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It's Not Just the Money

*Why don't they come? Why do they leave? What are they saying?
What are they NOT saying?*

These questions are oft repeated in the enrollment management world. Fortunately, Dr. Thom Gasper, Regional Superintendent, San Pedro Pastoral Region, in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, employed his doctoral work to dig deeper into issues related to attracting and keeping students.

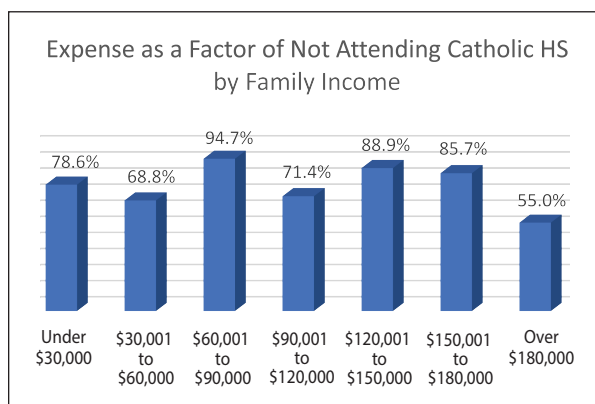


As leaders in Catholic education, we certainly understand that the costs of providing a quality Catholic education have risen significantly and this is often cited as the reason families do not enter or continue in our Catholic schools. However, while that is a factor, it is not the only factor, and schools need to dig deeper into their own data and reasons for departure to truly understand the issues impacting retention and recruitment.

It Will Often Start with Money...

Recent research, conducted with over 600 eighth grade students and parents in Catholic schools in Los Angeles County, found that over 30% of Catholic elementary school students did not continue in a Catholic high school, and just over half of those leaving selected "tuition is too expensive" as their top reason.

Students and parents were given the option of choosing up to three reasons for going to a different school, and almost 75% chose tuition expense as one of their top three reasons. As can be seen in the accompanying figure, a majority of parents in every income level, even those with relatively higher incomes, included expense as one of their reasons for not continuing in Catholic schools.



It is noteworthy that among families leaving the Catholic system after 8th grade, parents with household incomes between \$60,001 and \$90,000 were most likely to cite the expense of tuition as one of their reasons, significantly more so than the two lower income levels. The \$60,001 to \$90,000 group also showed the highest attrition percentage compared to all other levels.

Distribution of Aid

While families reporting the lowest incomes were at risk of not being able to afford Catholic high school, those with middle incomes between \$60,000 and \$120,000 demonstrated the highest vulnerability with regard to retention. Furthermore, parents were asked to indicate if they received any need- or merit-based financial assistance award to attend a Catholic high school. The results showed that the lower the income, the more likely the family reported receiving an award. While many Catholic administrators want to support the neediest in our communities, the drop in frequency of awards to those with lower middle incomes was steep. Only 54% of those earning \$60,000 to \$90,000 received some kind of award offer as opposed to 90% and 74% reported among the two lowest income groups.

Catholic school leaders may benefit from reexamining income thresholds and allocations to include some or greater assistance to middle-income families. Most of the middle-income families interviewed had not even applied for financial assistance, assuming that they would not qualify. **So even if school leaders are able to work with board and community members to raise more funding for these families, it will be equally important to look at how financial aid is promoted in order to eliminate parents' perceptions that they will not be eligible, it's not worth the trouble of applying, or there is shame in seeking support.** An award discounting tuition by 10% to 15% might be enough to sway many of these middle or upper-income families who are interested in remaining in Catholic education but feel like they need some assistance.

Only 16% of participants leaving the Catholic school system cited expenses solely.

But It's Rarely Only the Money

While it is apparent that the ability to offer merit- and need-based awards will help retain Catholic school students, don't count on it being just the money. In fact, only 16% of participants

leaving the Catholic school system cited expenses solely. Almost 80% of respondents chose at least two reasons for not choosing a Catholic high school. Follow-up interviews revealed that, in most cases, finances was just one part of the equation. For example, one parent, who was a Catholic high school alumnus, said that while finances were a factor, if the academic programs of interest had been significantly stronger than the public school, then they would have sacrificed and met the tuition demand of Catholic high school. **Ultimately, 46% of respondents chose something other than tuition expense as the primary reason they did not continue their Catholic education.**

So what aren't they finding in Catholic education? Specialized Academic Programs

After tuition expense, the most common reason for not attending a Catholic high school selected by over 28% of respondents was "Specialized academic program (e.g., Robotics, STEM, Advanced Placement) is stronger at another school." Many of the parents interviewed spoke of an academic program of particular interest to their son or daughter that seemed highly developed at a competing public, charter or non-Catholic private school. Miguel, a Catholic high school alumnus and parent of an 8th grade student in a Catholic elementary school, described his family's decision to have their son attend a local public school:

"They have an engineering program which he got into. By junior year, they're interning at JPL (NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory). They have a very advanced robotics program. They have these other programs, AVID and all this other stuff he was able to kind of take advantage of, and at the same time, we would not have to pay. So that's a big plus."



