## Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate Georgetown University Washington, D.C.

## Catholic Schools in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Importance in Church Life, Challenges, and Opportunities

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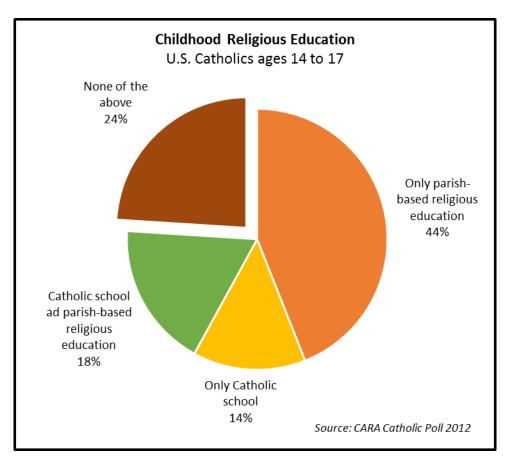


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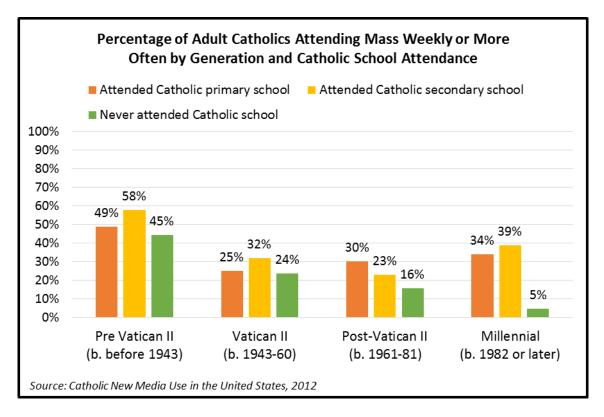
#### The Impact of Catholic Schools

What is the impact of Catholic schools on the Church in the United States? Answers to this question are entangled with generational changes. In CARA's national surveys of the adult Catholic population (CARA Catholic Polls; CCPs) a majority of those of the Pre-Vatican II Generation (born before 1943) and the Vatican II Generation (born 1943 to 1960) say they attended a Catholic primary school (51 percent). However, in the generations that followed many fewer report enrollment. Only 37 percent of Post-Vatican II Generation (born 1961 to 1981) Catholics and 23 percent of adult Catholics of the Millennial Generation (born 1982 or later) have attended a Catholic primary school at some point.

CARA surveyed an oversample of teenagers, ages 14 to 17 in 2012. As shown in the figure below, 14 percent said they attended a Catholic school only. An additional 18 percent attended Catholic schools and parish-based religious education. Overall, one in four Catholic teens reported having no religious education.



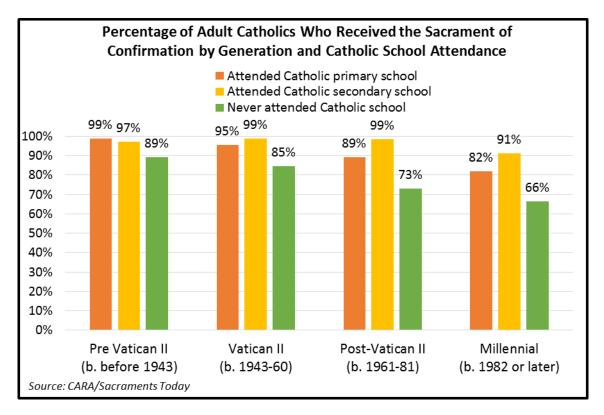
As shown in the figure below and on the next page, having attended a Catholic school has an effect on frequency of Mass attendance—especially among Millennial Generation Catholics.<sup>1</sup> Only 5 percent of Millennials who never attended a Catholic school go to Mass weekly compared to more than a third who attended Catholic schools.



