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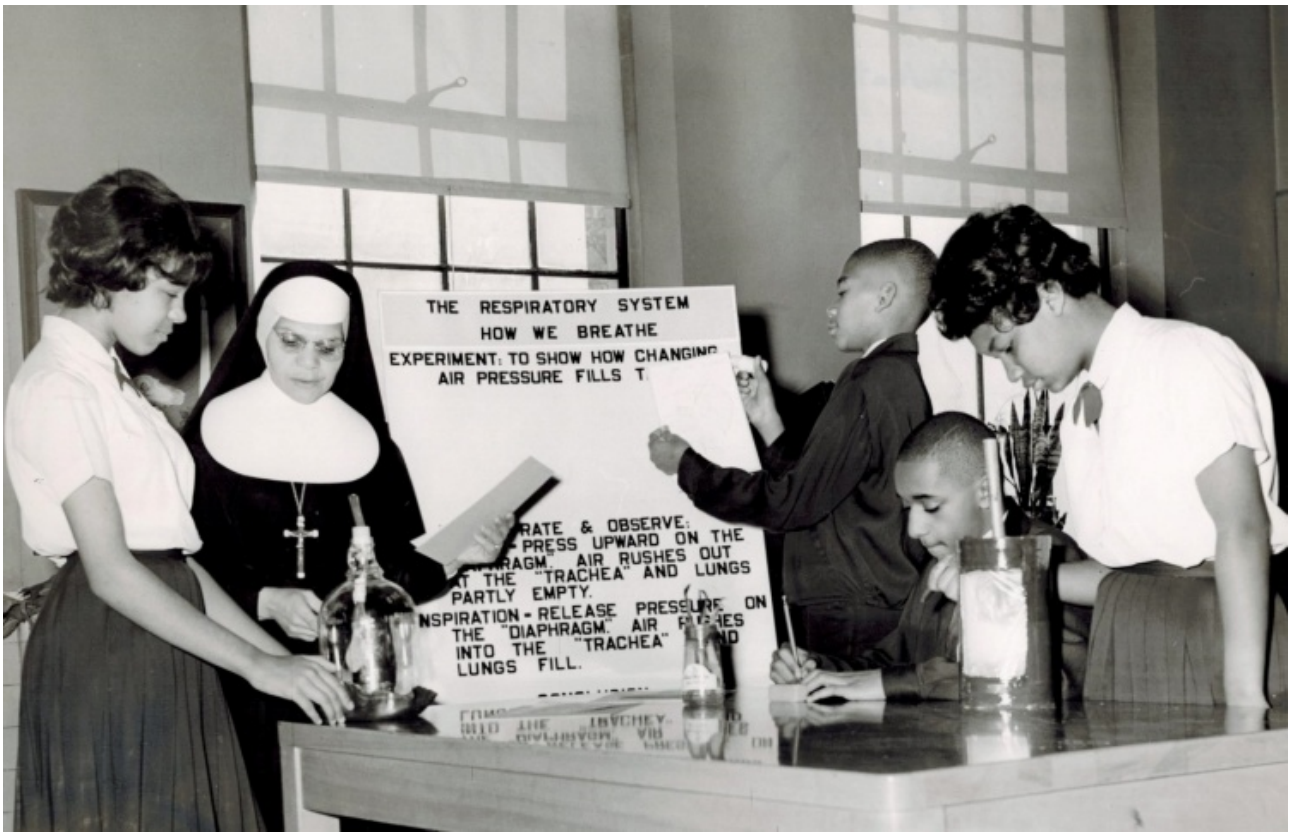

An Oblate Sister of Providence teaches a science class (Photo courtesy of the Oblate Sisters of Providence).

