

## Writing a New Story for Catholic Schools:

# Explaining Why Catholic Schools Are Worth the Investment

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## Part 1: ROI Indicators

**I recently noticed a big billboard in one of our larger cities that shouted, “A high quality school for free— Jones Public High School” (pseudonym). I stood there looking at the billboard, and I asked myself out loud, as if speaking back to the sign, “Is it really free?” Of course the answer is no, because schools operated by local governments are funded by the taxes paid by citizens. So why the not-so-true message proclaimed so loudly?**



Parents have a choice. Parents have the legal right to choose where their child attends school. This right of parents to choose a school for their children was spelled out in the Supreme Court Case *Pierce v. the Society of Sisters* (268 US 510). As more and more parents exercise this right to choose a school for their child, all PK-12 educational leaders are exploring how best to communicate to parents what their school can offer (Burke, 2016). Thus, the billboard. But

if we are going to tell parents what a school can offer their children, the best strategy is to tell them the truth. So in this two-part series, we highlight the return parents and students can expect on their investment in a Catholic school. We will then debunk some common myths about Catholic PK-12 schools in order to make a case that Catholic schools are worth the investment in time, talent and treasure.

## **Return on Investment (ROI)**

### **Indicator #1: Graduation Rates, Employment Rates and Median Earnings**

Understandably, parents and other stakeholders want to see a return on their investment (ROI) in Catholic schools. One good indicator of the ROI provided by Catholic schools is the comparison of graduation rates between Catholic high schools and public high schools. At the completion of the 2012-2013 school year, 99.3 percent of students in Catholic high schools had graduated, while 82 percent of students in public high schools had graduated (Broughman & Swaim, 2016; Kena et al., 2016; most recent comparative data available). Clearly, Catholic schools provide a better ROI than public schools on this indicator. Also, when you consider how public schools calculate their graduation rates, the reported 82 percent graduation rate for public high schools would actually be much lower if public schools used the same method to calculate graduation rates that is used by Catholic schools (Kamenetz, 2015).

The National Center for Education Statistics does not currently report comparable graduation rate data for public charter schools. What we can say in general about charter schools, based on the available data, is that their ROI is inconsistent, something that an investor would definitely see as a negative quality.

DePaoli, Balfanz, and Bridgeland (2016), who have researched public charter school graduation rates assert, "Charter and virtual high schools are overrepresented among the nation's low-graduation-rate high schools," and go on to point out that for some states, "they have become one of the biggest

sources of non-graduates" (p. 33). Furgeson et al. (2012), who have studied entities called Charter Management Organizations, note that there are wide variations in high school graduation rates among public charter schools. Some charter high school graduation rates approach the rate achieved by Catholic high schools, while other charter high school graduation rates (77 percent) fall well below the national graduation rate achieved by Catholic high schools (99.3 percent). Since graduation rates for public charter high schools vary widely across the United States, we suggest that educational leaders in PK-12 Catholic schools speak with local and state educational agencies to attain comparative data. We also suggest that you ask parents and prospective students to ask charter schools to share their graduation rates. Then parents and prospective students will be able to accurately assess the return on investment (ROI) they can expect from each type of school.

In addition to sharing comparative data on high school graduation rates to demonstrate the Catholic school ROI, PK-12 Catholic school leaders can flesh out for parents and prospective students why high school graduation rate is an important factor to consider when choosing a school. Parents may state that a "free" public school is hard to pass up. But the truth is that parents would be smart to invest in a Catholic high school, since high school graduation is a key to success in life. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics (Kena et al., 2016) reports on two indicators that point to the importance of earning a high school diploma: employment rate and median earnings. In general, the

employment rate is higher for those who have achieved higher levels of education. For example, the employment rate for young adults ages 20-24 who graduated from high school (67 percent) was higher than the employment rate for those who had not finished high school (51 percent; Kena et al., 2016). Individuals who complete high school also earn more money per year than those who do not (Kena et al., 2016). So Catholic educators can tell parents that their child is much more likely to graduate from high school, have a job and earn a good salary if they choose to send their child to a Catholic school. That is an ROI that any parent can understand.

