Decline in Student Enrollment, Parental Willingness to Consider Catholic Schools, and Sources of Comparative Advantage in the United States

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LIVED EXPERIENCE IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Research and Reflections from Sub-Saharan Africa and North America
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INTRODUCTION

Enrollment in Catholic schools in the United States has been declining for more than half a century. In 1965, 5.2 million children were enrolled in Catholic schools nationally. According to the National Catholic Education Association, only 1.7 million students are currently enrolled. There was a small gain in 2021-2022 versus the previous year, but the previous year enrollment decreased by 6.4% because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was one of the largest declines in 50 years.

There is a risk that enrollment may decline further in the future. While there is dissatisfaction with public schools among some parents, broad societal trends are not favorable for enrollment growth in Catholic schools. Lower fertility rates, including a dip during the COVID-19 pandemic which may affect enrollment in a few years, together with more restrictive immigration policies may lead to a reduction in the number of school-age children. This may affect enrollment trends in most types of schools. In addition, the share of adults in the population identifying as Christians is declining. Even if most of this decline is observed among Protestant denominations as opposed to Catholics, this may still affect Catholic schools. Finally, the pricing disadvantage faced by Catholic and other faith-based schools versus public and charter schools—i.e., the fact that faith-based schools must cover most of their operating costs through tuition—is likely to persist for some time, unless faith-based charter schools were to be allowed to operate.

The enrollment trends for Catholic schools in the United States are in sharp contrast with trends in the rest of the world. Globally, enrollment in Catholic schools

more than doubled from 1975 to 2020 thanks in large part to gains in sub-Saharan Africa.\textsuperscript{5} In many high-income Western countries, enrollment has remained steady, and in countries where enrollment has declined, losses have been smaller than in the United States. The decline of K12 (kindergarten to high school) Catholic education in the United States is unique. Catholic schools in the country face structural disadvantages that are hard to overcome, but other religious schools also face these constraints and have fared better.

What could be done to stem the decline in K12 Catholic education while continuing to fulfill the mission of the schools? If the answer to this question were straightforward, it would already have been answered, and the decline would perhaps have been stemmed. While there are no easy answers, the good news is that according to market research data collected by Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities and the National Catholic Educational Association,\textsuperscript{6} many more parents would be “very willing” to consider Catholic schools for their children in comparison to the parents who have enrolled their children in the schools. But to convince some of those parents on the fence that Catholic schools could be right for their children, Catholic schools need to make their case better. In this article, three sources of comparative advantage for Catholic schools are suggested. These sources are by no means the only assets that Catholic schools have, but they seem to have been overlooked, hence it may be useful to mention them.

The article is structured as follows. To provide context, a review of some of the factors that may have contributed to the decline in enrollment is first provided in the next section. Next, the analysis explores market research data to assess parental willingness to consider Catholic schools. The last section suggests three potential sources of comparative advantage for Catholic schools that have remained relatively untapped and could perhaps help convince more parents to send their children to Catholic schools. A conclusion follows.


FACTORS LEADING TO THE DECLINE IN ENROLLMENT

Much has been written about the collapse in enrollment in Catholic schools in the United States, but for readers of this Journal, many of whom may not be based in the country, a reminder of some of the factors that contributed to that collapse may be useful. Three main factors are reviewed: the lack of affordability of Catholic schools, a weakening of the perception of academic excellence of the schools, and secularization.

Lack of Affordability

One of the most important factors contributing to lower enrollment in Catholic schools is the issue of the lack of affordability of the schools given a lack of federal and state support. In most Western countries, the state funds Catholic schools, at least partially. In the United States, despite the emergence of voucher programs, Catholic schools by and large do not benefit from public funding to any substantial extent. This lack of public funding combined with rising operating costs due to a declining share of members of religious congregations in the staff of schools (less than 3% of staff today are religious) have led to increases in tuition.

Data from the National Catholic Educational Association suggest that the since the early 2000s, the average annual tuition cost for students in Catholic schools has been rising at a rate well above that of inflation. For example, in the 2017-2018 school year, tuition costs reached $4,841 at the elementary level and $11,239 at the secondary level, versus respectively $1,787 and $4,100 in 2000-2001. While children from disadvantaged families may receive tuition assistance from schools, the increase in tuition still threatens affordability for many.

