Public School “Secularists” vs. Women Religious: Competing Visions for Educating Immigrant Catholics in Jane Addams’s Progressive Era Chicago, 1890–1925

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Most accounts of the battle over how best to educate the children of the working classes leave out the critical role played by the women religious who ran Catholic schools.1 If included at all in histories of US education, nuns and sisters are mentioned as a cheap source of labor that proved essential in the expansion of the parochial school system. But they have rarely, if ever, been used for an inquiry into the vision of education they conceived and implemented as educators with novel ideas for the New World setting.2 This narrative is also absent from most histories of US Catholicism, including those emphasizing the growth of schools, which tend to view the issue almost entirely from the perspective of the male hierarchy and clergy.

However, with the emergence of a flourishing literature on Catholic women, we now know much more about how teaching sisters created Catholic schools for the working classes and the poor, as well as academies for privileged Protestant and Catholic girls.3 Catholic women staffed Catholic schools for boys

1 “Yet entire histories of American Catholicism, and even of Catholic education, have been written with only passing reference to sisters. Even when historians do acknowledge nuns’ contributions, they have tended to oversimplify their relationship to the church.” Kathleen Sprows Cummings, New Women of the Old Faith: Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 102.

2 After recalling historian Jay Dolan’s characterization of sisters as “Catholic serfs,” historian Kathleen Cummings glosses: “Unlike serfs, however, women religious were often committed to and empowered by the work they performed.” Cummings, New Women, 102. Cf. Mary J. Oates, The Catholic Philanthropic Tradition in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 142–64.

and girls; they established academies, high schools, and colleges that helped transform US society. Recasting teaching sisters as educational leaders who experimented with new methods and programs rather than viewing them as workhorses subordinate to the Catholic patriarchy deepens our knowledge of how Catholic schools functioned. Yet it also provides a more comprehensive view of the developments and nature of the hierarchal and patriarchal church as an institution that has democratized educational opportunities for immigrants, minorities, women, and the poor as much or more than did the public schools. In reconsidering the role of teaching sisters, we are able to rethink how the Catholic Church shaped our history.4

As European immigrants and the daughters of immigrants, sisters and nuns, representing hundreds of religious orders, were often part of the working classes they served. In a dual transformation, they climbed into the middle class as schoolteachers and administrators of substantial institutions and provided ladders of social and economic mobility for their students.5 In this regard, teaching sisters were on the front lines of the debate over secondary education, a debate that intensified between 1880 and 1920 when over twenty-three million immigrants arrived in the United States. Before the Civil War (1861–65), high schools were rare, and by 1880 only 3.7 percent of the nation’s fourteen to seventeen year olds attended high school.6 This small percentage was mainly


5 “Catholic education in the United States is the largest private educational enterprise known to history.” Editors’ introduction to Part 3, “Catholic Education in the United States: Foundations,” in Appleby, Byrne, and Portier, Creative Fidelity, 55–58, here 55.

6 David L. Angus and Jeffrey E. Mirel, The Failed Promise of the American High School, 1890–1995 (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 203. The country’s first public high school, the English Classical School, opened in Boston in 1821. Chicago’s first public high school opened in 1856. In 1920, the percentage of high school students had increased to only 31.2 percent.