



## Roundtable Resources

PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR CATHOLIC LEADERS

# Fostering Strong Catholic School Enrollment

It's Catholic Schools Week, and for Catholic schools around the U.S., that means the launch of enrollment season!

While this season is a time for much joy and celebration of the gift of Catholic education, this season can also be fraught with anticipation and worry for principals and pastors whose schools have struggled with declining enrollment, because declines are often a precursor to school closure.

While Catholic schools—particularly those that serve historically underserved communities—face significant challenges that make boosting enrollment difficult, there remains much that school and parish leaders can do to attract and retain young families. Indeed, while the context within which a school operates can make the work easier or more challenging, in the end, enrollment gains or losses are not something that happens only to schools. They are something that happens **because** of a combination of community context, school policy, culture, and leadership.

## The Path to Increased Enrollment

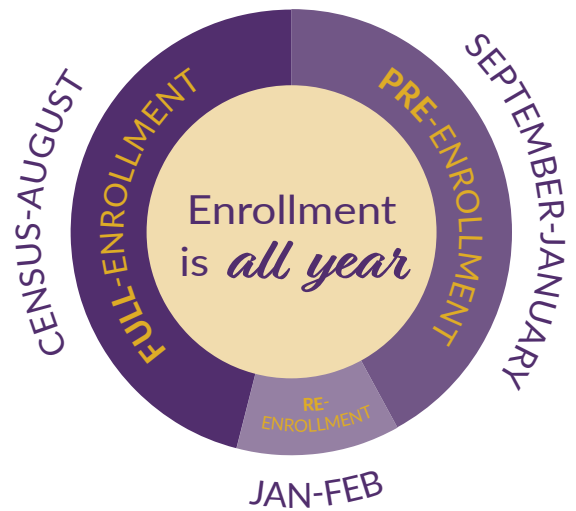
Critical to leveraging the power and potential of Catholic education to rebuild thriving parish communities is finding ways to attract and retain young families. To that end, it can be easy to think of enrollment as a once-a-year event—a moment in time when schools need to ramp up marketing and outreach to try to find new families. Often, that work takes the form of seasonal marketing, re-enrollment incentives and discounts, and open houses. While these can be useful tools in the enrollment or re-enrollment toolkit, they actually play a very small part of a school's effort to build (or rebuild) thriving school communities.

In fact, for schools facing enrollment challenges, declines are often a symptom of a problem, **not** the problem itself. **Just as a fever tells you that there is an infection or a virus that the body needs to fight off, declining enrollment tells leaders that there is something not working in the school community that will need to be addressed to help ensure enrollment increases endure.**

It stands to reason then to prioritize strategic solutions over temporary fixes to ensure sustainable growth.

Most importantly, enrollment isn't one person's job—it's everyone's job. Parents choose schools because they are more than classrooms—they are communities. So every interaction with a member of the community is a way to showcase what makes our Catholic schools special—what helps them form students in virtue and values.

As parish and school leaders kick off their Catholic Schools Week re-enrollment and enrollment push, below are some tips to help make the most of the **pre**-enrollment period, the **re**-enrollment period, and the **full**-enrollment period.



## Pre-Enrollment: From September through January

While, for many Catholic schools, enrollment season kicks-off in January with Catholic Schools Week events and celebrations, the reality is that significant planning is needed to set up pastors, principals, and parents for success. Therefore, once the school year kicks off—and certainly just after enrollment numbers are finalized for the current year—it's already time to begin planning for the year ahead.

Importantly, the pre-enrollment period should focus on evaluating existing policies related to admissions, tuition, scholarship, and budget, with an eye toward how to reduce barriers to entry and open the school doors wide to as many new and returning students as the school can serve.

To that end, the two critical stages of the **pre**-enrollment period are: *Get Set* and *Simplify*.