The affordability issue has been exacerbated by the current pandemic. The pandemic has led to large losses in learning in all schools, but in addition, Catholic

schools themselves have been affected. In the United States, more than 30 million individuals lost their jobs in just the first few weeks of the crisis. Despite substantial gains since then, employment is still at lower levels at the time of publication of this article than when the pandemic started. Today, as new crises have emerged (e.g., a substantial increase in inflation that threatens standards of living and the implications of the war in Ukraine), many parents may feel uncertainty as to their ability to afford tuition.

The pricing disadvantage faced by Catholic schools in comparison to public and charter schools is large. Estimates suggest that public education spending in the United States was at $14,455 per pupil annually in 2019 for K12 students—from kindergarten to the end of secondary school. Most of this funding is provided by state and local governments. In comparison, funding provided at the federal level is at only 7% of total public funding for the sector. Catholic schools, by contrast, must raise most of their revenues from private sources—through tuition mainly, as well as charitable donations.

Catholic schools have long tried to contain operating costs. Teachers in Catholic schools tend to earn less on average than teachers in public schools. This is a testament to the teachers’ commitment to the schools, but they still must be paid living wages. Unfortunately, as enrollment has dropped, some schools may have become smaller, which may lead to higher tuition since teacher and overhead costs are then spread among a smaller number of children in each school. There are some options to reduce overhead costs in the future, including by moving from the traditional model of the stand-alone parish school to a model with groups of schools working together and sharing back-office functions. Apart from reducing costs, this could have a range of other benefits, including for better teacher professional development. But even if Catholic schools are often less expensive for parents than other private schools, tuition will remain an issue for many families.

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9 See https://educationdata.org/public-education-spending-statistics.
One way to reduce tuition is to raise philanthropic donations, but Catholic schools compete for such donations with other causes—including with other organizations affiliated with the Church that provide social services. These needs often take precedent and are likely to increase given the current economic context.

What about public funding? More than half of states plus the District of Columbia have adopted legislation to provide opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to enroll in private schools, including Catholic schools. This had led to the schools being able to rely on a modicum of public funding. Yet funding for these programs remains small, so that the share of Catholic school revenues coming from them is also small. Furthermore, the issue of whether the rise of charter schools is a positive development remains very much debated, and the possibility (which may depend on Supreme Court rulings) of faith-based schools to operate charter schools in the future is likely to be even more debated.

The affordability issue has however played out in different ways in different contexts for Catholic and other faith-based schools. While enrollment declined in Catholic schools in the 1990s and 2000s, it increased in many other types of religious schools and in private schools.\textsuperscript{10} It could be that private schools were at least in part shielded from the affordability issue because parents choosing these schools tend to have higher levels of income (income inequality has risen and incomes in the top part of the distribution have grown). But the difference in fortunes between Catholic and other religious schools is more puzzling and would warrant more research. One explanation could relate to the location of many Catholic schools. As many schools operated in cities, they were affected by the flight of the middle class to the suburbs and by competition from emerging charter schools. This may have been the case especially in low-income urban areas where Catholic schools experienced large losses in enrollment. Today more children are enrolled in charter schools in the United States than in Catholic schools.

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Weakened Perception of Excellence

Another factor that may have led to a reduction in enrollment is a potential weakening of the perception of Catholic schools as academically excellent. Many Catholic schools continue to be excellent, and many schools market themselves in part based on this excellence. Yet in relative terms, the question remains debated as to whether Catholic schools are on average today better academically than public or other private schools. If this is not the case especially for the well-to-do who can more easily afford the tuition required to enroll a child in a Catholic school, the ability of the schools to maintain or increase their enrollment based on a claim to academic excellence may be limited.

At the risk of simplifying the literature, one could argue that there may indeed be a benefit of enrolling in Catholic schools for some students in terms of their educational attainment (i.e., completing high school and going to college), but the benefits are less clear for measures of student performance such as test scores. In addition, the literature suggests that after controlling for student characteristics and self-selection, (1) the academic benefits from attending Catholic schools may not necessarily be large; and (2) the benefits may be observed mostly for low-income or otherwise disadvantaged students. This is very encouraging for the mission of Catholic schools to serve those at the periphery, but not so great for efforts to stem the decline in enrollment given that those students’ families may not have the means to afford the schools.

