Avenues of Choice:

The Tax Credit Scholarship and the Politics Behind the Marketplace

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AVENUES OF CHOICE:

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Abstract

K-12 education policy has become increasingly centralized and technocratic, while falling short of achieving policy objectives. Young people are generally maladjusted to the personal and professional challenges of contemporary life. Parents experience diminishing political influence over the form and substance of their children's education. I argue that improvement of the quality of private education requires greater emphasis on local political dynamics. School choice offers a free market alternative to a public school system which has largely ceded decision making to avowedly apolitical bureaucrats. Ironically, politics remains essential for the formation and regulation of the very policies that enable the marketplace to thrive as in the case of the tax credit scholarship. The politics behind the marketplace is brought to light by examining the local political relationships required to establish and maintain the Illinois Invest in Kids Tax Credit Scholarship (TCS), a school choice policy of unprecedented magnitude in Illinois. Furthermore, this research examines local dynamics among parents in the Archdiocese of Chicago, many of whom benefit from the aforementioned tax credit scholarships and manifest a variety of views on the teleological purpose of the parochial school. In a nation that is both diverse and increasingly polarized, successful governance of community schools depends upon discerning leaders and the practice of reinvigorated federalism.

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Epigraph

If we compare the modern world with that of the past, the loss of human experience involved in this development is extraordinarily striking. It is not only and not even primarily contemplation which has become an entirely meaningless experience. Thought itself, when it became "reckoning with consequences," became a function of the brain, with the result that electronic instruments are found to fulfil these functions much better than we ever could. […] *It is quite conceivable that the modern age – which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of activity – may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.* […] *But the action of the scientists, since it acts into nature from the standpoint of the universe and not into the web of human relationships, lacks the revelatory character of action as well as the ability to produce stories and become historical, which together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence. In this existentially important aspect, action, too, has become an experience for the privileged few, and these few who still know what it means to act may well be even fewer than the artists, their experience even rarer than the genuine experience of and love for the world.*

Hannah Arendt, "The *Vita Activa* and the Modern Age," *The Human Condition*

1. Introduction

We are at a crossroads. Faced with diverging strategies for the cultivation of childhood education, which avenue must we pursue in order to ensure that local schools thrive, while satisfying the interests of parents and encouraging the development of well-adjusted citizens? The following research argues that the path worthy of pursuit is one which emphasizes the autonomy of community schools combined with bottom-up strategies implemented by school leaders sensitive to local dynamics. These leaders must possess the skills to navigate not only the highly technical realm of education policy, but must also have the ability to communicate complexities to parents whose views matter, and are too often alienated from the management of their own children's education.

A fundamental shortcoming of the centralized bureaucratic approach to education management is its propensity to overlook the significance of local politics, characterized in accord with the definition provided by Sir Bernard Crick as the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and survival of the whole community. Those who favor the free market alternative of school choice to the public system must yet exercise vigilance for potential market failings, and cognizance of the fact that strong social relations and political regulations are the foundation of a stable market place. In line with the thinking of Karl Polanyi, a market is simply defined as a meeting place for the purpose of barter or buying and selling. Insofar as the practical realization of a self-regulating market is fallacious, social relations and state regulation are necessarily embedded in the economic system. Polanyi, in his 1944 work *The Great Transformation* describes the relationship between the social and economic systems:

> *Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system. The vital importance of the economic factor to the existence of society precludes any other result. For once the economic system is organized in separate institutions, based on specific motives and conferring a special status, society must be shaped in such a manner as to allow that system to function according to its own laws. This is the meaning of the familiar assertion that a market economy can function only in a market society.* (57)

Polanyi further reminds readers of the role of social authority in regulating markets:

> *The "freeing" of trade performed by mercantilism merely liberated trade from particularism, but at the same time extended the scope of regulation. The economic system was submerged in general social relations; markets were merely an accessory feature of an institutional setting controlled and regulated more than ever by social authority.* (67) [i]

The reality that social authority, or politics, is ever necessary for the implementation and development of market-based solutions to social problems is exemplified in this research by a case study of the Illinois Invest in Kids Tax Credit Scholarship (TCS), a school choice initiative of unprecedented magnitude in Illinois. This is an education and economic tax policy which depends on the authority of social and political support, without which the school choice market in Illinois could neither exist nor thrive.

Receipt and distribution of the scholarship funds are processed by scholarship granting organizations (SGO's) such as Empower Illinois, which manage the necessary technical and bureaucratic information flowing through the multi-way intersection of tax policy, education policy, state legislators, private donors, local private schools, the Catholic Church, and Illinois parents of varying social, economic, and religious identities. Although this mediating function of the SGO may at first appear mechanical, in practice its execution requires the work of politically insightful individuals such as Juan Rangel, the Senior Director of Community and Government Affairs at Empower Illinois. Mr.

Rangel is a key figure in Chicago politics today, thanks to both his robust understanding of the technical demands education policy, and to his direct engagement with local constituents. Mobilizing the support and the vote of parents and community leaders who can directly benefit from the Illinois Invest in Kids TCS is crucial for launching such a program.

Furthermore, this research demonstrates how knowledge of local interests combined with decentralized solutions is advantageous for managing the parochial schools of the Chicago Archdiocese. This grassroots-style direction is presently championed by Superintendent of Schools Greg Richmond, whose background in politics aberrates from the norm of placing administrators in the role of superintendent, and underscores the value of political insight for addressing tough challenges such as the crisis of enrollment in parochial schools and the decline of public opinion toward Catholic schools as a viable K-12 option for religious and non-religious families alike. This state of affairs is the result of diverse factors, not all of which are political. Nevertheless, applied political awareness has allowed programs such as the Invest in Kids TCS to effectively combine the historic mission of American Catholic schools as suppliers of education to immigrant children with the widely embraced mission of promoting social justice in education by means of school choice.

The question of how to provide personalized high quality education to American students across social and economic strata speaks to a drive for social justice at the intersection of the free market approach to school choice and the Catholic Church. This phenomenon is visible in the participation of Illinois' majority Catholic private schools in the Invest in Kids TCS Program. Yet, even successful expansion of access to schools is

only part of the battle. The appropriate substance and form of an accessible education must be divulged.

This essay examines what it means to provide high quality education to young people such that children emerge from their studies as well-rounded independent thinkers, conscious of democratic society and eager to strengthen it with their contributions. I argue that this kind of civic education is best fostered by a personalized and qualitative approach, as opposed to impersonal quantitative assessments based on questionable values and metrics.

1.1 The Problem: the bureaucratization of education policy – absent the achievement of policy objectives

Contemporary education policy has become increasingly bureaucratic. Test scores and data-based evaluations largely determine the success or failure of children in American public schools. Yet young people often remain ill-equipped for the personal and professional challenges of today's world. The persistence of this challenge reveals that policy objectives have yet to be achieved as technocratic reforms have attempted to exchange data-driven science for the political art of education, characterized by localized solutions and nuanced approaches from leaders who possess adequate or advanced familiarity with community dynamics and preferences.

In a locally-controlled community-centered environment, parents have greater autonomy and more direct political influence over the form and substance of their children's education than in the case of a school subject to centralized top-down bureaucratic control. Both politics and bureaucracy are in themselves terms of neutral value, as noted by Brookings Institute scholars John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe:

> *Virtually all organizations of any size are in some sense bureaucratic. They rely on hierarchy, division of labor, specialization, formal rules, and the like in order to coordinate and control their members toward common ends, and it is clear enough that some measure of bureaucracy is often quite necessary for effective social action. Similarly, the public schools are no different from government agencies in being political. All organizations in the public sector are shaped and surrounded by democratic politics, and, in some form at least, this is clearly necessary if democracy is to work.*[ii]

Nevertheless, severe problems in public schools can be discovered within the parameters of bureaucracy and politics. Here we find the inefficiency of centralized bureaucratic control compared with the political autonomy of local schools. Local autonomy tends to be more easily harnessed by private schools that have the leeway to

follow independent regulation and cater to a specific parental customer base according to a free market model. That being said, educational organizations within markets are not necessarily decentralized. Chubb and Moe explain:

> *While markets decentralize effective decision making authority to suppliers and consumers of services, they do not automatically give rise to organizational structures that are themselves decentralized. The economic system obviously boasts all sorts of organizational forms, some of them highly centralized bureaucracies in which subordinate levels of organization have little discretion. Presumably, an educational market system might do the same if centralized organization were an efficient way to supply educational services that satisfy parents and students. As a rule, however, this is unlikely to be so.*

There are three primary aspects in which local autonomy is superior to centralized bureaucracy when it comes to governance of schools: technical requirements, administrative rules, and the impetus to respond to the preferences of the customer. Organizations seeking to foster successful educational environments for children have incentives to embrace a decentralized and autonomous model based on these aspects, the benefits of which are otherwise weakened by centralized top-down regulation by bureaucrats who are unfamiliar with local school culture and needs.

- **Technical requirements:** Education is based on personal relationships and continual feedback. Success depends largely on the skills and experience of teachers and, especially, on the autonomy of teachers to make autonomous decisions as professionals in their own right. In this way, the technical resources are inherently present in schools from the bottom of the organization's hierarchy, giving little additional purpose to higher level administrative units.

- **Administrative rules:** Top-down administrative control is a feature of effective bureaucracy, which is commonly built around specific rules, rewards and sanctions. According to Chubb and Moe, "all are rendered highly problematic in education, because good education and behaviors conducive to it are inherently difficult to measure in an objective, quantifiable and formal manner."

- **The customer is always right:** Teachers and school staff members who interact with parents and students regularly know better how to keep their "clients" happy

than administrators who are necessarily removed from the day-to-day of the schools.

Although the personal and academic results of this autonomous influence from parents and teachers are not readily quantifiable nor are they easily applicable to standard metrics of assessment, they are often a more precise reflection of local interests and values. Chubb and Moe describe the evolution away from local control of schools toward greater bureaucratization of the education system. The authors note that prior to these reforms, there was nothing that could meaningfully be called a public "system" of education.

> *Education was about simple, important things that ordinary people cared about and could understand.* […] *Because local schools were bound up with family, neighborhood, and community, and because teaching was intrinsically anchored in personal relationships and experiences, people naturally believed that they could and should be able to govern their own educational affairs.* […] *This was not to last.*

What has replaced this model is the dominant approach of today by which much of this local autonomous control has been ceded to education experts and social scientists, essentially obviating local politics from the educational equation.

