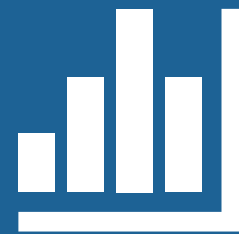# Global Catholic Education Knowledge Notes

PARENTAL PRIORITIES FOR WHAT CHILDREN SHOULD LEARN IN SCHOOL

*This note was written for NCEA (United States)
and is reproduced here for international readers*

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Analytics series

KEY MESSAGES:

- Among the overall population and parents considering Catholic schools, critical thinking and preparation for college or work are often top priorities for what children should learn in school. For parents with their youngest child in Catholic schools, developing a moral base and deepening the faith matter too.

- Catholic schools should not shy away from an emphasis on moral values and their Catholic identity. Yet if the focus on deepening the faith is too strong, possibly at a perceived cost for critical thinking and diversity, they risk becoming less appealing to parents willing to consider the schools for their children.

Introduction

All schools, whether Catholic or not, must ensure that their students acquire strong cognitive and socio-emotional skills that are not peculiar to the Catholic tradition. In addition, Catholic schools have a particular mission, which is to "educate towards fraternal humanism" according to the Congregation for Catholic Education. There are indications that many parents enrolling their children in Catholic schools share in this vision. At the same time, in the context of a rapidly changing and competitive world, parents also want schools to help their children think critically and prepare them for college and the labor market.

This note is the first in a set of several looking at parental priorities for the education of their children and their perceptions of the strengths and areas for improvement of Catholic schools. The note considers two questions: (1) What are the priorities of parents for what their children should learn in school; and (2) How do these priorities differ between different groups of parents, including those with children in Catholic schools, and those who are willing to consider Catholic schools for their children.

Box 1: Knowledge Notes

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Which topics are covered in the Knowledge Notes Series? The series explores achievements and challenges for Catholic schools globally, including in terms of enrollment, reach to the poor, academic performance, parental priorities, costs and affordability, and religious education. Interesting innovations are also featured.

What is the focus of this note? Two questions are asked: (1) What are the priorities of parents for what their children should learn in school?; and (2) How do those priorities differ between different groups of parents? The analysis is based on a national 2017 survey with a total of 1,403 respondents. Both statistical and regression analyses are used.

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Framework

The analysis is based on a national market research survey implemented in 2017 (see the Appendix for details on the survey). Conceptually, as shown in Figure 1, several groups of respondents can be considered. The first and largest group consists of the full sample which is meant to be representative of the overall adult population in the United States. The second group consists of the subset of parents in the adult population. When questions are asked about parental priorities, the focus is on the parents' priorities for their youngest child. Among parents, some may be "very willing" to consider Catholic schools for their children (this group can be identified based on responses in the survey; see Note 2 in this series), while others may not be interested. Finally, some parents have enrolled their children in Catholic schools while others have not.

Figure 1: Stylized Segmentation of the Population
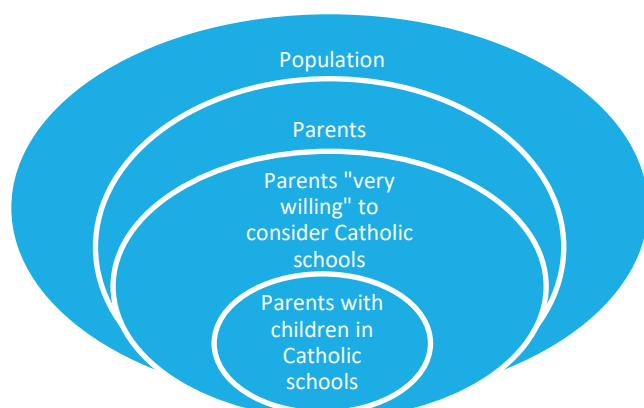
Source: Author.

While other ways of segmenting the population by various characteristics are considered in this note, Figure 1 conveys that for enrolment growth, or simply to stem the long-term decline in enrollment observed in Catholic schools in the United States (see Note 1 in this series), Catholic schools may have to convince a larger share of parents in the "very willing to consider" category to actually enroll their children in the schools. If schools were successful in doing so, the update could be very large.

