

FAITH-BASED SCHOOLS

Problem: Many parents perceive that public education has declined in quality, and believe that religious values have disappeared from schools.

Solution: Faith-based schools offer a private school education grounded in freely-expressed religious values.

Indianapolis has approximately 75 faith-based schools, divided almost evenly between Catholic and non-Catholic institutions. Of the latter, the majority are evangelical Christian in orientation. Most were established after 1970, as were the city's only Jewish and Muslim schools: the Hasten Hebrew Academy (1971) and Madrasat-ul-Ilm (1991).

The relatively recent founding of many faith-based schools is not a coincidence. In the early- and mid-1970s, several controversies erupted over the content of curricula used in American public education. The most memorable, bitter, and widely reported of these—a dispute in West Virginia in 1974—inspired a national movement.

The West Virginia case involved a proposed curriculum whose content was offensive to many Christian parents. The curriculum was eventually adopted over the vigorous protests of these parents, but that victory proved a hollow one for public educators. Many parents responded by pulling their children from the public schools and establishing private institutions.

Nationwide, evangelical Christian parents followed suit. By the late 1990s, an estimated five million (ten percent) of the nation's school-aged children were in faith-based elementary and secondary schools; about one-quarter of them in evangelical Christian schools. The motivation behind these newly founded schools was clear. The parents who started them wanted to shelter their children from the perceived dangers—moral and physical—of public education.

Religious-based education is not new, nor is it unique to evangelical Protestants. Most of the early attempts at education in America were faith-based, although these efforts were for the most part haphazard and short-lived. They were sponsored by Protestant groups attempting to fill a void left by the lack of organized public education.

In Indianapolis and elsewhere, even after the advent of free public schools in the mid-1800s, the educational system remained in practice, if not theory, a Protestant institution. The Bible was the central book in the curriculum, and schoolchildren used readers that relied heavily on scriptural verses and stories to impart their lessons. Locally, the question was not whether religious instruction would be a fundamental part of education; the question was which denomination—Methodists or Presbyterians—would control the public schools.

Catholics reacted to this Protestant dominance by forming their own schools. These were primarily urban schools serving the large influx of European Catholic immigrants to America. In many ways, the

evangelical Christian exodus from public education over the past thirty years parallels the Catholic education movement in the nineteenth century. Both the Catholic and evangelical parents were motivated by a desire to keep their children from harm, bolster their faith, and shelter them from offensive ideas and values promoted in public education.

Many of the Catholic schools that once served urban immigrant communities have now closed. The Catholic schools that have survived serve a largely suburban, middle and upper-middle-class clientele: about half the students in Catholic secondary schools live in households earning \$50,000 or more. As a result of these trends, the defining mission that once drove Catholic education has been obscured. Catholic schools no longer serve primarily urban, working class and immigrant populations, nor do they provide a Catholic education to exclusively Catholic children.

Other faith-based schools face a similar dilemma. Virtually all faith-based institutions, whether a Catholic school founded in the nineteenth century or an evangelical school founded last year, spring from the founders' desire to create a protective shelter for children.

At the local Muslim school Madrasat-ul-Ilm, for example, Principal Muslimah Mustafa describes the purpose of her school in language reminiscent of the evangelical Christians who have started schools recently. "What I'm trying to do is protect the children so that their roots will grow deep, so that they may sway but they won't be uprooted," she said. "Like a tree, you protect it until its roots will grow, then you take the protective covering off of it."

But the sort of shelter that a school provides can change over time; its sense of mission can be shaped by other factors or eroded entirely. Eventually, most religious schools face the challenge of maintaining their identity and purpose.

TWO INDIANAPOLIS EXAMPLES

Following are the stories of two faith-based schools. Superficially, they seem a study in contrasts. The first is a recently established evangelical Christian high school that draws its enrollment primarily from the suburbs; the second is a Roman Catholic elementary school that dates to the nineteenth century and is almost exclusively urban.

What they have in common is a clear sense of mission. Both are certain about the sort of protective shelter that they intend to provide. But both schools face the challenge of preserving their sense of purpose against forces that threaten to compromise their identity.

Covenant Christian High School

James Spencer spent 35 years teaching in public schools before taking early retirement in 1995. About the time of his retirement, several parents on the West side of Indianapolis were discussing the possibility of starting a Christian school for their children, who were then in a private middle school. The parents knew of Spencer's background and asked him to be the new school's principal. He agreed, provided they could come up with two things: sufficient money to fund the venture and a minimum of fifteen students. The start-up money, \$100,000, was supplied by Wood-Mizer, a West-side lumber company owned by a Christian businessman.

