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Teacher Recruitment and Retention — Strategies and Solutions

Teacher recruitment and retention was an issue before COVID-19. The pandemic has not helped.

The last issue of the *Catholic School Management Letter* focused on student retention, but that of faculty and staff is equally, if not more, pivotal to Catholic education in our country in the coming years. The number of students in schools of education is in no way commensurate with the number of teachers nearing or already past retirement age. If faculty are truly the backbone of marvelous, miracle-inducing Catholic schools, the manner in which they are sought and engaged needs to improve and expand.

Where Do You Stand?

Catholic school educators often describe themselves as mission-driven and data-driven, but this second element may not be as effectively deployed with regard to the teaching staff.

Every school and diocese needs accurate, up-to-date figures on current faculty. How many? What ethnic makeup? What degrees? What ages? What retirement plans? Faculty nearing or past retirement age deserve the courtesy of inquiry every year during their performance appraisals. Knowing a school has a lot of older teachers, but no idea when they intend to depart, leads to unfortunate surprises and magical thinking about “maybe one more year.”

In looking at faculty composition, it’s important to focus particularly on new hires. How many new? What kind of new — to the school, to the diocese, to Catholic education, to teaching? What ages? A recent teacher population profile in the Archdiocese of Chicago revealed a concentration of teachers under the age of 30.



Just as schools think about marketing for enrollment with an eye toward generational understanding of the parents, the same is true for recruiting teachers. A school that attracts mostly millennial applicants needs to know what is important to them, not just what grades the school seeks to fill. Common understandings about millennials is that they value work/life balance, are inspired to make a difference, expect to have a voice, aspire to leadership roles, assume flexibility and understanding (particularly this year), anticipate effective evaluations, and demand ease of access to information (yes, they will visit the website — how does it look from a prospective teacher view?). The level to which a school can demonstrate a match with candidates’ values will fortify its hiring position.

Why Do They Come?

The same study indicated the top reasons recent hires chose to teach at a Catholic school:

- ▶ Referrals from other teachers or friends who knew principals
- ▶ Sense that what they do matters
- ▶ Called to mission and specific student populations
- ▶ Experience as Catholic school parents themselves
- ▶ Educated in Catholic schools
- ▶ Timely response to application
- ▶ Engagement at job fair

Which begs the questions: Is the school actively promoting positions to faculty, staff, parents, alumni, etc.? How quickly are replies to applicants sent and in what manner? A response that not only confirms the next step in the decision-making process but also expresses gratitude for the applicant and heralds the unique appeal of the school will provide far greater benefit than an automated message indicating “someone” will be in touch.

Catholic schools both model and nurture Catholic values and practices, in students, families AND staff. Teachers who are Catholic report that is an important part of the employment decision. Highlighting the creative ways in which you form and foster a vibrant faith life across all members of the school community is another way to attract future instructors and speaks to Catholic schools’ distinctive characteristics.

The Power of Community

Both new teachers and those more tenured frequently express that the “sense of community” they feel with their colleagues, students and parents is reason for joining and staying at a school. This close knit, family feel is cited in student recruitment literature as well. However, that feeling is often hard to articulate in general communications.

In this regard, testimonials from teachers who have recently chosen your school, as well as that of veterans, can be very compelling. Faculty who left public school roles to join your Catholic community (regardless of their own religion) bring a particular impact for those considering a similar shift.

Teachers... In Their Own Words

“It’s very easy to love this place – the kids, the work, everything that happens here.”

“Our faculty meetings are great (and I never thought I would say that) and the administration is so appreciative.”

“I am a parent and teacher, and I always felt that my child was loved and taken care of emotionally, academically and spiritually. We appreciate the individual student. We really do. Every grade I’ve taught here, we talk constantly about how we can help each of the kids. As a parent, I know that is what every parent wants.”

“If I had any idea teaching could be like THIS, I would have made the move to Catholic education long ago and sent my children here too.”



Students Say...

“You can tell teachers here really like kids. I think that’s important.”

“I have close relationships with all the students, the teachers, the faculty members, and we’re all here to help each other. We have interactions with all the different grades.”

