

## COVID-19 AND ENROLLMENT IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES

*Dale McDonald, John Reyes, and Annie Smith  
(Note adapted from a NCEA Data Brief)*

*February 2021*



Analytics series

### KEY MESSAGES:

- With a decline of over 111,000 from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021, the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on total enrollment across Catholic schools outpaces the largest drop in the last 50 years. Catholic elementary schools bore the brunt of the impact on school enrollment, with an 8.1% decrease in enrollment from the previous academic year.
- Over 200 Catholic schools closed or consolidated at the end of the 2019-2020 school year. Catholic school closures disproportionately impacted underserved families and non-Catholic families.

### Introduction

Each year, the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) has published a statistical report on Catholic elementary and secondary schools in the United States. These annual reports are designed to provide an understanding of this significant sector of American education, to inform the public discussion of educational policy issues and to encourage and improve practice at the school level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has arguably served as one of the most transformative catalysts for educational change in the United States. Schools of all types – public, charter, private, parochial, online or homeschool – have been significantly impacted as a result of the pandemic's disruptions to our communities and society. This data brief highlights the most significant findings in NCEA's latest version of its annual statistical report in light of the current circumstances.



### 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.

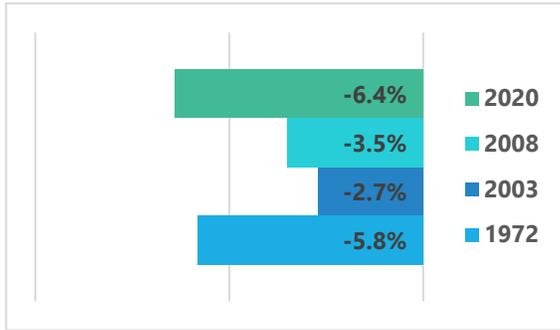
**Which topics are covered in the Notes Series?** The series explores achievements and challenges for Catholic schools globally, including in terms of enrollment, reach to the poor, academic performance, parental priorities, costs and affordability, and religious education. Interesting innovations are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

**What is the focus of this note?** Dale McDonald, John Reyes, and Annie Smith from the National Catholic Educational Association document the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on enrollment in K12 Catholic schools in the United States.

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**#1. Catholic school enrollment across the nation dropped 6.4% from the previous academic year – the largest single year decline in nearly 50 years.**

With a decline of over 111,000 students from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021, the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on total enrollment across Catholic schools outpaces the largest drop in the last 50 years (-5.8% from 1971-1972 to 1972-1973).

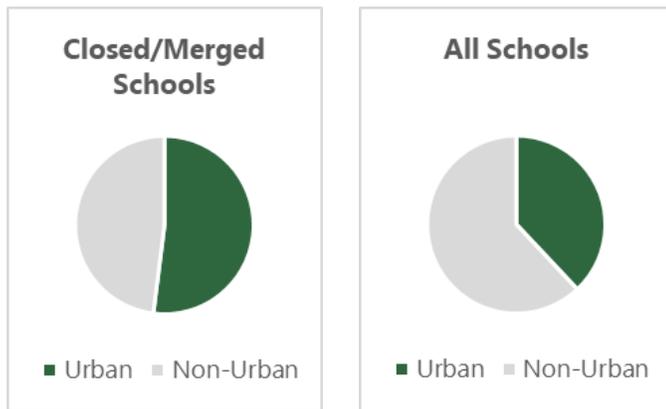


**WHY THIS MATTERS:**

The change in enrollment is greater than those seen in the midst of the clergy sex abuse crisis (2003: -2.7%) and the late 2000s economic crisis (2008: -3.5%). NCEA’s research on enrollment decline does not include any metrics relating to the reasons for attrition and enrollment decline is tracked as a net change to total enrollment (instead of explicitly tracking attrition and new enrollments separately).

**#2. Catholic school closures in 2019-2020 disproportionately impacted underserved families and non-Catholic families.**

Black families, Title I students, urban communities and non-Catholics were overrepresented in the demographic sample of closed Catholic schools. In many cases, these underserved groups were over twice as likely to have their Catholic schools close compared to both all school closures and all communities served by Catholic schools.



