese's plans, but by that time many unofficial conversations had taken place.<sup>lxviii</sup>

During the first off-line conversation, Nida expressed optimism, explaining that his board "would not reject the idea out of hand."<sup>lxix</sup> He maintained this position when the news went public. When the preliminary conversion plans were announced in September, Nida said his board was "open to the possibility" of the conversion. When the final conversion decision was announced by the Archdiocese in November, he downplayed the possibility of any major philosophical concerns: "I can't think of any issue that would be a non-starter for us."<sup>lxx</sup>

In Nida's opinion, the Consortium schools had a number of advantages compared to start-up charters—they had buildings, strong test scores, well-regarded faculty and staff, and established programs.<sup>lxxi</sup> A Center City board member agreed, "We were turnkey and ready to go."<sup>lxxii</sup> These attributes, mostly a result of the Consortium's creation a decade earlier, would help make the case to the board that the schools would be able to open successfully in the fall of



2008. Indeed, Nida said publicly that he expected Center City to be able to assemble an attractive proposal.

Nida also believed this conversion plan provided a unique opportunity for the city's charter school sector. The conversion of district schools into charter schools is often the result of a school's persistent failure; in such cases, chartering is used as a mechanism to help turn around long-struggling schools. But in this instance, chartering was providing the opportunity to save a number of good schools. So these conversions would transfer high-performers to the city's charter sector instead of low-performers.

Nida also recognized a bigger opportunity—using chartering as a means of maintaining the public's confidence in the city's education system. A banker by trade, Nida likened the conversion process to that of bank regulators who orchestrate a seamless takeover or merger of a failing bank by a healthier one. Though the change must occur, it can be managed without disruption to consumers. Just as bank customers want to know that their money will be safe and accessible during the transition period even if the name of the bank changes, parents want to know that their children will still have a quality school to attend even if its name changes.<sup>lxix</sup>

In Nida's view, the biggest challenge would be timing—the Archdiocese's rapid schedule was unprecedented. Even the PCSB staff expressed serious reservations about its own ability to process the conversion so quickly.

In order to expedite the process, Nida recommended three strategies for the charter application:

**1. apply for one charter, with all seven schools falling under a single contract, instead of one charter per school.** (Other "charter management organizations" operating in Washington have the same arrangement, holding one charter but operating multiple schools or "campuses.") Applying for one charter would ease the administrative burden on both sides and better enable the schools to work together. Since the schools had effectively functioned as a single unit while part of the Consortium, the Archdiocese agreed that this arrangement was for the best. Stanton later commented that it helped keep the schools out of the "pumpkin-patch" mentality that can prevent isolated schools from working together effectively.<sup>lxx</sup>

**2. address as many potential issues as possible in the initial application.** If issues were left out of the original package—such as lease agreements or staffing plans—they would need to be approved by the PCSB at a later date, which could cause delays. Ideally, all sub-

stantive matters would be covered in the application, which the board could approve in full.

**3. Separate the archdiocese from the operations of the converted schools.** The relationship between the converted schools and the Archdiocese should be limited to a landlord-tenant relationship (e.g., Archdiocese staff should not plan to serve on the new entity's board). By demonstrating that it would stay "at arm's length" from the converted schools, the Archdiocese could minimize the possibility of delays caused by public charges that the new schools were still Catholic.<sup>lxxi</sup>

In Nida's opinion, the process of making the schools secular—removing the "Catholic" from the Catholic schools—was not difficult. A year earlier, the PCSB had received complaints that one of its other schools was inappropriately including religious content during the school day. This experience forced the board to consider and improve its rules and procedures for addressing such issues, and served as a "great trial run" for the PCSB in advance of the Catholic conversion effort.<sup>lxxii</sup>

In the application, the schools would need to show that the educational content was secular. Since the Consortium already had a strong and recognized secular curriculum in core subjects like reading, writing, and math (instituted during Stanton's early Consortium days), only religion classes would need to be removed. It would also need to demonstrate that the schools' environment was totally secular, which could be accomplished by removing all religious images like crosses and statues of saints. Both were achieved to the board's satisfaction.

Indeed, Center City's proposal impressed the PCSB. At the time of the decision, Nida said, "They just simply had an excellent application. It covered all the bases we were looking for and then some."<sup>lxxiii</sup> Looking back a year after the decision, he called the application "the best we [the PCSB] ever acted on."<sup>lxxiv</sup>

In the end, the PCSB approved the application on June 16, 2008. Though Nida acknowledged that the board had received some critical comments from the public, the vote was unanimous. One board member said, "These have been well-run schools with a culture of achievement and high standards." Another said that Center City had submitted a "strong application," and that it was "our duty" to keep the schools open.<sup>lxxv</sup>

### aga in, money

Anticipating a positive decision, much work was being done in advance of the PCSB decision, but things moved

into high gear directly thereafter. The first day of school was less than 90 days away. Positions had to be filled, curricula had to be developed, classrooms had to be prepared. Once again, money became an issue.

