



Public Sector Services

The COVID 19 Crisis: A Catalyst for Change in Catholic Education

Over the last decade, **Catholic schools have faced a combination of challenges unlike any other time in their history.** Decades of enrollment decline and increased costs from the decline in religious orders operating schools have long been understood as a barrier to sustainability. Parishes have experienced decreasing levels of attendance and Catholicity. Financial pressures, including new waves of lawsuits due to changes in statutes of limitation, pose an existential threat to Catholic education.

Many Catholic school organizations have failed to adjust to shifting populations or declining enrollment, which has contributed to low class sizes and an inability to cover costs with tuition. Historically, Catholic schools have failed to consolidate when necessary; instead, in an effort to avoid the political challenges of closures and regionalization, dioceses continue to invest in struggling schools long after their fate is clear. In order to maintain enrollment, some Catholic schools have diluted their Catholic identity to appeal to a broader base of potential students.

COVID-19 has placed even more pressure on Catholic schools. Key to their success will be the continued focus on demonstrating the value of a Catholic education. Maintaining enrollment and collecting tuition in the distance learning environment has been a particular challenge, especially at the Pre-K and Nursery levels.

COVID-19 has created a new level of crisis for Catholic schools. Schools are facing reduced revenue from student withdrawals and requests for tuition forgiveness. Masses and devotions have moved online, limiting offertory collections and casting doubt on parishes' abilities to support school subsidies.

Now, Catholic schools have to make difficult personnel decisions and are looking to their philanthropic communities for support at a time when resources are becoming limited. Schools are also looking to government programs and other funding to survive in these uncertain times.

The complete impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the health of the Catholic school's people, schools, and parishes is yet to be totally understood; but, the unfortunate reality is that many parishes and schools will be forced to close as a result of this crisis. Rather than passively allowing themselves to be passengers in this crisis, Catholic schools should use this crisis as the opportunity to accelerate the radical transformation that is necessary for survival. Resources should be allocated to a strong base of schools from which families can obtain an outstanding Catholic education rather than devoting resources to schools that struggle to stay alive and have fallen well behind their peers.

**Strong Catholic schools support
strong Catholic families and communities**

1. Rogers Berner, A. (2019, July 11). The Case for Educational Pluralism in the U.S. Manhattan Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/educational-pluralism-in-united-states>

2. Lavertu, S., & Crawford, W. (2018). High School Options and Post-Secondary Student Success: The Catholic School Advantage. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 21(2). Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1182406.pdf>

3. Porter Magee, K. Catholic on the Inside: Putting Values at the Center of Education Reform. Retrieved from <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/traditional-charter-schools-lessons-from-catholic-schools>

The Indispensable Value of a Catholic Education

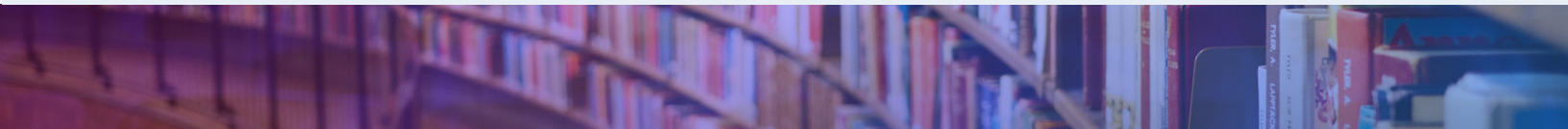
Catholic School students outperform public school students on reading and math, are more likely to graduate from college, and are more likely to choose a religious vocation or life of service to the Church.

Research shows that students who graduate from Catholic schools are more civically involved and engage in less risky behavior than their public school peers.³

Catholic schools provide an education that is deeply rooted in the Catholic faith, with a focus on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

“Catholic educators have a deeper motivation that has to do with what we believe about objective truth, including the deepest truth of who our students are.”

–Kathleen Porter-Magee, Manhattan Institute 2019



Take Decisive Action Now to Stabilize Schools and Support Students

Create Strong Distance Learning Programs to Support Students

- Take advantage of the relative lack of red tape compared to public schools in order to adapt quickly and excel in the transition to distance learning
- Strengthen Catholic identity by adapting daily prayer, sacramental preparation, and religious education to the distance-learning environment and inviting families to be more active participants
- Create spaces that encourage collaboration between principals and teachers to share best practices, lesson plans, and alleviate the larger burden of planning for remote learning
- Enable teachers to foster a personal connection via phone calls to support students in under-resourced communities with limited connectivity
- Critically examine the academic value Catholic schools are providing to students and adapt curriculum to be more rigorous
- Utilize temporary waivers of state and federal requirements to ease transformation

Take Action to Preserve the School's Financial Strength

- Develop an accurate weekly cash flow forecast to assess each school's cash needs
- Maximize Federal and State (if applicable) relief options – CARES Act
- Reduce school costs, prioritizing reductions in non-essential spend followed by support roles instead of reduction in classroom teachers
- In more extreme cases, evaluate across the board pay reductions in lieu of ending the school year early
- Set up payment plans for families struggling to make tuition payments

Support Pastors, Principals and Teachers

- Create a diocesan-led fundraising campaign to help parishes and schools
- Create a diocesan-led project management team focused on providing guidance and support on complex labor and financial issues
- Position the Diocesan schools office to aggregate and share best practices in distance learning
- Develop standardized tools and templates to assist business management of schools

Make Tough Decisions Now to Ensure a Sustainable Future

Focus on Fall 2020 Enrollment

- Establish a person or team in each school focused on tracking enrollment for Fall 2020
- Proactively reach out to families most at risk of not returning
- Promote distance learning programs on social media to showcase the hard work and dedication of the principals and teachers and encourage new families to enroll
- Understand any enrollment impact of COVID-19 early to guide planning for the future

Utilize COVID-19 as Impetus to Close Underperforming Schools

- Evaluate the strength of each school's Catholic charism, academic programs, enrollment, and financial health
- Consider closing schools that have insufficient cash reserves to survive this period and are struggling in the other areas of Catholicity, academics and enrollment
- Consolidate, concentrate and reinvest resources in larger, stronger schools

Plan for Fall 2020 School Opening

- Identify and administer a baseline assessment to understand losses in learning
- Develop plans to ensure students stay healthy when they return to school, including social distancing and building cleanliness
- Prepare to have additional mental health supports in place for impacted students
- Ensure a continuity plan is in place if distance learning programs must be provided again during the 2020-21 school year

Rebuild for the Future

- Invite Catholic school families to embrace a more robust vision of what Catholic identity and Catholic charity truly means - reinvest in the core values of the Church and develop a new vision that emphasizes family participation and a greater commitment to church life
- Streamline the diocesan schools office to support fewer schools and monetize excess real estate
- Demonstrate decisive action and transparency to gain support from sophisticated donors

CONTACT US

A&M is available to help dioceses conduct quick financial assessments, assess the scope of potential school closures, and engage key stakeholders to manage change.



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