

saint mary's press

Schools of Character

Faith-Inspired Public Schools in the Catholic Lasallian Tradition



Michael Fehrenbach, FSC

In *Schools of Character*, Brother Michael Fehrenbach tells the story of Catalyst Schools, a pair of charter public schools that are lifting the lives of students in two of Chicago's most challenging neighborhoods. What makes Catalyst Schools so impressive—aside from their excellent academic results—is their commitment to giving character and values a primary place in the education of students. As Brother Michael expertly relates, Catalyst Schools teach students not just how to learn, but how to live. They draw on the best of multiple educational traditions, offering a free, high-quality, public education infused with lessons in values development and character formation inspired by centuries of Lasallian teaching. *Schools of Character* is a compelling read for anyone who wants to understand how charter public schools are uniquely able to help disadvantaged students thrive academically and build a strong personal foundation for lifelong success—and why these schools are so popular with parents.

—*Nina Rees, President and Chief Executive Officer,
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools*

Many school mission statements speak about educating the whole person but too often focus on the intellectual development of students to the neglect of the other dimensions of our humanity. This work, *Schools of Character*, offers a blueprint for the education of the whole person; a blueprint that is rooted in more than three centuries of practical experience that crosses cultures, ethnicities, and religious traditions. Among other things, it highlights that the education of the young is best accomplished by a community of educators in dialogue with one another; that this community is in relationship with one another and with the students as individuals; and that a student's education takes place outside the classroom as much as it does inside.

Whether teaching in educational institutions with a specific faith tradition, or private academies or public schools, this book presents an educational vision that inculcates fundamental human values so necessary to care for our common home we call Earth.

—*Brother Robert Schieler, FSC,
Superior General of the Christian Brothers*

Dedication

To the dedicated teachers, staff, and administrators who have embraced the Lasallian tradition and who see their work as a vocational commitment to advance the salvation of the young, especially the poor.

Author Acknowledgments

It is important to acknowledge two people in particular, without whom this reflection would not have happened. First of all, Gary Wood asked me to consider writing this book. In spite of my reluctance, he pushed me and encouraged me to put on paper the things that had been in my heart and mind for quite some time. As the book began to take shape, he never stopped being a significant source of encouragement and support. Gary has a deep understanding of the core values explored in the pages of this book. In addition to Gary Wood, Ed Siderewicz has been a source of inspiration for forty years. He has been a companion on the journey into the sacred mystery we call education. His understanding of service with the poor, the value of education as a way beyond economic poverty, and his commitment to the Lasallian tradition have made him a significant friend not only in the process of writing this book but in introducing others to the rich tradition that has inspired schools in eighty countries around the globe. These two men really deserve credit for what follows.

In addition, there are many others who read an initial draft of this work but one stands out as especially important. Brother Miguel Campos has studied the works of Saint John Baptist de La Salle for many years. Miguel's own writings have always been a source of reflection and inspiration. His feedback and encouragement gave me courage to see this project to completion.

My gratitude to these three men and many others is genuine and from the heart. I hope this book offers a little insight into how the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle might not just inform our Catholic schools but all educational enterprises, be they religious or state-sponsored.

Finally I would like to thank Saint Mary's Press and Jerry Ruff, my editor, who really made this a book through his expert advice, gift of time, and patience with an inexperienced author.

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Created by the publishing team of Saint Mary's Press.

Front Cover Image: A Catalyst Schools student concentrates on his studies. (© John Lee, John Lee Pictures ht.)

Back Cover Image: Former Catalyst assistant principal Moses Tighil gathers students for a group photograph in the reading and reflection garden during ceremonies for a memorial brick dedication at Catalyst Howland Charter School. (© Catalyst contributed photo)

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Foreword

Imran Shamim

Assistant Director of Information Technology

The Catalyst Schools

In our world where church and state are separate, a religiously affiliated public school is unlawful. However, Catalyst (public charter schools) established roots in the Catholic Lasallian tradition not to defy law but to demonstrate that a public school can work well *within* the law as it embraces the vision and values of a Catholic saint and progressive educator, John Baptist de La Salle. This book explains how and why Catalyst Schools came into being, and explores the roadmap they provide for others inspired to follow their lead.

