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Losing Our Home: The Closing of St. Augustine School

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Chapter 1

Introduction

"I told them that they should just remove that cross and put up a dollar bill. At least I'll know what I'm dealing with."[1] Darlene Rhem, a teacher at St. Augustine School located in the Morrisania section of the South Bronx, stated this as she was discussing the decision by the Archdiocese of New York to close the school in June 2011. She has taught there for 18 years, and will now find herself out of a job in June through no fault of her own. Through that blunt statement, Rhem is vocalizing much of the frustration felt by teachers and those connected to St. Augustine School, and most likely teachers in other Catholic schools. Has money become the driving force behind Catholic education, or is there still an emphasis on the moral development of a child and on teaching as a lifelong vocation? While some would say yes, others would argue that there has been a subtle shift in the overall mission of Catholic schools.

Catholic parishes and dioceses throughout the United States are struggling to keep their schools open in the face of a stagnant economy, antiquated financial models, severe government spending cuts in education, and competition with public and charter schools for students. Many diocese have reached the "breaking point," and have been forced to close schools that are suffering financially.[2] Schools are facing shrinking enrollment numbers and growing deficits as the cost of providing a Catholic education has greatly risen over the years. One of the biggest reasons for this is an increase in hiring of lay teachers over religious men and women; this has forced schools to charge higher tuitions in order to pay teachers salaries (which are often very low to begin with). Money has become a huge concern for Catholic schools in the last few years; this is evident in school closures and appeals for private funding. While there is no denying that

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[1] Darlene Rhem, personal interview, 15 Mar. 2011.
[2] Francis J. Butler, "Empty Seats and Rising Costs Take a Toll" America 16 August 2010. Web.

money is essential to a school's operation, Catholic schools have been known to provide a quality ethics-based education at a low cost. Specifically in urban areas, Catholic schools act as alternatives to public schools, which can suffer under budget constraints and bureaucracy. Parents will scrape together money and make sacrifices to send their children to these schools, often because of the faith but also because of the quality of education. They desire a faith-based education for their children that stresses morality and discipline, which may not be found in public schools.

This thesis seeks to examine the role of Catholic schools in New York City. Catholic schools have been a part of New York's education system since the mid 1800s, and were founded to keep Catholic children out of public schools for fear of persecution and mind contamination. These schools thrived during times of heavy immigration to the United States, and would often enroll upward of 1,000 students. Eventually, when Catholicism became more accepted in American culture, it became more of an ideology and cultural identification. Children were enrolled in Catholic schools out of pride and a desire to receive a "Catholic education." These schools have educated thousands of New York City residents since their inception.

While Catholic schools have been an important part of the Church's mission, I am more interested in examining these schools as community institutions. One of the most significant aspects of the Catholic school, especially in urban settings, is the sense of community and ownership felt by its members. Often, the entire parish and local community would be invested in the school's well being, which would foster a sense of community among the participants.[3] This thesis will focus more on the ways in which the Catholic school, and to a larger extent the Catholic parish, can impact the history of a neighborhood and the lives of its residents.

[3] Timothy Dolan "The Catholic Schools We Need," America 13 September 2010. Web.

The best way to understand the value of Catholic education and the impact that Catholic schools have on a community is to study a particular school and chronicle its development. I have chosen to examine St. Augustine School for a variety of reasons. St. Augustine School was founded in 1887, and has been a solid community institution since its founding. Located on Franklin Street and 167th Street in the South Bronx, St. Augustine School has stood strong while unemployment, arson, and economic cycles have beset the neighborhood. The school's founding was similar to that of many Catholic schools in New York City. The parish was built in 1849 by Irish, German, and Italian immigrants who had moved to Morrisania from Lower Manhattan. Shortly after, a school was established, since education was a high priority for Catholic parishes. Enrollment grew, and at its peak St. Augustine enrolled over 1300 students.[4] The school also has a very important tradition of ministering to African Americans. St. Augustine Parish became one of the first black Catholic parishes in New York, and gave African American children an alternative to the poor public schools of the area. Currently the school has a very strong academic record, and a history of academic excellence. The School of the Arts curriculum, which was in existence from 1979 to 1993, was revolutionary at the time for using the performing arts as a way to engage children in school. Though I could have chosen any other school, St. Augustine School is the right mix of ordinary and extraordinary; every school has a similar story, yet this school has elements that make it different and interesting to urban educational and historical research.

Through researching parish documents and archives and conducting interviews with teachers, alumni, and other community members connected with the school, I was able to learn more about the school's history and its current situation. This method was effective for coming

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[4] The Official Catholic Directory. Published by P.J. Kenedy and Sons, 1943.

to understand some of the impacts of the school's closure, such as teacher unemployment and the financial hardships of parents.

In addition to being an Urban Studies major, I am completing a concentration in American Catholic Studies through Fordham University's Curran Center. I have an interest in urban religion and the ways in which churches and other religious institutions can act as a unifying force in urban areas. Additionally, I am a product of Catholic education in New York City. Having attended a Catholic elementary school in Queens and a Catholic high school in Manhattan, I am familiar with the ways that Catholic schools, and the Catholic parish, can play a significant role in the organization of urban communities. Having experienced the benefits of a Catholic education, I was drawn to researching St. Augustine School, as it provides a quality education for students beyond the classroom. Students at St. Augustine are challenged academically, but also are made to feel safe in a small school environment. There are also many enriching opportunities for students, such as African dance, art shows, music classes, international heritage days, and various sports.

I will first look at the history of Catholic schools in New York City, and chronicle some of the development of this educational network. This research will focus mainly on the populations served by the first Catholic schools, as well as the original mission and intent of the schools. I will then explore St. Augustine School as a case study of a Catholic school with a long history and important role in its surrounding community. This history will be broken into two parts: the first from the school's founding in 1887 to 1985, and the second from 1985 to 2011. It will include any significant changes in the school's demographics or enrollment and changes in the curriculum. In the fifth chapter, I will consider some of the effects of the closure of St. Augustine School. Though we may not know all of the repercussions until much later, some of

the immediate ones will be the displacement of current students, the pending unemployment of teachers and staff members, and the loss of a major community institution in the Morrisania neighborhood. The final chapter will consider some of the options for future growth and development among New York City Catholic schools, and whether this educational model is viable in the long run. By completing this project, I hope to preserve some of the history of St. Augustine School and consider some future solutions for Catholic diocese across the United States that are facing a schools crisis.

Chapter 2

A Brief History of Catholic Schools in NYC

The History

In order to understand the current state of Catholic education, we must look at its development throughout New York City's history. Historically, the Catholic Church in New York has served immigrant populations. During the mid 1800s, Catholics began to emigrate to the United States in large waves from countries like Ireland, Italy, and Germany. They brought Catholicism with them, and religion became a way to express their ethnic identity in a new country. The Catholic Church recognized that these new immigrant groups were in need of social support, and that the Catholic parish could fill that role. Parishes became vital institutions that offered support to families struggling to assimilate into New York life, whether the support was monetary or social. They also became ethnic enclaves, welcoming immigrants who were experiencing significant discrimination in other areas of society. Religion tended to play a more significant role for immigrants in their new country than it did in their homeland; it was a way for new immigrant groups to preserve some of the cultural traditions.

As the institutional Church in New York City was rapidly expanding, Catholics in the United States began to raise questions as to how they should educate their children. In the nineteenth century, Americans were highly concerned with education and its availability. Many embraced Horace Mann's concept of the "common school," which would provide free education for children regardless of social and economic background. Part of this concept included the idea that common schools would teach the religious values of American Christians, promoting the idea that all Christian denominations held the same general beliefs. Catholics objected, as they believed that their church was "The Church." They often refused to send their children to public

schools. This was frustrating to Protestants in New York, as Catholics comprised a fifth of the population. Their refusal to participate threatened the stability of common schools, where Protestant children could be educated with Protestant values. Thomas Shelley, historian of the Archdiocese of New York, states, "The fact that the threat came from a despised group of immigrants made the situation all the more annoying. The fact that the political clout of these immigrants was constantly increasing made the situation all the more alarming."[5]

Though many Catholic families chose to enroll their children in Catholic schools, these schools were often overcrowded and lacked funding. Recognizing the need for more schools and more money, lay Catholics from New York petitioned state legislators in Albany to request public funding for Catholic schools. After a long and drawn out battle between Archbishop John Hughes and the Public School Society of New York, which drew to a close in 1842, Catholic schools did not receive any state funding; however, sectarian religious education became prohibited in public schools. Hughes decided to focus his efforts on creating a strong network of Catholic schools instead, and he came to be regarded as the father of the parochial school system.[6] For many years, Catholic parishes organized to provide quality education for their children. Making do on little to no money, parochial schools were organized around the city, enabling children to receive an education grounded in Catholic morals.