On Monday, April 5, 1971, representatives of Baltimore's Black Catholic Lay Caucus traveled to the motherhouse of the Oblate Sisters of Providence (OSP) for an urgent meeting with Mother Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste. Distraught over the threatened closing of scores of Black Catholic schools across the nation, the caucus's members aimed to develop a long-term solution with the sixty-four-year-old superior. They also sought to warn Baptiste of a duplicitous local campaign then underway. "Some priests have initiated long range plans to close black schools staffed by the Order," the delegates charged. "In order to shift attention from their plans and motives they will attack and deliberately antagonize the Sisters in hope that the Order will withdraw. They will then place the blame for the school closings on the sisters." The caucus warned that the assault would only "escalate and intensify," and stressed the need for "strong black leadership" and unity among Black Catholics. They also called for rejection of the survival tactics many Black Catholics had long employed to remain in their Church. "The traditional Negro Catholic responses that 'white is right' must be replaced with an objective and analytical assessment of the role we, as blacks, have played in the perpetuation of the oppression of our people," the delegates asserted. Although the representatives acknowledged the unique pressures that Black sisters faced from both "black and white Catholics" to "defend [either] the Church or their people," they cautioned Baptiste against timidity. "We will hang together or we will hang separately," the delegates warned.

In the early 1970s, no issue was of greater concern to the African American Catholic community than the survival of the Black Catholic educational system. Before 1965, Church- and state-mandated school integration had closed or merged (with other schools) several long-standing southern Black Catholic schools, many of which were led by the Black sisterhoods. Although members of the Black laity and sisters often protested these closures, the lack of a national Black Catholic apparatus left impacted communities with few options. However, the crisis of the late 1960s threatened the Black Catholic educational system with extinction. Between 1968 and 1969 alone, 637 U.S. Catholic schools closed, with schools in inner cities whose student bodies had transformed from white to predominantly Black or all Black following the Great Migrations and white Catholic withdrawal hit especially hard. Because Catholic schools had historically been the primary vehicles for evangelization in Black communities, many observers viewed archdiocesan and diocesan decisions to close Black Catholic schools (almost always without consulting Black faculty or parents) as proof of a concerted Church effort to abandon African American communities. Some even understood it

to be part of massive white Catholic resistance to the civil-rights movement and increasing demands for racial justice within the Church. As such, the nation's Black priests, sisters, and lay Catholics organized on local and national levels and fought back.

In a daring 1971 move, the leaders of the newly formed national Black Catholic religious and lay organizations, including Sr. M. Martin de Porres Grey, president of the National Black Sisters' Conference (NBSC), traveled to Vatican City to present their grievances to Pope Paul VI. During their meeting with Vatican secretary of state Giovanni Bennelli, second in power only to the pope, the delegates argued that the Catholic Church was "dying" in the Black community, citing enduring racism in the Church, the interconnected crises of Black vocation losses and Black Catholic school closings, and the pressing need for Black leadership. However, the meeting did not produce tangible results. Bennelli remained skeptical of the delegation's complaints, noting they were "in conflict with the reports from white American bishops." As a result, the Italian prelate advised the group to take a "slow and measured" approach to addressing their grievances. In interviews given upon her return to the United States, however, Grey demurred. "The reality of the black Catholic situation in America is and has been one of separatism created by the domin[ant] culture of the American Catholic Church," she declared. In addition to noting that Black Catholics had already demonstrated heroic patience with white Catholic racism, the NBSC president argued that the present crises demanded immediate action. "Within five years, most parochial schools in Black communities will be non-existent," Grey declared, adding, "It does not have to happen."

