

Issue Bulletin

Examining Critical Issues in Faithful Catholic Education

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Not All Families Are a Good Fit for Catholic Schools

By Dr. Dan Guernsey

The Catholic educational project is best served when the school and the family work in harmony. Even though a Catholic school will be inclined to admit academically qualified students whenever possible, there are times when admission must be denied for moral reasons connected to the student or family. While this may be difficult for secular society to understand, it is mission-critical that a Catholic school not overlook or ignore behaviors that may interfere with moral and faith formation and risk leading young people away from a life of virtue and holiness.

While such situations will hopefully be rare, it is important to prepare for them and have the policies and procedures in place to ensure that such situations are handled faithfully, respectfully, compassionately, and with the hope of facilitating conversion, repentance, and full communion with the Church.

It is important that families are aware and supportive of a Catholic school's religious mission, because a Catholic school is emphatically not just an academic organization which also teaches religion. It is a real and concrete community of faith. The Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education states:

It is precisely the presence and life of an educational community, in which all the members participate in a fraternal communion, nourished by a living relationship with Christ and with the Church, that makes the Catholic school the environment for an authentically ecclesial experience.¹

¹ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission Between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful* (2007) 12-14.

The Church, school, parents, and students have responsibilities to each other. The Church has a responsibility to the school to offer support, and it has a responsibility to its parents and children to make available quality, faithful Catholic education. The Catholic school has a responsibility to the Church to serve it in complete fidelity to Christ's teachings and careful stewardship, and a school has an obligation to its families to provide a safe, professional, and faithful formation for their children. Parents have primary responsibility for the education of their children in truth and morality. Catholic parents have an obligation to the Church to support Catholic education as best they can,² and all parents have an obligation to their children's school to help it fulfill its mission as best they can. Finally, students are obligated to participate constructively in their own education and not distract or scandalize other students.

Families will vary in the amount of time, talent, and treasure they contribute to the mission, and they will also vary in their degree of religious formation, awareness, and practice. A Catholic school's first priority is to serve practicing Catholic families to ensure the Catholic education that is their right by baptism, but when possible, families who are not yet fully formed or fully practicing the Faith may also be invited to attend, as long as they affirmatively agree to support that mission and are not actively working against the mission or likely to interfere with the school's Catholic education and formation. The goal is to meet people of good will where they are and bring them more into Christ's plan for their lives, which includes complete union with Him. The closer students and their families are with Christ and with His Church, the more effectively the school can fulfill its mission.

Because of this fact, it is the school's right and responsibility to call all of its families to support the school's mission and to call everyone to greater holiness and Christian fidelity. Catholic schools are fully cognizant that it is the parents who are the principal educators of their children.³ However, while parents' responsibilities and rights to educate their children are primary, they are not absolute, as they are obligated to raise their children in accord with natural and divine law.⁴ The Church, as the authentic interpreter and safeguard of the divine law, has been given the authority to teach by divine mandate and the duty "to direct and fashion men, in all their actions individually and socially, to purity of morals and integrity of life, in accordance with revealed doctrine."⁵ Catholic parents therefore should partner with the Church in the education and formation of their children.

Catholic schools are both subsidiary and complementary to the family and Church. Because of this, Pope Pius XI noted:

² Pope Paul VI, *Gravissimum Educationis* (1963) 8.

³ Pope Paul VI 3.

⁴ Pope Pius XI, *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929) 35.

⁵ Pope Pius IX, *Quum Non Sine* (1864) 8.

It follows logically and necessarily that [the school] must not be in opposition to, but in positive accord with those other two elements, and form with them a perfect moral union, constituting one sanctuary of education, as it were, with the family and the Church. Otherwise it is doomed to fail of its purpose, and to become instead an agent of destruction.⁶

The family, the Church, and the school must be united in a common moral vision, or the whole educational and formational project could fail—and not only fail, but actually be destructive to students. Moral disunity between home and school runs the risk of alienating children from their parents or from God and the Church, when Catholic teaching appears to be contradicting a home situation. For this reason, if the school and family disagree about fundamental aspects of human flourishing and formation, they should not enter into a joint venture in the formation of students.

Proper Fit Between Family and School

Not every family and not every student is necessarily a good fit for a particular Catholic school. This is a painful but certain reality. This is why Catholic schools have admission processes in the first place. Given their limited resources, Catholic schools simply cannot serve every student or every family. There are frequently cases in which students are not invited to join a school because their academic needs are not able to be met by a school's limited program and resources, and cases in which students' prior disciplinary records indicate they may not be good additions to the school community.

During the admission process, if it becomes clear that a family disagrees with the school's mission or policies, it is also normal not to admit them. Catholic school leaders must be ready to acknowledge that a student's primary teacher, the parent, may be so passionate or committed to a non-Catholic or anti-Catholic worldview that admission to a Catholic school is inappropriate.

Even after admission, if these discordant elements later appear, it is appropriate to ask the student or even the whole family to leave the school community. If it later becomes clear that a student cannot benefit from a school's academic program (usually signified by failing grades), the student is asked to leave. Students who exhibit extreme discipline problems are also asked to leave. Even entire families are asked to leave if the parents refuse to abide by school policies (e.g., tuition or discipline requirements) or if the parents do something harmful to the school community, like publicly disparaging it or taking legal action against it. It may also be necessary in some cases not to foster a school/family/student relationship because of public behaviors and positions that contradict what students are taught in a Catholic school.

⁶ Pope Pius XI 77.

For those who are not ready to fully support and embrace a school's faith-based mission, solid catechesis with a pastor and private Catholic counseling can serve as preparation for entry or re-entry into a Catholic school. There is always the opportunity for amendment and reconciliation with the school and the Church.

It is important that families understand that exclusion from a Catholic school for academic, disciplinary, or mission-fit challenges is not the same as being excluded from the Church itself. The vast majority of Catholics are catechized, formed, and served outside of the Catholic school system.⁷ Not attending a Catholic school is not the same thing as being denied Christ, the sacraments, or access to the faith.

Catholic schools are academic communities of faith whose comprehensive mission is focused on the sanctification of their students and service to the common good through the presentation of a Christian worldview and in Christian service. Those who voluntarily seek membership in such a community should be both able and willing to work within this vision and be formed by it. The admissions process should identify any potential challenges, address them if possible, and deny or defer admission, if necessary, to ensure mission integrity and success.

Dan Guernsey, Ed.D., is a senior fellow of The Cardinal Newman Society, which promotes and defends faithful Catholic education. He has 13 years' experience as a high school principal and has served an associate professor and education department chair at the university level. He and his wife Lisa have six children.

⁷ National Catholic Educational Association, "Catholic School Data" at https://www.ncea.org/NCEA/Proclaim/Catholic_School_Data/Catholic_School_Data.aspx (accessed on 2/28/20).