American Catholic bishops noticed Hughes' school network, and they began to take steps on a national level to ensure that education become a top priority among Catholic families. In November and December 1884, the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, commonly referred to as the Baltimore Council, decreed that all Catholic children must receive a Catholic education,

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[5] Thomas Shelley, The Bicentennial History of the Archdiocese of New York (Strasbourg: Éditions du Signe, 2007) 112-113.
[6] Shelley 123-5.

and that each parish must provide an education for their young parishioners. The Council stated the following:

> Title vi, Of the Education of Catholic Youth, treats of (i) Catholic schools, especially parochial, viz., of their absolute necessity and the obligation of pastors to establish them. Parents must send their children to such schools unless the bishop should judge the reason for sending them elsewhere to be sufficient. Ways and means are also considered for making the parochial schools more efficient. It is desirable that these schools be free. (ii) Every effort must be made to have suitable schools of higher education for Catholic youth.[7]

The Baltimore Council posed a challenge to parishes across the country as they rushed to build schools to comply with this mandate. Occasionally the school was built before the parish in order to get children into Catholic schools. The parochial school model—a strong Catholic parish that supported a school for the children—became ubiquitous across the country, specifically in New York City where white ethnic immigrants sought a Catholic education for their children. The schools grew at an astounding rate. In 1870, there were 22,215 children enrolled in Catholic schools. By 1900, only 30 years later, there were 121 parochial schools that enrolled 52,184 students.[8]

There are two important notes to make in regards to the development of Catholic schools in New York City. The first is that many of these schools were founded without a long-term plan. Desperate to start schools for their children, Catholic parishes would simply build schools and employ teachers. There was little start up capital, and initially schools were overcrowded and survived on a small budget. Additionally, many of the early teachers in these schools were religious men and women. Religious women specifically saw education as a vocation, calling it

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[7] William Fanning, "Plenary Councils of Baltimore," The Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: Robert Appleton Company). Web <www.newadvent.org>.
[8] Shelley 363.

the "wageless work of paradise."[9] There was a huge rise in women religious communities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and thus a huge teacher pool that could be paid very low wages. This helped to keep low the operating costs of schools, which in turn kept tuition rates low.[10] For years, religious sisters were the backbone of the Catholic school; the decrease in vocations that occurred in the late twentieth century and increase in lay teaching staff was something that no one anticipated.

The second important note is that immigrants scraped together money to send their children to Catholic schools, believing that a Catholic education would protect their children from harassment and preserve some of their cultural identity. Because they enrolled their children in separate schools, Archbishop Hughes believed that Catholics were subject to "double taxation," as they were required to pay state taxes to subsidize public schools and find a way to finance their own schools. This was a significant burden on the poor immigrant community.[11] This situation has not changed much today; many poorer families still are struggling to pay tuition, either because they wish for their children to receive a Catholic education, or because they see Catholic schools as a strong alternative to public schools.

The Benefits

This strong history has given Catholic schools a reputation for being academically challenging environments that promote discipline and hard work in their students. Educational research has shown that there are significant academic and social advantages to attending a Catholic school. Some of the earliest research on this topic was conducted by Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1982), who examined whether students in Catholic and private schools have higher

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[9] Kathleen Sprows Cummings, New Women of the Old Faith: Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era (Chapel Hill: The University of North Caroline Press, 2009) 101.
[10] Cummings 109.
[11] Shelley 116.

achievement in basic cognitive skills than their counterparts in public schools. After administering tests to high school sophomores and seniors in reading, vocabulary, and mathematics, they found that sophomores in Catholic schools were at the same level as public school seniors. They also found that among their sample, there was a higher level of growth from sophomore year to senior year for Catholic school students. There also was higher achievement in vocabulary and mathematics among Catholic school students, sometimes as substantial as an entire grade level.[12]

Their research also studied the supportive factors involved in a Catholic, public, and private education. They found that Catholic students cited higher levels of social support in addition to academic support. For example, 25 percent more of the students surveyed in Catholic schools expected that they will finish college as compared to their counterparts in public schools. Their research indicates that Catholic schools "lead to plans for high levels of post-secondary education than do public schools." Students also have high levels of self-esteem and fate control, and drop out levels are lower among Catholic school students. They estimate that only 12 percent of students drop out of Catholic schools between sophomore and senior year, versus 24 percent in public schools. All of these elements—student coursework, homework, absenteeism, school disciplinary climate, and student behavior within the school—can account for the higher academic achievement in Catholic schools.[13] While this study is a bit outdated, it was one of the first to examine the "Catholic school advantage," and was responsible for starting a huge body of research into the benefits of Catholic education.

Other studies have discussed the personal benefits of attending Catholic school. Students at Catholic schools often have higher levels of personal motivation because of teacher

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[12] James Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore, "Cognitive Outcomes in Public and Private Schools," Sociology of Education 55 (1982): 68.
[13] Coleman, et. al. 73.

involvement. Bempechat, et. al. (2007) found that students surveyed noted the supportive attitudes of teachers who take an interest in their academic and social well-being.[14] Students experience positive pressure to succeed, as they do not want to disappoint teachers. They also seem to view failure as a part of the learning process; instead of it being an embarrassing experience, students surveyed saw it as an opportunity for growth and expressed motivation to succeed in spite of it.

Blacks and Hispanics in inner city neighborhoods benefit from attending Catholic schools, as Catholic schools in these low-income areas are likely more efficient than public schools.[15] Graduation rates for these students are higher, and they tend to do more homework and succeed academically. Test scores are also higher for minority students attending Catholic schools.[16]

One might argue that Catholic schools are so successful because they are allowed to be selective in their student population. These schools can deny admission and carefully select their student population, which must be able to pay the school's tuition before they can even attend. This self-selection is what allows the academically rigorous atmosphere, because Catholic schools are able to only admit the students who meet the high academic standards. This argument can hold with certain schools and in certain areas, but certainly not for St. Augustine School and other schools in similar economically depressed areas. Principal Cathryn Trapp said that nearly every student at St. Augustine receives some sort of scholarship or financial assistance; no

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[14] Janine Bempechat, Beth A. Boulay, Stephanie C. Piergross and Kenzie A. Wenk, "Beyond the Rhetoric: Understanding Achievement and Motivation in Catholic School Students," Education and Urban Society 40 (2008): 171-2.

[15] William Sander, The Effects of Catholic Schools on Religiosity, Education, and Competition (New York: NCSPE, 2001) 22.

[16] Sander 23.

students pay the full tuition rate, and many have their tuition discounted by nearly 50 percent.[17] Additionally, many of the teachers at St. Augustine have cited that their students will come to them with below-average reading and math scores; they catch up to the rest of the students by the end of the year once they are afforded the opportunity.

The best way to see this history come to life and explore the application of these educational studies is to examine a school itself. The next two chapters will take a deeper dive into the history of St. Augustine School to see how this history and these theories play out in a South Bronx school.

[17] Cathryn Trapp, personal interview, 8 February 2011.

Chapter 3

St. Augustine School: 1887-1985

Humble Beginnings

Though it may be hard to imagine, the Bronx was not always the urban neighborhood that we know today. For much of the early history of New York City, the Bronx was farmland and was far less industrial than Manhattan. Morrisania was one of first areas of the Bronx to be settled by Europeans (much of the Bronx was inhabited by indigenous peoples before the arrival of the first European immigrants). Morrisania is named after the Morris family, who purchased Jonas Bronck's estate in 1670 and increased their land holdings to 1,920 acres. [18] The construction of the New York and Harlem Railroad lines in 1841 began to bring more people to the Bronx and caused Morrisania to become more industrialized. Individuals and families who wanted to escape the tenements of lower Manhattan migrated north and found open spaces where they could build their own homes. Thus began the growth of the Bronx into an industrial center, and one of New York's most populous boroughs.[19] Many of the people moving to the Bronx were Irish, German, and Italian immigrants who were Catholic, and they were seeking to start worshipping communities.

St. Augustine Parish was established in 1849 in Morrisania. The parish's first mass was celebrated in a private residence on Boston Road near Home Street. The worshipping community grew quickly, and the next year parish members purchased an acre of land for $300 on Jefferson Street and Franklin Avenue; this was where the parish's first church structure was built. This original church was destroyed in a fire in 1894, and instead of building on the same small site, Reverend Thomas Gregg purchased property on 167th Street and Franklin Avenue. He also

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[18] Jill Jonnes, South Bronx Rising (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002) 12.
[19] Jonnes 13.

purchased additional property on Franklin and Fulton Avenues. The current church, located on 167th Street and Franklin Avenue, was built shortly thereafter.[20] Designed by architect Louis Giele, the church is one of the largest and most magnificent in the Bronx. Built on a hill with two tall bell towers, the church towers above the surrounding buildings and holds a place of prominence in Morrisania (see Figure 1). It holds up to 1500 people, and has been nicknamed "the Cathedral of the Bronx." The parish experienced a subsequent period of growth, and thrived as one of the largest Catholic parishes in the South Bronx.

During the first 50 years of the parish's existence, several attempts were made to found a parochial school. In 1863, Reverend Joseph Wood, pastor of St. Augustine, established a school under the charge of three lay parishioners. The students "were to procure their own books, the parish to pay the teachers. For lack of means the school was discontinued."[21] A second attempt was made in the mid-1870s, under the guidance of sisters from an Ursuline Convent, but this school failed as well for lack of support and resources. The current parochial school was founded in 1887, when Reverend Bernard Brady began preparations to found a school run by the Sisters of Charity. The school first opened its doors in September 1887 with 100 students. Though the beginning was shaky, attendance soon steadied and the school grew.