Like all sister leaders in 1971, the heads of the African American sisterhoods and the NBSC were knee-deep in an institutional crisis that few had predicted. After decades of steady exponential growth, the U.S. Church was in distress. In the previous five years, thousands of religious men and women had departed their congregations. Among sisters, the figures were especially stark. In 1966, the national sister population had reached an all-time high of 181,421. By 1971, that number had plummeted to fewer than 147,000, not including deaths. Equally distressing was the state of the U.S. Catholic educational system. Between 1965 and 1971, over 1,500 Catholic elementary and secondary schools closed, and thousands more were threatened with extinction. Northern cities already experiencing massive white Catholic suburbanization, such as Milwaukee, Saint Paul, Chicago, Detroit, and Denver, recorded enormous one-year drops in Catholic school enrollment and closed scores of parochial schools, including some of the region's oldest. Thus, as the 1970s began, most sister leaders, especially those whose congregations staffed Catholic schools, were faced with two herculean tasks: reversing the decline in their memberships and keeping their order's institutions viable.
Many Black Catholic leaders of the 1970s viewed the dismantling of the Black Catholic educational system as part and parcel of the larger white Catholic backlash to the civil-rights gains.

For the nation's Black sisters, however, these crises were substantially more acute. Not only was the rate of African American departures from religious life double that of white departures, but Catholic schools in predominantly Black inner-city communities were more likely to face closure or merger than their white suburban counterparts. Most Black faithful had welcomed desegregation on principle. However, both Catholic and secular school desegregation had resulted in the closure of long-standing Black schools and the token integration of some Black students and a handful of Black teachers into previously all-white institutions. In many cases, Black parents voluntarily withdrew their children from Black Catholic schools to support government- and Church-mandated desegregation. However, thousands across the country, especially those skeptical of white-directed integration and wary of violent massive resistance to desegregation—remained committed to the survival of Black Catholic education, especially institutions led by Black nuns. In fact, many Black Catholic leaders of the 1970s viewed the dismantling of the Black Catholic educational system as part and parcel of the larger white Catholic backlash to the civil-rights gains of the 1950s and 1960s—something Black Catholic activists felt had to be contested and stopped.

Without Black Catholic religious and schools, many Black faithful reasoned that the Church would lose all credibility and cease to function effectively, if at all, in the African American community. Because Black Catholic schools had also played leading roles in the education of thousands of non-Catholic Black professionals, segments of the wider African American community also took notice and threw their support behind Black Catholic leaders struggling to preserve African American access to Catholic education. During the 1970s, Black sisters and their supporters employed a host of tactics, from strategic accommodation to direct-action protest, to keep surviving Black Catholic schools open. However, their efforts would be met with formidable resistance from forces bent on maintaining the racial status quo and evading the Church's moral responsibilities for equality and justice.

In 1965, the U.S. Catholic Church operated the largest private school system in the world. As early as the 1950s, though, a small contingent of Church officials questioned the wisdom of having expanded it so rapidly. Citing the common overcrowding of Catholic classrooms and the strain placed on teaching sisterhoods, a few clerics even argued that parish schools should begin limiting rather than increasing their enrollments. Otherwise, the quality of Catholic education would suffer. In 1956, Msgr. William McManus, the assistant director of the National Catholic Welfare Conference's Department of Education, surveyed twenty-eight archdiocesan and diocesan school systems

and found them all strained beyond capacity, turning away hundreds of students annually. For McManus and others, the Church's goal to have every Catholic child in a Catholic school was simply unrealistic. Even with peak enrollments in 1965, the system educated only 47 percent of the Church's children.

Between 1965 and 1970, though, enrollments in U.S. Catholic primary and secondary schools dropped by over 21 percent, from 5.6 million to 4.4 million, and the number of schools declined from 13,1396 to 11,352. While demand for Catholic education remained relatively high, especially among African Americans and white Catholic suburbanites, declining numbers of sisters translated into higher tuition rates, since schools had to hire lay teachers to supplement depleted teaching staff. Unable and in many cases unwilling to pay the higher costs, thousands of middle- and working-class parents moved their children to public schools. This, combined with the steady white Catholic flight to suburban areas, where the parochial school system was much less developed, caused Catholic school enrollments to plummet. Between 1965 and 1968, elementary school enrollment alone dropped from 4.5 million to 3.9 million students. In response, archdioceses and dioceses across the country began closing hundreds of schools. No area of the country was exempt, but Catholic schools in inner-city and predominantly Black communities were hit especially hard.

