The debate in New York over the use of public tax generated funds to support Roman Catholic schools and to assist in the education of Catholic schoolchildren has continued since the early years of the new republic. It was part of the broader debate over the purpose of public education and the public school curriculum.

In Colonial America, schools provided children of farmers and workers with minimum literacy and numeracy. Most education was skill based. Girls learned to work from their mothers. Boys learned a trade from their father’s or were apprenticed to craftsmen who taught them a trade in exchange for a period of unpaid labor. This began to change in 1777 when Governor George Clinton argued for the diffusion of knowledge as a way to better the nation and mold youngsters into good Americans. While the nation was overwhelmingly Protestant, different sects were seen as providing religious diversity and the public, or common schools were seen as serving everyone.
However, by the second quarter of the 19th century, the schools and school funding had become contested terrain. Working-class New Yorkers, who needed their children to work rather than attend school, believed that public schools were intended to benefit the middle and upper class and did not want to pay taxes for a school system they would never get to use. Wealthy New Yorkers had reservations about a common school system because they did not want to pay for other people’s children to attend school, when they could afford to send their own kids to private schools. Protestant clergy and prominent Protestants controlled the common school fund and did not want to provide money for Catholic education. Nativists in the Know-Nothing Party took advantage of the New York City school controversy to assault Catholicism and the waves of Irish Catholic immigrants. Soon the religious wars of Europe were transplanted to the United States.

The state appropriation for education was initially divided among all schools, including a Catholic parochial school that was established in 1801. Enrollment at St. Peter’s parochial school reached 100 pupils by 1805, making it one of the largest schools in the city. In 1806, the New York State Legislature allowed the parochial school of St. Peter’s Church, initially supported by the parish, to receive a portion of the state education fund.

The Public School Society was created in 1805 to provide free schooling for poor children who were not provided for by either religious or private institutions. In 1826, the Public School Society became the Public School Society of New York, a private organization, dominated by Protestants and heavily anti-Catholic. Although the state still gave money to the Catholic Orphan Asylum and the Catholic Benevolent Society, the Public School Society of New York was responsible for dividing up New York City’s portion of the state education fund among the city’s schools. The society essentially held a state granted monopoly over the common schools. In 1840 it was operating nearly 100 schools with an annual budget of $130,000 dollars. School attendance was compulsory, tax-supported, free, and Protestant. Catholic parents were upset because their children had to read the Protestant version of the Christian Bible and were educated in an anti-Catholic atmosphere.

Protestant Version of the Bible

The Public School Society considered the common schools non-sectarian even though instruction in the Protestant version of the Bible was required. Horace Mann, a leading 19th century school reformer and a champion of the common school movement defended it by arguing, “Our system earnestly inculcates all Christian morals,” and that “a generic Protestantism would serve the needs of the nation well.” Despite this, the common schools were considered non-sectarian and eligible to receive public money. However, the Roman Catholic schools and other schools directly sponsored by churches were ruled ineligible for public funds because of their sectarian nature.

Catholic schools were established largely in response to the common school movement. They received some support from New York State Governor William Seward who was sensitive to the growing political power of Catholic voters. In his annual message to the New York State Legislature in January 1840, he argued, “The children of foreigners . . . are too often deprived of the advantages of our system of public education, in consequence of prejudices arising from differences of language or religion . . . I do not hesitate, therefore, to recommend the establishment of schools in which they may be instructed by teachers speaking the same language with themselves and professing the same faith.” Seward wanted the religious schools incorporated into the public school system so they would be eligible to receive state aid. In support of this position, an investigation by New York Secretary of State John Spencer found that 32,194 school age children in the state who received no formal instruction – many of whom were Catholic. At the time, the Catholic schools were flooded by the children of new immigrants from Ireland and Germany and were very overcrowded. As a result, many children were closed out of school. Only a few hundred Catholic children attended the common schools, partly because Catholic clergy tried to dissuade parents from sending their children to them.

Reverend John Power agreed with Seward and detailed the Church’s position in an epistle to the Freeman’s Journal. Power wrote, “Catholics could not in good conscience send their children to those schools, in which every artifice is resorted to in order to seduce them from their religion.” Following
Seward’s address to the legislature, trustees of the eight Catholic parochial schools in New York City, which served between 3,000 and 5,000 students, requested a share of the common school fund.

**Petition to the Common School Board**

In a petition to the Common School Board and the Public School Society, the trustees of the city’s Catholic churches argued that they “are willing to bear their portion of every common burden and feel themselves entitled to a participation in every common benefit.” The Catholic leaders argued that they were tax-paying citizens whose money was going to support the common schools. The petitioners asserted that public funds were monopolized by a private institution claiming to be non-sectarian that was actually promoting Protestant religious beliefs through hymns and biblical passages. The petitioners pointed to the Public School Society’s 22nd report as evidence “of the importance of religious instruction” and claimed that both reading and history lessons contained anti-Catholic rhetoric. The petitioners included an excerpt from a reading passage describing how “Huss, John a zealous reformer from Popery” was executed after “trusting himself to the deceitful Catholics.” They wanted the removal of books from the common schools that here prejudiced against Catholics. Catholic leaders pledged that public funds would not be used to support the Catholic religion or the Pope. They were even willing to accept non-Catholics be appointed to oversee the organization of schools and the disbursement of funds to ensure that the money was applied appropriately. They cited the statement by Governor Seward as proof that state law did not bar the sharing of funds with religious schools.