Catholic school attendance is important for Mass attendance among older generations as well. However, the attendance gap between those with enrollment in Catholic schools and those without this is largest for those born 1982 or later.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> CARA Catholic Polls are conducted with GfK Custom Research/Knowledge Networks. A national random sample of adult Catholics are surveyed over their computer or through a television-based interface. This reduces social desirability bias that occurs when surveys are conducted with human interviewers. It is well understood that respondents over-report their church attendance in telephone or face-to-face polling. This problem is minimized using the methods CARA employs in its national surveys.

One of the strongest effects of Catholic schooling is on the Sacrament of Confirmation. The number of Confirmations celebrated in the United States has been in decline since 2009. Part of this decline is likely linked to changes in Catholic schooling. As shown below, the likelihood that one will be confirmed is much higher among those who attended Catholic schools. Only two-thirds of self-identified Catholics who never attend a Catholic school are confirmed compared to 82 percent of those who attende a Catholic primary school and 91 percent of those who attende a Catholic high school.

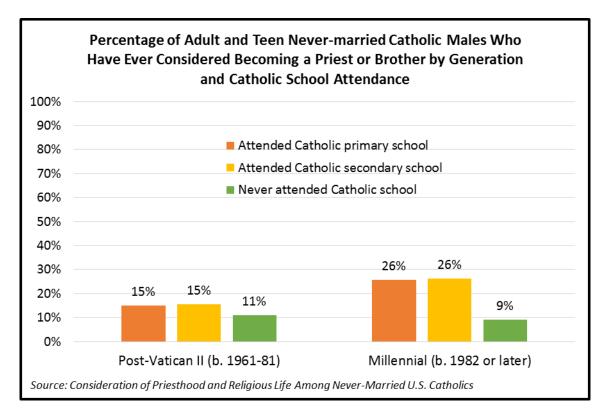


Yet this figure likely underestimates the impact of schools. As Pew found in the 2009 study, *Faith in Flux*, "Religious change begins early in life. Most of those who decided to leave their childhood faith say they did so before reaching age 24. ... Religious commitment as a child and teenager may be related to the propensity to change religion. The survey finds key differences, for example, in the levels of teenage (ages 13-18) religious commitment between former Catholics who have become unaffiliated and those who have kept their childhood faith. Former Catholics who are now unaffiliated are much less likely than lifelong Catholics to have attended Mass regularly or to have had very strong faith as teenagers."

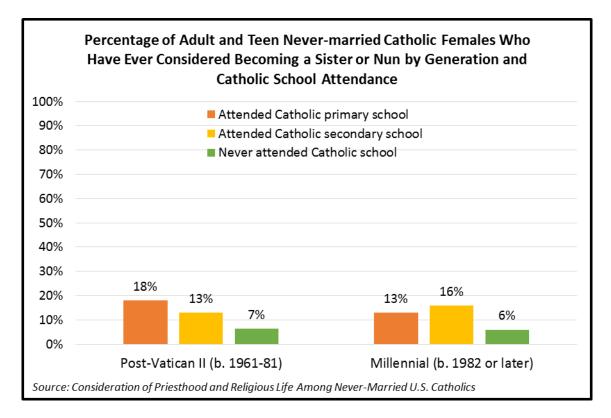
Thus, it is likely that some Catholics who never attend a Catholic school leave the faith before or shortly after becoming adults. These losses are not captured in the figure above, which only includes those who continue to self-identify as Catholic as adults.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> CARA estimates that nearly eight in ten Americans raised as Catholics who attend Catholic schools (primary and/or secondary) self-identify as Catholics as an adult. By comparison fewer than seven in ten of those raised Catholic who did not attend a Catholic school remain Catholic as adults.

Another area where Catholic schools have a strong impact is on vocations. As shown below, among never-married Millennial Generation male Catholics (ages 14 and older) who have attended a Catholic school, more than one in four indicate that they have considered becoming a priest or brother. Only about one in ten of those who did not attend a Catholic educational institution indicate this.