“I went to a different school before this, and the teachers here take their jobs way more seriously.”

“We incorporate Catholicism in every part of the school. We’re always praying for each other, family members, extended family members. We have people here who are not Catholic or are not religious at all. We have very open conversations with our teachers and each other.”



Also consider sharing perspectives from the mouths of babes. Student quotes tend to be tremendously honest, charming and revealing. Let future faculty get a sense of who they are in their own words.

Why Do They Stay?

Teachers reported school climate, salary and the school’s leadership as the top three reasons, more than double any other aspect. Each school needs to find out to what extent these elements help or hurt the retention of staff. Understanding the numbers, the rationale for joining, and the recruitment process in a given school or dioceses is essential to determining what works and what doesn’t for teacher recruitment.

Why Do They Leave?

And when? This is another area where tracking the stats will prove enormously helpful. Some schools and diocese indicate that if teachers stay three years they are likely to remain barring any external issues. Knowing that number allows schools to focus retention efforts during the early years in a manner that will take teachers past that milestone. These endeavors must be tailored to the unique circumstances of the new faculty, whereas ongoing retention efforts for all staff will be more generalized. Ironically, the two top reasons for staying in the Chicago study — school climate and salary — were also reported as being cause for departure with salary in the lead. The third ranking issue was level of autonomy in teaching.

Knowing what motivates a teacher to depart is just as essential as knowing why a family leaves before graduation. Is it a matter of unmet expectations, personnel issues, annoying parents, too much paperwork, communication (or lack thereof)? If the only reason given is salary, probe further. What would it take in salary? Just because you may not be able to meet it is no reason not to inquire; the data could make a very compelling case for future fundraising appeals. Ask each departing teacher...

- ▶ What did you value most while you were here?
- ▶ What will you miss the most?
- ▶ What improvements should we consider to enhance our school community?
- ▶ How can we better support our faculty and staff?

Allow them to exit with grace. Ensure that all teachers bidding farewell are reminded that they are welcome to return. Gather current contact info and add them to the database for outbound communications.

What Can We Do?

Secret Sauce

In the competitive world of student recruitment, it seems there is endless talk about a school’s value proposition. Why this school? Why is this school worthy? What makes it special? What is the USP — unique selling proposition or JPD — justification of the purchase decision? The list goes on and on. A compelling value proposition makes it easier to attract students, families and FACULTY. Look at the value proposition and see how it speaks to future teachers. Develop key messages that pertain to prospective staff members. Prepare others — teachers, families, board members, parish staff, alumni — to spread the word.

In marketing teaching positions, capture the school’s working environment as rewarding and engaging, appealing and fun. Correlate the mission, core values and beliefs with what inspires those in the teaching profession. Illustrate how the school community treasures faculty and staff. Help applicants picture themselves in the classroom, faculty lounge, at a game, at Mass, etc.

Go beyond traditional forums and deploy other vehicles, venues and messengers. In addition to school and diocesan websites, make sure this stunning opportunity is shared via social media, through enthusiastic participation in job fairs (aka on-site vetting and interviewing, effective handouts), strategic word of mouth, etc.



Hybrid Recruiting

One diocese, faced with unexpected retirements and resignations because of COVID, opted to use a centralized recruiter within HR plus hourly team members who posted extensively on LinkedIn and Indeed, through which they were able to find a significant number of early retirees to fill unexpected openings. That plus the use of long-term subs made it possible to meet the demand for onsite and remote all year. Schools were given the option of using the centralized effort, conducting their own recruitment or a combination of both. Seventy percent (70%) of schools are using the recruiter who lists, screens, vets and makes offers or provides preliminary screening and then turns candidates over to principals for subsequent interviews and hiring decisions. This both/and approach was funded by reallocated money not used due to COVID and has continued through this year. Teacher placement is 60% ahead of last year, so it seems to be working quite well.

Don't Wait on Them

Schools can hope that dazzling teachers will emerge... or they can reach out directly.