Since the size of the parish was rapidly expanding and more students were enrolling in the school, plans were drawn in 1904 to build a new school that would have a greater capacity than the current one. The cornerstone was laid in 1905, and the building, located on Franklin Avenue between 167th and 168th Streets, was dedicated on June 17, 1906. The three-story building was able to hold 1000 students, as the parish was hoping that a larger building would further facilitate the school's growth (see Figure 2). This building, which also currently houses

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[20] A History of St. Augustine Parish (New York: 1949). Recorded for its 100th anniversary.
[21] A History of St. Augustine Parish 1949.

the school, opened its doors to students in September 1906. Enrollment was at 485 students, with the Sisters of Charity running the Girls' School and the Christian Brothers running the Boys' School.[22]

Much like St. Augustine School, the Bronx experienced a period of growth in the early 20th century. More families were moving to the Bronx from Lower Manhattan to take advantage of quality housing stock, tree-lined streets, and the community atmosphere. The number of Catholics moving to the borough also grew; between 1901 and 1929, thirty-five new Catholic parishes were established in the Bronx.[23] This increase of families and children in Morrisania is reflected in the increase in enrollment at St. Augustine School. Shortly after the building of the new school on Franklin Avenue, the enrollment of St. Augustine School had more than doubled. In 1912, only six years after the opening of the new school building, 1000 students were attending at the school.[24] The primary school building became insufficient to hold the entire student body, so the Boys' Department of the school was moved to a newly built schoolhouse on Fulton Avenue.[25] For several years, two buildings were needed to accommodate all of the students enrolled at St. Augustine School.

The school thrived throughout the first half of the 20th century, similar to other Catholic parochial schools in New York City. From 1915 to 1942, over 1000 students were enrolled in St. Augustine School in any given year (see Figure 3). Throughout the 1920s, students continued to enroll at the school, and the number of students remained steady despite the Great Depression. This was the most populated time for the school and the parish; the school was often filled to overcrowding, a sharp contrast to the current situation. The school's enrollment peaked at 1330

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[22] A History of St. Augustine Parish 1949.
[23] Shelley 472.
[24] The Official Catholic Directory. Published by P.J. Kenedy and Sons, 1912.
[25] Historical Notes of Our Early Church (New York: St. Augustine, 1924). Recorded for its 75th anniversary.

students in 1942, and it seemed as if it would only continue to grow and prosper. However, after 1943, enrollment would not surpass 1000 students and would only steadily decline from there.

"And Then We Moved Away"

As the Great Depression was ending and citizens of the United States began to support the war effort, the Bronx began to experience a period of economic prosperity and a shift in population. Alan Marschall, a former student at St. Augustine School and parish member, recalls his childhood growing up in Morrisania within the St. Augustine community during this time:

> During WW2, we had a victory and flower garden in the back yard of 1188 Franklin Avenue. My father helped out the church and my brother was an altar boy. I remember WW2 recruits reporting to the Armory [and the various metal scrap drives where it was piled up just South of Boston Road]…On very hot summer days, my friends and I would leave the nearby park and seek relief from the heat by staying in the shade on the East side of the Church, and "Mackie" the custodian would "catch us" and chase us away. I remember when Pastor McCabe passed away. In May of 1942, I made my First Communion and then we moved away in September 1943. [26]

The last line of this memory is significant as many families began to vacate the neighborhood, which would lead to a drastic demographic change in a relatively short period of time. The change in the city's economy, the opportunities afforded to veterans through the GI Bill, and the suburbanization of America all contributed to this mass exodus.

World War II boosted New York City's economy, offering new job opportunities for war work and generally increasing the standard of living for its residents. Men left for Europe to fight in the war, and family sizes temporarily decreased. In *South Bronx Rising*, Jill Jonnes describes how the post-World War II economy caused a diaspora among Bronx residents. War wages were high, and those who remained in the United States suddenly found themselves with more money

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[26] 150th Anniversary Celebration of St. Augustine Catholic Church (New York: October 29, 1999).

than before. Families were better off financially, which gave way to a greater sense of mobility. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill, helped to accelerate the flight of white families from the Bronx. One of the most significant aspects of the GI Bill was a full four years of college tuition and a living stipend for returning soldiers; this enabled thousands of veterans to get a college education and become skillful, educated workers. These men were wise to do so, as manufacturing opportunities and unskilled work was slowly leaving New York. Manufacturing firms and printing companies recognized that they could relocate to smaller cities and hire non-unionized workers for smaller wages.[27] At the same time, the idea of the suburbs began to take off. It became very popular for families to move to areas like Westchester, Long Island, and Connecticut, as the GI Bill made homeownership possible for thousands of veterans.

White families were moving up the social ladder and moving out of the old neighborhood. This new middle class, many of whom were Catholic, began to leave the old inner city ethnic enclaves that were once "the stronghold of American Catholicism."[28] While whites received higher wages and had a greater sense of mobility, so did African Americans, who moved into the old white neighborhoods as whites moved to the suburbs. Monsignor Thomas Fenlon, current pastor of St. Augustine Parish, remarked that everyone, including African Americans, had more money during this time. Blacks in Harlem were looking to escape the crowded living conditions there, and Morrisania was one of the first neighborhoods where they settled.[29] Soon St. Augustine Parish found itself in a black neighborhood with its weekly church attendance decreasing.

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[27] Jonnes 91-104.
[28] Shelley 558.
[29] Thomas Fenlon, personal interview, 8 April 2011.

In 1943, Monsignor Cornelius Drew was named pastor of St. Augustine Parish. Drew came from Harlem, where he had significant experience working with African American Catholics. Harlem became overwhelmingly African American during the 1920s, and Cardinal Hayes saw the need to minister to this group if Harlem churches were to survive. Drew was a part of the New York Apostolate to Harlem, a group of priests charged with the evangelization of the African American population. Adult conversion classes were the main technique used by the Apostolate to Harlem to gain converts, as well as child enrollment in Catholic schools. Unlike some of his predecessors, Drew took an interest in the affairs of the community and was involved in the economic well being of his parishioners at St. Charles Borromeo and St. Paul Churches in Harlem.[30] He brought this experience and passion to St. Augustine Parish, which was experiencing demographic changes similar to those of Harlem in the 1920s.

Drew's time as pastor would emphasize evangelization and conversion among the African American community, as he recognized that this was necessary for St. Augustine's survival. In 1949, Drew wrote to Cardinal Spellman to ask for permission to reach out to African Americans in the neighborhood and encourage them to attend conversion classes.[31] They hoped that this would also boost the school's enrollment. At the time, Catholic education was only open to Catholics. This began to exclude more and more of the residents of Morrisania, as African Americans have historically adhered to Christian denominations, but not Catholicism. According to Roger Repohl, St. Augustine Parish archivist, African Americans in the Bronx were so dissatisfied with the public schools in the area that they "pleaded" with priests to let their children into the Catholic schools. Since the only way to do this was to be Catholic, young mothers were baptized and had their children baptized. They were often Baptist or Evangelical

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[30] Shelley 456-7.
[31] Roger Repohl, personal interview, 8 April 2011.

Christians, but would convert so that their children would have access to a better education.[32] By August 1949, Drew had brought 551 converts to St. Augustine.[33] This established the parish as one of the first black Catholic parishes in New York; this was highly important considering that the Catholic Church in New York traditionally was made up of white ethnic immigrants.

Though its enrollment was lower than when it was a predominantly Irish and German school, St. Augustine School still thrived throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The centennial history of St. Augustine Parish remarked that, despite the decrease in parishioners, "our schools have lost none of their efficiency because of the untiring and indefatigable sacrifices of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and the Sisters of Charity."[34] While enrollment decreased, there was never a loss of more than a hundred students at a time. Approximately 700 or more students were enrolled each year throughout the 1950s, and over 600 in the 1960s (see Figure 4). A majority of these students were African American, as whites kept leaving the neighborhood in droves.

In the 1960s, the South Bronx started on its slow path of decline that would make it world famous. Morrisania was experiencing a second round of retreat, except this time the African Americans who replaced white families in the 1940s were leaving. Neighborhood conditions deteriorated; unemployment rose, which pushed people to desperation and caused an increase in crime. At the same time, drug use was soaring and the drug trade ravaged South Bronx neighborhoods. The most storied aspect of the South Bronx during this time was the fires. Rents remained controlled, yet maintenance costs had risen; rent delinquency had also become common. Landlords saw their buildings as hopeless cases, and would often stop supplying services, allowing them to decay. Drug and scavengers would take over abandoned buildings and strip them of anything valuable. Eventually, people began to purposely set their buildings on fire

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[32] Roger Repohl, personal interview, 8 April 2011.
[33] A History of St. Augustine Parish 1949.
[34] A History of St. Augustine Parish 1949.

to collect the insurance money. The arson really began around 1969, and continued for years. Nearly 5,000 apartment buildings were destroyed, and there were more than 12,000 fires a year.[35]

During this time, the Bronx was essentially forgotten by New York City and by many social service agencies. If people could afford to move out of the neighborhood, they did. If they had no choice, as many did not, they stayed. Over a third of the families in St. Augustine Parish left the neighborhood as the arson intensified and landlords became more neglectful of their buildings.[36] Recognizing its calling to serve the community now more than ever, St. Augustine Parish became a significant community institution that held its ground despite the fires and crime in the surrounding neighborhood. It was a sanctuary to the poor who were otherwise abandoned by their government.

Under the leadership of Reverend Robert Jeffers, the parish began to establish many social service initiatives that would minister to the surrounding neighborhood, such as youth groups, housing assistance and repair, ministry to the elderly and shut-ins, and trauma counseling to children and parents.[37] Parents feared that they would have to put their children in public school because of inflation and tuition costs. In 1970, Terence Cardinal Cooke enacted the Commission for Inter-Parish Financing, which levied a tax on all parishes in the Archdiocese and used the money to help financially struggling parishes. Cardinal Cooke also started in Inner-City Scholarship Fund in 1971, which provided subsidies for minority students to attend Catholic schools.[38] These uniquely progressive programs provided St. Augustine with more financial

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[35] Jonnes 6-9.
[36] Peter Honerkamp, "Inner-City Parishes- St. Augustine, New York," Impact! Oct-Nov 1979.
[37] Honerkamp 1979.
[38] Shelley 588.

security, and allowed the school to stay well-funded.[39] Despite the shrinking population, the school was able to remain open and serve students.

