Partnership Schools Enrollment Report
Lessons on Equity, Accessibility, and Demand for Urban Catholic Education

Introduction

It is no secret that Catholic schools—particularly those that serve our nation’s most under-resourced and vulnerable communities—face an existential threat. Since 1971, the number of American Catholic schools has been cut nearly in half, shrinking from 9,366 in 1971 to 4,812 today. These closures are concentrated among schools serving majority minority and low-income communities. And in spite of the heroic efforts Catholic school teachers and leaders have made to serve students throughout the pandemic, the overall decline continued into 2020. As the NCEA reported this week, 202 Catholic schools closed at the end of the 2019-2020 school year, and “underserved groups were over twice as likely to have their Catholic schools close.”

Yet, there are rays of hope breaking through these dark clouds. While many schools have closed, some that had been selected for closure saw a resurgence in attendance. It is increasingly clear that a combination of strategic philanthropy, leadership, and public policy can help turn around the Catholic schools that serve our most vulnerable children.

At Partnership Schools, we believe in the power of Catholic education to educate and elevate students who go on to become community leaders, and our mission is to support once-struggling urban Catholic schools and to put them on the path to long-term sustainability and academic excellence. We believe that this work is a critical part of a national effort to ensure that every parent has the agency and access to choose the right school for his or her child. That’s why reversing the enrollment decline is at the heart of our work in both Cleveland and New York.

For the past eight years, we have closely tracked enrollment trends, and we have learned several lessons about the demand that exists for faith-based education in New York, as well as about how we can increase student enrollment and put our schools on the path to long-term sustainability. While there are many lessons to be learned, we believe that critical drivers of the enrollment decline urban Catholic schools have experienced include barriers to entry—both financial and those erected by schools themselves—that blunt demand and shrink enrollment.

While the COVID crisis has threatened our communities and challenged our schools, the past year has also provided us with some key lessons that point a way forward for Catholic schools not just to survive, but to thrive in the years ahead.

A Closer Look at Catholic Schools’ Enrollment

The COVID-19 pandemic has created what is arguably the most significant education disruption our nation has ever seen. Almost a year ago, nearly every school in America—private, public, and charter—shut down and shifted to “remote learning” in a nationwide effort to stop the spread of the deadly virus. While the spring schools shutdown was necessary, it was also only a temporary solution to the crisis—one that, in the long run, has the potential to do significant harm to communities and to children.

This is something that Catholic educators and leaders understood, and that’s why as the first day of the 2020-2021 school year approached, Catholic schools worked to find a way to safely open for in-person instruction.

That hard work and innovation paid off, and by the start of the year, 92 percent of Catholic schools opened for full-time in-person instruction or “hybrid” learning. That compares with just 43 percent of traditional public schools and 34 percent of charter schools. Indeed, Catholic

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schools have led the nation in showing how in-person learning can safely happen during a pandemic, and by doing so, we have ensured that millions of students have escaped the most negative academic effects of the shutdown. Moreover, for children of essential workers, Catholic schools have given parents the comfort of knowing that their children are being cared for and well served while they do the work that our nation needs right now.

Yet, in spite of the heroic efforts Catholic schools have made to reopen schools, too many continue to struggle. In fact, as a recent NCEA report reveals, overall Catholic PreK-12 enrollment declined by 6.4 percent this year—the largest single-year enrollment drop in fifty years. While it might be tempting to conclude this drop is the result of a lack of demand, a closer look at the data reveals the opposite: more families want to send their children to Catholic schools, but many are held back by the challenging economic times in which they find themselves.

In “choice states” around the country—where families can access public funding to send their children to private schools—there is evidence of increased demand for Catholic schools. In Ohio, for example, the number of students using the state’s private school scholarships to attend Catholic schools increased by 8.35 percent. Even more noteworthy: The number of students accessing the state’s “EdChoice Expansion” program—a means-tested statewide scholarship focused explicitly on giving economically vulnerable families greater access to choice—increased by a whopping 35 percent.