The Protestant religious press charged that the refusal of Catholics to send their children to public schools was based on opposition to bible reading, which they argued was an effort by the Catholic Church “to shut out the lights of divine revelation from the minds of its members.” Protestant leaders believed that behind the effort to secure funding for Roman Catholic schools was a more sinister plan to undermine education in the country so the Vatican could control American politics and government. According to Rev. William Boole, “our common school system is a main artery to carry the blood of national life and liberty to the extremities of the great body, and cannot be dissembled or mutilated without dangerously impairing, if not destroying, our existence . . . the encroachments of the Catholic Church in our political institutions, its extortionate demands upon the public treasury, its persistent and impertinent application of the effete idea for which there is no room in this land – of the supremacy of ecclesiastical judgment over the State – with its remarkable ability for agitation against the expressed will of the majority, are all the natural fruit of this ruling motive.” He believed the Catholic Church wanted to undermine religious freedom and leave room for only one church.

The Common School Board denied the Catholic petition claiming that their plan would replace public schools with religious schools. According to the Common School Board, if the Public School Society agreed to give a share of the common school fund to the Catholic petitioners they would have to do the same for all religious groups. The idea that sharing the common school fund would open “a flood gate of ruin” was later endorsed by *The New York Times*. The Public School Society, while still insisting that their schools were non-sectarian, did agree to remove “books in the schools” that were “offensive to their Roman Catholic fellow citizens.”

**Political Expediency or Principle**

In response, Bishop Hughes and local church leaders decided they would strive to educate as many Catholic children as possible in church schools, while trying to protect the faith of those who attended public schools. However, there was internal disagreement. Writing in the *New York Tribune* a Catholic correspondent demanded “our proportion of the school money, according to the number of our scholars, and to teach our children in our own schools” (Boole). A leading Catholic newsletter, *The Truth Teller*, charged that leaders of the Catholic community were placing political expediency over principle.

Bishop Hughes also petitioned the Board of Alderman, the governing body of New York City, for a debate on school funding. Hughes argued that the public school system was equivalent to a state supported Protestant parochial school and Catholic’s were paying taxes to support these schools while also having to support their own schools. Hughes was opposed by a lawyer for the Public School Society,
who alluded to a state law passed in 1824 that prohibited distribution from the common school fund to any group promoting religious education. Another lawyer for the Public School Society stated that he had also opposed petitions for school funding made by Episcopalian and Methodist churches.

In January 1841, after several weeks of debate, the Board of Alderman rejected the Catholic petition for a share of the public funds to improve Catholic parochial schools. A special committee visited public schools for two days accompanied by a committee of Catholic petitioners and a committee from the Public School Society. It concluded, “After a thorough scrutiny, in which all parties participated, your committee not only failed to discover anything strikingly defective in the system, but became strongly impressed with a conviction that the public schools under their present organization are admirably adapted to afford precisely the kind of instruction for which they were instituted.” The committee found that “[T]hough religion constitutes no specific part of the system of instruction . . . the well arranged and selected essays and maxims which abound in their reading books are well calculated to impress upon the minds of children a distinct idea of the value of religion and other moral sentiments, which do not conflict with sectarian views and peculiarities.” The committee praised the Public School Society for watching with “indefatigable vigilance and untiring assiduity over the rise and progress of the system” and vehemently endorsed the constitutional separation of church and state.

Bishop Hughes took the fight for school funding to the state government in Albany. In April, Secretary of State Spencer recommended a complete change in the operation of the New York City school system. He proposed that officials elected by the people should control the education fund. Hughes supported this idea and felt that with the power of the Catholic vote, Catholics might be able to keep religion out of the public school classroom. A senate committee was scheduled to listen to both sides in May 1841. However, before a decision could be reached, elections were held for new members of the legislature. Protestant voters were warned to “vote for none but those pledged to oppose the Catholic claims.” Bishop Hughes urged his fellow Catholics to disregard party ties and if candidates “are disposed to make infidels or Protestants of your children let them receive no vote of yours.” Unfortunately for the Catholic school, the new legislature denied Catholic schools the right to public funds in the name of maintaining the separation of church and state. Hughes, with the support of Governor Seward continued the campaign and finally secured passage of legislation ending the Public School Society’s control over funding for the City’s schools. However, effective control remained in the hands of Protestant leaders on a newly elected Board of Education.

Following passage of the law, Hughes’ home was attacked by anti-Catholic rioters. Two years later, anti-Catholic rioters in Philadelphia burned down two churches in several days of violence that left a dozen people dead. Nativist leaders announced they planned to come to New York City next and attack Catholic churches there. Hughes warned, “That if a single catholic church were burned in New York, the city would become a second Moscow.”

Following the Civil War there was continued growth in Catholic education in New York City. However, the remnant of the movement anti-Catholic movement coalesced in the Republican Party and promoted attacks on Catholic schools. In 1875, President Grant defended the public school system and called for a Constitutional amendment prohibiting the use of public money in sectarian schools, which he equated with Catholic parochial schools.