Covenant Christian High began in the fall of 1995 as an interdenominational high school with 20 children. For the 1999-2000 school year, it enrolled 250 students.

Principal Spencer provides a prime example of the frustration that has driven the rise of evangelical Christian schools in recent years. He agreed to cancel his retirement plans and become Covenant's principal primarily because of what he describes as a fundamental change in public education.

"What I saw change in public schools was the disappearance of truth," Spencer said. "Thirty-five or 40 years ago, it was pretty well assumed that truth existed. It was objective; it could be discovered; it could be taught and transmitted. That's what the public system did for the first 200 years. But it reached the point by the

time I left in '95 that it was illegal to assume that truth existed. Now, there are many truths. They're all relative. You've got your truth; I've got mine. Whatever floats your boat, you go with that."

Covenant borrowed the basement of Chapel Rock Christian Church for its first two years of operation. But Spencer's goal was to graduate the first class of seniors from an accredited school with a building of its own; and in May, 1999, the 24 members of the Class of 1999 had their graduation ceremony in a new building. It was built on 21 acres of land donated by, and adjacent to, Chapel Rock. (Covenant has no formal connection to the church, though informal ties between the two are strong.)

An \$8 million gift from the owner of Wood-Mizer made the building possible. Covenant will likely be operating at its capacity—400 students—by 2002 or 2003.

Spencer's goal that Covenant be accredited was achieved in 1997, when the state of Indiana recognized it under a program known as Freeway accreditation. According to this plan, candidates may submit their own curriculum, which may vary somewhat from the standard requirements for accreditation, to the State Board of Education. If the Board deems the proposed educational program valid, the school receives accreditation as a Freeway school and is entitled to the same rights and privileges as any accredited school.

In sum, Covenant has not only survived its start as a makeshift school meeting in the basement of a church; it has prospered. And its success is more than just superficial. In the first round of ISTEP testing that Covenant participated in, its sophomores placed seventh among all schools—public or private—in Indiana.

Holy Angels Catholic School

In 1986, Fr. Clarence Waldon of Holy Angels Catholic Church published a booklet titled "The Dynamic of Holy Angels Catholic School," a statement of the school's reason for being, in which he argued that the service it provided to the city was unique and critically needed.

Founded in 1906, Holy Angels had changed fundamentally over the decades. The neighborhood around the school, once white, had become predominately black. By the 1980s, Holy Angels served primarily black children.

But the composition of its student body did not make it unique; its philosophy of education did. The school provided elementary education from an Afro-American cultural perspective. This instruction differed fundamentally from the Anglo-centered instruction offered in most schools, as Waldon explained in his booklet.

"People of Afro-American descent in the U.S. have always had to learn to live in two cultures: the majority culture (western European) and their own minority culture (Afro-American)," Waldon wrote. "For many young children, this dual life is very confusing and frustrating. Therefore, they do not function well in both cultures which, many times, translates into poor performance in school."

At the time, Holy Angels faced an uncertain future. Its building was old. The cost of tuition prevented many potential students—primarily poor children from urban neighborhoods—from enrolling. It faced the persistent threat of being closed.

The situation was essentially the same with all of the city's urban Catholic schools. In the mid-1980s, all faced declining enrollments and uncertain funding. "There was always this big knife hanging over you, held by a thread, and it could come down at any time," Fr. Waldon said.

But in 1999, Holy Angels moved into a new building. The new facility was one of only two construction projects underway nationally at an urban Catholic school. The other is also in Indianapolis: Holy Cross Central School, 125 N. Oriental St.

The revived health of Catholic schools in Indianapolis was facilitated by a powerful network of local media, businesses, and philanthropic institutions—in addition to the energy of the local Catholic leadership, most notably the Archbishop of Indianapolis, Daniel Buechlein. In 1998, Buechlein announced a campaign to raise \$20 million for the city's eight urban Catholic schools.

The construction projects at Holy Angels and Holy Cross resulted directly from this campaign, which has also provided tuition assistance for many inner-city children.

This resurgent support for local Catholic education, particularly the city's urban schools, has allowed Holy Angels to remain committed to the mission that Fr. Waldon articulated in 1986. The school still serves black children almost exclusively (whites are welcome, though few have ever enrolled), and it still emphasizes education from an African-centered cultural perspective.

