

EDUCATION NEXT PODCAST

Podcast Subject: “Catholic Ethos, Public Education” By Peter Meyer

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EMILY: YOU’RE LISTENING TO EDUCATION NEXT – THE PODCAST. BRINGING YOU STORIES FROM THE FOREFRONT OF AMERICAN EDUCATION REFORM.

IN TODAY’S PODCAST WE’LL HEAR ABOUT TWO CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS STARTED BY A ROMAN CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS ORDER. YES YOU DID HEAR THAT RIGHT. PUBLIC SCHOOLS, CATHOLIC CHURCH. PETER MEYER FILLS IN THE DETAILS.

PETER: SO HOW DID THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS, ONE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH’S OLDEST ORDERS, END UP GETTING INTO CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS? THE SHORT ANSWER: ARNE DUNCAN, THEN THE SUPERINTENDENT OF CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS, ASKED THEM TO. WHY? BECAUSE THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS, WHOSE FOUNDER, JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE IS THE CHURCH’S PATRON SAINT OF EDUCATION, ARE VERY GOOD AT RUNNING SCHOOLS.

THE ORDER EDUCATES NEARLY A MILLION STUDENTS IN MORE THAN 80 COUNTRIES. ABOUT 20,000 OF THOSE STUDENTS ARE IN THE US.

AND IT WAS IN THE US IN THE MID-90S, THAT THE ORDER BEGAN OPENING A NEW SET OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS. NOT FOR MIDDLE CLASS KIDS WHOSE PARENTS COULD AFFORD THE TUITION, BUT FOR KIDS FROM LOW INCOME NEIGHBORHOODS—AND AT NO COST TO THE FAMILY.

THE ORDER OPENED TWO SAN MIGUEL SCHOOLS, AS THE NETWORK WAS CALLED, IN CHICAGO, AND WITHIN JUST A FEW YEARS, THEY WERE A HUGE SUCCESS, A FACT WHICH CAUGHT THE ATTENTION OF DUNCAN-- WHO SUGGESTED TO THE BROTHERS THAT THEY TAKE THEIR METHOD TO THE PUBLIC SECTOR AND START A CHARTER SCHOOL.

GORDON HANNON CO-FOUNDED THE SAN MIGUEL SCHOOLS IN CHICAGO. HE SAYS THAT INITIALLY, THE SAN MIGUEL SCHOOL BOARD DID NOT JUMP AT THE OFFER.

GH: The San Miguel Board, when it initially looked at the possibility of getting into the public system, via a charter or a contract school, was very concerned about, well, if we’re going really replicate San Miguel, doesn’t that mean that there would be crucifixes on the wall, and we’d be explicitly teaching Catholic religion?

ESSENTIALLY, HANNON SAYS, THE SAN MIGUEL BOARD WASN'T SURE THEY'D BE ABLE TO DO IT. SOME FELT THAT NIXING THE RELIGION COMPROMISED THEIR MISSION, AND SO, INITIALLY, THEY TOLD DUNCAN – NO THANKS.

BUT, HANNON SAYS, THEY NEVER REALLY STOPPED THINKING ABOUT IT.

GH: A deeper question that kept coming back was what's really fundamental to what you're trying to achieve for children in Chicago, particularly for children that may not really have great options? And so the Board kept looking at it, and they decided well, all over the world, Catholics serve Muslims and Muslims serve Catholics and Christians serve non-Christians. There's a compelling case that we serve anybody. And Catholic or not

THE MORE THEY CONSIDERED – AND RECONSIDERED – THEIR BASIC MISSION, THE MORE THEY CAME TO SEE THE CHARTER SCHOOL IDEA AS PART OF THAT MISSION, TO SERVE THE POOR THROUGH EDUCATION. SO THEY CHANGED THEIR MIND. THEY SUBMITTED AN APPLICATION TO OPEN A PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL IN THE AUSTIN NEIGHBORHOOD, A POOR SECTION OF CHICAGO'S WEST SIDE. THEY ALREADY HAD A SAN MIGUEL SCHOOL IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD, AND KNEW THE COMMUNITY. THEY'D CALL THEIR NEW SCHOOL SYSTEM 'CATALYST.' CPS SAID GREAT- BUT THEY HAD ONE MORE REQUEST. MIKE FEHRENBACH WAS ON THE SCHOOL'S PLANNING TEAM AT THE TIME.

MF: Chicago Public Schools came back to us and said, we will give you this charter, but we want you to open two schools, one in Austin and one in the Lawndale community.

AUSTIN AND LAWNDALE ARE TWO TOUGH NEIGHBORHOODS--LOW INCOME AND HIGH CRIME. IN SCHOOL, NEARLY ALL THE KIDS QUALIFY FOR A FREE OR REDUCED PRICE LUNCH. ALTHOUGH THESE AREAS ARE TECHNICALLY RIGHT NEXT TO EACH OTHER, THE SCHOOLS WERE MILES APART AND THE BROTHERS HAD NO PRESENCE IN LAWNDALE. IT WASN'T THEIR TURF.