For example, the Chicago Archdiocese hired Greg Richmond for the role of Superintendent of Schools in 2019 at the peak of a critical enrollment crisis that prompted the Archdiocese to reconsider its former strategy of almost exclusively hiring administrators for the job. Superintendent Richmond hails from a background in politics rather than educational administration. The precedent of hiring administrators beholden to practices of rational or scientific management partakes of a trend that has been consistently practiced across most public schools and some private schools since the Progressive era. Chubb and Moe describe this evolution:

> *Institutional reformers in the Progressive era would revolutionize American education over the first half of the twentieth century, creating a true system of public schools – and eroding school diversity and autonomy. The traditional explanation for what happened is one of inevitable progress. Reformers and educational leaders, dedicated to the goal of effective education and possessed of the best scientific knowledge about how to achieve it, succeeded in building a rational system of schools for the nation as a whole, triumphing over the parochialism, fragmentation, and party machines of an unenlightened past.* (4)

In particular, the effects of this emphasis on rational school systems had an effect on the demands of superintendents insofar as they were to be held administratively responsible for the measurable success of a given school or group of schools. In his 1962 book *Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Social Forces That Have Shaped the Administration of the Public Schools,* University of Chicago scholar Raymond E. Callahan comments on the vulnerability of school administrators in light of educational reforms that embraced scientific management above all else:

> *The sudden propulsion of scientific management into prominence and the subsequent saturation of American society with the idea of efficiency together with the attacks on education by the popular journals made it certain that public education would be influenced greatly. But the* extent *of this influence was increased by the vulnerability of leaders in the schools – the superintendents – to public opinion and pressure. As early as 1900 the professional survival of school superintendents depended on their ability to appease their most powerful and vocal critics.* (53) […] *It is difficult to see how the leaders in education could have done more to acknowledge the urgency and importance they attached to the need to apply scientific management to schools.* (64) [iii]

Superintendent Richmond's particular ability to navigate strategic interest groups would prove key to managing parish schools during a crisis of enrollment impacted by the onslaught of the pandemic and the diverse expectations of parents with regard to the mandate of medical masks as a protective health measure. Variegation among these outlooks reflected different political beliefs, as well as different expressions of Catholic

identity and opinion regarding the teleological purpose of a Catholic school. The case study shows that the particular and often diverging needs of these constituents are best addressed by decentralized grassroots response rather than top-down bureaucratic regulation.

Crises in school management such as low enrollment can begin to be effectively addressed by politically savvy individuals such as Mr. Richmond. Other challenges exist, especially at the intersection between Catholic schools and the fulfillment of an historical social justice mission of seeking to expand access to private schools for low income students. At the state level, these challenges require the implementation of political policies designed to introduce and to manage economic solutions to social problems. In fact, many of the schools of the Chicago Archdiocese today benefit from the Illinois Invest in Kids Tax Credit Scholarship (TCS), a school choice policy designed to provide scholarships for low income students to attend private schools across the state, including but not limited to private religious schools. This educational tax policy, too, has come to fruition largely thanks to on-the-ground work of individual political actors behind the marketplace.

1.2 A Proposed Solution: School choice – a market-based alternative, which boasts greater accountability and more personalized results

The school choice movement has gained momentum as a counterweight to the public school system's overwhelming monopoly of K-12 education. The school choice market promises that increased competition among educational models creates stronger incentives to serve the needs of parents, and yields better educational results for students in both public and non-public schools. Polanyi diagnosed that the role of state intervention in trade coincided with the emergence of the dangerous dyad of monopoly and competition.

> *State intervention, which had freed trade from the confined of the privileged town, was now called to deal with two closely connected dangers which the town had successfully met, namely, monopoly and competition. […] That competition ultimately lead to monopoly was a truth well understood at the time, while monopoly was feared even more than later as it often concerned the necessities of life and thus easily waxed into a peril to the community. All-around regulation of economic life, only this time on a national, no more on a merely municipal scale, was the given remedy.* (67)

School choice is a form of regulation that seeks to break up educational monopoly by providing parents with a plethora of choices, such as private Catholic schools, Jewish day schools, charter schools, vocational-technical schools, homeschools, and "microschools," to name a few of the options, which seem ever to multiply. Among these, Catholic parochial schools stand out for both their historic track record of providing education for the children of immigrants, and for provoking First Amendment debates around the constitutionality of providing public funding for private religious schools.[iv]

The intellectual origins of the free market framework of school choice in the last century are attributed to conservative economist Milton Friedman, who explored the

subject in works such as his 1955 essay, "The Role of Government in Education." Early implementation of school choice is often framed by critics as a tool used by segregationists to maintain independent education of the races. In a recent three-pronged review of anti-school choice books for *The New York Review,* titled "The Dark History of School Choice," former Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch writes:

> *In the late 1950s and early 1960s, seven states across the South—Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia—enacted voucher and tuition tax credit plans to subsidize white families fleeing integrating public schools. [Steve] Suitts writes that white flight was so great that by 1965, "there were nearly one million Southern private school students. Almost all were white." Promoters of school choice prefer to trace their ideological lineage to Friedman instead of southern segregationists, but their ideas overlap.*[v]

Be that as it may, school choice was also embraced by civil rights activists who sought alternatives to the ineffective public education that was available to black students in the immediate aftermath of the desegregation following *Brown v. Board of Education.* School choice and social justice advocate Dr. Howard Fuller describes the attraction of vouchers as policy mechanisms for expanding school choice in his memoir *No Struggle No Progress: A Warrior's Life from Black Power to Education Reform*:

> *Many of us in the community were searching for radical ideas that would give poor and working-class parents alternatives to public schools that were failing their children, and a proposal to support publicly-financed vouchers that allowed children from low-income families to attend private schools emerged. At the time, I knew nothing of the history of vouchers and had never heard of economist Milton Friedman, the Nobel prize winner who is generally given credit for first suggesting in the mid-1950's that tax dollars for education should follow the child. He argued that such competition for those tax dollars would force public schools to improve. I'd eventually learn, though, that conservatives like Friedman were not the only ones trying to advance the idea of vouchers. By the early 1960s, others on the opposite end of the political spectrum also were making the argument that vouchers were a viable alternative for getting around the bureaucracy and the ineffectiveness of many public schools.* (205)[vi]

Vouchers are just one of the policy mechanisms which were designed to help realize these "radical ideas" in education by expanding financial access to more parents across socio-economic strata.[vii] Vouchers consist of a direct payment from the government to the family of a student, to be spent on tuition for a private school. Another policy mechanism belonging to this first wave of school choice options is the tax credit. A tax credit allows a state-approved percentage of money to be donated to private schools, and to be deducted from the taxes of an individual citizen or organization otherwise rendered to the state.

Throughout the 1960s, reforms in tax policy gained popularity as efficient economic fixes for a host of social challenges. Tax policy scholar Stanley Surrey observes in his essay, "Federal Tax Policy in the 1960s," that "those seeking certain goals keep turning to the tax system as a vehicle for their ends.[viii] Thus tax credits are sought for college education, anti-pollution machinery, man power training, underground transmission lines, state income taxes, and a variety of other objectives." Surrey cautions, "their sponsors never seek to test the link between the tax credit and the objective, but instead rely on the appeal of tax credits and the social worth of the objectives." (Surrey, *Buffalo Law Review,* 489). Surrey also admits that the increasing complexity of the U.S. tax code presents difficulty in the long term forecasting of effects, even for trained tax economists. The marriage of tax policy with education policy remains in vogue.

Today, a second wave of school choice policy mechanisms has emerged, this time with greater awareness of potential objections from critics. The tax credit has evolved into a "tax credit scholarship" (TCS), designed with remarkable agility to navigate

potential constitutional challenges. Receipt and distribution of TCS funds depends on the existence of a non-governmental third party called a scholarship granting organization (SGO). SGO's are equipped to receive funding from private individuals or organizations (incentivized by a state-approved tax credit), and distribute those funds to participating private schools to cover scholarships for students, often from low income families. These families apply directly to the SGO for subsidies, and are able to send their children to participating private schools without directly receiving the funds themselves.

One example of such a policy is the Illinois Invest in Kids Tax Credit Scholarship (TCS) Program. With a $100 million cap in annual donations approved by the state budget, the Invest in Kids TCS has the greatest magnitude of any school choice policy in Illinois to date. The Invest in Kids TCS allows donors to give up to $1 million in individual contributions to a private school of their choice, and to receive a 75 percent tax credit, or up to $750,000, in tax return from what they would otherwise owe the state. These funds are processed by approved SGOs throughout the state. Some of these SGO's have explicit religious affiliations with the mostly religious private schools in Illinois. Other more prominent SGO's, such as Empower Illinois, are without any formal language tying them to Church or State.

The functions of the SGO are manifold. Overtly, the SGO serves as mediator between parents, students, schools, policy makers, and the state department of revenue. This function is facilitated by the ability of the members of the SGO to process the highly technical and bureaucratic language of education policy and tax policy makers, while communicating these complex details to parents and constituents. Another explicit function of the SGO is that of a lobbying entity. Despite the highly technical and

impersonal character of economic policy mechanisms, the SGO remains politically equipped to move policy makers and community leaders to support school choice policies. These community leaders often overlap with Church and other religious communities, invested in the vitality of private religious schools. Implicitly, the secular and non-governmental SGO can also amount to a front-facing workaround for the involvement of Church and State, despite the messy political overlap that inevitably occurs behind the scenes.

The overlap of religious ideology and school choice has received renewed attention in light of the activities of former U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, described by *The Washington Post* as a "stalwart ally" to President Trump until DeVos's resignation following the January 6 insurrection.[ix] DeVos's open alignment with right-wing Evangelical communities and anti-woke curriculum rhetoric often raises alarm bells from those who view private religious schools as vehicles for indoctrination and who view school choice policies as tax loopholes for the rich.

It is a curious fact that the language of "choice" has been captured by the left-of-center in pro-choice discourse around reproductive rights, whereas school choice (generally identified today with right-of-center politics despite growing bipartisan support) applies the term to education. In both cases, employment of the term "choice" appeals to an ultra-American penchant to believe that having more options equates to having better options, and that better choices can be made when the options available can be personalized.[x]

1.3 The Catch: Local politics remain essential for establishing policies that enable the practice of the school choice market

In its own way, the *laissez-faire* marketplace of schools boasts a clean, systematized, economic alternative, not only to bureaucratized public schools, but also to the messy politics of earlier community-run schools.[xi] By stating this I mean to allot some credence to the intentions of reformers who sought to diminish the autonomy of community schools which they fairly believed to be "parochial" rather than cosmopolitan and which were perhaps "unenlightened" in the words of Chubb and Moe. It is an ugly truth that parents do not always make the right best decisions for their children, and logical to imagine that inviting external experts to manage schools instead of parents and local school boards alone might yield better results. The messy reality that people may not always make the best decisions for themselves or their children enters the market equation when economists or education policy makers are tempted to regard parents as predictable customers who will rationally act in their own best interest.

