

## HOW ONE CATHOLIC SCHOOL INCREASED THEIR ENROLLMENT FROM 316 TO 356 IN ONE YEAR!

by  
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In today's Catholic school headlines, we often hear about declining enrollment - throughout the country. There are definitely some pockets of success, but when Catholic leaders go to conventions, conferences, and workshops, many want to know how they can stabilize/increase enrollment in their Catholic school. In fact, with the three on-line courses that ISPD is offering this fall semester through the University of Dayton, the course that has the most students is: *Enrollment Management Success in Your Catholic School*.

With this month's newsletter, it is thrilling to be able to talk about a Catholic school that in one year has turned around a ten-year downward spiral.

Tony Bonura, principal of St. Matthew the Apostle Catholic Elementary School in Harahan, Louisiana, is beginning his second year as head of this Pre-K thru 7th grade school. With many years of declining enrollment and a number of years of deficit budgeting, Tony took over a school in 2018-19 with enrollment standing at 316 students. Twelve months later, three major accomplishments have been the springboard in advancing SMA to greater heights.

- The 2019 - 2020 school year began with 356 students.
- There was a budget surplus at the end of the 2018-19 school year.
- Faculty received an increase in stipend/salary.

How did the happen? What took place? Five powerful guidelines were established with all school leaders that impacted the entire community. They are articulated below.

### 1. As administrators, be intentional.

- Have specific goals. Announce that enrollment management is the # 1 priority of everything and for everyone.
- State realistic enrollment increase goals for the year - even if it is only by one student.
- Share the enrollment management messages with all: faculty/staff, parents, parishioners, and school/parish leadership groups.
- Post all enrollment numbers by class - every week. Post in all administrative offices and put in every faculty/staff mailbox at the beginning of each week.

Example:

Week of September 9-13, 2019

Grade: 2nd  
Teacher: Sharon Jones  
Total: 22

Male: 15  
Female: 17  
New: 1

- Begin every group meeting/orientation with an enrollment update.
- Educate ALL on their roles and what they (faculty/staff, boards/councils, parents and students) can do:
  - More students = more resources
  - More students = more financial support
  - More students = greater critical mass and word of mouth

## **2. Drive every decision by enrollment.**

- We will have the best curriculum, athletics, extra-curricular programs - if it is driven by the questions:
  - Will our parents appreciate the decision?
  - Can we promote it?
  - Does it separate us from the competition?
    - Examples at SMA: Coding program, Lexia Core 5 supplemental reading, adding a dance team, transforming the library, adding a curriculum coach, etc.
- It is extremely important that we understand our niche. What is our WOW? What distinguishes us? (We used three focus groups to develop our Top 10 Selling Points and the crafted our messages around our # 1 - Community).

## **3. Foster and promote intense engagement, partnerships and "customer service."**

- Share everything with parents - go beyond the normal -- for example, budgets, school test scores, administrative challenges.
- Form teams and committees to offer their best wisdom. (We formed parent committees for major decisions or changes - uniform committee, Open House committee).
- Move the school into *strategic growth mode* through strategic planning. (SMA involved over 300 people in creating this new vision, new culture and new strategic initiatives for the next 1-3 years).
- Invite key players from the parish and the school to the table; they must be on board or more importantly, know exactly why we are making an unpopular decision.
- Never miss the carpool line.
- Go to every Parent Club meeting - Men's Club, Home & School Association, etc.
- Be at public events and performance outings.

## **4. Communicate everything.**

- Tell the truth.
- Remind people of the good news - constantly!
  - This generation of parents want to know why we are doing something and how it is going to benefit and/or impact their child.

- Quickly learn that disengagement by administrators is the worst form of betrayal.
- Remind them why they love or should love the school.
- Explain when we say "no."
- Combat gossip by staying on top of the social media buzz - invite people with any negativity to come in and sit down so we can explain the 1-10-100 rule:
  - Something negative? Tell me. That will hurt the school x 1, so it will not hurt us at all.
  - Something negative? Tell others in the school community. That will hurt the school x 10.
  - Something negative? Tell many inside and outside the school community. That will hurt the school x 100.

#### **5. Give constant personal attention to retention/attrition.**

- Be proactive - have conversations with any family we even suspect might be leaving.
- A wonderful question to ask: "How's the year going for you?" Followed by: "Let me know if you need anything."
- Best way to add is to keep our own people.
- Be strategic with financial aid.
- Get people through temporary setbacks - they will be our best ambassadors.

These five guidelines and their sub-points are what are working well for Tony Bonura and the administration, faculty, staff, parents, students, boards/councils, and ministry leaders at St.

Matthew the Apostle. Can this upward trend continue? I believe it can. Tony is one of ISPD's part-time associates, and because of that, I have the opportunity to see him on a regular basis - usually at his school. There is a change in culture, a change in attitude, a change in the trust level, a change in hope, and a change in people engagement. Congratulations to St. Matthew the Apostle - a wonderful success story in contrast to what we otherwise may hear across the country. It really does add up to that old one-liner: *Belonging leads to believing*. How long will it take for us to understand that statement?