The 1971 Black Catholic delegation to Vatican City (Photo courtesy of the National Black Sisters' Conference)

New state laws banning federal aid to private education, on which many white Catholic schools depended, also drove the crisis. However, these factors alone do not adequately explain what happened with Black Catholic education. While white Catholic school enrollments plummeted between 1965 and 1970, African American enrollments increased. In 1965, for example, approximately 99,245 Black youths were enrolled in over 349 Catholic elementary and secondary schools. By 1970, Black enrollments reached an all-time high of 112,987, despite the increasing precarity of Black Catholic schools. Over the next five years, Black Catholic school enrollments would drop to 107,313, largely because of school closures and mergers, not declining Black support for Catholic education. A 1970 study by the National Office for Black Catholics highlighted that support, revealing that African American parents, regardless of class background, consistently paid higher Catholic tuition rates than white Americans of the same class, an average annual tuition of $400 per child, while their white counterparts paid $160. The study also found that African American parents often paid more for one child's education than whites paid for five children, underscoring both how highly African Americans valued Catholic education and how unequal the Catholic school system was.

African American parents repeatedly demonstrated their dedication to Catholic education. That fact, and the insufficiency of other arguments to explain the crisis, suggest that it had an additional root: white Church leaders' long-standing, overtly racist opposition to substantial investment in Black Catholic education and evangelization.

While Black Catholic priests and sisters achieved a host of monumental firsts during the civil-rights era, meaningful integration and racial justice proved elusive. Archdiocesan and diocesan plans (generally devised by white clerical

and lay leaders) to integrate the Church's institutions, particularly its schools, almost always demanded closing Black schools and resulted in the token entry of a handful of Black youth into previously all-white Catholic schools with nonintegrated faculties. Moreover, across the nation, white Catholics mounted powerful campaigns against racial integration with the direct and indirect support of many Church leaders, prompting many Black Catholics to question publicly the sincerity of white Catholic commitment to racial justice. During a "confrontation group" at the 1969 meeting of the National Black Sisters' Conference in Dayton, Ohio, for example, participants pointed out that twenty-seven white priests from the city had written a paper "opposing desegregation of the school in the south." Others noted that while members of the Episcopal hierarchy, other Protestant leaders, and some Catholic sisters and priests participated in the Selma protests of 1965, "the Roman Catholic Church in the form of its hierarchy neglected to commit itself during the freedom marches." Such clear examples of individual and institutional fidelity to racial segregation in the Church were searing. So, too, was the pernicious resentment that some white sisters increasingly directed at Black sister-educators who began amplifying long-standing African American complaints about the detrimental impact of white sisters' educational ministries in Black communities.

At the first meeting of the NBSC in Pittsburgh, the sisters' small group discussions drew specific attention to the cultural incompetence and general unfitness of many white sisters teaching in Black schools. These discussions also emphasized the need for all sister educators of Black children to be able to instill Black pride in their pupils. Speaking to a national group of white sisters ministering in the African American community at a Department of Educational Service conference in Chicago in 1969, a NBSC member explained how white-administered Catholic education often propagated white supremacy and enforced racial self-hatred in Black children. "You've done our children too much harm already with your stories of white angels and a white God," the sister declared. "And the devil's black isn't he, in the stories you've crammed down our children's throats?... I've heard you in and out of the convents, reassuring one another. 'The black children love the white nuns more than they do the black nuns.'... Because you've taught our children to love white and to hate black.... You've taught our children to love you and to hate themselves." Speaking at the same meeting, School Sister of St. Francis Daniel Marie Myles testified about her gut-wrenching experiences of racism while desegregating her order, which was perceived to be a champion of racial equality. Myles also documented how the white members of her order who taught Black children with her in Chicago condemned her membership in the NBSC and continued to exclude her in explicitly hateful ways. "We're rejected, resented and hated, and we [Black nuns] know it," Myles stated. While a few white sisters in attendance acknowledged their moral and educational failures in the Black community, one white nun told an observer, "Do you really think those black people in the ghetto could get along for one month or one week without our committed white sisters?" The persistence of such paternalistic and racist attitudes among white sisters ministering in Black communities left many Black Catholics wondering if staying in the Church was worth the cost. While many Black Catholics opted to leave, others vowed to stay and fight. This was especially true of those who believed that preserving and transforming Black Catholic educational institutions was the key to dismantling white supremacy.

