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Retention 2021 – Necessity Not Niceties

Never before. Pivot, pause, flex. What a year.

I yearn for precedented times. Immensity, inconsistency, indeterminacy.

COVID-19 has given Catholic schools new terminology and new meaning to old phrases including, of course, the new normal. Yet success on the Catholic school enrollment front, particularly at this time of year, will rely heavily on low-tech, old-fashioned cultivation, outreach and demonstrations of care.

Some Catholic schools have benefited from dramatically increased enrollment as public school counterparts have remained fully remote. Other Catholic schools, although required to serve remotely all year, have maintained and, in some cases, grown enrollment. Yet overall, Catholic school enrollment nationally is down. What's the secret? Is it just open doors or effective distance learning? Certainly they help, but the schools enjoying the greatest response as determined by enrollment, satisfaction levels and next year's registration have been exemplary in their contact, connection and customer service.

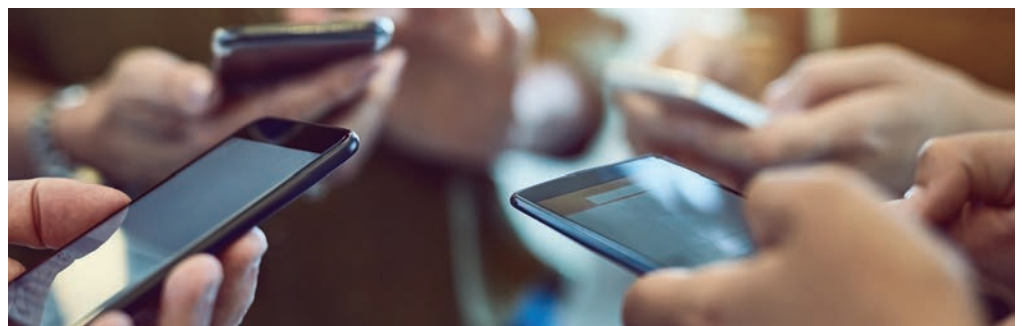
Seven months into this school year Catholic schools can trumpet many successes – creative programming, effective contact tracing, low positivity numbers, new traditions, superlative faculty and more.

Ongoing communication about a school's strengths, special and distinctive characteristics, and sensitivity to the challenges of the day is heartily encouraged. But communication is, ideally, a two-way street. Just imparting updates doesn't convey the level to which the recipients of the news are important themselves.

Everyone's on the Retention Team

A strategic outreach effort with key constituencies is a best practice at all times, but vital right now, as both current and future families are looking at education in an entirely new light. Recognizing that it is always easier and less expensive to keep a student than attract a new one means that retention is Job #1, with those new to your school at the top of the list. Who else?

- ▶ New students
- ▶ Current students
- ▶ Last year's prospects who couldn't attend due to space constraints
- ▶ Current year prospects
- ▶ Those who showed interest but didn't choose your school for 2020–21



Success on the Catholic school enrollment front, particularly at this time of year, will rely heavily on low-tech, old-fashioned cultivation, outreach and demonstrations of care.

It is essential that school leadership understand these audiences and know the families in each group as well as possible. A retention mindset – shared by faculty, staff and parents in leadership roles – serves as an early warning system so that intervention is possible before departure is a fait accompli. Retention needs to be part of each faculty, coach, counselor and administrative meeting to reinforce its importance. According to Frank Cawley, Director of Admission & Enrollment at Mullen High School in Denver, “Awareness is 80% of the battle.”

Faculty and staff must be attentive to any rumor or feeling that a student or family is unhappy, has issues, and/or is pondering a move, and report that to admissions or administrative personnel. Coaches provide cut lists, club moderators notify when students stop participating, the Dean’s office keeps abreast of discipline matters, etc. Likewise, student and parent ambassadors are charged with keeping school officials in the loop so they can determine who knows the family best and can reach out in a caring manner to address and resolve concerns.

New Families

With so many new parent traditions necessarily abandoned due to visitor limitations, first-time families may not be feeling the love. Some student recruitment staff engaged in marvelous outreach to incoming students and families last summer. Well done! Once the school year began, their attention shifted, naturally, to potential 2021–22 families. What is your school doing to make sure that those new families are affirmed in their decision and fully intend to return?

“I don’t get it. We are a new family, we have younger kids who could follow, we gave \$4,000 to the annual fund LIKE THEY ASKED, and not a call, email, note from any teacher, administrator or counselor since the start of school.”

