

# OPINION

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### COMMENTARY

# More school choices, not fewer

By Sister Karen Dietrich

Thanks to a bill recently passed by the New Jersey Legislature, Catholic Partnership Schools can convert our schools in Camden into public charter schools.

But why would we?

Negative news about Camden has become a staple. But Catholic Partnership Schools' model of sharing resources and a culture across the city's five remaining parochial elementary schools is a success story.

At a time when Catholic schools across the country are closing, ours are growing and thriving. Last month, we began the school year with a record 1,070 students, representing a 7.2 percent increase in enrollment over the previous year.

Our schools outperform Camden's traditional public schools and the majority of the city's charter schools by a wide margin. While our tuition is just \$6,000

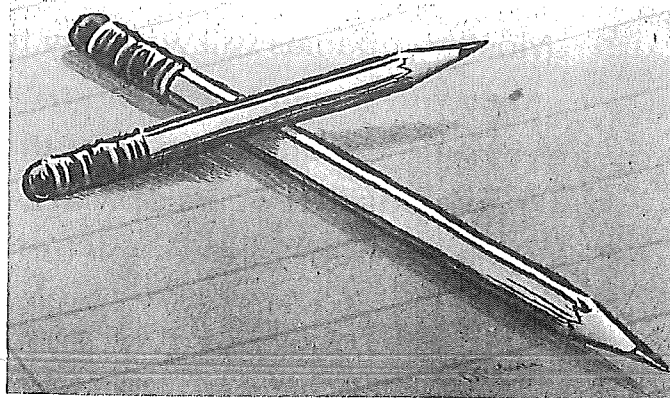
a year — less than a third of what public schools are spending per student — our proficiency rates in math and reading are the best in the city. Eighty percent of our graduating eighth graders are at least proficient in those core subjects.

The charter school bandwagon has been growing, and the New Jersey legislation is a reflection of that. Unfortunately, on the altar of charter expansion, some policymakers are willing to sacrifice the very thing that makes Catholic schools successful: our culture. But charters alone will not solve all our educational problems.

This shouldn't be an either/or proposition. Camden and other communities need more educational choices, not fewer. There are more than 13,000 school-age children in the city, and they all deserve a decent education.

Catholic Partnership Schools are educating only about 8 percent of those children. Clearly, we need more great charter schools — and more great traditional public schools — if we are going to fulfill our society's responsibility to future generations and, in Camden, end the cycle of poverty and violence.

While public education systems are undergoing reforms, some Catholic as well as charter schools are already making a difference in the lives of children every day. They



DEAN ROHRER

should be supported, not supplanted. It's a mistake to think we can turn the lights off at a successful Catholic school in the evening and turn them on at a charter school with the same great results in the morning. Several converted parochial schools in Washington have learned that lesson.

If you convert a Catholic school into a charter school, and the teachers and leadership can no longer infuse the hearts and minds of the students with the "God stuff," it will fail. And this has nothing to do with religious icons or crosses on the wall.

Culture is a critical factor in the success of all kinds of schools. KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), one of the country's leading charter school networks, has developed a successful culture around such themes as delayed gratification and hard work. Mastery Charter Schools

have an achievement-focused culture that "sweats the small stuff."

The Catholic school culture teaches students that they are children of God for whom anything is possible. Its defining characteristics are faith-based values, an abiding respect for the family and the power of a child's potential, and an excellent academic foundation. Catholic school values embody the most highly prized characteristics in education today, and charter operators are looking to replicate our success.

Why in the world would we tinker with that formula, lose what has sustained us for more than a century, and give families one less meaningful choice for their children? And why are New Jersey legislators looking to dismantle something that works in Camden?

When one considers all the ink devoted to education reform initiatives in New Jersey and the rest of the nation these days, it's amazing that this point is repeatedly overlooked. In their rush to provide meaningful options for students trapped in failing public schools, policymakers are overlooking the obvious.

So if they shouldn't be encouraging Catholic schools to shut down and convert into charters, what should they do to build on our success? The best current proposal is the Opportunity Scholarship Act, which would provide businesses with tax credits in exchange for tuition assistance for underserved children.

The education reform we seek will come from preserving what works and increasing school choice, not restricting it.

Sister Karen Dietrich is executive director of Catholic Partnership Schools in Camden.