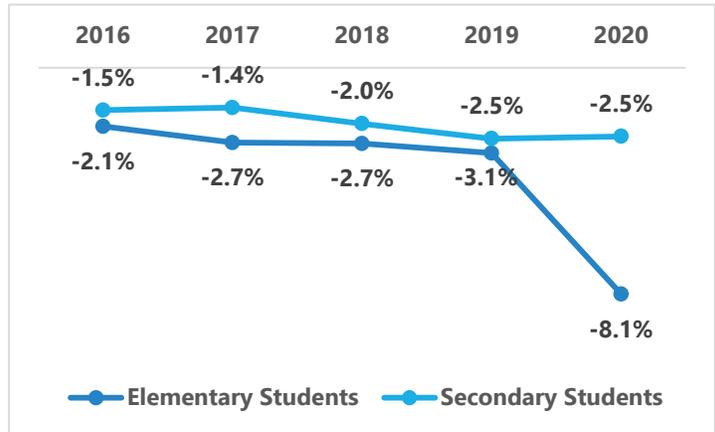
**WHY THIS MATTERS:**

The legacy of Catholic schools in the United States is deeply reflective of a continuing mission to serve those most in need. Historically, Catholic schools were created to serve immigrant families or those marginalized by other schooling options which did not provide safe learning environments for families; indeed, Catholic schools have thrived not solely by serving Catholic families but all families because of the animating belief of Catholic schools.

The erasure of Catholic schools from communities across the nation, particularly underserved communities, amounts to a disruptive divestment of social capital and pathways of opportunity for all families. It also has the added effect of decreasing the diversity of Catholic school communities that enriches all families regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or opportunity.

**#3. Catholic elementary schools bore the brunt of the impact on school enrollment, with an 8.1% decrease in enrollment from the previous academic year.**

Elementary schools increased declines of over three times that of secondary schools (-2.5% from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021).



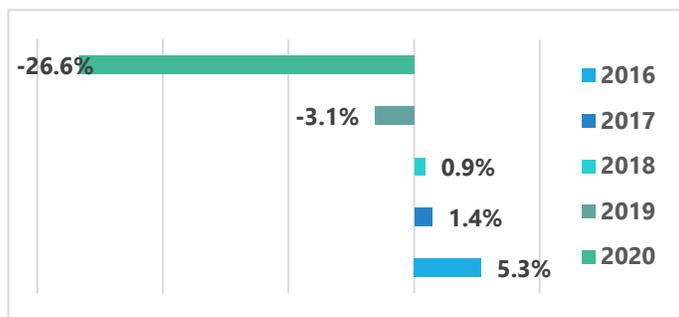
**WHY THIS MATTERS:**

Elementary school enrollment is largely seen as a predictor of future enrollment trends for secondary schools, as retention of students within Catholic school systems as they matriculate from elementary to secondary school is a key factor in Catholic secondary school viability. Declines in enrollment at the primary grade levels may lead to a delayed but significant impact on secondary school enrollment within the next five to ten years, proving potentially disastrous for secondary school viability.

**#4. Pre-Kindergarten enrollment declined by 26.6% from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021.**

Enrollment of the youngest learners in Catholic schools was a driver of the overall Catholic elementary school decrease. There were strong regional trends relating to pre-Kindergarten enrollment, with California (-56%) and Delaware (-42%) showing the most significant declines.

Of the net loss of 111,000 students to Catholic schools from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021, 40% of that loss can be attributed to Pre-Kindergarten related enrollment attrition. This mirrors similar losses in public school preschool and Kindergarten enrollment<sup>1,2</sup>.



**WHY THIS MATTERS:**

Prior to 2020-2021, pre-Kindergarten enrollment had been trending slightly upwards across the nation. In the wake of the pandemic, Catholic schools were among the first schools to open and many school leaders prioritized operating in-person for early childhood and primary school students. Although demand for pre-Kindergarten school options can't be interpreted from this data, it is troubling that even in the midst of prioritization of in-person learning, many seats in Catholic schools were left unfilled.

