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Factors Influencing Parent Choice of a Suburban Catholic Parish Elementary School

Lori Lopez Arends

Dissertation Committee

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

Department of Education Leadership, Management, and Policy

Seton Hall University

2021

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN SERVICES  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION LEADERSHIP MANAGEMENT & POLICY

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**APPROVAL FOR DISSERTATION PROPOSAL**

**Lori Arends** has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the Ed.D. during this **Spring Semester**.

**Title of Proposed Dissertation:** Factors Influencing Parent Choice of a Suburban Catholic  
Parish Elementary School

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## **Abstract**

Catholic schools across the country serve a valuable role in their communities as a source of academic strength, faith formation, and as a support system for families. The decline of Catholic school enrollment continues to be a source of challenge for families seeking a Catholic education for their children as well as for the Catholic school leaders working to sustain and grow their schools. The purpose of this study is to explore the influences that impact parental decisions in selecting a suburban Catholic parish elementary school in northern New Jersey for their children. This study seeks to learn more about parents' motivators, opinions, perceptions, and concerns about Catholic education and their overall priorities for their children's education as they relate to selecting a parish elementary school for their children. The study investigated the following research question and sub-questions: (1) How do parents describe the primary contributors to the decision-making process when they enroll their child/children in a northern New Jersey suburban elementary parish school? (1a.) How do parents describe the initial motivators that drive them to consider a parochial elementary school? (1b.) How do parents describe their decision-making process?

This qualitative study gathered open-ended interview responses from 18 parent participants who were randomly selected from three Catholic parish elementary schools in northern New Jersey. Interview questions were designed to elicit reflective responses on the experiences of participants as they initially selected a Catholic elementary school as well as their experience in re-enrolling each year. The findings from this study reflect the emphasis parents place on the academic program, faith formation, and relationships within the school community.

## **Dedication**

To my daughters, Mya and Ryan, who will always be my strength. You both inspire me to be the very best version of myself.

## **Acknowledgments**

I am deeply grateful for the support, love, and encouragement of my family, friends, and colleagues. The strength I gained along the way from each person's positivity cannot be measured.

I am blessed with parents, Rosalie and Tony Lopez-Lopez, who have taught me about faith and love through their example. Their limitless support is a foundation upon which anything is possible.

Thank you to my mentor, Dr. Barbara V. Strobert. Her depth of knowledge, candid feedback, thoughtful reflection, and her joyful positive goodness inspired me through this process and will always be a source of great inspiration to me.

Thank you to my colleagues in SHU Cohort 22. Their friendship, professionalism, and constant encouragement has meant very much to me throughout this program. They each lead in their schools with grace and goodness, and I am honored to call them my colleagues and friends.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

School choice has been an area of ongoing focus and debate for decades and arguably since the founding of Catholic schools over 200 years ago. This study explores how Catholic school parents make the decision to send their child to a parochial school. The ramifications of recent economic trends, demographic shifts, and generational decision-making patterns continue to impact the enrollment of parish elementary schools. These shifts require school leaders to remain constantly engaged in strategic planning as they work to both mitigate enrollment decline as well as strive to grow their school communities in ways that meet the needs of prospective families as well as the families they already serve. Parents have a growing number of options when considering the perfect fit for their child's school years, while their decision-making process is also directly influenced by a number of external and internal factors.

Belfield and Levin (2016) write extensively about school choice as well as its place and implications in the landscape of education in the United States. The authors discuss parent decision-making in addressing that “families have considerable choice in selecting schooling experiences for their offspring. These can consist of choices among public schools, both within school districts and among them, and through residential moves and charter schools; private schools and home-schooling are also options. Little is known about the patterns of school choice, and particularly what kinds of families choose what types of schools” (p. 17). The continuing decline in Catholic parish school enrollment has been particularly evident at the elementary level (McDonald, 2006). This decline is keenly studied by Catholic parish elementary school leaders each year as they seek to implement meaningful strategies that will draw in new families as well as stabilize retention numbers.

## Background

Catholic education has served a critical purpose for communities across the United States. According to the *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2018-2019 Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment, and Staffing*, Catholic schools in the United States developed with French and Spanish settlements, continued during the colonial era, and expanded into the 19th century (McDonald & Schultz, 2019). By 1884, the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore announced the goal of a school for every parish in the United States, which, while never reached, led to prolific growth in the number of Catholic schools (2019). Catholic education's early growth is arguably driven by the purpose and mission in which it is rooted.

The purpose Catholic schools serve for communities has evolved over time while schools have remained steadfast in their Catholic identity. Catholic school identity is the concept that encompasses all that it means to be a Catholic school, including Catholicity and mission. Catholic schools of the 1950s could have been described as culturally isolated, doctrine-driven, and racially segregated to such an extent that opponents brought into question whether Catholic schools should continue to exist at all (Bryk, Holland, & Lee, 1993). By the 1990s, Catholic schools were contributing to the growth of educational opportunities across the country by educating large numbers of minority students and non-Catholic students (Bryk et al., 1993). Catholic schools have continued to evolve while remaining rooted in their Catholic Identity.

When discussing Catholic schools, the parish or parochial school frequently comes to mind. There are, in fact, four categories of Catholic schools. The parish or parochial school is sponsored by a single parish church community, while an inter-parish school is sponsored by two or more parishes. A diocesan school is sponsored by a diocese or archdiocese, and a private

Catholic school is sponsored by a religious order or a private corporation (McDonald & Schultz, 2019). While more than 66% of Catholic elementary schools in the United States are sponsored by a single parish, the percentage of inter-parish elementary schools has risen by nearly 4% in the last 30 years, which is a sign of the reorganization and consolidation that has become a necessary part of Catholic school survival (2019). This study focuses only on parish elementary schools.

The need for parochial elementary school leaders to personally engage in meaningful data analysis to shape their own enrollment practices is critical. Building principals, presidents, and directors must engage their entire community in mitigating enrollment challenges. Polka et al. delve deeply into the challenges school leaders face in the October 2016 issue of the *Journal of Catholic Education*. They address the need for principals to manage growing enrollment challenges coupled with the significant task of maintaining low tuition rates and providing exemplary academic programs that rival local public and nonpublic competitors (p. 224). In order to effectively do this, leaders must understand current data trends as well as the needs and considerations of parents who ultimately are the decision-makers. The National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) supports school leaders' need for data by distributing the *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools: Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing*. A review of the 2018-2019 numbers provides an insight into current needs and trends.

NCEA's 2018-2019 annual report cites national trends that are reflected in recent studies as well (Manning, 2018; McDonald, 2006; Pelz, 2018; Polka et al., 2016). With the widening gap between tuition income and cost to educate growing exponentially for many schools, dioceses are focusing their efforts on restructuring fundraising practices and focusing marketing



efforts around the academic and faith formation benefits of Catholic education (p. ix). While this direction does provide guidance for school leaders, the need for much more specific, local data that delve into exactly what drives parent decisions when considering parochial elementary education continues to remain critical.

### **Statement of the Problem**

While declining enrollment in Catholic schools nationwide is an area of research with no shortage of attention, school leaders, largely principals, point to the uniqueness of their schools as a limiter in getting the most out of large-scale data on enrollment. This study seeks to offer specific, actionable insight into the factors that influence parents' decisions in order to offer parish elementary school leaders information they can act upon immediately. Parish elementary school leaders undoubtedly have strong enrollment acumen, yet the scale of the enrollment challenge and the unique features of each community contribute to the need for more specific data. This study seeks to provide parish elementary school leaders with additional tools in the area of parent decision-making that are keenly focused on their own school's unique landscape and profile.

Declining enrollment in Catholic education is a widely pervasive concern for educators committed to contributing to the education landscape of school options for students. Parish school leaders are tasked with using exit interviews, national studies, and some anecdotal evidence to shape their decision-making when mitigating enrollment challenges. Building leaders in parochial elementary schools know that each school's community, parish, local school district, and program all influence their own enrollment in unique ways that are often not broadly translatable to other schools. Parents are influenced by many factors that come together in their decision to enroll their children in a parochial school. Assuming an understanding of these

factors without tangible data is a risk that may lead to enrollment and marketing decisions that are less than effective.

While parochial schools are organized under diocesan central office leadership and support, each school functions largely as its own district and in competition with its local public school district and other area schools. School leaders work to engage parents through social media, events, parent ambassadors, and with the help of marketing firms in order to best reach their target audience. They engage families in area parishes, including their own school's parish, through outreach partnerships, student leadership opportunities, and by engaging the pastors of each parish. It is critical that building leaders have specific, actionable insight into the goals and needs of parents who consider their own specific school and their own community in order to strategically shape all of these efforts effectively.

Each parochial elementary school is largely impacted by its own parish and the challenges that the parish faces within its specific structure and community. The challenges parishes face directly and indirectly influence parochial school enrollment both from a demographic angle and in the context of factors that impact the decisions parents make in choosing a school. The troubles of the Church in the United States and the enrollment challenges of parish elementary schools are inextricably connected in that "Catholic schools in the United States continue to struggle with declining enrollment just as the wider American Church continues to struggle with rampant disaffiliation. While some Catholic educators have generated creative solutions to keep their schools afloat, the long-term viability of U.S. Catholic education will require understanding the deep roots of current disaffiliation trends in the gradual fading of the Christian worldview from Westerners' imaginations" (Manning, 2018, p. 26). The trend

toward disaffiliation and declining parish attendance must be considered in light of the many facets that contribute to these patterns.

Catholic church affiliation, disaffiliation, and attendance patterns have their roots in several constructs that are interwoven as they develop each unique parish community. To summarize these constructs, it is relevant to consider the work of Zech, Gautier, Gray, Wiggins, and Gaunt (2017) in their book, *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century*. The authors discuss the uniqueness of each parish by pointing to the complexity of social structures, leadership, finances, community outreach needs, and diverse generational cohorts and ethnic groups (Zech et al., 2017). Each parish and parish school is uniquely impacted by all of these contributors. Understanding what contributors have a place in the decision-making process of parents and to what extent they influence the choices parents make is crucial for parish elementary school leaders.

The critical problem of declining parish elementary school enrollment and the need to understand how parents arrive at decisions regarding enrollment in parish elementary schools, while a national area of focus, is also supported by Catholic school enrollment decline in New Jersey specifically. Ten years ago, student enrollment in New Jersey Catholic schools was 106,797, dropping to 86,863 in the 2013-2014 school year, and 69,392 for the 2018-2019 school year (McDonald & Schultz, 2019). This decline can be felt in each regional area of New Jersey in ways that are specific to the needs and interests of the families each diocese or archdiocese serves. New Jersey's Catholic communities are organized into five diocese/archdiocese led by either a bishop or archbishop. Each of these five groups of parishes and schools is diverse within and among themselves. School leadership must dive deeply into the work of understanding the

needs of the families their schools serve in order to make strategic decisions that are purposeful and impactful.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the influences that impact parental decisions in selecting a suburban Catholic parish elementary school in northern New Jersey for their children. This study seeks to learn more about parents' motivators, opinions, perceptions, and concerns about Catholic education and their overall priorities for their children's education as they relate to selecting a parish elementary school for their children. School leaders are tasked with enrollment management, academic and extra-curricular program design, and hiring goals. Understanding the motivations driving enrollment before parents even enter their school building, and also once enrolled, may help school leaders better develop strategies to encourage enrollment, facilitate parent decision-making, and reduce student attrition rates.

As educators, school leaders are constantly considering, reflecting, and researching the needs of their students in order to drive strategic planning. In their ongoing goal of partnering with parents, it is critical to better understand the factors driving parents' motivation to consider parochial elementary education for their children.

This study also seeks to add to the growing body of research in the area of Catholic school enrollment in order to expand upon quantitative studies at the national level by exploring the underlying drivers of those statistics through qualitative methods. This study's exploration of the decision-making process seeks to add to the understanding of enrollment challenges by including considerations such as generational patterns and trends as well as community-specific influencers.

On a national level, research has been done by the Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education (2008) as well as the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), as referenced by McDonald (2006). The challenge of understanding and affecting change in the area of parochial school enrollment is actively being studied locally as well as evidenced by the growing number of doctoral dissertations on the subject. One such study is the work of Killeen (2017), which addresses enrollment in the context of Catholic school leadership. Jakuback (2017) addresses this from the perspectives of Catholic Identity and teacher retention. This study seeks to add to this body of work in a way that is applicable for school leaders in northern suburban New Jersey, where enrollment is declining rapidly and, in some areas of northern New Jersey, at a faster rate than in urban areas and in southern areas of the state.

### **Research Questions**

This study seeks to answer the following primary research question and additional subquestions:

1. How do parents describe the primary contributors to the decision-making process when they enroll their child/children in a northern New Jersey suburban elementary parish school?
  - a. How do parents describe the initial motivators that drive them to consider a parochial elementary school?
  - b. How do parents describe their decision-making process?

The focus of these research questions is on understanding what drives parents as they consider and enroll in a suburban parochial elementary school. The research questions are designed to glean insight into both the process parents go through and the stages of that process

as well as the factors that they describe as critical or, conversely, simply perks of parochial elementary school rather than those features they describe as critical to their decision to enroll.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Social values theory, as presented by Stone and Allgaier (2008), grounds this work within the context of the influences of social circles on decision-making. Social values theory considers the impact of people's perceptions of the values of their social circles on their decisions. These influences, as addressed by Stone and Allgaier (2008), are particularly strong in circumstances of risk-taking. It may be posited that decision-making on behalf of children specific to the educational environment comes with high risk. The priorities of academic outcomes, physical and emotional safety, and the social implications of school selection together present a case for considering elementary school selection to be a high-risk and socially influenced process. Social values theory provides a framework within which this work is well-positioned.

### **Design**

A qualitative study with a phenomenological approach was conducted to more comprehensively understand the parental decision-making process. This work explored parental opinions and perceptions in an open-ended format through interviews with parents. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) discuss, interviews may be used as the dominant strategy for collecting data or may be used together with other techniques in order to acquire descriptive data that further deepen the insight the researcher gains into how participants are engaging in the topic being studied (p. 103). Creswell and Poth (2018) also discuss the phenomenological approach to qualitative research in addressing the underlying assumptions of qualitative work. Creswell and Poth (2018) also discuss qualitative research, the phenomenological approach with its origins in social sciences, as well as the philosophical approaches researchers may consider in designing

their studies. In the first phase of the research process, the researcher must identify, through reflection, his or her own involvement in the study specific to personal history, ethical and political considerations, and perceptions of self and others (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These tenets of the phenomenological approach to a qualitative study align with the goals of this study.

In the case of this study on parent decision-making in considering a suburban parish elementary school in northern New Jersey, interviews with parents delved into themes found in the literature review and helped the researcher develop a more comprehensive understanding of how parents make decisions about enrollment. Interviewing parents contributed to developing an understanding of their experiences in the admissions process as well as the factors that continue to confirm their decision to enroll in a parochial school. These interviews elicited information about questions that parents ask, experiences during tours and school visits before enrolling, and the school's relationship with parents in local parishes.

Participants were selected from three participating suburban elementary parish schools in northern New Jersey. Schools were selected using specific criteria. Each participating school is supported by a single parish, is representative of the typical size of suburban parish schools in northern New Jersey, and is led by a principal who has been in this role for more than five years.

Participants were identified by working together with the principal from each school. The principal from each of the three schools participating generated a list of potential participants. A sample size of 18 participants from three suburban parish elementary schools in northern New Jersey participated in the interview process. The researcher contacted twenty parents from each school using the lists provided by each principal. Of the parents who responded that they were willing to participate, six parents were randomly selected from each school. The interview questions were developed using information gathered from participating principals as well as

from information gathered during the literature review. Principals of the participating schools, as a jury of peers, reviewed the interview protocol prior to the researcher conducting the interviews. Interviews were recorded, with participant permission, to ensure accuracy. The interview responses were coded for analysis in order to make connections and understand themes. Interview transcripts and participant logs using numerical identification numbers only were stored using a password-protected, cloud-based storage site. Results were also stored using an external hard drive that was secured in a private space.

### **Significance of the Study**

Understanding the contributing influences on parental enrollment decisions when selecting a suburban parochial elementary school in northern New Jersey is critically important for parochial elementary school leaders. Leaders are faced with the challenge of rapidly declining enrollment in suburban parochial elementary schools. Marketing firms that specialize in Catholic school enrollment management are increasingly supporting school leaders as they shape their schools to appeal to discerning parents. With so many influences potentially contributing to parental decisions, it is vital that school and parish leaders understand the primary influences, deterrents, and strengths that parents hone in on when considering where their elementary-age children will go to school.

Parents, including those who are active parishioners in a Catholic church, are not choosing parish schools as evidenced by the large numbers of students in faith formation classes compared to the enrollment of the parish schools. When comparing the numbers of registered parish families who have children in the faith formation program to the corresponding parochial school enrollment data, it is not uncommon to find large differences between these numbers and the enrollment numbers of the same parish's parochial school.



### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study include participant bias and the honesty of participants' responses to interview questions. Researcher expectations and bias are also limitations to this study. Researcher reflexivity was employed in order to support the validity of this study while acknowledging researcher bias (Creswel & Miller, 2000).

