

The Catholic Diocese of Cleveland recently announced the necessary closings or mergers of several of its churches, and some of its schools. Naturally the process leading to these changes has been emotionally charged, culminating most recently in posturing by city council attempting to preserve some of these beloved treasures as historical landmarks.

We hope the bigger issue will not be lost in these debates. The impact of the Church in the city is not from its historic buildings, or its treasured artifacts. It is from the social services and education it has long provided.

The Catholic Diocese of Cleveland is the largest school system in the state of Ohio. Although some innovative and admirable things are happening in urban public and charter schools recently, public high school graduation rates in the city have hovered in the 30th percentile, while Diocesan graduation rates exceed 98%.

In blighted neighborhoods all over the city, Catholic schools are the one anchor that remains, and they offer the one single opportunity for disadvantaged children to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty - a quality education.

These schools don't look like they did in the 1960's when they were parish schools serving Catholic immigrants living in the city. Today, they serve increasing numbers of non-Catholics in the city centers that have long been abandoned.

As a result their administrative model will have to change. Like any business owner, they will have to assess the changing environment in which they exist, and refine their strategies for viability in that environment. They'll have to be smarter about how they operate, and they won't survive on parish or even Diocesan support alone. They will have to build partnerships with businesses, philanthropists, city officials and other community members.

Support of these schools is not a Catholic issue. It is a moral imperative, and a savvy investment. Piles of research confirm the success of these schools in educating our most vulnerable children, even when others fail. In a time when world markets are tumbling and few investments are yielding expected returns, Catholic schools remain a sound investment in our city and our children.

We hope the discussions in the coming weeks will quickly move away from where the stained-glass windows will be stored, and toward how we can collectively ensure the future of the most effective institution serving our city's children.

Stacey Picard & Sister Ritamary Welsh
Partners & Co-Founders, SDG Advisors, LLC

SDG Advisors works with Catholic K-12 schools to help them understand their finances, market for enrollment, raise more money, build better boards and plan for their future.