Catalyst Schools, a faith-inspired (not faith-based) two-campus charter school group serving grades K-12, was started in Chicago's North Lawndale through the dedication of a few Christian Brothers. The history of Catalyst is simple. The brothers wanted to venture into the public sector without compromising any of the values they brought from Catholic Lasallian schools and without overstepping the First Amendment. The Catalyst Schools intended to address the need of underserved children who could benefit from the 335-year-old Lasallian educational tradition of touching minds and especially touching hearts. It is a tradition in pursuit of both academic knowledge and values. Through core values of Hope, Rigor, Results, and Relationship, the Catalyst Schools brought the inspiration of John Baptist de La Salle to the public school system.

I believe the Lasallian mission is rooted within me not because I am employed by Catalyst, but rather by virtue of my upbringing as a follower of an Abrahamic religion—Islam. The values of human dignity, social justice, and emotional well-being are important to Islam. De La Salle's vision is about building bonds and creating fraternal, caring relationships and community with students. As Brother Mike Fehrenbach states in this book, "De La Salle was concerned with the journey into the depth of the human heart." To truly understand oneself, one must also adhere to the Golden Rule. In the Qur'an we hear, "They are all enjoined to observe the ties of kinship" (Q.4:1). De La Salle's vision is not incompatible with Islam.

Standing beside my Catalyst family is humbling. This community has inspired me to do better and to be better. I believe Catalyst is doing the work of God and living within constitutional bounds. At Catalyst, the expectation is to see your work as self-sacrificial and rooted in compassion for, and faith in, humanity and its potential for salvation. The teachers at Catalyst Schools, much like the brothers of Reims, come as “full human beings,” authentic, and “not playing the role of the teacher.” The school diligently assists teachers to achieve their full potential. Love, central to the Lasallian vision, is fostered and the result is zeal for each student’s well-being.

Students are the heart of the organization. Everything is done for the betterment of their young minds and hearts, families and neighborhoods. Care and compassion for the underserved are at the heart of the Catalyst mission as inspired by Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

The mission of Catalyst Schools is much like this scripture from Qur’an: “Whoever saves the life of one human being, it shall be as if he had saved the whole of humankind” (5:32). At Catalyst Schools we emphasize saving humankind by serving each and every child who comes through our doors.

Introduction

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"I know! I know!" Children respond enthusiastically at Catalyst Schools Circle Rock Campus.

Catholic schools in the United States can trace their beginnings to Florida in 1606, when Franciscan monks established a mission school among natives there. As the country developed, however, it was public schools that became most popular. Predominantly Protestant religious schools, they used the King James translation of the Bible as their primary religious text. According to one story, the first Catholic school in Boston was begun in 1859 in response to the beating of a young Catholic boy who would not read the Ten Commandments aloud from the King James Bible. True or not, the tale

speaks of the religious divisions that existed and suggests motivation for a growing drive in the Catholic community to educate its own youth with the vision of the Church.

The Catholic school system began to develop with strength in the mid-nineteenth century. A century later, by the mid-1950s, nearly every Catholic child was assumed enrolled in a parish school, and these were supported by the almost free labor of the women religious who ran them. Schooling was a huge commitment of labor and resources by the Church. If a family was a supporting member of a parish, their children could attend the parish school at minimal cost. One of the most basic reasons parents sent their children to religious schools was to pass the religious culture from generation to generation. The religious nature of the schools, however, never minimized the importance of strong academics. Children who attended Catholic schools were well educated in secular as well as religious content and most of them, along with their public school counterparts, went on to significant success in life. Strong education was the backbone of progress and development for the country. Prosperity informed by strong values, whether learned within parochial systems like the Catholic schools or from the more Protestant-influenced public schools, greatly shaped the cultural development of the United States.

As society has become more diverse, including religiously diverse, educating for explicitly religious values has become increasingly controversial, and the effort to remove such values—or at least to refrain from identifying them as “religious” in public school settings—has been enshrined in law. The gulf between religious educational systems and the public schools has deepened as well.

Such a reality is neither useful nor good for children, however. Both public and religious school systems have deep value. That being the case, doesn't the welfare of children demand more collaboration and cooperation between the systems rather than intense competition? Furthermore, must the public sector fear religious values, or the religious community assume that public education is “value-free”? In fact, don't both systems share, teach, and practice many values? And shouldn't this be a cause for celebration?

Enter the Charter School Movement

The evolution of charter schools in the United States has the potential to reduce this anxiety—both public and parochial—over values. The charter school movement maintains neutrality about religion but not about values, part of its strong appeal to many families.

