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Holding Your Own: A Guide to Retaining the Students You Worked So Hard to Get

EDITOR'S NOTE: The September 2002 issue of the CSML, "Student Recruitment and Retention: Matching Strategies and Research," along with the November 2009 issue, "Holding Your Own: Reducing Student Attrition in Catholic Schools," have provided to our readers ongoing resources for understanding the nature of successful programs for student and family retention. In this issue, Sr. Carol Cimino, SSJ, Ed.D., has provided not only a reaffirmation of this original research, but a clear, concise, and compelling update as to the importance of intentional programs designed to result in strong re-enrollment of satisfied students and families, who ultimately can serve as ambassadors for overall enrollment efforts. Using insights gained from a career in Catholic education and most recently as a Superintendent of Schools, and informed by a knowledge of the research associated with student retention, CSM is pleased to provide this guide to contemporary considerations for student and family retention.

Catholic schools have spent countless hours, dollars, and resources hoping to attract students to their campuses. Yet often, scant time and resources are spent on tracking and attending to the lack of retention of those same students. This article is geared toward providing some steps that schools can take to determine what are the causes of attrition, when does it occur, where the students go, and, finally, what can the school do about it.

During my tenure as superintendent of schools in the Diocese of Buffalo, we spent considerable time and effort working on the problem of attrition. By the time I retired from that position in June of 2018, our total loss for the year 2017-2018 was 51 students out of an elementary enrollment of almost 10,000. That was remarkable considering that previous years' numbers were over 200 annually. So what happened, and what can schools do to get control of a loss of students?

The notion of routine attention to student retention cannot be taken seriously enough. Regular checking, taking the "temperature" of student and parent attitudes helps to tweak the school's journey throughout the year as minor or sometimes major adjustments can be made when there is widespread dissatisfaction with the school. In any case, the wise school leader checks the exits as well as the entrances to his or her school.

1. CAPTURE DATA: Get a handle on the situation.

Establish an expectation and practice that monthly enrollment reports will be available, and it shouldn't be difficult to track the numbers of students who enrolled and left. But just knowing numbers is not sufficient. It is vital to know at what time of year did a student leave, from what grade, for what reason, and, of course, for what destination.



What Time? By tracking the time of year that students left, school officials might be able to consider some motives. Was it at report card time? A break in the semesters or trimesters? At the time of a school break? When tuition/fees are due? Take note of patterns; knowing what time of year students are more likely to leave helps school officials to plan preemptive moves.



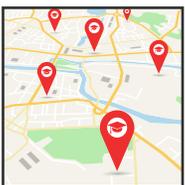
What Grade? Mass exodus from a specific grade might conjure up questions such as: Is there a problem with the perception or performance of a specific teacher? Does it signal a break in the public school structure such as the beginning grade of a middle school? Often parents transfer their children after First Communion or First Penance or Confirmation, ascertaining that, since the child has received a sacrament, Catholic school is no longer relevant.

FIND OUT MORE:

“Often students will express their dissatisfaction with the school thoughtlessly. I heard a high school sophomore outside my office one day complaining to her friend that, “I hate this school!” So I stepped outside and asked her to be more specific. She replied, “Oh, I’m just having a bad day.” So I asked her to come and see me the next time she was having a bad day; she did!”



What reason? Schools should, of course, try to do an exit interview/survey, but, often, parents are reluctant to reveal the real reason behind pulling their children out of the Catholic school. Often the children know, and there is no law against asking them, as long as the question is followed by, “We’ll miss you!” As explicated later in this article, regular satisfaction surveys can reveal much about what parents think the school is doing well or poorly. Even if a parent obfuscates regarding the reason for transferring his or her child, regular surveys can give a real clue. A critical question to ask when possible is, “What would it take to keep you here?”



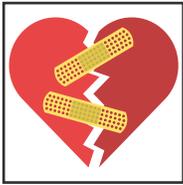
What destination? If the destination is a public or charter school, the parent is saying that he or she is finished with Catholic education. But alarms should go off if the destination is another Catholic school. At this juncture, the parent is saying, “I’m not done with Catholic education; I’m just done with the way you do it.”

REVERSE NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS:

“I had to deal with a group of parents whose perception of the fifth grade teacher was that she was “cold” and “didn’t care.” I had discovered that she was very introverted and found it hard to be all “soft and cuddly.” When she met with the parents and showed them that, not only did she know so much about their children, but showed how she cared for them as individuals, parents were satisfied that she really did care.”

2. USE THE DATA: Do something about it.

Simply watching enrollment numbers drop, of course, accomplishes nothing. When a student leaves the school, he or she takes a whole universe of influence: the family, co-workers of the parents, friends, and neighbors. All of these people participated in the life of the school, the fundraisers, and various school events. Moreover, the students who stay report their classmates' leaving to their parents and friends and may start to wonder if they should look for a reason to leave, too. Finally, the students who leave will, via social media, relate how very happy they are and invite their classmates to this new Eden.