### **ROI Indicator #2: College Enrollment Rates, Employment Rates and Median Earnings**

The clear difference in parents' ROI in either a Catholic school or a traditional public school is evident when one reviews college enrollment rates, employment rates and median earnings. A review of the most recent comparative data on enrollment in college immediately after high school graduation demonstrates that PK-12 Catholic schools are doing an outstanding job of preparing their students to attend four-year colleges when compared to public schools (Table 1). It is also important to note that the unemployment rate for adults with a bachelor's degree was just 5 percent in 2015, and the median salary for adults with a bachelor's degree was \$22,000 higher than for adults who only earned a high school diploma, and \$17,000 higher than for adults who only earned an associate's degree (Kena et al., 2016).

**Table 1: Immediate College Enrollment Rate**

	% of Graduates from Catholic HS in 2013	% of Graduates from Public HS in 2013
Enrolled at 2-year college	not available	29
Enrolled at 4-year college	85.2	37

Source: Broughman & Swaim, 2016; Kena et al., 2015.

Certainly, public charter schools are another option that families may consider. And although charter school data on immediate college enrollment rates are not currently reported by the National Center for Education Statistics, using data collected by other researchers, we can estimate that the immediate four-year college enrollment rate for graduates of public charter schools is in a range between 47 and 51 percent (Booker, Gill, Sass, & Zimmer, 2014). To obtain the most accurate information, we suggest that PK-12 Catholic school leaders encourage parents and prospective students to ask charter schools to share their immediate college enrollment rates.

As parents explore the ever-widening number of PK-12 school options, it is important for school leaders to tell them what the graduates of Catholic PK-12 schools are doing, as an important indicator of the ROI provided by Catholic schools. We suggest that Catholic educational leaders track graduates' post-high school successes in the job-market, military service, and in one- and two-year college programs. Adding this information to our data about four-year college enrollment rates will assist in showing parents the real long-term difference Catholic schools can make for their children. Also, a more complete picture of what Catholic high school graduates do after graduation could aid us in making a case to our communities that parental choice should be a funded choice. Since Catholic schools yield a

better ROI, as measured by high school graduation rate, college attendance rate, employment rate and median earnings, employers and taxpayers could be convinced that Catholic schools are the better investment for the community.

### **ROI Indicator #3: School Climate & Student Success**

One important reason why students in PK-12 Catholic schools are so successful is that the teachers in these schools have time to provide individualized help for their students. From 2011 through 2016, the National Catholic Educational Association monitored the student-teacher ratio in Catholic schools. Over this time period, the student-teacher ratio in Catholic PK-12 schools remained constant at 13 students to one teacher (McDonald & Schultz, 2016).

Byrk, Lee, and Holland (1993) state that there is a discernable difference in school climate between private and public schools. Byrk et al. note that students feel safe and secure in Catholic schools. Byrk et al. attribute these feelings of safety and security to regular and consistent student discipline and a shared philosophy and purpose for the school.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) uses 23 different indicators to report on PK-12 school climate in the United States. These indicators track reports of very serious violent disruptions in schools; such as violent deaths and the presence of firearms at school, as well as other issues related to student safety and well-being at school;

including general discipline problems and bullying.

In general, we can say that the data collected by NCES has demonstrated that private school students have reported safer school environments than students in public schools. This difference is especially evident in student reports about gangs at school and student reports of feeling afraid at school (Table 2).

Data reported by NCES on school climate are consistent with data reported by Fan, Williams, and Corkin (2011). Fan et al. found that when asked to rate their perceptions on three dimensions of school climate, students in both private and Catholic schools rated their school climates more positively than did students in public schools.

In terms of bullying at school, however, Catholic schools need to improve. For example, in 2013, 22.4 percent of students ages 12-18 in Catholic schools reported being bullied at school, while just 21.5 percent of students ages 12-18 in public schools reported being bullied at school (Zhang, Musu-Gillette, & Oudekerk, 2016). The National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) has resources that school leaders can use to address bullying in Catholic schools. One resource is titled, *School Violence Prevention Workbook, Stopping Harassment & Hazing*, and is available at [www.ncea.org](http://www.ncea.org).

