

## INTERVIEW WITH ASHLEY ROGERS BERNER FROM THE INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION POLICY AT JOHNS HOPKINS

*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon  
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### EXCERPTS:

- « Most democracies fund a wide variety of schools – whether secular, Catholic, Jewish, or Montessori – and require all of them to deliver a robust and challenging curriculum. The public funding [...] in return for curriculum-based accountability that embodies the public interest – this is educational pluralism. »
- « Here at the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, we work with leaders from all different sectors. Our tools are sector-agnostic. We bring the same guidance, capacity, and methods to district, charter, and non-public school systems. »

**You are Director of the Institute for Education Policy at Johns Hopkins University. Could you please explain the origin and goals of the Institute?**

In 2015, then-Dean Andrews of the Johns Hopkins School of Education brought my colleague, David Steiner, and me, in to build Hopkins' presence in education policy. Our role was to translate excellent educational research – much of which was being conducted at Hopkins – into the language of policy and practice, and simultaneously to translate the urgent needs of the field into high-impact research. Since 2015, we've grown from a team of two to fourteen; partnered with dozens of state, district, charter, and private-school networks; and developed trademarked resources that generate key findings for the field.



Institute for Education Policy

### Box 1: Interview Series

**What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website?** The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

**Why a series of interviews?** Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

**What is the focus of this interview?** In this interview, Ashley Rogers Berner, the Director of the Institute for Education Policy at Johns Hopkins University, explains the origins of the Institute, its mission, and its strategic orientations, especially in matters related to advocacy and support for education pluralism.

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**What are the main activities of the Institute today?  
What are your priorities for the future?**

We have become persuaded by international research showing that two powerful, in-school factors exercise an outsized, positive effect upon students' academic success and long-term civic participation: a rigorous, knowledge-rich curriculum in all subjects throughout the K-12 experience, and a strong, distinctive school culture that rests upon a clear mission whose values are shared across the school community. We thus designed a suite of integrated resources and research projects that, in various ways, support these two factors for school systems across the country.

The graphic below lists resources we provide, two of which are trademarked by JHU. More details can be found on our [website](#), but I'll mention just two of them.

Our School Culture 360™, which we released last April, is already in wide use, including in Louisiana, where the Department of Education placed it at the top of its approved survey list; Florida, for the tool's capacity to assess the preconditions of long-term civic formation; Catholic dioceses in three states; the Council of Islamic Schools of North America for its accredited schools; and

so on. This is an immense joy, and we think it's a low-cost, high-impact way to help schools build distinctive schools that deliver on the promise of democratic education.

We have fielded our Teacher Survey on Curriculum Use in dozens of districts and, increasingly, across entire states. This analysis provides information about the materials teachers are using and to what instructional purpose. It has been amazing to see the results: in math, ELA, and social studies, teachers seem to be curating their own materials from a wide array of online platforms – and spending a lot of time doing so. This may sound quite bizarre to my colleagues in other countries, many of which do a much better job of standing up a coherent, sequenced, knowledge-building course of study for students! Unfortunately, my country's educational establishment chose process over knowledge, and skill-building over mastery of core content, more than a hundred years ago. It's been a disaster for students, and in particular, for low-income students. We're leveraging the research about *why knowledge matters* – to borrow shamelessly from E.D. Hirsch's 2016 book – and are working with many, many other groups trying to turn that around. It's working. It's a privilege.

**Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy**  
Integrated Education Resources

 <b>School Culture Survey 360™</b> for Face-to-Face and Remote Learning Contexts <a href="#">Learn more</a>	 <b>Knowledge Map™</b> for English Language Arts and Social Studies <a href="#">Learn more</a>	 <b>Teacher Survey of Curriculum Use</b> - <a href="#">Learn more</a>
 <b>Classroom Observations</b> - <a href="#">Learn more</a>	 <b>Focus Groups</b> - <a href="#">Learn more</a>	 <b>Benchmark Analysis</b> - <a href="#">Learn more</a>

Visual: Programs from the Institute for Education Policy.

**The Global Catholic Education Report 2021 focuses in part in education pluralism. You have done a lot of work on this topic. What are your views?**

This goes back to the earlier point: what matters most for students' success? Most democracies make it much, much easier for distinctive school cultures and strong academics to sit side by side. These systems are educationally plural. They fund a wide variety of schools – whether secular, Catholic, Jewish, or Montessori – and require all of them to deliver a robust and challenging curriculum. Teacher preparation (on the front end) and content-rich assessments (on the back end) reinforce the instructional core. This approach to the culture and the content of education is often found to narrow achievement gaps between wealthy and low-income students, and to make good on the promise of democratic education in creating opportunity and civic preparation.