To illustrate this (admittedly broad-brush) summary of findings from the literature, consider the data on student performance from the National Assessment of Educational Performance. These data have suggested for many years that students in Catholic schools perform better on average than students in public schools. Yet there are two caveats. First, differences in performance are not very large and they tend decrease when controlling for the characteristics of the students enrolled (i.e., part of the differences in performance are due to differences in the characteristics

of the students who enroll in Catholic versus public schools). Second, there are few differences among students who perform well. The main differences are in terms of a smaller share of students in Catholic schools who do not meet proficiency levels. This is again great for the mission of Catholic schools to serve the less fortunate, but not for enrollment growth.

Some readers may be surprised to hear that on average, students in Catholic schools may not perform much better than students in public schools. Many Catholic schools still retain a perception of academic excellence, but cracks may be appearing. The market research data\textsuperscript{12} used in this article reached six conclusions, three of which relate to academic excellence: (1) most parents are well-informed, savvy consumers looking for schools that will position their child for success in college and beyond; (2) while many parents view Catholic schools positively, they worry that a greater emphasis may be placed on religious instruction than academics, which could put their child at a disadvantage; (3) in particular, Catholic schools are seen as not sufficiently emphasizing science and technology and as lacking diversity in their student body, both of which may again affect their children negatively.

\textit{Secularization}

Secularization has also been mentioned as a factor leading to the decline in enrollment. As noted in the latest Pew Research Center study on this topic, in 2021 less than two thirds (63\%) of the adult population identified as Christian, versus 78\% in 2007\textsuperscript{13}. Most of the decline was concentrated among Protestants, but the decline may still affect enrollment in Catholic schools. In proportion to base values in 2007, the drop in the share of the adult population praying daily decreased even more, but the largest drop in proportion to base values was for the share of adults considering religion as very important in their life. That share dropped from 56\% to 41\%, a drop of more than one fourth of the base value in 14 years. Apart from these broad trends towards secularization, the sex abuse scandal that has affected the Catholic Church especially in the Northeastern part of the country may also have contributed to lower enrollment in Catholic schools.

\textsuperscript{12} FADICA and NCEA, \textit{The Catholic School Choice}.
\textsuperscript{13} Smith, “About Three in Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated.”
There may be some untapped opportunities, however. The growing share of the Latinx population has long been heralded as such an opportunity, and it may explain why the share of Catholics in the adult population has remained relatively steady in comparison to the losses observed for Protestant denominations. Still, for this opportunity to be materialized through higher enrollment, efforts by Catholic schools will be required to reach out and provide cost effective option for enrollment since many Latinx families do not have levels of income that make Catholic schools affordable for them.

A broader question is how the focus on faith formation in Catholic schools is perceived in the population. For parents with their children enrolled in Catholic schools, there is support for current practices. But for the much larger group of parents who may be interested in the schools and for the overall population, perceptions may be different. The other three conclusions of the market research study mentioned earlier suggest the following: (1) while many parents do want their children to develop strong morals and good values, they worry that Catholic school teachings may be too rigid and prevent children from considering other points of view; (2) not surprisingly, parents are concerned about tuition costs in Catholic schools—the affordability issue; and finally (3) marketing materials focusing on religious instruction would probably not help to increase enrollment. This does not mean that Catholic schools should abandon their evangelical mission, but it suggests that they may need to carefully think about how to implement this mission in today’s societal environment.

**REASONS FOR HOPE: PARENTAL WILLINGNESS TO CONSIDER CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**

The previous section suggests that multiple factors may have contributed to the long-term decline in enrollment in Catholic schools in the United States. Yet one reason for hope for the future is that many more parents are willing to consider Catholic schools in comparison to the share of parents with their (youngest) child enrolled in the schools.