Ohio is not alone; according to the research group EdChoice, participation in 29 private school choice programs across the country increased by 2.5 percent. Notably, Florida saw an increase of 3.2 percent; Wisconsin, 4.9 percent; and North Carolina, 16.3 percent.

Support for school choice programs has also never been higher, according to recent polling data which showed that nearly three-fourths (73 percent) of Americans support school vouchers. Where that support is met with programs with the nimble capacity to serve families, enrollment increases. Indeed, in our two Cleveland schools, one of which had been scheduled for closure in January 2020, we saw a 39 percent enrollment increase in 2020-2021 alone.

Of course, these bright spots are not universal. As the NCEA reports, nationwide Catholic school enrollment dropped even in choice states, and some dioceses and schools continue to struggle to capture the demand that exists. It is important to note that these 2020 declines are not unique to Catholic schools. COVID has had a devastating effect on American education. In late December, the New York Times suggested that as many as six percent of public school students nationwide are not attending school at all. And the public school enrollment data that is beginning to trickle in shows massive numbers of students absent from Kindergarten and preschool classrooms. Overall enrollment is predicted to be down at least two percent in public schools across the country.

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But the fact that the decline isn’t unique to Catholic schools is no cause for celebration. And now is no time for Catholic leaders to be complacent—or fatalistic. Rather, we should look at the bright spots and learn lessons from the decline to sketch out a blueprint that we then must translate into action. The moment is now for Catholic school, diocesan, and network leaders to take a critical look at our own enrollment trends and make a commitment to reducing barriers to entry in an effort to stem the decline and put this critical sector back on the path to long-term sustainability and success.

Lessons from the Field

An analysis of the work we have done in New York and Cleveland shows that there is much that individual schools and networks can do to convert this growing demand into increased enrollment. Below are the four key lessons from our analysis that are driving our Partnership Schools re-enrollment and enrollment efforts in the 2021-2022 school year.

Lesson 1: There is strong demand for faith-based education, particularly in vulnerable and under-resourced communities.

Despite the dark cloud cast by enrollment trends, the reality is that there is strong demand for faith-based education that we are simply not taking full advantage of. In New York, we have seen this firsthand, as we receive on average three inquiries for every open seat—demand that did not dramatically decline this summer when uncertainty around COVID and school reopening was high.

National data released by the NCEA showed that the number of Catholic schools with waiting lists increased—from 28.5 percent to 39.7 percent—during the past year.\(^\text{10}\) NCEA also reports that eight dioceses managed to increase overall enrollment in the midst of the COVID pandemic.

Further, in the City of Cleveland, where 100 percent of families can take advantage of the state’s oldest Cleveland Scholarship Program, enrollment in K-8 Catholic schools increased by 2.1 percent overall and by 13.9 percent in the five Catholic elementary campuses serving the city’s lowest-income northeast neighborhoods of Fairfax, Hough, St. Clair-Superior, Glenville, and Collinwood. Meanwhile, enrollment in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) declined by 5.2 percent.\(^\text{11}\)

Unfortunately, as will be discussed in greater detail in Lesson 2 (below), in too many dioceses, families—particularly economically vulnerable families—face barriers to entry that prevent schools from converting demand into enrollment.

Lesson 2: Across geographies, barriers to entry undermined demand.

Perhaps the biggest lesson we’ve learned from managing urban Catholic schools in two dioceses is that, while the financial constraints urban Catholic schools face are real, there remains much we can do to reduce barri-


ers to entry and make a Catholic education accessible to all families who want one for their children.

At the Partnership Schools in New York, enrollment across our six flagship schools was stable from 2013 (2,036 students enrolled) to 2018 (2,037 students enrolled). Between 2018 and 2020, our New York enrollment dropped by 13 percent even as the number of inquiries we received remained stable. After careful analysis, our conclusion is that we lose too many families during the application process itself. More specifically, while 100 percent of the families we serve are subsidized by Partnership or partner scholarships and grants, in order for families to earn those grants, they need to demonstrate their need. And that often means submitting tax records, notarized letters of child support, birth certificates, report cards, and more. In total, our analysis shows that we lose 87 percent of families who are unable to fulfill paperwork requirements in the first week after their initial outreach.