- ▶ Teachers returning to the workforce
- ▶ Recent graduates
- ▶ Second career candidates
- ▶ Retired public school teachers
- ▶ Parishioners
- ▶ Alumni (another reason to keep the database current!)
- ▶ Recently departed faculty who may not have found ideal circumstances in new posts

Be aware of reduction-in-staff situations in local school districts and notify staff so they can reach out to friends, colleagues, etc. Personal outreach to all potential audiences will always be more effective than advertisements.

Grow Your Own

With a stronger marketing approach, more applicants will likely become interested, but the national numbers clearly portend a challenge that may be best met with a grow-your-own posture. Teaching assistants, paid summer interns, Federal Work-Study interns, non-teaching staff, parents, volunteers, early retirees — any or all can be cultivated over time to embrace the mission and ministry of Catholic education in a teaching role. Amongst second career and retiree candidates, encourage the philosophy of “learning, earning and returning.”

What could be better than sharing the gift of Catholic education with the next generation? That architect probably never envisioned herself as a math teacher; show her the way.

Partner Up

Relationship building is key in all aspects of recruiting, not just with candidates themselves but also the institutions from whence they come. Schools of education that feed your diocese or locality should be treated as the valued partners they can be. Welcome student teachers and other clinical workers. Participate willingly in studies. Keep track of former faculty and principals who have gone on to work in colleges and universities and make sure they receive notices of all your posts (in a fashion that makes it easy for them to share).

Compensation

Don't just talk salary. Describe the entire package — salary, insurance, pension, professional development, university discounts, graduate school matching opportunities, milestone bonuses, free tuition for offspring, additional stipend opportunities, summer income. If your new faculty are young, educate them about budgeting, debt management, housing, retirement planning, investing, communal living.

Look into federal and state loan forgiveness programs. Recently one program meant teachers at qualifying schools were eligible for up to \$17,500 on their Federal Stafford and Direct Loans after five consecutive years of full-time employment. Another program offered total forgiveness after 120 payments were made while employed full-time. Be on the lookout for COVID-related opportunities in the year to come.

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

Consider going beyond the paycheck. Bonuses, referral incentives for bringing in new faculty (midyear payout and retention bonus at Year 5), gift cards, and hosted events — all reflect the high regard in which teachers are held. Skill-building programs, mentoring for new teachers and mentorship opportunities for the more experienced are also attractive features to highlight with potential hires.

Interview – Before and After

The decision to accept an offer AND the likelihood of staying beyond Year 1 are both heavily influenced by the interview. The manner in which it is arranged, the information shared in advance, the questions, the invitation to pose questions, the clarification of next steps, and the warmth demonstrated toward the candidate all send a signal. Tracking the acceptance rate of offers made is another data point that should be noted.

Once hired, communication with the selected candidates should affirm their decisions and educate them about the school. Contact from other teachers to ensure familiarity before Day One will be appreciated and noted. Cards or notes from board members, student council, pastors, bishops, etc., offering a hearty welcome say a lot about the school and/or diocese.

New teacher orientation that reinforces the healthy, happy culture of the school is a must. In addition to the ins and outs of school management, consider self-care strategies and tips on communicating with

peers, administrators and parents. Staff orientation days should be engaging and uplifting experiences. Make sure that new employees are teamed up with positive returning members of the school community lest they be dismayed by the chronic complainers. Design ongoing professional development specific to newer teachers.

Recognize that the early years of employment — at the start of careers or just new to the school — will heavily impact retention. Stable and caring leadership; ample opportunity for feedback, sharing, venting; useful evaluation; recognition of a job well done; reinforcement of the profound impact of Catholic education — all this not only supports retention but also the importance of each member of the school community.

Not a Match for You?

There is a personality to every school, faculty and community; the ideal faculty member needs to be a good match. Good teacher, but not a good match? Call colleagues, or the diocese, and alert them to this talent. Share the wealth and help someone committed to Catholic education find the right home in another school.

Not Just Hiring Staff

At Catholic schools students are known and loved. So, too, are the faculty and staff. Teaching in a Catholic school is an honor and a privilege. Teacher recruitment is not just about filling open positions; it's about giving educators a matchless experience that will provide endless blessings.

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