Virtually all charter schools run deficits in their first several years. The primary reason is the significant upfront costs associated with starting a new school. The federal government's Charter School Grant Program helps most charters overcome this problem by providing "start-up" grants so charter operators can plan, open, and then run their schools until financial sustainability is reached. To be eligible for these funds, however, a converted school must hold an open lottery for all interested students if applications exceed available seats. Doing so would have meant risking that some current students would lose the lottery and be unable to attend the converted charter. Center City decided not to follow that path, thereby becoming ineligible for federal funds.

Center City had substantial early costs. They needed to hire and pay several central staff members (three to eight members over six months), compose the extensive charter application, hire and train new teachers and principals, build new programs, construct interim assessments, purchase computers and other supplies, and cover outside expenses

such as consulting and legal fees. Center City estimates that the costs associated with conversion amounted to approximately \$600,000 in advance of opening and an additional \$400,000 in the first year of operation (e.g., continued student recruitment and community outreach).

This financial challenge was exacerbated by Center City's delayed receipt of operational funding from the District; the first payout, expected in July, wasn't received until October, after the schools opened. As a result, Center City had to engage several outside entities. Two national organizations designed to help successful charters replicate and expand proved particularly helpful: NewSchools Venture Fund provided a grant of \$250,000 in August 2008 to help Center City build internal organizational capacity. The Charter School Growth Fund provided a loan (some of which will convert to a grant if performance measures are met). The organization also secured a bank loan. According to Stanton, had these early costs not been covered, the schools would have been in jeopardy.<sup>box</sup>

In early September 2008, less than a year after the conversion decision was finalized by the Archdiocese, less than nine months after an operator was selected, and less than three months after the charter was awarded, the seven Center City Public Charter Schools opened for business.

## negotiating leases

The Archdiocese agreed to lease the affected school buildings to the new charter school operator. Though a separate lease exists for each facility, their components are nearly identical. Lease provisions and discussions with Center City and archdiocesan staff suggest that those contemplating similar conversions should consider a number of issues when negotiating leases.

- 1. Size:** Since charters need to reach a certain enrollment to achieve financial sustainability, is the facility large enough to house the school at capacity?
- 2. Shared space:** Does the church intend to use the school facility for other events before or after school, on weekends, or during the summer (several of the D.C. leases allow the parish to use the school on Sundays for religious education)? Does the school plan to use space outside of the school facility (some of the D.C. leases allow for occasional use of the parish hall)? Will both have access to kitchens, offices, and storage areas?
- 3. price:** How can both parties set a price that fairly compensates the diocese for a turnkey building while not stretching the budget of a new school? The D.C. leases range from \$218,000 to \$279,000 in year one (both parties agreed to a below-market rate to help Center City's early bottom line) and then increase 24 percent by year five.
- 4. agreement length:** How long will the charter schools have access to the facilities? In the case of D.C., Center City signed five-year leases with three five-year options.
- 5. maintenance, renovations, and alterations:** Who will be responsible for snow removal, replacing lights, and fixing sidewalks? If facility improvements are allowed, is the landlord's permission required in advance?
- 6. additions:** Will the diocese allow additions, and if so, who will pay?
- 7. expertise:** Who will negotiate? Does the diocese's representative have sufficient expertise to negotiate the best deal possible? If not, can the diocese afford legal and broker fees?
- 8. permitted uses:** For what purposes may the lessee use the facility? The D.C. leases forbid subletting and state that the sole allowable use is the operation of a "secular, values-based elementary charter school."
- 9. Signage:** Where and under what circumstances may the new school place signs on the exterior?
- 10. parking:** Will the school have full, unfettered access to church parking during the school week? The D.C. leases provide additional access to parishes on Holy Days of Obligation and several reserve spaces for use by convents, rectories, or Catholic Charities.
- 11. terminations:** Under what circumstances can the leases be ended? The D.C. leases allow the Archdiocese to terminate the agreements if the schools fail to open or are forced to close.
- 12. Staffing:** Is the lessee under any obligation to retain any staff from the previous school? The D.C. leases require a "reasonable effort" on the part of the schools to hire qualified faculty and staff employed by the school at the time of the conversion.



# Continuity and Change

center city public charter schools  
2008 – present

The conversion process has resulted in an interesting blend of continuity and change.