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14 FADICA and NCEA, *The Catholic School Choice*. 
To show that this is the case, consider the market research data already mentioned collected in 2017 for NCEA by Mayhill Strategies with support from the Catholic Education Philanthropy Working Group, FADICA, and the Philanthropy Roundtable. The report published on the data is available online.\textsuperscript{15} It combines quantitative survey-based analysis and focus groups. In what follows, the quantitative data are used for secondary analysis to assess how Catholic schools fare in comparison to other types of schools in terms of parental willingness to consider the schools for their (youngest) child. The brief secondary analysis for this article was conducted by the author using the unit (respondent) level data from the survey that was made available to the author by NCEA.

A total of 1,403 adult respondents responded to the survey. Respondents participated in the survey online, but survey weights were adjusted to lead to a nationally representative sample since potential target groups for enrollment in Catholic schools were oversampled (chiefly, adults from Hispanic or Latino background; see the report for details) and online responses may lead to bias if some groups respond more than others. Details on how the survey was conducted are available in the market research report. A very useful feature of the survey is that many questions on perceptions towards schools are asked for six different types of schools: (1) public schools (owned, operated, and funded by states); (2) charter schools (owned and funded by states, but privately operated); (3) magnet schools (public schools for highly talented students); (4) private secular schools; (5) Catholic schools; and (6) other religious schools.

As suggested in Figure 1, from the point of view of boosting or at least keeping enrollment steady, questions in the surveys can be used to assess perceptions of Catholic and other schools in a three-step logical framework based on questions asked in the market research survey. First, adults are asked how favorable their perceptions of Catholic and other schools are. If adults do not see a type of schools favorably, it is unlikely that they will consider this type of schools for their children. Next parents are asked if they would be willing to consider Catholic or other schools for their youngest child. Finally, we know in the survey if parents chose

\textsuperscript{15} FADICA and NCEA, \textit{The Catholic School Choice}. 
Catholic of other schools for their youngest child or another child. Analysis of these three sequential questions provides a useful framework for thinking about how to market Catholic schools to parents, and how large the potential market may be.

Figure 1: Thought Process for the Decision to Enroll One’s Children in a Specific Type of School

In terms of favorability, respondents could rate their perceptions of various types of schools as very favorable, favorable, unfavorable, and very unfavorable, or state that they never heard about the schools or did not know enough to respond. It turns out that in the population (the sample consists mostly of parents, but other adults are also included), traditional public schools have the highest shares of favorable ratings, and correspondingly the lowest shares of unfavorable ratings. The other five types of schools have similar favorable ratings, but Catholic and other religious schools have a comparatively higher share of very unfavorable and somewhat unfavorable ratings. Still, even for Catholic and other religious schools, the proportion of (very or somewhat) favorable ratings is larger than the proportion of (very or somewhat) unfavorable ratings.

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16 The figure is adapted with minor changes from Wodon, “Declining Enrollment in Catholic Schools in the West and Insights from the United States,” *Journal of Catholic Education* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 285-299. [http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2401182021](http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2401182021).

17 Analysis of favorability ratings is provided in Wodon, “Declining Enrollment in Catholic Schools.”
Results are similar for the willingness of parents to consider various types of schools for their youngest child. The question asked to parents is: “How willing, if at all, are you to consider sending your child to one of the following types of school for grades K-12 in your area in the future?” This question is asked only to the subset of respondents who have children, and specifically for their youngest child. Respondents may respond that they are very willing, somewhat willing, somewhat unwilling, or very unwilling to send their youngest child to various types of schools, with again an additional modality if they never heard about the schools or did not know enough to comment.

Table 1 provides the shares of respondents by category and by type of schools. Public schools have higher proportions of respondents very willing (43.7%) or somewhat willing (34.9%) to enroll their children in the schools, and lower proportions of respondents stating that they do not know enough to answer the question. Religious schools, whether Catholic or not, again score lowest. The response rates indicating a willingness to consider private, charter, and magnet schools are broadly similar, although private schools have a lower share of respondents declaring not knowing enough to respond. The shares of parents willing to consider Catholic and other religious schools is lower than for the other types of schools. This is not surprising. As mentioned earlier, according to the Pew Research Center, the share of Americans who state being Catholic has remained relatively stable over time and was estimated at 21% in 2021, but the share of Protestants has been declining, falling to 40% in 2021 from 52% in 2007. The share of adults not affiliated with any religion increased from 16% to 29% over the same period.

