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## PRIVATE SCHOOLING

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### “Doing Something” in a Catholic School

Brother Bob Smith

This selection first appeared in *The American Enterprise* magazine's November/December 1995 edition. Brother Bob Smith is principal of Messmer High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

I grew up in Chicago during the early 1960s, and my parents taught my sisters, brothers, and me to appreciate and respect all people. We learned to seek out the common things that make us neighbors, not to focus on minor differences like race, religion, or income. When I am asked why I choose to minister today in the place I do, I always refer back to an incident that happened early in my life.

I remember walking with my mother and another woman on Madison Street in Chicago one afternoon, and standing outside a large public high school. As we waited for the light to change, the school dismissal bell rang, and a door banged loudly open. Our attention was immediately grabbed by a young man as he ran from the school down the middle of the street. I was struck by the fact that he didn't look for oncoming cars. A mob of 100 or so other students seemed to nab the boy in mid-air. They threw him to the ground and then proceeded to “stomp” him with a vengeance. Many of the students literally walked on the young man, and footprints of blood followed people as they completed their senseless deed. As a young child watching the crazed frenzy of the mob and the defenseless boy, the only thought in my mind was “Why doesn't somebody do something?”

Then my mother and her friend pushed me against a building and told me to wait. As I stood watching, they shoved their way through the mob and dragged the boy to the curb. That act of courage by my mother and her friend left a permanent mark on my life. No one honored them for their actions, and some would call them “nuts” for what they did. But they saw an injustice and acted. The fact that the boy being stomped was white and my mother and her friend black did not make a difference. Those two women were Christians, and their Gospel values were being tested. Dante said in *The Inferno* that “the hottest places in hell were reserved for those who remained silent in times of moral crisis.”

Three years ago, I decided, in the name of the Catholic school I serve as principal, to try to “do something” to help low-income students in inner-city Milwaukee. The public school system in Milwaukee is poor. The drop-out rate is over 50 percent, and the typical student who does graduate leaves with a D+ average.

When I first got involved, Milwaukee had an experimental voucher program that excluded religious schools. The State Department of Public Instruction fought against having any voucher system, and reluctantly began to administer it only after losing a court challenge it pursued all the way to the State Supreme Court. After the state administrators finally put together their vague list of conditions schools needed to meet in order to accept vouchers, we believed that we were eligible under the criteria. Although we are a Catholic school, over 50 percent of our students are non-Catholic. More than 65 percent live at or below the poverty level. Demographically, Messmer High School is quite similar to Milwaukee’s public inner-city schools.

But that is where the comparison ends. The graduation rate at Messmer is 98 percent. Of that number, over 80 percent go on to college. We have virtually no problem with drugs or violent activity, and do not have students bringing weapons into our building.

We felt that our school environment could save a few voucher students from almost certain academic death in the public school system, so we applied, and to our surprise were told that we were eligible. Within a few days the Milwaukee papers got the news and printed a front-page story about the Catholic school becoming eligible for public funds. They invoked the specter of other religious schools enrolling in the program and threatening the public school status quo. What happened in the next year was truly unbelievable.

First, we received from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction a request for data stretching to three single-spaced pages. Then two teams of “investigators” descended on us. The state had not investigated any other school that applied to the program, but all of our classrooms, financial records, textbooks, trophy cases, and yearbooks were pored over for three full days. The bookcase in my office was examined when I went out to get coffee. In addition to mentioning in their report a picture of the Last Supper on my office wall, the state investigators counted the number of crucifixes in classrooms, listed any known Catholic donors who contributed to our school, and mentioned sports awards won in the 1960s in the Catholic Athletic Conference.

The bureaucrats did not, however, talk to any teachers, students, or parents about the quality of our educational program. They never noted that although the majority of our students are non-Catholic, the church provides large tuition subsidies to our school.

When our request for equal participation in the state voucher program was eventually denied, I went to Madison for an appeal hearing. It turned out to be frighteningly like a criminal trial. The state’s legal counsel interrogated me for  $7\frac{1}{2}$  hours! “What is the significance of different colored clerical shirts for your job, as seen in various yearbook pictures?” “Who writes the daily prayers read each day during morning announcements?” Most puzzlingly: “Doesn’t the Pope ultimately control our school?”

I found the questioning sometimes amusing, often very sad. Our only intention was to help needy students who voluntarily selected our school to get a high-quality education. The voucher from the state would pay for barely half the cost of educating each student. The rest we were willing to make up ourselves.

As I’ve observed thousands of our youth either drop out or graduate from public schools with dysfunctional skills, I have felt in many ways like I did when I was a small child watching a man be trampled. I have asked myself again, “Why doesn’t someone do something?” The difference here is that it is not a frenzied mob that is doing the damage but educated and well-paid adults working in the public sector.

My story does have a happy ending, though. Over the past two years a number of people have joined together to break the gridlock on educational freedom in Wisconsin. Governor Tommy Thompson, Bradley Foundation head Michael Joyce, Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist, and

State Representative Polly Williams have gotten passed through the state legislature the first school choice voucher program that places religious schools on equal footing with others. In late July, the governor came to Messmer High School to sign the bill.

Great forces will be marshaled in an attempt to derail this new law in the courts. But we have powers on our side too. In addition to some brave political leaders, we have the greatest authority of them all—God Almighty.