## Staffing

Center City leadership sought to retain most teachers and principals. In a number of the schools, large proportions of the staff stayed.<sup>bxix</sup> At the new Trinidad Campus, formerly the Holy Name Roman Catholic school, the principal and all of the full-time classroom teachers remained.<sup>bxix</sup>

This was crucial for some families. One parent disappointed by the conversion nevertheless decided to keep her child enrolled because “we love the teachers and the whole family atmosphere. They didn’t change the teachers, so that’s why we’re back.”<sup>bxix</sup>

The conversion did, however, present some important opportunities related to staffing. The change in status enabled the Center City leadership to think anew about their faculty needs, and in some cases, previous members were not transitioned into the new schools. Additionally, some teachers chose to retire or stay with the Archdiocese—some needed additional years of service to qualify for pensions. In total, about 70 percent of staff members stayed through the transition.

But because the conversion led to significantly improved finances and many new students (discussed below), the schools created a number of new positions, such as instructional coaches, and hired many new teachers, including in special education, art, and music. As a result, about 60 percent of the adults in the converted schools are new.<sup>bxix</sup> (Sensing the potential challenges related to maintaining the previous positive culture in the schools with so many new staff members, Center City has begun conducting staff assessments to ensure that new hires fit the network’s model.<sup>bxix</sup>) Importantly, these openings proved to be very popular; Center City received more than 30 applications for each opening in 2008-09.<sup>bxix</sup>

The influx of public money also enabled Center City to give teachers substantial pay raises in the first year (20-30 percent), with additional raises planned for year two.<sup>bxix</sup>

Improved salaries have helped to attract talent for new positions. According to Center City central staff and principals, many high-quality, energized teachers have been recruited.

D.C.’s flexible charter law eased the transition process for returning teachers in one important way. Whereas some state laws require charter teachers to have the same paper credentials (certification, licenses, etc.) as traditional public school teachers, D.C. provides more leeway: a charter teacher in D.C. must have a college degree and pass a basic national teaching test, the Praxis exam. Since all Consortium teachers were college graduates, those returning to the converted schools weren’t forced to jump over new administrative obstacles.

Schools have also been able to afford a range of supports for their new and growing numbers of teachers, including new books, supplies, and instructional programs.<sup>bxix</sup> One principal said, “We now have the money that we need to do the job.”<sup>bxix</sup> Stanton agreed, saying the additional resources “enabled us to do more for our kids and stay focused on their needs.”<sup>xc</sup>

The central office, providing leadership in professional development, recruiting, and more, has also seen a mix of continuity and change. About half of the members of its 16-member staff are holdovers from the Consortium. At full size, the office will employ approximately 20.<sup>xi</sup> The central office is remarkably lean compared to the traditional public school district; it accounts for less than 10 percent of Center City’s total expenses, whereas the administrative arm of D.C. Public Schools accounts for more than 20 percent of the system’s expenses.<sup>xii</sup>

## Religion

Of course, the most obvious change is the loss of religion. In some cases, teachers and students miss the faith-based aspects of their day—mass, group prayers, and physical symbols of faith, like crucifixes on the walls.<sup>xiii</sup> In fact, one of the most conspicuous challenges of the conversion process has been

determining how to find a substitute for—not merely expunge—Catholicism in the fabric of the school. Parents saw religion as a major contributor to one of the schools’ greatest attractions: in Stanton’s words, “discipline, discipline, discipline.”<sup>xciv</sup>

Accordingly, the schools sought to substitute secularized versions of critical, previously religious, activities—maintaining “a level of value formation,” in the archbishop’s words.<sup>xcv</sup> A Boston University scholar of ethics who advised the schools during the conversion process commented that this type of substitution could meet the schools’ needs while still adhering to their new religious boundaries because “enduring moral values cut across lines.” A mix of change and continuity was the result: Teaching character would take the place of teaching religion.

Some things had to be wholly abandoned, for instance weekly mass and the prayer before lunch. But others could be altered. Because “ritualistic gatherings are essential for community building”—in the words of Head of Schools Juana Brown—instead of beginning the school day with a morning prayer, students and teachers congregate for a “morning gathering.”<sup>xcvi</sup> Students recite Center City’s Honor Code, uniforms are checked, and students shake hands with one another.<sup>xcvii</sup>

Similarly, lessons based on the Bible have been replaced by lessons built around 10 Core Values, such as compassion, perseverance, integrity, and justice.<sup>xcviii</sup> Every month, schools focus on a value, and students learn how to make it part of their everyday lives.<sup>xcix</sup>

**10 Core Values**

Collaboration	Knowledge
Compassion	Peacemaking
Curiosity	Perseverance
Integrity	Respect
Justice	Discipline

**Honor Code**

- I will arrive at school each day on time and ready to work.
- I will treat all with respect and dignity.
- I will solve any conflicts that arise peacefully.
- I will care for and protect our environment.

