

“Enter Through Their Door”:
An Ignatian Way of Recruiting High School Students

St. Ignatius taught that the most effective way to persuade someone to your way of thinking is to “*enter through their door but be sure to leave through your door.*” One of the reasons Catholic school recruiting and enrollment have been struggling over the past decade is that many schools try to recruit students through their door and not the student’s door. By adopting St. Ignatius’ strategy, Catholic schools could increase their enrollments by meeting students where they are – at their door – not where they want them to be.

When I visit Catholic high schools and ask them what is unique about their school, I am almost always told that the school is like a family, it is Christ-centered and has a good culture. Instead of thinking about what a 13-year-old might want in a school they tell me what *they* like about their school.

In 2016, the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) did a nationwide public opinion research project to determine what parents considered when choosing a school for the children. The top three reasons included: encourage individual and critical thinking, prepare children to successfully enter the job market and preparing children for college. Deepening children’s relationship with their religious faith was number ten.¹ Many of us who have spent our careers in Catholic education, embrace the mission and vision of a Catholic education. But today’s parents clearly are looking for something other than faith formation at the forefront of their child’s education. There is a clear difference between schools using the Ignatian enrollment strategy and the traditional Catholic enrollment strategy. And as you might have inferred, the schools using the Ignatian mantra are generally oversubscribed. Their focus is on college outcomes. “This year we had seniors accepted to every Ivy League University and they collectively earned \$4 million in financial aid. We have also introduced a partnership with (insert local prestigious university) where your daughter can take college courses while enrolled here and leave with close to an entire year of college credit. And finally, we have developed a summer internship program with 10 organizations that are accessible to our rising juniors and seniors.” It is this type of message that the young parents today are interested in hearing.

In 2017, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, in partnership with EY Parthenon, conducted research with families who had expressed interest in a Catholic school but ended up opting for a different school. The research found that these parents did not think as highly of Catholic schools as they had anticipated. The parents were more concerned about the academic rigor and quality of Catholic schools than with its Catholicity. Catholic schools need to promote their excellence. One school in Philadelphia has started to run television ads during Eagles and Flyers games promoting their college outcomes and AP scores. A Catholic high school in Chicago has built such a stalwart reputation that one of my colleagues did not even know it was a Catholic school until this year. His son is going in his door but, knowing the success of the school, he will be leaving through Ignatius’ door!

¹ “The Catholic School Choice: Understanding the Perspectives of Parents and Opportunities for More Engagement”;
https://www.ncea.org/NCEA/Proclaim/The_Catholic_School_Choice/NCEA/Proclaim/The_Catholic_School_Choice.aspx?hkey=63385894-6726-4562-b824-990bf089a06a. June 2019.

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