

Student Success Begins at Home

By Michael Goodwin
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It's the parents, stupid! That it is the overwhelming reaction to my column praising the success of Catholic schools in New York City.

Readers, including public school teachers, don't deny that Catholic schools do a better job of educating minority children who come from poor families, and at far less cost than public schools. They concede that those kids, about 40 percent of whom are not Catholic, are more likely to succeed in life as a result.

But most believe that success or failure happens before those children ever walk through the school door. The way they see it, behind every failing child are failing parents.

"Can we evaluate parents? Can they get report cards, too?" one teacher said, ticking off topics he'd like to grade:

"Does your child come to school properly fed or do you get your child to the school's breakfast program? Does your child always do homework? Does your child get to school on time? How many absences does your child rack up? Is your child appropriately dressed? Do you attend parent-teacher conferences?"

He and others say that Catholic schools have the advantage of parents who, by definition, care about those things.

"Parents that are willing to work a little harder or do with a little less are parents that look at school as more than just a convenient place to park their kids," Jeff Lewis writes.

That's exactly how parent Lora Stubin-Amelio sees it. "I work two jobs to send my kids to St. Ignatius Loyola on East 84th Street," she writes. "It is a luxury to send my kids there but I believe in strong academics and a great religious foundation."

Absenteeism is a huge issue, and very much related to parents. A public high school teacher in Westchester County says his students miss an average of 35 days a year, but most parents don't respond when he tries to get their help.

"Teachers have these kids for 45 minutes a day," he wrote. "We cannot control or change what happens in the home."

Out-of-wedlock births, now at 45 percent in the city, and single-parent households can complicate childhood development. A recent study found that nearly a quarter of black and Hispanic third- and fourth-graders in the city miss at least a month of school. Noting that those kids are likely to drop out, Mayor Bloomberg launched a program that includes waking children with celebrity phone calls, and rewarding them for attendance.

Discipline is also a problem, and public school teachers complain they have little authority.

"The number one thing that gets in the way of students achieving is the behavior problems of

other students, and the overwhelming amount of red tape and resistance met with trying to remove those students,” teacher Eric DiVito writes. “The few that are suspended are usually back within a few days and repeating the same behavior.”

Some readers believe the Catholic schools have an advantage because they are free to give troublemakers the boot. But Susan George, the head of the inner-city scholarship fund for the New York Archdiocese, says that is a common misunderstanding.

She says few kids are booted from archdiocese elementary schools, with Manhattan reporting one this year, Staten Island zero and The Bronx just six over the last six years.

High schools are a different matter, with an expulsion rate approaching 3 percent. Other kids “voluntarily” withdraw, but that happens in top public schools as well.

“The point is not the discipline, but the expectation we put on our students,” George says. “Of course we have kids with problems. We try to help them and give lots of second chances. But kids who grow up in Catholic schools know that they are expected to succeed.”

That is the secret sauce. Students succeed when schools and parents share the goal and responsibility for making it happen. Anything less is a recipe for failure.