At the same time, the share of parents “very willing” to consider Catholic schools, at 27.1%, is much higher than the current market share of Catholic schools, estimated based on administrative data at less than five percent nationally for primary (elementary) schools and less than three percent at the secondary level (in the market research survey, the share of students in Catholic schools is a bit higher at 6%). Being willing to consider Catholic schools and enrolling one’s child in one of the schools are of course not the same thing. The actual decision to enroll depends on

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18 Smith, “About Three in Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated.”
many considerations, including the out-of-pocket cost of schooling as mentioned earlier. But the fact that more than a quarter of parents are very willing to consider Catholic schools for their children is encouraging.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Table 1: Willingness to Consider Enrolling Children by Type of School (%)}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public schools</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Charter</th>
<th>Magnet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very willing</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat willing</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat unwilling</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very unwilling</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never heard/don't know</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Private Schools</th>
<th>Private</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Other Religious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very willing</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat willing</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>29.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat unwilling</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very unwilling</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never heard/don't know</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s estimation with FADICA-NCEA 2017 survey.

While this Journal is not the place to provide a detailed econometric analysis of some of the characteristics associated with parental willingness to consider Catholic schools for their children, a few findings from such an analysis are worth noting.\textsuperscript{20} First, in comparison to respondents not affiliated with any religion, Catholics are substantially more likely to be willing to consider Catholic schools. In addition, parents who state that their faith is important to them and those attending

\textsuperscript{19} In previous work, I used these data to look at whether Catholic schools were viewed favorably or not by parents and at the heterogeneity in parental priorities for what children should learn in schools. In this article, the focus is related more directly to the competitive position of Catholic schools in terms of parents’ willingness to consider the schools for their children. As for favorability ratings, statistical analysis suggests a correlation between faith affiliation and whether parents are willing to consider Catholic schools for their children. The proportion of parents willing to consider Catholic schools is higher among Catholics, but many non-Catholics are also potentially interested in Catholic schools.

\textsuperscript{20} Results are available from the author.
religious services regularly are also more likely to be willing to consider Catholic schools. Finally, respondents who attended Catholic schools as children are also more likely to be willing to consider Catholic schools for their children.\textsuperscript{21}

None of those findings is surprising and they point to the importance for Catholic schools of transmitting the faith to students who are from Catholic families. However, another lesson from the market research data is that parents willing to consider Catholic schools do not have on average the same set of priorities for what their children should learn in school in comparison to parents with their children already enrolled in Catholic schools. Respondents in the survey were asked to choose three priorities among a set of nine for what their children should learn in school. For parents with a child in a Catholic school, deepening the faith is important, but for parents very willing to consider Catholic schools but not having enrolled a child in one, deepening the faith is not a key priority.\textsuperscript{22} Parents very willing to consider Catholic schools but not having enrolled their child in one place a higher weight on readiness for college and the labor market than parents with their child in Catholic school. What are the potential implications of this result? Catholic schools should not sacrifice their identity for the sake of attracting more students, but they need to think carefully about balancing priorities—such as emphasizing values apart from faith. This could help attract more students, and a more diverse student body, which could be beneficial for the students apart from stemming the decline in enrollment.

THREE UNTAPPED SOURCES OF COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE

Providing a comprehensive discussion of what Catholic schools could do to stem the long-term decline in enrollment and attract a larger share of parents “very willing” to consider them is beyond the scope of this article. There is no magic bullet,\textsuperscript{21} On the other hand, and again as expected, if parents who attended a Catholic school had a poor experience in Catholic schools when they were children, an even larger marginal effect in the other direction is observed.\textsuperscript{22} As discussed in Wodon, "Heterogeneity in Parental Priorities."
but beyond the usual emphasis on academic excellence, faith formation, and values, perhaps a few additional suggestions can be made to tap into sources of comparative advantage for Catholic schools that may have been neglected. In this section, three such sources of comparative advantage are explored. These three sources of comparative advantages are not meant to be exhaustive, but illustrative of some of the strengths that Catholic schools could tap into.

**Engaging Catholic Education Alumni**

While Catholic universities in the United States have a long tradition of engaging alumni, alumni support remains largely untapped for K12 schools. And yet, this potential has never been greater than today simply because after five decades of declining enrollment, the US is an outlier in terms of the ratio of Catholic school alumni to the number of students currently enrolled. Engaging just a fraction of these alumni could make a large difference.