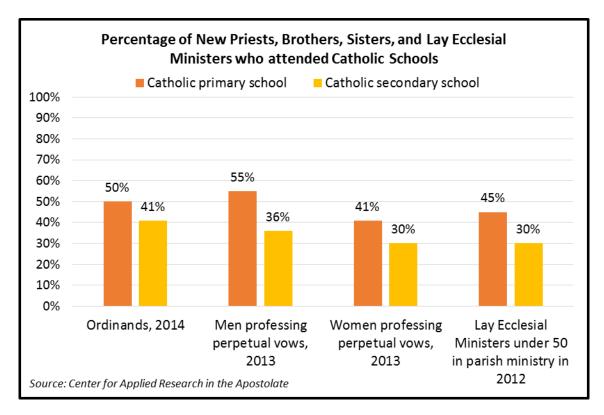
As shown below, among never-married Post-Vatican II and Millennial Generation female Catholics (ages 14 and older) who have attended a Catholic school, 13 percent or more indicate that they have considered becoming a sister or nun. Only about 6 to 7 percent of those who did not attend a Catholic educational institution indicate this.



If fewer and fewer Catholics enroll in Catholic schools it will become ever more challenging for the Catholic Church to foster vocations to the priesthood and religious life.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The connection between Catholic schooling and vocations is found to be robust and statistically significant even after controlling for a variety of other factors (e.g., enrollment in parish-based religious education, frequency of Mass attendance, race and ethnicity, income, other youth experiences). See: *Consideration of Priesthood and Religious Life Among Never-Married U.S. Catholics* (2013).

Catholic schools provide a major source of vocations and ministers. As mentioned previously only 37 percent of Post-Vatican II Generation Catholics and 23 percent of Millennial Generation Catholics have attended a Catholic primary school at some point. Yet, half or more new priests (50 percent) and brothers (55 percent) attended Catholic primary schools as did 41 percent of new sisters and 45 percent of young lay ecclesial ministers.



Without Catholic schools the next generation of Church leaders would be more difficult to recruit and form in the numbers that will be needed for a growing Catholic population.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, the long-term benefits of Catholic schools in making Mass attendance more likely and helping ensure young Catholics are confirmed (and remain Catholic as adults), along with the importance these institutions play in fostering Catholic leaders likely outweigh many short-term financial considerations. The Catholic Church will be weakened by significant future losses of Catholic schools.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> CARA estimates that the Catholic U.S. population will be about 100 million in 2050. It numbers approximately 78 million now (survey-based estimate of self-identified Catholics)

#### **Challenges and Opportunities**

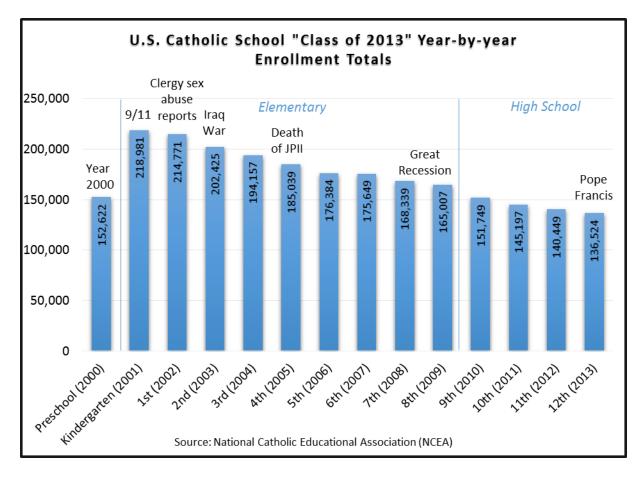
Catholic schools are facing demographic (i.e., fertility and mobility) and economic challenges (i.e., recession, financing, and the impact of tuition costs on parental decisions).

Some of the most recent decline in Catholic school students is simply a function of fewer Catholic children. For example, in 2000 there were 213,723 students enrolled in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade in the 6,923 Catholic schools in the United States. By comparison, in 2013, there were 140,680 students enrolled in that grade in 5,472 schools. On top of losing seats in 1,451 schools there were also 56,729 *fewer* children in the baptismal cohort for the fourth graders of 2013 compared to the baptismal cohort for 4<sup>th</sup> graders in 2000 (1,008,226 infants were baptized in 1990 compared to 951,497 in 2003). Declines in fertility and infant baptisms are now impacting the lower primary school grades and will likely do so for the foreseeable future.<sup>5</sup>