In their 1978 work *Education By Choice: The Case for Family Control*, University of California scholars Coons and Sugarman bluntly state:

> […] *No one knows how the poor would react if empowered to make significant choices defining their own future – as in the case of education.* [...] *If which class suffers most is in doubt, it is nevertheless clear that society's general presumption that parents should speak on behalf of their children is simply abandoned with respect to education. The combination of compulsory school attendance, the public school administrative structure, and the taxing apparatus displace the normal parental-choice standard and substitute a presumption that only rich parents are the best judges of their child's educational interest. With respect to food, clothing, and shelter, all families are fit to choose; in matters respecting basic loyalties, intellect, and fundamental values – in short, where the child's humanity is implicated – the state must dominate the prime hours of the average child's day. Whether a distinction of this sort among economic classes is good public policy is the basic issue.* (27) [xii]

Coons and Sugarman go on to explore a scenario in which the desires of parents directly contradict the ends of a social goal established by the government. For example, imagine the government has decided to instill in young students a fervent martial spirit for the sake of enhancing national military power, yet a significant portion of parents prefer to "indoctrinate their children with pacifism" thus frustrating the public goal. Professor Peter Skerry of Boston College criticizes this utilitarian view of the family in a 1979 review that otherwise lauds Coons and Sugarman's oeuvre as "by far the most thoughtful contribution to the continuing debate over vouchers." Professor Skerry writes:

> *In short, Coons and Sugarman's interest in the family is essentially pragmatic: they advocate family choice primarily as a means of decentralizing educational decision-making away from legislators and bureaucrats. That is, of course, a worthy objective. But the authors seem to lack any principled commitment to the family as an institution, as well as any awareness of the possible consequences of their legalistic proposals. Surely a state that can routinely enforce children's rights against their parents will do so and, in doing so, will aggrandize itself. Indeed, policies such as the authors advocate threaten to reduce the family to an appendage of the welfare state, valued only for its efficiency in realizing welfare objectives*. [xiii]

The good news is that markets are set up by the work of human hands and of deliberate political action.[xiv] Free markets for education are not abstract economic schemas, but rather living communities with parents who deserve to be heard by leaders equipped to intelligently incorporate parents' demands into feasible public policies. In practice, this means that the imperfect preferences of humans ought to be accounted for, rather than sublimated or reduced to pure utility. With this realization, it is critical for education reformers to recall the inherent value of the family institution, without reducing it to a practical unit alone within an impersonal economic scheme. Furthermore, the ideal of competition within the market place should, in practice, allow the best ideas and most

innovative interests to rise to the top of the system leaving behind those most at odds with both the public goal and the popular preference.

1.4 Case Studies: Social dynamics among parochial schools of the Chicago Archdiocese, and the Illinois Invest In Kids Tax Credit Scholarship

By taking a closer look at community dynamics between the parents and parishes of the Chicago Archdiocese and bringing to light the local political activity surrounding the Illinois Invest in Kids Tax Credit Scholarship (TCS), Illinois' first school choice-driven policy, I shed light on an important aspect of the creation and practical implementation of school choice policy. Namely, I show that what may superficially appear as a highly mechanized and bureaucratic process of processing and delivering tax credits is, in fact, a living political experiment, contingent upon the cultivation of grassroots support by community leaders.

Furthermore, I offer an important corrective to the common belief that education policy is best approached by scientific and centralized administrative processes. Instead, I recommend greater emphasis on local dynamics, a position which is corroborated by a case study of the variegated political outlooks of parents of parish school students in the Chicago Archdiocese.

In this study which strongly advocates for the importance of taking into consideration the needs and preferences of parents, I am nevertheless conscious of the potential limitations of this approach. Like it or not, the realm of K-12 education policy can feel remarkably complicated, even for experts. From this reality it is reasonable to infer that parents who are understandably preoccupied with day-to-day management of their own households cannot be expected to keep up with all the ins-and-outs of which education policy opportunities best serve them and their children. To do so is likely to prove challenging even for the most well-educated parents with the most resources. To do so is likely unrealistic for parents with limited education, time, and financial support.

I argue that effectively expressing parents' needs in education policy while accounting for challenges and requirements that may be out of their purview requires education reformers to be fluent in both technical policies and local dynamics in order to strike an appropriate balance in policy prescriptions.

1.5 The Argument in a Nutshell: Acute awareness of local dynamics is required to successfully navigate the K-12 education landscape

The management of K-12 education amounts to a discussion of the form and substance of learning that directly informs the behaviors and values of the nation's youth. In all likelihood, this conversation will always be a deeply personal affair and, consequently, one that merits a reciprocally personal approach rather than a one-size-fits-all solution.[xv] The work of formulating political strategies best suited for local communities is an exercise that is more anthropological than technological.

This approach requires experiencing the locales in question, and becoming acquainted with the people who live within them. This is made possible by asking questions and investigating histories, mores, as well as present interests. It is important to be aware that views may differ significantly not only between neighboring school communities, but also within the communities themselves. These differences need not be generalized, but instead invite the education policy reformer or school leader to craft an approach that is cognizant of the nuance in present opinions.

According to British political theorist Sir Bernard Rowland Crick, "Politics arises from accepting the fact of the simultaneous existence of different groups, hence different interests and different traditions, within a territorial unit under a common rule." (18). He provides the following definition:

> *Politics, then, can be simply defined as the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and survival of the whole community. And, to complete the formal definition, a political system is that type of government where politics proves successful in ensuring reasonable stability and order.* (21)

Local politics are an element of enduring importance for education management, especially given the intense politicization of education discourse. At the same time, the political landscape of today demands that special attention be paid to differing values among communities. Today's hyper-polarized environment requires that policy makers and school reform leaders become intimately familiar with the ideological values of parents and families in order both to mitigate conflict and formulate innovations.

Both the technocratic domain of public education regulation and even the economic market-based solution of school choice are culpable of touting a seemingly simpler way out around messy interest-based politics. Individuals with political skills and awareness of local interests are needed to ensure the best results for parents and students, by reflecting authentic diversity of opinion. Furthermore, it is important to be aware that metrics we use to inform policy making directly reflect our society's willingness and capacity to govern a society composed of both shared values and variegated outlooks.

2. Christopher Lasch detects a decline in education of American youth

"To see the modern world from the point of view of a parent is to see it in the worst possible light." (33) [xvi] So wrote Christopher Lasch in 1991, reflecting upon the challenges he and his wife faced as they considered how best to educate their four children in the United States of the mid-seventies. Around this time, the historian and social critic undertook to investigate the question of whether changing patterns of family life had not brought about long term changes in personality structure. This inquiry was born from "a belief that social order no longer required the informed consent of citizens." Lasch observed a world in which he hoped to raise his children as informed and well-rounded individuals, able to contribute to and benefit from a democratic land of promised opportunity. He was met with a bleak picture:

> *Every form of authority, including parental authority, seemed to be in serious decline. Children now grew up without effective parental supervision or guidance, under the tutelage of the mass media and the "helping professions." Such a radical shift in the pattern of "socialization," as the sociologists called it, could be expected to have important effects on personality, the most disturbing of which would presumably be a weakening of the capacity for independent judgment, initiative, and self-discipline, on which democracy had always been understood to depend.* (31)

Although he did not identify the language of school choice to describe his behavior, Lasch was effectively engaging in school choice when he intentionally opted out of the public system to instead adopt his preferred personal alternative for his children. With little confidence in American schools, Lasch chose to homeschool his children as an alternative. He chose to emphasize teaching qualitative values geared towards individual development. Lasch admits:

> *We had no great confidence in the schools; we knew that if our children were to acquire any of the things we set store by–joy in learning, eagerness*

> *for experience, the capacity for love and friendship–they would have to learn the better part at home. For that very reason, however, home was not to be thought of simply as the "nuclear family." Its hospitality would have to extend far and wide, stretching its emotional resources to the limit.* (32)

Lasch possessed the educational and financial resources to create a different option for schooling his children, yet he still encountered obstacles. The first obstacle was related to limitations of resources. For Lasch these were emotional resources. However, in the case of other families, engaging in school choice can place strenuous demands on material resources.

The emotional resources of Lasch's nuclear, affluent, and well-educated family were stretched thin by attempting to take on the responsibility typically shouldered by society and schools. Lasch was an Ivy-League-educated historian and social critic, having attended Harvard University for his BA and Columbia University for his MA and PhD. His father was a Rhodes Scholar. Lasch's wife, Nell Commager, was the daughter of Henry Steele Commager, a University of Chicago-educated historian and liberal intellectual. *If the emotional resources of an affluent family hailing from generations of college-educated parents were stretched thin by an earnest attempt to account for the void within American culture and education, how much more acute is likely to be the challenge of a low income, minority, or immigrant family?*

In response to this dilemma, it is important to remember that even if alternative school options are ready to accept students, it remains necessary to create and implement policy measures with understanding of needs of specific communities and families. To address gaps in access to schools and to facilitate the expansion of educational opportunity demands knowledge of the limits and availability of resources within specific locales. In this case, Lasch serves as a model of a parent with relatively unconstrained

material opportunity to maximize educational choice for his family for the purpose of comparison. We see that even Lasch faced the challenge of having the emotional resources of his family stretched thin by the challenge of opting to craft his own preferred educational experience for his children. Still, another core issue arose, this time in the form of the broader culture's understanding of personal success, defined by metrics and institutions, rather than by richness of personal development.

This second obstacle arose even after Lasch had completed the home schooling of his children. Lasch had succeeded in raising well-rounded children according to his standards and those of his wife. However, by accomplishing his own goals, Lasch had effectively condemned his children to failure in a world where the metrics of success have been warped. Lasch described his predicament:

> *It was only gradually that it became clear that none of my own children, having been raised not for upward mobility but for honest work, could reasonably hope for any conventional kind of success. None of them could hope for abundant, ready-made opportunities, in other words, in some honorable line of work that would make the best use of their abilities, provide them the satisfaction that comes with the exercise of responsibility, and bring them some measure of financial security and public appreciation. Success was no longer to be had on such terms. The "best and brightest" were those who knew how to exploit institutions for their own advantage and to make exceptions for themselves instead of playing by the rules.* (33)

Lasch was noticing the effects of a broad social shift away from viewing the formation of the independent democratic citizen as an end in itself, in favor of the efficient and productive social contributor, or a member of the "helping professions" which Lasch first described. British political theorist Sir Bernard Crick in his 1993 book *In Defence of Politics* points out that to identify the token image of a citizen in a given era serves to illuminate the values of the civilization in question.

> *All civilizations, and the doctrines of government they keep, create some image of the type of citizen they most need and value. The world of the Greek polis had the hero, the man of arete, the active 'doer of deeds and speaker of words' in the public realm; early Christianity had the humble, suffering, other-worldly man, the saint. Medieval Christendom had the knight and the priest, ideally fused as the crusader or the member of an order of knighthood. The English in modern times have been torn between the gentleman and the businessman, just as the Americans have been torn between the common man and the businessman. The Nazis had their Aryan superman, and the Communists have their party man (sub-category, Stakhanovite worker).* (92)

When he identified the ineffectiveness of the tutelage of children by mass media and the helping professions, Christopher Lasch was observing the evolution of this image of the citizen amid our industrialized and increasingly technocratic civilization. The roles of the helping professions are deemed important insofar as their contributions to society are measurable. The engineer is the archetype of this sort of helping profession, which Crick identifies as being especially praiseworthy in our industrial age dominated by technology:

> *To those who see all industrial civilizations as on the common path of 'technology', the typical citizen is the engineer. The engineer is to be the true hero-citizen of our times: he will rescue us from the dilemmas of politics and the pangs of hunger (and envy?) if 'left alone to get on with his job' free from, in various circumstances, the intrusions of the politicians, the businessmen, the bureaucrats, the generals or the priests. The engineer is what every boy will want to be. The engineer is what every father will be ashamed of not being.* (94)

That the engineer or expert ought to be left alone to do his job without the meddlesome ways of politics – none were immune to this line of rhetoric throughout the COVID-19 crisis as news outlets proclaimed that if only we "stuck to the science," the whole mess would finally disappear. Without dwelling on this particular example, the broader transformation in question is relevant to our discussion of education policy insofar as the dominating social opinion on who is most useful to the *polis* directly

informs the vision of policy experts who are responsible for changes in education management. Crick predicted that education itself would begin to reorient toward increased production of this sought-after form of citizenry.