Dean Meminger, reporter for NY1 News, was a student at St. Augustine School in the 1980s. Though Meminger was living in the South Bronx during this time, he commented on his positive memories of a strong school and community, with parish dances and socials and a sports league. Parents sacrificed so that their children could attend St. Augustine and experience the support and benefits that came with attending the school and receiving a Catholic education. He cited how the parish's history as one of the few black Catholic parishes was important, as it gave the community a sense of identity and strength.[40]

By the early 1980s, the school's enrollment numbers were steadily declining and hitting an all-time low. In 1980, 450 students were enrolled at the school; by 1985, there were only 295. The following years saw a more dramatic drop, with only 220 students enrolled in 1986 and 1987. This was the lowest number of students ever enrolled at St. Augustine (with the exception of 2011). Fearing that the school would be closed for under-enrollment, and recognizing that the school needed a new approach to education, principal Tom Pilecki founded the St. Augustine School of the Arts curriculum, which became wildly successful.

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[39] Honerkamp 1979.
[40] Dean Meminger, personal interview, 29 March 2011.

Chapter 4

St. Augustine School, 1985-2011

The School of the Arts

In 1985, enrollment at St. Augustine School was at an all time low. Families were continuing to move out of the neighborhood, and those who remained struggled to afford the tuition at a Catholic school. The Archdiocese of New York informed Father Robert Jeffers, pastor of St. Augustine Parish, that the school was in danger of closing. Knowing that a new approach was needed, Jeffers and principal Tom Pilecki decided to integrate the arts into the school's curriculum. Pilecki came to St. Augustine Parish in 1979 as the music director, working with the parish gospel choir. Since he was trained as a concert pianist, the new curriculum would have a musical slant.[41] As Pilecki stated, "We decided to make music and the arts as important a part of the curriculum as reading and math."[42] The St. Augustine School of the Arts was born, and the school became one of the more progressive schools in the Bronx.

Pilecki's program was wildly successful, and reached its initial goals of increasing school enrollment. By 1987, enrollment had risen to 311 students, which was all that could be accommodated at the time given the new need for rehearsal space. Parents were highly receptive to the idea, as they craved a safe school environment for their children where they would receive a solid education. The school was so popular that 78 percent of the students were not Catholic. At the time, religious education was still part of the St. Augustine curriculum, but parents of non-Catholic students complied with this. They saw that Catholic schools had strong academics, but also provided discipline and fostered values.[43] The religious instruction at St. Augustine was

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[41] Ellen Hopkins, "The Sound of Music," New York Magazine 23 Nov. 1987: 55.
[42] Something Within Me, dir. Emma Joan Morris, perf. Tom Pilecki and Gary Schall, Direct Cinema Ltd., 1993.
[43] Hilary Stout, "More Non-Catholic Students Trying Catholic Schools," New York Times 28 Nov. 1987, 15 Apr. 2011 <www.nytimes.com>.

intended to help students develop their own values; administrators made it clear that it was not indoctrination into the Catholic faith. They also sought to make students aware of the social problems occurring in their neighborhood and gave students an opportunity to discuss them.[44]

The curriculum integrated music and the arts with academics wherever possible. Students began music studies in kindergarten, where they studied music theory, voice, and the recorder. In the fourth grade, students began piano instruction. They also chose an instrument that they wished to study, and practiced this instrument from the fourth to eighth grade. This instrument was played in one of the school's musical ensembles—the orchestra, the jazz band, or the Latin band. All students worked toward the end of year school concert, a large affair that included the efforts of all students in music, costume, and set design. In addition to musical instruction, students studied dance and visual arts. The school also included a humanities curriculum, which ranged from reenactments of scenes from famous operas or readings of Shakespearean sonnets. Teacher Alan Givens believed it was important to expose children to the humanities and to culture in general, not just their own culture. They were often familiar with their Afro-centric culture, but the School of the Arts exposed them to a selection of cultures that would pique their interest and encourage them to explore.[45]

One of the most important factors about the School of the Arts was that students were *not* required to audition. Pilecki believed that this would only create an elitist school and would deny children the opportunity to be exposed to the arts; the administrators saw that all children have some special talent and can thrive if given the chance to explore their creative side. The musical education was rigorous for students who often had no exposure to musical instruction before, but the students rose to the challenge. Administrators found that teaching the arts as a discipline was

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[44] Something Within Me 1993.
[45] Something Within Me 1993.

wonderful for students, because the structure of class and rehearsals actually was freeing. Students liked the idea of a challenge and the School of the Arts curriculum had very tangible benchmarks where they could measure their progress. Music instruction also served as a motivator for students to succeed academically. They knew that in order to participate in the school concerts, they had to perform well in their other classes. As a result, test scores improved dramatically at St. Augustine, and students thrived academically.

Venice Hunter was a teacher at St. Augustine School during the School of the Arts era. The arts program had an incredibly positive impact on students, and encouraged them to be more confident and independent. Knowing they would be on stage, they developed a certain way to carrying themselves. Hunter commented that the program would occasionally disrupt the traditional education curriculum because students would sometimes be pulled out of classes to rehearse or attend a concert. But the School of the Arts did achieve significant fame, and the students performed at venues like St. Patrick's Cathedral, the Apollo Theater, and the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree lighting. Reporters were frequently in the school, and students became accustomed to this. The increased publicity also gave the school increased attention from the Archdiocese of New York; she believes that if St. Augustine were still a School of the Arts, it might not be facing closure.[46]

As the program grew and developed, the School of the Arts became more well-known. One of the common reactions from the media and from donors in the private sector was shock that such an innovative program could exist in the South Bronx. Believing it to be a wasteland, supporters were often surprised that children from the poorest congressional district, who were already being short-changed by virtue of their environment, were making music. Soon, prominent individuals were supportive of the program, and private sector funding was what kept

[46] Venice Hunter, personal interview, 22 March 2011.

the School of the Arts running. Composer Leonard Bernstein was on the school's board of directors, and actor Bill Cosby was also a strong supporter. In 1993, Emma Joan Morris directed a documentary about St. Augustine School, focusing on its success and the benefits of an arts-based education. *Something Within Me* premiered at the 1993 Sundance Film Festival, and received three awards.

Despite the praise and the fame, St. Augustine School of the Arts often struggled financially, since the program was incredibly costly and did not receive much funding from the Archdiocese of New York. Accidents could be devastating to the school's budget. For example, a fire destroyed a portion of the school in 1993, forcing teachers to use an old theater nearby and a daycare center for some classes. The repairs from the fire were costly; over $500,000 was needed to fix the damage and renovate parts of the school. While the spirit was an important aspect of the School of the Arts, they did need material things and funding in order to survive. As a result, administrators struggled financially to make ends meet.[47]

Over time, it became difficult for St. Augustine School to gather funding for the School of the Arts. Only a third of the school's costs were covered by the Archdiocesan tuition; the rest came from fundraising and the support of private sector donors. Teachers frequently had to hold paychecks in order for the school to pay its bills. Arts education programs also experienced competition for funding. In the mid 1990s, private funding for arts education came to national attention. St. Augustine was one of the earlier privately funded arts programs, and enjoyed little competition in its early years. As arts education expanded, and more programs came to rely on the generosity of private donations, donors became choosier with their contributions.[48] In 1995,

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[47] Felicia R. Lee, "Bronx School Struggles Despite Praise and Fame," New York Times 1 June 1993, 6 Apr. 2011 <www.nytimes.com>.

[48] "Morrisania; St. Augustine: A Cautionary Tale," New York Times 11 June 1995, 18 Feb. 2011 <www.nytimes.com>.

the school failed to fundraise the $600,000 needed to run the program. The Archdiocese also chose to divert their money to the school's general fund instead of specifically to the School of the Arts, and the program filed for bankruptcy on December 30, 1995.[49]

The Closing

After the School of the Arts folded, the enrollment at St. Augustine remained steady throughout the rest of the 1990s (see Figure 4). Between 1995 and 2001, enrollment remained above 300 students. However, in 2002, there were only 260 students at St. Augustine, and the numbers grew smaller from there. The economic recession of 2008 affected Morrisania residents greatly. Unemployment rose, and many families struggled to afford the tuition at St. Augustine. Cathryn Trapp, current principal of St. Augustine School, said there was a slight increase in students between 2005 and 2008, but as the recession worsened, their numbers fell. In 2009, 231 students were enrolled at St. Augustine; the 2010-2011 school year started with only 170.[50]

Today's students generally live within the 10456 zip code, and the school serves the local population. There are a significant number of non-Catholic students in the school due to the demographics of neighborhood. As noted earlier, a majority of St. Augustine was not Catholic during the School of the Arts era. However, an increased Hispanic population moved to Morrisania in the 2000s, and thus more baptized Catholics enrolled in the school. Currently the school is approximately split 50/50 between Catholics and non-Catholics.[51] Additionally, the school is located in the nation's poorest Congressional district; the median income for a family of four at St. Augustine is $16,664.[52] Approximately 56% of families are "outside of the workforce," where they are either unemployed, undocumented, or have lost their unemployment

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[49] J.H.L., "Morrisania; St. Augustine: A Cautionary Tale," New York Times 11 June 1995, 18 Feb. 2011 <www.nytimes.com>.

[50] The Official Catholic Directory. Published by P.J. Kenedy and Sons.

[51] Cathryn Trapp, personal interview, 8 February 2011.