As shown in Table 1, according to the survey used for analysis, 6.2 percent of the youngest children for parents responding to the survey are in Catholic schools (questions on where students are enrolled were asked to all parents primarily for their youngest child in the survey). This estimate appears to be slightly on the high side since administrative data suggest that the market share of Catholic schools nationally is at less than five percent for primary education, and less than three percent at the secondary level (see Table 1 and Note 1 in this series).

Still, in comparison to the share of parents stating that they are "very willing" to consider Catholic schools for their children (27.1 percent of the survey sample), the current market share of Catholic schools is low. This suggests potential for growth, or at least for stemming the decline in enrollment that has been observed for quite some time.

However, apart from the issue of the affordability of Catholic schools for parents which will be discussed in a separate note in this series, convincing a larger share of parents to actually enroll their children in Catholic schools requires paying attention to their priorities for what their children should learn in school. The implications may not be straightforward because the priorities of the two groups at the bottom of Figure 1 – those "very willing" to consider Catholic schools (most of whom do not have children enrolled in the schools) and those actually enrolling their children in the schools – may not be the same. If this were to be the case (and this note suggests that to some extent, it is), trade-offs may occur. While decisions regarding these trade-offs must be made by individual schools or school districts taking into account their own particular context, being informed about the trade-offs through market research may be helpful. This is the objective of this note.

Table 1: Willingness to Consider Catholic School for Enrollment and Market Share of Catholic Schools (%)

	Share of parents
Willingness to consider Catholic schools	
Very willing	27.1
Somewhat willing	24.0
Somewhat unwilling	16.5
Very unwilling	25.5
Never heard/don't know	6.9
Total	100.0
	Share of students
Market share by type of school	
Public schools	72.5
Public charter schools	6.4
Magnet schools	2.7
Private non-religious schools	5.7
Catholic schools	6.2
Other religious schools	2.2
Home schooling	3.6
Other type of schooling	0.8
Total	100.0
Market shares of Catholic schools (admin.)	
Primary	4.7
Secondary	2.4

Source: Author's estimation with FADICA 2017 survey.
Note: The share of students by type of school is based on parental responses for their youngest child. By contrast, the market share of Catholic schools from administrative sources is based on data from the Office of Church Statistics and the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (see Note 1 in this series for details).

Parental Priorities: Skills versus Values

The survey on which this note is based asked respondents which should be the three most important areas of focus for K12 schools in their area. Nine potential responses were provided: (1) Preparing children for college; (2) Preparing children to successfully enter the job market; (3) Teaching children to care about their community; (4) Developing individuals with a sound moral base; (5) Teaching children strong in-person communication skills; (6) Encouraging individual and critical thinking; (7) Measuring and monitoring student progress consistently; (8) Deeping children's relationship with their religious faith; and (9) Teaching children to accept and embrace diversity. The order in which responses were listed was randomized to avoid bias in responses rates related to their order.

Table 2 provides the share of respondents who chose each of the potential responses in the overall population, among all parents, among parents stating that they are very willing to consider Catholic schools, and among parents with their youngest child enrolled in Catholic schools. Since respondents could choose three priorities, shares sum to 300 percent. Responses have been ranked according to two broad categories of priorities, those related to the skills that children should acquire, and those related to the values that they should acquire. While the differences between skills and values could be debated, this simple categorization is useful for the analysis. The priorities have been listed from the most to the least cited among the first sample which represents the overall population.

Table 2: Top 3 Parental Priorities for What Children Should Learn in School among Various Samples (%)

	All	Parents	Interest	Enr.
Skills				
Critical thinking	53.4	53.3	48.3	34.6
Preparing for job market	46.8	47.7	33.3	34.9
Preparing for college	42.7	42.4	40.4	33.7
Communication skills	38.9	39.4	37.8	39.7
Measuring progress	32.5	31.6	31.1	30.6
Values				
Embracing diversity	29.1	25.0	32.0	22.6
Sound moral base	29.0	30.6	33.2	41.9
Care about community	18.2	19.1	24.4	27.9
Deepening the faith	9.6	10.9	19.5	34.2
Total	300.0	300.0	300.0	300.0

Source: Author's estimation with FADICA 2017 survey.
Note: "Interest" are parents stating they are very willing to consider Catholic schools for their children; "Enr." are parents whose youngest child is enrolled in a Catholic school.