Since this was going to be a major change for the transitioning teachers who had been accustomed to faith in the classroom (as well as for new teachers who might have been unaccustomed to values playing such a central role in instruction), Center City provided extensive professional development. For six months, the staff learned how to implement the new secular approach to character development.<sup>c</sup>

In some ways the substitution process is showing early signs of success. As one teacher noted, “I can tell them to have faith or courage whether the crosses are up or not.”<sup>ci</sup> Some teachers believe that families have stayed because the fundamental values haven’t changed.<sup>cii</sup> Though troubled by the loss of spirituality, some parents were confident that they could compensate by having their children receive religious instruction in mass and Sunday school.<sup>ciii</sup>

But not all parents agreed, arguing that faith is an indispensable, irreplaceable component of the schools’ operations. “When you change to a charter school, you are not allowed to do the things that make a Catholic school Catholic and that preserve the mission,” one parent said.<sup>civ</sup> Another parent described herself as “skeptical” about the removal of religion. “We’ll try it for a year and see what happens.”<sup>cv</sup>

In the first year of Center City’s operation, the Archdiocese offered no complementary religious program for Center City students. Though this would have been permitted as long as the program was voluntary, took place before or after school hours, and didn’t use public funds, the Archdiocese was unable to develop and implement such a program quickly enough given the speedy transition process.

However, there are plans to offer such a program in year two through at least one of the landlord parishes. Though full details have yet to be finalized regarding its daily length and weekly schedule and whether it will include students from other schools, the program is envisioned as a combination of music and Bible study that will be held in the church, not the school. The parish will likely charge students a modest fee.

**Students**

The biggest changes in the schools, however, relate to the students themselves. First, the shift to charter status brought higher enrollments. Across all of the converted

## Prior to conversion, 65 percent of students qualified for the federal meals program. After conversion, the number climbed to 75 percent.

schools, enrollment increased by 27 percent in the first year. One school saw a 40 percent increase in its student body; another nearly doubled.<sup>cxvi</sup> One principal commented on the sight of the first day of school: “It’s been a long time since we’ve seen that many students in the school yard.”

In early discussions with the PCSB, Center City had maintained that it would be financially viable in the first year with as few as 700 students in its seven schools.<sup>cxvii</sup> Early enrollment counts showed, however, it had twice that number. The network expects to have approximately 1,500 students in year two.

Despite the remarkable overall growth in the network’s student population, one school’s long-standing and severe struggles to achieve full enrollment continued as a “free” charter school. Before its conversion, Saint Francis De Sales had not been competing well against surrounding options, which included an unusually high-performing public district school and several charter schools, among which is a campus of one of the city’s most respected providers. Despite increased recruitment efforts during the transition process, it re-opened as a charter school with fewer than 100 students. At the end of its first year, this school was closed and two-thirds of its students transferred to other Center City campuses.<sup>cxviii</sup>

While Center City schools continue to be almost entirely minority, their students are economically more disadvantaged than ever before.<sup>cxix</sup> Prior to conversion, 65 percent of students qualified for the federal meals program, an indicator of child poverty. After conversion, the number climbed to 75 percent.<sup>cx</sup>

More of the students also have special needs. Between 15 and 18 percent of students require special education services; since the Consortium schools were private and therefore not required to provide such services, they had a much smaller special education percentage. Also, the schools saw a significant increase in ESL (English as a Second Language) students. One school had 46 additional ESL students after the conversion.<sup>cx</sup>

Finally, the students themselves are actually different. Overall, only about 35-40 percent of the currently enrolled students are from the former Consortium schools.<sup>cxii</sup> In the case of one school, only 30 percent of its current students had attended during its final year as a Catholic school.<sup>cxiii</sup> This is the result of several factors: the influx of new students, previous students who chose to transfer, previous eighth graders who graduated, and previous students who lived outside of the District and are therefore no longer eligible to attend.

Most of the new students are lower-performing, many having come from under-performing public district schools. Also, unlike many new charters, which start with only early grades, Center City enrolled new students in kindergarten through eighth grade, which resulted in a particular challenge. In many cases, new students entering the middle school grades were not only behind academically, they were also less amenable to Center City’s culture. Both issues influenced the network’s decision to only admit new students at the elementary level in year two.