The public funding of a wide variety of schools in return for curriculum-based accountability that embodies the public interest – this is educational pluralism. I support it wholeheartedly. It is equitable, honors distinctive views, and also insists on high quality.

The problem in the States is that our turn away from educational pluralism and *towards* a unitary system (the district model) happened so long ago, that we've lost the larger view. Any move against the unitary system is thus viewed in highly competitive terms, with entire sectors pitted against one another. On the one hand, you've got devotees of the district, who do not believe that non-state actors can provide democratic education. On the other, you've got libertarians who want funding without accountability. Neither option seems to me healthy or evidence-based. Pluralism is different from both of these options, which dominate political discourse. I'm trying to change that conversation.

**After a long progressive decline, enrollment in Catholic schools in the US has decreased even more because of the COVID-19 crisis. How do you see the future of the sector?**

Of course, I'm worried about the future of Catholic schools. But I do take heart from the innovations that are happening in the sector. Kathleen Porter-Magee, for instance, has effectively centralized the operations of her Catholic school network in the South Bronx (the Partnership Schools). She is expanding into other places. Or the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education brings back a strong, liberal arts focus as a strategic intervention into struggling Catholic schools – to good effect. Finally, Notre Dame's ACE Academy model has turned around diocesan systems across the country.

**What types of research and training should be done to support Catholic education in the US and abroad?**

At the school level, focus on the fundamentals: a knowledge-rich curriculum, support for teachers in delivering it, and a coherent, theologically-informed school culture. These are the drivers of the "Catholic school effect" in the United States and abroad. Keep to these things. Philanthropic efforts could also help Catholic systems create better operating models. High-performing charter school networks in the States have done a good job, and the Partnership Schools, mentioned above, learned from their example.

**What is your own personal journey? How did you come to work on education policy and sometimes, on Catholic education?**

I am a person of faith, albeit Episcopalian rather than Roman Catholic. My daughters attended Catholic girls' schools in Oxford, UK, while I was doing my doctorate, and then in NYC where I worked afterwards. They were wonderful, nurturing, intellectually challenging communities. My girls were loved and supported in every way.

I know that's not the experience of all kids attending Catholic schools. There is real variability in the Catholic sector, and some obvious cases of abuse and neglect. The first should be amended, and the second shouldn't be tolerated. But beyond my family's good experience, the Catholic school research captivated me. One of the most famous educational reports of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the so-called "Coleman Report" published in 1966, concluded that, in the aggregate, American education did not change the trajectory for American students. Family background was the single greatest contributor to academic outcomes. These headlines still shock, and they remain true, for far too many of our young people.

But James Coleman noticed an anomaly in his research; some schools were breaking this pattern. He was curious, and spent the next decade comparing outcome data from a wide cross-section of high schools. What did he find? Catholic high schools virtually erased the learning gaps between wealthy and low-income students in four years. The resulting book, *High School Achievement: Public, Private, and Catholic Schools Compared* (1982), is simply stunning. Coleman called Catholic high schools, in effect, "the *real* common school in America." The book changed the field, and it changed research methodology – from a focus on the inputs of education, to its outcomes.

Now, the Catholic school sector has changed a lot since that time. And other school sectors – from district to charter to independent - have caught up in some ways, in some places. But the key indicators that drove that powerful effect, are still to be found. They are still possible. Where school systems prioritize rigorous, knowledge-rich instruction and deep, normative school cultures, good things happen for young people. I bring this message to school leaders from all sectors.

Here at the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, we work with leaders from all different sectors. Our tools are sector-agnostic. We bring the same guidance, capacity, and methods to district, charter, and non-public school systems. This may be relatively rare in the United States, but it is very much the model in many pluralistic systems. The Netherlands, the UK, most provinces of Canada, Singapore...these systems don't create different accountability structures and supports sector-by-sector. Rather, they value and evaluate schools on the same basis. We've taken our cues from systems where there isn't a competitive drive against one another. It's an immense privilege to partner with all different kinds of schools, and to walk alongside them as they support students.

**Could you share with our readers a personal anecdote about your passions, your interests?**

Oh, gosh! I have a lot of passions! I love what I do; it's a privilege to get up every day and support the *real* heroes: the teachers and leaders who support kids, every day, in this country and others.

I love English poetry. One of my favorite poets is the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins. I discovered his work as a teenager and committed vast tranches to memory. His words taught me to see the natural world. When I arrived in the UK for my studies, his words filled my mind, and I half expected to see him around corners. My daughters were never surprised to hear me launch into one of his sonnets!

Exercise, good friends, cooking at home – these things matter to me. Life can be exquisitely difficult. I am thankful to have companions on the journey.