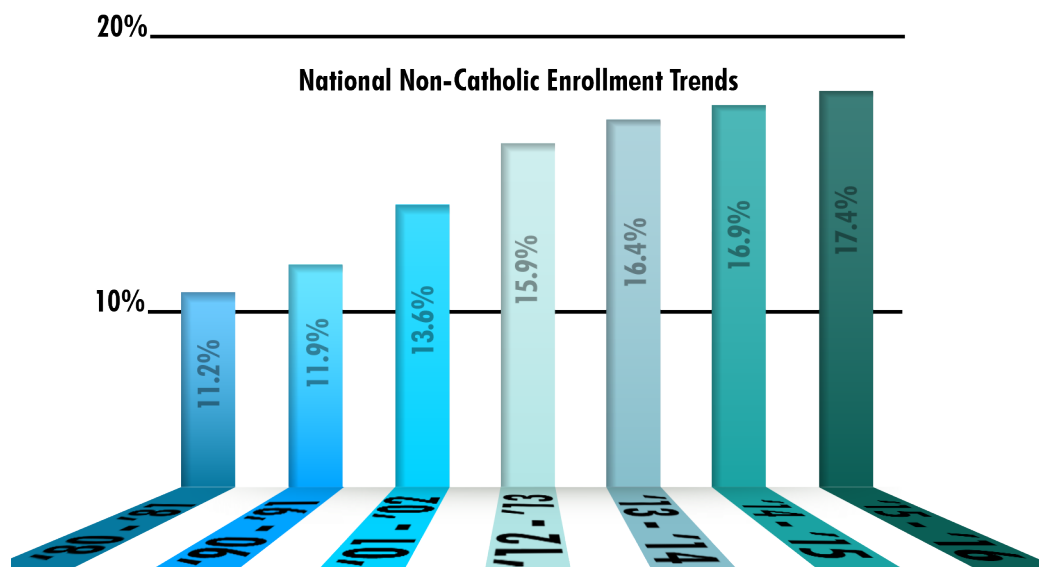


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The Changing Face of Catholic Schools: Engaging Non-Catholics in the Mission



Vouchers, scholarships, Education Saving Accounts, and tax relief programs offer parents a choice regarding where to send their children to school. Twenty-seven states, including the District of Columbia, provide financial assistance for students attending a Catholic school in grades Kindergarten through grade twelve. These voucher programs, or Parental Choice Programs, do not discriminate as to whether a family is Catholic or non-Catholic. Parental Choice Programs are contributing to the growing trend of non-Catholic enrollment in Catholic schools and school leaders need to be prepared to embrace effectively this changing face of Catholic schools.



Source: National Catholic Educational Association: Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment, and Staffing

On October 25, 1965, the Second Vatican Council released *Gravissimum Educationis* which includes the statement that all men have “an inalienable right to an education that is in keeping with their ultimate goal, their ability, their sex, and the culture and tradition of their country ...” *Gravissimum Educationis* went on to say that since parents have given children life, it is their obligation to educate them and to realize that the parent is each child’s first and primary educator. Canon 798 states that “Parents are to entrust their children to those

schools which provide a Catholic education.” Canon 798 also recognizes that a Catholic school education may not be possible for all, and in these situations parents are obligated to provide for the proper Catholic education of their children outside of the school. For many Catholic families, voucher programs can address financial barriers to Catholic school access.

Ask parents why they send their children to a Catholic school and you will likely receive a multitude of answers. Families who reside in the inner city may state safety as their primary reason. A family located in a suburban town may cite academic rigor, and many families may share religious instruction as the number one reason their children attend Catholic schools. The National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) provides 10 reasons to choose a Catholic school:

Top 10 Reasons to Choose Catholic Schools

01	Catholic tradition and academic excellence in a community grounded in faith	06	Safe and disciplined environment
02	Strong preparation for further education	07	Exceptional faculty who help students reach their highest potential
03	Emphasis on moral development, service to others and leadership skills	08	Commitment to technology use to enhance education
04	99 percent graduation rate	09	Individual attention in a caring community
05	Balanced curriculum that includes art, music and fitness	10	Good stewardship of resources