Despite the schools’ strong academic program, the influx of new students lacking basic skills has presented substantial challenges for the schools’ teachers and principals, and may have a negative impact on the schools’ aggregate performance. Center City officials expressed concern that the schools may not make “Adequate Yearly Progress” under the No Child Left Behind Act in their first year.

Comparing the challenges facing the converted schools to those of the schools she took over in the first days of the Consortium, Stanton says, “In some ways, we’re back where we started.” However, because of the proven effectiveness of the strategies used by the Consortium and maintained by Center City, she remains confident that student performance will improve significantly over time.<sup>cxiv</sup>

The potential drop in test scores during the first year does not alarm the PCSB, Center City’s authorizer. “The dilution of

results is consistent” with the experience of other schools when a batch of new, lower-performing students enters, said Nida. “We’ll evaluate the converted schools based on their progress with these students.”<sup>cxv</sup>

Most of the schools’ demographic changes can be attributed to the fact that the schools are now tuition-free. Though the Archdiocese had set tuition at modest levels, for many families the cost had still been prohibitively expensive. Speaking of his decision to send his child to one of the converted schools, one parent said, “I knew their expectations for children [as Catholic schools] were much higher than in D.C. public schools, so I always wanted to come here. But now [that the schools are tuition-free] they’ve made it so everyone can come.”<sup>cxvi</sup>

### inStrUctional program

The changes in student enrollment and the requirements associated with public status forced a number of substantial changes in the schools’ educational program. The biggest driver was the influx of special education students. The Consortium didn’t have sufficient expertise in special education, so Center City hired a special education director; it also

engaged consultants to help build the special education program, which included developing teacher training programs and support services as well as learning how to diagnose student needs and navigate IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) compliance issues.<sup>cxvii</sup>

The schools also had to prepare for the growth in ESL students. Additional Spanish-speaking teachers were hired and intensive training was developed for returning teachers. Training was also developed to prepare principals and teachers for the influx of significantly lower-performing students. Finally, though Consortium schools were accustomed to administering and analyzing standardized assessments, Center City had to acclimate its principals and teachers to D.C.’s official exams and the associated reporting requirements.<sup>cxviii</sup>

Since Center City didn’t receive its charter until June, most of this work had to be completed in July and August. A three-week summer pre-service training session provided a targeted opportunity to train teachers, begin implementing new programs, and build the new network’s culture. During the summer, new students were brought in for testing to determine placements and establish performance benchmarks.<sup>cxix</sup>

### a WHoI l Y neW ScHoo l : VISITING THE SHAW CAMPUS

Apart from the cavernous church next door, there are few indications that the building housing the Shaw Campus of Center City Public Charter Schools was once a Catholic school. Not a single cross or religious statue is in sight. Walking toward the front door, past the giant Center City welcome banner, only the most observant visitor would notice the inconspicuous cornerstone commemorating the building’s 1864 construction as the Immaculate Conception School for Boys.

Should the visitor arrive at 7:50 a.m., he would see Jason Lody unlock the front doors and welcome every student by name and with a handshake. Lody, an experienced public and Catholic school educator and former D.C. police officer, is principal, and like just about everything else here apart from the walls and floors, he is new.

In its conversion from Immaculate Conception to Shaw, the school received a new leader and an almost entirely new teaching corps. It also ended up with a virtually brand new student body. Eighty-five percent of last year’s class—many of whom lived in Maryland—now receive their education elsewhere. A wave of new students not only compensated for the loss, it doubled enrollment to 260, the most students in this building in ages.

After entering, the students rapidly convene in the school’s high-ceilinged mini-auditorium on the first floor. Unlike generations of the building’s previous students, Shaw’s pre-K through eighth-grade students begin their day with a recitation of an honor code (not a prayer),

promising to work hard and treat others well. Next are “shout-outs,” another novelty between these old walls, where Lody recognizes outstanding student performance. Imbued with the day’s inspiration and guidance, students decamp for their classrooms, which are notably cramped, a result of the school’s popularity and an unintentional but noticeable nod to the school’s Catholic past.

Otherwise, that past is all but invisible. Like its exterior, the building’s classrooms, halls, and offices are completely secular; all paintings, pictures, crosses, statues, bibles, and prayer books were removed before opening day. In their places hang motivational messages, student work, and images of important figures. A misbehaving student sent to the principal’s office won’t be asked to contemplate the Ten Commandments; instead, before meeting with Lody, he’ll fill out a form explaining how his behavior failed to adhere to the school’s 10 core values.

Lody is pleased with the school’s early progress. Behavior is improved and interim assessments suggest strong gains, particularly among younger students. Most of his teachers will return. And next year, he’ll have two Teach For America corps members, as clear a sign as any that Shaw is on the front lines of urban public education.