In the late 1960s, public protests against the mass closings and mergers of Catholic schools in inner-city and predominantly Black communities erupted across the nation. From New Orleans to Chicago, Charleston to New York, and Cincinnati to Detroit, African American Catholics demanded that Catholic schools not only remain open and accessible but also become true sites of Black educational liberation. Activists accused white ecclesiastical authorities, priests, sisters, and school boards of deliberately abandoning their professed commitments to Black Catholic education and giving in to massive white (Catholic) resistance to civil rights and demands for racial equality. While many Black (and some white) observers charged that the closures and mergers resulted from anti-Black racism, ecclesiastical and school board officials (overwhelmingly white and male) dismissed such claims. They cited instead the declining number of teaching sisters, increased operating costs, and the large presence of Black Protestants in formerly white Catholic urban neighborhoods as the chief catalysts, especially in the inner city. However, ever-increasing African American Catholic school enrollments and the demonstrated willingness of African American parents to pay substantially higher tuition rates than their white and suburban counterparts belied claims that Black schools were no longer viable investments. Simultaneously, white Church leaders directed substantial resources to building a new educational system to accommodate white Catholic suburbanization, itself in part an effort to circumvent racial integration.
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From the perspective of Black Catholic leaders, the decision to close inner-city and predominantly Black Catholic schools while steadily investing in suburban schools for richer white Catholic families was tantamount to racial genocide. Black Catholic leaders took drastic measures to direct national and secular attention to the crisis. In Detroit, protesters led by NBSC member Sr. M. Shawn Copeland and National Black Catholic Lay Caucus president Joseph Dulin responded to the archdiocese's 1970 proposal to close 75 percent of its schools, including its only Black Catholic high school, St. Martin de Porres, by seizing the all-Black Visitation Catholic Church on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Adopting the tactics of the civil-rights movement, the group sat in and blocked the church's entrance. "No schools, no churches!" the group proclaimed to reporters and the parishioners prevented from attending Visitation's three Sunday morning Masses. Because St. Martin de Porres High School had been established to correct

the widespread exclusion of Black youth from most white Catholic schools in the archdiocese, protesters feared its closure would lead to "a systematic phasing out of Catholic education in the inner city."

Such dramatic actions in Detroit brought Cardinal John Dearden to the table with three hundred Black Catholic leaders and parents in early December 1970. However, the meeting only exacerbated the tensions between the protesters and the white-led archdiocese. The group charged Dearden with addressing them in a cold, dismissive manner and giving evasive answers to their questions and demands. The archdiocese maintained its decision was driven by the new state law banning public aid to private schools and pointed out that it "took up a special collection [that] year to aid 21 financially troubled inner city schools," which were three-fourths Black. The protesters argued that Church leaders who had unapologetically upheld segregation and exclusion could find the will to support Black Catholics in their "number one priority in the inner city...EDUCATION." "Blacks have demonstrated, picketed, protested, prayed, cried, and believed in the White racist Church in an unfruitful effort to become full human beings and total members of the Church," local Black sisters and lay leaders said in a statement. "This in itself is a failure on the part of the Church." Across the country, Black Catholics kept the pressure up.