While most families recognize that managing this academic year is infinitely challenging, their lofty expectations remain in place. Letting them know they are as valuable as when they were prospective customers – better yet, more so – is essential this year. Personal contact is key not only in support of the old adage “they don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care” but also because other schools, public and private, ARE taking this approach to exceptional levels. Catholic schools cannot afford to be conspicuous by their silence.

The Power of Voice

Call, call, call – get on the phone and find out how the families are coping, feeling, and, most importantly, what they need. These calls should come from a variety of voices over time. Teachers, board members, administrators, counselors, staff, students, parent club leaders, alumni, past board, recently retired faculty – all can play a pivotal role in sounding the trumpet into the night. Schools fortunate enough to have religious on staff should make every opportunity to engage them in this endeavor.

Schools that have taken this approach have received tremendous response, and that, of course, stimulates positive word of mouth.

“We get a call almost every three weeks, I’d say. They just want to know how we’re doing. It shows they really care... and it’s nice to talk to someone we aren’t living with.”

“I get almost no information from my daughter about anything, so it’s great to be able to ask questions. I couldn’t figure out how they were doing Mass so often. She told me they rotate groups in Church and broadcast to the rooms.”

“One time they called and asked us to pray for a school family that encountered a tragedy. And then they asked if we had any prayer requests.”

An optimal calling program is organized regarding who’s calling whom, when and about what. Moreover, information gained needs to be tracked so the next call/caller can follow up.

“Mrs. Kearney mentioned that your brother sprained his ankle. How is he doing?”

“Mr. Slinkard said you had questions about your son’s placement. I’m calling to follow up.”





"Dear Benny, We miss you at school, but know you need to attend remotely to keep your Grandma safe. Tell her I say hello! I wanted to tell you what happened last week. We were lining up for...."

Bear in mind that not everyone in a school community is comfortable making such calls but may be more than happy to send handwritten good-news notes about student or school accomplishments. Some schools have established buddy programs between remote and in-person learners that include phone calls, written notes on school postcards, snaps if age-appropriate and parent-approved, etc. Others have older students connecting more frequently with their younger pals, particularly if the students are new to the school this year.

Outreach such as this not only shows how much you care but also provides invaluable family insight, allowing Catholic schools to be more responsive to unique challenges in the lives of those they serve.

Let's Hear It for the Moms

Multiple schools have shared that one of their most effective communication efforts is thanks to their Mothers' Clubs leaping in to ensure that new families have go-to people to answer questions, direct them to the correct personnel, feel connected to the larger community, etc. "This has been a huge success," said Jim Quaid, President of St. Rita High School in Chicago. "They went so out of their way to help families adjust." Some schools have coordinated by neighborhood, others by student's classes.

To say that Zoom has lost its luster is an understatement, so activities for parents that take place electronically may not be generating much interest. This response may also be caused by the invitations occurring electronically as well. Pick up the phone and personally invite. Many Mom-to-Mom programs have not only swelled participation but also tracked questions in order to create an ever-growing FAQ that is easily accessible on the school website and parent pages.

Some parent clubs have had success with small gatherings at Mass (abiding by local guidelines) followed by outdoor, masked, socially distant gatherings with individually wrapped treats. Parents who may never pick up a phone to place a call with a question or worry now have an option to meet others and be reminded of the Catholic identity of the school.

Not that Dads aren't helping out. They, too, have engaged in personal outreach for meetings and events, and some schools report that their Fathers' Clubs have been terrific at encouraging parents who are enthusiastic about the school to update testimonials on school comparison websites such as GreatSchools.org and Niche.com.

Speaking of Catholic Identity

It's essential that, despite lower or all-electronic attendance, Catholic schools maintain a presence in their local church communities. An announcement each week, a prayer of the faithful for students, teachers, parents, etc., and links in the parishes' online presence to your school must continue.

Invitations to parents, prospective parents, alumni and neighbors to participate remotely in school Masses remind one and all of this important and prevailing dimension. Videos of students in chapel for private prayer, having one-on-one time with campus ministers, clergy, etc., send a strong signal that goes well beyond academics.

Guidance and counseling have never been more important given the worrisome statistics about students and depression, anxiety, etc. Yet G&C at Catholic schools brings forth another dimension that furthers the commitment to students and families. Share how teachers, counselors and religion/religious staff meet regularly regarding student welfare.