BALANCING ACT

Both Covenant Christian and Holy Angels have a clear sense of the sort of shelter they want to maintain. But both institutions face challenges to their identity.

For Covenant, the challenge stems from its attempt to join academic excellence with the mission of teaching evangelical Christian values. As the school matures and its reputation as an academically sound school becomes well known, it likely will attract more students who are not Christians. The policy at present is to admit all children, regardless of their religious beliefs, provided they are receptive to the school's Christian mission.

But the potential for conflict over this practice was evident in a survey of Covenant's first class of graduating seniors. One of their most common complaints was that Covenant accepts students "who don't want to be there"—non-Christians, in other words. Parents have expressed disappointment with the practice, too.

"You have a very delicate balance between ministry to believers and ministry to unbelievers," Spencer said. "The scriptures command us to do both. But it's a very thin line. It's important not to lose your vision."

Holy Angels is fundamentally different from Covenant Christian: it does not define its mission primarily in terms of inculcating a faith-based world view. Consequently, it does not face the threat of "dilution" by students who attend the school for its academics but do not share its faith.

Yet Holy Angels does face a challenge common to virtually all faith-based schools: finances. Income from tuition does not cover the costs of operation at most religious schools, but the dilemma is particularly severe in the case of Holy Angels. The school's reason for being is primarily to serve inner-city children from poor homes, so it must be cautious about raising its fees. On the other hand, it must generate sufficient income to provide students with a good education. The difference between operating costs and income from tuition fees is covered mainly through philanthropic gifts.

For the foreseeable future, Holy Angels has been granted a reprieve. The school's new building seems to guarantee that it will survive for many years to come, free to pursue its unique educational mission.

But if funding sources dry up, if the general enthusiasm for Catholic education wanes, or if new Church leadership sets other priorities, Holy Angels could find itself back in the precarious position of 1986—unable to attract substantial assistance from the outside or to generate sufficient money from within.

Holy Angels' mission gives it a definite reason for being, but narrows its marketability and makes it unsustainable without outside assistance. Though it separates itself from the broader culture educationally, it is dependent on that culture financially.

This dilemma is common, even in cases where a school does not serve primarily a poor population. Most faith-based schools experience some degree of tension between the goal of preserving their identity and the reality of having to pay the bills.

This is true even at Covenant, where the policy of admitting non-believers is justified primarily as a matter of ministry. Principal Spencer couched it as a scriptural injunction, arguing that "the scriptures command us to do both"—that is, serve both believers and non-believers.

But the policy is also tied to the issue of funding, as Spencer acknowledged. "I have to have tuition to pay people's salaries," he said. Despite the gift of a new building, Covenant's \$4,000 annual tuition charge falls far short of the actual per-student operating expense, which is \$6,700. (Referring to this deficit, Spencer said "we pray it in," meaning that the school relies on gifts to supply the necessary funds.) In a sense, Covenant cannot afford to refuse admission to non-Christian students.

Covenant intends to inculcate a particular world view, whereas Holy Angels intends to offer students a culturally sensitive educational environment. But both are Christian schools that view themselves as distinct alternatives to—and a protective shelter from—what is offered in the public sphere. And both are subject to pressures—primarily economic—that threaten to compromise their reason for being.

DISSENTING VIEWS

Religious education can be cast as a commendable effort by parents to protect to their children. But there are sharply opposing viewpoints.

James Dwyer, a law professor at the University of Illinois—Chicago, recently voiced one contrary argument. In *Religious Schools v. Children's Rights* (1998), Dwyer deplores "the pervasively uncritical attitude toward religious schooling in our society" and the "abandonment" of children in what he deems to be harmful environments. Accordingly, he calls for sweeping reforms in what state and federal governments require of religious schools. In his view, private schools should be required to seek certification, should be allowed to use only state-approved materials, and should be subject to unannounced inspections by regulators.

Dwyer's prescriptions are unlikely to influence public policy in Indiana, if anywhere. State regulation of faith-based schools is virtually non-existent. Indiana's Department of Education asks only that a school report the number of students it educates at each grade level. And the trend runs toward more rather than less accommodation of faith-based educational endeavors.

For example, Indiana's state legislature has passed a bill that will allow accreditation by some independent organizations to qualify a school for state accreditation. That legislation awaits implementation by the Board of Education. If approved, alternative accreditation of this sort would be a boon to many faith-based schools. Those that are accredited by an approved, independent organization (such as, perhaps, the Association of Christian Schools International) would gain all the benefits and legitimacy inherent in state accreditation.