Since their institutions were usually the first targeted for closure by white-led archdiocesan and diocesan councils in the early years of desegregation, the leaders of Black teaching sisterhoods had been the earliest to recognize and confront the crisis. As the progenitors of Black Catholic education, these orders had built an impressive and mostly accredited network of seventy-five elementary and secondary schools across the United States during Jim Crow. However, between 1954 and 1965 alone, five schools administered by the Oblate Sisters of Providence (OSP), including their St. Rita Academy in St. Louis, Missouri, and seven schools administered by the Sisters of the Holy Family (SSF) closed or merged. While the SSF opened three new educational ministries during that period, two of them in Los Angeles, in 1966 four SSF schools closed, and one in Klotzville, Louisiana, merged with another Black Catholic school, St. Augustine, in 1967.

Because Black nun principals were among the earliest to decry racism in archdiocesan and diocesan decisions to close or merge Black Catholic schools, they were also among the first to experience the white clerical backlash to Black demands for the survival of Black Catholic education. White priests began pressuring Black leadership councils to remove "militant" Black sisters from leadership positions in Catholic schools. Most often, the sisters targeted were NBSC members who emphasized Black pride among their students, joined local protests, and revised their curricula to incorporate and champion Black studies. In 1969, Fr. André Bouchard, the white rector at Saints Paul and Augustine Catholic Church in Washington D.C., penned a letter scolding OSP leader Mother Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste for assigning Sr. Majella Neal as the school's principal. Bouchard described Neal, a NBSC foundress, as "a woman who has no concern for the community or a willingness to understand it." While he admitted he was to blame for "a misunderstanding" at the beginning of their relationship, he nonetheless advised Baptiste "to advise and council [sic] Sister Mejella [sic] so that the experience [at Saints Paul and Augustine would] be a fruitful one both for the school and for this community."

Black-administered Catholic schools like Saints Paul and Augustine were often attached to Black parishes led by white priests who held racially derogatory views of Black people and opposed Black leadership. Historically, Black superiors had counseled their members to find ways to work with paternalistic and hostile white priests to ensure the survival of their schools. However, by 1969, even the most cautious of Black superiors refused to let blatant disrespect for their members by offending white priests go unchallenged.

Baptiste, for example, took exception to Bouchard's characterization of Neal and her commitment to the Black community. She wrote, "You mention that Sister Mary Majella has no concern for the community or a willingness to understand it. It would be interesting to know the basis for this statement considering the fact that she has been there hardly a month…. There are several sides to every question, Father, and unless we are totally involved it is very difficult to sift the fact from personal opinion." Moreover, instead of heeding Bouchard's demand to get Neal in line, Baptiste suggested Bouchard "assist [the OSP] by a real spirit of communication and support."

An Oblate Sister of Providence with students at St. Pius in Harlem, New York (Photo courtesy of the Oblate Sisters of Providence).

Despite Baptiste's efforts to assuage tensions, Bouchard and his successor, Fr. Leonard Hurley, continued to harass Neal, forcing her to transfer or risk termination in 1970. Such was also the case for Sr. Marilyn Hopewell, who was forced to transfer from her teaching position at the historically Black Holy Comforter Catholic School in Washington D.C., after several run-ins with a white teacher (formerly a brother) during the same academic year. After Hopewell's removal and the forced transfers of all five OSP members assigned to Saints Paul and Augustine for the 1969–70 academic year, Black lay Catholics in D.C. protested what they called "the politics of genocide being performed on...the Oblate Sisters by the white hierarchy of Washington, D.C." Black parents cited the "persistent, sinister pressure...constantly exerted on the black women of the Oblate Order to 'keep them in their place' and to 'whip them into line.'" They also championed the commitment of Neal and Hopewell to the Black community, noting that "those who come under the most merciless attack are the faithful, loyal women who have the courage and stamina to defend the rights and interests of black children."