> *The engineer is what society will strain itself to produce through the schools and colleges – and he will be trained, by accident or design, in a kind of aristocratic seclusion from, and contempt for, other types of education. The engineer will try to reduce all education to technique and training, and its object will be to produce social engineers and to transform society into something radically more efficient and effective.* (94)

Lasch was unable to mold his children into one of Crick's engineers. Prepared not for upward mobility but for honest work, they were not geared toward becoming the measurably efficient workers, preferred by the institutions of today. Crick reminds us:

> *The engineer is not interested in ordinary politics; he thinks in terms of invention and construction, not of maintenance and management. But he will be naturally attracted to doctrines which attack 'mere politics' and to régimes which have shown great technological advances and which have all-intrusive ideologies claiming to be scientific.* (39)

The technocratic impetus to embrace scientific metrics reflects a broader cultural obsession with metrics that tends to be expressed in school management as a particular penchant for administration. Crick, in his own context, was cautioning against a grave and extreme potential for totalitarianism or a cumulative effect born, in part, from the continued misappropriation of science as a general theory of society. Crick writes:

> *Totalitarian ideologies are, in large part, a perversion of science. […] Ideology arises when science is thought of as the only type of human knowledge and is then misapplied to government in the name of some general theory of society. […] Let us call such perversions of genuine scientific activity, all attempts to apply science beyond its own sphere, 'scientism'.*

I am not making the claim that the United States of today is a totalitarian regime. Far from it, I believe that the politics of freedom and diversity are active and alive in this

country – especially at the local community level. That being said, the value of local communities' beliefs and practices cannot be overlooked by policy makers and social reformers without negative consequences for the well-being of those who reside in those communities.[xvii] "Fractured" and "divided" are words commonly used to describe the landscape of American political life today. Although the extreme polarization of opinions gives cause for concern, the fact that there are radically different outlooks being vocalized by the people is, at base, a good sign. For Crick, politics is the problem of maintaining any order whatsoever within a complex social structure that houses differing opinions:

> *But the establishing of political order is not just any order at all; it marks the birth, or the recognition of freedom. For politics represents at least some tolerance of differing truths, some recognition of government is possible, indeed best conducted, amid the open canvassing of rival interests. Politics are the public actions of free men. Freedom is the privacy of men from public actions.* (18)

In the domain of educational choice, a vibrant private sphere provides a healthy and diverse alternative to the broad reach of the public system. Yet there is a deeper lesson to be drawn from Crick's description of politics as toleration for different truths. Even in a free society, differences need to be carefully mitigated and a vigilant watch kept out for the symptoms of scientism which can be found in totalitarian and free societies alike. Crick cautions: "Scientism can also exist in free societies in the respectable guise of academic social science."

I take the claim that social science is at risk of scientism as an important reminder for the methodological approach to my own research. In part, this is why I am intent on counter-examining claims derived from statistical analysis and academic books with on-the-ground field research and insight from local individuals. It is this hands-on approach

that led me to discover some of Crick's claims corroborated by dynamics among the local parish schools of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

In particular, I observed that the Chicago Archdiocese, otherwise engaged in the tendency to separate administration from politics in its local school districts, experienced a sobering reminder of the ineffectiveness of this approach. Schools across Chicago have been plagued by severe declines in enrollment, and parochial schools have not been exempt, their plight exacerbated by internal institutional difficulties including declines in the number of religious teachers and high turnover among secular replacements. In 2019, Greg Richmond was chosen for the role of Superintendent of Schools of the Chicago Archdiocese, breaking with the precedent of having hired mostly former Catholic school principals to fill the position.

3. Local politics in parochial schools of the Chicago Archdiocese

Crick describes a form of technological thinking that is not scientism, but which can express itself as faith in the practice of administration above and distinct from that of politics:

> *There is also a type of technological thinking which may have little to do with scientism: those who think that administration can always be clearly separated from politics, and that if this is done, there is really very little, if anything, that politicians can do that administrators cannot do better. This view is very familiar.* (107)

Crick goes on to explain that we are often tempted to believe that the "pseudo-science of public administration" can save us from political complexities, an outlook that is, at root, technological.

> *Why is this view technological? It is technological because its holder thinks he knows best what is wanted because, like the engineer, it is his task to do what is wanted. It does not matter that he may attack technique in the sense of learning how to administer from books or some pseudo-science of public administration; for he is still tempted to believe that, as the fruit of experience, he possesses a unique knowledge which can be applied and can govern without politics. He thinks he has a technique of rule which is not arbitrary and yet which is not political.* (108)

Greg Richmond, Superintendent of Schools of the Archdiocese of Chicago, came from a political background, not an administrative one. Although Mr. Richmond had worked as Chief Officer of the New Schools Office of Chicago Public Schools for ten years, and served as President and CEO of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) for almost fifteen years, the bulk of his experience was derived from the world of political practice. Mr. Richmond worked for years in Springfield in the Illinois State Senate, and then as Special Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy in the Clinton Administration. Even when Mr. Richmond had worked in the realm of charter schools in Idaho, it had been as Strategic Advisor. The skills of a political

strategist were exactly those necessary to engage with the complex situation in the schools of the Archdiocese.

"My background is not typical for the job of Superintendent," Mr. Richmond shared with me by phone, in early November 2021. "I have never been a teacher or a principle. All Superintendents previously were Catholic school principals, but the Superintendent job is different today. What is needed is managing and leading change in a complex environment." What distinguished the task facing Mr. Richmond was the severity of decline in the institution of local parochial schools, and the crisis in understanding how to manage it.

Today, the Chicago Archdiocese has 194 Catholic schools within its geographic boundaries of Cook and Lake County, and the archdiocese is responsible for over 150 of these, with the remaining schools privately run. Prior, there had been more schools under the dominion of the archdiocese. In 2014, eleven schools of the Chicago Archdiocese had been consolidated or closed, affecting 1,280 students and almost 230 teachers and staff. Five more schools closed in 2020, and another four in 2021. Mr. Richmond specified that comparing the problems of parochial schools within the context of the country is "highly contingent upon location." He explained, "Areas in the North or Northeast are stagnant and declining, South and Southwest improving. Catholic education in Chicago for 50 years has had declining enrollment."

These trends in Chicago, the second largest Catholic school system (after Boston), reflected a growing national aversion to Catholic schools. According to Dale McDonald, Policy Director of the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), the height of Catholic school enrollment nationwide was in 1960 with more than 5.2 million students

enrolled, compared to less than 1.8 million in 2019. Nathan Glazer, in a 2014 *EducationNext* review of Brinig and Garnett's *Lost Classroom, Lost Community: Catholic Schools' Importance in Urban America,* writes: "In Chicago, the major site of the research reported on in *Lost Classrooms, Lost Community*, 130 Catholic schools closed or were merged with others between 1984 and 2004. The Archdiocese of Chicago educated 300,000 students in 1965; by 2012 that number was reduced to 87,000. Of these, 22 percent were not Catholic, and 30 percent were "racial minorities" (one assumes Latino as well as black)."[xviii]

Mr. Richmond described what he witnessed upon arrival to the Chicago Archdiocese as, "kind of schizophrenic." He emphasized, "You can't underestimate the concern about declining enrollment." These downturns in enrollment were the result of a range of social and historical factors.

At the broadest level, American society has become increasingly secularized since the 1960s. A 2020 Gallup poll indicated that U.S. Church membership has dipped below a majority for the first time, at 47 percent, since the study was first conducted in 1937, finding a 73 percent attendance rate. In particular, the schools in the Catholic Church were losing students in droves as a result of emerging evidence of numerous sexual assault and pedophilia scandals from within the Church, revealed throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.[xix] From a managerial perspective, the Church, like other institutions with an educational function, was not immune to the allure of the administrative claim to fix-all. Yet, before these forces, which were reasonably pitted against the success of the Church's institutional mission, an effective path forward for salvaging parochial schools would have to be political, rather than purely administrative.

"So many players and dimensions to leading any school system, including this one. Explicit work, implicit work. Explicit actors, implicit actors. Other Church Archdiocese members, external people…" rattled off Mr. Richmond as he described the landscape of interests which he faced. "Some are friends, some are foes, and some are allegedly objective reporters. My background is in navigating these things: players and interests."

When Mr. Richmond first arrived on the job, he was optimistic, despite the gravity of the situation at hand. "I would like every parent in Cook and Lake counties, regardless of their faith, to think about whether a Catholic school could be a good school for their child," he told archdiocese newspaper *Chicago Catholic* in an interview announcing his arrival. "We can grow our enrollment," he insisted. "Not just for the sake of adding numbers, but because by doing that, we are growing our students academically and in their faith, and growing our church." Part of the way Mr. Richmond intended to develop the schools was by recognizing differing opinions within parishes *vis-à-vis* the purpose of the schools, and working with these variegated outlooks on their own terms.

Richmond described to me how the function of the parish schools had evolved since their origin. "Churches in Chicago were established by immigrants for their own ethnic groups along with schools for their children, as instruments of the parish. The schools are intertwined, under Church law, they are a ministry or mission of the parish – similar to a food bank and shelter. The priest was – and is – the boss." The hierarchy of the Church, in addition to being top-down from Pope to priest, is decentralized, meaning practically that each parish has authority to express itself according to the style and interests of its parishioners. Pope Francis, then Bergoglio, writes in his 2013 book

Evangelii Gaudium, "It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound' decentralization.'"[xx] This decentralized structure, expressed at its origin by parishes attuned to the diverse needs of early Catholic immigrants, is highly adaptable for the purpose of managing schools today, when parents' opinions on educational governance can differ by the city block.

The evolution of the democratic educational mission of parochial schools is described in the 1995 book *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* by authors Bryk, Lee, and Holland, who remind readers of the precedent of local school management:

> *Catholic schools took root in colonial America. The development of schools in Catholic communities during this period closely paralleled activities occurring in Protestant communities. Education was viewed as a fundamentally moral enterprise, and Protestants and Catholics alike sought to ground the education of their children in particular beliefs. Until about 1830, the provision of education was an informal local matter.* (18)

In this earlier vision, the purpose of filling parochial schools directly overlapped with the purpose of filling the pews. Today, the overlap in purpose of Church and school is less obvious now that greater numbers of Catholics and non-Catholics attend the schools. Meanwhile, Church attendance is in decline. Mr. Richmond explained, "What varies is what people want, and their motivations for why they might enroll their child," explained Mr. Richmond. "I have done some market research and it varies. There is a debate within the Church: *How Catholic should the Catholic schools be?*" This existential question is especially pertinent in the United States where the Church has been pressured to contend with its identity in the democratic context. Charles M. Morris in his 1998 work *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church*, articulated: "The core tension in the American Church has always been

its stiff-necked resistance to the great American assimilation engine, and the terms of its accommodation with the rest of the country."

According to Mr. Richmond, parents' differing answers to the question of the purpose of the parochial schools fall into three main categories.