For the full sample, whether respondents have children or not, the top five priorities are all related to skills and success in college and in the job market (even if several of these priorities also have inherent value independently of their usefulness for college and the labor market). The other four priorities related to moral values are ranked lower. Results are similar for parents in general.

By contrast, for parents with their youngest child in a Catholic school, moral values rank higher. Developing a sound moral base ranks first followed by communications skills, and deepening one's faith essentially ties up with critical thinking and being ready for the job market. Finally, for parents very willing to consider Catholic schools for their children, results are closer to those observed for parents as a whole, but priorities related to values score higher than is the case for all parents (this sample essentially includes the sample of parents with their youngest child in Catholic schools). For example, for those very willing to consider Catholic schools whether they have their youngest child enrolled in Catholic schools or not, embracing diversity and developing a sound moral base are as important as preparing their children for the job market.

> Parents with children in Catholic schools are much more likely than other parents to mention embracing diversity, developing a sound moral base, teaching about caring for the community, and deepening one's religious faith as priorities for what children should learn in school.

Box 2: Oversampling, Weights, and Standard Errors

Estimates from surveys have standard errors. Therefore differences between groups in responses to questions are not always statistically significant. To ensure that notes in this series are short and easy to read, while statistical significance is discussed for results from regressions, this is not done for statistical tables. Readers should be aware that standard errors are larger when samples are smaller. The samples in Table 2 have different sizes: 1,403 observations for the overall population, 1,201 observations for parents, 332 observations for those very willing to consider Catholic schools (27.1 percent of parents are in this category, as documented in Note 2 in this series), and only 71 observations for parents with their youngest child enrolled in a Catholic school (6.2 percent of parents in the survey, as shown in Table 1 above). As noted in appendix, some groups were oversampled based on their demographic characteristics, but this is accounted for when reporting statistics by using sampling weights.

Table 3 and Figure 2 provide estimates in a slightly different way. The first column in Table 3 provides priorities for parents very willing to consider the schools who do not have their youngest child enrolled in Catholic schools. This is essentially a subset of the sample of all those very willing to consider Catholic schools, and potentially a key target group for the schools. The second column provides the differences in ratings between that group and those with their youngest child enrolled in Catholic schools. Figure 2 displays the estimates of priorities for parents with their youngest child in Catholic schools and parents very willing to consider the schools but with their youngest child enrolled in another type of school. The differences between

the two groups correspond to the distances between the red and blue bars.

The gaps in ratings for the two groups are largest for critical thinking and embracing diversity on the one hand (these are higher priorities for those who are very willing to consider Catholic schools but have not enrolled their youngest child), and deepening the faith on the other hand (a higher priority for those with a child enrolled). While deepening the faith is not necessarily at odds with critical thinking and embracing diversity, the fact that the gaps in opposite directions are largest for those priorities is important to consider. The two groups are aligned on many priorities, but less so on the role that Catholic schools should play on deepening the faith versus promoting independent and critical thinking and embracing diversity.

Gaps in priority ratings between parents who have a child in Catholic schools and parents very willing to consider the schools who do not yet have a child enrolled are largest for critical thinking (higher priority for those very willing to consider Catholic schools), and deepening the faith (higher priority for parents who already have a child enrolled).

Table 3: Differences in Priorities between Parents Considering Catholic Schools but Not Enrolling Their Youngest Child and Parents with the Child Enrolled (%)

	Parents very willing to consider Catholic Schools with their youngest child not enrolled	Differences in priorities vs. parents with their youngest child enrolled in a Catholic school
Skills		
Critical thinking	51.1	16.5
Preparing for job market	33.1	-1.8
Preparing for college	41.5	7.8
Communication skills	36.8	-2.9
Measuring progress	31.0	0.4
Values		
Embracing diversity	34.1	11.5
Sound moral base	31.8	-10.1
Care about community	23.6	-4.3
Deepening the faith	16.8	-17.4

Source: Author's estimation with FADICA 2017 survey.

Said differently, the results in Table 3 and Figure 2 suggest both a specific identity for Catholic schools – in terms of the priorities of parents who have enrolled their youngest child in a Catholic school, and a potential trade-off between responding solely to the priorities of these parents and aiming to attract parents who are very willing to consider Catholic schools, but have not enrolled their youngest child in a Catholic school. In terms of size, as mentioned earlier, the second group (27.1 percent of the sample) is much larger than the first (6.2 percent of the sample, and less than five percent according to administrative data).