The growth of charter schools over the past fifteen years in many US cities is impressive.¹ These independently run public schools are intentionally more experimental, free (within limits) to establish policies, procedures, budgets, curricula, and hiring practices without the same level of bureaucratic control as the traditional public school. Part of the motivation for establishing such schools is, in fact, to develop and exercise new best practices with less bureaucratic interference. Accompanying this greater freedom, charters must comply with state regulations and are accountable for results. The charter can be revoked if either compliance or results do not meet minimal standards established by State Charter School Law.

In some ways, charter schools may offer a way to bridge the divide that exists between parochial and public educational systems—a bridge built on this intentionality and openness about values. No parent is obligated to send their child to a charter school and so the school must be deliberately chosen. Often, parents choose a charter school because of its values and the culture that arises from those values, as well as the academic results many judge these values to produce.

This book reflects on the experience of one charter school community that has intentionally tried to bridge the divide between religious and public education while answering a public desire for strong values-infused education. Catalyst Schools in Chicago, a two-campus charter school group serving grades K-12, grew out of the Catholic educational system, and specifically schools associated with the De La Salle Christian Brothers, a Catholic religious teaching community that has operated schools throughout the world since 1680. Popularly known as Lasallian schools, the name derives from the founder's name, John Baptist De La Salle, a seventeenth-century French priest.

The Controversy over Values

The simple fact is, children need to be educated and children need to develop a sense of coherent values that will guide their lives and help them become good, whole, well-integrated people. It is difficult to create the structure children need and crave in an institution that tries to be “values-free.”

1. “Since 1999, the share of students in charter schools has grown from under 1 percent to over 5 percent. In the same time period, the number of charter schools has risen by almost 5,000. In contrast, the number of non-charter schools has increased by only 326 since the 1999–2000 school year. . . . Across the country, 2.5 million students attended 6,440 charter schools during the 2013–14 school year, according to data from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.” Jason Russell, “Charter school movement is growing,” *Washington Examiner*, May 7, 2015, <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/charter-school-movement-is-growing/article/2564134>.

An educational system need not be “religious” in order to have and teach values. All educational systems have values. A claim of religious neutrality is itself a value statement. Public schools embrace and articulate a range of values and are operated by adults who likewise profess and live values. Values in this context are often articulated as rules for behavior (e.g., no bullying; dress appropriately; maintain decorum in the cafeteria; etc.), but they are not called values.

The founders of Catalyst Schools wanted to be clear about the values undergirding the culture of their schools. Catalyst, Chicago articulates those values as “Relationship,” “Rigor,” “Results,” and “Hope.”² Those values, in turn, reflect five core values that are part of the Lasallian tradition of education dating back to 1680. That tradition may be summarized as education that emphasizes and articulates values embraced by Lasallian education historically and worldwide, widely articulated as a Spirit of Faith, Living Gospel Values, Academic Excellence, Inclusive Community and Respect, and a Commitment to Justice and the Poor.³ While these are values shared by Lasallian schools throughout the world, the Catalyst team believed they could be articulated as the foundation stones for a public school as well, without violating the US First Amendment prohibition that maintains the separation of church and state.

This book attempts to explain how Catalyst has made every effort to create such a values-centric public school, and to describe how such a school looks, acts, and believes. An additional hope is that describing the Catalyst philosophy and experience will be useful to other Lasallian educators who are interested in the public school option as a way of living their mission. Quite possibly, John Baptist de La Salle’s experience and the evolution of the Lasallian schools during the last three centuries might hold some clues about some commonly held values we might all benefit from embracing.

Each of the five core Lasallian values will be explored in turn, both as the value evolved in the early Lasallian community and the experience of De La Salle, and also as it can apply within a public school today. The spirit of faith and the values of the Christian Gospel that inform the Lasallian tradition initially created roadblocks to conversation between the faith

2. “Our Values,” the catalyst schools, <http://www.catalystschools.org/about-us/our-value>.

3. A comparison paralleling Catalyst Schools values and the Lasallian tradition of education might look like this, with Catalyst value(s) first and Lasallian values in parentheses: Relationship (inclusive community, respect, social justice), Hope (faith and Gospel values), Results and Rigor (academic excellence, quality education). The Lasallian preference for the poor is evidenced in the neighborhoods where Catalyst Schools are located and the population they serve (e.g., 95%–99% free and reduced lunch—these are high-poverty communities).

community and the public educational sector regarding the establishment of the Catalyst charter model. The ultimate success of this model, however, demonstrates that as other communities consider creating similarly modeled charters, there need be no such presumption of conflict.

