



Has Catholic K-12 Education Turned the Corner?

For decades, the story of Catholic education in the United States was grim. The number of students enrolled in K-12 peaked in the mid-1960s. The decline was relentless through 1990, followed by another steep drop in the 2000s. By 2025, enrollment had fallen by 70 percent from the peak to fewer than 1.7 million students.¹

But finally, *there is some good news to report*. After a sharp slump during the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, enrollment bounced back, registering gains for the first time in decades.² While the upward trajectory has more recently stalled, enrollment is holding its own.³

Renewal is not just a matter of counting heads. Efforts to revitalize the mission and Catholic content of K-12 education are spreading. Meanwhile, the work of Catholic schools consists not only in preparing students for college but also in serving disadvantaged students.

Challenges remain. Catholic schools are competing with other private and charter schools for the shrinking pool of school-aged children whose families are dissatisfied with public schools. Catholic enrollment that continues to hold steady while producing better-formed graduates would count as a win.

The Long Decline

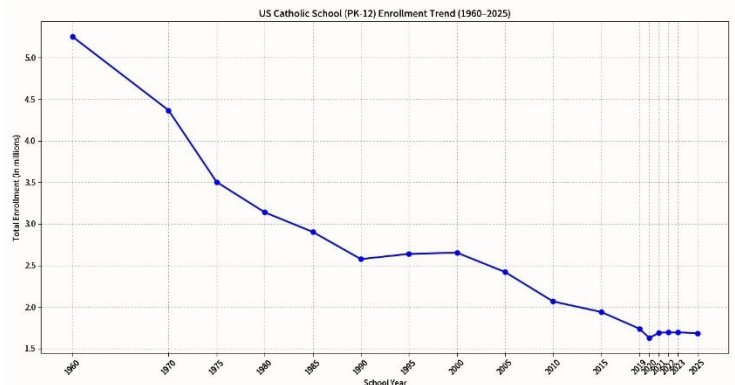
A series of unrelated developments came together in the mid-1960s to send Catholic education into a tailspin.

Some of them were quite positive. One was the growing acceptance of Catholics in America after World War II. The Catholic school system, which became the largest private school system in the world, originated as a defensive maneuver. It was built on the Protestant majority's hostility to Catholicism.⁴ But as part of the diverse force that fought

World War II, and the broad New Deal coalition of the Democratic Party, Catholics were becoming normalized.

When suburbs sprouted in the 1950s, Catholics, like other groups, packed up their lives and moved for new, more spacious housing. Some might have commuted to the old ethnic neighborhoods on Sundays until the churches followed them, but they began to substitute public schools for parochial ones.⁵

School closures and the drop in enrollment began in earnest with Vatican II. The Catholic school system has never returned to anything like the 1960s peak.



Data drawn from the National Catholic Education Association yearly reports

Vatican II mattered because it triggered the departure of priests, brothers and especially nuns from the teaching staff. They made up close to 70 percent of Catholic school teachers in 1965. By 1990, they were only 2.5 percent of the teachers, a percentage that holds today.⁶

Interpretations vary on why so many sisters abandoned their vocations—approximately 30 percent from the 1966 peak to 1980—and were not replaced. Whatever the individual sisters' reasons for leaving, their exodus threw schools into a financial crisis. Lay teachers in Catholic schools usually earned less than their public school peers, but they were substantially more expensive than the nuns.

Naturally, tuition, once a bargain, rose. Between 1970 and 2010, the average tuition increased from \$1,234 in 2026 dollars to \$8,283.⁷ Many families that wanted to send their children to parochial schools could not see their way to doing so. Thousands of schools closed.

From the 1990s into the early 2000s, Catholic schools enjoyed a small enrollment bounce, even with the closure or consolidation of nearly 600 schools. A relatively sturdy economy, alongside a small uptick in the birth rate, no doubt helped.⁸ So too did the strong reputation of Catholic schools for robust academics and discipline. This was, after all, the era of President Bill Clinton's support of school uniforms as a way to inculcate discipline in otherwise chaotic classrooms.