Similar to the engineering intern opportunity that Miguel mentioned, research revealed that other students were being drawn to non-Catholic schools that offer a specialized career pathway in other fields such as medical, technology, media or arts. Some parents were interested in schools in which students earned significant college credits during the school day. While these were often in combination with other considerations including finances, in several cases, a perceived high-quality program that matched the interest of the child was a significant factor in their school selection.

Rigor vs. Innovation

However, these academic opportunities should not be confused with a negative perception regarding the rigor of Catholic high schools. Very few respondents included the reason “Academics may not be challenging enough” among their choices. Thus, the need to be more innovative with unique programs should not be confused as an indictment of the college prep rigor capacity associated with Catholic high schools. Rather, data show the concern is with the lack of development of strong or tailored academic programs of interest.

Many of our Catholic schools are smaller today, and it may not be possible to offer as many niche programs as larger schools. Therefore, it is important to assess which programs will make the greatest

impact on the students entering your schools and to communicate that impact and opportunity in a manner that will resonate with the target market. While some Catholic schools might have a great number of these programs, if they are not highly developed, they will not pass the sniff test, particularly if current students are underwhelmed with the delivery.

It is important to be honest about which programs your school can deliver. While most Catholic schools are not in proximity to NASA, they do have a rich history of being an integral part of their communities. As leaders, we need to be bold in **developing partnerships with colleges, industries and community organizations.** (Check out the last CSML, [“Calling on Social Capital,”](#) for ideas on partnerships.) Yet, administrators need not go it al one. Key alumni, parishioners, parents and board members should be ready, and willing, to help.

He Just Doesn’t Want to Go...

Among students and parents, the third most common reason for not enrolling in a Catholic high school was the fact that the student simply does not want to attend a Catholic high school.

Over a quarter of parent and student respondents named this as one of the top three reasons. However, it is worth noting that less than 10% of them named it as the primary reason for not continuing with Catholic education at the secondary level. Only one parent interviewed described her son as adamant about not attending a Catholic school, yet many parents, who were worried about cost, seemed to take ambivalence from their son or daughter as an invitation to be able to explore other less cost-prohibitive options.

In none of the comments or interviews was it revealed that the student didn’t want to attend a Catholic school due to any aspect of the religious instruction or faith formation/community.

Catholic Is Not the Issue

Although students often indicated they wanted a change or a bigger environment, in none of the comments or interviews was it revealed that the student didn’t want to attend a Catholic school due to any aspect of the religious instruction or faith formation/community.

Follow-up interviews revealed that student rationale had less to do with Catholic high schools per se and more to do with wanting a change from negative social issues associated with the Catholic elementary students with whom they had attended for several years.



Drama, Bullying, Too Much the Same

Parents spoke critically of bullying, drama and other social issues that became pronounced in middle school grades, impacting the student’s sense of community. Catholic elementary school parent Maria explained her daughter’s interest in a nearby charter school having little to do with high school programs but getting away from some peers.

“She wanted a change socially, to be around a different group of students to help with the drama. She said, ‘there’s too much drama.’ But I told her that at a bigger school, there’s sometimes bigger drama.”

While some parents like Maria recognized some of these challenges are simply part of adolescent growth, others felt Catholic elementary school leaders did not do enough to address the issues. Furthermore, it was shared that the small and fixed nature of a singular class perpetuated cliques and stymied changes in peer perceptions.

Catholic elementary school leaders must develop strategies to minimize bullying and social drama, particularly in 6th–8th grades, not for the sake of retention or recruitment but because we are Catholic. Given the increase of significant social emotional challenges highlighted by the COVID-19 era, concerned school leaders are creating new initiatives and programs that foster supportive communities to address the increasingly taxing period of adolescence.