### *Get Set*

Enrollment season cannot officially kick off until schools have set policies for the year ahead. Among the policies pastors, principals, and school boards can consider as they plan for the year ahead are:

**Scholarship, Tuition, and Fees** — Perhaps the most obvious decisions that need to be made during the pre-enrollment period are related to tuition, fees, and scholarships. But the question can—perhaps *should*—go beyond “by how much should we raise tuition?” Instead, consider:

- Does our tuition reflect our full cost-to-educate? If not, should we shift from a “tuition” model—where the subsidy that the parish or school covers is hidden from parent view—to a “cost-to-educate” model that more transparently communicates not just what parents are being asked to pay, but how much of the full cost is covered by other sources (scholarship, parish, etc.)?
- Do our family and sibling discounts help us attract families, or do they add complexity to the tuition model? Is there a way to simplify?
- Do we have a clear-eyed look at our budget for the next year? Have we considered budgeting an emergency fund for families who face legitimate and unexpected hardships that could lead to missed tuition payments?

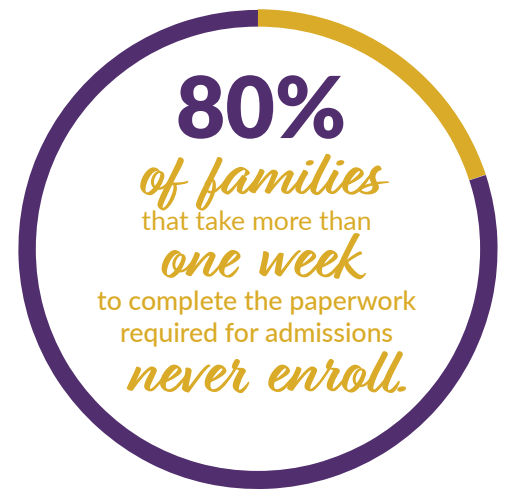
**Timelines and Decisions for Scholarship and Admissions** — One hidden challenge to boosting Catholic school enrollment is the barriers leaders create that deter prospective new families. These barriers generally take two forms: paperwork barriers that are required for scholarship and admissions decisions to be made, and selective admissions policies.

- **Paperwork barriers to entry**

In a well-intentioned effort to collect critical student and family information, too many Catholic schools have inadvertently created paperwork burdens that become so onerous, interested families are discouraged from even applying. For instance, in order to qualify for scholarship support, families that face financial hardship often have to complete complicated financial-aid forms or submit up-to-date tax records, often before taxes are even due.

While income verification and other paperwork are necessary for the start of school, these needn't become admissions barriers. In fact, organizations that support Catholic school leadership and success have found that as many as 80 percent of families that take more than one week to complete the paperwork required for admissions never enroll in Catholic schools.

Therefore, efforts to build stronger Catholic school communities should start by asking, “How can we reduce the paperwork burden on families and also reduce the time from inquiry to enrollment?”



- **Shift from “admissions” to “enrollment”**

While Catholic schools were initially founded to serve all students in the parish community, they evolved over time to become more selective. Of course, there are elite, independent Catholic schools for which admissions standards are essential to maintain academic rigor, but most local parish and diocesan schools still exist to serve the community. And, while there may be some students with special needs for which a Catholic school may not be the best fit, embracing an “all are welcome” attitude is essential to building community and boosting enrollment.

There are lots of reasons why schools should consider shifting from an admissions-mindset to an enrollment-mindset. For starters, by bringing an exclusive “admissions-mindset” to Catholic school enrollment, schools may unintentionally deny admissions to students who would actually thrive in—and benefit from—the warm, supportive culture that a faith-based school provides. In addition, selective admissions barriers generally slow down the enrollment process for families, which can act as a deterrent to enrollment growth for struggling schools.

At the same time, one critique of embracing an enrollment-mindset over an admissions-mindset is that Catholic schools are meant to stand apart in terms of culture, values, and discipline from other schools. It threatens the fabric of our school communities if they sacrifice standards to boost enrollment.

The reality, however, is that Catholic schools' strong culture and reputation for safety and rigor depend **not** on being selective and refusing admissions to students with behavioral or academic challenges, but rather by the classroom and school culture that is built once the students arrive. The reputation that Catholic schools have built as being safe and academically rigorous was driven by our strong instruction, our faith and values-filled culture, **not** by selective admissions.