### **Delimitations**

This study only includes participants from three suburban parish elementary schools in northern New Jersey. This study includes only participants who have children enrolled in a Catholic parish elementary school rather than a broader community of parents who are not already registered in a Catholic elementary school but may have considered enrolling at one time, parents who have decided to leave a parish school, or parents of children in parish faith formation who are not enrolled in their parish school. This study engaged participants with children ages three through fourteen rather than more broadly also engaging parents of high school-age children who may or may not have selected Catholic elementary school prior to high school. A delimitation of this study is the geographic confines of participants only from northern New Jersey in three suburban elementary schools.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Catholicity:** the concept of being Catholic and in communion with the Catholic Church

**Charter School:** a publicly funded independent school

**Diocese:** the ordinary territorial division of the church headed by a bishop (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018). This includes the parishes, schools, and Catholic organizations in the geographic area covered by the leadership of a bishop.

**Faith Formation Program:** the religious education program run by a parish in order to provide religious education for children who do not attend a Catholic school.

**Independent School:** a private, non-public, religious or non-religious school

**Parish:** a Catholic community governed by a diocesan or archdiocesan bishop and pastorally cared for by a parish priest. Most parishes are formed on a geographic basis, but they may be formed along national or ethnic lines (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018).

**Parishioner:** a person who is registered as a member of a parish.

**Parochial School:** a private school, specifically Catholic, that is managed and led by the pastor of the parish with which the school is affiliated.

**Pastor:** A priest in charge of a Catholic parish or congregation. He is responsible for administering the sacraments, instructing the congregation in the doctrine of the church, and providing other services to the people of the parish (USCCB, 2018). In the context of a parochial school, the pastor has full authority over all school decisions, leadership, and fiscal responsibilities.

**Religiosity:** the degree to which a person feels strongly about a religious belief

**Vouchers:** government-funded subsidy provided to families to be used toward private school tuition.

### Summary

Parents, the decision-makers who must reconcile their goals for their children with the mission and program of the school their children attend, are the focus of this qualitative study. Understanding what motivates parents to consider a parish elementary school as well as the decision-making process that parents go through as they consider the factors that are most important to them is extremely valuable for parish school leaders as they shape their own

practices and goals in order to mitigate enrollment challenges in their parish elementary schools. Chapter I addresses the background for this study, the purpose and problem, as well as the research questions that guided this study. Chapter I also introduces the design of this study and the driving theories used to shape this design.

Chapter II presents a review of relevant literature to place this study in the context of the school choice landscape of today, the theories specific to decision-making that influenced this study, as well as the structure of Catholic education and its influence on enrollment. Chapter III then further elaborates on the design and methodology of this study as well as the data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter IV outlines the results and findings of the research, while Chapter V addresses the findings of the research through the lens of implications for practice as well as suggestions for future studies. The intent of this work is to delve into the experiences of parents in choosing a parish elementary school in order to better understand their priorities and process followed as a means to add to the current body of research on Catholic school enrollment from a qualitative approach.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the influences that impact parental decisions in selecting a parish elementary school for their children by exploring their motivators and perceptions about Catholic education as well as their decision-making process and the factors that influence their decisions in selecting a parish elementary school. The 18 parent participants have children enrolled in one of three suburban parochial elementary schools in northern New Jersey. Contributors such as generational and social trends, financial factors, and religiosity and Church current events are all considered in developing a context in which to study how parents describe their priorities and decisions.

#### **Introduction**

As Catholic school enrollment, specifically in parish elementary schools, is declining at a rapid pace with ramifications to parishes and communities, there is a growing body of work in this area at a national level. While attention has been centered on the outcomes for Catholic schools as a consideration for enrollment management, understanding why parents send their children to Catholic schools has drawn far less attention (Sanders, *Catholics and Catholic Schooling*, 2005). This review of literature seeks to develop a foundation for understanding suburban parish elementary schools in northern New Jersey in the context of current trends as these trends contrast with Catholic school history in the United States.

While the decline in parish elementary school enrollment nationwide continues to draw attention, with school leaders pointing to financial constraints, tumult and scandal within the Church, and a generational decrease in participation in religious practice, these big picture concepts are not always actionable for school leaders in mitigating a school leader's own

school's enrollment decline. School leaders collect anecdotal data from parent tours, demographic data from their own community, and collaborate with other local school leaders in order to generate results-oriented strategies that are consequential for their specific school. School leaders are faced with some constructs that inhibit enrollment that are out of their control. While many may point to increasing tuition rates as a contributor to declining enrollment, this is an area, short of strategic and aggressive fundraising, that elementary school leaders are not in a position to mitigate.

The financial model of Catholic schools has historically been heavily dependent upon the generosity of its parish and parishioners as well as low labor costs as a result of faculty who were largely members of religious orders (Brinig & Garnett, 2014). Brinig and Garnett assert that this is an unsustainable model that Catholic leadership has either been unwilling or unable to replace with an alternative that offers a viable solution. Faced with top-down and bottom-up challenges, understanding how parents engage with a parish elementary school and how they describe its value for their children is integral in order for school leaders to strategically plan programs, hire faculty and staff, and market their schools to grow enrollment.

The parental decision-making process is shaped by the factors that are prioritized by parents as well as the generational trends and current events at play when parents are considering a parish elementary school for their children. Catholic school leaders must not base their strategies on assumptions but are much more effectively served by understanding parents' needs and considerations on a level more local than national data can offer.

### **Literature Review Process**

The following review of research in the area of school choice, the theories relevant to decision-making, and perceptions of Catholic Church and Catholic education provides an

overview of the current issues impacting parish elementary school enrollment as well as the need for further study. The literature review for this study was conducted using sources from the Seton Hall University online library database, articles from peer-reviewed journals, books, and published reports. Online databases accessed for the purposes of this review included the following: Google Scholar, EBSCO, ERIC, NCEA, NCES, OpenAthens, and ProQuest. Search terms included the following: Catholic school enrollment, decision-making theories, history of Catholic schools, parent decision-making, school choice. Themes of research for the purposes of this study are focused on the following:

- School choice
- Decision-making
- Catholic education in the United States
- Catholic school enrollment

These themes are explored in the context of their influence on parish elementary school enrollment, their role in impacting the decision-making of parents, and how they relate specifically to suburban, northern New Jersey communities.

An important assertion must be made in considering the context of this study. Schools must always function in full partnership with families. Belfield and Levin (2016) articulate this partnership concisely.

All families are immersed in “homeschooling” in that about 90% of children’s waking hours from birth to 18 are not spent attending school but are spent under the direct influence of their families . . . [This] reinforces the common-sense notion that strong families, strong schools, and strong communities and neighborhoods, working together,

are requisite for nurturing the young to a healthy and productive adulthood and educational success (p. 16, para. 2).

School leaders must have the needs and goals of parents deeply embedded in their practice and work in order to fulfill their own goals for students and for their schools as community contributors.

This review of literature considers sources from 2005 to the present to develop a current overview of trends with the exception of Bryk et al. (1993), who provide a comprehensive look at both Catholic school history in the United States and address implications that intersect with this study. Studies specific to the conceptual frameworks associated with decision-making were also reviewed outside of the 2005 to the present parameter in order to appropriately include relevant theoretical approaches to decision-making. Research on parental decision-making theories, current events in the Church, academic and social perceptions and priorities, and school choice is reviewed for the purposes of this overview.

### **School Choice**

The topic of school choice has been at the center of the political stage since the beginning of the twentieth century. The Supreme Court weighed in on the debate (*Pierce v. Society of Sisters, 1925; Yoder v. Wisconsin, 1972*) by affirming the constitutional right for nonpublic schools to exist as well as the right of parents to choose alternatives to public education for their children (McDonald & Schultz, 2019). School choice continues to be a central area of debate, research, and focus in United States politics nearly a century after the Supreme Court's *Pierce* decision. Belfield and Levin (2016), in their book *Privatizing Educational Choice: Consequences for Parents, Schools, and Public Policy*, explain school choice, its players, and each angle of opinion related to this area of debate. The authors summarize this polarized arena

in noting that, while each side of the school choice aisle may ideologically posit its perspective with a strong argument, the evidence on both sides is largely opinion and should be carefully considered by readers and those seeking to develop their own opinions. Both those in favor of school choice and those opposed must be addressed in order to comprehensively present the concept of school choice through the lens of today's changing landscape that impacts parish schools.

Much of the advocacy for or opposition to [these] forms of privatization is ideological in nature. Free-market advocates believe that the discipline of the marketplace will provide choice and competition that is currently absent from the existing system of public schools and that these features will provide greater parental freedom and more efficient use of resources. Skeptics believe that privatization is simply a ploy to create emerging opportunities for investment and profits from business entities by shifting \$500 billion in government revenues to private enterprises as well as to establish more effective mechanisms for segregating the educational system by income, religion, and race as parental values and wealth determine school choice. (Belfield & Levin, 2016, p. 2, para. 2)

The position in favor of school choice would assert that “the efficiency of the educational system will increase through both choice and competition for student clientele. Through choice, it is argued that families will determine the most effective educational approaches and schools that will meet their child’s needs. Through competition, schools will have incentives to excel in order to attract sufficient numbers of students to maximize profits or promote their missions in the case of nonprofit providers. In recent years, a large number of econometric studies have addressed the relation between competition among schools and educational achievement of students as well as



other educational outcomes” (Belfield & Levin, 2016, pp. 17-18). School choice refers to a wide range of school options, including homeschooling, religious schools, independent schools, charter schools, school vouchers, academies, vocational schools, and the list continues to grow.

Charter schools, an option that in many areas of the United States replaces parochial schools in parish buildings as a tenant when a parish school closes, are publicly funded schools that are intended to be centers of innovation within their communities. The charter school movement has its beginnings in 1992 with the passing of the Charter School Act and has continued to take shape as a nonpublic option that does not impose financial hardships on families that private education typically connotes. Charter schools offer unique, mission-specific options that attract students with specific interests and learning goals (Belfield & Levin, 2016). This mission-specific option is one that is critical to consider in light of the shift in the religiosity of Catholic parents who, just one or two generations removed, approach faith-based education from a new angle.

### **Motivators Involved in School Choice**

School choice has become a beacon for debate, discussion, and, in some cases, discord. The school choice movement has drawn significant attention in recent years as the landscape of options grows to include charter schools, school vouchers, and even online learning institutions reaching students in the younger years. Economists, educators, and politicians are all weighing in on the school choice debate. Research in the area of motivators and factors involved in school choice can be difficult to compare. Bukhari and Randall (2009) explore school choice and factors contributing to parent decisions. The authors point out that, as proposed by this study as well, reviewing previous studies on parental choice of schools is difficult to do in a comparative way. A review of the research demonstrates that each study asks different questions, focuses on

different factors of influence, or groups factors influencing choice into different categories that may not be compared across studies (Bukhari & Randall, 2009). Many studies in the area of school choice are specific to the states in which they are conducted yet offer insight that provides researchers with perspective to shape their own studies.

Michael L. Marlow from California Polytechnic University addressed the topic in 2010 in the journal *Applied Economics*. Marlow's study is relevant to this review for two reasons. First, California educates about 13% of all public elementary and secondary students in the country. Private schools educate about 9% of California's students, which is consistent with the national average of private school enrollment (Marlow, 2010). Additionally, Marlow's study acknowledges that the data, when comparing public and private schools, may be confounded by two-way causality. In short, Marlow acknowledges and accounts for the question of whether private school enrollment increases due to decreased performance in public schools or if public school performance is negatively impacted by higher-performing students potentially leaving public schools for private alternatives. Marlow points to the hypothesis that public school strength and private school enrollment are inversely related in California school districts. This idea that the public perception or data-driven judgment that a community's public schools may not be as strong as some parents would like is what then drives private school enrollment up or down is not a new one. Community-specific demographic studies may be found across the country and in New Jersey specifically that point to the strength of the public schools as the driver behind nonpublic schools' growth or a catalyst in their path toward closure.

While public school performance is one consideration that may drive parents to select an alternative option, there are a host of other possible factors, including perceived outcomes of private education, both social and academic, as well as the perception that parents who have

selected to invest financially in education beyond their tax bill may be more invested in their children's schooling and therefore in establishing an engaged school community (Marlow, 2010). Marlow's work presents an overview of the debate associated with school choice and the ever-present concern that parents who "vote with their feet" by choosing nonpublic options for their children's education may negatively impact the public schools within their communities.

Religiosity, a motivator often anecdotally cited as a perceived reason parents may select a nonpublic school, specifically religious schools, is one that warrants attention. Non-religious private schools account for only 17% of private schools nationwide (Sander & Cohen-Zada, 2012). In their study, *Religiosity and Parochial School Choice: Cause or Effect?*, Sander and Cohen-Zada (2012) found that religiosity is a result of private education, not a statistically significant motivating reason that parents select a religious school to start out. While adults who attended a Catholic school are more likely to continue to attend religious services and define themselves as religious, religiosity is not found to be a primary reason for initially selecting to send children to a Catholic school. Motivators that spur parents to consider alternatives to public schooling, specifically a parish school, vary widely and may be largely specific to the state or even local community in which a family lives, while the decision-making process also largely contributes to the final decision of parents in selecting a school for their children.

### **Decision-Making**

In order to address how parents make decisions and the driving forces at work throughout that process, it is important to consider this process through the lens of conceptual frameworks that establish a perspective around decision-making as well as the generational patterns that may also influence how parents make decisions. It is through these conceptual frameworks and

generational patterns that parent decision-making may be framed in a manner that drives purposeful inquiry.

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

Social values theory, proposed by Stone and Allgaier (2008), offers a perspective on decision-making when a person is making a decision on behalf of someone else. This framework considers risk and the degree to which risk is socially valued in the context of a particular situation that requires a decision. The authors, for the purposes of their work and developing social values theory of decision-making, use the definition put forth by Rohan (2000), positing that social values are developed by people's perceptions of what others in their social circles value and that these perceptions may or may not accurately reflect what people in those social groups actually value (Stone & Allgaier, 2008). Social values theory posits that in situations where there is a perceived norm or value placed on a particular attribute of the decision, people will tend to choose the norm-based choice for someone else as a perceived less risky decision. Risk-taking choices are decreased when the relationship with the other person is a high-impact relationship. Social values theory, positioned in the context of parent decision-making for their children, offers a perspective that, when considered along with generational norms, provides some insight into understanding patterns and priorities.

The work of Dore, Stone, and Buchanan (2012) is a lens through which to consider social values theory as it relates to parent decision-making. The authors find, through their own literature review, that there is very little work in the area of how parents make decisions for their children, particularly very little that explores these decisions in the context of a theoretical framework. This study, *A Social Values Analysis of Parental Decision Making*, finds that parents are much more likely to make decisions for their children based on the perceived norms of their

social groups, which may be a way of avoiding risk when making decisions for their children in comparison to when making decisions for themselves. This study also demonstrates that in the area of safety, which may be considered both physical and emotional, parents will avoid risk for their children much more than decisions only impacting themselves. These decisions are based on parents' perceived understanding of their social groups' norms and perceptions of the context of the decision, even in the area of safety. This study also found that parents were less likely to be influenced by inconvenience in decision-making for their children than for themselves, particularly when the social norm associated with the decision was stronger. Overall, this study aligns with the growing body of work that suggests that decisions for others, in this case, one's children, are much more significantly influenced by social norms than decisions for oneself.

It is noteworthy that this study also addresses the strong yet competing norms in Western society. The first is the goal of zero risk. Dore, Stone, and Buchanan (2012) suggest that this norm may be a contributor to the trend toward "helicopter parenting" in which parents may be responding to a stronger social norm to both protect their children from harm while working toward the other social norm of valuing success. The other norm that the authors point out as a competing influence is that of autonomy. In some cases, this may influence parents to be less risk-averse for their children when the decision may promote independence. Understanding, in the context of social values theory, both the social norms of a community of parents as well as the degree to which parents perceive that a circumstance presents their child with risk is at the foundation of better understanding how a specific community of parents may consider the decision-making process.

Another framework to consider in understanding decision-making is that of Tiebout (1956). Tiebout's model, most commonly referenced as "voting with your feet," suggests that

consumers are fully capable in all capacities to move to communities and make choices that best reflect their preference patterns. The studies of Marlow (2010) and Sander and Cohen-Zada (2012) both reference Tiebout's "voting with your feet" in the context of school choice. Parents are likely to consider selecting from a range of school options when they perceive that their own social or personal values are better met in a specific community and their means of mobility allow them that choice. A noteworthy study using Tiebout's framework as a lens is that of Gürer, Irlenbusch, and Rockenbach (2014). This study focused on the choice of community based on Tiebout's work. Gürer et al. found that participants were more likely to "vote with their feet" and leave a community that they perceived to be punishing while receiving reward in a community did not have an effect on movement. This further supports the idea that understanding parent perceptions regarding risk is critical to developing an understanding of their decision-making process.