A Stalled Recovery

The recovery was fleeting. Catholic schools enrolled 2.5 million in 9,000 schools in 1990. By 2013, enrollment dropped below 2 million students in 6,954 schools.⁹

No single cause accounted for this reversal. Cost, as always, was an issue for many families, especially those living in suburbs with decent public schools. For those who lived in areas with less-than-stellar district schools, the spread of charter schools hurt. Declining enrollment and school closures especially affected elementary and middle schools.¹⁰

Catholics' attachment to the Church weakened, which appeared in both a smaller percentage of the population identifying themselves as Catholics and in declining Mass attendance among the remaining faithful.¹¹ While Catholic schools attracted an increasing number of non-Catholics, they naturally drew (and still draw) on church members as their normal constituency.

The clergy sex abuse scandals mattered in two ways. The appalling stories, especially in Boston but rolling from diocese to diocese, obviously damaged the reputation of Catholic schools. One quantitative study calculated that the *Boston Globe* coverage of the scandals and the hierarchy's evasions accounted for two-thirds of the enrollment decline after 2002.¹²

A financial hit followed the reputational one. The suits and settlements were expensive, driving some dioceses into bankruptcy. Parishioners cut off donations. All of this meant closed parishes and schools.

The Covid-19 disaster arrived on the heels of these other troubles. As states closed schools and experimented with (ineffective) remote learning, enrollment dropped by 6.4 percent, the largest slide in nearly 50 years.¹³

Out of the ashes of the pandemic rose new hope for Catholic schools. While public schools stuck with online classes, many Catholic schools figured out how to return to in-person instruction faster. While only 43 percent of public district schools opened in Fall 2020, 92 percent of Catholic schools opened their doors.¹⁴ Unfettered by unions that put the interests of teachers and administrators first, Catholic schools made students and learning their priority.

A Modest Renewal

While public school enrollment dropped, Catholic schools boomed. They saw a record-breaking 3.8 percent increase, the first in 25 years. More modest increases followed. However, the most recent head count showed a slight slip.¹⁵

Perhaps this is a temporary setback, but the forces arrayed against parochial schools before the post-Covid bump remain in the field. Every Easter in the past few years has brought good news about record numbers of new young Catholic converts. Yet the proportion of the population that identifies as Catholic continues to slide, and for every new convert, about eight leave the Church.¹⁶

Meanwhile, *the dwindling overall number of school-age children means that Catholic schools are competing for a slice of a smaller pie.* School choice programs, which are expanding in more and more states, help Catholic schools in states that have them. Covid school closures spawned a new competitor in homeschooling, the fastest-growing educational option. Solid Catholic homeschooling programs help parents who make that choice, but they serve children who otherwise might have gone to a parochial school.¹⁷

Hostility toward faith keeps Catholic schools on defense. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2022 (*Carson v. Malkin*) that a Maine program providing rural students with tuition assistance to attend private schools in areas without public schools could not discriminate against Catholic options. Undeterred, the state rewrote its Human Rights Act to exclude religious schools that fail to toe the line on the state's woke views on gender and sexuality. A state court refused to provide relief to the parents who sought to access the program. An appeal is in process.¹⁸

Despite the obstacles, Catholic parishes and religious orders offer a dizzying variety of schools—coed, same-sex, urban, suburban, rural, high-powered prep, athletic powerhouses, classical and vocational.

They do have one thing in common: They are good at what they do.

Catholic schools make a real difference in inculcating self-discipline, leading to classrooms without disruptions that encourage learning and setting students on a path toward success. They outpace public schools in math and reading, with a fairly narrow gap in the 4th grade widening significantly by the 8th grade.¹⁹

It is not that Catholic schools use some super-innovative curriculum (although reminders about God's presence and love no doubt help) or cherry-pick their student bodies. The learning advantage holds across income and race. Rather, Catholic schools typically set an expectation of self-discipline.

Catholic School Achievements

Catholic schools usually have extremely high graduation rates and college placement records. They can do better in spreading that good news. They also excel in other ways.

