School choice and our Catholic vice presidential candidates

By Regina Wenger
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For the second election in a row, both major-party candidates for vice president identify as Catholic. Republican governor Mike Pence was raised in an Irish Catholic home, served as a Catholic youth worker, and aspired to be priest. He now describes himself as an "evangelical Catholic" after undergoing a conversion experience as a young adult and later attending a nondenominational church. Democratic senator Tim Kaine was also brought up in a Catholic home, attended a Jesuit high school, worked at a Jesuit missionary in Honduras, and continues to be a practicing Catholic today.

Despite their common faith background, the two candidates hold divergent views on the issue of school choice, which allows parents to select from an array of educational options other than traditional public schools—including receiving vouchers and tax credits, sending their children to charter or magnet schools, and homeschooling.

In the past, Catholics have possessed a wariness about public schools. The Common School Movement of the early 19th century—a precursor to today's public schools—insisted its instruction was nonsectarian. In reality, it favored Protestant Christianity. Catholics, acutely aware of this bias, sought to provide their children with a distinctly Catholic education. In 1840, Catholic leaders petitioned the aldermen of New York City for access to public school funding, noting the prejudice exhibited toward them by the objectives of the Public School Society:

> And yet in all these "early religious instructions, religious impressions, and religious influence," essentially anti-Catholic, your petitioners are to see nothing sectarian; but if in giving the education which the State requires, they were to bring the same influences to bear on the "susceptible minds" of their own children, in favor, and not against, their own religion, then this society contends that it would be sectarian!

Archbishop John Hughes of New York led the development of an extensive parochial school system for American Catholics. But whether these schools receive government funding—and if so, how much—remains a contested question. In the 19th century, anti-Catholic sentiment fueled by the influx of Catholic immigrants led to the passage of Blaine Amendments in several states prohibiting the use of state funds for schools deemed to be sectarian. This sentiment only abated in the mid-20th century as people like the Kennedy family and Bishop Fulton Sheen helped usher Catholics into the cultural and political mainstream.

During the century after their inception, American public schools underwent massive changes, becoming increasingly professional, institutional, and secular. Following these transitions came broader participation by Catholics in the public school system. Gravissimum Educationis from the Second Vatican Council in 1965 shows a warming toward public schools as long as they partner with parents, the primary educators of children.

Today many Catholic children attend public schools, and animosity between American Protestants and Catholics no longer exists in the public sphere. Further, in the last several elections, Democrats and Republicans roughly split the American Catholic vote. This diversity creates space for Catholics to hold varying views on school choice.

Pence's position favoring school choice draws upon the Catholic beliefs that faith formation should be part of education and parents should play a primary role in their children's education. Many evangelical Protestants currently share these beliefs.

Due to his formation in the Jesuit education tradition, Kaine opposes school choice based on principles of Catholic social justice and liberation theology. Kaine's children attended the predominately black Richmond Public Schools and his family presently worships at a racially diverse church, so he may also be influenced by the historic connection, especially in the South, between school choice and race.

The long relationship between Catholics and public schools is complicated by the breadth of beliefs across American Catholicism. This complexity provides insight into how our two vice presidential candidates, both Catholic, hold opposing positions on school choice.

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