New People, New Horizons

In a substantial metropolis like Los Angeles, even though a Catholic high school may draw a large number of students from a particular Catholic elementary school, most enroll students from 20 to 40 different Catholic and public middle schools. Those students end up mixing with new students based on common activities or interests as opposed to elementary school background.

This social expansion is an important dimension to market to students who may be concerned about being limited to the social group or status of their past. Furthermore, while many Catholic high schools offer shadow days tailored to all students of a particular elementary school, it may be more effective to give prospective students opportunities to experience high school activities mixed with prospective students from other schools.

Speaking of Shadow Days...

Join us for our upcoming webinar, *Shadow Days 2.0*, on Tuesday, April 26, 2022, at 1:00 p.m. Central Time. [Register here](https://www.cbsservices.org/webinars_upcoming.php) or on our website at: https://www.cbsservices.org/webinars_upcoming.php.

Sports, Again

A little over one-fifth of all respondents leaving the Catholic system factored in the athletic program(s) at another school as one of the pulls to a non-Catholic high school. However, it is important to note that this is more prevalent among student responses than those from parents. This is not just the case among those leaving Catholic schools but also within the general population including those matriculating to Catholic high schools. When all participants were asked to rate how important various factors were in the decision to choose a high school, parents consistently rated all variables higher than students, except athletics. In fact, in spite of how much pressure coaches and administrators might feel from parents of student athletes, athletics was valued less important to parents in high school selection than eight of the nine other variables. Students rated athletics more important in school decision than parents, and boys rated athletics more important than girls. Finally, multiracial students and parents rated athletics significantly higher in importance than white participants.

It is important for Catholic school leaders, with limited enrollment or resources, to evaluate which athletic programs are most meaningful to today’s prospective students. Since competing schools will also likely offer those sports, it is imperative to ensure that current student athletes are highly engaged and positive.

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	Communication Social Media Plans Strategic Planning Financial	Governance Administrative Structure Search Board Training/Development Professional Mentoring	Workshops and Webinars Retreat Facilitation Keynote Presentations Individual Seminars and Series

Furthermore, the discrepancy in responses between students' and parents' ratings points toward the need to ensure that Catholic schools are differentiating their marketing accordingly. Clearly the promotion of teams' success, and opportunities for students to participate, are key messages to include when utilizing student-facing channels or materials. However, an audit of websites, materials or social media posts geared toward parents may reveal that athletics is being overemphasized at the expense of other factors that are of greater importance to them.



All the Arts

The perception of a stronger arts program factored into the decision of approximately 18% of those planning to enroll at a non-Catholic high school. While departing parents conceded that most Catholic high schools had offerings in the visual and performing arts, some felt that they did not have the same degree of programming or

depth of resources as other schools. Larger staged productions, improvisational theater groups, as well as greater film and media production opportunities, featured in their expectations.

Again, this data point should encourage Catholic school leaders to look at their arts programs to determine where the gaps and opportunities lie. However, from a marketing point of view, co-curricular arts was one of the least important factors among the total population in choosing a high school. Yet, when looking at subgroups, 8th grade girls rated the arts program to be a significantly higher factor of importance than boys or parents. This difference was even more pronounced among students matriculating to all-girls high schools, so those schools may wish to invest resources and marketing efforts accordingly.

How to Use This Data

While some findings from this research may be generalizable to many other Catholic schools in urban and suburban areas, it is important for leaders to utilize surveys and other means for honest feedback from prospective and current students and parents. Exit interview protocols should encourage families to share openly multiple reasons for leaving. Catholic school leaders and community partners should continue their efforts to secure, offer and promote more assistance to more families to offset the cost of tuition. However, leaders also need to be careful not to automatically deflect enrollment and retention issues to be related to money.

Rejecting the simplicity of “it’s just the money” in favor of making data-driven decisions to solve related concerns, Catholic school leaders can augment both programming and marketing to improve retention and attract new families to their communities.

A more comprehensive understanding of Dr. Gasper’s research of school decision factors and Catholic school attrition can be found in: Gasper, T. (2021). *Understanding Catholic School Attrition: Catholic Elementary School Students’ and Parents’ Perceptions and Matriculation Decisions* (Doctoral dissertation, Loyola Marymount University). <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd/995/>

You can also access Dr. Gasper’s recent webinar on this topic, **It’s Not Just the Money**, on demand [HERE](#) or on our website at: https://www.cbsservices.org/webinars_catholicsschoolmanagement_ma.php



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