Building that classroom culture and community can be challenging, but there are tools and resources that principals can use at the start of the year to set teachers—especially new teachers—up for success. But the work to build thriving classroom communities begins by opening doors wide to the community today.

With that in mind, one thing for leaders to think about during the pre-enrollment period is whether—or how—they can work to shift from an “admissions” to an “enrollment” mindset.

### *Simplify*

In addition to the considerations above, schools can think about how to simplify and focus the parent communication, outreach, and enrollment processes—all with the goal of making it as easy as possible for new and returning families to understand their processes. Clear, enthusiastic, streamlined communications is a critical, perhaps under-appreciated, component of enrollment marketing. After all, how a school communicates—the warmth it exudes, how welcoming it feels to new students—gives families a flavor of what it will be like to join the school and parish community.

## Re-Enrollment: Late January to February

The most reliable way to stabilize and increase enrollment over time is to retain the students already in your building. The reality is that the vast majority of a school's re-enrollment work is connected to the ongoing community-building that happens every week, all year long. Everything that schools already do—from school plays to family game nights to sporting events and more—are opportunities to strengthen the bonds between families and their parish and school community.

In addition to that critical community-building work, the time-bound re-enrollment work intensifies the day that re-enrollment kicks off—generally during Catholic Schools Week. As schools work to maximize this re-enrollment work, there are two things to think about:

### *Shrink the Timeline*

In order to stabilize a school community, re-enrollment should typically hover around 80-90 percent of eligible students. However, the longer it takes to re-enroll returning students, the less bandwidth a team has to attract new students. **Therefore, the goal should be to get to at least 75 percent re-enrollment before March 1.**

To hit that goal, re-enrollment incentives can be used to build excitement, to build community, and to spark action. Some of the best enrollment incentives include:

- Dress-down days in K-8 schools for classrooms who get to 90 percent or more re-enrollment by Valentine’s Day.
- A free tuition raffle for anyone who re-enrolls before March 1.
- Customized giveaways, like branded stuffed animals for the youngest students, hats and backpacks for older students, or special tee-shirts for seventh and eighth graders/upperclass students.

There are undoubtedly more ways to encourage schools to hit their re-enrollment goals, and, in fact, the best ideas are those that your community generates on their own, because the ideas that work are the ones *your community* is most excited about.

### *Make it Sticky*

One of the most important things to consider when launching re-enrollment incentives is how to ensure that the incentives you launch today don’t make it hard to retain students tomorrow.

Often, schools offer registration fee discounts as a key re-enrollment incentive. However, if you discount the fee too much to get an early re-enrollment boost, you make it easier for a family to walk away because of the fee later. Said more simply: in order to ensure that your re-enrollment numbers reflect authentic intent to stay, it is important to consider policies that make it less likely that families will say yes today and no tomorrow.

To that end, consider instead shifting from “registration fees” or “enrollment fees” to non-refundable tuition deposits. These might make families think twice before re-enrolling, but it will also make your re-enrollment stickier over the long term.

## Full-Enrollment: From March to Census Pushing (beyond!) Capacity

The final stage of the enrollment cycle—which is often the part of the enrollment work that gets the most attention—is the push to full enrollment, which involves attracting and enrolling new students and families. Critically, because attrition happens naturally every year, schools should be working to enroll beyond capacity. Particularly in high-attrition grades, schools that don’t push beyond capacity will end up under-enrolled by the start of the year.

Even more importantly, though, are three things that are central to efforts to attract new students, and really, to every stage of the enrollment cycle:

- Leading with your “why”
- Strengthening systems and tracking data
- Building community, leading with strength.