Hirschman's (1970) book, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, addresses both the economics and the politics of decision-making. Hirschman (1970) aligns *exit* with the ability of the consumer to use the market to his or her advantage by choosing to abandon an organization in an effort to better meet one's own needs or to further personal goals. *Exit*, according to Hirschman, is much less personal; rather, it is neat and clearly defined. *Voice*, Hirschman discusses, is the political realm of decision-making. It is far less impersonal compared to *exit*. Rather, *voice* involves a range of expressing one's decision from the mild grumble to the robust pontificating. In order to make his point salient, Hirschman references Friedman's parallel of the economic view of choice and *exit* to school vouchers. Hirschman cites Milton Friedman's 1962 *Capitalism and Freedom* discussion that addresses school choice by likening school vouchers to giving parents the ability to *exit* or use their freedom of choice to more cleanly make a clear statement by exiting a school

for another that they perceive better meets their needs. Hirschman references Friedman's implication that without school vouchers, parents are left to *voice* their choices in a much more political way by being vocal about their opinions within a system they can only leave by changing their residence.

Hirschman's theory of *exit*, *voice*, and *loyalty* is used by Bukhari and Randall (2009) as the conceptual framework for their study of school choice in Utah. Bukhari and Randall describe Hirschman's theory in the context of school choice as follows:

When parents are faced with evidence of deterioration of academic excellence, physical or intellectual safety of their children, or discipline in the public schools, parents have three options: first, the loyalty option or passive acceptance of the status quo with the trust and hope of eventual improvement; second, the voice option or the raising of one's voice as an individual or as a group to create awareness among customers (other parents) and school administrators (firm managers) of the necessity for change and improvement; and third, the exit option where the parent removes their children from their current school and places them in another school in the public or private sector (Bukhari & Randall, 2009, p. 244, para. 3).

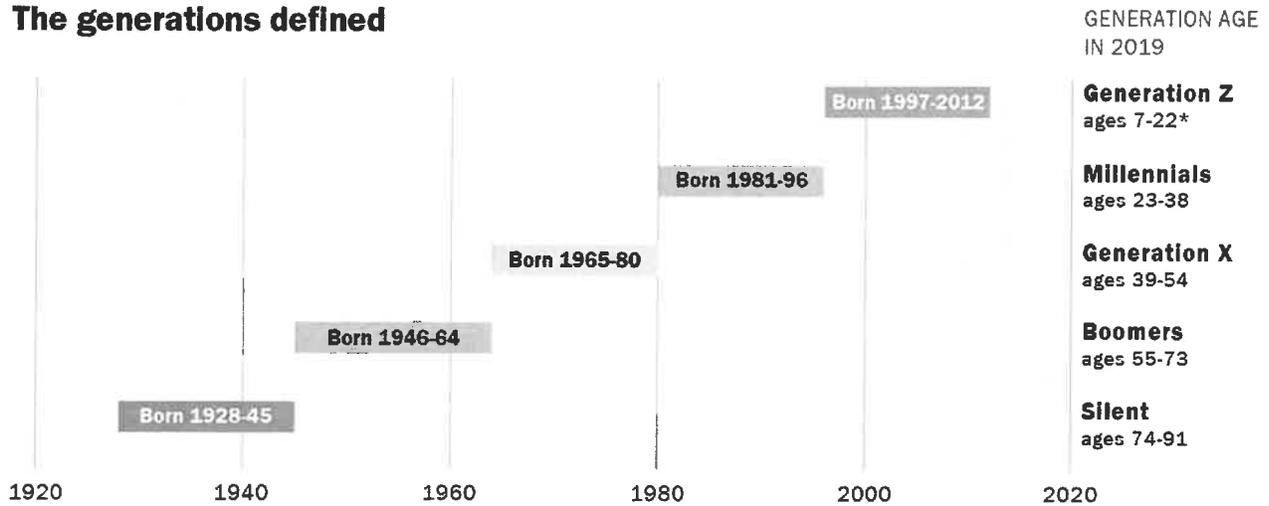
Social values theory, Tiebout's "voting with your feet," and Hirschman's *loyalty*, *exit*, and *voice* provide a comprehensive lens through which to consider the parent decision-making process and influences.

### **Parent Decision-Making in the Context of Generational Patterns**

While birth years defining a generational cohort may vary slightly depending upon the source, it is important to define a range for research purposes. The Pew Research Center in

Michael Dimock’s 2019 article, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” uses the following ranges for categorization purposes:

### The generations defined



\*No chronological endpoint has been set for this group. For this analysis, Generation Z is defined as those ages 7 to 22 in 2019.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 1. The Generations Defined. Adapted from “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” by M. Dimock, 2019.

Generation Y, or millennial, parents are those who, according to the Pew Research Center, are age 23-38 in 2019, while Generation X parents are those who are 39-54 in 2019. Boomer parents are currently age 55 to 73. Dimock reiterates the point that defining cohorts by generation is a tool to track viewpoint changes and patterns.

Millennial parents are categorized as socially conscious and are digital natives. Only 15% of millennials read a newspaper daily, while only one in four Americans reads a newspaper at all (New Strategist Editors, 2015). DeVaney (2015) highlights the point that millennials are generally very comfortable with providing public feedback and expect that businesses with which they interact should be responsive and receptive to such a response. Millennial parents are considered to be highly involved in their children’s lives, seek work-life balance, and are



comfortable with frequent change (DeVaney, 2015). Millennials are likely to thrive through social interaction, both digitally and in person, and seek peer feedback when engaged in decision-making. Specific to religious beliefs, millennials have a much more secular perspective than any generation before them (New Strategist Editors, 2015). The New Strategist (2015) book, *The Generation X*, includes the table below, highlighting the degree to which generational cohorts identify themselves as religious.

Table 1

*Degree of Religiosity, 2012*

“To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?”  
(percent of people aged 18 or older responding by generation, 2012)

	Very	Moderately	Slightly	Not
Total people	18.8%	39.5%	21.6%	20.1%
Millennial (18 to 35)	11.2	34.5	26.2	28.1
Generation X (36- to 47)	20.3	38.3	20.1	21.3
Baby Boom (48 to 66)	25.0	40.7	18.6	15.7
Older Americans (67 or older)	20.0	50.1	20.5	9.4

*Note.* Adapted from New Strategist Editors (2015). *The Generation X: Americans Born 1965 to 1976* (Eighth edition), p.11. Amityville, New York: New Strategist Publications, Inc. Copyright 2015 by the New Strategist Press, LLC.

Table 1 data originally sourced from *Survey Documentation and Analysis. Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program, University of California, Berkeley, General Social Survey, 1972-2012 Cumulative Data Files*. Internet site <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss12>; calculations by New Strategist.

If, as discussed earlier, religiosity is a result of parish school education rather than a reason parents choose a parochial school, then shifts in religiosity by generation may be a result of declining enrollment in some communities rather than a cause.

Generation X parents, while maintaining some similarities with Generation Y, have their own unique approach based on characteristics specific to their cohort. While Generation X is often categorized in the literature as a bridge-like generation that is not quite the boomers or millennials yet largely impacted by both, Generation X parents make decisions in their own way. Katz (2017) considers the impact of baby boomers and their focus on the power of individual choice on Generation X after them. While millennial parents are likely to engage their social networks as they navigate a decision, Generation X parents are more likely to make decisions internally as a family, researching their choices and then discussing them within a smaller, more intimate group of confidants. Generation X also holds the unique title of the first generation of Americans in which a majority will not be better off financially than their parents (Gelfeld & Rangel, 2017). Generation X parents are less likely to be concerned about upward mobility in financial or social class and more concerned with stability as they consider choices for their families. It is noteworthy to highlight that, without an unforeseen change, on average, Generation X will have about half of their previous income to live on in retirement (Gelfeld & Rangel, 2017). Over time, as Gelfeld and Rangel (2017) note, Generation X has also shifted its drive from primarily seeking to achieve materialistic priorities to a focus on experiential priorities. As the “bridge” cohort, Generation X has been heavily influenced by the baby boomers who came before them.

Baby boomers are characterized as the wealthiest generation of Americans with an expectation that their situation will consistently improve (Gelfeld & Rangel, 2017). Boomers are likely to remain loyal to an organization and are more focused on the overall benefits of an organization to the community than the benefits they experience individually (Bennett, Beehr, & Ivanitskaya, 2017). In exploring the concept of work-family conflict as it is experienced by

generational cohorts, Bennett et al. (2017) point out that baby boomers are likely to have been in their jobs for a long time and may have more flexibility with time out of the office or off from work, allowing more time for family-specific attention. This is an interesting point when considered in conjunction with the authors' additional finding that millennials are likely to spend the most time on school-related tasks for their children in comparison with their Generation X and baby boomer parenting peers. It could be posited that this time spent is part of prioritizing and decision-making specific to each generation.

### **Catholic Schools in the United States in the Context of Enrollment**

#### **Catholic School History in the United States**

Catholic schools developed and grew throughout the 19th and 20th centuries into the largest private school system in the world that we know today (Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education, p. 277). This growth emerged out of a need for local communities to provide religious education that was encompassing local cultures and communities. Hunt's (2005) work in his article, "*Catholic Schools: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*," reviews the history of Catholic education. Hunt addresses the point that in the 19th century, bishops mandated that every Catholic parish must establish a school within the first two years unless a specific exception had been made. Bryk et al., in their book, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, echo a similar history as they point out that by the early 1800s, Catholic schools were well established in areas such as New York, with most parishes managing some form of a Catholic school (p. 20). Understanding these beginnings in the context of the oversaturation of parochial school options is significant to how this contributes to the issue of declining enrollment.

Declining enrollment has plagued parochial schools in part due to the well-intended structural design in establishing schools in so many parishes without assurances of demographic

data to support filling these facilities. Hunt discusses that even though this commitment to Catholic education was made on the part of Church leadership and parishes, at no time during the 19th century were even half of the Catholic children enrolled in a parochial school (p. 164). By the mid-twentieth century, Catholic schools reached peak enrollment, educating about 12% of all K-12 students in the United States. Hunt's narrative of Catholic school enrollment history from its inception to the present from multiple angles—financial, demographic, and governance—summarizes a history that provides the context for the enrollment challenges Catholic schools are faced with today. Hunt's concluding point that at a time when Catholic schools are closing, consolidating, and facing significant fiscal and demographic challenges, schools are at a crossroads is the summary that then is a catalyst for further analysis for action in the face of critical challenges (Hunt, p. 173). The enrollment challenges that Catholic schools face are many with much opportunity to engage in growth.

Catholic education has developed over time in a way that has shaped the successes and challenges faced today. Bryk, Holland, and LeeLee (1993) synthesize the work of Neuhaus (1987) and Bellah et al. (1985) in their discussion of this evolution of Catholic education.

In broad strokes, the development of Catholic schools can be divided into three periods. The first, spanning the period from colonial times until approximately 1830, represents the birth of a new Church in a new nation. The second period, from 1830 to 1960, sees Catholic schools expanding rapidly in response to immigration and confronting many divisive issues that shaped the formal system and gave it a distinctly American character. The third period, from 1960 to the present, has been described as the “Catholic moment,” during which Catholics have become part of the mainstream of American political, social,

and economic life, and Catholic social ethics have become a vibrant voice on the national scene (Bryk et al., 1993, para. 2).

This development is deeply relevant to the challenges schools face today in the context of Church social presence and parish life within communities.

### **Catholic Schools Today**

In reviewing the need for assessing areas of growth in order to mitigate the enrollment challenges of Catholic schools, The Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education has also outlined a review of Catholic education in the United States. In response to a call in 2005 from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to address the viability and future of Catholic elementary schools, the task force outlined recommendations and a renewed commitment to revitalizing Catholic schools in areas such as school leadership, Catholic Identity, and fiscal recommendations. Similar to the work of Hunt and Bryk, the Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education concludes that there is a need for immediate action in order to address the rapidly declining enrollment of Catholic schools.

Enrollment in Catholic schools is largely impacted by community demographic shifts and trends. The largest concentrations of Catholics tend to be in large cities and suburbs of large cities in the East and Midwest regions of the country (Sander, 2005a). McDonald and Schultz, in the NCEA Annual Statistical Report 2018-2019 (p. 13), share the table below (Table 2), illustrating enrollment by region.

Table 2

#### *Enrollment by Region*

Elementary/Middle	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
New England	90,428	5.5	75,590	5.4	59,086	4.6

Mideast	424,889	26.0	324,323	22.9	271,513	21.3
Great Lakes	383,134	23.5	339,809	24.0	305,491	24.0
Plains	171,229	10.5	157,661	11.1	147,212	11.6
Southeast	250,139	15.3	227,788	16.1	217,464	17.1
West/Far West	313,716	19.2	290,073	20.5	273,396	21.5
United States	1,633,535	100.0	1,415,244	100.0	1,274,162	100.0

*Note.* Adapted from D. McDonald, & M. Schultz (2019). *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2018-2019: The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing* (Rep.). Arlington, VA: National Catholic Education Association. Copyright 2019 by the National Catholic Education Association.

The urgency for action is critical at the present juncture of Catholic school enrollment in the United States. Understanding how Catholic schools are perceived in communities is vital to determining the next steps. Sander (2005b) reviewed national data to determine the relationship between parent religiosity and the probability parents may send their children to private schools. This study assessed the probability of parents sending their children to private schools based on how actively religious they are. As Sander points out, this study is limited in scope and does not address the many other reasons parents may send their children to private schools outside of their religious affiliation and participation (Sander, 2005b). Sander’s study found that Catholic parents were most likely to send their children to private schools as compared to other religious affiliations. When adjusting for attendance at religious services, respondents who reported the highest attendance at religious services were more likely to choose a private school (Sander, 2005b). Sander’s results also reflect that participants from both large and small cities were likely to send their children to private schools. Religiosity is certainly a contributing force in the decision to select Catholic schools; however, the reasons Catholic schools have maintained their niche in the private school market far exceed this one facet.

In assessing the driving forces of Catholic school enrollment, Mikael L. Pelz and Kevin R. den Dulk (2018) address two perspectives. They consider the idea that there are two primary concepts that are the underlying reasons why parents choose a private school. The first, which the authors call the social identity perspective, highlights the desire for parents to select a school that mirrors their belief system and teaches this belief system. The second perspective, the secular good theory, acknowledges that religious private schools attract some of their population because they are a means to attaining other benefits of a private school, namely academics, discipline, and safety (p. 80). This study used state-level education statistics data over time from 1993-2011 from a range of sources: national religious surveys that were large enough to gather state data, school choice policies within states, and the quality of public education in states using the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). Pelz and den Dulk (2018) found that private school enrollment, including in religious schools, is increasingly coming from families with no strong religious connections, if any at all. The authors also found that religiosity alone did not have a statistically significant relationship to enrollment in three of the four types of religious schools they included.

The strength of the Pelz and den Dulk (2018) study lies in its scope. This work addresses enrollment over time and includes data from a wide range of sources. While this study does consider the secular good theory, the degree to which each contributing factor is important within the secular reasons parents choose a private school are not explored for the purposes of this work. The work of Pelz and den Dulk serves to broadly develop an overall understanding of enrollment decisions in recent years on a large scale. This is an important area of focus in connection with studies that seek to drill down to more local trends that address specific demographics unique to each subgroup of school populations. This more local look, such as that

addressed in the 2018-2019 NCEA *Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing*, is particularly relevant to this study in looking more closely at New Jersey Catholic school enrollment decisions made by parents.

### **Current Issues in the Catholic Church**

Catholic parishes today, in many ways, mirror the communities in which they function, yet they also reflect the effects of larger issues within the Church. Sander's (2005a) study titled *Catholics and Catholic Schooling* addresses the construct of religiosity and its current impact on Catholic school enrollment. Sander considers the religiosity of Catholic parents as measured by their church attendance and contributions. Sander finds that Church attendance has decreased, particularly with younger Catholics, those most likely to have school-age children. While this study measures religiosity only by church attendance, this is a limitation that Sander directly acknowledges. This particular study uses church attendance as a measure of religiosity, yet contributions, which are also a measure of religiosity, have declined steadily over the last several decades (Sander, 2005a). Religiosity is far from the only shift the Church is adapting to as it adapts to the climate, culture, and communities it serves today.

This work must address the 2009 study conducted by CARA (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate), which is elaborated upon in the 2017 book, *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century*. From a demographic perspective, Zech, Gautier, and Gaunt (2017) highlight that Catholics have shifted out of the Northeast and Upper Midwest to areas in the South and Southwest.



