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A Private Solution Helps Kids Succeed

By JAMES PIERESON & NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY | June 17, 2020 6:30 AM



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Children's Scholarship Fund enables low-income children to attend private schools — and thrive.

It has by now become a familiar and depressing trope: Those

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I the families that could least afford it. This was confirmed by the Children's Scholarship Fund in a survey of parents who receive financial aid from the organization to send their children to inner-city private (mostly Catholic) schools. More than four out of five CSF respondents have lost income in the lockdowns — almost evenly divided between those who lost a job and those who had their work hours cut. Given that the average family income of CSF scholarship recipients (the vast majority of whom are black or Hispanic) is only \$37,000, the economic toll was high. In addition, one in five had a family member test positive for COVID-19, and 7 percent had someone in their immediate family hospitalized.

During these difficult times, though, it turned out that the elementary and middle schools their children attended were beacons of hope. When it came to how satisfied they were with their children's education, almost 90 percent graded their school a 4 or 5 out of 5. And 80 percent gave their child's experience learning from home a 4 or 5. By contrast, an Education Trust-New York poll conducted in April found that “nearly two-thirds of [public school] parents (63%) said they were “very concerned” about their child falling behind, including 71% of parents who are low-income, 72% of Black parents.” And while many public-school students have fallen behind since schools went online — with as many as one in three children in Los Angeles not even attending the class meetings — CSF principals report high rates of attendance, with 85 percent of schools reporting an average attendance over 90 percent.

It's not surprising, then, that keeping their children in private schools has become, if anything, more important during these difficult times. When asked to rate their “most pressing economic concerns,” the CSF parents listed covering tuition as among their highest priorities, ranking ahead of groceries and medical care.

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fund has helped more than 180,000 children attend private schools. CSF's high-school graduation and college matriculation rates far surpass those of the urban public schools that surround them. In Philadelphia, for instance, 96 percent of CSF eighth-graders graduated from high school on schedule — compared with Philadelphia's public-school graduation rate of only 62 percent. A study of CSF in Baltimore found that 84 percent of scholarship recipients were enrolled in college five to ten years after completing eighth grade, compared with fewer than half of students from local public schools.

Nor are these high-priced private schools. The average tuition at these schools is about \$5,300 per year, and the average scholarship award is \$2,200. Parents are required to pay at least a quarter of the tuition. But these families have even fewer resources now than they did a few months ago. CSF raised an extra \$1.5 million this spring to help families make the rest of their tuition payments for the year.

But the larger concern now is whether these schools will be able to survive in the teeth of the lockdowns. With the lockdown and church closures has come a 50 percent drop in collections for Catholic parishes. The church already makes up for the difference between the tuition and the average of \$9,000 a year it costs to educate each child. According to the Cato Institute, at least 60 private schools nationwide have announced they are closing due to the lockdowns, but other observers are predicting that ten times that number are in danger of closing.

When these schools — which use less money to educate students more effectively than their neighborhood counterparts — close their doors, students will flood into local public schools, forcing their costs to go up. That's one reason why advocates are hoping that the next congressional relief bill will include at least some money for these struggling schools. Another option would be finally to pass the kind of tuition-tax-credit legislation that allows businesses in the

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But this is a time for private solutions as well as public ones. In recent weeks, many well-meaning Americans have become more deeply concerned with racial disparities across the country that go well beyond income differences. In education, for example, fewer than one in five black eighth-graders can read proficiently. Governments, corporations, foundations, and private citizens want to know how they can do more to help. Providing these children with better educational opportunities would go a long way toward addressing the disparities most of us are worried about.

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