Global and regional estimates of the number of alumni from Catholic primary and secondary education can be computed based on past enrollment data. There are assumptions involved, hence estimates are only tentative. But for the ratio of alumni to current students, the story is clear: North America, which in practice means the United States since enrollment is much smaller in Canada, has by far the largest ratio of alumni to current students in Catholic schools. Due to the decline in enrollment observed for half a century, the ratio of alumni per student in North America is at more than twice the level observed globally.

Engaging these alumni already makes a difference. In the United States, philanthropic giving accounts for less than one percent of the cost of operating (public) schools. In Catholic schools, philanthropy contributes more when subsidies and grants from parishes are included in the estimation. This is in part because each year collections for Catholic schools are implemented in parishes, and many

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23 This section is shortened and adapted from Quentin Wodon, “Catholic K12 Education Alumni: A Unique, Yet Mostly Untapped Resource,” *Momentum* (Late Fall 2021): 30-32.

parishioners contribute during Catholic Schools Week. Still, the share of funding from philanthropy is very low.

Yet funding is only part of the story as alumni could contribute in many other ways. For example, some alumni may be willing to serve in tutoring programs that often have positive effects on student performance. Even if the effects of tutoring programs are found to be stronger on average for tutoring by teacher and paraprofessional than by volunteers, alumni could really help, especially in the early grades when tutoring is most effective.

While tutoring is especially effective in the early grades, other modes of alumni engagement can be beneficial for high school students. This includes career fairs where alumni share their experience and their passion. College fairs may also be useful for recent alumni to share insights about their college experience and how to get into specific colleges. As mentioned earlier, preparing students for college and the labor market are high priorities among parents willing to consider Catholic schools. Alumni can help and engaging them is not rocket science. Tools can be used for reaching out and finding how they would like to be engaged. As just one recent example, public schools in San Diego carried a formative study of efforts to increase alumni engagement that is a useful read.\(^\text{25}\)

**Investing in Socio-emotional Skills**\(^\text{26}\)

Catholic schools—and the Pope himself—have long decried an excessive emphasis placed by school systems on student performance as measured by standardized assessments. Beyond cognitive skills, research suggests that five core skills related to social and emotional learning (SEL) enable success at school and in life: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.\(^\text{27}\) Given their mission and values, many Catholic schools already embrace SEL, but some schools could do better. There is no trade-off here as research shows

\(^{25}\) Susan Yonezawa et al., *The Educational Value of Alumni for Public High Schools* (San Diego: Yankelovich Center for Social Science Research, University of California San Diego, 2019).

\(^{26}\) This section is shortened and adapted from Molly McMahon and Quentin Wodon, “Investing in Socio-emotional Skills: Natural for Catholic Schools, But Still More Needed than Ever,” *Momentum* (Winter 2022): 42-44.

\(^{27}\) See the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) at [https://casel.org/](https://casel.org/).
that socio-emotional skills can be learned\textsuperscript{28} and can also improve cognitive skills.

Investing in SEL can be done through available resources\textsuperscript{29} or through school-developed lessons. This is not a matter of adding an extra class on SEL per week to the curriculum, but rather to weave SEL through the whole curriculum, reinforce progress when students demonstrate an acquisition of those skills, and provide support when this is not the case. One particular framework used for SEL in the United States is the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.\textsuperscript{30} This pro-social approach helps students to understand norms for their school and their community, with competencies to be acquired defined by grade.

The main rationale to teach SEL to students is not economic: it is to help students become well-rounded adults who can contribute to their family, community and society. But as mentioned earlier, many parents pay attention when choosing a school to the ability of the school to prepare their children for college and the labor market. This was one of the conclusions of the market research mentioned earlier. The good news is that SEL interventions may have high returns. A recent study from the World Bank on ending violence in schools includes a brief review of SEL programs.\textsuperscript{31} Acquisition of socio-emotional skills often leads to gains in well-being, positive attitudes, and pro-social behavior, reductions in risky behaviors such as violence and substance abuse, and improvements in academic performance, all of which can lead to success in adulthood in the labor market. In secondary schools, approaches such as cognitive behavioral training have proven effective for at risk adolescents. Interventions can also be implemented to prevent dating violence and help adolescents to build and maintain healthy relationships. After-school programs that combine recreational activities and academic support


\textsuperscript{30} See https://www.pbis.org/.