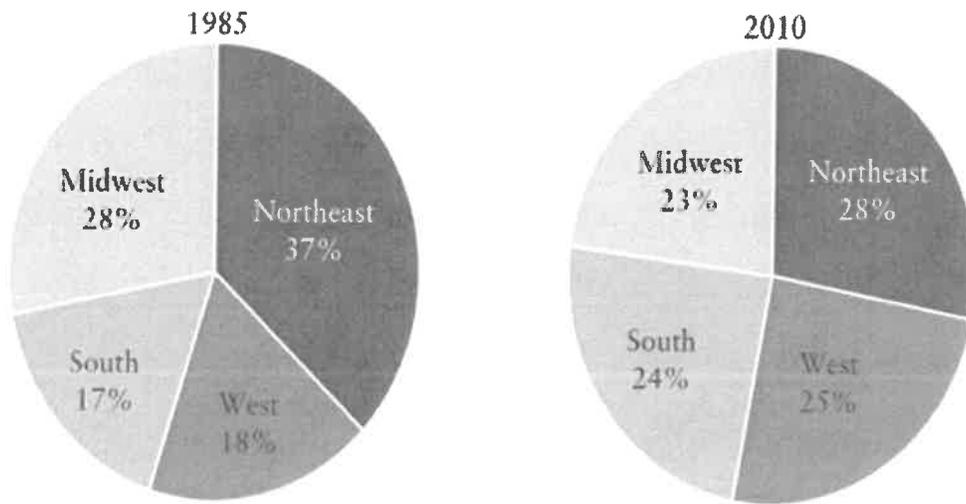


Figure 2. Regional Distribution of Catholic Population, 1985-2010.

As can be seen by Figure 2 from Zech et al.'s (2017) reference to Regional Distribution of Catholic Population, 1985-2010 in *The Official Catholic Directory*, relevant years, in the span of about 25 years, there has been a shift that has moved Catholics out of the Northeast. This shift has resulted in parishes closing or merging with one another in order to maintain pastoral care of communities in areas that are experiencing changes in the population of Catholics. Zech et al. (2017) discuss that bishops in the Northeast have come to realize that the infrastructure in place in the region, with respect to both parishes and schools, is not sustainable by the population of Catholics. The authors point to the statistic that between 2000 and 2010, seven dioceses in the Northeast sustained a net loss of 50 parishes or more. Closures, shifts in population, and community economic challenges have impacted parishes financially in new ways.

While parishes have struggled with decreased collections due to declining religiosity, population changes, and economic strains within their communities, they have also faced scrutiny resulting from the unscrupulous actions within their own leadership. In light of more

recent press that has shined a beam on embezzlements and financial impropriety, parishioners have begun to expect increased financial transparency leading to parish administrators and managers taking on responsibilities that were once largely managed by parish priests (Zech et al., 2017). In some cases, parish finance councils have emerged as a way to engage the parish community in both parish and school financial life in order to ease the concerns of parishioners and demonstrate transparency.

The Catholic Church in the United States today is also faced with the deep wounds of abuse. Paul Elie, writing for the *New Yorker*, reports that social scientists point to the 1960s and 1970s as the gravest of times for abuse within the Church in the United States. Elie notes that for American Catholics, the realities of coverup and demonic behavior are a daily focal point none are soon to move on from while victims are still seeking justice. As this researcher cannot possibly find appropriate words to address this issue and the very tangible need to include it as part of the current issues facing parish schools today and their association with parishes embroiled in the pain of abuse, the writing of Elie (2019) is included in order to summarize the issue of the Church abuse scandal.

It's not that the bishops in this country haven't responded. They've cycled through one crisis-resolution strategy after another. They've consulted experts, set up review boards and hotlines, issued charters and reports, trained parish staff in "best practices" for avoiding and reporting sexual abuse. They have met with survivors and led Masses of penitence and healing; they have apologized and begged for forgiveness. And they've made payments, through settlements and court-ordered damages, amounting to three billion dollars.

All that crisis response has worked, and it hasn't. As questions about restitution arise, the bishops' responses feel inadequate, insincere, or off point. The Vatican, meanwhile, now regards American bishops as masters at handling abuse allegations. At a meeting in Rome in February, Pope Francis and his deputies, addressing a "global crisis" of "the protection of minors," suggested that the rest of the world could learn from the American Church. "Church moving from 'American problem' to American solutions on clergy abuse" a headline from a Catholic news service declared (Elie, 2019, para. 8).

Today's challenges within parishes and the public image of the Church at large associated with this level of deviance have fractured Church communities internally and have isolated communities as they try to remain engaged as community servants for those they are to serve.

### **Summary**

Catholic school enrollment is at a critical crossroads at a time when school choice, Catholic identity, financial strains, and suburban family life are all rapidly evolving as well. The history of Catholic education in the United States has developed over many decades, and yet the enrollment challenges of today seem to be growing quickly for many reasons. The contributing factors that work together to develop the decline in enrollment that schools are faced with are many while only some are well-researched. Studies such as Sander's (2005) and Pelz and den Dulk's (2018) primarily address the impact of religiosity on the decision to choose a private school compared to public; however, the body of work beyond this contributing factor is far less extensive. While the area of Catholic school enrollment has become an area of tremendous focus, understanding exactly how parents arrive at decisions for their children's elementary school experience, the contributing factors to these decisions, and the degree to which each

consideration is significant to that decision-making process are areas that need to be explored in order to address the rapidly changing landscape that is Catholic education. At a time when marketing firms are specializing in Catholic school enrollment management to answer the need in the marketplace for support, actionable ideas, and enrollment management planning, understanding the parent as a customer and decision-maker is critical for school leaders.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the methods used to gain insight into what motivates parents to consider a parish elementary school as well as the decision-making process that parents engage in with their specific priorities at the forefront. A description of the participating suburban parish schools and parent participants is provided as well as the method for data collection, interview instrument, and analysis. The design theories that have influenced this work are also discussed in detail. Additionally, as part of this qualitative work with a phenomenological approach, the researcher's personal experiences within Catholic education are discussed, through reflexivity, to provide further context for this study.

#### **Background**

Catholic school enrollment nationwide continues to decline, year after year, with little progress being made to stave off the continued downturn. Parish elementary schools in the Northeast have been particularly hard hit as schools are closed or consolidated in response to declining enrollment and increasing attrition rates (McDonald & Schultz, 2019). School leaders need all of the information and insight they can gather in order to shape the enrollment strategies that their schools prioritize. Understanding parents and the ways in which they experience the enrollment process is critical for school leaders. Parents, as the decision-makers for their children's schooling years, are influenced by the initial motivators that spur them to consider a parish elementary school as well as the factors that shape their decision-making process along the way. In selecting a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach, this study engages in

understanding the experiences of parents who have experienced the process of selecting a parish elementary school.

As the researcher, my own experience in Catholic education sheds light on the interest in this topic and is important to explicitly share in light of ethical considerations and the validity of this study. As an early childhood teacher and then middle school teacher in a parish elementary school in northern New Jersey, I was fully engaged in the school community effort to develop the most exceptional learning experience possible for students and families. Faculty were an integral part of the reflective process in assessing programs, instructional decisions, and school community development. I then assumed the role of principal at a time when this school's enrollment was more than marginalized. Year after year, for the previous four years, enrollment had declined and was not showing signs of slowing despite an enthusiastic school community. I was principal for two years, working to implement new marketing strategies, engage benefactors, and develop innovative programs to draw community attention. At the end of the two years as principal, with an unsustainable projected enrollment for the following school year, the parish school was closed. Both during my time as a teacher and then as a principal, I spent time speaking with parents on tours, at open houses, and in admissions meetings as they considered my own parish school. This very emotional, monumental decision of selecting a school to entrust children to each day for their educational and social experience is intense, important, and complex for so many families. The relationships built with many families as I supported them in reaching the right decision for their own family were deeply fulfilling as an educator. I continue to work in administration in Catholic education in an archdiocesan secondary school and remain focused on engaging in the process of developing a sustainable way forward that continues to offer a Catholic education to families as an outstanding option for their children's education.

This study is influenced by social values theory's implications for understanding how decisions are made under the influence of social groups, validation, and risk avoidance. In addition to social values theory, influence is found in Tiebout's "voting with your feet" and Hirschman's concepts of *exit*, *voice*, and *loyalty* as they relate to decision-making from economic and political angles.

The research question guiding this study is the following : How do parents describe the primary contributors to the decision-making process when they enroll their child/children in a northern New Jersey suburban elementary parish school?

The sub-questions considered in developing a depth of understanding of the research question are as follows:

- a. How do parents describe the initial motivators that drive them to consider a parochial elementary school?
- b. How do parents describe their decision-making process?

### **Design**

This study is designed as a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach. The primary framework considered in shaping this study is that of social constructivism. The framework of social constructivism, as explained by Creswell and Poth (2018), places a focus on the participants' views in the context of the historical and cultural norms that influence those views. This approach lends itself to more open-ended interviews, and the researcher acknowledges her own position within the topic of the study. The phenomenological approach was selected for several reasons. Phenomenological research seeks to develop commonalities among participants while engaging with curiosity in the differences by exploring participants' experiences of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study seeks to develop

an understanding of the essence of the decision-making process: the emotions, priorities, and motivators that shape that process as experienced by parents. As Creswell and Poth (2018) discuss, in a phenomenological approach to qualitative research, developing an understanding of the essence of the experience may lead to developing practices and policies as well as a deeper understanding of the features of these experiences.

Interviews were used to gather the data for this study. The use of interviews in this phenomenological study is designed to develop an understanding of the meaning within the decision-making process of parents in selecting a parish elementary school. This meaning-making is critical to the strength of the study.

Meaning-making is a particularly human process, heavily reliant on language...Schutz argues that meaningfulness does not reside in the lived experience itself but is the “act of attention” that brings experiences that would otherwise be simply lived through into “intentional gaze” and opens the pathway to meaningfulness (Schutz, 1967, pp. 71-72). By asking participants to reconstruct their experience and then reflect on its meaning, interviewers encourage participants to engage in that “act of attention” that then allows them to consider the meaning of a lived experience (Seidman, 2019, p. 19, para. 2).

Qualitative interviewing has its foundation in this meaning-making. The assumption that participants’ perspectives contain meaning, knowledge, and may be made explicit through qualitative study is this foundation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016).

The qualitative approach of this study allows for inductive, bottom-up concept development. Qualitative researchers are developing a picture that emerges as the data are collected and examined (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). In this way, the coding of interview transcript take shape through emerging categories and themes.



## Setting

The setting for this research is suburban parish elementary, preschool through grade eight, schools in Northern New Jersey. Purposeful sampling was used to select the three schools included in this study. The participating schools were selected because they are representative of the size and demographic makeup of the vast majority of suburban parish elementary schools in Northern New Jersey. They are each located in a school district that is highly ranked among its counterparts in New Jersey, as determined by the Niche report of the best school districts in New Jersey. The diocese or dioceses in which these schools reside is not identified for the purposes of confidentiality for this study. All three participating schools are affiliated with a single parish. For the purposes of this study, in understanding the selection of parish elementary schools, none of the three schools has ever been part of a consolidation or organizational restructuring. The three schools are also reflective of typical suburban parish schools in the area of enrollment. None of the three schools has enrollment that would be considered marginalized or at risk. Written permission was received from each of the three participating school principals. Each of the three principals was engaged through a letter explaining the purpose of this study, as can be seen in Appendix A. The three principals replied via email, indicating that they would like their schools to be part of this opportunity.

All three schools are led by a principal with five or more years of experience in the principal role and have been engaged in Catholic education for ten years or more. The size of each school represents the range of parish elementary schools in northern New Jersey. One school maintains one class per grade level with a student population in the low 200's, while the other two participating schools, with larger campuses, each have a student population in the low 400's. All three schools are financially independent of their parish, not receiving a subsidy to

offset tuition costs. This financial independence is a goal of many parish elementary schools, as parishes often do not have the funds to support schools with the same scale that had been historically the case as a tuition management strategy.

### **Participant Sample**

Parent participants were identified in conjunction with the principal from each school. The principal from each of the three participating schools shared a list of potential participants. This list included a range of parents who have had their children attending the participating school for one to ten or more years. A sample size of 18 participants from three suburban parish elementary schools in northern New Jersey participated in the interview process. Using the list provided by each principal, the researcher randomly selected and then contacted 20 parents from each school. Six parents were then randomly selected from each school based on the responses of willingness to participate. Parents who agreed to participate but were not selected received a letter thanking them for their willingness to participate and explaining their random non-selection, as can be seen in Appendix D.

Participants were provided with a letter explaining the purpose of this study and the manner in which data were collected and confidentiality maintained. Participants were reminded at several stages that their participation is voluntary, and they may choose to exclude themselves at any time. Participants, if they chose to participate, completed a letter of informed consent, and this consent was reviewed verbally at the start of each interview. The background of the researcher was summarized for each participant in an effort to ethically share the researcher's position within the topic of parish elementary school enrollment.

In terms of background, 15 out of 18 participants are Catholic, with their children's other biological parent also being Catholic. Of the 18 participants, 16 are married, and 11 participants

are in a dual-income household. When asked about the commute to get to school, six out of 18 participants commute between 40 and 45 minutes to get to school, with five of those six participants commuting that distance because one or more closer Catholic schools closed. Six out of 18 participants commute between 20 and 30 minutes to get to school, with two of the six commuting that distance because a closer Catholic elementary school closed, and six out of 18 participants have a commute of about 15 minutes or less. The interview questions following those associated with background gathering were then aimed to glean insight into the priorities and motivators of each participant.

### **Restatement of the Problem**

This study investigated the motivators that cause parents to initiate consideration of a parish elementary school for their children's school as well as the factors that influence parents' decisions and the decision-making process itself. The experience of parents, as they explain it, within the decision-making process, is critical to this study's goal of developing an understanding that may drive school decisions in the area of enrollment management.

### **Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol was developed in light of the guiding theories of social values theory and the work of Tiebout (1956) and Hirschman (1970). Generational patterns were considered in shaping the interview protocol to elicit the essence of the experience of parents and what drives them in their decisions. The interview questions were reviewed by a jury of the three principals whose schools participated in this study. As an additional layer of review, the interview questions were reviewed by an expert in the field of Catholic school marketing and development who has worked for a firm specializing in Catholic school management for decades.

The interview questions were open-ended to allow each participant to elaborate and add details in line with their own experiences and priorities within the decision-making process discussion. The three primary types of questions asked were feeling-based questions, opinions, and experience-based questions. Feeling-based questions are directed at developing an understanding of the emotional aspects of a participant’s experience, while opinion questions allow the researcher to develop insight into the cognitive process a participant has gone through, including the interviewee’s goals, intentions, and values (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). Experience-based questions allow participants to describe their actions, experiences, and choices (2016). These three approaches to interview question development shaped the protocol to elicit responses that may provide school leaders with a deeper understanding of the experience of school choice as parents describe it in the context of their own priorities and goals. Some background questions were included in the interview protocol to develop a profile of each participant that includes their generational influences, the extent of experience in Catholic education, and personal background as it relates to school choice and religious affiliation. For a complete review of the interview protocol used for this study, please see Appendix D. As can be seen from Table 3 below, the interview questions used were aligned with the research questions intended to help glean insight for the purposes of this study.

Table 3

*Research Questions and Interview Questions Alignment*

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>	<b>Guiding Theory</b>
1. How do parents describe the primary contributors to the decision-making process when they enroll their	6. In choosing to re-enroll each year, what are some of the things you think about or consider as you assess re-enrolling? 7. Do you ever question your decision to stay in parochial school? Please explain why or why not.	Tiebout, Social values theory, Hirschman

<p>child/children in a Northern New Jersey suburban elementary parish school?</p>	<p>8. What aspects of your parochial school are most important to your decision to stay in a parish school?  9. Describe your place in the community of your school. What about your role in the school community is most important to you?  10. How would you describe your interactions with people when you tell them that your child or children attend a parochial school? What do you tell them, and how do they respond?</p>	
<p>1a. How do parents describe the initial motivators that drive them to consider a parochial elementary school?</p>	<p>1. Tell me about how you initially decided to consider a parochial elementary school. What was the initial motivator, or what were the initial motivators?</p>	<p>Tiebout</p>
<p>1b. How do parents describe their decision-making process?</p>	<p>2. Once you decided to consider a parochial school, how did you go about selecting the one that you chose? Please explain the process that you went through?  3. What were the top priorities within that process? What aspects of the parish school were most important, and why?  4. Who took part in helping you arrive at your decision? Who did you discuss this decision with as part of completing your choice?  5. What parts of the learning process were most important to you as you explored understanding more about the school you were to choose? What tools were most critical to your process in learning about the school?</p>	<p>Tiebout, Social values theory, Hirschman</p>

### **Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted, one-on-one, with each participant at a time of their choosing. Each interview was conducted in the parent’s participating school in a private setting. In instances when a parent requested a video interview or an alternate private location for their own convenience, those options were arranged. Each interview was recorded with participant permission, and the recordings were transcribed. Audio recordings of each interview were

destroyed once transcripts were complete. Participant logs were maintained using a numerical identification system in order to ensure confidentiality. Transcripts are stored, together with participant logs, using a password-protected USB drive secured in a passcode-protected private space.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview transcripts were analyzed and coded to identify themes in participant responses in alignment with the study research questions. Transcript review and coding took place within a brief window of time following each interview in order to capture as much information as possible from each interview without losing some of the essence with time. Coding, in alignment with the inductive process, began with a review of the transcripts for an initial overview of patterns, topics, and regularities that then became the categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). Additional layers of the review were conducted to further develop a deeper understanding of the essence of the decision-making process and priorities of parents in selecting a Catholic parish elementary school as described by participants.