WORSE, CPS WANTED THE SCHOOL IN LAWNDALE TO OPEN FIRST. A PUBLIC SCHOOL WAS JUST ABOUT TO CLOSE, AND DUNCAN WANTED IT TO REOPEN AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. AS ONE OF THE BROTHERS WOULD LATER SAY, "WE NAIVELY SAID YES." AND THEY LEARNED ONE LESSON VERY, VERY QUICKLY. HERE'S CO-FOUNDER GORDON HANNON.

GH: One of the things that we learned as we moved into North Lawndale was you really need to know a lot more about the community before you move into it. The school had been closed two years before we moved into it, and there was still a lot of hard feeling and some raw nerves around that. There was also a lot of fear about who we were, what our relationship with CPS was. People did not understand charter schools, you know, and so, thought we were a private school, thought we would be bussing kids in from other

communities. There was...also a sense in the community that there was a bit of a conspiracy to gentrify this community and to displace the residents.

AND IT WASN'T JUST PROBLEMS WITH THE COMMUNITY. THERE WERE PROBLEMS WITHIN THE SCHOOL AS WELL.

GH: A principal was hired that everyone thought, you know, on paper this was a terrific candidate and certainly he was a great educator, but in this particular context, it wasn't a successful match.

THE PRINCIPAL WASN'T GRANTED ENOUGH TIME TO PREPARE, HANNON ADMITS.

OVER IN AUSTIN, IT WAS A DIFFERENT STORY. MOSTLY BECUASE THE COMMUNITY WAS SUPPORTIVE. THE SCHOOL PARTNERED WITH A LOCAL BAPTIST CONGREGATION THAT WAS DEEPLY INVOLVED IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND SCHOOL PRINCIPAL SALA SIMS COULD FOCUS HER WORK ON MAKING SURE HER LEADERSHIP TEAM WAS READY.

SS: So literally, my leadership team, my Grad Support Director, my AP, my lead teachers, my mentor teachers...they'll call and say, you know, I got an idea about something for next year, or I'll call somebody and say, "Are you still awake? I need to talk about this."

IN A NEIGHBORHOOD FULL OF UNREST, SIMS WAS ABLE TO CREATE A PEACEFUL AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL. AS A RESULT, SIMS SAYS, ACADEMICS ARE IMPROVING. SCORES ON THE ILLINOIS STANDARDIZED TEST CAME IN AT THE 57th-PERCENTILE IN THEIR FIRST YEAR...

SS: and by our last year we had a reading and math composite of 72%.

THAT MAKES THE AUSTIN SCHOOL AN ACADEMIC LEADER IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD. THE LAWNSDALE SCHOOL, MEANWHILE, IS BEGINNING TO FIND ITS SEA LEGS -- AFTER GOING THROUGH 3 PRINCIPALS IN 3 YEARS. NUMBER THREE, CHAUN JOHNSON, SAYS THAT WHEN HE TOOK OVER LAST YEAR, IT WAS OBVIOUS WHY THE SCHOOL HAD BEEN SUFFERING

CJ: The first few days or so, I asked questions to everyone, and then I came to understand that everyone's talking, but few people are listening to each other. The goal here was to build communication among the family here.

NOW IN HIS SECOND YEAR IN LAWNSDALE, JOHNSON SAYS HIS STUDENTS HAVE MADE SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS.

TURNS OUT, BUILDING UP THE STAFF COMMUNICATION WAS A KEY DRIVER IN BOTH SCHOOLS' SUCCESS. HERE'S CATALYST CEO GORDON HANNON.

GH: It's a building up of a professional group of very intelligent people, sharing power, sharing decision making, recognizing leadership, recognizing other people's gifts and talents, and building community, and that is something that perhaps, historically, has been really the root of a lot of Catholic education. Not the sole purview of Catholic education, absolutely not, but maybe something that with the accoutrements of religion and common language, has been something that is a real gift in Catholic education that helps a child learn, because the adults have community, the adults are in a relationship, and there's respect and there's trust.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH DOESN'T HAVE A MONOPOLY ON CREATING COMMUNITY, HANNON SAYS, BUT IT IS PRETTY GOOD AT IT.

GH: That's the value that we need to bring into the public sector. Because ultimately, that's what we want the world to be about, and that's what we want our children and families to see. The answer is in community, it's in trust, it's in love, it's in caring, it's in respect, and it's in fairness. And so when that context is created, people who are intelligent, people who know what they're doing, they can fly.

CATALYST IS LOOKING INTO ADDING MORE SCHOOLS IN THE NEAR FUTURE.

I'M PETER MEYER.

EMILY: YOU CAN FIND OUT MORE ABOUT CATALYST SCHOOLS...ON OUR WEBSITE—
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