

Catholic schools are closing as coronavirus pandemic exacts economic toll

Marisa Fernandez

June 13, 2020

The coronavirus pandemic is accelerating economic hardship for Catholic schools across the U.S., as dozens closed their doors this month and many more may have to do the same.

Why it matters: The loss of private schools — about one-third in the U.S. are Catholic — could narrow the education market, especially in low-income and high-minority communities, federal estimates show.

What's happening: Most private schools heavily rely upon tuition and fundraising to keep them afloat. That community support was lost once events in the spring had to be canceled due to social distancing measures.

- Struggling schools considering reopening are expect additional costs to adequately disinfect and monitor the health of students and teachers.

By the numbers: 60 private schools, 49 of them Catholic, have permanently closed since the pandemic, displacing more than 8,100 students; according to the CATO Institute Center for Educational Freedom.

- The National Catholic Educational Association told the AP the number of Catholic school closures in recent weeks could be as high as 100.
- If public school districts are forced to absorb these students, CATO estimates an additional \$125 million from their already squeezed budgets will be needed to educate them.

The big picture: Long-term enrollment declines already had dioceses closing or consolidating private schools in years past due to demographic changes, parents' inability to afford tuition and overall competition from neighboring schools, AP reports.

- Catholic school enrollment peaked in the 1960s, per government data, and during the Great Recession, 4,200 closed.
- The private schools that shuttered before the pandemic averaged nearly twice as many black and Hispanic students total compared to private elementary and secondary schools.
- Enrollment shrunk 18% or 382,044 students since 2010, according to the National Catholic Education Association, with elementary grades most affected.

Dioceses are quickly trying to figure out how to salvage the coming school year without shuttering more schools, EdWeek reports:

- **In Sacramento:** The diocese had to close two schools and is considering a third. Parochial schools in the area are weighing whether to keep one of its high schools open as an online learning center, where students login to live classes, rather than close the building.
- **In Newark:** Parents were outraged when the archdiocese recently announced the closure of seven elementary schools. About 1,500 signatures were collected and \$413,000 were raised to reopen one of the schools this fall.

The bottom line: Schools that have closed so far have higher enrollments of black and Hispanic students — particularly in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods — than private schools on average.

What to watch: As another new stimulus relief package is debated, private schools, including Catholic schools, are looking to Congress for relief. The Education Department's announcement in April to shift coronavirus stimulus funds to private schools received bipartisan opposition in Congress, though some Catholic schools were granted Paycheck Protection Program loans.