[52] Viability Proposal: Alternate Plan Submission (St. Augustine Parochial School, 2010).

benefits. The school serves a poor community, and is committed to the South Bronx. They seek to treat students at the school "as if they were the children of the King of kings."[53] The school's current mission statement is succinct: "The purpose of St. Augustine Parochial School is to provide a Catholic education based on a commitment to Gospel values and high academic standards to any students who seeks refuge and safety." The school offers refuge to any students seeking a Catholic education and embodies the Catholic teachings of a preferential option for the poor.

St. Augustine School was incorporated under the Catholic Elementary School Association (CESA) in September 2006. This took the control of the school away from the parish and placed it under the direct supervision of the Archdiocese. At this time, the Archdiocese optimistically wanted the school to remain open, recognizing the mission-driven nature of the school. Since the school was under CESA control, they were obliged to follow the demands of the Archdiocese. A 12% tuition increase was mandated at a time when the average household income of zip code 14056 residents decreased by 7%. St. Augustine became unaffordable for more families, and thus enrollment fell even more.[54] Around this time, the Archdiocese also took control of tuition collection and instituted specific payment schedules for the school. It also required that tuition be paid by credit card; this was a burden on many families who did not own credit cards and felt more comfortable paying by cash or money order.

There has been discussion of closing St. Augustine School since 2009. Timothy McNiff, superintendent of Catholic schools for the Archdiocese of New York, visited St. Augustine Parish in November 2009 after the church building had been closed due to structural damages the previous July. He asked Monsignor Tom Fenlon if closing the school would help the situation.

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[53] Viability Proposal: Alternate Plan Submission 2010.
[54] Viability Proposal: Alternate Plan Submission 2010.

When Fenlon responded that he wanted the school to remain open, McNiff informed him that St. Augustine was on a list of 16 schools targeted for closure.[55] The school and parish tried to increase enrollment in the following months. They launched an enrollment drive and worked with families to reach a tuition rate that was within their means. The 3% Plan based tuition rates on 3 percent of a family's income. This plan was implemented in September 2010, and the school conducted an enrollment drive the following November. In only a week and a half, 45 new students were registered to attend the school. Families are very willing to send their children to St. Augustine, provided that it is affordable. In the case of St. Augustine, and many other Catholic schools in low-income areas, affordability is based on a family's *ability* to pay tuition rather than their desire to do so. Despite this boost in enrollment and promising signs that the 3% Plan could attract more students, it was not enough to keep the school open.

In November 2010, Fenlon received a phone call notifying him that the Archdiocese intended to withdraw the subsidy from the school. Fenlon and other school administrators attended an Archdiocesan meeting on November 11th where they were told to develop some alternative plans that could be pursued in order to keep the school open. The Viability Proposal included the participation of students, alumni, families, faculty, Board members, donors, and foundations to sustain the school. It focused on enrollment, budget cuts, fundraising and development, and student performance. The Proposal did not eliminate the need for Archdiocesan support, but instead sought to increase the efficiency of the school.[56]

The Viability Proposal proposed several strategic options that could decrease St. Augustine's operating costs and increase enrollment and efficiency, without closing the school or sacrificing its mission. Highlights of the plan included increased marketing of the 3% Plan to the

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[55] Thomas Fenlon, personal interview, 8 April 2011.
[56] Viability Proposal: Alternate Plan Submission 2010.

neighborhood to attract more students, more strategic applications for grants and fundraising, and salary cuts for faculty. A strategic partnership with St. Pius V Girls High School was also proposed. St. Pius is a South Bronx high school that the Archdiocese is also closing, and both schools proposed that St. Pius occupy the upper floors of St. Augustine School to maximize school space. The school also recommended that they be allowed to remain open to participate in the Catholic School Advantage Campaign, a partnership with the University of Notre Dame that increases Catholic schools' outreach to the Latino community in New York.[57] Another prominent recommendation was that the school serves as a model for the Archdiocese as a mission school dedicated to providing a preferential option for the poor.[58]

Despite the work and innovative solutions included in the Viability Proposal, the Archdiocese did not accept it. Cathryn Trapp was notified in early January 2011 that St. Augustine would be closed in June. The news was devastating to teachers, students, parents, and community members. Responses ranged from sadness, confusion, anger, and occasionally a questioning of faith and the authority of the Archdiocese. When Trapp announced to the students that the school would be closed, she told them, "God is God, and the Archdiocese is the Archdiocese. We may have been abandoned by the Archdiocese, but we have not been abandoned by God."[59] She was aware of the effects this event would have on the students and teachers as well, and wanted to ensure that the school community did not emerge from this event having lost their faith.

St. Augustine School leaves behind 124 years of history. It has withstood two world wars, neighborhood changes, recessions, times of prosperity, fires, rebuilding, curriculum

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[57] "Archdiocese of New York Announces Publication of Strategic Plan for Catholic Schools," The Archdiocese of New York 5 October 2010. 9 Feb. 2010 < http://www.archny.org/news-events/news-press-releases/index.cfm?i=17877>.

[58] Viability Proposal: Alternate Plan Submission 2010.

[59] Interview with Cathryn Trapp, personal interview, 8 February 2011.

changes, and countless other events. Closing the school marks a sad chapter in Catholic education in the South Bronx, and will undoubtedly have repercussions for all involved.

Chapter 5

The Effects on the St. Augustine Community

Despite the efforts to keep the school open, the protests of parents and community members, and the significance of such an important institution, St. Augustine School will close its doors in June 2011. It may be easy for some to write off St. Augustine as another failed Catholic school, one that simply struggled to attract students in light of changing times and could not make the cut in the face of economic burdens. After all, the story of school closures is not unique; Catholic schools have slowly been consolidated, closed, or converted to charter schools for the past several years. It seems as if Catholic education is becoming an antiquated educational model in a society that values achievement and test scores over an ethical, holistic education. St. Augustine School is another casualty of the sweeping changes being made to Catholic schools by the Archdiocese of New York.

It is important to pause and consider the effects of closing a school that has had neighborhood presence for over one hundred years, and continues to provide quality education to an economically depressed neighborhood. Closing a school wreaks havoc on a community and on the lives of all involved. Teachers and staff must find other jobs, students must adjust academically and socially to a new school, and neighborhoods suffer the loss of a key institution.[60] Parents may find themselves with fewer options as they try to find another school for their children with a comparable academic and social environment; they also face the issue of tuition affordability at other schools. This chapter will examine some of the effects of the closure of St. Augustine School on its students, on teachers and staff, and on the surrounding neighborhood and community.

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[60] Marisa de la Torre and Julia Gwynne, When Schools Close: Effects on Displaced Students in Chicago Public Schools (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, Oct. 2009) 1.

The Students

Change is never easy for a child. A safe school environment offers a stable place where children can develop academically and socially. Children spend at least 30 hours per week at school, and sometimes more if they are enrolled in after-school programs. While academics are an important aspect of any school, the educational environment and culture is crucial to ensuring that a child feels comfortable to succeed. Having a good school culture is just as critical for the psychological and emotional development of a child as a stable home life or a safe neighborhood. Students at St. Augustine School experience both strong academics and a secure school environment; they may lose this as they go to other schools.

Academically, students who relocate from closing schools can adapt to a new learning environment relatively quickly. The Consortium on Chicago School Research conducted a study in 2009 of the academic effects on students who are displaced from closing schools. They found that students experience an initial period of setback when they switch to a new school, but will eventually reach the same level as their peers and acclimate academically. School closings had a negative impact on reading and math achievement the year the closing was announced, but after transferring to a new school, most students adjusted and returned to their previous levels of academic achievement.[61] This slight setback could be attributed to the initial shock of the school closing, the anger of parents and community members, or the difficulty for teachers to remain motivated while seeking new employment. On average, students adjusted to their new schools and did not experience significant delays to their learning.[62]

However, the most significant academic factor in the relocation process is the receiving school; that is, the school that absorbs the students who are displaced from the closing school. If

[61] De la Torre and Gwynne 18.
[62] De la Torre and Gwynne 19.

the receiving school is on par academically with the closing school, students adapt relatively quickly and their academic performance does not suffer much. If the receiving school is worse than the closing school, students will not experience any academic gains and may even experience setbacks. Many of the students in the study re-enrolled in academically weak schools, and those who did enroll in high performing schools traveled an average of 3.5 miles from their neighborhood to attend school.[63] Thus misplaced students find that they must enroll in weak schools or travel a far distance to attend a better one. Additionally, the Consortium found that summer school enrollment and subsequent school mobility were also affected by school closings. At the schools studied, the displaced students "were more likely to change schools a second time after the initial displacement, either during the academic year or during the summer."[64] Changing schools can be highly disruptive to a child, and if students are switching more than once in an academic year, it may become harder for them to get back to the appropriate academic level for their age.

It is debatable whether the receiving schools for students will be as academically strong as St. Augustine School. When discussing academic progress, teachers cited the high test scores of their students. They noted that students often come to them below grade level, and the teachers will work with them to bring them to grade level. Parents also choose to enroll their children in St. Augustine because they find that it provides a better education than some of the public schools in the neighborhood. Some students at the school have left, gone to a public school, and returned to St. Augustine because they found that the education and environment were better.[65] The academic success of students in their receiving school will depend on what school they attend, and also whether it is a Catholic, private, public, or charter school. Since the

[63] De la Torre and Gwynne 2.
[64] De la Torre and Gwynne 3.
[65] Karen Asare, personal interview, 15 March 2011.

students will be going to different schools, it will be difficult to track their development after they leave St. Augustine School.