Comparing Grade-level Catholic School Enrollments and Infant Baptisms for School Year Cohorts, 2000 to 2013						
	Change in Enrollments, 2013 compared to 2000	Change in Infant Baptisms for grade cohort, 2013 compared to 2000				
Kindergarten	-71,790	-140,328				
1st	-84,554	-64,157				
2nd	-82,258	-121,343				
3rd	-76,958	-91,768				
4th	-73,043	-56,729				
5th	-66,565	45,061				
6th	-57,239	28,067				
7th	-46,280	58,252				
8th	-40,507	40,097				
9th	-23,609	16,926				
10th	-15,037	53,381				
11th	-9,435	28,594				
12th	-6,419	16,395				
Source: National Catholic Educational Association, The Official Catholic Directory						

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The U.S. fertility rate has been below "replacement level" (2.1 births per woman) since the recession began in 2009 and has yet to recover. The decline in Catholic infant baptisms pre-dates this recessionary effect and dates to 2003.

Catholic schools are also suffering from a slow year-to-year losses within cohorts. The figure below isolates the Class of 2013. In 2001, 218,981 students in this cohort enrolled in Catholic schools. Each year, fewer in this cohort enrolled in Catholic schools. The 12<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment for the cohort was 62 percent of the Kindergarten enrollment. Some of these losses were likely created with the aforementioned closures of Catholic schools during their educational years.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> When a school closes, parents may not seek out the next closest available Catholic campus and opt for public schooling or another private or charter school option.

A national random sample of Catholic parents interviewed for CARA's *Primary Trends, Challenges, and Outlook: Catholic Elementary Schools Since 2000* (2006) indicated that the top reason parents chose to enroll children in Catholic schools was for "quality religious education" followed by a "safe environment." Thus, parents are not looking for a Catholic version of their local public school. The most distinctive aspect of Catholic schools that lead to enrollment is religious education.

In making this decision [to enroll a child], how important were the factors listed below?					
Percentage of Catholic parents who have or plan to enroll					
a child in a Catholic school responding "very important"					
Quality religious education	81%				
Safe environment	79				
Quality academic instruction	78				
Discipline and order	65				
A sense of community	61				
An affordable tuition	50				
A connection to parish life	43				
Well maintained school facility and grounds					
Up-to-date classroom technology					
Availability of financial assistance for tuition and other school costs					
Opportunities for students to volunteer or provide civic service					
Quality extracurricular activities	24				
An up-to-date library	23				
Welcoming environment for non-Catholics	23				
Music, arts, and drama programs	22				
Welcoming environment for students with special needs and/or disabilities	22				
Athletics, competitions, or intramurals					
Availability of busing	13				
Source: Primary Trends, Challenges, and Outlook: Catholic Elementary Schools Since 2000 (2006)					

The one factor that dissuades Catholic parents the most from enrolling children in Catholic schools is tuition costs. Whether parents choose to enroll children or not, a majority cite tuition costs as a problem for them. Parents also cite insufficient tuition assistance—especially those choosing not to enroll their children.

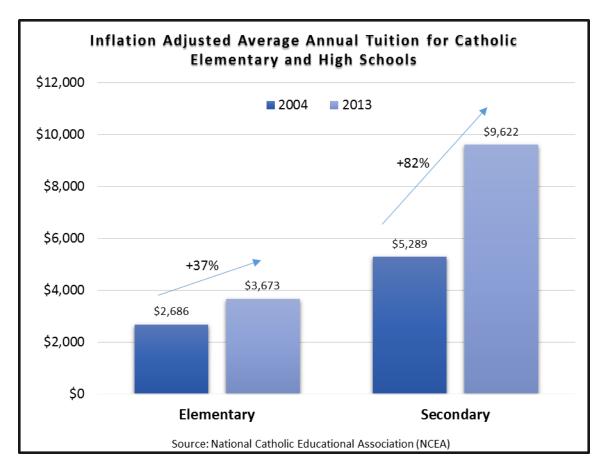
# To what extent were the following a problem when making your Catholic school enrollment decision...