While feeling safe at school and having a good environment for learning are less quantifiable than other aspects of a school's performance, school

leaders can creatively share this quality with parents and interested students. Warren Buffet, an American financier well known for his acumen in investing, notes that getting to know a company and its products before making an investment is critical for a successful return on investment. So educational leaders can develop ways for prospective students to get to know a school; for example, by providing ways for elementary students to participate in events at a Catholic high school, providing opportunities for potential new students to spend a day at the school, and connecting teachers with potential students. School leaders could also develop talking points to use with interested parents and potential students that describe what a particular school is doing to enhance student safety, well-being and overall school climate. Given the prevalence of bullying in all schools previously documented in this article, we suggest school leaders make a special point of addressing this issue with potential parents after they have first made strides to reduce bullying in their schools.

Word of mouth among parents, youth and community members may well be the most important way that prospective parents and students will learn about the climate of your school. What is the word on the street about your school? What can you do to change the commonly held perception of your school in the community in order to increase the number of people who invest in your school?

## ROI Indicator #4: School Programs & Student Success

Catholic schools are different from public schools and public charter schools, and that is a good thing. Parents are becoming more selective in the educational choices they make for their children, so it is in our best interests to highlight for parents and potential students the unique opportunities available to them in Catholic schools. Here is a short list of what makes Catholic schools different and enables these schools to yield a very high return on parent and student investment of time, talent and treasure.

- The presence and positive influence of priests, religious, deacons, and campus ministers
- Opportunities for Mass, Confession and retreats
- Sacramental preparation and connections with local Catholic parishes
- Inclusion of religious education across the school curriculum
- A values-centered student formation program
- Cocurricular programs for all students
- Parent resources and groups
- Opportunities for younger siblings

The real difference between Catholic schools and public schools is difficult to encapsulate in a short list. But if we briefly review the four indicators of return on investment Catholic schools provide to parents and students, we can put everything we have documented into perspective. For example, we have learned that virtually every student in a

Catholic high school will graduate from high school (99.3 percent), over 85 percent of these students will then attend a four-year college and their quality of life will be enhanced both through meaningful employment and a good salary. We have also learned that the reason for this phenomenal success story is individual attention, a safe and structured school environment and a faith-filled school experience for every student. With these indicators of success in your portfolio, we feel confident that you can explain to parents and potential students why your Catholic school would provide an excellent ROI, both now and in the future.

*Note from the authors: The four authors of this article are all members of a professional service organization; Catholic Higher Education Supporting P-12 Catholic Schools (CHESCS). Responding to a request from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2005) to Catholic institutions of higher education, CHESCS seeks to discover new ways to assist PK-12 Catholic schools. One concrete way that CHESCS will assist PK-12 Catholic schools is through research initiatives. This article represents one research contribution by CHESCS that can be practically applied by stakeholders in PK-12 Catholic schools. Our topic for this article – why Catholic schools are worth the investment – was suggested to us by seven superintendents of United States Catholic schools who completed a survey given by CHESCS.*

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**Table 2: Student Reports of Safety at School**

	% of Students Who Said Yes 2001		% of Students Who Said Yes 2003	
	Public	Private	Public	Private
Gangs are present in my school.	21.6	4.9	13.3	2.3
I avoid one or more places, activities, or classes at my school because I am afraid of being attacked or harmed.	4.9	2.0	3.9	1.0

## Writing a New Story for Catholic Schools:

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## Part 2: Debunking Catholic School Myths

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As mentioned in Part 1, several metrics comparing Catholic schools with public schools and charter schools, making a strong case for Catholic schools as the best investment for parents and students based on:

- **Graduation Rates, Employment Rates & Median Earnings**
- **College Enrollment Rates, Employment Rates & Median Earnings**
- **School Climate & Student Success**
- **School Programs & Student Success**

But in order to seal the deal, we now set out to debunk four common myths your prospective parents and students may have heard about Catholic schools.

### Myth #1: Students of Different Racial and Ethnic Groups Will Not Have Friends Like Themselves in a Catholic School

The percentage of racially and ethnically diverse students has been steadily increasing in Catholic schools across the United States. For example, in 2010, racially and ethnically diverse students made up 29.8 percent of the total PK-12 Catholic school student population (McDonald & Schultz, 2010). Six years later, in 2016, racially and ethnically diverse students made up 36.4 percent of the Catholic school student population (McDonald & Schultz, 2016).