### **Summary**

Chapter III explicitly outlines the structure of this study, its design, and the alignment of data collection with study goals and research questions. Reliability and validity are explained in the context of participants, data collection and analysis, and the researcher's position within the study. The rationale for using a phenomenological approach to this qualitative study with interviews is discussed. A participant sample of 18 parents from three suburban parish elementary schools in northern New Jersey is discussed in terms of their representation of the population of parents for the purposes of this work.

The data collected are important to those engaged in the work of Catholic education, specifically parish elementary schools. This study is designed to glean important insight into what motivates parents to consider a parish elementary school, how they experience the decision-making process, and what drives their decisions. This information may be used to develop programs and market strategically to stabilize enrollment despite these challenging times of decline.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter IV presents an analysis of the research and the findings from this qualitative study with a phenomenological approach. A review of the background and context within which this study is grounded begins this chapter. An examination of the themes that emerged from the research within the context of the research questions follows the background review of this study. Chapter IV concludes with a summary of the research findings.

A sample of 18 parent participants included a range of years in which their children were enrolled in a Catholic elementary school from one year to more than ten years. Participants were interviewed with open-ended questions to gain insight into the motivators and factors that contribute to their decision to select Catholic elementary school for their children. Background questions were included in the interview protocol to gain further insight into initial motivations for seeking to explore Catholic education for their children. The interview protocol was reviewed by the principal of each participating school as well as an expert in the area of Catholic school enrollment and marketing for reliability. The interview questions were aligned to the overarching research question and two sub-questions. The guiding research question for this study and its two sub-questions are as follows:

1. How do parents describe the primary contributors to the decision-making process when they enroll their child/children in a northern New Jersey suburban elementary parish school?
  - a. How do parents describe the initial motivators that drive them to consider a parochial elementary school?



- b. How do parents describe their decision-making process?

### **Themes - Research Question 1**

Research Question 1. How do parents describe the primary contributors to the decision-making process when they enroll their child/children in a northern New Jersey suburban elementary parish school?

Several considerations need to be addressed in order to develop an understanding of what contributors are the overarching drivers of the decision-making process for parents in enrolling their children in a Catholic parish elementary school. As was previously outlined in Table 3, Interview Questions 6-10 were written to glean insight into these primary contributors as parents define them when reflecting on the considerations that come up for them in initially enrolling and then re-enrolling each year. Parents discussed this process in terms of finding a good fit or right fit for their children.

The right fit for participants included contributors that may be best understood in terms of several themes. Quality of education was a key component for parents in considering to enroll and also to re-enroll each year. As is discussed in addressing Research Sub-Question 2, a strong academic program was an important part of the initial decision-making process and part of the data gathered by parents as they learned about their children's school before enrolling. Another theme that emerged as important to the overall reflection for participants was the importance of the faculty, specifically the personal attention and connections between faculty and students. Relationships within the school community emerged as a theme from participant responses as they reflected on their own role in the school as well as the relationships their children build. Safety, emotionally and physically, was noted by parents as they highlighted specific examples of their assurance that a parish elementary school was the right fit for their children. Faith

formation was also addressed throughout participant responses in explaining the importance of the positive experiences and outcomes their children have as a result of attending Catholic school. As can be gleaned from Table 4, eight out of 18 participants referenced all five themes in their responses.

Table 4

*Participant Responses by Theme*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Themes Referenced- Quality of Education, Faculty, Relationships with Community, Safety, Faith Formation</b>
1	Quality of Education, Faculty, Relationships with Community, Safety, Faith Formation
2	Quality of Education, Faculty, Safety, Faith Formation
3	Quality of Education, Faculty, Faith Formation
4	Quality of Education, Faith Formation
5	Quality of Education, Faith Formation
6	Quality of Education, Faculty, Relationships with Community, Safety, Faith Formation
7	Quality of Education, Faculty, Relationships with Community, Safety, Faith Formation
8	Quality of Education, Relationships with Community, Faith Formation
9	Quality of Education, Faculty, Relationships with Community, Faith Formation
10	Quality of Education, Faculty, Relationships with Community, Safety, Faith Formation
11	Faculty, Relationships with Community, Faith Formation
12	Quality of Education, Faculty, Relationships with Community, Faith Formation
13	Quality of Education, Faculty, Relationships with Community, Safety, Faith Formation

14	Quality of Education, Faculty, Relationships with Community, Faith Formation
15	Quality of Education, Faculty, Safety
16	Quality of Education, Faculty, Faith Formation
17	Quality of Education, Faculty, Faith Formation
18	Faculty, Faith Formation

Quality of education emerged as an important contributor to the decision-making process both initially and as part of annual re-enrollment considerations. With 15 out of 18 participants referencing the quality of the education as part of their considerations and process, this aspect of their school was clearly an overwhelming priority. Participants pointed to differentiated instruction, a STEM program in the school, and competitive test scores as considerations that they identified as indicators of quality education. Participant 10, when describing the thought process that results when the re-enrollment contract is due each year, shared the following:

I feel that it's a good fit for her, and each time I think about whether it is still a good fit. She has an ISP (Individualized Service Plan), so they work really hard to differentiate and make sure that her needs are met. I think that is always really important and the first thing my husband and I think about and often even discuss. She has made friendships and formed those bonds. That is also really important to us and part of why we keep her there. I truly believe she is getting the best education as well as the best faith education possible.

This participant's response addressed the initial priority of quality education while noting that other themes, such as community relationships and faith formation, contribute to the overall thought process when considering satisfaction with the school.

In terms of the decision process and the thoughts involved in considering re-enrollment each year, participants overwhelmingly indicated that they do not question the decision to stay enrolled in their parish elementary school. While they do consider how the experience is going with the quality of education as a top priority, 16 out of 18 participants noted that they do not ever question their choice to stay in a parish elementary school, with 12 participants noting that they had been in another parish elementary school at some point that had been closed due to decreasing enrollment. Participants discussed their confidence while addressing their priority of the quality of education.

Participant 5 noted that when comparing his children to those he knows who attend public school, his children seem much more advanced academically. He noted that this confidence in the quality of academic education his children are engaged in together with the faith formation they receive is why he does not ever question his decision to keep his children enrolled in Catholic school. This participant went on to say that while the public school may offer additional experiences that the parochial school cannot also offer, “the academics, the social, and the religious aspects are far and away, in my opinion, better than they are in the public school.”

Participants discussed their trust and confidence in the school faculty as they shared their experiences that shape their decision to stay enrolled in Catholic school. The personal attention of faculty, parents’ confidence that faculty know their children very well, and the feeling that faculty want what is best for their children were all noted as participants discussed the role of faculty in their decision to enroll and stay enrolled in Catholic school. With 13 out of 15 participants citing faculty as part of the contributors to the decision-making process, the role of

faculty is critical in instilling confidence in parents. Participant 15 addressed the connection with faculty as a primary point of importance. He noted the following:

We have frequent touchpoints with the teachers. I think it's important. I mean, I think for me, if the teachers were not present and weren't actively involved in our children's success, I think my wife and I would have considered not going to the school in the future. These are the data points that we really focus on when we get the contract each year. We just got our contract for next year, and there was no hesitation because there is so much focus on each of our children. Their teachers are really focused on their development progressing, and so I think that's the most important thing we look for that we are thinking about and considering.

This particular response highlights the point that parents, referencing the importance of faculty, were focused on the care, attention, and personal connections that faculty have with their children. While they also overwhelmingly noted that the quality of education was important, when elaborating on why the faculty are important, they focused on the way teachers make their children feel.

The overall importance of personal connections was also evident in participants' responses as they discussed relationships within the school community as a theme of significance. Ten out of 18 participants pointed to relationships, including the influence of peers, the character of other students and families, and feeling as though the school community is a family. Participant 7 explained her connection by saying that it is the family environment and that the other families were really their family, and it just felt natural. She referenced that because she was able to be very involved as a volunteer, there was more familiarity and relationship building that led to this feeling of family for her. Participant 12 noted her connection

to the principal and faculty in terms of community, stating that she feels that it is important to stay connected to the principal and teachers and that is where she feels most connected to the community. Participant 8 referenced being involved in the community as an important factor in affirming her choice to be part of a parochial school. She discussed that parents are part of the school community in addition to the children. Parents are able to be part of the community and school as much as they want, which, for her, was significant. Parent engagement in the school community was referenced in terms of the relationships and also in terms of evidence of a healthy school.

While enrollment numbers were referenced sporadically by participants as part of their responses, three of the 10 participants who discussed the community addressed the community connection in terms of how assured they are of a sustainable school. Of the 18 participants, 12 had been in a school that had closed. As participants in this study, they had clearly continued their children's education in parochial school by enrolling in another Catholic elementary school rather than transitioning to their local public school or another nonpublic option. In referring to community connections as part of the decision-making process as well as a sign of school sustainability, Participant 1 explained her thinking as follows:

I have a very good sense that the community of the school is extremely strong. The principal has a following. She is now the principal of grandchildren whose grandparents she possibly taught when she first started at the school. The priest is very involved in the parish and the school. Sports are popular. Anytime there has been a difficult time or a loss, the whole school community comes together very quickly to support a family in need. So there is a very strong presence of the school family that just makes it feel like it is not going to go anywhere. The families are so devoted to the school, and there are so

many families. The school runs on volunteers, and parents have to step up and be that extra support to faculty. They do it in such a loving, positive way.

While school enrollment did not emerge as a theme in reassuring parents of the decision to re-enroll each year, it remained an underlying thread in responses. Relationships within the community were important to parents both in terms of the family feeling that they wanted for themselves and their children and also as a sign of a healthy school.

Participants addressed safety as a mostly emotional component that played a role in the assurance that a parochial school was the right fit for their children. While one participant did elaborate on physical safety, including school security measures, technological upgrades that made the school safer, and the best practices of faculty and staff, this participant's response was an outlier. Responses within the theme of safety were centered around emotional safety, with participants using terms such as *patience*, *loving*, *gentle*, *nurturing*, *thriving*, and *Jesus' love* as part of their responses in discussing how their school was confidently the right fit.

Seven out of 18 participants included feelings of safety and security, largely a nurturing environment, as part of why they felt that their school choice in Catholic education was the right one for their children. Participant 1 shared that, in terms of class size and school culture, her children were in a nurturing classroom environment that allowed them to feel comfortable to let their own unique personalities emerge without social fears holding them back or shaping their personalities away from who they naturally are.

The response from Participant 1 was mirrored by other participants as they pointed out that their children feel at ease, are eager to come to school each day, and are overall very happy children at school and, in turn, at home. While safety within the school environment and

community was addressed specifically as its own theme in responses from these seven participants, faith formation was overwhelmingly part of these conversations as well.

Faith formation emerged as a strong theme as parents considered the critical aspects of their parochial school. With a nearly unanimous 17 out of 18 participants addressing faith formation as part of their decision, the role of faith formation was clearly considerable as it set their school apart from its competitors in the minds of parents. Participant 2, who had recently been in a school that closed and had enrolled in another parochial elementary school, highlighted faith formation in terms of her and her husband's decision to remain in Catholic education rather than using the school closure as an opportunity to try their public school.

To be honest, we do not question our decision. So when our school closed down, there was probably a split second where we considered the public school district. We live in a really great district with some great public schools. But I will tell you that, you know, in that split second, my daughter started singing a religious song from school. I just looked at my husband, and he looked at me, and we knew we had to stay with the Catholic schools. I mean, I firmly believe in the religious aspects, and I just don't think we would ever consider public because of that.

This comparison to public school was largely consistent as parents shared the importance of faith in their children's school experience. Parents cited the benefit of their children being able to talk about God, Jesus, and praying with their peers as a part of daily school life. The learning of faith in terms of Church teachings as well as social responsibility came up repeatedly during these conversations.

Faith formation, as it shaped their children's awareness of their own social responsibility, was noted by three participants. Participant 14 shared that seeing her children and their peers as



respectful of people and property and exhibiting informed judgment and a “social conscience” is something that she and her husband actively consider as part of their decision-making process as they reflect on the impact of their school and its value to their family. She continued to point out that, in her experience, Catholic schools have the flexibility and instructional time to also focus on life skills, including faith formation. Parents addressed community service, giving back to the community, and engaging school children in parish life as part of the importance of faith formation in school.

Parents reflected on their experience in selecting and annually re-enrolling in their children’s parish elementary school, and it was through these reflections that the themes of quality of education, faculty, relationships with the community, safety, and faith formation emerged as critical components to the school decision-making process. Parents were passionate, clear on the goals they have for their children, and enthusiastic to share their experiences as part of the Catholic school community.

#### **Themes - Research Sub-Question 1a**

Research Sub-Question 1a. How do parents describe the initial motivators that drive them to consider a parochial elementary school?

This research question was specifically targeted through Interview Question 1 in asking participants to “tell me about how you initially decided to consider a parochial elementary school. What was the initial motivator, or what were the initial motivators?” While participants later elaborated on additional motivators that drive their decision to stay in Catholic school, the responses to this question were focused on the initial motivator or motivators that were the catalyst to even consider a Catholic parish elementary school rather than the presumed

assumption that their children would attend the local public school. Participant responses may be found in Table 5 below.

Table 5

*Initial Motivator or Motivators in Considering a Parochial Elementary School*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Initial Motivators- Interview Question 1</b>
1	Conduct of students/families in the school
2	Preschool with extended day; faith formation; care of the faculty and school community
3	Personally attended Catholic school; Care of the faculty and school community
4	Convenience of commute to work; Strong curriculum
5	Daily faith formation; Smaller class sizes with nurturing environment
6	Spouse attended Catholic school; faith-based education; smaller size
7	Nurturing environment and faculty; preschool
8	Spouse attended Catholic school
9	Spouse attended Catholic school
10	Personally attended Catholic school; care of faculty and school community
11	Personally attended Catholic school
12	Daily faith formation; care of faculty and school community
13	Preschool
14	Daily faith formation
15	Preschool with an extended day option
16	Daily faith formation
17	Daily faith formation; care of faculty and school community
18	Care of faculty and school community; small class sizes

As can be discerned from the responses in Table 5, six participants either attended Catholic school themselves or have a spouse who attended Catholic school and cited this background as an initial motivator. Most participants elaborated on their own experience or their spouse's experience in Catholic school, sharing why this experience was a motivating factor in what they hoped to pursue for their children. Participant 6 shared the following:

My wife attended Catholic school beginning in primary school and continuing through high school and had very positive experiences. We are a very faith-based family, and I did not have the opportunity of a private school. I think I really would have benefited from the smaller environment. I know that now that I am an adult and have had the chance to think back about it and also consider my wife's experience and the experiences of my children in Catholic school. Catholic school was something that really benefited my wife, and she really flourished. She was valedictorian of her class and continued on to become a physician.

One participant, Participant 4, indicated that commute convenience was an initial motivator, which is an outlier response when considering the responses to Background Question 7, indicating 12 out of 18 participants commute 20 minutes or more to take their children to school. Of the 7 participants commuting more than 20 minutes to school, five of these participants travel about 40 minutes each way. The same 12 participants all indicated that their commute to school was, at least in part, a result of the closure of Catholic schools that were closer.

The care of the faculty and school community and a nurturing environment were cited by eight out of 18 participants as initial motivators. Two of these eight participants attended Catholic school personally, while six did not have personal experience with Catholic school prior

to enrolling their own children based on the desire for a nurturing and caring environment. A caring and nurturing learning environment was noted throughout participant responses, as was noted in addressing Research Question 1. The parents who cited care of the faculty and school community and a nurturing environment as the initial motivator described this desire to enroll their children in a Catholic school setting using words and phrases such as *caring teachers*, *loving*, *patient*, and *individual attention and care*. Participant 7 had this to say about the initial motivator in considering a Catholic school, in this case a Catholic preschool

My eldest daughter was in preschool, a nondenominational preschool in our town where we lived, and she was in her final year there. I had some discussions with the head of school about my daughter's personality and anxiety. I was concerned about putting my daughter in the public school for kindergarten due to my daughter's kind of reserved personality and her anxiety levels. I was worried that she would not flourish in a public school environment, and the head of the school agreed with me and recommended a local Catholic parochial school to us. And so, after that conversation, we had a few friends who also put their children in this school. We decided to follow suit and place her for an extra year of preschool in that Catholic preschool so that she would continue to grow in a loving place with patient teachers who would understand her sensitivities and needs. We wanted our daughter to be in a class with children from families who wanted the same things for their children in school. Then our second child followed naturally into that school for preschool and beyond as well.

As Participant 7 indicated, the motivator of both a nurturing environment with caring teachers and also the desire to be in a school with a community of like-minded families was an initial motivator for participants.

Faith formation was referenced by six out of 18 participants as an initial motivator in considering a Catholic parish elementary school for their children. With 14 out of 18 participants in families in which both spouses are Catholic, and six participants that either attended Catholic school themselves or have a spouse who attended Catholic school, faith formation was discussed both in responding to Question 1 as well as throughout participant interviews. Participant 16 described the initial motivator to consider a Catholic parish elementary school by saying the following:

I would say the religious aspect; We want our children to have a good base of religion. And also just understanding the basic concepts of caring for people, loving others, those types of concepts; both my husband and I, and he is Hindu, we both have gone to private religious schools our entire lives from, you know, kindergarten through college. And so we just thought it would be really important for our children to have that same perspective.