Most importantly, a “bounce-back” in enrollment is not assumed. There has been no evidence in NCEA's historical research on Catholic school enrollment over the last 50 years that suggests positive and commensurate shifts in enrollment typically follow these negative shifts.

**#5. Only 8 of the 174 Catholic school dioceses saw an increase of 1% or more in student enrollment.**

These dioceses were Duluth (MN), Charleston (SC), Charlotte (NC), Reno (NV), Manchester (NH), Bismarck (ND), Greensburg (PA) and Las Vegas (NV).

Diocese	Percent Change	Number Change
Duluth (MN)	1.0%	12
Charleston (SC)	1.1%	73
Charlotte (NC)	1.9%	130
Reno (NV)	2.3%	40
Manchester (NH)	2.3%	119
Bismarck (ND)	3.3%	92
Greensburg (PA)	4.9%	118
Las Vegas (NV)	5.5%	187

Conversely, the top ten dioceses in total enrollment in 2019-2020 lost a total of 36,000 students – Los Angeles (CA), Chicago (IL), Philadelphia (PA), New York (NY), Cincinnati (OH), Cleveland (OH), St. Louis (MO), New Orleans (LA), Miami (FL) and Brooklyn (NY).

Diocese	Percent Change	Number Change
Los Angeles (CA)	-12.3%	-9,045
Chicago (IL)	-8.2%	-5,698
Philadelphia (PA)	-5.0%	-3,048
New York (NY)	-11.1%	-6,658
Cincinnati (OH)	-3.6%	-1,448
Cleveland (OH)	-3.6%	-1,398
St. Louis (MO)	-3.8%	-1,356
New Orleans (LA)	-5.2%	-1,729
Miami (FL)	-7.3%	-2,434
Brooklyn (NY)	-9.3%	-3,128

**WHY THIS MATTERS:**

Media coverage of the impact of the pandemic's impact on school enrollment to date has suggested that Catholic schools and other types of non-public schools have benefitted from pandemic-induced suspension of in-person instruction. However, NCEA's research suggests that systems of Catholic schools have largely suffered notable enrollment losses, including the largest Catholic school systems as noted above. Additionally, none of the ten dioceses with growth had similar increases in enrollment the prior year, suggesting that it may or may not be a sign of things to come.

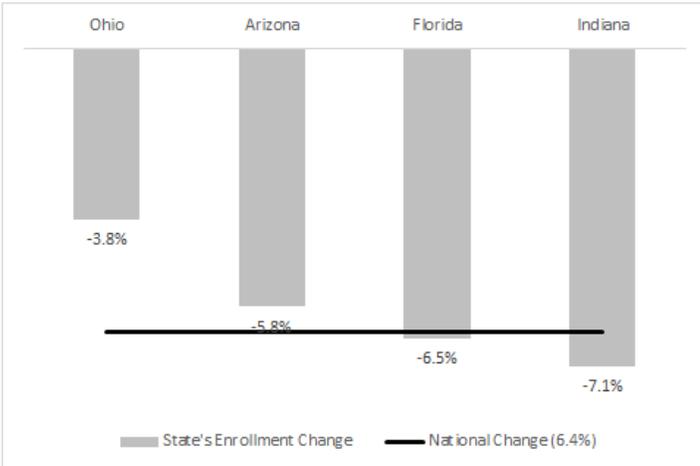
**#6. More information is needed to determine the impact of state-funded parental choice programs on enrollment trends.**

NCEA's research on four states with significant parental choice programs – Arizona, Ohio, Indiana and Florida – did not reveal any specific trends relating to the impact of those programs on enrollment. Arizona (-5.8%), Ohio (-3.8%), Indiana (-7.1%), and Florida (-6.5%) all experienced declines in enrollment.