Voucher programs, or Parental Choice Programs as commonly known, are programs and policies that allow families to choose the best school for their children. These programs differ state to state. For example, in the state of Ohio, the EdChoice Scholarship Program provides scholarships for up to 14,000 students attending under-performing public schools (HB 79 and HB 530, 2006; Ohio Rev. Code Ann. 3310.02). These vouchers enable the students and their families to enroll at a participating private or Catholic school. The vouchers are worth up to \$4,375 for grades K-8, and \$5,150 for grades 9-12, toward tuition to the private or Catholic school. The amounts of monies vary state to state, yet the average voucher program ranges from a contribution of \$2,000 to \$5,200.

Jackie Venzeio, Principal at John F. Kennedy Catholic School Lower Campus in Warren, Ohio, states, “*Over the past five years, John F. Kennedy Lower Campus School has had an increase in enrollment in four out of the last five years due to the EdChoice Program. Our students and staff are very welcoming to all new students, and parents who are non-Catholic tell me they love the family-like structure as well as the academics. One great thing is the number of non-Catholic families who are interested in converting to Catholicism due to their children’s interaction with the Catholic students. These students are going home and asking their parents if they can be Catholic too.*”

Forms of Parental Choice

Parental Choice Programs are typically found in one of the following four forms: Opportunity Scholarships (also known as Vouchers), Scholarship Tax Credits, Parental Tuition Tax Credits and Education Savings Accounts.

1. In **Opportunity Scholarship programs**, public education funding “follows the child,” as families receive some portion of the public funding allocated toward educating the child in the traditional public school system.
2. In **Scholarship Tax Credit programs**, the state permits individuals and/or corporations to donate to qualified nonprofit organizations in exchange for credits against their state-tax liability. These nonprofit organizations use the contributed funds to provide scholarships for eligible students interested in attending a Catholic school.
3. In **Parental Tuition Tax Credit programs**, parents receive a credit or deduction on their state income taxes that can be used for a child’s educational expenses, including private school tuition. Although several states have such programs, only North Carolina and Alabama provide a credit sufficiently large enough to affect a family’s ability to enroll their child in a private school.
4. In **Educational Savings Account (ESA) programs**, parents receive a deposit of public funds into government authorized savings accounts. These funds can be used for private school tuition, textbooks, tutoring, testing fees, online learning or higher education expenses such as community college costs.

Each of these forms typically restricts eligibility to a particular set of students:

1. *Means Tested*: Eligibility based on family income;
2. *Failing Schools*: Eligibility based on the performance of students' assigned public schools and districts;
3. *Special Needs*: Eligibility restricted to children with exceptional educational needs (USCCB.2015).

Promoting the voucher program to both existing families and new families requires strong leadership, an implementation and communication plan, and staff members who understand and embrace the concept of the who, what and why of Parental Choice. To implement the program effectively, the leadership of the school must have working knowledge as to how the program operates. It is crucial that the Diocesan Catholic Schools Office as well as the school's parish office, if applicable, support the voucher program. Building an effective Parental Choice Program should be highly collaborative to ensure its success. Building relationships regarding a voucher program requires the support of leadership and ongoing planning to ensure a smooth transition for existing students as well as new students and their families. Enrolling children who come from public schools involves determining their educational needs and the resources necessary to educate them. Here are a few steps to implement a voucher program effectively in a Catholic school:

1. **Communication.** The primary role of the school leader is to communicate to all constituents the need to participate in the voucher program. For many Catholic schools with voucher programs, low enrollment was the number one reason the voucher program was introduced. Once the leadership of a school makes the decision to become a Parental Choice School, the following steps are suggested:
 - Letters are sent home to the parents of the children who are currently enrolled at the school promoting the opportunity for other Catholic families and non-Catholic families to have access to a high quality Catholic education.
 - The pastor educates his parishioners via the weekly church bulletin regarding the Parental Choice Program and the mission of the church in accepting non-Catholic families and their children into the Catholic school.
 - Press releases are sent out via community newspapers and social media with quotes from the leadership of the school utilizing words such as: opportunity, accessibility, service and mission.
2. **Welcome the students and their families.** Invite families into your school and provide tours utilizing Parent and Student Ambassadors. Promote the tours by utilizing the following methods:
 - Publish the event in parish bulletins as well as neighboring parishes without schools.
 - Share information via social media, the school and parish Facebook pages, ask parents to share and post, tweet the event, and place information on the school and parish website. Use email as well as texts to promulgate the information.
 - Distribute posters and flyers to neighboring daycares and preschools, local businesses, libraries, etc.
 - Mail a postcard to those families interested as well as to a ZIP code mailing list sorted by families with young children in the local community.
 - Utilize a school database by sending flyers to alumni, grandparents and other donors or constituents.
3. **Create a welcoming community.** Most non-Catholic families have not had the opportunity to attend a Catholic school; therefore, they are not aware of Catholic practices, prayers, etc.:
 - Never assume that all families are familiar with Catholic rites or rituals.
 - Take the opportunity to explain the beauty of the Catholic faith even in the simplest prayers.
 - Invite all families to participate in school liturgies and para-liturgical services.
 - Ensure that all are welcome to approach and receive a blessing if not prepared to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist.
 - Acknowledge other faiths and cultures for how we are similar more than how we are different.
4. **Welcome non-Catholics into your school.** Most Catholic schools at both the elementary and high school levels currently have non-Catholics enrolled in their schools. Reach out to these families and invite them to serve as Parent Ambassadors to speak to other non-Catholic families interested in attending the school. Have information prepared for the Parent Ambassadors to share with new families:



MEET ...

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Administrator Searches,
Catholic Elementary School
Administration, Strategic
Management and Development
Programs, Enrollment
Management, Communication
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- Discuss being a non-Catholic in a Catholic school and the benefits of attending a Catholic school: moral values, ethics, the mission that education is rooted in the life of Christ, and the focus on the whole child, spiritually, physically, mentally and academically.
- Foundational Documents: Include language that clearly references and identifies the school as Catholic.
- Marketing Message: Promote the value of the diversity that exists within the school, including religious diversity.
- Provide statistical information on the demographics of the school's population, i.e., class sizes, ratio of teacher to students, the number of Catholic vs. non-Catholic, the number of different faith denominations enrolled, etc.

5. Enrolling children from public schools involves determining their educational needs and the resources necessary to educate them. Teachers have the responsibility to provide the best possible methods to educate students; however, this can be challenging for teachers unfamiliar with their students' educational backgrounds.

- Build a shared understanding between staff of what it means to bring in students from low performing schools and how this will impact their classrooms.
- Provide professional development for teachers regarding the adaptation of classroom instruction and materials to meet the needs of all students.
- Provide professional development for teachers regarding cultural differences.
- Assess new students' educational needs before the start of the new school year to ensure the resources are in place to accommodate their learning styles and needs.

In conclusion, families from different faiths choose Catholic schools for many different reasons. Virginia Colwell, Principal of Paul VI Catholic High School in Fairfax, Virginia, stated in CatholicHerald.com that, *"Beyond class size and beyond the academics, they (parents) are looking for something more, for a school that has their moral values and their beliefs. They want their children to be exposed to values in the classroom every day, not just at home."* And Father Thompson, Chaplain at Bishop O'Connell High School in Arlington, Virginia, shared via CatholicHerald.com, *"While we must be unapologetically Catholic, Catholic schools are not simply here for Catholics; we are here for everyone."* With Parental Choice Programs, non-Catholic families have the choice to send their children to Catholic schools. Yes, the face and culture of Catholic schools may be changing, and Catholic schools can respond effectively to these changes.

"The education of children and young people is such an important task in forming them as free and responsible human beings. It affirms their dignity as an inalienable gift that flows from our original creation as children made in the image and likeness of God. And because education truly forms human beings, it is especially the duty and responsibility of the Church, who is called to serve mankind from the heart of God and in such a way that no other institution can."

~ Pope Francis



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Published in September, November, January, March May and July.

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