The group of parents very willing to consider Catholic schools for their children is important not only for future enrollment in Catholic schools and their long-term sustainability, but also for their very mission. As stated by the Congregation for Catholic Education in 1977 quoting *Gravissimum Educationis*, the Church offers its educational service to *"the poor or those who are deprived of family help and affection or those who are far from the faith."* The mission of Catholic schools is not only to transmit the faith to those who may already be convinced, but to open its doors to those who may not yet be convinced. This in turn requires striking the right balance in terms of how to express the Catholic identity of schools.

Figure 2: Priorities for Parents Very Willing to Consider Catholic Schools and their Youngest Child Not Enrolled, and Parents with the Child Enrolled (%)
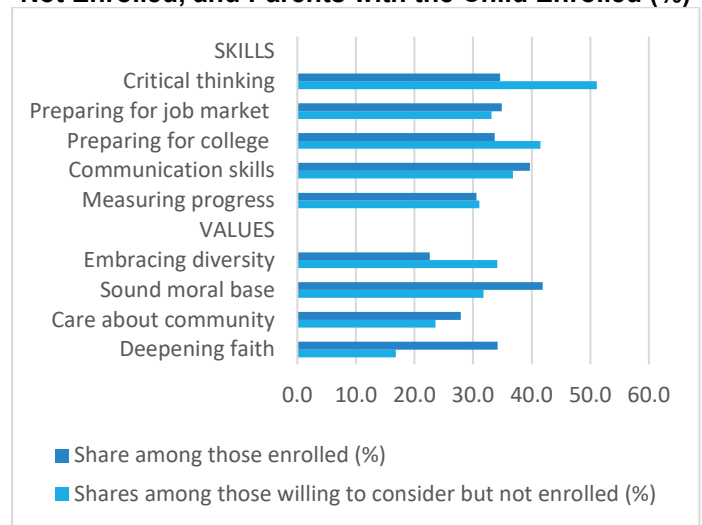
Source: Author's estimation with FADICA 2017 survey.

The potential risk here, if there is one, is that if Catholic schools were to emphasize too much issues related to religious education, they could become less appealing to at least some of the parents very willing to consider them but who have not enrolled their youngest child. At the same time, given their mission and the priorities of the families they already serve, Catholic schools should not shy away not only from an emphasis on moral values, but also from the possibility for the children already enrolled who desire it to deepen their faith in the schools, as suggested by their parents. The schools must manage this balancing act.

Parental Priorities and Faith Affiliation

A quick reading of the previous section could lead to misunderstandings about the importance of faith affiliation in driving parental priorities for what children should learn in school. While parents with their youngest child enrolled in Catholic schools do emphasize values as well as the role that schools may play in deepening the faith for their children, this does not mean that in general, Catholics have the same priorities, or those priorities to the same extent.

In the survey, Catholics account for 20 percent of the sample. Most Catholic parents do not send their children to Catholic schools, and the majority rely on public schools. Those parents may have priorities that differ from those of parents who send their children to Catholic schools. More generally, the relationships between faith affiliations and priorities for what children should learn in school may be complex, defying simple generalizations.

As an indication of those complex relationships, Table 4 provides the shares of respondents identifying various priorities for what children should lean in school by faith affiliation. Four stylized groups are considered: Catholics, other Christians (Protestant or other non-Catholic Christian), respondents affiliated with other religions (Mormonism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, other), and respondents stating no religious affiliation (atheist, agnostic, or not identifying with any religion).

A few interesting stylized facts emerge from Table 4. First, less than one in ten (9.3 percent) Catholics place a high priority on deepening the faith for children in schools. This is a much lower proportion than for parents (Catholic or not) who have their youngest child in a Catholic school. This does not mean that Catholic parents do not care about deepening the faith for their children. They could for example think that the school is not the best place to do so.