Participants referenced wanting faith formation for their children on a daily basis in addition to what they teach at home, as well as the consistency of faith formation in all areas of their children's lives, including families who want the same faith formation for their children.

Participant 14 referenced faith formation in relationship to other families when saying the following:

I wanted my kids to know that going to church each Sunday isn't just a once a week thing that we do but also just kind of only a small part of practicing faith. I wanted my kids to be singing about Jesus with their friends at Christmas time. I also just really liked the idea of their teachers bringing up religion lessons when topics come up in other subjects. Really though, I think if I had to pinpoint what about the faith formation aspect was

important, it is really summed up by something that I have noticed about my children and their friends. When their friends come over, or they go to friends' houses, they always pray before they eat. Usually, it is one of the kids who reminds the group, and it just happens so naturally. They just all say a quick blessing for the food and move on because it is part of everyone's home life, so it doesn't feel awkward. I think that, while I didn't actually anticipate that specifically, that faith formation in the school curriculum, and from the teachers, but also from the other families and the school community is really what was a big thing for me, and it has continued to show in my children's lives as they have gone through school.

The initial motivators and their intersection with the factors that parents prioritize when choosing to re-enroll each year provide an overall understanding of the critical tenets of Catholic parish schools that establish their place in the landscape of school choices. The initial motivators of personal experience in Catholic school, a caring and nurturing learning environment, and faith formation were the most significant.

### **Themes - Research Sub-Question 1b**

Research Sub-Question 1b. How do parents describe their decision-making process?

Research Sub-Question 1b, addressed through Interview Questions 2 through 5, was directed at providing school leaders some understanding of the process of decision-making; specifically, the people parents may engage with as they make their decision, the tools parents use for information gathering about schools they are considering, and what parts of this process become most critical to their decision in electing to initially enroll or re-enroll each year when parents are faced with the arrival of the annual tuition contract.

As participants discussed the process of selecting a Catholic parish elementary school, themes emerged from the responses that were highlighted as parents discussed their experience with the school selection process. The school community, leadership, faith formation, and academic program were focal points for parents as they articulated how the process unfolded for them. Each of these themes, consistent with the responses to questions addressing Research Question 1 and Research Sub-Question 1a, establish an overall understanding of the priorities of parents and the needs they most feel must be met by their children's school experience.

As parents responded to Interview Questions 2 through 5, they highlighted their interactions with the school community prior to enrolling through tours, open houses, attendance at school-led masses in the parish, and interactions with students and families in other community settings such as athletic events. These school community interactions were discussed by participants most often by referencing the impression other children who attended the school gave them and then, in turn, parents wanting a similar outcome for their own children. Participant 1 described both the experience of her spouse as well as her own experience with Catholic school community members and how this emerged as a driver in enrolling her children in her parish elementary school.

My husband was working in Washington, D.C., at the time right outside of Catholic University. He would go to the same place for breakfast or lunch very regularly, and college students from Catholic University would come in, sit down, and they would pray. They were, in his eyes, like the most well-behaved, and he would be like, oh my goodness, this is how I want my children someday to be conducting themselves. So he came home one weekend from D.C., and we had just moved to another town in the same county specifically for the public schools. My mom had considered sending me to

Catholic school when I was young, but my parents couldn't make the financial obligation. When my husband came home and started talking about Catholic school for our children, we talked about how fortunate we are to be able to make the financial commitment, and maybe Catholic school would be the right choice for the reasons he saw each day in the restaurant with the college students. Since we had just moved, we were also looking for a new parish to attend mass. I did a quick Google search that day and not only saw that one of the parishes had a school, but they happened to be having an open house that weekend for Catholic Schools Week. So we sat down at mass, and we sat behind a family that I now know very well. We didn't know them at the time, but I just could not stop looking at them and at my husband. I just kept feeling this connection like, oh my goodness, this feels so right. Now, this is coming from my husband, who has no real strong Catholic upbringing or beliefs for that matter. The second graders were conducting the mass, and we just kept looking at our kids and looking at the families around us. I was just like, wow, if I could give anything to my kids right now, this just feels so right. When mass was over, we proceeded to the gym. A family greeted us, and then the children gave us the most professional eighth-grade tour you can imagine. They were so well-spoken and so proud of their school. I called the school office the next morning and dropped off my children's application later that same day.

Participant 1, addressing the draw of the school community as well as the interactions through the school-led mass and open house, reflects the responses of other participants. Participant 18 described the theme of the community by saying, "We both felt like we wanted to walk through the halls and feel part of a community and part of a family because, you know, we like that aspect of the parochial schools, the Catholic schools." Participants referenced "like-minded



families,” their children feeling “emotionally safe with everyone they interact with,” and “how the students carry themselves” as focal points that they were keenly aware of on tours and during their early interactions with the schools they were considering. Participant 6, considering the experience of a student-led tour, stated that “the best advertisement for the school is the kids. Just spending time with them, you could just tell that the education and learning they were doing there was exceptional.” Participants consistently referenced the feeling that they experienced throughout the process and continue to experience as part of the decision-making process. The feeling of the school culture and community was a common thread throughout a range of participant responses.

Interactions with school leadership, primarily the school principal, were also highlighted as a critical component of the decision-making process. Participants referenced tours with the principal and individual interviews that helped them to get to know the school leadership, philosophy, and the overall climate of the school as articulated through the building principal. Participant 11 discussed going on a tour with the principal and having a better sense of the school’s focus on faith formation and a “kinder, more structured approach and also having a little bit more of a sheltered learning environment.” This participant discussed how the principal took a significant amount of time during the interview, and her love for the school could really be felt throughout the discussion.

Engaging with school leadership was referenced by eight out of 18 participants with responses focusing on the time spent, the feelings the principal shared, both directly and indirectly, that mirrored the school culture, and the overall leadership qualities exhibited by the principal during the admissions process interactions. Participants used words and phrases such as *warm, knowledgeable, committed to the school, engaging, and we connected*. Connections with

the school community, including other families, faculty, and the school principal, were highlighted by participants regularly throughout their responses to the range of interview questions. These connections included faith formation and the sense of a faith community.

Faith formation emerged as a theme as participants responded to the key components of the decision-making process. When considering faith formation as a theme in responses to Interview Questions 2 through 5, faith formation and the religious community were named by 12 out of 18 participants as they articulated their experiences in deciding on a parish elementary school for their children. Participant 17 discussed a particular experience during a tour in which a class was preparing for an upcoming event, and the students were writing prayers to their parents. Participant 9 discussed the feeling in the school cafeteria during a tour and how evident it was that faith “was alive and very much part of the daily interactions of the children. They just seemed to have a different way about them, and I could feel that it was because of the religious component and just that everyone, from the teachers to the other kids and parents, is on the same page.”

Participant 1 discussed faith formation in terms of the outcomes expected as a result of daily faith formation. Participant 1, when addressing the key components in selecting a Catholic elementary school, stated, “I am not saying that my kids only have to be around children that believe the same beliefs they do, but it is really refreshing and comforting that on a daily basis they and their teachers and their peers strongly believe in the same religious beliefs that we do. They are required to act a certain way and conduct themselves a certain way; and if they don’t, there is the teachable moment of ‘What would Jesus do?’ and the kids wanting to be a good follower of Jesus makes them want to be kinder and nicer.” While faith formation was referenced

throughout participant interviews, the academic program also emerged as a critical component to the decision to enroll in a parish elementary school.

The academic program was a theme that repeatedly emerged both in discussing it as a key part of selecting which school to enroll in and also as part of the tools used to gather information about the school. The strength of the academic program as a key component of the decision-making process was referenced by nine of the 18 participants. Participant 5 addressed academics in connection with faith formation as priorities by explaining that “the academic achievement of the school was the top priority. While it was probably equally as important that the school is faith-based, I don’t think, and again it was my wife driving this decision at the time, that she would have sacrificed the academics to have a stronger faith-based education. So this kind of went hand in hand.”

Participant 10 specifically referenced learning about the school’s STEM curriculum as a factor in the decision-making process. This participant referenced “the stigma Catholic education had for a while of not being as strong as public schools. I was very focused on academics while on the tour and when speaking with the principal. Knowing the school graduated students who got into some high achieving high schools and also had teachers trained in STEM was a big factor in reassuring me that the decision to send our son and then later our daughter to this Catholic school was going to be the right one from a faith perspective but also would give them opportunities academically.” Participants discussed both the inquiry into the strength of the academic program as well as the reputation of the academic program as an important part of the decision-making process.

Of the nine participants who addressed strong academics as an important factor in deciding to enroll their children in a Catholic parish elementary school, five specifically

discussed the reputation of the school for having a strong academic program. Participant 6 and Participant 7 both told specific stories rather than speaking in general terms about the academic reputation of the school that they selected. Participant 6 shared that when discussing the next step for her daughter after preschool with the head of that school, the school administrator shared that the particular Catholic school they were discussing had a very strong reputation for a rigorous curriculum and had strong test scores. Participant 7 elaborated on the academic reputation of the school his family was considering by sharing that not only did the school have a widely accepted reputation for strong academics, but he also had interacted with several families who had children in the school and felt confident based on his interactions with those parents and children that the academic program was reliably living up to its reputation within the community. Both the research of the academic program and the reputation of the academic program point to the tools participants used during the decision-making process to gather information.

The tools used to learn about the school during the decision-making process were consistent across participants. Participants pointed to tours, with 16 out of 18 participants referencing a tour, either with school students or with the building principal, as part of their process. Participants also attended an open house at the school, with seven out of 18 participants indicating that attending an open house had a role in their decision. Interviews, conversations, and interactions with the principal were also widely referenced, with seven out of 18 participants pointing to their time with the principal as a factor in the decision-making process. These personal interactions with the school community and school leadership, were widely addressed as a large part of the decision-making process, together with data gathering.

Participants, in addition to the conversations and question and answer opportunities found in their interactions with those in the school community, also gathered information during the

decision-making process through the school website and through their own fact-finding. The school website was specifically mentioned as a tool used in the decision-making process by four of the 18 participants. These participants each referenced the school website as part of their overall discussion without pointing to the specific information they gleaned that was useful in their process. Participants highlighted standardized test scores, the high school graduates attended, and the college students later attended as part of the most important aspects of the school that were researched during the decision-making process. Participant 2 elaborated on how this part of the process came together by stating the following:

I think it was important that when we went on the website, all of the information was there for us. I think that with some schools, their marketing materials and the use of technology for marketing were poorer than others. I think that it made it a little easier to make our decision based on the materials we were able to look at. And also, the data that we were able to see, you know, data in the sense of what are the school's graduates going to do after eighth grade and what are the college rates. Obviously, preschool through eighth grade is different from high school, but just looking at the success rate of the students going to college, that was very important for my husband and me.

Speaking specifically about standardized test score data, Participant 13 elaborated on the importance of the principal sharing the school summary data in addressing the past reputation of Catholic schools as not having the same level of technology or academic rigor as the public schools. Participant 13 discussed that because of this past reputation; she looked closely at standardized test data, particularly how students were performing against their peers and other schools. The particular school she chose to enroll her children in, according to her review of scores, was either outperforming or performing at the same level as the children from the public

school. As she continued with this example, she referenced that during the tour, she also was reassured by the technology available in every classroom that seemed to be the same or, in some cases, more than what she knew the local public schools to have in their classrooms. Personal interactions, together with school reference tools, worked together for participants as they worked through the process of selecting a parish elementary school.

Participants engaged with others in discussing their decision during this process as well. While all participants indicated that the primary person they discussed this decision with was their spouse or child's other biological parent, nine out of 18 participants indicated that they engaged others in the decision discussion. Of this group of nine participants, seven of them referenced grandparents as part of the decision-making process. Participant 4 explained that since her mother had felt strongly that she and her brothers would attend Catholic school, she discussed the decision for her own children with her mother. This participant explained that while her mother did not try to persuade her, it was more of an affirmation of the decision. This response mirrored that of the other participants who discussed the decision with grandparents. While the grandparents were not driving the decision, the participants in these cases discussed the choice with them for affirmation and validation.

In addition to grandparents, six of the nine participants who discussed the decision with others indicated that they reached out to other families or had interaction with other families who had children in the Catholic school in which they were planning to enroll. Participant 7 explained that she and her husband spoke with families in-depth about their experiences, asking if they were happy and if they felt that their children were receiving an academically strong education. She also explained that once she and her husband felt confident that they were going to enroll but prior to enrolling their child, they also spoke with the participant's sister and parents as one of

the final steps to the process. The interactions with current families both through school events such as open houses and school-led masses as well as through organic interactions within the community as a driver of word of mouth attention to the school played a role for participants in their process of ultimately enrolling their children in Catholic elementary school.

### **Summary**

The decision-making process for parents as they compared schools and learned more about the school they would ultimately choose to enroll in was shaped by several facets. The themes of the school community, school leadership, faith formation, and academic program emerged as significant influencers in this process and in the decision. Participants also specifically addressed tools critical to the process that shaped their experience. Participants pointed to school tours, including open houses, as they elaborated on their process and the feelings they had while learning about the school.

Parents also discussed interactions with school leadership, specifically the school principal, including interviews and conferences as well as principal-led tours. Parents used the school website as a starting point and were seeking, through the website or in discussions with the principal, information on standardized test scores, high school admissions, and college admissions. While parents largely came to this decision together with their spouse or their child's other biological parent, they did discuss this decision with their children's grandparents as well as with other families enrolled in the school as part of their process, largely for validation.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter V presents an overview of the research study with a review of the purpose of this study, a restatement of the research questions, and a study summary. The findings are reviewed in terms of how they connect to the literature review and theories that shaped this study. Chapter V also presents implications of this research as well as recommendations for policy, practice, and future research studies.

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that impact parental decisions in selecting a suburban Catholic parish elementary school in northern New Jersey for their children. Critical aspects of the selected school, as well as the experience of the decision-making process, were explored in terms of parent priorities and perceptions, as well as the tools parents used to investigate and affirm their decision. Data were gathered about the decision-making process parents engage in both initially in selecting a parish elementary school, and as they consider re-enrolling their children each year.

Declining enrollment in Catholic parish elementary schools across the United States and specifically in suburban northern New Jersey continues to be a needed area of focus with qualitative data to support and further elaborate on the quantitative data school leaders use to shape their enrollment management practices. As parents consider family needs and goals, the individual needs of their children and the school options that are available to them, their own background, priorities, and underlying influences impact the decision-making process that they engage in as they select a school they feel is the best fit for their children. This decision-making process begins with the initial motivator or motivators that trigger parents to seek an educational



environment option outside of their local public school district. As parents reflect on their family needs and goals and how the school will fit into their overall family structure, the purposeful consideration of all educational environment options becomes part of reaching these family goals. This process continues as an iterative process as parents re-enroll their children each year. Initial motivators remain, while the decision-making process is now influenced by the experiences as part of the school community.

This qualitative study with a phenomenological approach used open-ended interview questions to glean insight into the experiences and motivators of the 18 parent participants. Participants were randomly selected from three suburban Catholic parish elementary schools in northern New Jersey. All three schools had a healthy enrollment size that was not at risk and had a principal with five or more years of experience in the principal role in Catholic education, specifically in the school participating in the study. All three schools were affiliated with a single parish and financially independent of the parish. Social constructivism was used as a framework to shape the design of this study, as it centers the focus on participants' views in terms of the norms that influence them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A more extensive understanding of participant experiences and perspectives in school selection was elicited from these conversations.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that shaped this study are the following:

1. How do parents describe the primary contributors to the decision-making process when they enroll their child/children in a northern New Jersey suburban elementary parish school?

- a. How do parents describe the initial motivators that drive them to consider a parochial elementary school?
- b. How do parents describe their decision-making process?

### **Summary of the Findings**

The findings of this study are consistent across the research questions and, while some parallels with other school choice study findings are evident, offer some unexpected outcomes that provide areas of action for school leaders. At the outset of this findings review, it is important to recall that all three suburban Catholic parish elementary schools were located in high-performing public school districts. This, by design, was intended to limit the variable of academic comparison due to a data-informed clear disparity between performance in the public school and performance in the parish elementary school. Marlow (2010) noted the presumption that, at least in California, where Marlow's specific study took place, private school enrollment was inversely related to the strength of the public schools. The variable of low performing public schools was intentionally eliminated as a consideration when designing this study in order to provide school leaders actionable insight that connects more directly with the considerations parents in their schools might prioritize. The findings of this study center on the areas of academics, religiosity, and social implications among the themes that emerged from participant responses.

#### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1. How do parents describe the primary contributors to the decision-making process when they enroll their child/children in a northern New Jersey suburban elementary parish school?

When parents addressed the primary contributors to the decision-making process, they did so with a focus on the themes of quality of education, the school faculty, relationships within the school community, safety, and faith formation. These themes emerged similarly in responses to Research Sub-Question 1b, establishing consistency as well as the importance of these themes and their impact on the process for parents.

