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Schools done right

ABOUT this time of the year, education headlines take on a dreary, déjà vu quality. Unions resist firing teachers caught in sexual cases, some with students. Graduation rates flatline, and fewer than one-in-four grads are college-ready. There are lawsuits and battles about school closures.

Predictably, the trouble leads to demands for more funding, as if money is the answer.

So it goes in New York's tiresome public-school wars. Meanwhile, there's another city school system that doesn't make headlines. It just keeps chugging forward, quietly carrying its students to remarkable success at about half the cost of the public system. Teachers are unionized, yet the schools succeed without endless confrontation.

New York's Catholic schools are the little engine that could. Their success doesn't make news because there's nothing shocking about it. It happens routinely, year after year, student after student.

Some 80 percent of Catholic high-school freshmen graduate in four years. Nearly all take the SAT test, and their average scores are higher than the public system's, where the rate of test takers is far lower. About 96 percent of Catholic-school grads go to college, the bulk to four-year institutions.

True, it's a smaller system, with only about 33,000 students in 74 elementary and 18 high schools in the New York Archdiocese, which covers Manhattan, The Bronx and Staten Island.

But don't be fooled by claims that these schools "cream" the best kids. For these incredible statistics are from schools designated as "inner city" by the archdiocese because of family-poverty



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levels. In short, these kids are very much like those of the public system, yet the outcomes are dramatically better.

Consider that about three out of four inner-city Catholic-school students live at or near the poverty line. More than 50 percent come from single-parent homes and 93 percent are nonwhite. Only about two-thirds are Catholic. About 40 percent get help with tuition, which is about \$6,800.

"An inner-city kid is an inner-city kid," says Susan George, a matter-of-fact tone to her voice. "The only question is

whether they are getting a great education."

George, executive director of the archdiocese's inner-city scholarship fund, notes that one donor wanted to help kids get out of failing public schools and into Catholic ones. Thousands are benefiting, but principals report that kids coming from the public system usually are two years behind grade level in reading.

"But they catch up pretty quickly in our system," George said evenly.

There she goes again. No drama, not even a boast.

Indeed, there is no time for gloating or complaining in the Catholic system. As Tim McNiff, the superintendent puts it, there is too much to do in the "lean and mean administration."

Test scores for fourth- and eighth-graders are about 10 points higher than the city average in math and reading — the tests are the same — but McNiff thinks they can be better.

Teacher salaries are largely comparable, except at the top, where those at Catholic schools can be as much as 30 percent below the public ones.

McNiff says the union, the Federation of Catholic Teachers, challenges most termination cases through arbitration, but adds that disputes "are not as intense and, more times than not, we come to a meeting of the minds."

Imagine that — a teachers union with common sense.

Of course, the Catholic schools do have another advantage. "I don't want to downplay the spiritual component," McNiff says. "It tells a child we have high expectations for you, and that spills over into academics."

The striking results suggest a thought experiment. The next mayor will presumably want his or her own chancellor. Maybe there's a new way to get a good one.

The next chancellor should come from either the Catholic schools or a charter school. A vet from those systems would bring all the necessary experience of dealing with the complications of an urban system.

But that background would bring another kind of experience, too: achieving consistent student success. That would be new. And better.