<sup>1</sup> Colorado Department of Education. “Pupil membership | CDE.” <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/pupilcurrent>

<sup>2</sup> Blume, H. (2020) “LAUSD enrollment decline continues during online learning, with unexpected drop of 6,000 kindergarteners.” *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-08-31/lausd-kindergarten-enrollment-drop>

Our team at NCEA suspects that this particular finding is constrained by the scope of the data collection for its annual research. With the exception of the data gathered on the 209 schools that closed, all data is reported to NCEA aggregated at the Diocesan level. Disaggregation of the data to group enrollment trends by family income levels, cities/counties, and actual utilization of parent choice programs could lead to more definitive and generalizable insights regarding the impact of state-funded parental choice programs on enrollment.



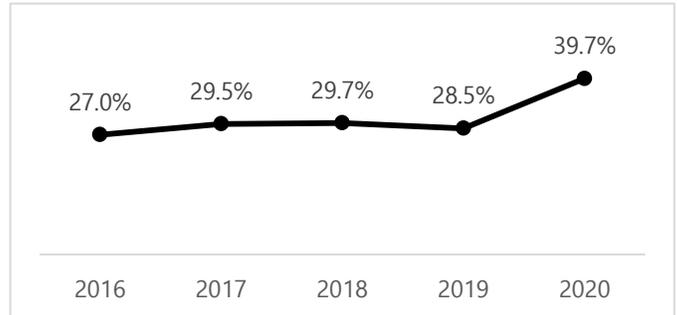
As an example, the Diocese of Cleveland reported to us that in the city of Cleveland – the only jurisdiction in Ohio where 100% of families have access to public funding to attend private schools – enrollment across the 18 diocesan elementary Catholic schools increased by 2.4%, even as city public school enrollment elementary declined by 5.2%. Additionally, Diocese of Cleveland schools that served families who could not access state voucher programs experienced three times the enrollment loss compared to schools that could access state voucher programs. NCEA intends to pursue further research into diocesan and school-level trends in the coming months.

**WHY THIS MATTERS:**

Expansion of parental choice programs has long been viewed as a potential solution to increasing challenges of Catholic school viability. In light of the aggregated state-level data collected by NCEA, to say that parental choice programs have no impact would be an inaccurate assertion. School choice programs vary in terms of their funding mechanisms and criterion, and accessibility for families and schools is a factor that we believe certainly impacts family participation in those programs and overall school enrollment trends. Taken together with the findings relating the disproportionate impact of school closures on underserved families, further research that mirrors what the Diocese of Cleveland has conducted and disclosed would help provide more clarity for leaders and decision-makers.

**#7. More schools reported having students on an enrollment waitlist than prior years.**

Each year, NCEA collects data on the number of schools with a waiting list in any grade. In 2020-2021, 39.7% of Catholic schools reported having a waiting list in at least



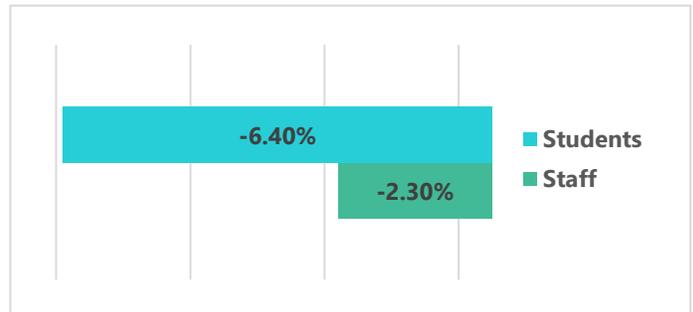
one grade, up from 28.5% the year before.

**WHY THIS MATTERS:**

In a typical year, an increase in Catholic schools with a waiting list could be reasonably interpreted to suggest increased demand for Catholic schools against available seats in classrooms. We know, however, that local and state guidelines as well as physical constraints may have artificially decreased enrollment capacities in the midst of social distancing requirements. This is a crucial metric to follow in the next few years as schools begin to readjust to operations post-pandemic, especially in the hard-hit pre-Kindergarten sector of Catholic schools that once held the bulk of waiting lists in Catholic schools.