We believe it is important to tell all parents about the racial and ethnic diversity of Catholic schools. Parents want their children to be career-ready when they graduate from high school and college, and in our increasingly diverse culture, being career-ready means being able to work with racially and ethnically diverse people. Catho-

lic schools are definitely assisting with career-readiness by creating school environments that are coming close to the racial and ethnic makeup of our cities and workforce.

### Myth #2: Students Who Are Not Catholic Do Not Attend Catholic Schools

The number of non-Catholic students attending Catholic schools is also on the increase. In 2010, non-Catholic students made up 14.5 percent of the national PK-12 Catholic school student population (McDonald & Schultz, 2010). In 2016, the percentage of non-Catholic students in PK-12 Catholic schools had risen to 17.4 percent. An additional 2.9 percent of students in 2016 did not report their religious affiliation, which could indicate that the percentage of non-Catholic students attending Catholic schools is closer to 20 percent (McDonald & Schultz, 2016).

Moving forward, leaders in Catholic schools will need to carefully plan



how to talk with prospective parents about the religious diversity of their schools. We think that admitting non-Catholic students to Catholic schools provides advantages for all students attending Catholic schools. A religiously diverse student body will assist all students with preparing for a workforce that is religiously diverse. At the same time, an integral part of a Catholic school education is the Catholic faith formation program for students that is integrated into every program and course in the school. We suggest that school leaders partner with the NCEA

to develop best practices in communication, marketing and programming to use in Catholic schools that are religiously diverse.

### **Myth #3: Catholic Schools Do Not Provide Additional Help for Students**

Increasingly, Catholic schools are providing additional help for those students who need these services (Boyle, 2016). Examples of additional help Catholic schools are providing to students include (McDonald & Schultz, 2016):

- Extended day programs
- Transportation to and from school
- Free breakfast
- Free lunch
- Academic assistance

Offering these and similar services to students in Catholic schools is consistent with our charism of providing individualized help for students. We know our small class sizes and caring environments make the difference for our students, and prospective parents need to know this as well. Creativity is the key to debunking the myth that Catholic schools still use a “sink or swim” model with students. For example, Creighton College Preparatory School (2016) in Omaha, NE published a document entitled 10 Myths About Creighton Prep and Some Helpful Answers. In this document, school leaders provided key information to prospective students and parents; such as how transportation needs can be addressed, how academic assistance is provided, some facts about the Catholic character of the school, and a description of the racial, ethnic and religious makeup of the student body. Developing a similar document to share with your prospective parents and students may help you convince them that your school is the right choice for them.

### **Myth #4: We Cannot Afford to Send Our Son or Daughter to a Catholic School**

This may be the most important myth we need to debunk. Remember the billboard we mentioned at the beginning of this article? True or not, many people will say that schools operated by municipal and state agencies are “free public schools for everyone.” So how do we compete with “free” schools, including “free” public charter schools?



We think there are two effective strategies to help make PK-12 Catholic schools even more affordable. First, leaders in Catholic schools can make affordability a priority. Through working with people in their communities, school leaders can develop scholarships, work-study programs and flexible payment plans. Would it be possible to endow half the desks in your school in the next 10 years? Each desk or group of desks could be named in honor of a benefactor of your school. If Catholic schools really have made a difference in the lives of their graduates, it makes sense to ask them “to pay it forward.” For we believe that our country will only change for the better when our educational system becomes more effective, values-centered and open to parental school choice.

In addition to new school advancement strategies, we think that a second way to increase the affordability of Catholic schools for parents is by convincing all Americans that we need Catholic schools for the common good. Public charter schools have developed as one way to direct Americans’ tax dollars to a new type of school. We believe a next natural step in this evolution would be to develop a way for American’s tax dollars to fund private schools. An increasing number of states are providing tuition vouchers, tax-credit

scholarships and tuition tax credits to support private schools for the common good (McDonald, 2016). We suggest that by working together, all of us in Catholic school education – NCEA, USCCB, religious orders, diocesan Catholic conference, and school leaders – could make the full meaning of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Pierce v. the Society of Sisters* (268 US 510) a reality.

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# Catholic School

# EDUCATION