The curriculum at St. Augustine is quite rigorous and seeks to educate students in a well-rounded manner. Students receive instruction in math, reading, language arts, science, religion, and social studies; gym and studio art classes are offered to students as well. A main goal of the teachers is to educate students who are prepared for life beyond St. Augustine, and they often succeed at this. Teacher Karen Asare explained how her students are frequently over-prepared when they reach high school in terms of their reading level. The English curriculum at St. Augustine for the upper grades, which was developed by Asare, includes books like *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. She said that students frequently come back to her and explain how they re-read these books in high school, and that they have a significant advantage over the rest of their class because they have already studied it.[66]

Students at St. Augustine School also have access to a wide variety of cultural activities. Though the arts curriculum is not as strong as it was in the 1980s, arts education is still a priority. Students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades take studio art classes with Constance Cooper, a retired teacher of St. Augustine School who now teaches on a part-time basis. The school sponsors art shows each year, where student artwork is auctioned off to parents and community members. This is exciting for the students, as they get to see the importance of their artwork and in turn boost their self-esteem. Students also can take African dance classes with Darlene Rhem, who brings in drummers each year for student performances. This has become quite popular at St. Augustine as there is an increased population of families who have emigrated from Africa. Ballet classes and various sports teams have also been formed for students. Recently, the eighth

[66] Karen Asare, personal interview, 15 March 2011.

grade class received a Special Collections Tour of the Cloisters in Northern Manhattan, where they viewed medieval tapestries and illuminated manuscripts. Programs like these are rare in any school today, regardless of whether it is public or private, and it is not likely that St. Augustine students will be given this exposure to culture and the arts at other schools.

The second loss that students at St. Augustine School will experience is the loss of a stable educational environment. After spending time at St. Augustine School and conversing with teachers and staff, it became clear that the school's culture is unique, not only for the South Bronx but for elementary schools in general. There is a focus on academics, but the staff at St. Augustine is also concerned with educating the whole person and making their students responsible members of society. One of the noticeable characteristics of the school is its size; there are roughly 230 students currently enrolled at the school, and only one class for each grade. Teachers know their students well and are able to develop relationships with them. While low enrollment is one of the reasons St. Augustine is closing, there is a benefit to having a small school. Students develop relationships with their teachers, and in turn teachers are able to keep tabs on students' home lives and make sure they are supported outside of school.

Teachers at St. Augustine School find that the school has a family environment, one where students feel comfortable approaching teachers and asking for help. They make it clear to students that they care for their well being but hold them to a high standard. This creates an environment where students feel comfortable in the school to grow and learn. The school also literally has a family dimension, as siblings often attend the school at the same time. Parents will choose to enroll younger children in St. Augustine after having one child in the school already. The school is one of the few that adopts a Family Tuition Plan, where parents receive discounted tuition if they have more than one child enrolled at the school. This not only helps to increase

enrollment, but it also keeps families and siblings together and makes the school more affordable to parents. Furthermore, many students who have graduated from the school choose to send their children to St. Augustine School as well. Asare commented on how she has taught the children of her former students, and that graduates will often come back with their own children because they valued the education they received there.[67]

Even if parents and guardians decide to enroll their children in another Catholic school instead of a public or charter school, they might struggle with the tuition payments. Initially, the Archdiocese of New York guaranteed students at St. Augustine School the same tuition rate for one year after the school closed in hopes of keeping most of the students in Catholic schools. However, other Catholic schools are hesitant to honor this, since the tuition rate at St. Augustine is quite low. The tuition rates for displaced students are now up to the pastors and principals of each school. Parents are finding it difficult to enroll their students at other schools because the tuition is too high and there is a lesser degree of flexibility with rates and payments.

This family environment extends beyond the school's walls and includes students' parents in the life of the school. Teachers commented that parents are involved in the school and are kept informed of their child's progress. Venice Hunter commented on the increase in African immigrants in the school, and on the generally diverse population of students. Not all parents speak English, and they often rely on their children to teach them and translate. As a result, students may struggle to complete their own homework, as they may not have the help of their parents when doing so. Hunter has also worked personally with parents who have studied for their GED or who struggle with the English language, so that they might be able to help their

[67] Karen Asare, personal interview, 15 March 2011.

children.[68] This is a tremendous service, and it is possible because St. Augustine is so small and students are well known.

It is clear that students will experience loss in some way when they leave St. Augustine School. Tracking the development of each child will prove challenging, as Principal Cathryn Trapp cited that students are not likely to attend another Catholic school.[69] Students have been placed in an unfortunate situation. After having several strikes against them already—being a student of color in a white society, living in a poor urban neighborhood, coming of age in a time of severe government budget cuts—they are losing a place that has become their home.

The Teachers

Perhaps more severely affected than the students, the teachers at St. Augustine School now suddenly find themselves unemployed through no fault of their own. The school currently employs 9 teachers plus several staff members, some of whom have been teaching at the school for over 20 years. Teachers at St. Augustine were drawn to the school's mission and to the learning environment that it promotes. Many of these teachers did not choose to work there because of money or ambition. They were drawn to the school's mission and the possibility of impacting the lives of young people. Some also specifically mentioned the South Bronx, that they saw a need in this area for dedicated teachers who would serve their students. After speaking with several of these teachers, it became clear that teaching is not just their job, it is their vocation.

Fifth grade teacher Karen Asare was drawn to working at St. Augustine because of the school's mission, as she wished to be a positive role model for children in the South Bronx. She explains, "You didn't go into it thinking you were going to be a millionaire. It was because of the

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[68] Venice Hunter, personal interview, 22 March 2011.
[69] Cathryn Trapp, personal interview, 8 February 2011.

children and you wanting to make an impression on the children, and help them to succeed." Asare has been teaching at St. Augustine for 33 years covering a variety of grades and subjects. She believes that the teachers at St. Augustine instill a sense of morality in their students, giving them a sense of personal motivation and letting them know that they can succeed. Ultimately, she believes that teachers at the school let students know "they can be someone, regardless of the violence around them. They don't have to succumb to the violence."[70]

When teacher Darlene Rhem was asked about her career at St. Augustine School, she simply responded with, "It's been my life." Rhem was a student at St. Augustine along with her siblings. Her mother, Yvonne Rhem-Tittle, began her career at St. Augustine cleaning bathrooms. She worked for her undergraduate and master's degrees, and eventually became the school's principal. Darlene Rhem became a teacher at St. Augustine in 1994, and has enjoyed her experience ever since. Like many who are close to St. Augustine School, Rhem is frustrated by the Archdiocesan treatment of teachers throughout the closure process. She discussed her struggle to understand the paradox of closing a Catholic institution for financial reasons when it is meant to serve the poor. Though the Archdiocese states that their mission is to educate children, they are closing a strong school in one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City. She is highly concerned that the mission of Catholic education has changed over the past several years. Instead of educating students in the way of the Gospel, she believes that these schools will teach you "if you have some cash."[71]

Second grade teacher Venice Hunter has 140 sick days; she has been a teacher at St. Augustine School for 25 years and has never taken a day off. This may be because her children also attended the school and she had to bring them in each day, but she does not seem to mind.

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[70] Karen Asare, personal interview, 15 March 2011.
[71] Darlene Rhem, personal interview, 15 March 2011.

Hunter helped to start the kindergarten program at St. Augustine, and has taught various grades during her tenure at the school. She also currently runs the after-school program, an important service to St. Augustine parents, as many work and cannot pick up their children until the evening. Hunter cited the attention and patience that teachers give to students as one of the school's strengths. St. Augustine offers many enriching programs, such as African dance and sports, but there are smaller events like Thanksgiving dinner, International Day, and Grandparents Day. These events build school community, and get the students involved in the welfare of their school. Hunter also mentioned that the faculty of St. Augustine goes on retreat together, giving them time to pause from their busy lives and reflect, and also to grow as a teaching staff.[72]

Nydia Benitez has only been teaching at St. Augustine School for two years, but noticed a difference at the school as compared to some of her previous positions. She believes that the school's environment encourages students to be comfortable and happy; they are treated with respect. In contrast to other schools where she has been employed, Benitez stated that these parents play a role in their children's education. However, in the two years she has been teaching at St. Augustine, there has been little involvement from the Archdiocese as to the school's welfare. She is currently on an Archdiocesan list to be notified of job openings, along with teachers from other closing schools. As a tenured teacher, she is high on the list, but another teaching position is not guaranteed.[73]

Constance Cooper is retired from a long career at St. Augustine School, but still teaches studio art several days a week to the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. A veteran of St. Augustine, she attended the school as a child, was married in St. Augustine Church, watched her

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[72] Venice Hunter, personal interview, 22 March 2011.
[73] Nydia Benitez, personal interview, 14 April 2011.

children and grandchildren attend the school, and has taught there for over 30 years. She also is a neighborhood resident. Cooper lives several blocks from the school, and was able to work in her own community instead of having to travel elsewhere. Since she is retired, she will not necessarily lose a job, but she will lose part of her family's history. Her dedication to the school is a testament to its importance and the influence it has on people's lives.

Each of these teachers will face varying degrees of challenge when they leave St. Augustine. Some are overqualified, and may have to take pay cuts and lose sick days if they go to another Catholic school. The likelihood of finding another job at a Catholic school is slim, as some schools only have one class per grade and the Archdiocese has specific requirements for schools when they seek to add another class and hire more teachers. Some teachers have explored charter schools, but are not necessarily interested due to the competitive pay scale and pressure for results.