**#8. Catholic school staffing did not decline at a rate proportional to overall enrollment decline.**

Overall, professional staffing in Catholic schools (principals, teachers, others involved in student learning) declined by 2.3% compared to the overall enrollment decrease of 6.4%. This is due in part to broad availability and utilization of the Paycheck Protection Program in the spring of 2020. Based on NCEA's research on operational response to the financial challenges of the pandemic, less than one third of schools nationally made adjustments to staffing (reducing or consolidating positions) in response to the pandemic.



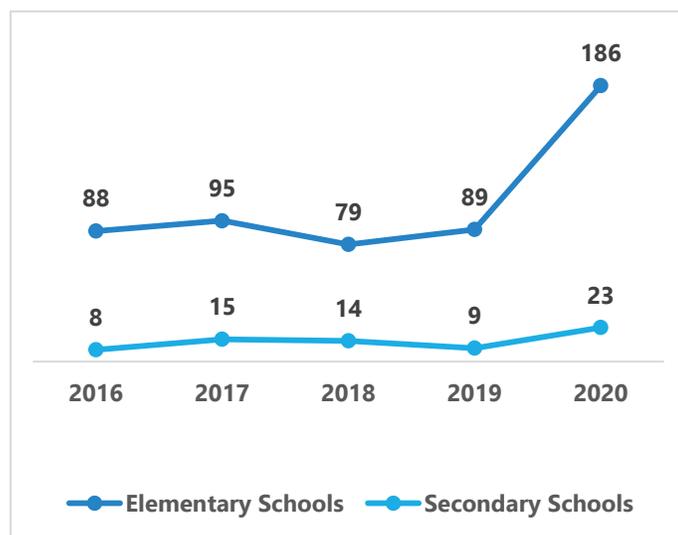
**WHY THIS MATTERS:**

The comparatively lower student to teacher ratio (11:1 as of 2020) has long been a hallmark of Catholic schools made possible by significant investment into personnel. Surprisingly, Catholic school staffing levels are at nearly the same levels they were in the 1960s. This means that the cost to educate students in Catholic schools, although lower than public schools nationally, has increased due to the nearly 69% drop in enrollment over the last 60 years.

However, the most recent legislation passed by Congress to provide relief could pose significant financial challenges for Catholic school leaders. The Emergency Assistance to Non-Public Schools (EANS) program allocates \$2.5 billion of funding for non-personnel expenses incurred as a result of the pandemic (including training, personal protective equipment, etc.). However, schools can only take advantage of either EANS or the second round of the Paycheck Protection Program regardless of whether they shouldered increased costs for personnel or non-personnel expenses. If schools choose to use relief funding for non-personnel expenses, expect to see either drastic staffing declines or potentially more enrollment declines in the near future as the cost to educate and tuition increases to support retaining current staffing levels.

**#9. Over 200 Catholic schools closed or consolidated at the end of the 2019-2020 school year.**

On average, approximately 100 Catholic schools close or consolidate – a rate that is six times higher than the average number of new Catholic schools (approximately 15 per year). Elementary schools made up a disproportionate share of school closures; 186 of the 209 (89%) Catholic schools that closed or consolidated were elementary schools.



**WHY THIS MATTERS:**

In late spring, early reporting on the number of school closures at the end of 2019-2020 seemed to suggest that it would be similar to prior years. However, by the fall that picture changed rapidly. Because of the availability of the Paycheck Protection Program and the use of operational reserves, it is possible that the number of schools that closed could have exceeded 209 in the absence of these safety nets. As the pandemic persists and vaccines, rapid testing and therapeutics begin to move societies and communities toward “stability,” the availability of relief funding and drastic shifts in operational strategies for Catholic schools could tip the scales in favor of either trend correction or a frightening new normal in Catholic school closures.

*Acknowledgment and disclaimer: The objective of the note is to convey research findings in a rapid and accessible way. The opinions expressed in this note are those of the author only and need not represent the views of the Global Catholic Education project.*