In the late-19th-century expansion, Catholic schools were immigrant schools. In the 21st century, the Catholic population of the United States, especially the school-age cohort, has become more Hispanic and Asian as immigration from those groups has surged. Ongoing conversations about how to engage the Latino population in particular—many of whom want faith-filled educations for their children—are important. They make up 60 percent of Catholics under the age of 18, but just over 17 percent of Catholic school enrollment.²⁰

A number of initiatives aim to boost Hispanic enrollment. One, the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity (SOLT), a Texas-based missionary society, brings the Good News to impoverished communities. Its missionary schools and churches are present in nine dioceses in the United States. It has revived schools in four of those dioceses.

Their Phoenix school was in danger of closing but now successfully serves a largely Hispanic population. At a celebration for its 15th anniversary of operation, a single mother who was able to send her three children to the

school spoke of its life-changing importance. “If they didn’t have an opportunity to come to this school, it (would have been) hard, not being able to know our faith and about God. It is important because that’s how we know God is with us and He guides us in this world,” she said. One of her children went on to a Catholic high school; another is studying for the priesthood; and the third is a teacher’s aide.²¹

Lasallian schools serve poor and immigrant communities. One remarkable middle school in the District of Columbia is intentionally small, capped at 65 students. Its size allows for the faculty and staff to devote attention to each student and his family and to bring him up to speed, since many students arrive with skills below grade level.²² One hundred percent go on to Catholic high schools, and 97 percent of them graduate. The comparison population logs only a 50 percent graduation rate.

The stories can be multiplied across the country, from California to Cleveland.²³ Work certainly remains in reaching Hispanics and other growing Catholic populations, but the effort is inspiring.

Educating for Mission

There is an explanation for falling enrollment that does not require the dedication of missionaries or major grants to address: a slippage in Catholic identity. Fifteen years ago one scholar pointed to “weak” faith formation among the other more familiar factors that contribute to declining enrollment. Parents, he said, “are unwilling to pay for a Catholic school if they perceive that the public schools, charter schools or other private schools in their area are adequate,” unless they offer something more.²⁴

For some Catholic leaders, the revival does not begin with lobbying for state support or targeting neglected demographic groups, as important as those things are. Rather, it begins with a return to first principles. At a May 2026 gathering of educational leaders, including four bishops and one archbishop, at Christendom College, the 50 attendees signed the Front Royal Statement.²⁵

The statement began with the fundamental meaning of education and the human person, and described the responsibilities of parents, clergy, teachers, leaders and the state. It advocated for a curriculum rooted in the classics but aimed at forming the whole child. It proclaimed that human flourishing is the ultimate end of education.

That may sound abstract, but some of the signatories are involved in concrete programming. Thomas W. Carroll, who retired as an innovative superintendent of the Boston Catholic schools, has expanded the Catholic Talent Project. Now operating in Boston and San Francisco, it recruits, trains, mentors and places young faithful new teachers. More than a Catholic Teach for America, it also seeks to find and retain talented and faithful leaders.²⁶

In St. Louis, the Augustine Institute acquired a large campus in 2024 to serve as a graduate program in theology for future evangelizers in Catholic schools, parishes and dioceses.

Schools in the Chesterton Academy network already follow a curriculum of the sort outlined at Front Royal. With more than 90 schools open or soon to open in the United States and a smaller international reach, Chesterton schools fill a need for a classical education in the Catholic tradition.²⁷

Finally, the Cardinal Newman Society has expanded its recommendations of colleges that provide a genuine Catholic education, to add K-12 options including online programs. Its five principles center Catholic teaching and practice in the whole curriculum.²⁸

These initiatives give ample reason for hope that truly Catholic educational alternatives will continue to form new generations of students.

¹ <https://cardinalnewmansociety.org/tragic-anniversary-60-years-of-decline-in-catholic-schools/>.

² <https://manhattan.institute/article/catholic-school-enrollment-boomed-during-covid-lets-make-it-more-than-a-one-time-bump>.

³ National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools, 2025-2026: The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing* (Arlington, Va., 2026).

⁴ Timothy Walch, *Parish School: American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial Times to the Present*, rep. ed. (Arlington, Va.: NCEA, 2003).

⁵ Stephen M. Koeth, *Crabgrass Catholicism: How Suburbanization Transformed Faith and Politics in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025).

⁶ <https://www.ncregister.com/cna/catholic-schools-fare-better-in-states-with-voucher-programs>.

