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## **Big 'C' or little 'c' Catholic?**

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Catholic schools struggle with identity issues as their student bodies grow more diverse

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Each year, at least a few of the elderly parishioners of St. John Kanty, a Catholic parish on the city's south side, sell their houses or pass away, and Latino families take their place.

Without school vouchers, St. John Kanty School would be gone, too.

Vouchers have preserved dozens of religious schools in Milwaukee, but they've also presented them with a unique set of challenges.

In the seven years since the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program expanded to include religious schools, St. John Kanty's choice enrollment has steadily climbed along with the growing Latino population in the neighborhood. This year, 70% of the 140 students at St. John Kanty participate in the voucher program.

Without choice?

"We'd be closed," says Beth Eichman, principal of the school.

In most other cities in America, St. John Kanty would have shut down as its traditional parish base moved to the suburbs and Latino families who could not afford the tuition at the school moved in.

"The money just wouldn't be there" to keep so many city schools open without choice, said David Prothero, director of Catholic education for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

This school year, 56% of the students enrolled at Catholic elementary schools in the city of Milwaukee participate in choice, bringing tuition vouchers worth close to \$6,000 apiece

along with them. As a result, Milwaukee's Catholic schools have stayed open to serve more poor students, more minority students and more non-Catholics than in other cities.

By contrast, earlier this year, the Archdiocese of Chicago said it would close 23 city and suburban elementary schools at the end of the school year, most of them in poor, minority neighborhoods.

But the rapidly changing student population in the Catholic schools in Milwaukee has come with its own set of issues: How can they teach theology to children who, increasingly, do not come from Catholic backgrounds? How can teaching staffs, which for years have been nearly all white, be diversified? And, for a school used to serving kids from one parish - kids often tightly connected by race, class and religion - how can the notion of what a Catholic school is, or should be, be broadened?

A question of identity

For Brother Bob Smith, the president of Messmer Catholic Schools: "Catholic means universal. We've always been an immigrant church, and opened our doors to the poor."

Still, some school officials are soul-searching about the mission and nature of their schools.

At St. Catherine of Alexandria School on the city's far northwest side, the percentage of non-Catholics has steadily risen in recent years; it's now above 40%. The percentage of choice students also has increased, to 42%; the school would like to keep it between 40% and 45% for now.

"When I started 25 years ago, everybody was Catholic," said Linda Kuhn, the principal. She said the church welcomes the changing demographics of the school, but "there is concern, particularly among older parishioners, that we want to keep the Catholic identity."

At St. Sebastian School on the city's west side, about 28% of the students participate in the choice program. That percentage increases every year, along with the number of students who aren't Catholic.

"Are we a parish school or an alternative to MPS?" asked Principal Paul Hohl. "Right now we are still a parish school, but we are talking more about that. We've seen that happen in other schools where they get so many choice students they can turn into something they weren't before, or didn't plan on being."

Kathryn McGrane-Sargent, co-chair of the school's education committee, said, "We view our participation the choice program as a very important aspect of our being a city school."

But she added that the committee recently decided to cap the percentage of choice students at 25%. McGrane-Sargent called it a "soft cap," noting that St. Sebastian won't turn away current choice students or their siblings. They wanted the cap, she said, to ensure that the school didn't grow too dependent on voucher money, and would keep its identity as a predominantly neighborhood and Catholic school.

"St. Sebastian is first and foremost a faith community," she said. "We wanted to make sure the people who attend our school are people committed to Catholic values . . . and to keep the neighborhood participation alive, and not have that in any way changed unnecessarily."

A higher percentage of the choice students come from outside the parish and neighborhood, and "when people come from a distance, it is more difficult for them to show up at a fish fry to volunteer or just be a part of daily life," McGrane-Sargent said.

#### A balancing act

In south side neighborhoods with exploding numbers of Latino families, the dynamic is different than in north side neighborhoods with largely African-American populations - simply because Latinos are more often Catholic.

Finding the right approach to teaching religion to non-Catholics can be a balancing act, says Brother Smith, who heads up educational efforts in the 10-county Milwaukee Archdiocese, in addition to his role at Messmer.

"As schools receive more children who are low-income and may not be Catholic, there is absolutely a discussion that must take place as to how you bridge their faith with Catholicism without demeaning them, and making them feel that it is wrong or less," he said. At St. Leo Catholic Urban Academy, only six of the 178 students are Catholic, at a school that was almost exclusively white, German and Catholic when it was founded in 1908. Nearly all the students today are African-American.

"We're ecumenical," said Sue Swieciak, who teaches classes on religion and faith at the school. "We're not teaching Catholicism. We're teaching about faith and Christian values."

Swieciak does not teach about the paschal mystery, the litany of the saints, or the assumption of Mary. The religion classes have a generic feel to them.

During one recent class, Swieciak asked the students to write a prayer to the Holy Spirit. A couple of the students looked bored, but Swieciak pushed forward with the lesson, asking the students to build mobiles cut from purple construction paper. The students attached strings of varying lengths to the oval shapes to show how the Holy Spirit influences their faith, moods and behavior.

For a parent who wants their child to learn Catholic practice, the ecumenical trend might be a turnoff. But for a student such as Daniel DeVougas, a Protestant who recently graduated from Marquette University High School, it shows what he sees as a willingness to embrace a larger community. Roughly 16% of the school's student body is non-Catholic.

Dan Quesnell, the director of admissions at Marquette, says for years the school has had a tradition of accommodating other religions. Overall, he said, the emphasis is not solely on Catholicism, but allowing students to express their own spirituality.

DeVougas said he does not take communion or participate in other rites of the Catholic Church. But he has given readings from the Bible during liturgies and participated in annual Catholic retreats. Muslim students also have read from the Qur'an at Marquette High liturgies. At commencement ceremonies last month, DeVougas received the highest award given a student at the Jesuit institution.

Says DeVougas: "The emphasis is on human values, a universal morality."

#### Diversifying staff

Beyond teaching theology, Milwaukee Catholic schools also struggle to diversify their teaching staffs, which historically have been white and accustomed to working with parish children.

Walk into many Milwaukee Catholic elementary schools, schools like St. Catherine of Alexandria, 8660 N. 76th Place, and you will see a nearly all-white teaching staff, many of them older women. This sharply contrasts to the diversity of the student body.

Catholic schools that want to diversify their teaching staffs often find it an uphill battle. The competition for qualified, minority teachers is keen, and the Catholic schools' pay target often is 80% of the salary of MPS teachers, or less.

"You have MPS. You have other private schools. You have a high demand and a low supply," Smith said. "It's not an excuse. It's a reality."

But Catholic and Lutheran schools that have successfully diversified their faculty and staff say the payoff is worth the effort.

When Steven Gerner took over as principal of Siloah Lutheran School four years ago, he realized that it wasn't "beneficial to have all-white teachers teaching all-black students."

He started by hiring an African-American administrator and some teaching assistants, and then three African-American teachers.

Gerner said the school's relationship with parents and reputation in the community improved. The dynamic in some of the classrooms also was better. "When you talk about student discipline and body language, there is less of a cultural divide there with the African-American teachers and teaching assistants."

To some parents, having teachers of the same race is crucial. For others, it's far less important than the overall diversity and quality of the staff.

The color of the staff, the curriculum for theology class, the ties to the parish: It's all part of a shifting identity for Catholic schools across the city.

"It's a paradigm that's unknown to us," Smith said. "And there is no single best way to do it."

Alan J. Borsuk of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.