- The first and most conservative group is a relative minority, which believes that the schools are an instrument of evangelization and passing on the faith. Mr. Richmond sums up this version of the schools' purpose as "serve Catholics, or make people into Catholics."
- The second group leans progressive, and is representative of a larger swath of Chicago society, affectionately termed "Light Catholics." These parents want a school that educates their children in a way that is more or less aligned with their religious values and with a personal history of Catholicism, without necessarily going to Mass. Mr. Richmond notes that priests of the archdiocese are almost universally frustrated by this group. "Something is wrong, [the priests] say, when there are five hundred kids in the school, but the pews on Sunday are half-empty."
- The third group consists of non-Catholics. These families and students are drawn to parochial schools for safety, aversion to public schools, and a qualitative approach to academic and cultural values. Mr. Richmond cites the South Side neighborhood of Englewood as a prime example in which almost none of the students or families are Catholic.

The first group adheres more closely to the traditional views of Catholics prior to the reforms of the 1960s coinciding with the Second Vatican Council, whereas the second is representative of the reformed community itself. The third and non-Catholic group,

largely composed of students from low income and minority families, has grown in proportion since the 1960s, when the American Church began to reframe its formerly after-life-focused mission toward a more immediate worldly goal of achieving peace and social justice. Bryk, Lee, and Holland describe this evolution, with reference to some of the key open letters of the nineteenth century which explored the rationale behind reform:

> *Since the Reformation, the Catholic Church had viewed its mission primarily as preparing the faithful for eternal life, emphasizing personal religion with an omnipotent God in heaven. As such, Catholicism was vertical, individualistic, and otherworldly in its focus. Beginning with Rerum Novarum and followed forty years later with the encyclical Quadragesimo Anno (On the Reconstruction of the Social Order), the Church had begun a commitment to social justice based on Natural Law. The force of this commitment came fully forward at Vatican II, as the Church articulated peace and social justice as the central concerns in carrying out the life of Christ. Rather than a primary emphasis on the hereafter, the Council emphasized that God was immanent in humankind and revealed through its development. As human society moves inexorably toward the realization of the Kingdom of God, the pursuit of peace and social justice is God's work on earth.* (50)

In the late nineteenth century, the Church was beginning to grapple with what it would mean to retain its religious and cultural identity in a democratic context. "Some engagement with modernity was evident in the Catholicism of the 1800s. […] the American Church had flirted with democratic ideas during the colonial period," write Bryk, Lee, and Holland (35). As the original waves of Catholic immigrants embraced an Americanized expression of Catholicism, the institution of the Church was faced with the challenge of assimilation or disintegration. "With the election in 1960 of John Fitzgerald Kennedy as the first Roman Catholic president of the United States, American Catholics had clearly come of age." (Bryk, Lee, Holland, 33). The authors describe the evolution of the identity of the Church in greater detail, culminating with its impact on the Catholic school system:

> *This revitalized social mission had important implications for American Catholic schools. As American Catholics had moved in greater numbers toward the middle class, the last vestiges of the ghetto Church had crumbled in the early 1960s. With this, the questions naturally arose about maintaining a separate Catholic school system, given that its traditional mission – protecting and nurturing immigrant Catholics in a hostile new world – was apparently accomplished. In the council's commitment to the pursuit of social justice, however, a renewed sense of purpose would blossom in Catholic schools. […] This call to social justice involved confronting America's most important social issue – racism.* (52)

This social justice mission has become a key point of connection between the school choice movement and the Catholic Church today. School choice policy initiatives such as the Illinois Invest in Kids Tax Credit Scholarship (TCS) Program are designed to provide scholarships for low income students to attend private schools across the state, the majority of which are Catholic schools within the Chicago Archdiocese. The Invest in Kids TCS Act incentivizes donors to give up to $1 million in return for a 75 percent tax credit. Funds are directed to approved scholarship granting organizations (SGO's) such as Empower Illinois, then distributed by the SGO directly to participating schools. Scholarships are granted to students of families who have applied to the program by means of the SGO based on certain criteria, including a household income of less than 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Donors are given the option to indicate which among the Illinois schools will benefit from their tuition dollars, including many of the parochial schools of the Archdiocese, long hungry for increased enrollment.

Bishop Blaise Cupich was among those who lobbied for the Invest in Kids TCS Program. "Crucial to Empower Illinois' meteoric growth has been an alliance with the Catholic Church — a setup that is benefiting both groups in their rush to secure scholarship money and the power it could bring with it, including the power to influence

future state education policy," reported a March 2018 article in WBEZ Chicago, titled "How To Take In $33 Million In Taxpayer Dollars: Partner With The Catholic Church." Since 2018, well over 31,000 scholarships totaling more than $257 million have been awarded. The Invest in Kids TCS Program has met its cap annually, with demand vastly exceeding supply. Currently, more than 24,000 students across Illinois are waiting in line for a scholarship, according to Empower Illinois.

At its origin, the Invest in Kids TCS Act never benefitted from a formal debate in the Illinois General Assembly. Rather, the program was implemented under the Illinois State Senate Bill 1947, along with an omnibus overhaul memorably executed by former Illinois Governor Republican Bruce Rauner in 2017. The Invest in Kids TCS Program was granted a five-year trial run, followed by a one year extension set to expire in 2023. Over the last year, debates have been ongoing in the Illinois state legislature considering whether to remove the sunset on the bill, or end the program entirely. Despite major opposition from the Chicago Teacher's Union (CTU) and other school choice critics, the Invest in Kids TCS eventually received a seal of support from Governor Pritzker. The Illinois Policy Institute reported in February 2023 that approximately 65 percent of Chicago parents surveyed support the Invest in Kids TCS. The Church's goal of boosting enrollment in parochial schools coincides directly with the drive to appeal to all three groups of parents described by Mr. Richmond, from Catholics of variegated political persuasions to non-Catholics alike.

Mr. Richmond had little to say regarding which of these three groups had the "correct" interpretation of the purpose of a Catholic school. His own purpose as Superintendent was invested in making sure these groups could co-exist harmoniously

within the archdiocese, and that each kind of parent saw their preferences reflected in their local school. In addition to satisfying parents, Mr. Richmond's job is to address the preferences of priests and members of the archdiocese, as well as entities outside the Church ecosystem such as policy makers who are interested in the issue of school choice and in cultivating appeal to religious constituents.

Mr. Richmond's awareness of these dynamics coupled with a localized approach, he felt, boded well for his tenure as Superintendent with the mission of increasing enrollment. However, the difficulty of the situation facing the parochial schools was rendered even more complex by the onslaught of the pandemic, just months after Mr. Richmond's arrival. The public health crisis, ultimately a disaster for the public school system, housed a silver lining for parochial schools. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) had suffered back-to-back closings, due to state-imposed shut downs then, upon initial reopening, due to strikes led by the CTU.

This saga yielded hordes of frustrated parents, eager to place their children in any available alternative, including Catholic schools.[xxi] According to a report in *The Chicago Tribune,* in the fall of 2020, schools in the archdiocese saw a 5 percent jump in student enrollment – the first significant increase in forty years.[xxii] Parochial schools possessed the independent leeway to decide whether to remain open or closed, as well as to impose or remove mask mandates independent of the decisions of Governor Pritzker, exemplifying some of the tangible advantages of private regulation of schools. "We are a private school so we can require you to wear a funny hat. In fact, we could require students to wear uncomfortable pants – and we do," stated Mr. Richmond dryly.

Even a year after Governor Pritzker had ceased to impose a mask mandate, Mr. Richmond chose to rigorously enforce mask wearing in the parish schools. A common stereotype of religious communities during the pandemic was their perceived aversion to wearing masks, given the assumption that the will of God would do a better job warding off disease than scientifically proven protective measures. In reality, within the Catholic community of the archdiocese, opinions on masks among parents varied by parish – just as on any other political issue.

As Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Richmond reasoned that despite a diminution in infection rates, so long as death rates were consistent among those who were infected, the crisis remained severe enough to merit maintenance of the mandate. This decision was met with severely divided reactions among parents. "Many thought we only were keeping masks in place because the governor commanded it, but we required masks to stop people from getting infected and dying so we could stay open and so we mandated them even after the state court lifted the law," asserted Mr. Richmond. He described the passion in the reactions within the parishes. "Parents were apoplectic. People literally, in the literal sense of the word literal, feared for their lives and kids."

The three groups previously delineated offer an approximate typology for inferring attitudes on masks. Progressive Catholic parents tended to embrace the mask rule, conservative Catholic parents tended to oppose it, and the non-Catholics were a mixed bag depending on their neighborhood. "In some schools there was outright warfare, violence, when the school struck it down. Others were totally calm. Each community varied, and some wanted [the mandates]," said Mr. Richmond. No matter the outlook, these differences in opinion were voiced with all the vitriol of a true town hall

meeting, and then some. “I have worked in politics my whole life. I had never seen this kind of vitriol,” stated Mr. Richmond, bluntly.

The first signs of improvement in decades of negative public opinion towards Catholic schools, it seemed, would be crippled by internecine political divides. Mr. Richmond described, “There was this irony: COVID was an opportunity to change the narrative broadly about Catholic schools, to make use of positive brand of staying open. But there was internal chaos going on. It felt totally ironic. While *The Chicago Tribune* was editorializing about what a great job the Catholic schools are doing staying open, parents are seething. The things people wrote and said were astounding, breathtaking. This is our Church! In my own parish, I still remember the hateful things people said.” I thought I detected a shudder in the Superintendent’s speech as he recounted the turmoil of the pandemic. So much for local politics saving the day, right?

I press Mr. Richmond further on the apparent challenge that local diverging interests are posing to his agenda of school management, wondering what tools he has brought with him from his formative days in the political arena that might equip him to squash this kind of internal dissent. Yet Mr. Richmond seems unphased by my questioning. Is this scene the messiest he had seen to date? Yes. Do parents have a right to express how they want local schools to be run? Yes – and they neither have to do it nicely, nor in agreement with scientific data. “This is not a situation where those of us downtown analyze everything and decide what happens,” Mr. Richmond explains, matter-of-factly. “It’s grassroots, it’s a function of who are the parishioners, what do they want, how do they communicate? It’s mostly navigated at the parish and school. It’s democracy in action – it can be beautiful, it can be very, very ugly.”

Listening to Mr. Richmond describe his approach to managing the schools of the Chicago Archdiocese, I am again reminded of Bernard Crick's description of politics as a living thing.

> *Politics is, then, an activity – and this platitude must be brought to life: it is not a thing, like a natural object or a work of art, which could exist if individuals did not continue to act upon it. And it is a complex activity, it is not simply the grasping for an ideal, for then the ideals of others may be threatened; but it is not pure self-interest either* […] *The more one is involved in relationships with others, the more conflicts of interest, or of character and circumstance will arise.* (25)

Circumstances arise, and circumstances evolve. I ask Mr. Richmond about the forecast for the coming academic year. "This school year is better, back to the normal challenges. Regular start of the school year, regular problems of opening a school – which is great."