1

A Uniquely American Point of View

CONGRESS SHALL MAKE NO LAW *respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

 **THE FIRST AMENDMENT
TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION**
15 DECEMBER 1791

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Memorial plaque narrating the First Amendment in the US Constitution, Independence National Historical Park, Old City, Philadelphia.

The First Amendment to the US Constitution—and also the lesser-known yet highly influential Blaine Amendment, to be discussed in greater detail shortly—provide a useful starting point for this conversation. Popular agreement as well as legal standards support the principle that there should be no proselytizing or otherwise attempting to influence specific religious faith preferences in children by administrators or teachers in public schools. However, there are ways to articulate a rich *faith experience* that connects not to proselytizing or promoting doctrine or a specific faith tradition, but rather

to practicing and teaching a set of values that provide a framework for a life well lived as productive and contributing citizens motivated to build a better society. The experiences offered at Catalyst Schools introduce students to these values by providing a deep context for humanizing education and children and building a flourishing community.

Before the colonial era, early immigration to the New World resulted, in part, from religious repression and persecution. Settlers left all that they knew—their culture, their families, their work, their lives—for a kind of freedom they could not experience in their homeland. The hardships of life in the New World were viewed as a small price to pay for the benefits received. The inspiration of freedom, the ability to be your own person, to have the opportunity to make it by the sweat of your brow, to raise your children as you saw fit—all gave rise to the great American dream that continues to be articulated in ways that guide the ongoing development of US culture in the twenty-first century.

More specifically, religious freedom has always been central to who we are as a culture. In fact, religious believers at war with each other in their homeland have learned to thrive side by side in the United States. The wisdom of the founding vision that protects religious freedom cannot be minimized. The First Amendment that prohibits government from establishing a religion and protects each person's right to practice (or not practice) any faith without government interference is unquestionably wise. All religious traditions in the United States enjoy this freedom and all should embrace and defend its cause.

Yet articulating and enforcing the First Amendment also has led to some historical miscues. One such misstep took shape in the form of the Blaine Amendment of 1875. Although the amendment ultimately failed at the federal level, some state interpretations and applications of the failed rule have created a certain trepidation regarding what appropriate and healthy involvement of the religious sector in the public educational sphere might be. Yet even these misunderstandings carry a silver lining, in that they force efforts such as the Catalyst Schools to a heightened and healthy intentionality and articulation of their mission, values, and practice. More on that to come, but first, a closer look at the Blaine Amendment.

The Blaine Amendment, December 14, 1875

“No State shall make any law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; and no money raised by taxation in any State, for the support of public schools, or derived from any public fund therefor, nor any public lands devoted thereto, shall ever be under the control

of any religious sect, nor shall any money so raised, or lands so devoted be divided between religious sects or denominations.”¹

Rep. James G. Blaine (1830-1893) of Maine proposed [the Blaine Amendment to the US Constitution] on December 14, 1875 in reaction to efforts of, in particular, the Catholic Church to establish parochial schools. The amendment was passed by the House on August 4, 1876 by an overwhelming majority (180 votes in favor, 7 votes opposed), but failed to muster the necessary two-thirds vote in the Senate (28 votes in favor, 16 votes opposed). Afterwards, the Blaine Amendment was incorporated into a number of state constitutions, especially in the West, where its inclusion was often a prerequisite for consideration for statehood.

Many First Amendment scholars consider the Blaine Amendment unconstitutional because it requires government to discriminate against religious groups.²

More insulting is the fact the court had to invent the fiction of substantive due process in order to rewrite “Congress shall make no law” to “No State shall make no [sic] law” in order to apply to the States, something that never was successful through seven attempts to amend the Constitution post Fourteenth Amendment to make the Establishment Clause in some form or another applicable against the States.³

While the Blaine Amendment failed to garner sufficient support to become enshrined in the federal constitution, it has greatly influenced states throughout the country. States generally continue to live by the intent and letter of Blaine’s intervention.