While there is logic to these requirements—after all, we all want to ensure our scholarship support goes to the families who most need it—they can become bureaucratic hurdles that discourage families, particularly those who need support the most, from enrolling.

In Catholic schools around the country, even those families who manage to navigate the scholarship barriers find themselves facing admissions barriers erected by the schools. Requirements like excessively high registration fees, onerous paperwork, mandatory interviews, student academic and behavior reports (beyond transcripts), and more don’t have to be done before admission. If our goal is to boost enrollment and increase access, we should reduce barriers on the front end and focus on integrating students into the community afterwards. Otherwise, admissions requirements can become barriers that discourage prospective families, pushing many of them to “self-select” out of enrollment. And, ironically, this leads to the loss of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of students who would actually grow and thrive in a Catholic school environment.

That’s why, at Partnership Schools, we have made a commitment to reducing barriers to entry as part of our determination to put a Catholic education within reach for any family who wants one.

Lesson 3: COVID blunted interest in preschool and Kindergarten nationwide, and Catholic schools were not immune to this.

While Catholic schools around the country beat the odds and provided more in-person instruction than any other sector, our schools were not immune to the financial impact and enrollment pressures of the COVID era.

Nearly one half of the 6.4 percent decline in overall Catholic school enrollment that NCEA reported is concentrated in Pre-K and Kindergarten, where enrollment dropped 26 percent and 6.7 percent, respectively.

These early childhood declines, while worrying, mirror a nationwide pattern. Early estimates suggest that parents of Pre-K and Kindergarten students opted out of formal schooling in large numbers this year. In Cleveland, public Pre-K enrollment dropped more than 50 percent. In New York City, enrollment in the pub-

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lic Pre-K programs dropped 13 percent. And an NPR survey reveals an average decline in Kindergarten enrollment of 16 percent in twenty public districts it polled.

Overall, Chalkbeat reports that in the states it has data for, drops in public school Kindergarten enrollment account for 30% of all declines in enrollment.

No schools—Catholic or public—can simply assume that families will return to Pre-K and Kindergarten when the pandemic abates, and it is incumbent on all of us to help families see the life-long impact of high-quality early childhood education.

**Lesson 4:** Public funding is essential to meet the demand for equitable access—and it takes more than that funding stream for Catholic schools to thrive.

The two Cleveland schools that joined the Partnership Schools network in 2020 have had access to parental choice scholarships for over twenty years. Yet, both had declining enrollments and were near-closure when they joined our network. Then, beginning in summer 2020, enrollment took off in a new way this year—because we worked for it in new ways. Partnership Assistant Superintendent Christian Dallavis reflected on several of the steps that increased the number of families those schools are serving this year—an increase that began before it was clear that Cleveland’s public schools would stay remote while ours offered an in-person option. Improving systems, personalizing communication, adapting our program for a longer school day that better meets students’ and families’ needs—these are all crucial components to spreading the impact Catholic schools can have.

While we would not have been able to increase our enrollment in the neighborhoods we serve without access to programs that give low-income parents the same school choices as wealthier ones, our schools need academic excellence; joyous, productive, faith-filled school cultures; and a vigorous effort to spread the good news of our schools—in addition to equitable funding—in order to thrive.

In his 2008 homily on his visit to Washington, D.C., Pope Benedict XVI said “people who have hope live differently.” There is much reason to hope in the future of Catholic schools: the research on their impact, particularly for low- and middle-income students, is compelling; the demand for them is clear, as the data above suggest; and the barriers to entry are ones we’ve found that schools and policymakers can lower. Now is the moment for all who believe in the importance of Catholic schools to act on our hope in their future.

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