⁷ <https://www.educationnext.org/why-cant-middle-class-afford-catholic-school-anymore/>. We converted the 2015 numbers cited in the article to 2026 equivalents.

⁸ <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2011/05/31/the-state-of-catholic-schools-in-the-us/>; <https://econofact.org/the-mystery-of-the-declining-u-s-birth-rate>.

⁹ https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_205.70.asp.

¹⁰ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED660107.pdf>.

¹¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx>.

¹² Ali Moghtaderi, "Child Abuse Scandal Publicity and Catholic School Enrollment: Does the *Boston Globe* Coverage Matter?" *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 99, no. 1 (2018), pp. 169–84.

¹³ https://www.ncea.org/NCEA/How_We_Serve/News/Press_Releases/NCEA_Releases_2020_-_2021_Data_on_State_of_Catholic_Schools_Amid_COVID-19.aspx.

¹⁴ <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/time-crisis-catholic-schools-offered-choice-not-echo>.

¹⁵ <https://manhattan.institute/article/catholic-school-enrollment-boomed-during-covid-lets-make-it-more-than-a-one-time-bump>; National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools, 2025-2026: The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing* (Arlington, Va., 2026).

¹⁶ <https://leadershiproundtable.substack.com/p/latest-pew-study-shows-catholics>.

¹⁷ <https://www.ewtnnews.com/world/us/as-homeschooling-soars-in-us-catholic-schools-struggle-to-recover-from-pandemic>; "School Choice on the March," *Mindszenty Report*, July 2023; "Homeschooling in America: From Fringe to Future," *Mindszenty Report*, October 2025.

¹⁸ <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2024/08/18/maine-continues-to-discriminate-against-faith-based-schools/>.

¹⁹ <https://fordhaminstitute.org/sites/default/files/publication/pdfs/05312018-self-discipline-and-catholic-education-evidence-two-national-cohorts.pdf>; <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2025/03/03/catholic-schools-surpass-public-schools-in-nations-report-card/>.

²⁰ <https://www.ewtnnews.com/world/us/why-do-so-few-hispanics-attend-catholic-schools-in-the-us>; NCEA, op.cit.

²¹ <https://www.catholicism.org/2024/05/28/bishop-with-great-joy-marks-orders-schools-anniversaries-at-most-holy-trinity-parish/>.

²² <https://www.ewtnnews.com/world/us/how-one-catholic-school-takes-a-hammer-to-the-cycle-of-poverty>.

²³ <https://cacatholic.org/advancing-educational-excellence/education/innovative-catholic-schools-working-all-students/>; <https://thepartnershipschools.org/five-lessons-from-125-years-of-cleveland-st-thomas-aquinas-school/>.

²⁴ <https://www.ewtnnews.com/world/us/weakening-of-catholic-identity-contributes-to-school-enrollment-decline-cautions-professor>.

²⁵ <http://www.christendom.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Front-Royal-Statement.pdf>.

²⁶ <https://catholictalentproject.org/>.

²⁷ <https://chestertonschoolsnetwork.org/curriculum#academic-model>.

²⁸ <https://cardinalnewmansociety.org/school-affirmations/>.

Mindszenty Report Reprints

1 copy	\$1.50	20 copies	\$15.00
10 copies	\$8.00	50 copies	\$25.00
		100 copies	\$35.00

RACIAL GERRYMANDERING HITS A BIG ROADBLOCK.

An important U.S. Supreme Court decision on legislative redistricting continues the Court's restoration of colorblind constitutional interpretation. Ask for 7/26

THE LURE OF SPORTS GAMBLING TO YOUNG MEN.

Legal online gambling has rapidly become a big seductive industry. Ask for 6/26

The Mindszenty Report is published monthly by

Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation

7800 Bonhomme Ave.

St. Louis, MO 63105

Phone 314-727-6279

Subscription rate: \$25 per year

Outside the U.S.A. \$35

We accept credit card payments.

Contributions to the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Website: www.mindszenty.org

Email to orders.inquiries@mindszenty.org

Visit us at Facebook.com and Substack.com

(<https://cardinalmindszentyfoundation.substack.com/>)