The quality of the education in the parish elementary school in which their children were enrolled was a strong theme both as part of the decision-making process as well as discussed in the findings of Research Sub-Question 1b, an initial motivator. Parents largely pointed to the need to feel reassured that their children were engaged in an academic program that was at least as strong as that of the high-performing local public school districts. This finding was consistent with Pelz and denDulk (2018) and the perspective of the secular good theory that posits that parents may be drawn to religious private schools because of perceived benefits, including academics but not limited to academics. Secular good theory also notes discipline and safety as perceived benefits that attract families to religious private schools, which will be addressed across themes found in this study as well (Pelz & den Dulk, 2018, p. 80). The quality of education was a focal point as parents described their considerations when faced with assessing satisfaction in the school and with their child's overall experience.

In addressing the quality of education, parents cited standardized test scores; academic outcomes, including admittance to private high schools; instructional practices; and curriculum as contributors to their overall satisfaction in the academic program. Parent satisfaction with the quality of education was overwhelmingly identified as important to the decision-making process. Dosen (2016) describes the Catholic school curriculum as one that strives to be rigorous, rooted in content standards, and maintains the uniqueness of including religious teachings within the

curriculum and across the content areas (p. 67). Maintaining and growing the quality of education in Catholic schools remains critical to enrollment stability as well as growth.

Quality of education is entwined with the strength of the faculty within the school. This is true both in how the academic program and curricula are implemented but also in the relationships faculty build with their students. Participants cited the faculty and their care for students as well as the personal attention faculty provide as a driving force in the decision-making process. The faculty was reported by participants to be an integral part of the critical aspects of the school that parents consider when making a choice to enroll and stay enrolled in parochial elementary school.

The focus on attention from faculty, including personal attention and care, may be considered in terms of the goal of zero risk, as discussed by Dore, Stone, and Buchanan (2012). The propensity for parents to seek to reduce the risk for their children, including emotional risk and challenges of stress, aligns with the focus on personal attention from faculty and, as addressed in connection with other themes, emotional and physical safety of their children. Parents pointed to the interpersonal connections with faculty and confidence that faculty know their students well and seek to meet their individual needs academically, emotionally, and spiritually.

D'Souza (2016) addresses the role of faculty in Catholic education in noting the importance of personal presence and the intentional interactions of teachers in meeting the needs of the whole student. D'Souza points out that the teacher's comprehensive approach to instruction and interactions is critical to meeting the goals of Catholic education and, ultimately, meeting the needs of students (p. 143). This understanding of the role of parochial school faculty is critical to addressing the goals of parents for their children in selecting Catholic education.

Parents' perceptions of Catholic school faculty and their approach to engaging with each student emerged as a driving contributor to decision-making in line with zero risk theory as well as the work of D'Souza in diving into the Catholic philosophy and approach to education.

Relationships within the school community were cited by parents as critical to their decision as well. The relationships parents forge themselves as well as those their children form with peers and school families, faculty, and school administration all work together to create a sense of family that parents cited as both a feeling and a network that was grounding for them. Marlow (2010) and Sander and Cohen-Zada (2012) point to Tiebout's "voting with your feet" theory of decision-making as they address school choice in terms of community selection. This work considers parent choice in school in terms of their selection of a community that reflects their own values and personal priorities. Parents discussed this connection with others as a strong priority for them in wanting to remain part of the school family. The bonds forged with school community members affirmed their decision to "vote with their feet" in selecting a community that aligned with the goals they set for their children.

This sense of community that feels like family is supported by the work of Anguiano, Thomas, and Proehl (2020), who found that parent participants, when describing their Catholic school community, also used terms such as *like a family* and *community* with frequency while describing the feelings of connections, care, and strong relationships. Their work, in connection to Tiebout's "voting with your feet," also pointed out parents' perceptions that this sense of community in Catholic school was unique to their school and not something they would be able to find in the same way in their public school.

Safety emerged as a theme in parent responses as they described the critical aspects of the school that contribute to the process they undergo in choosing a Catholic education for their

children. Social values theory (Dore et al., 2012) posits that parents, when considering decisions that they perceive to include the emotional and physical safety of their children are less likely to be influenced by inconvenience. This was evident in the findings of this study as parents were willing to take on a long commute in order to keep their children enrolled in Catholic school. Bukhari and Randall (2009) point to Hirschman's theory of exit, voice, and loyalty to explain parents' decision to seek a school setting that best meets the intellectual and physical safety of their children. Safety as a driving factor in parent decision-making also aligns with secular good theory (Pelz & denDulk, 2018, p. 80) as an area of parent attraction to religious private schools. Parents were largely focused on maintaining a school environment that felt safe and nurturing even if it meant managing an inconvenience such as a considerable commute to school.

Faith formation, a theme across all research question responses, was addressed by parents in responses that focused on both the experiences of their children as well as outcomes of faith formation in school, which included social responsibility. The work of Sander and Cohen-Zada (2012) addresses this aspect of faith formation in Catholic education in pointing out that religiosity is more significantly an outcome of Catholic education rather than a broadly significant primary motivator to choose Catholic education. Parents addressed faith formation, in response to this research question, largely in terms of connections with other themes, including relationships within the community, faculty, and the quality of education. Parents pointed to faith formation as an outcome of their parish school as well as an outcome of the relationships within their school, the interactions with faculty, and the faith-based lessons woven into all content areas.

### **Research Sub-Question 1a**

Research Sub-Question 1a. How do parents describe the initial motivators that drive them to consider a parochial elementary school?

The initial motivators parents pointed to as they described what led them to first consider a Catholic parish elementary school were focused on their prior personal experience in Catholic school, the care of faculty and school community, and faith formation.

Personal experience in Catholic school, including the participant or the experience of the child's other biological parent, was identified by six out of 18 participants as a factor in initially considering to choose a parochial school. While Sander and Cohen-Zada (2012) found that nationally adults who attended Catholic schools were not statistically more likely than their peers to choose a Catholic school for their children, they were more likely to identify as a religious person. While the personal experience in Catholic school was not noted as significant in initiating enrollment nationally, this highlights further the need for a local understanding of unique parent motivators. Disaffiliation with the Catholic church, as addressed by Manning (2018), is a growing trend that will only further impact Catholic school enrollment as Catholics with personal experience in parochial school become further disconnected with their parish community.

The care of the faculty and school community emerged as an initial motivator for parents in choosing to consider Catholic education for their children. In terms of social values theory (Dore, Stone, & Buchanan, 2012), this finding aligns with parents' need to feel reassured, including by their peers, that their children are insulated in a setting that is protected and emotionally safe. Choosing a community of other families electing the same setting for their children and for similar reasons, aligns with social values theory and the reassurance that other

parents are in agreement with their decision. Decisions based on the perceived norms of a social group as well as the reassurance of the emotional safety and security that would come with a community of families and faculty who are aligned with the same goals emerged as part of the initial motivator of seeking a caring school community.

Faith formation again emerged as a theme driving parent decisions. As an initial motivator, parents pointed to faith formation both in the instruction and the faith community as the catalyst in seeking out a Catholic education for their elementary-age children. Marlow (2010) addresses the range of factors that parents consider in addition to public school performance as initial motivators for parents to consider an alternative to the public school for their children's education. The social and academic outcomes, both of which come together in terms of faith formation in Catholic education, are driving forces that appeal to parents as they picture what they want their children's school experience to look like as well as the outcomes they hope to achieve in seeking an alternative to public education.

### **Research Sub-Question 1b**

Research Sub-Question 1b. How do parents describe their decision-making process?

Research Sub-Question 1b was largely aimed at understanding, once the initial motivator had begun the process, how parents investigated parish elementary schools and the most significant priorities that were part of that investigative process for them in learning about schools and then ultimately selecting a school in which to enroll their children. Parents described their decision-making process in terms of the school community, school leadership, faith formation, and the academic program as the themes that were largely part of that process. They also addressed the tools they used, including school visits and tours, communication with the school principal, the school website, and outcome data.



The school community, the feel of the community, and experience engaging with the community as part of the decision-making process was a theme that was underscored across participants as they described the learning process. Güreker et al. (2014) use Tiebout's (1956) "voting with your feet" to explain the desire to leave a community that is perceived to be more punishing. Parents described the feelings they experienced when engaging with the community through tours and admissions events as well as through the parish as feelings of safety, warmth, and care. These "gut feelings" about the school family they would become part of if enrolled in the parish elementary school were instrumental in shifting their decision positively toward the parish school.

School leadership, namely the principal, was critical to the decision-making process in selecting a parish elementary school. Parents described the role of the principal in terms of the confidence this person instilled in them, confidence in competency, as well as the emotional responses from interactions in reassuring parents that the school leadership was driving a warm, nurturing, and safe school environment. The impact of connection with the school principal may be considered in terms of Hirschman's (1970) work framing decision-making, in part, using *voice* to describe the personal connection to decision-making. Hirschman describes *voice* as the most personal of avenues to express a decision. In making connections with the school principal, it may be posited that parents are both finding an outlet to express their rationale for choosing an alternative to public education and also being reassured that their future opinions and needs will be able to be voiced and heard through the anticipated positive relationship with the school principal. The importance of the personal connections forged between principal and prospective parents from the start of the introductory process to the school and through the relationship building within the community on an ongoing basis cannot be understated.

The Catholicity of the school and experiences with faith formation that parents engaged in as part of their learning process in investigating parish elementary schools emerged as a theme that was impactful in the decision to enroll and remain enrolled in a parish elementary school. Parents pointed to evidence of faith alive in the school that they noted through tours and their interactions with community members. These interactions provided parents with opportunities to understand the role of faith education both as explicit instruction and in the softer experiences students had as part of a faith community in the school. The religiosity of parents is declining, with millennials identifying as more secular than any generation before them (New Strategist Editors, 2015). The appeal of a faith-based learning environment and community is an area of draw for parents to suburban Catholic parish elementary schools that may be shifting with time.

Learning about the academic program was referenced as an important part of the process in deciding to enroll in a parochial elementary school. Parents explained that if there had been concern about the academic program, it could have caused a change to the decision they would ultimately make to enroll. The strength of the academic program, including the access to technology, standardized test scores, high school and college acceptances, and reputation of the quality of education, were addressed by parents as key aspects of the learning process that helped them arrive at their decision to enroll. Belfield and Levin (2016, pp. 17-18) point to school choice and parent decisions as driving more effective educational strategies and approaches. This competition within the educationa system, Belfield and Levin suggest, is an incentive for schools to excel in order to both grow their enrollment numbers and also promote their school mission. Catholic schools know that they must remain competitive academically with their high-performing public school counterparts, as the other driving factors that attract families to them are not an exception to the importance of the academic program.

As part of the learning process, parents also addressed the tools they used to gather information, data, and experience critical aspects of the school. Parents used tours, open houses, interviews and interactions with the principal, and the school website to gather information and also personally experience the school as much as possible. Parents also engaged with others as part of this process. They discussed the decision with their children's grandparents and also engaged with other parents in the school community prior to enrolling.

When considering how parents engage their social network when making a decision, this may be understood through a generational lens as well as in connection with social values theory. Katz (2017) explains that millennial parents may choose to discuss their decisions with their social networks while Generation X parents are more likely to make decisions as a family while engaging only close family members in the process. In terms of social values theory, parents seeking to engage others already in the school as an affirmation of their decision points to the tendency to select a perceived norm-based choice as the less risky decision (Stone & Allgaier, 2008). Seeking affirmation both from family members and school community members is a reassuring stage of the decision-making process and one that is noteworthy when considering stakeholder satisfaction as part of the admissions process.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have important implications for parish elementary school leaders as they manage school enrollment. Parents prioritizing the experience of Catholic education and all that comes with it, including a nurturing environment, personal attention from faculty, a faith community, and faith-based education, also maintain high expectations for the quality of education that their children are engaged in as well as high expectations for the school principal.

Maintaining and growing a strong academic program that meets or exceeds parent expectations is critical. At the elementary school level, comparisons remain largely centered on core content areas, technology, and special education supports rather than including extra and co-curricular offerings, which is more likely at the secondary level. The academic program must remain a clear priority. As is evidenced by the responses in this study, demonstrating a competitive academic program can be a challenge. Parents cited high school and college acceptances of graduates as evidence of a strong foundational academic experience; however, they also cited standardized test scores. Largely, students in Catholic parish elementary schools are administered standardized tests that are not the same as those used in the local public school district. While standardized test data are useful for parents as a tool, it is important for school leaders to share the strength of the quality of the education their schools offer both outwardly to the community as well as internally within their school and parish community.

Relationships emerged strongly across research questions as a priority for parents. Feeling part of the school community both as parents and for students was a strong priority both as part of the initial decision-making process and also as a driver in continued satisfaction in wanting to re-enroll each year. Maintaining a school community that feels engaged and authentic for parents who are actively involved in volunteering as well as those who may not be as physically present in the school building regularly is critical for school leaders. Engagement and a connection between and among families, as well as with faculty and school leadership, must be prioritized from a range of angles in order to limit the risk of families slipping through cracks in the layers of engagement. Engaging in reflective practices as a school and assessing stakeholder satisfaction is critical.

Bryk et al. (1993) refer to the unique sense of community that results from the structure of Catholic schools as a *communal organization* (p. 127). The authors cite four tenets of Catholic schools that provide the structure of the communal organization: the school community's boundaries, the system of beliefs that establishes a shared purpose, social activities that make these beliefs tangible, and the formal organizational roles that drive the social dynamic. Considering the concept of communal organization and how this works within each school to form bonds that are passively and actively felt by stakeholders in a meaningful way is paramount.

This study makes prominent the importance of school leadership, namely the elementary school principal, as critical to admissions and enrollment management. The school principal's role in all areas—academic program, relationship building, faculty support, faith formation, and communication tools, among many others—cannot be understated. In suburban Catholic parish elementary schools where the principal is most often the only school administrator in the building, this burden can be a heavy one with implications across all areas, including time spent in classrooms, fiscal and curricula planning, and, importantly, relationship development with students, faculty, and parents.

## **Recommendations**

### **Practice Recommendations**

The confidence in the quality of education that parents shared offered insight into the experiences of participants that is important to explore as school leaders address their own school programs in terms of meeting the needs of their families and providing opportunities that instill this confidence. School leaders must look inwardly at their own school's classroom practices, curricula, and pedagogy but also must be keenly aware of their peer schools and the forward

movement of best practices. Engaging in the local community, including attending local public school board meetings, connecting with colleagues from both the non-public and public sectors, and establishing ongoing reflective practices that continually assess the efficacy of academic practices is important for principals to prioritize in ensuring that the quality of the education provided by their schools is strongly felt with confidence by stakeholders.

Parents cited specific catalysts that initiated them to consider Catholic education for their elementary-age children: personal experience in Catholic school, a caring and nurturing learning environment, and faith formation. These overall priorities offer insight for school leaders to consider as they shape the communications from their schools intended to engage prospective families. As Sander and Cohen-Zada (2012) point out, parents who attended Catholic schools themselves are more likely to attend mass and identify as religious. Developing meaningful connections with the parish community is an important practice for school leaders. Communicating regularly with the parish community, including highlighting academic achievements of school students as well as demonstrating the family-like bonds alive in the school, reinforces the key tenets of parish school life for those who may be considering Catholic education but have not yet taken steps toward actively enrolling.

Social values theory, as it connects with participants responding that they sought affirmation from family members, namely grandparents, as well as other families, highlights the importance of word of mouth as an area of focus for principals. The importance of word-of-mouth promotion cannot be understated; however, this must be carefully managed and be leveraged as part of a more comprehensive enrollment management approach that includes active stakeholder satisfaction assessment. Principals must consider regularly implementing stakeholder surveys, focus groups, and purposeful engagement of their families and then acting on the results

of this work with the intention that it is visible to parents. Only then, when satisfaction is high and meaningfully understood by the school principal, should word-of-mouth strategies be implemented through school parent and parishioner ambassadors. Word of mouth strategies should also include actively working with school grandparents and parishioners. Seeking out enthusiastic grandparents with children in the school is a strategy to both support admissions efforts as well as to build the important sense of family and community that parents prioritize.

Practices that connect the school with the larger community are also an important approach to enrollment efforts. While some Catholic elementary schools have a large presence within the community, it is not unusual for community members to note that they had not realized a parish had a school associated with it. Community engagement should be multifaceted to include participation in community events and athletic opportunities, social media communication highlighting students' accomplishments, and engaging school families and the school principal with families of school-age children for events at the parish school.

The school principal drives each area of priority for parents when assessing the "right fit" school for their children. As the building leader, relationships, communication with stakeholders, the academic program, connections with the parish, and admissions events and strategies all fall to the principal to drive and structure. These admissions and enrollment priorities are significant, yet the school principal also must manage the operational priorities of the school. Maintaining and growing a school culture that is united, faith-centered, and feels meaningful for students, faculty, and families is critical yet can be a genuine challenge in terms of time and stretched personal resources for principals.