Build Relationships: Let students who are leaving know they will be missed and that they can come back any time they'd like. When persons who have left the Church were queried on why, they reported that they “just drifted away” and “no one ever said I was missed.” Conveying this message may result in the student's admission of why he or she is leaving. Knowing this, school leaders should contact the parents to offer a remedial measure.



Build Responsiveness: Keep a finger on the pulse. Regular satisfaction surveys, available online, allow parents to express their satisfaction with various school components, as well as pointing out areas where the school could do a better job. The wise school leader sees this as an opportunity to point out what the school is doing to improve, and to thank respondents for their participation.



Build Community: Make parents and students feel that they are welcome and belong to the community. Often school officials will assign a “buddy” or mentor to students new to the school, but fail to do so for parents. Parents want to know how to ingratiate themselves into the school community, and the “veterans” can guide them to volunteer positions or committee jobs. Many times, parents will report frustration at the fact that the “regulars” always run fundraisers or school activities; the school should ensure that there is room for every parent to volunteer. The school's parent organization should take the lead in this.



Build Awareness: Be aware of the grade configurations of surrounding schools. Often, local public school districts operate middle schools that begin at grade six or seven. Knowing that this can create an obvious leaving point, take a good look at those grades in the school. What would be the advantages to a student's remaining in the school for those grades? What would parents look for as an incentive to keep their young adolescents in the Catholic school?



Build Understanding: Take parent/student perceptions of teachers seriously. When parents pull their children out of the school because Mrs. X is “tough” or “strict” or “doesn't like kids,” school leaders should see this as an opportunity for the teacher to meet with parents in small groups, and let them see that she won't eat their children.



Build Identity: Where are the parents taking their children? If it's a public/charter school, they are telegraphing that they don't see the importance of Catholic education, and school leaders have a clue as to how to respond. If it's another Catholic school, then school leaders need to pay more attention to what parents are saying both formally and informally. Ensuring that at least one of your annual satisfaction surveys probes specifics as to the practices and programs associated with Catholic identity is an imperative.

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About the author ...

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Sister Carol Cimino is a Sister of St. Joseph of Rochester, New York. Currently, she is a consultant, presenter, and keynoter who travels the country speaking to various groups associated with Catholic schools.

Sister Carol has been a teacher on the elementary, secondary, and college levels, an elementary and high school administrator, a development director, a national consultant, and, until 2018, served as the superintendent of Catholic schools in the Diocese of Buffalo, New York.

An accomplished author, she has written two books, hundreds of articles, and given a bazillion workshops. In spite of all this, she is still proudest of the fact that she remains the only woman religious to have been a three-day champion on "Jeopardy!".

Sister Carol serves Catholic School Management and its clients on a part-time basis, specializing in school administration, comprehensive development programs, enrollment management programs, and communication programs.

School leaders need to understand that what they consider assets may be liabilities. Many times boasting a "small school" may be perceived as too small for some parents. A "family atmosphere" may suggest inbreeding; a small group is running everything and new parents can't get into the "in group." Watch for what other schools tout as their assets, and either devise an alternative, or fix the liability.

Finally, just as most schools devise a recruitment calendar, they should build a retention calendar. It might look like this:

<p>AUGUST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postcards to all students welcoming them; • Individual messages from teachers; • Family picnic; • Assignment of parent mentors to new parents. 	<p>FEBRUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion of profiles of the graduate/graduate outcomes in re-enrollment materials; • Reminder of enrollment/re-enrollment requirements; • Parent meetings with teachers ascertain parent attitudes about the school.
<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Back to school welcome; • Assignment of student mentors to new students; • Assembly to introduce, welcome new students. 	<p>MARCH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction survey geared toward the next school year; • Board involves parents in financial report and budget setting; • State of the School Report.
<p>OCTOBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "How are we doing?" survey to new parents and middle/high school students; • Board review of enrollment/retention and survey results; • Grandparents/generation celebration event. 	<p>APRIL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holy Week and Easter greetings to families; • "Step-up" preview day of next grade for elementary students/Senior testimonials/videos to underclassmen; • Initial plans for next year's initiatives, new programs.
<p>NOVEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thanksgiving greetings to families: Thank you for giving us your children; • Student essays: Why I am grateful for my school. 	<p>MAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muffins with Mom Day; • Celebration of students who have received sacraments; importance of "Second Communion."
<p>DECEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christmas greetings to all families; Christmas pageant/chorale; • Use programs to describe and promote the school. 	<p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donuts with Dad Day; Ribbon Day for Eighth Graders, High School Seniors; • End-of-year activities, traditions; • After-graduation family event.
<p>JANUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mid-year check with satisfaction survey; • Response to parents with summary of survey results; • Review for mid-term exams; • Study tips sent home. 	<p>JULY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction survey; • Follow-up on students who have not re-registered; • Principal letter: Summer initiatives: professional development, new teachers, facilities enhancements, etc.



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