When asked about the influence of the Archdiocese in the school before its closure, many of the teachers stated that it was minimal and their visits infrequent. Processes have been put in place in regards to teacher re-employment, but many are not holding their breath. The teachers did not even receive a formal letter from the Archdiocese communicating the school's closure; an email communication was sent to Cathryn Trapp, who then gave the news to the teachers. The Archdiocese of New York tries to place unemployed teachers from closing schools at another Archdiocesan school, so that they might retain them. However, the Archdiocese is quite large and includes Westchester, Dutchess, Rockland, Ulster, and Putnam Counties (see Figure 5). It is unlikely that these schools will hire teachers that are so far away, and even less likely that St. Augustine's teachers would be able to commute so far for work.

Though these educators are now facing unemployment, each voiced a serious concern for the well being of their students throughout this process. Their selflessness and devotion to their work is apparent; they will undoubtedly experience changes in light of St. Augustine's closure.

The Community

A third area that will experience loss is the community surrounding St. Augustine School. The history of St. Augustine School makes this closure that much more difficult. Not only has St. Augustine educated thousands of Bronx residents since it opened in 1887, it has remained a solid community institution during Morrisania's tumultuous history. Darlene Rhem commented on how stable Franklin Street has been because of St. Augustine, saying, "This block has been peaceful for 40 years. If you walk down this block in the summertime it's just a whole new feeling. When you go up the block it's madness, but on this block it's always been peaceful, because of the church and the school."[74] When fires were burning in Morrisania in the 1970s and residents were fleeing the neighborhood, St. Augustine School kept its doors open to serve the community and offer students some form of stability and safety. The parish and church can be seen as a place of refuge, one that serves its community unselfishly and places human needs as the highest priority.

A majority of students at St. Augustine School come from the neighborhood; they live within the 10456 zip code and will walk to get to school. This makes St. Augustine a truly "neighborhood" school. However, teachers said that there are a number of students who commute from different neighborhoods, and sometimes other boroughs. This could be for a variety of reasons. Parents will sometimes work in the neighborhood, especially at Bronx Lebanon Hospital or at retail shops, and will want their children to attend a school close to their place of employment. Other times, families will voluntarily move out of the neighborhood yet

[74] Darlene Rhem, personal interview, 15 March 2011.

want their children to still attend St. Augustine. So while the school serves local students, there is a significant contingent that travels to get to school each day.

Unusual for a Catholic elementary school, SAS has a very strong alumni base. Monsignor Tom Fenlon, pastor of St. Augustine Parish, remarked that he is always surprised at how many people will tell him that they attended the school.[75] This is also evidenced in the number of alumni who choose to send their children to the school, as well as the number of alumni who decide to teach at the school. While conducting interviews for this project, it became apparent that alumni are invested in the school, and many will remain connected in some way after they leave. The parish has also provided a vibrant worshipping community for Bronx residents for years. St. Augustine became one of the first black parishes in New York, and families will continue to attend mass at St. Augustine, even if they have left the neighborhood.
Fenlon believes that since the school is closing it will only be a matter of time before the parish is closed as well.[76]

[75] Thomas Fenlon, personal interview, 8 April 2011.
[76] Thomas Fenlon, personal interview, 8 April 2011.

Chapter 6

The Future for Catholic Education

"I don't think the closure is unique to St. Augustine," alumnus Dean Meminger stated as he discussed the school and some of the reasons for its closure. His comment is telling, as the epidemic of school closures certainly is not unique to St. Augustine School. The Archdiocese of New York recently launched its Pathways to Excellence Plan, which intends to "re-imagine" Catholic schools to make them accessible and affordable, while still providing a quality Catholic education.[77] Unfortunately, the pathway to excellence seems to be one where financially struggling schools with low enrollment are closed. The plan seeks to "close underperforming schools to reduce growing deficits, channel funds from the sale or rental of shuttered properties to a general education fund and replace the traditional parish governance model with a regional structure."[78] This causes one to question what the future for Catholic education looks like, particularly in working-class urban areas. Are school closures the right means for achieving a sustainable model of Catholic education, or should other alternatives be explored that fairly distribute funds and enable all schools to carry out their missions of serving students?

Catholic education was founded out of a desire to provide a moral, faith-based education to children. Catholics were coming to the United States in waves, and parents feared that their children would experience discrimination in public schools. Parishes began to build schools as quickly as possible, and enroll as many students as they could hold. It was essentially assumed that nuns, priests, and brothers would teach forever, and this model was viable for the first 100 or so years of Catholic schools. However, there was not much of a long-term, careful plan beyond

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[77] "Archdiocese of New York Announces Publication of Strategic Plan for Catholic Schools," The Archdiocese of New York 5 October 2010. 9 Feb. 2010 < http://www.archny.org/news-events/news-press-releases/index.cfm?i=17877>.

[78] "N.Y. Plan Closes Weakest Schools," America 18 Oct. 2010. Web.

this. No one could foresee then changes in American society that would decrease the role of religion and religious education, and in turn decrease the number of religious vocations. The vocation crisis caused Catholic schools to lose their most important teacher base. As schools began to pay salaries for lay teachers, they were heading into new territory without changing practices. Though tuition has increased to cover salary costs, Catholic schoolteachers are still underpaid as compared to their counterparts in public schools. Catholic schools were bound to reach a tipping point, and it seems as if that time is now.

The "re-imagining" of Catholic education, as Archbishop Timothy Dolan puts it, is much needed. The parochial school model—one where the parish oversees the needs of its school directly—seems to be antiquated in a time where Church attendance is falling and parish communities are shrinking. In order to prevent complete closures, some Catholic schools have considered converting themselves to public charter schools, where the school community remains together and the parish leases the building to the new school. Several schools in Brooklyn and Queens are adopting this model; religious education will be banned from the curriculum and religious symbols will be covered. This proposal from Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of the Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens and Mayor Michael Bloomberg was intended to bring stability to 14 Catholic schools that were scheduled to close in 2009.[79] Though this might bring stability to the schools themselves, it does not solve the crisis occurring in Catholic education. It allows these schools to continue as schools, but compromises a crucial aspect of their identity: Catholicism and religious and moral instruction. The school loses many if not all of the benefits associated with Catholic schools, and students experience a subtle cultural shift in their education.

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[79] Javier C. Hernandez, "Mayor and Bishop Propose a Plan to Save Schools," New York Times 7 February 2009, 8 Apr. 2011 <www.nytimes.com>.

Other schools have opted to pursue private donors to keep their schools financially stable. While this is obviously helpful, donors have become increasingly vocal and sometimes demand to play a bigger role in the schools' administration.[80] Many donors are Wall Street financiers and people in the business sector who approach education with a business mindset. They tend to place an emphasis on standardized testing performance, and wish to hire and fire teachers based on testing scores. Principals in Catholic schools are put in a compromising situation as they find that they must bend to the demands of donors who have a significant financial stake in the school. Donors' decisions are often made on logical business practices, but not on ethical educational principles. This also compromises Catholic schools, and undermines the dedication to serving the poor regardless of the cost or results.

The Wall Street ideas of consolidation and downsizing seem to have spilled over from donors to administrators and the Archdiocese itself. The Archdiocesan campaign to close "weak" schools is a part of a new vision for Catholic schools, but it is quite subjective. What identifiers mark a school as weak? One would imagine that a weak school would be one that is underperforming, one that struggles to educate students to state standards and provides a substandard learning environment. A weak school should be one where parents are ambivalent about the school, and students do not seem to receive much beyond the basic classroom education. However, it seems that in reality a school that is labeled "weak" is one that struggles financially. These so-called "weak" schools that are being closed, schools like St. Augustine, are located in working-class neighborhoods comprised of ethnic minorities. They serve the poor and try to bridge the educational gap that students from low-income areas experience. Additionally,

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[80] Paul Vitello, "Donors Demand a Bigger Voice in Catholic Schools," New York Times 6 Feb. 2011, 18 Feb. 2011 <www.nytimes.com>.

these schools are often very strong in their neighborhoods. In reality, St. Augustine is not a weak school, but it has gained this label from the Archdiocese.

Even if the Archdiocese continues with the Pathways to Excellence Plan, the closing of St. Augustine School does not serve as an example of its success. School closures are not the right way to achieve academic excellence in the Archdiocese of New York. It undermines the purpose of Catholic education: to provide a faith-based education for those who want it. In developing his Pathways to Excellence Plan, Archbishop Dolan has pledged that a seat will be available in a New York Catholic school to any child who wants it. He has overlooked the fact that it will really be available to any child who can *afford* it. As discussed earlier, the desire among parents for their children to attend Catholic schools is there. Oftentimes, the money is not. This speaks to a larger issue of wealth inequality in New York City, where those from low-income backgrounds are systematically shut out of educational opportunities and are forced to crowd into under-funded public schools.

Timothy McNiff, superintendent of Catholic schools for the Archdiocese of New York, was quoted as saying that it is a "horrible business model" to have so many "poor customers." He obviously sparked controversy with this statement and eventually recanted, but his comment is telling. The Archdiocese has placed results and financial stability over ministry, and the poor are experiencing the worst of the blow. Catholic Social Teaching stresses an option for the poor, where Catholics are obliged to promote social justice and assist the poor out of their own means. This is rooted in the Gospel passage, "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."[81] It seems as if a preferential option for the poor is being disregarded, while Catholic schools pull out of some of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City. McNiff also claims that closing schools and pursuing the Pathways to Excellence Program is like the biblical

[81] Matthew 25:40

analogy of the vine grower: if you prune a tree, you prepare for growth.[82] The working-class are the ones being pruned away, making Catholic education something that only the wealthy can afford. Growth may, and Archdiocesan schools will grow stronger financially, but it will be at the expense of the poor.