\textsuperscript{31} Quentin Wodon et al., *Ending Violence in Schools: An Investment Case* (Washington, DC: The World Bank and Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, 2021)
may reduce violence, as is the case for programs designed to reduce bullying.\(^{32}\) A synthesis of cost-benefit analyses of SEL and related interventions suggests that many interventions generate larger benefits than their costs.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests benefits from SEL for staff.\(^{33}\) Teachers may progress in their own emotional awareness, empathy, perspective taking and meaningful conflict resolution. With both students and teachers benefiting, this may transform the entire culture of a school. This happened in some schools during the COVID-19 pandemic as teachers started to reach out more to parents to find out what families needed rather than filling in a narrative about parents’ lack of involvement.

**Establishing Global Connections**

Finally, a third source of comparative advantage for Catholic schools that often remains untapped is the possibility of establishing global connections. Catholic schools operate in most countries of the world, with 35 million students enrolled at the primary level, and 19 million at the secondary level according to the latest statistics from the Vatican.\(^{34}\) Because schools in different countries share a common ethos, there are a wide range of opportunities for students in the United States to learn and exchange views with students in other countries—including simply by Zoom or other forms of digital connectivity. This can also be done by public schools, but perhaps less naturally.

As a recent example of initiative tapping into this potential for global connections, the International Office of Catholic Education recently launched a “Planet Fraternity” project to facilitate connections across schools. Students in a school in one country work together with students and a partner school from another country on

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32 On the economic benefits of SEL programs in comparison to their costs, see Clive A. Belfield et al., “The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning,” *Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis* 6, no. 3 (December 2015): 508-544, [https://doi.org/10.1017/bca.2015.55](https://doi.org/10.1017/bca.2015.55).

33 McMahon and Wodon, “Investing in Socio-emotional Skills.”

themes related to Pope Francis’ encyclicals (especially *Laudato Si’* and *Fratelli Tutti*) and the United Nations’ 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). English is used as a common language. The project builds on online resources created by professionals to build commitments towards fraternal humanism and safeguarding the common home. During the school year, a different topic is explored each month to structure exchanges of views between students. These themes relate to the various SDGs (e.g., providing quality education for all; ending extreme poverty; ensuring good health and wellbeing; protecting the planet; and reducing inequalities). The project started recently, but already 2,400 students from 15 countries are participating. This type of initiatives could easily be scaled up and could help students in Catholic schools better understand the world and create bonds of fraternity with students in other countries, while also strengthening their own identity.

**CONCLUSION**

Enrollment in Catholic schools in the United States has been declining for half a century. Broad societal trends, including a process of secularization, a lack of affordability of Catholic schools, and the risk of a weakening of the perception of their academic excellence are not encouraging for future enrollment. At the same time, there is hope since recent market research suggests that many parents who have not enrolled their children in a Catholic school would be “very willing” to consider doing so. Attracting those parents may require some adjustments and flexibility, for example for tuition payments for families that suffered from income losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. But Catholic schools also have comparative advantages that they should build upon.

It is often recognized that Catholic schools need to strive to be excellent academically speaking. It is also clear that they need to transmit the faith, especially for students who are Catholic themselves. Finally, they need to promote strong values among students. In addition, to improve the lived experience of students in school,

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this article has suggested that the schools could perhaps also tap into sources of comparative advantages that have been somewhat neglected. Three such sources of comparative advantage have been suggested: (i) engaging the large number of Catholic education alumni in comparison to the number of students enrolled; (ii) strengthening the emphasis on socio-emotional learning across the curriculum; and (iii) building global connections. These are but three ideas, and many other suggestions could be made to tackle the challenges faced by Catholic schools in the United States. But while there is no magic bullet to stem the decline in enrollment, a stronger emphasis on those three comparative advantages could perhaps help, at least a little bit.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Decline in Student Enrollment, Parental Willingness to Consider Catholic Schools, and Sources of Comparative Advantage in the United States