A significant challenge to faith-based education comes from critics who view it as an abdication of civic and Christian responsibility.

"We tried hard to court pastors, and they weren't really interested," Covenant's Spencer said. "I've been told by many pastors that they prefer to have their children in the public schools, where they can be salt and light."

Darren Cushman-Wood, pastor of East 10th Street United Methodist Church, supports public education as "one of the essential building blocks of democracy. The presence of public schools are fundamental to preserving a democratic society."

Cushman-Wood, whose church has a close working relationship with a nearby public school, said the shift of attitude among evangelical Christians during his childhood was dramatic. When he was growing up in an evangelical home in the 1970s, the evangelical community supported the local public schools. But the political mobilization of conservative Christians in the 1970s was driven in large part by a resistance to perceived liberal trends in public education. For some evangelical conservatives, said Cushman-Wood, "Whether your kids attended a Christian school became a litmus test."

While he believes there is room for public schools and private religious schools to co-exist, Cushman-Wood clearly comes down on the side of the former. He says that the charges of relativism and secular humanism leveled at public education are overstated, and indeed, politically motivated. Cushman-Wood's views are representative of many liberal Christians. How people view faith-based education has a great deal to do

with how they view society in general.

CONCLUSIONS

Ease of entrance into the field of faith-based schooling and the absence of state regulation do not translate into a high probability of success. While there are few regulatory burdens placed on faith-based schools, there are substantial economic burdens. Most successful religious schools are launched with the aid of a generous donor.

Even generous benefactors are no guarantee of survival. The \$100,000 that Wood-Mizer gave Covenant Christian was sufficient for the school to begin meeting in the basement of a church, but nothing more. After a year of working under relatively primitive conditions, Principal Spencer was nearly ready to quit. Covenant's first year, he said, was "just exhausting."

Today, only a few years after its shaky beginnings, Covenant has a new building and provides state-certified, academically sound education to hundreds of students. It's true that this rapid progress was made possible by large financial gifts. But at the outset, Covenant's founders had no idea those gifts would materialize. There would be no Covenant Christian High School today if a few interested parents had not had the vision and perseverance to bring it about.

SCHOOLS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

Covenant Christian High School
7525 West 21st Street
Indianapolis, IN 46214
(317) 390-0202
<http://covenantchristian.org>.

The administration of Covenant Christian believes an important part of its educational mission is to help others interested in beginning a private school. They welcome questions on the subject and are available to give guided tours of Covenant's building.

Holy Angels Catholic School
2822 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Street
Indianapolis, IN 46208
(317) 926-5211

The Hasten Hebrew Academy of Indianapolis
6602 Hoover Road
Indianapolis, IN 46260
(317) 251-1261

Madrasat-ul-ʿIlm
2846 Cold Springs Road
Indianapolis, IN 46222
(317) 923-0328.

Holy Cross Central School
125 N. Oriental Street
Indianapolis, IN 46202
(317) 638-9068

RESOURCES:

An article about changes in Catholic education by David P. Baker and Cornelius Riordan, "The 'Eliting' of the Common American Catholic School and the National Education Crisis," can be found in *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1998, p. 16. See also, Fr. Andrew Greeley's response to Baker and Riordan in the same issue.

James Dwyer's argument for increased regulation of religious education is presented in *Religious Schools v. Children's Rights* (Cornell University Press, 1998). For a summary and lengthy rebuttal of Dwyer's argument, see Stephen Gilles, "Hey, Christians, Leave Your Kids Alone," *Constitutional Commentary*, Spring 1999, p. 169.

The Indiana Department of Education is online at <http://www.doe.state.in.us>. Among other information, it maintains a page with links to private schools around the state and offers any school the opportunity to add itself to the list. These options are available from the Department's K-12 home page, <http://www.doe.state.in.us/htmls/k12.html>.

There are two organizations of special note for evangelical Christian schools. The Association of Christian Schools International has more than 4,000 members spread across nearly 100 countries. It offers its own accrediting system, conferences, publications, and various other benefits for members; its web address is <http://www.acsi.org>.

Christian Schools International overlaps significantly with ACSI in its purpose and programs. Both ACSI and CSI offer a magazine as a benefit of membership, and both offer curriculum materials.

A notable web site for Jewish educators is maintained by the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education. The site includes a link to CAJE's journal, *Jewish Education News*, a portion of which is available online; it also offers books for sale, announcements of conferences, and other information. Its web address is <http://www.caje.org>.

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