We wind down our phone conversation, which Mr. Richmond is receiving from his office in downtown Chicago and I from an Airbnb in the Superintendent's old stomping grounds of Springfield, Illinois. I had driven down from Chicago to observe a rally to be held in the rotunda of the State House. Parents, teachers, and political organizers were gathering to advocate for removal of the sunset on the Illinois Invest in Kids Tax Credit Scholarship Program. Before we part ways, I ask if Mr. Richmond would impart upon me any wisdom from his early days in politics. Among the things Mr. Richmond tells me is this: "If you want a different perspective, go to the Capitol and try to speak with Juan Rangel. He knows one hundred times what I do."

4. The Illinois Invest in Kids Tax Credit Scholarship

Juan Rangel is the Senior Director of Community and Government Affairs at Empower Illinois. As a scholarship granting organization, Empower Illinois serves a technical function in the marketplace of school choice. The SGO is a hub that processes paper trails within the complex world of education policy. It is also an outlet for education and engagement with legislators, parents, and members of local school communities across the state. Beneath a bureaucratized façade, Empower Illinois does not run without individuals such as Mr. Rangel, who are keyed into community dynamics and steeped in Chicago politics.[xxiii] For years, Mr. Rangel has been a mainstay of gubernatorial and mayoral campaign strategy as well as grassroots initiatives in the world of Chicago charter schools and nonprofits, advocating for an improved academic experience for Latino students *qua* students – not just *qua* minorities. Mr. Rangel's origins in Alinsky-style organizing coupled with his mastery of complex policy mean he is fluent in the language of parents and technocrats alike. This kind of versatility provides a value highly recherché in the labyrinthine world of education policy, as reformers seek to cultivate necessary ties with constituents.

I find Mr. Rangel in the rotunda of the Illinois State House behind a megaphone. Parents, teachers, and some students brought along for the ride cluster around Mr. Rangel, all wearing matching blue t-shirts emblazoned with a rising sun. The megaphone crackles. "In a few moments we are all going to gather at the foot of the rotunda. We are going to hear from some speakers. And we are going to tell those legislators here today *what* we want, and *when* we want it." *Applause.*

Before long, Mr. Rangel had succeeded in generating a palpable current of energy within the crowd of parents and teachers. He and the group engaged in a political responsorial chant:

Whose schools?
Our schools.
What do we want?
Remove the sunset.
When do we want it gone?
Now!

Integrating the demands of the group seamlessly within the rhythm of the chant, Mr. Rangel effectively breathed the spirit of an outdoor community demonstration into the granite halls of the State House.

For many parents and school teachers who received the scholarships, this was the first direct encounter with an Empower Illinois, the otherwise mechanical entity behind their scholarship grants. Realistically, most of the legwork of advocating for the Invest in Kids TCS Act had already occurred behind closed doors in Springfield or back home in the offices of local district legislators. This day was for the parents and the teachers, and for cultivating a vital sense of democratic engagement among those directly impacted by the Invest in Kids TCS Program. To reach this point of being able to instill in parents reasonable hope for the program's renewal, years of political advocacy had to transpire from the inception of former Republican Governor Rauner's Senate Bill well into Democratic Governor Pritzker's present tenure.

Governor Pritzker originally campaigned on a platform to oppose the Invest in Kids TCS Act. "I'm opposed to that $75 million tax credit, that school voucher system (Gov. Bruce Rauner) created, and we should as soon as possible do away with it. What I oppose is taking money out of the public schools, and that's what happened here," stated

Pritzker in April of 2018 before an audience at the Illinois Education Association, the state's largest union. Pritzker's language featured a common misidentification of school tax credits as vouchers.

The two key differences between vouchers and tax credits consist of the source of funding and the method of distribution. Funding for educational vouchers is indeed derived directly from state collected taxes. The payment is distributed by the government directly to parents, who are able to spend the funds on tuition or school-related expenses, depending on the specific policy prescription. Tax credit scholarships are funded by private donors who then receive a tax credit for their charitable donation, as is common practice with philanthropic contributions in a variety of sectors. In education, these donated funds are not given directly to parents but rather to an SGO, which then distributes scholarships to families and schools in compliance with state regulation.

Legal allotments for tax credit scholarship programs must be approved and factored into the state budget, meaning that the funds which are provided by private donors and then eligible for a significant tax credit to "come out of" the state education budget. The claim that school choice programs dispossess public schools of essential funding, though not entirely groundless, ought to be considered within the context of scale. The Invest in Kids TCS is capped at $100 million – the budget for Illinois K-12 public education amounts to $9.7 billion in 2023. The remarkable disproportion between funding for public education and private school choice underlines the effective monopoly of public schools over the education market. In response to overwhelming bipartisan support of school choice by Illinois parents, when Governor Pritzker campaigned as an

incumbent in 2022, he responded to a *Chicago Sun Times* poll in the affirmative – he would support the Illinois Invest in Kids TCS.

The distinction between tax credits scholarships and vouchers can indeed be confusing. Professor Peter Skerry concedes in his 1979 review of Chubb and Moe that "The difficulty may be that the voucher idea is largely untested by concrete experience and thus tends to be a kind of social policy Rorschach blot onto which individuals of widely divergent perspectives project their own views."[xxiv] Nevertheless, critics often play off of that confusion without demonstrating the obvious distinctions that do exist between the voucher and the tax credit, namely the source of funding and the means of distribution.

In February 2023 *Forbes Magazine* published an article critical of the Invest in Kids TCS, titled "The Illinois Voucher Law is About to Ride Into The Sunset. Will Lawmakers Rescue It, Or Just Wave Goodbye?"[xxv] The article raises a number of challenges to the TCS, from issues of Church and State, allegations of tax loopholes and flows of dark money, and normative concerns about the teachings of private school curricula. The author concludes pessimistically, "On top of all this a body of research shows that vouchers have negative effects on student achievement. Educationally, vouchers just don't work." I raise three points in response to this objection on the grounds of academic achievement in schools.

First, it is certainly possible that a school attended by students who are funded by vouchers may deliver unsatisfactory academic results. Neither is there a guarantee that a public school will not have negative effects on student achievement. Second, it is also possible that even with the best market policies available, some parents may not be

adequately informed or otherwise able to make the best educational decisions on behalf of their children. We have already explored the present difficulty facing many parents, given the entrenchment of complex bureaucracy, to pin down a straightforward response to the question of who is responsible for the decisions that impact the management of K-12 education today. Parents may endorse a school mission contrary to public goals, as suggested by Chubb and Moe, or they may altogether fail to make use of available opportunities. However, the long term endurance of policies such as the Illinois Invest in Kids TCS create the opportunity for more parents to refine their understanding of how best to engage with policies designed to help them and their children. Endurance of the Invest in Kids TCS also allows policy makers to refine the program over time by responding to the needs of the community. The development of more school choice policies over time will stimulate competition and incentivize all programs to improve their offerings while raising the public profile of the opportunities available.

Third, the issue of measuring the educational achievement of students invites a crucial conversation regarding the true purpose of childhood education in a democratic society. *What is most important for children to learn and for educators to encourage?* While an independent school funded by vouchers or tax credits scholarships or some other form of aid may not check all the boxes of an externally imposed quantitative threshold, at the same time, it is possible that the same school is nurturing future democratic citizens, capable of making independent judgements and engaging with society.

When I encounter arguments such as the one presented in *Forbes*, deeply skeptical of the potential for academic achievement within independent schools, I am

reminded of the conundrum which Christopher Lasch encountered after homeschooling his children. "It was only gradually that it became clear that none of my own children, having been raised not for upward mobility but for honest work, could reasonably hope for any conventional kind of success. […] Success was no longer to be had on such terms," lamented Lasch. Metrics used for determining academic success veer toward the quantitative over the qualitative. Consequently, such rubrics are unlikely to account for personal development and long term potential for a student to contribute to democratic society.

In 1995, four years after the publication of *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics,* Lasch resumed his examination of the failures of American education in *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy.*[xxvi] Among other topics, Lasch reviews the impact of early education reformer, Massachusetts's Representative Horace Mann, on the public education system and his enduring legacy for the broader concept of American education. Overall, Lasch is respectful of Mann's reforms and his ideological motivations within the historical context of American industrialization and the need to rear citizens as more efficient workers, able to clock in on time and quickly process directions. Mann felt that history ought to be taught to children in such a way that national values could be painted in black and white.

The unintended consequence of this extreme pragmatism, over time, has been withered spiritual enrichment and absent appreciation of the role of national myths, creative fictions, and inspiring stories of far off lands on the imagination of young people.

> *Mann's plea for historical realism betrayed not only an impoverished conception of reality but a distrust of pedagogically unmediated experience – attitudes that have continued to characterize educational thinking ever since. Like many other educators, Mann wanted children to receive their*

> *impressions of the world from those who were professionally qualified to decide what it was proper for them to know, instead of picking up impressions haphazardly from narratives (both written and oral) not expressly designed for children.* (148)

Mann envisioned the school house as the be-all end-all of pedagogy, practically eradicating the understanding there are critical opportunities for learning around us. Lasch presents an alternative that acknowledges the sponge-like nature of children who organically take in information from many sources, and who ought to be encouraged to think critically and make inferences beyond their immediate physical experience or geographic and cultural constraints.

> *Anyone who has spent much time with children knows that they acquire much of their understanding of the adult world by listening to what adults do not necessarily want them to hear – by eavesdropping, in effect, and just by keeping their eyes and ears open. […] The great weakness in Mann's educational philosophy was the assumption that education takes place only in schools.* (151)

Lasch suggests that this form of parochialism – not the kind that respects and responds to local values but a related kind that, as a result, suffocates a healthy cosmopolitanism and stifles the child's capacity for empathy with others who are raised differently.

> *History has given way to an infantilized version of sociology, in obedience with the misconceived principle that the quickest way to engage children's attention is to dwell on what is closest to home: their families, their neighborhoods, the local industries, the technologies on which they depend. A more sensible assumption would be that children need to learn about far away places and olden times before they can make sense of their immediate surroundings.* (159)

Furthermore, Lasch concedes that Mann's overall sectarianism and emphasis on Protestant Christian mores, if any at all, were perfectly understandable in an era when most of the country was indeed Protestant and there was political fear of faction. Today,

evolution of American social diversity has created an exigent demand for greater religious and pedagogical diversity reflected in schools.

> *His program envisioned the public school system as a monopoly, in practice, if not in law. It implied the marginalization, if not the outright elimination, of institutions that might compete with the common schools. His opposition to religious sectarianism did not stop with its exclusion from the public sector of education. He was against sectarianism as such, for the same reasons that made him take such a dim view of politics. Sectarianism, in his view, breathed the spirit of fanaticism and persecution. It gave rise to religious controversy, which was no more acceptable to Mann than political controversy.* (155)

Today, the call for greater religious and social diversity manifest in education is crystallized in the movement for school choice. In my own esteem, a pedagogy that incorporates fundamental elements of history, civic appreciation, and liberal values should not be and is not incompatible with robust development technological advancement in math and science. On the contrary, scientific and technological advancement are not only important ends in themselves but also critical for improving the quality of life of citizens domestically while remaining internationally competitive. I mean to emphasize the value in developing the broader historical and philosophical awareness of young people such that they can make informed decisions about both the moral and practical implications of creating and using powerful technology. It is especially these purposive considerations which I fear have been eclipsed by American education's inestimable emphasis on metric success and scientific methods without sufficient context.