Percentage of each group responding "somewhat" or "very much"

	All Catholic Parents	Parents Enrolling	Parents Not Enrolling			
Tuition costs	53%	50%	54%			
Insufficient tuition assistance	44	26	47			
Child's school preferences	29	13	33			
Lack of transportation and/or busing	27	14	29			
Location of school campus	25	24	26			
Competition from local public schools	23	15	24			
Perceived quality of academic program	22	24	22			
Lack of extracurricular programs	20	15	21			
Availability of parish religion education classes	16	17	16			
Limited or no space at the school; waiting list used	16	26	14			
Turnover in teachers at the school	14	16	14			
Lack of after-school care programs	14	12	14			
Competition from local charter schools	11	6	12			
Source: Primary Trends, Challenges, and Outlook: Catholic Elementary Schools Since 2000 (2006)						

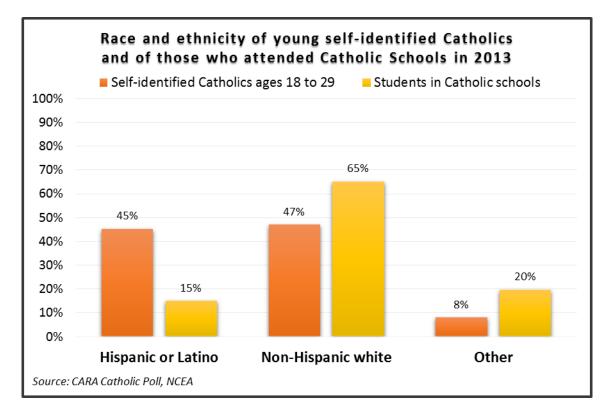
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In the last 10 years, inflation-adjusted elementary school tuitions have increased by 37 percent and high school tuitions by 82 percent. The percentage of school costs covered by these tuitions has remained relatively stable with costs of schooling having risen as quickly as tuition. Sixty-eight percent of per pupil costs are covered at the elementary school level and 82 percent at the high school level. Tuition costs, especially since the Great Recession of 2009, have likely been a substantially important factor in declining enrollments.



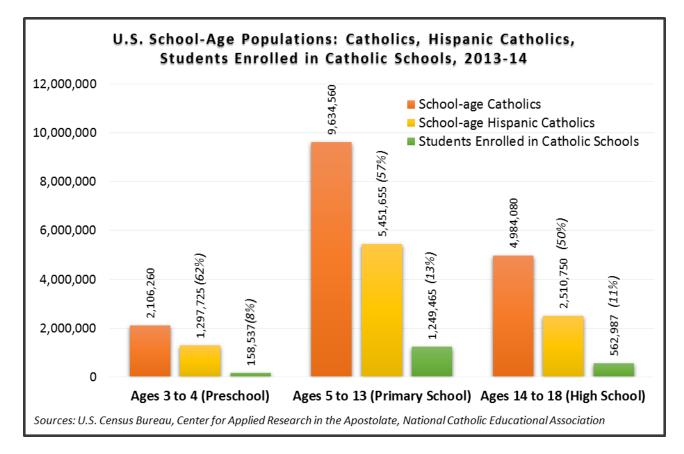
The percentage of students in Catholic schools receiving federally subsidized free or reduced price lunches, an indicator of the numbers of students in families facing financial difficulties, has remained relatively stable in the last decade at 9 percent.

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that the median household income for Hispanic families in the United States is about 64 percent of what the average non-Hispanic white family earns.<sup>7</sup> It is reasonable to assume that the cost of tuition is likely a greater burden among Hispanic Catholic families than non-Hispanic white Catholic families. This is important as Hispanic Catholics are much more numerous among Catholics of child-bearing age than older generations. Yet they are disproportionately underserved by Catholic schools. Although 45 percent of Catholics between the ages of 18 and 29 self-identify as Hispanic, only 15 percent of students enrolled in Catholic schools is Hispanic.