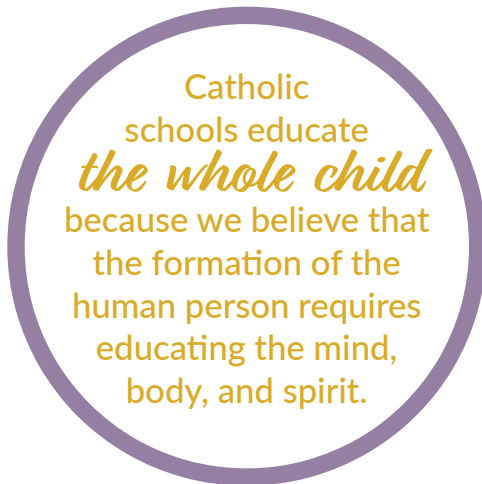


Parents choose schools because they are more than classrooms—*they are communities.*

## *Leading with Why*

When it comes to rebuilding Catholic school communities, it's important to put your "why" front and center. Our schools are part of our broader Church ministry. Our historic academic success stems from our Gospel-driven call to seek objective Truth, and to learn about what is true, good, and beautiful.

Over the past several decades, one of the challenges that struggling Catholic schools have faced is trying to "compete" with public schools, often by looking more and more like them. But this has actually accelerated the enrollment declines more than it has helped them rebuild. After all, if there is no meaningful difference between Catholic and "free" public or charter schools, why seek a Catholic education?



But the reality for Catholic schools—just as with any mission and values-driven institution—is that leading with your mission, vision, and purpose is the clearest path to growth and thriving. That's because people are drawn to a clear "why" more than they are attracted to a "what."

That is to say, Catholic schools educate the whole child because we believe that the formation of the human person requires educating the mind, body, and spirit—that catechesis is not something to "add on" to education, but rather it's something that is best infused throughout a school's community, culture, and curriculum. The pursuit of academic excellence, then, stems from something deeper.

Therefore, the path to rebuilding strong school communities is leading fearlessly with your "why." To be sure, Catholic schools can express their why—their charism and culture—differently. But it stems first and foremost from the mission to teach the faith and to proclaim the Gospel. By being clear about this and strengthening our Catholic identity and culture, school enrollment efforts will be more successful.

## *Strengthen systems, track data*

While it's important to reduce the paperwork and barriers that interested families face as they decide whether to enroll in Catholic schools, it's critical for schools to build, or leverage if already in place, an infrastructure that allows them to track inquiries and analyze data over time. That is because, quite simply, numbers don't lie. And "eyewitness" accounts of what works and what doesn't when it comes to boosting enrollment can be unreliable.

For instance, one thing that has been reported repeatedly, particularly in urban Catholic schools, is that there is always a "first week of school" enrollment boost because principals often experience an influx of new students who transfer in, even after school has just started. The feeling of accepting new transfer students adds to the energy and hustle and bustle of the new year, and it can feel like this "first week of school" boost is helping rebuild a struggling school community.

However, when you track the data, the reality is that the slower drip of students who are lost between April and August is far greater than the flurry of new students who arrive and seek to transfer in September.

Tracking your data and understanding where the leaky pipes are in your enrollment processes is critical to maintaining re-enrollment and building strong systems for new student enrollment.

## *Build community, lead with strength*

Finally, the appeal of Catholic schools for many parents is that they are so much more than just classrooms: they are communities that support the moral, academic, and spiritual growth of their children. Therefore, it's important to remember that enrollment is a year-long activity that involves (and includes) everything your school does to build community. Bingo nights, plays, basketball games, and family movie and games nights are just as important to the enrollment process as are Catholic Schools Week activities. And the best way to attract new families is to welcome them into your community early, and to engage them often.

To that end, think about creative ways to stay connected to families that have inquired about your school—invite them to events, check in on them; call them by name into your community.

## Conclusion

In the end, while there are common practices that can support pastors and principals seeking to boost school enrollment, the truth is that the best marketing strategy is a strong, welcoming, faith-filled community. To that end, for leaders wondering where to begin, start by engaging the entire community—faculty, staff, students, and parents—in efforts to attract new families and to make them feel welcome. The energy and enthusiasm of an already engaged community is the best-kept secret to boosting school enrollment.



# LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE

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