5. Evolution of education policy in broad strokes: attempts at expanding access and improving accountability

The broader cultural fixation with metrics as a means of accounting for success is the product of a displacement of educational outlook away from local political responsibility toward school governance, and toward embracing scientific methods as a solution to social problems. As an alternative, programs such as the Illinois Invest in Kids TCS will be held accountable by local constituents over time. Removal of the sunset on the program will engender continued refinement of the policy by legislators and reformers in direct response to the preferences of parents in the community. While the era of largely unmediated local control over education is mostly bygone, policies like the Invest in Kids TCS incorporate elements of this ground-up model in an otherwise centralized space.

5.1 Local governance of schools superseded by impersonal bureaucratization

Childhood education has historically been a local affair. However, reforms in education policy have produced the effect of largely ceding local community engagement to the oversight of external authorities. Arthur E. Wise, a social scientist at the Rand Corporation describes this evolution in his 1979 book *Legislated Learning: The Bureaucratization of the American Classroom:*

> *In the past, the local board of education was the final arbiter of institutional policies and practices. To be sure, some policies for local institutions were set elsewhere, but for all practical purposes most decisions were made at the local level. If a student, parent, or teacher had a problem with institutional policies or practices, it was everyone's expectation that the problem would be resolved locally or not at all.* (48)

In the localized model, the people making the decisions were those likely to have the closest insight into the institutional culture of community schools. Over time, this model has evolved. Wise described the modern tendency for school management as he saw it in the late 1970s:

> *Today that expectation has changed dramatically. A person with a grievance about the way in which he is being affected by his institution's policies or practices may first try to resolve it locally. However, should such efforts fail, he will often turn to authorities external to the institution.* (48)

As a consequence of the rise of external authorities, parents or local school boards with on-the-ground insight into their schools and direct understanding of the culture of their educational institutions are increasingly removed from education management.

Wise termed this shift toward bureaucratization of education and increased leaning on scientific management as the "hyperrationalization of schools." This term is helpful for identifying the gap between highly technical policy processes and the

attainment of policy objectives that actually address the needs of local schools and communities.

> *The bureaucratic characteristics of the schools are strengthened as decision making about people and resources is based on established rules and procedures; scientific management techniques are adopted to increase efficiency; and goals are specified in measurable outcomes. To the extent that this process causes more bureaucratic overlay without attaining the intended policy objectives, it results in what I shall call the hyperrationalization of the schools.* (48)

To a great extent, bureaucratization and increasingly specialized "expert" external management of schools has come to be perceived as a desirable end in itself. However, within a sea of scientific data, the particular interests of parents and students who depend on community schools are often obscured.

Wise's critical lens does not object to carefully thought-out and systematic approaches to improving overall outcomes in K-12 education. The problem occurs when policy goals are not achieved by reforms. Wise's diagnosis serves as a reminder not to let process prevent progress. Wise specifies:

> *Whether rational systems of thought applied to educational planning lead to rationalization or hyperrationalization depends upon the adequacy of these systems." He concedes: "It is possible certainly, for common sense, economic analysis, science, and legal reasoning, for example, to lead to sound educational policy. […] However, […] such rational systems of thought contribute to strengthening the bureaucratic characteristics of educational institutions and often work to the detriment of the process they are intended to improve.* (47)

This replacement of local control by external authorities can result in misunderstanding the particular needs of a school, and in the application of misdiagnosed and therefore ineffective solutions. Wise writes:

> *Those who are attempting to change or control schools by reference to it are implicitly basing their actions on a set of assumptions, that may be different from the assumptions, opinions, and theories under which the schools actually operate.* (79)

Solutions that may seem appropriate from the vantage point of an expert removed from the scene may not be entirely effective when applied to the milieu of a particular school. Writing in the late 1970s, (around the time that Christopher Lasch was engaged in the "unexpectedly rigorous business of bringing up children") Mr. Wise was presaging a technocratic trend in educational policy that persisted into the 1990s and through to the present day. This policy evolution toward greater technocratization and use of scientific metrics in education has come to pass over the course of several decades.

5.2 Optimism regarding the use of government programs as tools for the creation of a greater and better-educated society

Throughout the civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s, there was a surge in public and political attention to equality of opportunity and outcome in American society. This trend was also reflected by developments in the federal vision of educational objectives.

In his 1964 "Great Society Speech," President Lyndon B. Johnson articulated a qualitative vision for educational improvement. President Johnson's vision appears less in line with the technocratic program of more students for the "helping professions," which Lasch so disparaged. Rather, President Johnson espoused a more scholastic, if not utopian, ideal of students who not only love learning and are equipped for labor, but also have ample time for leisure. President Johnson proclaimed:

> *We must seek an educational system which grows in excellence as it grows in size. This mean better training for our teachers. It means preparing youth to enjoy their hours of leisure as well as their hours of labor. It means exploring new techniques of teaching, to find new ways to stimulate the love of learning and the capacity for creation.*

In 1965, President Johnson implemented The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). As part of President Johnson's War on Poverty, the ESEA increased federal funding and oversight with the goal of addressing the gap in reading, writing, and mathematics skills between students from low-income households in urban and rural schools, and middle-class suburban schoolchildren. However, education reform – like many other New Deal-era government programs with the aim of improving liberal democratic society – was practically competing for funding with the ongoing war in Vietnam. When the decision of where to allocate federal resources came down to guns *or* butter, domestic education looked more like butter. The challenge of unequal educational access and outcomes among America's school children persisted.

5.3 Pessimism toward global competitiveness and a perceived sense of national frustration

In 1981, President Ronald Reagan established the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which proceeded to survey and identify problems afflicting American education and to propose solutions. President Reagan's U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett – described by Chubb and Moe as an "articulate, hard-hitting spokesman for the cause of academic excellence, grabbing media headlines and urging policy makers at all levels to take aggressive action" (11) – conducted a survey of the nation's public schools, taking particular aim at Chicago Public Schools. "You've got close to educational meltdown here in Chicago," said Bennett in 1987. "Is there a worse case? You tell me."[xxvii] The negative assessment would have a lasting effect on both the internal morale and the external impression of the quality of Chicago schools – a feature which Mayor Richard M. Daley would leverage in order to increase his own centralized control of the public school system.

In 1983, the National Commission on Education published *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.* The central risk was identified as the foreboding possibility of the United States slipping behind other developed nations in international standards and markets as a result of declining standards of teaching and learning in both public and private schools. *A Nation at Risk* contextualizes America's failure to cultivate human skill and enthusiasm within the sphere of global competition:

> *History is not kind to idlers. The time is long past when American's destiny was assured simply by an abundance of natural resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilizations. The world is indeed one global village. We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood*

> *workshops. America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer.*

The report concluded that Americans were exhibiting extreme deficiencies in academic achievement at a time when the demand for highly skilled workers was accelerating. As well as doubling down on the pressure to remain globally competitive, *A Nation at Risk* included a cautionary reminder of the limits of statistical measurement for diagnosing the deeper challenges in education, believed to reflect an emerging sense of national frustration:

> *Statistics and their interpretation by experts show only the surface dimension of the difficulties we face. Beneath them lies a tension between hope and frustration that characterizes current attitudes about education at every level.* […] *What lies behind this emerging national sense of frustration can be described as both a dimming of personal expectations and the fear of losing a shared vision for America.*

President Reagan was interested in domestic education while at the same time placing great emphasis on a foreign policy agenda reflective of the national mood. President Reagan acted with awareness of the effects of preceding single term of President Carter. Neither a complete failure nor a success, the Carter presidency had left the American public with a sense of anxiety around foreign affairs, and a vivid sense of the precariousness of the United States' place in the world following events like the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and the Iranian hostage crisis.

Domestically, socio-economic disparities persisted as Americans continued to wrestle with the ramifications of the Civil Rights movement. Among these consequences on our national politics was the rise in role of public interest groups, prepared to organize and assert their special interests in such a way that each faction of American society would come to have its own advocacy group. Nelson Polsby assesses aspects of the

Carter presidency in his 1978 work *Presidential Cabinet Making: Lessons for the Political System.*[xxviii] Polsby describes the link between President Carter's propensity for comprehensive reform and its effectiveness in the arena of national politics within the original context of President Carter's election, suggesting that a key feature of national politics has since changed, namely the legitimacy derived directly from the people as opposed to the people's desires coming to be represented through the mediation of interest groups.

> *The goals President Carter has stressed are essentially administrative in character: simplification, reduction of duplication, and the establishment of uniformity, predictability and long-range goals. He is a believer in comprehensive reform, in finding once-and-for-all solutions to problems. Theoretical commitment on the part of President Carter to general and far-reaching purposes, and a desire to separate himself from the piecemeal accommodations of bureaucrats and the narrowly focused desires of interest groups is surely part of the answer. But this answer poses a still more fundamental problem: how is it that President Carter finds it possible to gratify this theoretical preference in the harsh arena of national politics? The answer to this, I believe, can be found in the political conditions which made Jimmy Carter's nomination and election possible. Mr. Carter is the latest in a lengthening line of political leaders – of which Mr. Nixon was also an example – who have made the claim that their electoral victories conferred on them a legitimacy direct from the people, unmediated by special interest groups, or by parochial considerations. For a Democratic politician, the basis of this claim must rest in large measure on the transformation of the rules for nominating presidents that has occurred over the past decade.* (22)

The role of private interest groups today has increased along with the role of private money and media in politics, coupled with an enduring ideological conviction that the interests of every segment of society must be formally represented by an organization. The roots of this outlook lie in the Civil Rights era, when interest groups arose to defend the both rights and entitlements of segregated African Americans, especially in the context of public schools. A common perception of the Civil Rights "movement" is that

the movement was organically and spontaneously generated by virtue of the collective will. In reality, the dramatic changes in our legislation and social values were the result of concentrated political organization and strategic mobilization of individuals that lead to significant changes in regulation and law.

5.4 Non-public schools and parental choice of educational alternatives

Since the 1954 landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education,* the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled racial segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional. However, debates over the quality of education for white students and black students remained in play among integrationists and segregationists. The school choice movement began to take shape as both sides experienced increasing dissatisfaction with public schools. Segregationists wanting to avoid keeping their children in mixed-race schools were eager for government aid that would give them the financial leeway to place their children in privately regulated schools. At the same time, even though the battle for integration had been won, this did not amount to any guarantee of the quality of education being offered to black students who now had the right to attend integrated public schools.

Even when policies were designed to incentivize busing of inner city and rural black students to mostly white suburban schools, these schools were rarely accommodating of the needs of black students and the interests of their families and communities. While some families advocated for choice to avoid integration in and of itself, others emphasized the need for mostly black-controlled schools as a way of giving parents greater say over the management of their children's education, rather than leaving it up to suburban school leaders little acquainted with the provenance of incoming black students. Cultural clashes were apparent not only in the realm of race relations but also in a deepening divide between a secularized mainstream and a more traditional religious constituency.