Now is the time to showcase class work, videos of engaged activity in each subject, alumni memories, parent testimonials, academic superiority, outcomes, and, most especially, new student delight despite the limitations of COVID.

Surveys

One of the easiest tools to deploy, and a longstanding Catholic School Management recommendation, is satisfaction surveys. Some schools have continued to use these as part of their standard efforts, with updated questions relating to current events. Schools that ignore this essential opportunity for student/parent feedback do so at their peril. It is rewarding to see that some schools have been surveying even more regularly during these atypical times.

Parent surveys done well – asking for more than your onsite vs. remote selection – are strongly associated with retention rates. Make sure each survey provides the option for a personal call to discuss matters.

“Follow up is key,” said Ed Barrett, Director of Institutional Advancement at Providence Catholic High School in New Lenox, Illinois. Surveying requires not just seeking answers but also expressing thanks to the participants and taking action based on the input received.

“Thank you so much for participating in our parent survey. We are thrilled with the response and the suggestions made. As a result, our clubs will start meeting in person next week with an electronic option as well. Masking and social distancing remain required. See the Bulletin for club schedules and descriptions. New members are encouraged to join!”

Student Engagement

Just as parents are more likely to participate via personal outreach, so too are students more likely to get involved with school activities if there is direct prompting by faculty and staff. Staying six feet apart and masked inhibits meeting new friends. Without the school orchestrating connections, lunch is often an unfortunate, quiet affair of kids on phones, as if they don’t spend enough time with devices.

The new student, without older siblings at the school, who is involved in nothing, is a red flag.

Schools that are attentive to this prioritize creating contact points. Clubs meet both in person and electronically. Ceremonial experiences are created for each class. Outside activities, that can be safely undertaken, occur regularly (not just athletics). Getting to know you/know more about you efforts occur in both classes and extracurriculars. Room competitions, service activities that integrate grade levels and student groups not likely to come together, student projects that require two-person teams...the possibilities are endless. Simply engaging faculty, staff and students in brainstorming ideas for encounters is itself a form of connection.

Without student engagement, a first year’s experience at your school is just classes and that may not be sufficient to keep them, particularly if the parents, too, feel like there was nothing special about the school they chose.



CSM SERVICES	Strategy	Planning	Leadership
	School Assessments Program Audits Enrollment Marketing Mission Clarification	Advancement Alumni Capital Campaigns Feasibility Studies	Enrollment Technology Annual Fund Development Marketing
			Governance Administrative Structure Search Board Training/Development Professional Mentoring
			Workshops and Webinars Retreat Facilitation Keynote Presentations Individual Seminars and Series

Marketing More

In addition to the usual marketing efforts Catholic schools undertake for image, enrollment and resources, this year requires much more. Fortunately, many schools have found their families to be marvelous social media ambassadors and their teachers brilliant generators of content. Never before has your social media calendar required greater attention to ensure that all grade levels, programs and activities are covered well. Now is the time to showcase class work, videos of engaged activity in each subject, alumni memories, parent testimonials, academic superiority, outcomes, and, most especially, new student delight despite the limitations of COVID. Many schools report that without some of the usual outlets, their students have reached incredible heights with service projects. Don't hide that light under a bushel!

“Quarterly newsletters to the broader community have never been more important,” says Greg Dhuyvetter, CSM Lead Consultant. “These can market how well the school

has coped with the pandemic and, just as importantly, remind the surrounding area that the school is still there. Given the public message of Catholic school closures, schools need to shout ‘We’re here!’”

It's Not Fair

It's not fair that, in the midst of pulling off the miracle of Catholic education despite countless odds, schools cannot be content with ensuring health and learning. It is, however, reality. School decision-making can be heavily influenced, and often it is simply a matter of telling your story more broadly, persuasively and continually. In many ways, COVID has revealed more than ever the blessings and benefits of Catholic education. Not only does your school *require* an outreach strategy for these shifting realities, new and prospective families *deserve* it, lest they make poor decisions due to limited understanding and insight.

Every step Catholic schools take to remind others of not just who we are, but whose we are, is utterly worth the time and effort.

Special thanks to ...

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CSM Founder

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Our gratitude is also extended to the countless parents who conveyed their 2020-2021 Catholic school experiences.



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