In terms of practice, establishing a team of support is critical for school leaders to be able to shift focus and attention as they need to in order to engage meaningfully with school families

while also directing focus to admissions events and engagements. Empowering teachers as leaders within the school in order to support one another collaboratively while also engaging stakeholders creatively to support admissions efforts is critical. Parent and alumni ambassadors who can also support the principal's admissions efforts in giving tours while allowing the principal shorter focused interviews with prospective families is another practice that draws connections with the school community while still maintaining principal engagement at critical junctures in the admissions process.

### **Policy Recommendations**

While Catholic parish elementary schools largely function as their own district with great autonomy, they are under the leadership of a diocesan or archdiocesan central office. From a policy perspective, several recommendations should be considered when reviewing the findings of this study. As has been addressed across themes, school principals play a consequential role in nearly all areas of the decision-making process for parents as they consider Catholic education for their children. With enrollment management an unequivocal priority for schools and central office leadership alike, establishing systems that enable rather than hinder the admissions work of principals must be prioritized. It is critically important to keep principals in their buildings for admissions work. While diocesan-level planning and collaboration among principals are meaningful, building presence is paramount both for the internal school community and also for principals to be available for interactions with prospective families. Limiting the obligation of principals outside of their buildings is important and can also make their time with one another much more productive.

The academic program and technology available in each building emerged as instrumental in all areas of the decision-making process for families. This was articulated from a



competitive angle and also across themes in terms of differentiated instruction and individualized attention to students. School principals generally have significant flexibility and license to shape their academic programs to meet the needs of their students within the curricula required by the central office. It is recommended that central office leadership provide supports for schools in developing student support services such as in-class support, co-teaching, and differentiated instruction training for teachers. Parents seek a rigorous academic experience that acknowledges that students each learn in their own unique ways and where better to find an understanding and nurturing environment to learn about learning than in a Catholic elementary school with a community of faculty, students, and families who understand and respect that uniqueness.

While not an overwhelming theme in this study, parents did cite preschool as an initial motivator in selecting their Catholic school. They then elaborated, stating that their school felt like family and that they had developed relationships with families that further engaged them in wanting to continue as part of the school community beyond the preschool years. Central office leadership, while reasonably focused on fiscal responsibility, may consider supporting schools that do not yet have a preschool program to implement one and to further support schools with preschools to grow their program and specifically engage the families participating in that preschool program.

As Catholic schools continue to close due to declining enrollment in significant numbers, consolidation and regionalization become a means by which central leadership seeks to continue to offer Catholic education for students. While these strategies are specific to the needs of each community, it is important to remain focused on the motivators that draw parents to Catholic schools as well as the contributors to their decision to stay enrolled: small class sizes, a community that feels like family, quality of education, and faculty attention to students. When

considering how best to support schools from a central office perspective, it is important to maintain standards and policies that protect the tenets of Catholic education that mean most to families. Maintaining small class sizes that allow faculty to work closely with students, including through differentiated instruction, individualized instruction, and forming bonds with their students through sharing of faith, is an important consideration for central office leadership as they work to restructure due to declining enrollment in schools.

### **Future Research Recommendations**

While the range of future study needs is vast and a solution urgently needed as Catholic education faces an enrollment crisis in many areas of New Jersey and across the country, several studies are recommended as they emerge naturally from this work. This study focused on parents who had already enrolled their children in Catholic parish elementary school. Their initial motivators, the learning process they went through, and the decision-making process as they continue to re-enroll each year were investigated through the research questions.

In considering future work to build on the findings of this study, investigating the initial motivators and decision-making process of parents who considered Catholic elementary school but opted not to enroll is an area that may offer meaningful information for school principals and leaders as they connect with prospective families. While participation may be a challenge, engaging families from the parish of each school who may have investigated the school and then opted not to enroll may be a strategy to glean insight from participants willing to share their experiences.

In a similar vein, addressing the perceptions of the Catholic parish elementary school from those families with elementary-age children outside of the school community is an

important source of meaningful information for schools to act upon. Families may be solicited through the parish as well as community activities such as athletics and extracurricular activities.

The satisfaction of principals and the understanding of their role in admissions is critical both for school leaders as well as for central office leadership to understand. The role of the principal cannot be understated, and gathering as much insight as possible into their experiences with enrollment challenges as well as their role in admissions as they see it in practice is pivotal.

In recent months, Catholic schools in many areas have seen an increase in attention and, in some cases, an increase in enrollment due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Future studies on Catholic school enrollment may address motivators, the decision-making process, satisfaction once enrolled, and the likelihood of staying enrolled over time. Catholic schools are cautioned to manage this boost in enrollment with care, particularly fiscally, and must first understand what this boost will mean over the course of time before using an increase in enrollment numbers as a data point for operational, structural, and fiscal decisions.

### **Summary**

Mitigating declining enrollment in Catholic parish elementary schools continues to be an area of focus for school leaders as well as diocesan/archdiocesan leadership. The experiences of parents as they consider Catholic education remains an important source of information in shaping admissions practices. The role of the school principal cannot be understated as critical to each key priority for parents as they choose to enroll and re-enroll their children each year. Supporting school principals as they seek to build relationships, maintain and grow a high-quality academic program, build a faith-filled community, and support faculty is absolutely critical to the outcomes needed to support enrollment growth in Catholic schools.

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## APPENDIX A

### School Participation Letter for Principals



Lori D. Arends  
Doctoral Candidate  
Seton Hall University  
College of Education and Human Services, Jubilee Hall  
400 S. Orange Ave.  
South Orange, NJ 07079

[Date]

Dear [Recipient],

I am currently enrolled in Seton Hall University's Ed.D. program in Executive Educational Leadership. As partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree, I am conducting a dissertation research study that will include interviews with parents whose children are enrolled in elementary parochial schools.

This study will explore the motivators and factors that influence parents to choose a parish school for their children. It will also explore the decision-making process that parents go through as they select a parish school as well as their considerations in remaining enrolled each year. You, as a parish school principal, are intimately involved in enrollment management and deeply engaged in mitigating the enrollment challenges parish schools are faced with each year. The purpose of this study is to provide parish school principals with useful insight that is actionable.

Should you agree to include your school in this study, know that all information will remain confidential. No school identifiers will be included, and the parents who participate will also remain confidential. If your school chooses to participate, I will then ask that you develop a list of parents who may be willing to participate in a one-on-one interview with me. Of the parents who agree to participate, I will randomly select six to interview from your school. Each participant will receive a selection or non-selection



letter from me. Each interview may last between 40 and 60 minutes and will be scheduled at the participant's convenience. The interview questions will be provided to you in advance for your review and input. All participants will be asked the same interview questions.

Your school's participation, as well as the participation of parents, is completely voluntary. Your participation or non-participation and the participation or non-participation of parents will remain strictly confidential. You may choose to withdraw your school from this study at any time.

All participation and identifying information will remain confidential throughout the research and reporting process of this study. The goal of this research is to better understand the process that parents go through in selecting a parish elementary school as well as the factors that are most critical to their decision. Parents who participate will be coded with a number in order to identify their responses while maintaining their anonymity. All interview transcripts and data resulting from this study will be stored securely using a password-protected, cloud-based storage site. Results will also be stored using an external hard drive that will be secured in a passcode-protected space.

I sincerely appreciate your consideration, and I hope that this study will support your work in your school.

If you would like to contact me with further questions, please reach me at [lori.arends@student.shu.edu](mailto:lori.arends@student.shu.edu). Please respond to this participation request by emailing me your decision in the body of an email or via an attached letter.

Thank you for your assistance. I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Lori Arends, M.A.T., LDT-C  
Doctoral Candidate, Seton Hall University

## APPENDIX B

### Parent Participation Letter



Lori D. Arends  
Doctoral Candidate  
Seton Hall University  
College of Education and Human Services, Jubilee Hall  
400 S. Orange Ave.  
South Orange, NJ 07079

March 3, 2020

Dear Parent,

I am currently enrolled in Seton Hall University's Ed.D. program in Executive Educational Leadership. As partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree, I am conducting a dissertation research study that will include interviews with parents whose children are enrolled in elementary parochial schools.

This study will explore the motivators and factors that influence parents to choose a parish school for their children. It will also explore the decision-making process that parents go through as they select a parish school as well as their considerations in remaining enrolled each year. Understanding the process and perceptions you experience is important for school leaders as they meaningfully engage in enrollment management. The purpose of this study is to provide parish school principals with useful insight that is actionable.

Should you agree to participate in this study, know that all information will remain confidential. No school identifiers will be included, and the parents who participate will also remain confidential. If you choose to participate, I will include you in the random selection process. I will randomly select six parents to interview



from your school. Each participant will receive a selection or non-selection letter from me. Each interview may last between 40 and 60 minutes and will be scheduled at your convenience. All participants will be asked the same interview questions.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw from this study at any time. All participation and identifying information will remain confidential throughout the research and reporting process of this study. The goal of this research is to better understand the process that parents go through in selecting a parish elementary school as well as the factors that are most critical to their decision. Parents who participate will be coded with a number in order to identify their responses while maintaining their anonymity. All interview transcripts and data resulting from this study will be stored securely using a password-protected laptop and passcode-protected drive. Results will also be stored for three years using an external hard drive that will be secured in a passcode-protected space and will then be destroyed.

I sincerely appreciate your consideration.

If you would like to contact me with further questions, please reach me by email at [lori.arends@student.shu.edu](mailto:lori.arends@student.shu.edu). Please respond via email if you are interested in participating in this study.

Thank you for your assistance. I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lori Arends".

Lori Arends, M.A.T., I DT-C  
Doctoral Candidate, Seton Hall University

## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent



Seton Hall University  
Institutional Review Board

MAR 04 2020

Approval Date

**Dissertation: Factors Influencing Parent Choice of a Suburban Catholic Parish Elementary School**

#### Researcher's Affiliation

The researcher for this dissertation research study is Lori Arends. Lori Arends is a doctoral student in the Executive Ed.D. in Educational Leadership, Management, and Policy at Seton Hall University, College Education and Human Services.

#### Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this research is to explore the perspectives and experiences of parents who have selected to enroll their children in a Catholic parish elementary school in order to develop insight into the factors that influence their decision-making. Each participant will be engaged in this study for approximately one hour.

#### Description of the Procedures

If the participant chooses to engage in this study, the researcher will ask each participant to be interviewed for between forty-five and sixty minutes by the researcher. The interview conversation will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Only the researcher will transcribe each audio recording. Approximately eighteen participants will be interviewed using the interview protocol which has been reviewed by professionals in the field.

Interviews will take place in a private space in the school in which each parent's children are enrolled. The interview space will be selected to protect the participant's confidentiality. Each participant will have an opportunity to review their transcript for accuracy of meaning.

#### Instrument

An interview protocol will be used for each participant's interview with the researcher. Interview questions will include questions asking the participant to describe the selection process undertaken in selecting a school, the factors prioritized, and other descriptions of the details involved in the selection process.

#### Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary, and each parent may elect to decline or withdraw without penalty at any time. Participants may also decline to answer any interview question without penalty.

#### Anonymity

Participants will not be anonymous to the researcher. Only the researcher will know the identity of each participant.

#### Confidentiality

The identity of participants will remain confidential, and only the researcher will know the identity of the participants. Each participant will be assigned a numerical code in order for the researcher to identify responses to interview questions.

#### Confidential Data Storage

All audio recordings will be stored in a passcode-protected space until transcripts are complete. Once transcripts are completed, and within twelve weeks of each interview, audio recordings will be destroyed. Transcript data with only numerical code identifiers will be stored on a password-protected USB drive in a passcode-protected space. The code key identifying names and code numbers will be stored in a separate space that is passcode protected. Data will be stored for three years following the publication of this study and then destroyed.

#### Access to Confidential Records

The researcher and members of the researcher's dissertation committee will have access to participant data. The dissertation committee understands its obligation to maintain the confidentiality of this information.

Expiration Date

MAR 04 2021

College of Education and Human Services  
Executive Ed.D. Program  
180 South Orange Avenue, South Orange, NJ 07075  
(973) 279-2100 / (973) 279-2444

What great minds can do



**Risk or Discomfort**

There are no anticipated risks associated with participating in this study. While responding to interview questions may cause some stress or emotional response, participants may refrain from answering any interview questions that they are not comfortable with or withdraw from the interview at any time.

**Benefits**

While there is not a direct benefit from participation in this study, the experience of participating and reflection that considering each interview question will bring may be positive personally. Participants are supporting the growing body of research in the area of Catholic school enrollment and school leadership practices.

**Remuneration**

There is no monetary remuneration for participating in this study.

**Alternative Procedures for Participants**

Participation is voluntary, and participants may select to excuse themselves from the study at any time.

**Researcher Contact Information**

Lori Arends, the principal researcher, may be reached at (973) 761-9668 with any questions related to participation in this study. For questions about participant rights or to discuss concerns about this study, please contact the Seton Hall Dissertation Advisor, Dr. Barbara Strobert, at (973) 761-9668 or the Seton Hall University Office of the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Michael LaFontaine, at (973) 313-6314.

Participants will receive a copy of this Informed Consent document for their records. A signed copy of this document will be maintained with the records for this research study.

I have read, understand, and have had the opportunity to ask questions about this Informed Consent document. By signing this document, I am acknowledging that I understand my role as a participant in this research study. By signing, I am consenting to participate in an interview that will be audio-recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

**Seton Hall University  
Institutional Review Board**

**MAR 04 2020**

**Approval Date**

**Expiration Date**

**MAR 04 2021**

## APPENDIX D

### Parent Non-Selection Letter



Lori D. Arends  
Doctoral Candidate  
Seton Hall University  
College of Education and Human Services, Jubilee Hall  
400 S. Orange Ave.  
South Orange, NJ 07079

[Date]

Dear [Name],

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the dissertation research study I am conducting in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree at Seton Hall University. As part of the random selection process, you were not selected to continue to participate in the interview process.

All identifying information will remain confidential throughout the research and reporting process of this study. The goal of this research is to better understand the process that parents go through in selecting a parish elementary school as well as the factors that are most critical to their decision. I sincerely appreciate your consideration to participate.

If you would like to contact me with further questions, please reach me by email at [lori.arends@student.shu.edu](mailto:lori.arends@student.shu.edu).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lori Arends".

Lori Arends, M.A.T., LDT-C  
Doctoral Candidate, Seton Hall University



## APPENDIX E

### Interview Protocol

#### Background information

1. What is your religious affiliation? Your child's other biological parent?
2. Do you attend church/mass regularly? If so, how many times, on average, per month?
3. Did you/your child's other biological parent attend Catholic school?
4. What is your marital status?
5. What is your highest level of education? Your child's other biological parent?
6. Is your household a dual or single-income household?
7. Is the parochial school that your child or children attend located in the same school district in which you reside? If not, about how far do you commute to get to the school in which your children attend? Is there another parish school that is closer to your home?
8. How long have your children been enrolled in a parochial school?

#### Interview Questions

1. Tell me about how you initially decided to consider a parochial elementary school? What was the initial motivator, or what were the initial motivators?
2. Once you decided to consider a parochial school, how did you go about selecting the one that you chose? Please explain the process that you went through?
3. What were the top priorities within that process? What aspects of the parish school were most important and why?
4. Who took part in helping you arrive at your decision? Who did you discuss this decision with as part of completing your choice?
5. What parts of the learning process were most important to you as you explored

understanding more about the school you were to choose? What tools were most critical to your process in learning about the school?

6. In choosing to re-enroll each year, what are some of the things you think about or consider as you assess re-enrolling?
7. Do you ever question your decision to stay in parochial school? Please explain why or why not.
8. What aspects of your parochial school are most important to your decision to stay in a parish school?
9. Describe your place in the community of your school. What about your role in the school community is most important to you?
10. How would you describe your interactions with people when you tell them that your child or children attend a parochial school? What do you tell them, and how do they respond?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in deciding to send your child/children to parochial school and your experience in this school?

## APPENDIX F

### Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Lori Arends** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants."

**Date of Completion:** 07/20/2018

**Certification Number:** 2867368



APPENDIX G

Institutional Review Board Approval



March 4, 2020

Lori Arends  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Re: Study ID# 2020-042

Dear Ms. Arends,

The Research Ethics Committee of the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved your research proposal entitled "Factors Influencing Parent Choice of a Suburban Catholic Parish Elementary School" as resubmitted. This memo serves as official notice of the aforementioned study's approval as exempt. Enclosed for your records are the stamped original Consent Form and recruitment flyer. You can make copies of these forms for your use.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol, informed consent form or study team must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

You will receive a communication from the Institutional Review Board at least 1 month prior to your expiration date requesting that you submit an Annual Progress Report to keep the study active, or a Final Review of Human Subjects Research form to close the study. In all future correspondence with the Institutional Review Board, please reference the ID# listed above.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

*Mara Podvey*  
Mara C. Podvey, PhD, OTR

Associate Professor  
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board

Office of the Institutional Review Board

President's Hall - 400 South Orange Avenue - South Orange, New Jersey 07079 - Tel: 973.275.4654 - Fax: 973.275.2978  
[www.shu.edu](http://www.shu.edu)

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