

# Editorial: The rise in enrollment at Catholic schools is an opportunity that should not be ignored

Finding silver linings within the destabilizing and tumultuous years of the COVID-19 pandemic is not always easy. But the major shifts that took place in public life as a result of the coronavirus uncertainty provided an opportunity in one unlikely arena: Catholic schools.

Demand for Catholic education began to increase during the 2020-21 school year when many parochial schools returned to in-person instruction even as many public schools opted to continue education online. The result was an influx of students in Catholic schools that continues even today.

According to [data released this fall](#) by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), Catholic schools welcomed 62,000 new students to their classrooms this academic year. This marked an uptick nationally by 3.8 percent – the first time Catholic school enrollment has increased in the United States in 25 years. That brings the total number of children currently being educated in parochial schools to nearly 1.68 million.

The boom has presented an opportunity in dioceses across the country, including the oldest. The Archdiocese of Baltimore reported this week that Baltimore Catholic schools will welcome 530 new students. And to help support those new students, the schools are hiring 100 new teachers.

Why is this an opportunity? Because it allows dioceses the chance to creatively and effectively make use of additional resources in a way that prioritizes the catechesis and

evangelization of a generation that the Church desperately needs, and at the same time strengthens the Catholic identity of indispensable religious institutions.

In 1970, [4.2 million youth were enrolled in parish religious education programs](#). Today, that number has dropped by more than half to 1.8 million. Perhaps more alarmingly, in 1970 there were 1.08 million infant baptisms, whereas in 2021 there were 411,482. If parents are willing to enroll their children in a Catholic school, however, perhaps children whose families would otherwise not send them for religious instruction will receive it. Even more hopefully, perhaps they will have a chance to receive the sacraments.

Of the new students arriving in Catholic schools this fall, when assessed by grade level, Pre-K accounted for 66 percent of the boost. This growth means that Catholic schools have just received an influx of young families – and that the Church, in the wake of massive disaffiliation and decline in Sunday Mass attendance, now has the opportunity to welcome, serve and form those children and their families.

Furthermore, with the hiring of 100 new teachers, Archbishop Lori and his team of lay school leaders in Baltimore have the opportunity to strengthen Catholic identity in the classroom. (A similar opportunity exists anywhere in the country where schools are growing.) While a temptation for these school administrators facing demand is going to be to fill personnel needs quickly, rather than selectively recruiting teachers who are steeped in the Faith themselves, we hope that this growth will provide the chance to recruit and retain teachers and staff with missionary hearts, who might have the ability to pass on their own beloved faith to increasingly secularized and nonpracticing families. This takes a necessary commitment of resources to ensure that Catholic school teachers are compensated fairly and competitively.

Teaching is a special vocation in our Church. In serving their

students, teachers are seeing Christ before them, in need of their love and mercy. Instead of merely transactional institutions, Catholic schools can become places where the Gospel thrives, where parents and young people belong as true community members and where all are known and loved as persons rather than statistics. In such a place, vocations to service are fostered, and those children will grow to be young men and women who will have the formation and strength to hear and follow Christ's invitation for their lives, wherever it may lead.

The NCEA insists that for growth in Catholic schools to continue, barriers to admission must be removed, increased public funding should be secured, lay leaders should be further empowered and the young families who have opted for Catholic education in recent years must be retained, even while others continue to be invited.

It is our prayer that this growth will not be a temporary increase but that it will mark the beginning of a renewal of our nation's parochial schools. Our children deserve the best. They deserve the best of the Catholic tradition. They deserve to be raised in environments that foster a love for our art, our history, our saints, our prayers and our God. They deserve a Catholic education that helps them become the saints they are called to be.

*Our Sunday Visitor Editorial Board: Father Patrick Briscoe, Gretchen R. Crowe, Scott P. Richert, Scott Warden, York Young*