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What Are the Numbers Telling You?

Demographic Data and Your Enrollment Management Plan

Location, Location, Location!

For too many years, Catholic school leaders believed that enough families would choose their schools based on religious fidelity, history, and reputation alone. When the doors opened in September (Remember when schools opened in September? Remember when schools opened their doors?), the seats would be full and the budget balanced.

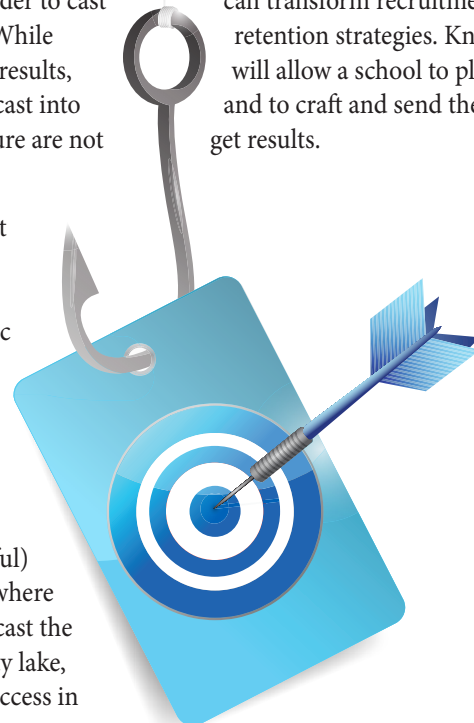
Most schools have long moved away from this model and these expectations and have embraced a proactive approach to recruitment, admissions, and retention. Schools have learned how to tell their stories and to communicate through traditional and digital tools in order to cast a wide net and attract students. While these efforts often show positive results, many times it feels as if nets are cast into black holes, and success and failure are not predictable.

Part of this uncertainty stems not from an ineffectual message, but from a lack of concrete data to inform the process. Demographic data about the areas surrounding a school is vital to shaping both the content and delivery of the message for optimal results.

An often used (but no less truthful) statement in marketing is “Fish where the fish are.” If an angler should cast the best lure ever made into an empty lake, the hook will come up empty. Success in

fishing, and in recruiting students, depends on casting the right lure into a *crowded* lake. Population information, how many, where, and who they are, is critical to successful marketing.

In assisting Catholic schools with assessments; strategic planning; enrollment, marketing, and development audits; and other services, Catholic School Management has always encouraged combining the art of marketing with the science of sound demographic study. Just as the science of assessment and data-driven decision making is transforming classroom instruction, data-based knowledge of the market can transform recruitment, enrollment, and retention strategies. Knowing the market will allow a school to plan for the future and to craft and send the right message to get results.



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Data Versus Anecdotes

Everyone has opinions about demographic trends near their school. However, these opinions can be skewed by the scope of the observer. Often a president or principal will be encouraged to focus on a particular area based on informal observations, “*It feels like I see more people there recently.*” While such anecdotal evidence is valuable and can lead to further exploration, building enrollment strategy on informal data will often lead to disappointing results. Demographic data that has been validated with sound methodology and verified through more than one source has a far greater likelihood of leading to predictable results.

There are many ways that a school can acquire demographic data for the immediate and surrounding neighborhoods. A school may be lucky enough to have a demographer on the school board or in a local parish who can provide detailed reports. Other sources of demographic data include:

- ▶ **Online Census Data** (www.census.gov): Population and income information by city, state, or zip code.
- ▶ **USPS**: Specific carrier routes within zip codes with range of income and age distribution.
- ▶ **Local Chambers of Commerce**: Job growth, housing starts, etc.
- ▶ **Local Real Estate Agents**: Population movement and anecdotal information about what families are looking for in schools.
- ▶ **Parish and Diocesan Data**: Current membership, Mass attendance, number of infant baptisms, donation patterns, etc.

There are also fee-based services that will provide demographic information with a range of depth and detail.

What Is My “Market”?

A school’s market is the geographic areas from which the school currently draws students or attempts to draw students. Usually the primary market for a school can be defined as a radius around the school where the majority of families live. This radius may be further defined by artificial borders such as highways or the drawing area of another school. The easiest way to define primary and other markets is to plot all current family addresses onto a map. The resulting picture can define current enrollment patterns and identify areas for future efforts.

- ▶ **Primary Market**: The area (usually surrounding the school) where the majority of families currently reside.
- ▶ **Secondary Market(s)**: Pockets of school families away from the Primary Market.
- ▶ **Potential Market(s)**: Areas currently without significant numbers of families, but potential for growth.

Segmenting markets allows the school to gather discrete information about each one in order to individually target the families of the area in the most effective manner.

Gathering Data

While there are many elements to any demographic report, Catholic School Management has developed a dashboard of the most critical indicators of enrollment trends. It is useful for school leadership and boards to have yearly access to this data when making decisions regarding school size, staffing, finances, tuition assistance, and recruitment strategies.