Looking ahead, Lody would like to serve more students, an impossibility in these cramped quarters. Internal discussions have begun about relocating Shaw to a different facility down the line. Fittingly, taking this next step forward and leaving this old building behind would mean severing the final tie to the school’s Catholic past.



## Leader SHip

One final change is of note. Mary Anne Stanton, who retired from the Consortium in 2006 only to return to shepherd the schools through the transition to charters, has retired again. Highly satisfied with the central office's leadership and the trajectory of the schools, Stanton began stepping away in April 2009, her replacement already named and on the job.

## the new Consortium of Catholic academies

The four schools that remained Catholic under the new framework became part of a new network called the "Consortium of Catholic Academies" in the fall of 2008. Like those that converted, these schools had common inner-city Catholic school demographics, including high rates of poverty (a third of the students received federal scholarships) and a majority of non-Catholic students.<sup>cxix</sup>

The new entity hoped to build on the academic and operational successes of the Center City Consortium while adding new supports including enhanced technology, full-time resource specialists, and fine arts programs. The new Consortium's board of directors included the former mayor of Washington, D.C., Anthony Williams, and a wide array of other city, business, and church leaders.<sup>cxix</sup> In summer 2009, the Archdiocese expressed optimism about the future of the new Consortium and its other inner-city schools for four reasons:

1. The four-school network and St. Augustine (the school that avoided conversion by becoming a parish-run school) were at or approaching full enrollment.<sup>cxix</sup> During the conversion process, some families wanted their children to stay in a religious environment, so rather than remaining with the charter school network, they enrolled their children in one of the remaining Catholic schools.
2. The Archdiocese believed that it would be able to raise the funds necessary to support these schools. Though the 12-school Consortium required support that exceeded fundraising capacity, the financial needs of the smaller four-school network were thought to be manageable. Considerable financial planning and forecasting was done in advance of the new Consortium's creation, and ultimately both the Consortium's board and the Archdiocese committed to fully supporting these schools.<sup>cxix</sup> The Archdiocese, for example, committed to providing \$1 million annually to the Consortium for a decade.<sup>cxix</sup> St. Augustine, self-described as "the mother church of black

Catholics in the District of Columbia," was thought to have the fundraising potential to sustain itself.<sup>cxix</sup>

3. The lease agreements between Center City and the Archdiocese (acting as landlord of the seven facilities) generate significant income. According to the terms of the leases, in the first year, for example, just under \$2 million was due. Since previous donors to the Archdiocese supported school facilities, the Archdiocese decided to use a portion of the revenue generated by these buildings to continue supporting Catholic education. Host parishes also receive a share of these payments, using their allotments for parish needs including setting aside a portion for major capital improvements.
4. The Archdiocese is increasing aid to its schools and distributing more funding via tuition assistance. Approximately \$850,000 in tuition assistance was distributed in the 2007-08 school year; the Archdiocese has already awarded nearly \$4 million in tuition assistance for the 2009-10 school year.<sup>cxix</sup> A new assessment on parishes is expected to help sustain this effort. Churches without affiliated schools will provide a larger share of their offertory collections to the Archdiocese to support its schools.

One noteworthy force, however, is weighing against these schools: the precarious position of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. A "substantial" number of Archdiocese students receive vouchers from the federal government, and though this subsidy doesn't fully cover the per-pupil costs, it does cover a portion, helping maintain enrollment figures. Were this program to be defunded or scaled back (as desired by the Obama administration and the Democratic leadership of Congress), these schools would see fundraising demands skyrocket and/or enrollment plunge.

Despite this significant concern, the Archdiocese believes its remaining inner-city schools are sustainable. While two of its Maryland schools were forced to close at the end of the 2008-09 school year, all of its D.C. schools will remain open. There are no plans to close or convert any additional inner-city schools.

# Moving Forward

## Lessons Learned and Conclusion

Though there will be differences of opinion regarding whether converting inner-city Catholic schools into charters is in the best interest of Catholic education, public education, or the children and families both seek to serve, there can be little doubt about two facts related to Washington's experience.

- Hundreds of disadvantaged students were able to avoid the disruption of having their schools shuttered, and several hundred more were able to attend the schools once they were converted to charter status.
- These seven schools overcame a number of serious obstacles during the conversion process, any one of which could have threatened the ultimate success of the endeavor. Strong leadership, substantial planning, and the cooperation of varied individuals and groups contributed mightily to this success.

The schools that eventually became charters had three key advantages, which greatly facilitated their navigation of the conversion process.