A significant reorganization of finances is needed in order for the Archdiocese of New York to sustain its Catholic schools. While the Archdiocese is experiencing financial strain on all fronts, and while the current state of the economy poses great challenges to the public sector, there must be a way to reconsider budgets and spend money efficiently. Unnecessary costs can be decreased or cut, and spending can be aligned with the mission of the Church. One might even argue that money spent on beautification and unnecessary church renovations could be cut and the money diverted to struggling schools. In a time where the entire public sector is struggling financially, such expenditures seem to be in bad taste. Promoting a spending plan that reflects the Church's larger mission to minister to Catholics could greatly help struggling schools.

Perhaps most importantly, the Church needs to commit itself to those schools located in low-income urban areas. These schools play a significant apostolic role in poor neighborhoods, and provide an important ministry to those who attend them. Without this, Catholic education may become accessible only to the elite, and its original mission of serving urban communities may be a thing of the past. There needs to be a serious reconsidering of the management of Catholic schools and, most importantly, of their fundamental mission. A new conversation is needed, one that discusses the connection of Catholic education to the Church's mission. The Archdiocese of New York, and bishops across the country, must consider whom they serve, and where resources should ultimately be placed.

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[82] "N.Y. Plan Closes Weakest Schools," America 18 Oct. 2010. Web.

St. Augustine School is one of many Catholic schools being closed in inner-city neighborhoods. These closures invite one to pause and consider the implications for minority and working-class residents, who lose community institutions and affordable schools that provide a certain type of education. Like Darlene Rhem, I fear that the Archdiocese has lost sight of the mission behind Catholic education. If closures continue, Catholic schools may only be available to those who can pay, which is a startling departure from their original intention. For Catholics who believe that those in power are obligated to preference the needs of the poor, the closing of Catholic schools is a shocking trend that seems to go against what *we* were taught growing up in Catholic schools ourselves. It is time that the Archdiocese tries to practice what it preaches to Catholic students across New York City.

Appendix

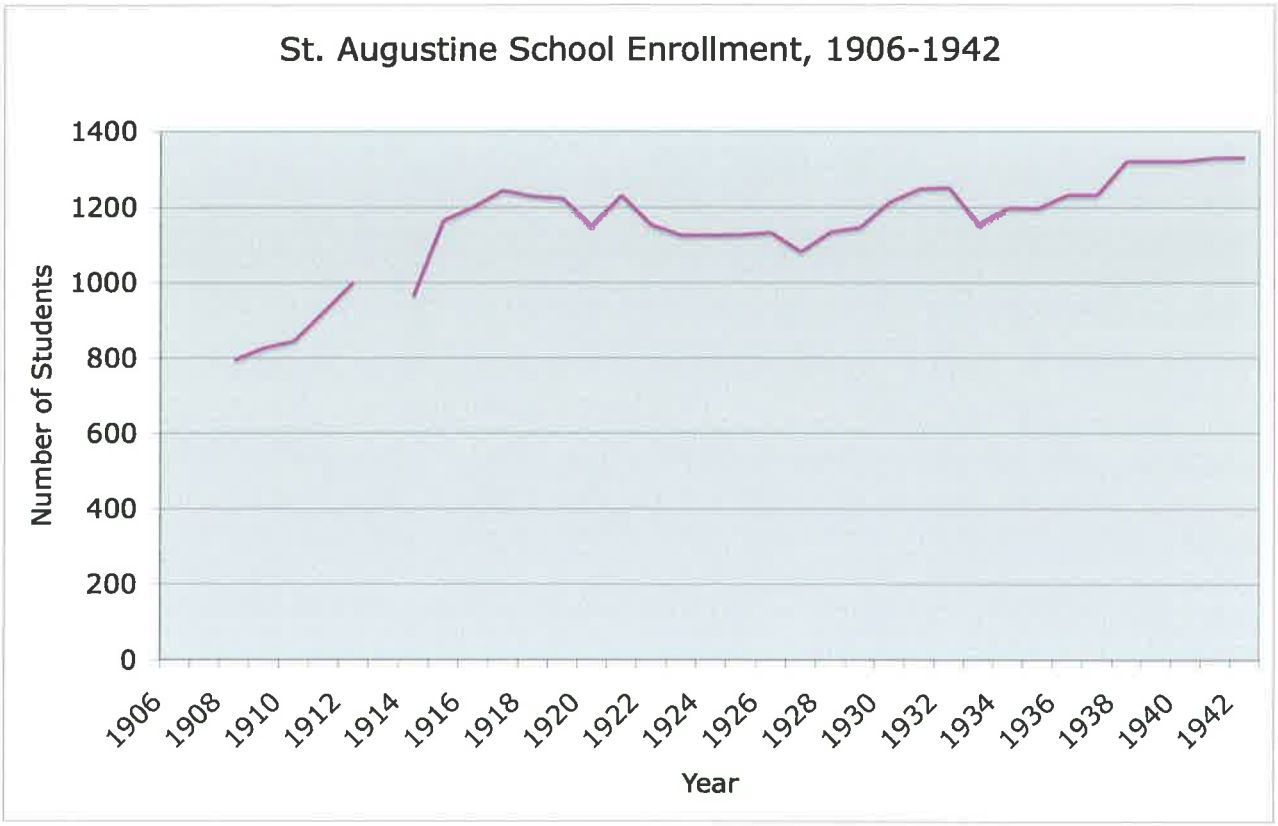
Figure 1: photo of St. Augustine Church, located on 167th Street and Franklin Avenue, Morrisania, the South Bronx.

Source: Bronx Catholic < http://bronxcatholic.blogspot.com/>.

Figure 2: photo of St. Augustine School, 1176 Franklin Avenue, Morrisania, the South Bronx.

Source: Bronx Catholic < http://bronxcatholic.blogspot.com/>.

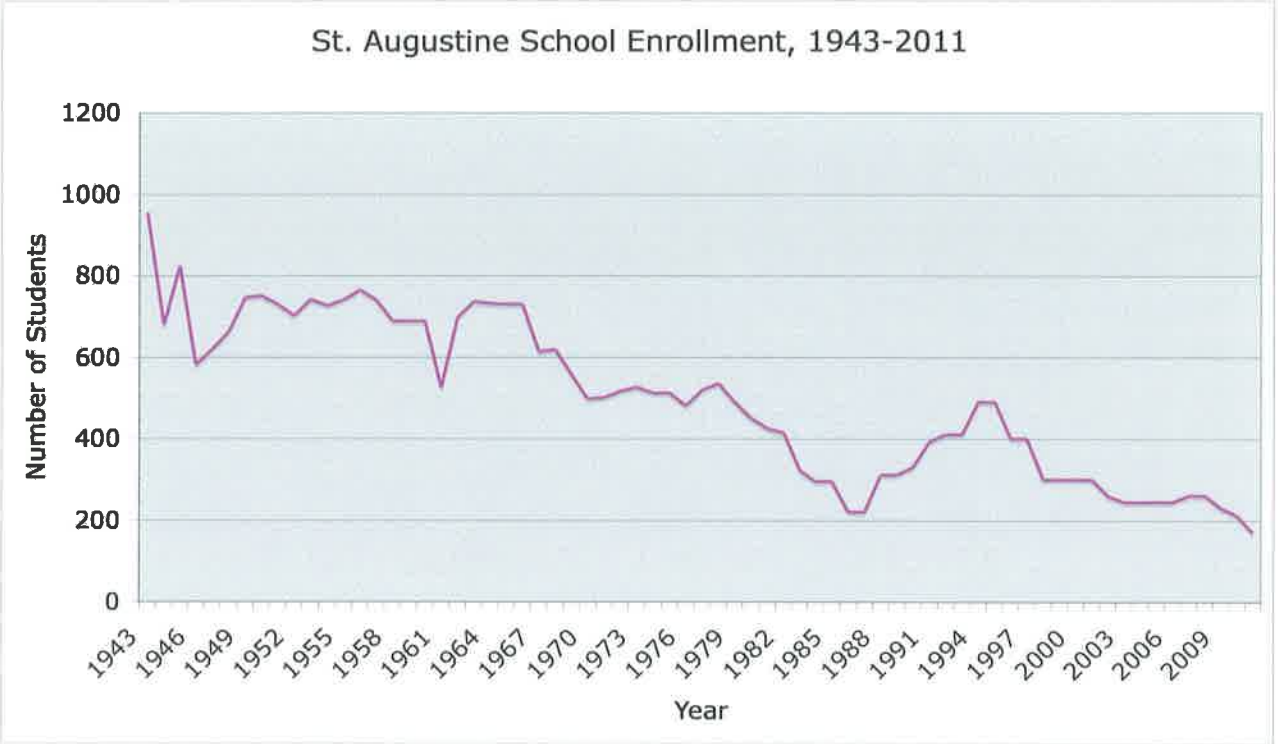
Figure 3: Annual Enrollment at St. Augustine School, 1906 to 1942



Data compiled from The Official Catholic Directory, published annually by P.J. Kenedy and Sons.

*Please note, data unavailable for years 1906, 1907, and 1913.

Figure 4: Annual Enrollment at St. Augustine School, 1943 to 2011



Data compiled from The Official Catholic Directory, published annually by P.J. Kenedy and Sons.

Figure 5: Map of the Archdiocese of New York (detailed in red)

Source: St. Mary's Church, Fishkill, New York, < http://www.saintmaryschurch-fishkill.org/index.php>.

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