Table 4: Parental Priorities for What Children Should Learn in School by Faith Affiliation (%)

	Cath.	Christian	Other	None
Skills				
Critical thinking	48.1	46.4	63.6	70.4
Preparing for job market	36.2	52.9	44.3	43.8
Preparing for college	43.9	41.0	41.6	46.1
Communication skills	43.1	36.3	52.1	33.7
Measuring progress	36.0	32.0	36.3	27.9
Values				
Embracing diversity	30.6	26.5	18.0	39.8
Sound moral base	29.2	35.2	27.3	14.4
Care about community	23.6	16.9	9.4	20.7
Deepening faith	9.3	12.9	7.3	3.1
Total	300.0	300.0	300.0	300.0

Source: Author's estimation with FADICA 2017 survey.
Note: "None" are respondents with no faith affiliation.

Another interesting finding is that respondents with no religious affiliation and those affiliated with non-Christian religions are the most likely to consider independent and critical thinking as a priority for what children should learn in school. The differences in the shares of parents stating that particular priority by faith affiliation (or the lack thereof) are especially large. Interestingly as well, the importance granted to learning to care for the community is as high among parents with no religious affiliation as it is for Catholics and Christians, but it is apparently lower for those with another (non-Christian) faith affiliation.

At the same time, those various differences may not necessarily be related to faith affiliations themselves to the extent that other individual characteristics correlated with faith affiliation may play a role. In order to dig a bit deeper in those patterns, it is best to rely on regression analysis.

Correlates of Parental Priorities

To explore some of the factors that may affect parental priorities for what children should learn in school, regression analysis can be used (see Box 3). The idea is to identify marginal effects of some variables on stated priorities while controlling for other variables. For example, assume for the sake of the argument that middle or high income individuals may consider some priorities as more important than low income individuals. This could be related to their income level, but also possibly to race or their education level, and possibly even to their faith affiliation. Regression analysis can helps in disentangling these various potential effects, looking at the effect of each variable while controlling for the effects of other variables.

To keep the analysis as simple as possible, the outcomes or dependent variables are binary (yes/no). The positive (yes) category corresponds to a goal being considered as a priority by the respondent regarding what children should learn in school. The comparison category (no) reflects a goal that is not a considered a priority by the respondent. The individual characteristics used as independent variables are as follows:

- **Gender:** Male or female.
- **Age:** Baby boomer or born earlier (born in or before 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1976), or Generation Y (born after 1977).
- **Race:** White, Hispanic or Latino, African American, or other races/biracial or multiracial/other.
- **Location:** Urban, suburban, or rural.
- **Parental Status:** Parent or not a parent of a child.
- **Political affiliation:** Republican, Democrat, or independent/something else/not registered.
- **Household yearly income:** Low (below $50,000), middle (between $50,000 and $100,000), high (above $100,000), or no response.
- **Education level:** High school or below (some high school, high school graduate, vocational/technical school, or other), undergraduate, or graduate.
- **Employment:** Working full-time or part time, or not working (full-time student, unemployed, stay-at-home parent or retired).
- **Religious affiliation:** Catholic, Other Christian (Protestant or other non-Catholic Christian), Other religious affiliations (Mormonism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, other), or no religious affiliation (atheist, agnostic, or not identifying with any religion).

- **Importance of religion:** for those with a religious faith, whether they consider their faith as extremely or very important in shaping their daily life.
- **Practice of religion:** for those with a religious faith, whether they attend services regularly (almost every week or more often).
- **Active Catholic:** for those who are Catholic, whether they consider themselves to be a somewhat active or very active Catholic.
- **Experience with Catholic schools as a child:** Whether the respondent went to Catholic school at any level as a child and whether he/she had a poor experience while in Catholic school.

Box 3: Regression Analysis

The objective of the regression analysis is to look at associations between various characteristics of respondents and their priorities for what children should learn in school, while controlling for the potential effect on these priorities of the respondents' other characteristics. Probit regressions for each priority separately are used to keep the analysis as simple as possible instead of more complex models. The outcomes are whether respondents consider various goals as priorities for schools. The regression analysis is tentative in that alternative model specifications could yield different results. For ease of interpretation, marginal effects (dF/dX) are reported at the mean of the sample. These effects should not be interpreted as implying causality. They are simply indicative of a potential association between specific characteristics of respondents and their stated priorities for what children should learn in school.