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2009, Current Population Reports

As shown in the figure below, the 50 percent or more of the school age Catholic population at all levels during the 2013-14 school year were Hispanic. During this school year, Catholic educational institutions enrolled less than 15 percent of the school age population at each level. Reaching out to and increasing enrollment among Hispanic Catholics would be vital and important to any efforts to increase enrollments nationally.



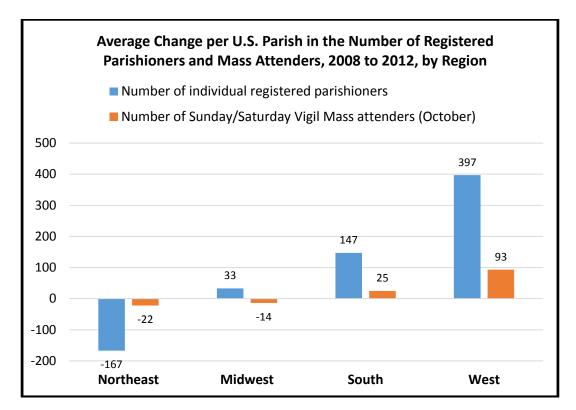
A lack of Hispanic Catholic enrollments is not simply an issue of finances.<sup>8</sup> The Hispanic Catholic population is concentrated in the South and West and this is an area where Catholic schools may be less available or have waiting lists. While 53 percent of the overall U.S. Catholic population lives in the South or West, 76 percent of Hispanic Catholics live in these regions.

Cultural issues may also play a role. Many Hispanic immigrants may be less inclined to seek enrollments in Catholic schools because they feel that these institutions are for the wealthy or elite, which has often been the case in many Latin American countries.<sup>9</sup>

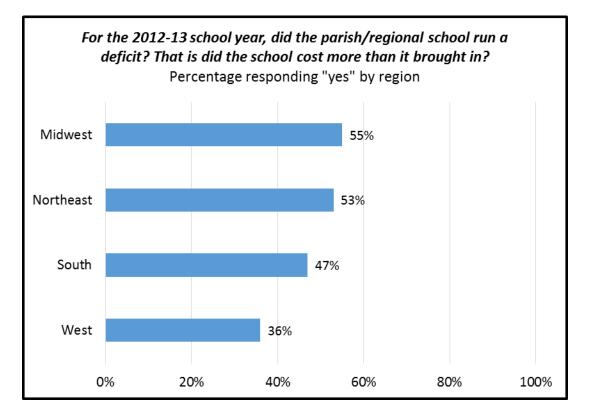
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> However, in CARA surveys, after controlling for income, age, frequency of Mass attendance, education, region, and availability of financial assistance (public or private), Hispanic Catholic parents are no more or less likely to enroll children in Catholic schools than Catholic parents of other races and ethnicities. Source: *Primary Trends, Challenges, and Outlook: Catholic Elementary Schools Since 2000.* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> An exception would be schools operated by Fe y Alegría.

As the figure below from a 2013 CARA survey of U.S. parishes shows, there is substantial growth in parishes in the West and South while in the Northeast and Midwest there is some evidence of losses. Pastors in the Northeast, on average, indicate that they lost 167 registered parishioners and 22 Mass attenders from 2008 to 2012. In the Midwest there hasn't been a decline in registered parishioners but the number of Mass attenders during this period, on average, dropped by 14 per parish.



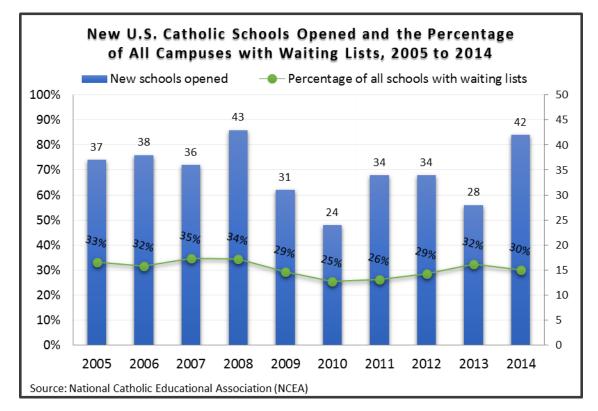
Overall, half of pastors in parishes with schools nationally indicated that their school ran a deficit in the 2012 to 2013 school year. As the figure below shows, this is most common in the Northeast and Midwest where mobility and demography are most disadvantageous for Catholic schools.