One month after members of Baltimore's Black Catholic Lay Caucus met with the OSP superior to express their concerns over the mistreatment of Black sister principals by white priests, the group held a sit-in at the Josephite headquarters in the city. Since the Josephites' arrival in the United States, many white members had undermined the leadership of Black Catholic women—especially those whose influence could not be usurped by white religious—in the African American educational apostolate. By 1971, though, many in the Black Catholic community were steadily fighting back. In addition to calling for the Josephites to "make black priests and brothers more visible in black communities," the protesters demanded the order implement an antiracist and Black awareness training program for all Josephites through the National Office for Black Catholics, support programs for "the development of real Black leadership," and create a diaconate program "relevant to Black people." This protest, combined with internal struggles within the Josephites, led to an all-out revolt against white and Black faculty members regarded as "insensitive, irrelevant, white paternalists or as black Uncle Toms." While some Josephite faculty members were transferred, the failure of the order's leaders to adopt an antiracist praxis prompted most of its Black seminarians and some white seminarians to defect from the order. Four Black ordained Josephites also resigned during the 1970s, leaving a significant void of Black clerical leadership when the Black community needed it most.

Black lay Catholics also directed significant attention to the increasing retreat of white sisters from inner-city and predominantly Black schools, believing their decisions were racially motivated. While the experiences of Black youth in the increasingly Black inner-city Catholic schools of the North, Midwest, and West were never free of racism and paternalism, many upwardly mobile African American parents still preferred the Catholic system over the public one. This became even more true as select schools led by white sisters began to incorporate Black-studies curricula and some orders stopped barring Black women and girls. However, when in the late 1960s and 1970s many white orders began closing their inner-city and predominantly Black schools and diverting resources to their increasingly suburban schools and academies for white Catholic families, Black Catholic parents protested.

In 1970, for example, Black Catholic parents supported by Fr. Edward McKenna, a white assistant pastor at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church on Chicago's West Side, publicly charged the Religious Sisters of Mercy with racism after the order unexpectedly announced that it would soon close the parish's elementary school. While the Mercy leadership in Chicago initially denied the charge in letters to the editors of the city's newspapers, the evidence and the fight to keep St. Thomas Aquinas open over the next two years revealed that anti-Black racism was indeed the chief driving factor. In a letter to the editor of the *News Journal* in Chicago, Fr. Michael Rochford, a pastor at Resurrection parish, not only outlined that "the Sisters of Mercy have not been open to, or attracted black vocations" but also pointed out that the order had withdrawn "from neighborhoods when they turned black." Regarding St. Thomas Aquinas, Rochford noted that "some white schools announced as withdrawal schools have made a 'deal' to keep the Sisters." He also noted that at the white sisters' initial meeting with Black Catholic parents, they "admitted...that they could not get their Sisters to teach at black schools," and that this was "the real reason" behind the proposed closure. While there were notable cases of white sisters taking public stands against racism in white Catholic schools and unnecessary withdrawals from inner-city schools in the 1970s, white congregations by and large made minimal commitments to preserving Catholic schools in inner-city communities at a moment when Black parents regularly proved to be their most passionate champions. In one highly publicized exception from 1971, ten Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters assigned to the all-white St. Raymond School in Detroit resigned in protest after the white parish council admitted that they did not want the school to close chiefly because it might lead to a decline in local property values, forcing people to leave and letting "undesirables...move in."

Although Black congregations remained firmly committed to the survival of Black Catholic education, their institutions' financial vulnerability and their own legacy of strategic accommodation to white racism placed Black leadership councils in increasingly precarious positions. Faced with strident white opposition to Black self-determination and clerical pressure to clamp down on outspoken Black sisters, some Black superiors soon proved unwilling to support militant and creative struggles to preserve Black Catholic education. However, individual Black sisters kept up the pressure. Working within Black Catholic organizations and in alliance with white-led sister organizations opposed to white flight, Black sisters rallied to keep remaining inner-city and Black Catholic schools open by any means necessary. And as the 1970s continued to unfold, this increasingly meant advocating for community control.

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