Table 5 provides a synthesis of the results from the regressions for each of the nine potential priorities. The following abbreviations are used to report results for each priority: (1) College=Preparing children for college; (2) Jobs=Preparing children to successfully enter the job market; (3) Caring=Teaching children to care about their community; (4) Values=Developing individuals with a sound moral base; (5) Comms.=Teaching children strong in-person communication skills; (6) Thinking=Encouraging individual and critical thinking; (7) Progress=Measuring and monitoring student progress consistently; (8) Faith=Deeping children's relationship with their religious faith; and (9) Diversity=Teaching children to accept and embrace diversity.

The interpretation of marginal effects that are statistically significant is as follows: a value of 0.050 indicates that controlling for other factors, the variable is associated with an increase of 5.0 percentage points in the likelihood that the respondent considers the goal as a priority. For example, the value of -0.059 for men for the dependent variable "College" suggests that controlling for other factors, men are 5.9 percentage points less likely than women (the reference category) to consider that preparing

students for college should be a key priority for schools. An effect marked as NS indicates that the effect is not statistically significant (at the 10 percent level). It is again important to note that the results from the analysis are tentative and that they need not imply causality.

A value of 0.05 in the regressions in Table 5 indicates that controlling for other factors, the variable is associated with an increase of 5.0 percentage points in the likelihood that the respondent considers a specific goal as a priority. NS indicates that an effect is not statistically significant. Results are tentative and need not imply causality.

The following comments can be made on the results.

- **Overall comment:** For the most part, the independent variables included in the analysis do not seem to be associated with a higher or lower likelihood of choosing specific priorities for what children should learn in school. Most coefficients are not statistically significant (NS), suggesting that the association between most variables and parental priorities is not statistically different from zero. This is in itself an important finding. It suggests that other individual characteristics, some of which may not easily be observed in standard surveys, probably matter more than the observed characteristics that have been included in the analysis. It also suggests that one should be fairly careful in not making quick generalizations about how some groups of respondents may have different priorities than other groups.
- **Gender, age, location, parental status, political affiliation, income, education, work status, and race:** For the most part, these variables do not seem to affect priorities in a systematic way. Coefficients are statistically significant in a few cases, but one should not infer too much from those cases since patterns across similar types of priorities do not emerge clearly. There are a few exceptions though. One exception is that respondents with a college education seem to place more emphasis on the role of schools to develop critical thinking, perhaps because they had the opportunity to experience the value of critical thinking while in college. Another exception is the fact that some racial minorities (especially Latinos and the "others" category) seem to place less emphasis on communications skills and on the role of schools in developing a sound moral base. This of course does not imply that these groups place a lower emphasis on moral values in general. Simply, they may have other priorities for what schools should focus on in priority.

- **Faith affiliation and the importance of faith in one's life:** The roles of faith affiliation and the importance of faith in one's life seem more salient since a larger number of coefficients for these variables are statistically significant. There seems to be a bit of a dichotomy at work. With the exception of critical thinking already mentioned earlier, respondents with a religious affiliation tend to place a higher emphasis on priorities related to skills than respondents not affiliated with a religion. Yet, this effect may be counterbalanced by the fact that those for whom faith matters more in their life tend to place more emphasis on values. One should not overinterpret these findings, but they are suggestive of a difference between faith affiliation and the importance of one's faith.

- **Experience with Catholic schools as a child:** By and large, respondents' experience with Catholic schools (or lack thereof) in their youth does not seem to relate in any systematic way to their priorities for what children should learn in school.

> There may be a difference in the roles that faith affiliation and the importance of faith in one's life play in influencing views for what children should learn in school in priority. Respondents with a faith affiliation tend to place a higher emphasis on skills than those not affiliated with a religion. But respondents whose faith matters more in their life tend to place more emphasis on priorities related to values.

Table 5: Correlates of Identification of Priorities for What Children Should Learn in Schools (dF/dX)