The negative mandate “no state shall make any law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” becomes incredibly difficult to understand and implement in day-to-day life. When has a public employee (teacher, administrator, staff member) crossed the line and violated the law? Is wearing a religious symbol by a public employee allowed? Is sponsoring a student-led prayer group permitted? Is prayer be-

1. Text of the Federal Blaine Amendment.

2. “Blaine Amendment, December 14, 1875,” The Religious Liberty Archive: A Service of the Religious Institutions Group, Lewis Roca Rothgerber, <http://churchstatelaw.com/library/historical-materials/blaine-amendment-december-14-1875/>.

3. P.A. Madison, “Misunderstanding Jefferson’s ‘wall of separation’ metaphor,” The Federalist Blog: Where Federalism is Kept Honest, http://www.federalistblog.us/2010/11/_defending_jeffersons_wall_of_separation_metaphor/.

fore a football game a violation of the establishment clause or is it the free exercise of religion by student athletes? What about a moment of silence in a classroom? Can we teach about religion and, if we can, should we? Can a teacher speak about her own beliefs or values? Is it okay to read the Bible in the faculty room?

Because new situations arise regularly, the separation of church and state as lived in the schools remains a controversial and frequently visited topic and often is resolved in the courts. Even what seems settled is not set in concrete, at least as far as the Anti-Defamation League is concerned.

The issue of the proper role of religion in the public schools continues to be the subject of great controversy. School officials, parents and students—as well as lawyers and judges—wrestle with these questions every day. However, clear standards and guidance are elusive.⁴

So what is a school supposed to do?

In practice, this means that the public schools must never endorse—or appear to endorse—any religion or religious practice. Indeed, not only may they not appear to endorse religion, but they may never appear to disapprove of religion either. Moreover, schools may not give the impression that they endorse religious belief over non-belief or any particular belief over others.

The principle that public schools must never endorse or disapprove of religion has been established in a long line of US Supreme Court decisions. Students must never be given the impression that their school officially prefers or sanctions a particular religion or religion generally. Further, students must never feel coerced by pressure from their peers or from the public to adhere to any religion.⁵

This means the school must maintain neutrality toward all religions.

The employees of a charter school that purports to follow the inspiration of Saint John Baptist de La Salle in the United States must follow the same legal standard applied to any other public school employee—that is, to maintain neutrality toward all religions. It is neither permissible nor legal to promote Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, or any other

4. “Religion in the Public Schools,” Anti-Defamation League, <http://www.adl.org/assets/pdf/civil-rights/religiousfreedom/rips/ReligPubSchs-PDF.pdf>, 1.

5. *Ibid.*, 4.

religious or spiritual “ism” or “anity.” And subtle influence upon children regarding religious belief must be avoided.

What about Faith?

But does this mean there is no room in the world of public education for the values taught and lived in the private religious educational realm? Given the constitutional context in which “faith-inspired” charter schools are developing, how can they function and be true both to their foundational beliefs and the law? Is this an attempt to be true to two masters? Superficially, it seems that way. However when taking a deeper dive, possibly not.⁶

Saint John Baptist de La Salle believed the purpose of the Christian School was salvation. By this he meant the school was to teach a value system based on faith in God and acquisition of the life skills that made integration into and advancement in productive social citizenship possible. Today’s public educational structures are concerned with the “salvation” of children as well, though they would understand this in the secular sense of economic and social success. If you watch daytime television, likely you will notice an abundance of advertisements for colleges that are skilled at promoting career advancement but rarely market themselves as institutions that encourage and support a balanced education or the development of the whole person. This attitude seems dominant in society at large as well. Many parents send their children to school so they can get a job and make money. The salvation De La Salle envisioned was about much more than that. He was concerned with the journey into the depth of the human heart.

In fact, progressive public and private/religious educational systems are not fundamentally at odds. Those working in them want the same thing for children and society. The goals remain the well-being (“saving”) of children and that they grow into whole, healthy, productive, contributing members of society. Achievement of this outcome requires that we give them a value system that helps them establish a moral compass and can form the basis of healthy relationships. Teach them the Golden Rule. Provide a vision of community that says my ego is not the only thing that matters in the world. Give them the requisite skills for life in a twenty-first century that experiences change so rapidly that predictions about the future children will be living in are tenuous at best.

6. An excellent guide to help a school maintain appropriate boundaries is the resource: “Know Your Rights: Religion in Public Schools: A Guide for Administrators and Teachers,” http://www.aclu-tn.org/pdfs/briefer_religion_in_public_schools.pdf.



Students listen during a career day presentation at Catalyst Circle Rock.