There are 31 U.S. dioceses where the number of parish-connected Catholics (i.e., registered or attending Mass) per elementary school exceeds 20,000. Most of these are in the South or West. Alternatively, there are 34 U.S. dioceses where the number of Catholics per elementary school is under 5,000. Many of these are in the Midwest or Southern states bordering the Midwest.

Dioceses where the number of parish- connected Catholics per elementary school exceeds 20,000		Dioceses where the number of parish- connected Catholics per elementary school is less than 5,000		
Brownsville (TX)	97,680	Jefferson City (MO)	2,169	
Las Vegas (NV)	78,771	Memphis (TN)	2,550	
El Paso (TX)	68,955	Wheeling-Charleston (WV)	2,700	
San Bernardino (CA)	61,391	La Crosse (WI)	2,768	
Atlanta (GA)	55 <i>,</i> 556	Springfield-Cape Girardeau (LA)	2,914	
Fresno (CA)	53,747	Great Falls-Billings (MT)	3,022	
Laredo (TX)	51,059	Covington (KY)	3,188	
Las Cruces (NM)	44,215	Lexington (KY)	3,251	
Dallas (TX)	38,853	Owensboro (KY)	3,308	
Orange (CA)	38,370	Wichita (KS)	3,309	
Fort Worth (TX)	37,778	Belleville (IL)	3,350	
Lubbock (TX)	36,264	Peoria (IL)	3,394	
Colorado Springs (CO)	33,043	Jackson (MS)	3,409	
Rockville Centre (NY)	32,584	Evansville (IN)	3,437	
Austin (TX)	31,540	Mobile (AL)	3,552	
Corpus Christi (TX)	26,500	Springfield (IL)	3,567	
San Angelo (TX)	25,743	Steubenville (OH)	3,603	
Sacramento (CA)	25,133	Lincoln (NE)	3,613	
Galveston-Houston (TX)	23,628	Indianapolis (IN)	3,738	
Boston (MA)	23,535	Gaylord (MI)	3,779	
Reno (NV)	23,418	Oklahoma City (OK)	3,795	
Santa Fe (NM)	22,992	Fort Wayne-South Bend (IN)	3,898	
Metuchen (NJ)	22,570	Salina (KS)	3,985	
Scranton (PA)	22,466	New Ulm (MN)	4,026	
San Antonio (TX)	21,918	Omaha (NE)	4,272	
Trenton (NJ)	21,777	Crookston (MN)	4,301	
Salt Lake City (UT)	21,308	Dubuque (IA)	4,361	
San Diego (CA)	20,989	Nashville (TN)	4,372	
Phoenix (AZ)	20,922	Altoona-Johnstown (PA)	4,376	
Venice (CA)	20,641	St. Louis (MO)	4,645	
San Jose (CA)	20,345	Duluth (MN)	4,701	
		Kansas City-St. Joseph (KS)	4,797	
		Superior (WI)	4,909	
		Tulsa (OK)	4,940	
Source: The Official Catholic Directory				

The Catholic Church could likely successfully construct many new Catholic schools in areas where the Catholic population is growing strongly (e.g., Las Vegas, Atlanta, Dallas, San Bernardino). These campuses would replace closing campuses in the Midwest and Northeast and maintain the Church's capacity to provide education for the shifting U.S. Catholic population. Some of this is occurring. Since 2005, the Church has established 347 new schools. Also during this period about three in ten schools have had waiting lists (i.e., 1,986 schools with waiting lists in 2014).



In sum, the opportunities for growth in the number of Catholic schools and enrollments is in the South and West and among Hispanic Catholic families. Challenges will remain. Tuition costs and financing school operations remain as significant hurdles. However, the Church may best evaluate these costs in relation to the aforementioned long-term benefits of having more young Catholics enrolled in Catholic schools.