	College	Jobs	Comms.	Progress	Thinking	Caring	Values	Faith	Diversity
Gender (Ref. Female)									
Male	-0.059	NS	0.059	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Age (Ref. Older)									
Generation X	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Generation Y	-0.102	NS	NS	NS	0.073	NS	NS	NS	NS
Race (Ref. White)									
Hispanic/Latino	0.085	NS	-0.080	0.065	NS	NS	-0.081	NS	NS
African American	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Other races	NS	NS	-0.102	NS	-0.103	NS	-0.082	NS	NS
Location (Ref. Suburban)									
Urban	NS	NS	NS	NS	-0.103	NS	NS	NS	NS
Rural	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	-0.076
Parent (Ref. Not a parent)									
Parent	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Political aff. (Ref. Dem.)									
Republican	NS	0.064	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	-0.120
Independent	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Income (Ref. Low income)									
Medium income	NS	NS	-0.094	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
High income	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	0.056	-0.069
Income not declared	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Education (Ref. HS/below)									
College - Undergraduate	NS	NS	NS	NS	0.111	NS	NS	NS	NS
College - Graduate	NS	NS	NS	NS	0.091	NS	NS	-0.037	NS
Work (Ref. Not employed)									
Employed	NS	NS	NS	NS	-0.068	NS	0.048	NS	NS
Faith (Ref. Not affiliated)									
Catholic	NS	NS	0.092	0.092	-0.120	NS	NS	NS	NS
Christian	NS	0.081	NS	0.105	-0.144	-0.085	NS	NS	NS
Other religion	NS	NS	0.139	0.167	NS	-0.096	NS	NS	-0.130
Importance of religion									
Faith important	-0.064	NS	0.072	NS	NS	NS	0.095	0.068	NS
Attending services regularly	NS	NS	-0.100	NS	-0.063	NS	NS	0.081	NS
Active Catholic	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
School in childhood									
Attended Catholic school	NS	NS	-0.064	NS	NS	NS	0.079	NS	NS
Poor exp. in Catholic school	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS

Source: Author's estimation with FADICA 2017 survey.
Note: NS = Not statistically significant.

Conclusion

Two questions were asked in this note: (1) What are the priorities of parents for what their children should learn in school?; and (2) How do those priorities differ between different groups of parents? The analysis was based on a national 2017 survey funded by FADICA with a total of 1.403 respondents. Respondents could select three priorities for what children should learn in school among a set of nine: (1) Preparing children for college; (2) Preparing children to successfully enter the job market; (3) Teaching children to care about their community; (4) Developing individuals with a sound moral base; (5) Teaching children strong in-person communication skills; (6) Encouraging individual and critical thinking; (7) Measuring and monitoring student progress consistently; (8) Deeping children's relationship with their religious faith; and (9) Teaching children to accept and embrace diversity.

Two findings stand out. First, among the overall population and parents considering Catholic schools, critical thinking and preparation for college or work are often top priorities for what children should learn in school. For parents with their youngest child in Catholic schools, developing a moral base and deepening the faith matter too. Second, Catholic schools should not shy away from an emphasis on moral values and their Catholic identity. Yet if the focus on deepening the faith is too strong, possibly at a perceived cost for the ability of schools to develop critical thinking and diversity, the schools risk becoming less appealing to parents willing to consider the schools for their children.

Part of the motivation for this note was the realization that in comparison to the share of parents stating that they are "very willing" to consider Catholic schools for their children (27.1 percent of the sample), the current market share of Catholic schools is low (only 6.2 percent of parents in the sample have enrolled their youngest child in a Catholic school). There is scope for growth if Catholic schools were able to convince more parents to enroll their children in the schools. Yet apart from the issue of affordability that will be discussed in a separate note, convincing a larger share of parents to enroll their children in Catholic schools requires paying attention to their priorities. How this is to be done will vary between individual schools and school districts. The hope is that this note will have provided at least some useful information to help inform those decisions.

Appendix: Data Source

This note relies on market research data collected in 2017 by Mayhill Strategies LLC with funding from the Catholic Education Philanthropy Working Group and support from FADICA (Foundations and Donors interested in Catholic Activities) and the Philanthropy Roundtable. The market research led to the publication in 2018 by NCEA and FADICA of a report available online entitled *The Catholic School Choice: Understanding the Perspectives of Parents and Opportunities for More Engagement*. The report team adopted a mixed research methodology with quantitative as well as qualitative data collection and analysis. This note conducts more detailed analysis of the data, relying specifically on the quantitative component.

The quantitative data were collected via an online survey of 1,403 adult Americans between March 31 and April 11, 2017. As several target groups were oversampled (including Hispanic parents), sample weights based on the U.S. Census and findings from the Pew Research Foundation were used to adjust population shares to reflect the demographic profile of the adult American population. More details on the sample are available in the report. A more detailed version of the analysis summarized in this note is available from the author.