First, they had been functioning as part of a single unit for a decade (via the Consortium), and that unit had a central management team. This enabled the schools to be easily converted together under one contract. It also meant that a central office (along with all of its established processes) didn't need to be built from scratch once the conversion was complete. Had they been independent, parish-operated schools, the transition likely would have been more difficult.

Second, the schools had been using standards and assessments for years and had proven track records of academic success. This positively influenced the behaviors and decisions of the PCSB and outside funders, among others. Had the schools been of questionable quality, the path would have almost certainly been rockier.

Third, key experienced Consortium leaders, including Stanton and several board members, were willing to not only lead and facilitate the transition process, but also to stay with the newly converted schools during its first phase.

Had Stanton decided not to return and/or had her top lieutenants and key board members not embraced the conversion, the project's success may have been cast in doubt.

While other dioceses considering the charter conversion route may not be able to replicate these auspicious conditions, the lessons of Washington's experience suggest that they ought to carefully weigh a number of additional issues:

**early, Broad internal consultation**—In advance of its conversion decision, the Archdiocese assembled an extensive and expert group of stakeholders to devise a plan. After a preliminary decision was made, more feedback was solicited from parishes and schools. Though this didn't assuage all concerns, it ensured that those affected would be heard, which appears to have smoothed the execution of an admittedly difficult decision.

**right of appeal**—Though the Archdiocese recommended charter conversion, schools and parishes had the right to appeal. Though most schools ultimately accepted the recommendation, one school developed a plan that enabled it to avoid conversion.

**engaging the authorizer**—Many months in advance of the public announcement, conversations were taking place between the schools and the charter school authorizer. Pitfalls were quickly identified, trust was developed, and a plan was arranged. The early engagement of the D.C. Public Charter School Board may have been among the most important decisions made.

**outside Funding**—Center City's ineligibility for federal start-up dollars was an issue. Its engagement of NewSchools Venture Fund and Charter School Growth Fund played an important role in its successful launch.



**Timing**—The Archdiocese settled on an aggressive timeline that enabled Consortium members to close as Catholic schools in June and open as charters in September. Though this created significant challenges for staff on both sides, students and teachers were not displaced, which helped maintain enrollment and faculty during the transition.

**Character and discipline as pillars**—Center City’s leadership ensured that a secular version of the school’s previously faith-based character formation was in place once the schools’ Catholicism was removed. This helped convince families and faculty to stay.

**Changing Student Bodies**—The changes in the schools’ students are noteworthy. Over the span of a summer, the schools’ enrollments increased significantly, and the new students were, on average, poorer and lower-performing. Schools contemplating charter conversion should consider whether their programs and staffs are prepared to educate a more disadvantaged student body, and, if not, what types of changes should be made. Conversion will almost certainly lead to more school resources, so significant new funding should be available.

**General optimism**—Although there was a consensus among families, school staff members, and Archdiocese leaders that the loss of additional Catholic schools was lamentable, there was, surprisingly, much agreement that the conversion plan was the best solution available. An important reason for this outcome appears to be the Archdiocese’s considerable effort explaining the severity of the financial crisis and the limited options at hand. Other dioceses should bear in mind both the Archdiocese of Washington’s efforts to counsel stakeholders and the ultimate willingness of parents, teachers, and principals to support the final decision.

**Localized Backlash**—Though the Consortium and Center City teams did much to help parishes, schools, families, and teachers navigate their way through the transition process, there was still bitterness among some stakeholders, particularly affected parents. It is doubtful that this anger could be totally avoided, but leaders of future conversion efforts might consider all of the ways to mitigate such distress. When first presented with a conversion plan, many parents and communities will only hear that the schools serving their children well are being taken away.

**Remaining Schools**—After a number of its schools are converted to charter status, a diocese may still have inner-city schools to operate. Consideration should be given to how these schools will be supported. For example, will students affected by the conversions and interested in remaining in Catholic schools receive help in transferring to another school in the diocese? Will lease payments from the charter schools be earmarked to support the remaining Catholic schools?

## Conclusion

The major Catholic-charter conversion process undertaken by the Archdiocese of Washington has serious implications for the Catholic Church and its schools, public education (district and charter), and countless low-income children and communities. Though there will be a wide array of normative judgments about whether such conversions are good for private and public schooling in the long-run, adjudicating those differences was not the purpose of this study.

Instead, the goal was to understand the timing and mechanics of the process. Without doubt, converting these seven schools was an enormously complex and labor-intensive task. Numerous issues required great attention, including community outreach, contract negotiations, teacher training, and fundraising; handled poorly, any of these could have delayed or derailed the process. That seven Center City Public Charter Schools were able to open in September 2008 is a testament to the commitment and hard work of many people.