In education, this divide was manifest in the debate as to whether the government should provide funding to support private religious schools, the majority of which were Catholic. Parochial schools were attended by both Catholics and non-Catholics. However, those seeking to develop policies that would support wider access to parochial schools had to contend with constitutional disputes regarding the legal boundary between Church and State, as well as with anti-Catholic sentiment in an historically Protestant America. It was in this time period that President Kennedy's presidential campaign evoked palpable concern that having a Catholic president would amount to having a hotline between the White House and the Vatican.

Anxieties around the separation of Church and State were, and still are, often fought out in debates over funding for private religious schools. In 1949 Paul Blanshard published *American Freedom and Catholic Power,* a manifesto warning of the dangers of the American Catholic Church as an "autocratic moral monarchy in a liberal democracy," (Blanshard,13). Blanshard, a Socialist and theologian, had also been head of New York City's Department of Investigations and Accounts and former State Department official in Washington and the Caribbean. His book, which was characterized as anti-Catholic propaganda by critics and dismissed on the grounds of the author's socialism, nevertheless went into twenty-six printings for a total of 240,000 copies, striking a chord among readers. Among the core arguments is a discussion of public money and parochial schools, and a cautionary claim that the private religious school, being the primary battleground for Church and State control, should not be supported by public funds.

Public concern regarding the appropriate separation of Church and State was coupled with an awareness of the expanding role of the federal government over state and

local autonomy. Senator Kennedy, aware of these contentious dynamics, tactfully avoided advocacy for federal support of private parochial schools during his campaign. Treading with caution, Senator Kennedy ultimately leaned away from federal aid for religious schools, making sure to deemphasize federal oversight of education in general. When Nixon ran against Kennedy in 1960, Nixon supported federal aid for parochial schools and carried over 60 percent of the Catholic vote. As a candidate, on September 12, 1960, Senator Kennedy addressed the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on the subject of religion and politics.

> *I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference; and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the president who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.*

Once President Kennedy won the race, the language of his approach to education tended to emphasize state and local power over federal programming. As Senator Kennedy drew a line between religion and government, so too did he emphasize the boundary between the federal government and state and local level legislation. On February 5, 1962, President Kennedy delivered a "Special Message on Education" in which he declared: "No task before our Nation is more important than expanding and improving the educational opportunities of all our people. […] For education is both the foundation and the unifying force in our democratic way of life – it is the mainspring of economic and social progress – it is the highest expression of achievement in our society, ennobling and enriching human life."

Seeking to put to rest what Kennedy termed the public's "unfounded fears that 'Federal money means Federal control," Kennedy reminded listeners that control and operation of education should remain a primarily state and local responsibility, with improved organization of existing federal programs. Yet, as the century progressed, the size, activity, and spending of the federal government continued to grow. As social and economic disparities remained manifest in American K-12 education, the New Deal approach of investing in government programs to stimulate social change persisted. The role of federal government programs and regulations would continue to expand well into the turn of the century, resulting in further transformations in the increasingly centralized management of education policy at the state and local level.

5.5 Data-based accountability

In 1993, the Clinton Administration signed the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), a reauthorization of President Johnson's 1965 ESEA with added math, reading, and language requirements. In 2001, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, a further reauthorization of ESEA. In particular, NCLB doubled down on data-based evaluations. NCLB required that schools in each state supply statistics that would be compared to a standard of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). These benchmarks measured factors such as student test scores, graduation rates, math and reading proficiency.

Intellectual historian Muller uses the term "metric fixation" in his 2018 book *The Tyranny of Metrics* to describe our society's belief in metrics as a dependable solution to social problems, and as an attractive replacement for the challenges of personal judgement. Muller's "metric fixation" sheds light on the persistence of the belief that making transparency of metrics assures that organizations are indeed carrying out their purposes, and that personal experience and judgement ought to be replaced by standardized data – even when unintended negative consequences arise from putting these beliefs into practice. Muller writes:

> *When proponents of metrics advocate 'accountability,' they tacitly combine two meanings of the word. On one hand, to be accountable means to be responsible. But it can also mean 'capable of being counted.' Advocates of accountability typically assume that only by counting can institutions be truly responsible.* (17)

The AYP standards enforced by NCLB were used to determine which schools merited staying open, established with the goal of monitoring and incentivizing greater equality of outcome in academic performance of minority students across the U.S.

Accordingly, Jerry Muller identifies NCLB as the "show horse" of metrics in the public sector. Muller highlights the unintended consequences of the reform.

> *The unintended consequences of NCLB's testing and accountability regime are more tangible, and exemplify many of the pitfalls of metric fixation. Under NCLB, scores on standardized tests are the numerical metric by which success and failure are judged. […] The problem does not lie in the use of standardized tests which, when suitably refined, can serve as useful measures of student ability and progress. […] It is the emphasis on these tests as the major criterion for evaluating schools that creates perverse incentives, including focusing on the tests themselves at the expense of the broader goals of the institution.* (93)

According to EducationWeek, "the [AYP] measures must apply not only to students on average, but also to students in subgroups, including economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, English-language learners, African-American students, Asian-American students, Caucasian students, Hispanic students, and Native American students." Although intended to improve academic results across these groups, low income and minority students in disadvantaged locales often lacked the educational resources to facilitate the anticipated improvement. Furthermore, within the national sweep of the policy, significant inconsistencies arose in individual states' decisions regarding the application of metrics. The government engaged the topsy-turvy tactic of bouncing from federal to state control without providing necessary support to the states which, after decades of increased centralization, could hardly be accustomed to newly enforcing drastic educational regulations. By first centralizing government management of educational standards, then exporting these regulations with insistence that states resume making their own decisions, the federal government was doing the opposite of creating a hospitable environment for federalism to thrive.

According to a 2007 research brief on the accountability of NCLB produced by the RAND Corporation, "student proficiency in the tested subjects has little common meaning across states." For example, "95 percent of schools in Wisconsin met progress targets, compared with only 23 percent of schools in Alabama and Florida. Differences among states were directly related to the states' definitions of proficiency. […] High-poverty, high-minority, and urban schools were less likely to make adequate yearly progress." The radical differences among these outcomes serve as a reminder that even the most accurate data is determined based on subjective conditions of study. Furthermore, there is a cautionary lesson that concentration on metric standards of assessment can come with the risk of losing sight of the objectives which the procedures were intended to achieve in the first place. It is possible to look at these disparate results entirely pessimistically.

However, I prefer to partake in the optimism of scholars such as Martin R. West and Paul E. Peterson who, in their 2003 essay "The Politics and Practice of Accountability," pointed to the fact that although the reach of government programs for education has been widespread, there remains significant leeway – and significant work to be done – in education reform at the state and local levels. West and Peterson conclude, "Though No Child Left Behind is undoubtedly the most important piece of educational legislation in thirty-five years, it does more to initiate a political process than to decide it. So much has been left to state and local governments, the most important political battles are more likely to be waged at these levels than in Washington."

I believe that reinvigorated activity in education policy at the local and state levels should be informed by acute awareness not only of the assumptions that necessarily

underlie scientific pursuits, including those conducted in the realm of social science and policy research. An alternative approach applies data and metrics as tools to inform, rather than control or become ends in themselves. Yet, it is easy to fall into the trap of insisting that the solutions to educational challenges must occur at the state level without acknowledging the difficulties that states are likely to encounter given the entrenched power of centralized bureaucracy. The impact of decades of aggrandizement of the federal government has left its mark on the ready ability of states to act freely and autonomously.

Martha Derthick, in her 1996 paper "Whither Federalism" notes that the federal government today is quick to give more responsibility to the states when doing so can diminish the cost of federal spending, without necessarily providing states with the resources to shoulder these burdens.[xxix] Derthick comments:

> *When American federalism was being constructed, James Madison wrote that the states would be "subordinately useful." That is precisely what they have become, whether Democrats or Republicans control national offices. Today the states are useful to conservative Republicans in Congress who seek to reduce federal spending.* […] *Congress is doing that is unfamiliar is giving back what had previously been centralized. At a time when the nation is coming to grips with the politics of retrenchment, Congress is exercising its historic option of leaving matters to the states—thereby alleviating its own burden of making uncomfortable financial and policy choices.*

Derthick goes on to assert that giving back power to the states is a step in the right direction toward revitalizing federalism but predicts that given the slow pace of change, states are likely to continue making policies in a consistent pattern, at least for the foreseeable future. She also explores possible scenarios in which, given the leeway, differences in states' policies either widen or converge.

Only about two decades after the publication of this paper, state policies have evolved rapidly in the realm of school choice. The form of this development reflects some cohesion across states insofar as there is increasing bipartisan support for school choice programs among parents. However, as states begin to cultivate school choice policies in response to this growing interest, the particular application of each program differs widely from state-to-state according to local dynamics. As we have seen in the cases of the Illinois Invest in Kids TCS Program and among the parochial schools of the Archdiocese of Chicago, many of which benefit from the TCS, school leaders and policy reformers require awareness of local interests and must use this insight to directly confront any political challenges which emerge from opposition as well as from the entrenchment of centralized control.

6. Conclusion

This reminder of the political leg work needed to get a school choice policy off the ground is not meant to discourage. On the contrary, reforms are ready to be enacted at the local and state levels with the proper attention. In subsequent conversations with Mr. Rangel and his associates, I was reminded of the level of skepticism which the Invest in Kids TCS Program faced at its inception in Illinois, where policies of similar substance and scale were almost unprecedented. Mr. Rangel shared that as the Illinois Invest in Kids TCS Program became a mainstay of the school choice movement, in flooded calls from other states and local school districts asking, "Can we get one of those?"

In simple terms, the answer is no – there is no such thing as a one-size fits all school choice policy. Yet, if education reformers are willing to form organic connections with policy makers, parents, and donors, over time unique initiatives that reflect the values akin to those behind the Invest in Kids TCS can take root in new environments. Political action is required in order to set up the market framework in which private school options can be made accessible to parents. As witnessed in the case of the Illinois Invest in Kids TCS, years of network-building and community organization are required to leverage support for a policy of such magnitude.

As education policy has become more narrowed and specialized, experts required to navigate the terrain are often worlds apart from the lifestyles of those affected by their decision-making. Individuals in positions of leadership who are able to achieve fluency in the realms of both technical policy-making and on-the-ground politics are few and far between. However, these are specifically the kinds of leaders needed in the education

reform world. As witnessed in the case of the parish schools of the Chicago Archdiocese, even families of children attending private Catholic schools – a group which the outside spectator could reasonably assume to be relatively homogenous – express a multiplicity of views. Harmonious governance of even this small sampling of local schools demands insight into the preferences of parents, and patience when dealing with personal challenges, as exemplified by Superintendent Greg Richmond.

Ironically, local politics are inescapable when it comes to delivering such a personal service as the education of one's children. On the one hand, the potency of local values and identities is an enduring aspect of society. On the other, we find ourselves in a political climate of increasing polarization. Rather than ignoring these radical differences in opinion or responding to them with a standardized approach, an effective political strategy is based on forming personal connections at the community level. What is learned from interacting with parents and understanding local preferences must then be intelligently expressed in policies that realistically engage with the existing structure of authority and are mindful of big picture educational goals of forming well-rounded democratic citizens.

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