- ▶ **Total Population**: To establish whether an area (and number of families) is growing.
- ▶ **School-Aged Children**: To recognize what portion of the broader population are potentially students at the preschool, grade school, and high school levels.
- ▶ **Family Income**: To gauge the affordability of Catholic school tuition to families in the coming years.
- ▶ **Percentage of Families Above \$\$ Income**: To indicate what percentage of families should be able to afford Catholic school tuition without assistance. *Research indicates that for many families, tuition costs exceeding 10% to 15% of annual family income are seen as unaffordable without financial assistance.*

Potential Markets

Underserved Areas
(nearby areas with few current students)

Likely Population Growth
(new construction of family residences)

Business Expansion
(growing companies or new startups)

Fading Areas
(significant dropoff in students)

Blossoming Areas
(sudden increase in students)

Research indicates that for many families, tuition costs exceeding 10% to 15% of annual family income are seen as unaffordable without financial assistance.

- ▶ **Racial/Ethnic Makeup:** To indicate most effective marketing strategies and whether materials need to be in multiple languages.
- ▶ **Percentage Completion of Higher Education:** To indicate the desirability and importance of private school education. Parents who have experienced and completed advanced education often have a greater understanding of its value.

For all of these data points, no number is illustrative by itself. Only by looking at *multi-year trends* can data be given context and meaning. For example, if 50% of families in an area are in income brackets that can afford Catholic education, this number has a completely different meaning if it has increased from 30% or if it has decreased from 70%. This is why demographic study must be ongoing and comparative.

Beyond these secular criteria, a school can learn from parish and diocesan sources

- ▶ Total number of families registered;
- ▶ Average Mass attendance;
- ▶ Numbers of infant baptisms;
- ▶ Giving patterns.



“In developing a strategic marketing and enrollment plan for the future of our school, it was critical to have accurate data on the potential for population growth in our area— not only the data but expert analysis of the data to give clarity for decision making.”

Mary Anne Vigliante
Head of School
Academy of the Holy Names

“I used the data from the demographic analysis this fall to change some of our initiatives to recruit future students and target new markets. We are already seeing results in a short period of time. I believe this year, and going forward, we will spend our time more wisely and see a greater result in our recruiting efforts.”

Scott Lawler
Director of Recruitment
Benet Academy

“Demographic data helped our Diocesan team turn anecdotes and assumptions about our Catholic schools into concrete information. It confirmed what we already knew about our schools and opened our eyes to other possibilities to strengthen our schools.”

Kimberly Cheng
Superintendent of Schools
Diocese of Monterey

Catholic School Management offers a comprehensive demographic study including establishing markets, developing data dashboards, and providing detailed analysis of the effect demographic trends may have on future enrollment marketing efforts. For more information [click here](#).

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

A Narrative of the Future

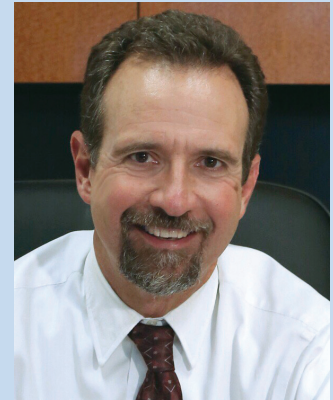
Compiling numbers is a promising first step, but the “secret sauce” of demographic studies is reading, analyzing, and comparing the data. In the process of data analysis, it is important to keep several things in mind:

- ▶ Data is neither good nor bad, it just is. Every “up” number has potential pitfalls and likewise, a “down” number can be rife with possibilities.
- ▶ Data numbers mean very little in the abstract. Rather, they are defined in comparison to earlier numbers or numbers from other areas.
- ▶ Data trends become clearer and more reliable when tracked over a longer period of time.

Even perceived negative numbers can be turned to a positive outcome. For example, a school may discover that the population of school-aged children is likely to decline

in the coming years. While most would consider this a disadvantage or a threat to future enrollment, a proactive administration armed with this data can focus on efforts to capture a greater share of a declining population through adjusting the marketing message, examining and broadening the types of students who are accepted, focusing on new areas, or increasing available financial assistance. Once a school has data pertaining to each of its markets, through trend analysis and comparison between markets, the school can better tell the story of its present and effectively create the narrative of its future.

There are few school decisions (and none that involve planning) that are not improved through access to and use of demographic information. Knowing who is out there can be the difference between success and failure of enrollment efforts and the school itself.



About the author ...

Gregory Dhuyvetter Lead Consultant

Gregory Dhuyvetter joined Catholic School Management with more than 35 years of experience at all levels of Catholic school education. He has served as teacher and administrator and has seven years of service as a superintendent.

Greg presents regularly at the National Catholic Educational Association Convention, the Catholic Leadership Conference and has twice been the keynote speaker of NCEA's national conference on STREAM.

Greg has published articles in Momentum Magazine, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Journal of Educational Excellence and other journals. In 2016, he was a recipient of the Lead. Learn. Proclaim. Award from NCEA.

Greg received his BA and MA in English from Cal State University, Fullerton, where he taught for a number of years, and a master's degree in educational leadership from United States International University in Los Angeles.



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