If any value judgment is to be made here and recommended to leaders in other cities and dioceses, it is that the closure of these seven Catholic schools—the typical response to urban faith-based schools’ financial unsustainability—would have displaced a thousand students and had negative ripple effects on countless families and neighborhoods. The conversion process enabled these schools to keep their doors open, which benefitted their previous students and hundreds more who enrolled after they became charters.

This simple lesson doesn’t speak to weighty issues like the value of faith in K-12 education or the place of chartering in public schooling. But it does shine a spotlight on one strategy that could be pursued by those whose overriding concern is ensuring that disadvantaged boys and girls have access to safe, academically rigorous schools, regardless of the financial and political issues swirling overhead.

# Notes

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- <sup>iii</sup> Interview with Mary Anne Stanton, April 30, 2009.
- <sup>iv</sup> Martin Davis, "It's All About the Kids," *Fwd*: 2, no. 2 (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, July 21, 2005): 7.
- <sup>v</sup> Martin Davis, "It's All About the Kids," *Fwd*: 2, no. 2 (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, July 21, 2005): 7-8; Approximately \$10 million was used to rehabilitate deteriorating facilities.
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- <sup>vii</sup> Archdiocese of Washington, "Executive Director of Center City Consortium Steps Down," press release, June 6, 2006.
- <sup>viii</sup> Center City Consortium, promotional video, [http://centercityconsortium.net/ccs\\_promo\\_short.mpg](http://centercityconsortium.net/ccs_promo_short.mpg) (accessed April 14, 2009).
- <sup>ix</sup> "Results of the Consultation on a New Catholic Framework for Education," Archdiocese of Washington, November 2007. Four interviewees said that, in hindsight, the Consortium expanded entirely too quickly. This increased the network's costs significantly, which created an additional burden for donors.
- <sup>x</sup> Interview with Mary Anne Stanton, April 30, 2009.
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- <sup>xv</sup> Theola Labbe and Jacqueline L. Salmon, "8 D.C. Catholic Schools Eyed for Charters," *Washington Post*, September 8, 2007. The conversation between Wuerl and the Archdiocese's education leaders was confirmed by Mary Anne Stanton.
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- <sup>xxvii</sup> "Results of the Consultation on a New Catholic Framework for Education," Archdiocese of Washington, November 2007.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Richard Szczepanowski, "Washington Archdiocese to Reconfigure Consortium, Some to Become Charter Schools," *Catholic Standard*, November 12, 2007.
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- <sup>xxx</sup> Richard Szczepanowski, "Washington Archdiocese to Reconfigure Consortium, Some to Become Charter Schools," *Catholic Standard*, November 12, 2007.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Richard Szczepanowski, "Washington Archdiocese to Reconfigure Consortium, Some to Become Charter Schools," *Catholic Standard*, November 12, 2007.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Washington, D.C., uses a weighted-student funding formula, so the amount allocated for each child varies based on a number of factors, including grade level and special needs. See D.C. Public Charter School Board, "District of Columbia Public Charter Schools Uniform Per Student Funding Formula (UPSFF) FY 2008 Formula," <http://www.dcpubliccharter.com/home/fundformula08.html> (accessed June 2, 2009).
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Section 307(a)(1) of the law reads, "The amount of any tuition or fees charged by a school participating in the grantee's program under this title to an eligible student participating in the program does not exceed the amount of tuition or fees that the school customarily charges to students who do not participate in the program." (DC School Choice Incentive Act of 2003 [Title III of Division C of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2004]; P.L. 108-199 Stat. 3 [2004].)
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- lxi Richard Szczepanowski, "Archdiocese Selects Operator for New Charter School Group," *Catholic Standard*, December 12, 2007.
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## Notes continued

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## **aBout tHe aut Hor**

Andy Smarick is a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and an Adjunct Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Previously, he served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development at the U.S. Department of Education, where he helped manage the Department's research, budget, and policy functions. Smarick has served at the White House on the Domestic Policy Council, working primarily on K-12 and higher education issues. Other prior positions include: Chief Operating Officer for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, legislative assistant to a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and aide to members of the Maryland state legislature. His articles have appeared in the *Washington Post*, *Baltimore Sun*, National Review Online, *Education Next*, and other outlets. He is a former White House Fellow and earned a bachelor's and master's degree from the University of Maryland.

## **aBout Seton education Partner S**

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 Partner S**

1016 16th Street NW, 8th Floor  
Washington, DC 20036  
202.742.6334

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1016 16th Street NW, 8th Floor

Washington, DC 20036

202.742.6334

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