

Strengthening Catholic Schools in the Diocese of San Diego

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A non-partisan, university-based research center.

This study was conducted by the Center for Education Policy and Law (CEPAL), a research entity operating under the auspices of the School of Leadership and Education Sciences and the School of Law at the University of San Diego. Established by a grant from the William D. Lynch Foundation in 2007, CEPAL's mission is to foster better linkage between educational research, policymaking, and practice. To this end, CEPAL undertakes empirical and legal research on educational policy issues, enhances communication between education leaders and state-level policymakers, and facilitates understanding among USD law students and education graduate students about the policymaking process through courses, internships, and research opportunities. Additional information about CEPAL is available at www.sandiego.edu/cepal.

Center Director

Scott Himelstein

Associate Director

Frank Kemerer

**Authors**

John J. Franey, Ph.D., Research Associate, CEPAL

Maria K. Horsley, M.A., Graduate Research Assistant, CEPAL

Mara V. Robinson, M.A., Graduate Research Assistant, CEPAL

Executive Summary

Faced with declining enrollment and the closure of Catholic schools throughout the Diocese of San Diego, Bishop Cirilio Flores commissioned the *Strategic Vision Committee for Catholic Elementary Schools* in the summer of 2013. This committee included local pastors, school principals, Diocesan office personnel, national Catholic education experts, University of San Diego School of Leadership and Education Sciences experts, as well as the Diocese's Director of Schools and Vicar General. The Committee was tasked with developing a better understanding of the growing issues and challenges faced by local Catholic schools, including the steady decline of school enrollment and the closure of three local Catholic K-8 schools in recent years. The Diocese commissioned the Center for Education Policy and Law (CEPAL), a research center within the University's School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES), to study the current state of Catholic education in the Diocese, including the issues and challenges schools face, as well as the foundational pieces that the Diocese can build from for future sustainability and effectiveness.

At the request of Bishop Flores and the Committee, the study centered on providing a voice to Diocesan stakeholders, including pastors, principals, teachers, and parents, regarding their experiences with and perspectives of Catholic education in the Diocese of San Diego. The nine-month study focused on reviewing the literature on national trends in Catholic schools, collecting demographic and statistical data from the Office of Schools, distributing online surveys to stakeholders, and interviewing survey participants. Over 2000 diocesan stakeholders participated in the study, including 1552 parents and grandparents, 57% of diocesan pastors, 88% of diocesan school principals, and 30% of diocesan teachers. Interviews were conducted with 250 stakeholders including Diocesan Office personnel, pastors, principals, teachers, parents, grandparents, and other patrons of the Diocese.

The overarching theme to emerge from the study was the lack of a cohesive collective of Catholic schools working in collaboration to educate children in the Diocese. The Diocese of San Diego school system is a competitive environment where schools are contending with each other for a perceived limited pool of resources. The resources most highly sought after are the number of students that can enroll in a school and the funding to operate effective Catholic schools. Competition is reinforced through the Diocese's parochial system of governance where each school operates as a separate entity. In the current system, the diocesan Office of Schools lacks authority over the schools in the Diocese, instead the parish pastor governs the school as the "Superintendent." In addition to this overarching theme of competition over collaboration, several other findings emerged regarding the current state of the Diocese of San Diego school system:

1. The competition between schools exceeds the collaboration between schools
2. Quality leadership is integral to the success of individual schools and the school system
3. Declining enrollment is a major challenge based on a series of socioeconomic factors
4. Struggles with financial stability negatively impact individual schools' health and success
5. Families seek a school environment of high quality academics infused in the faith
6. There is a lack of diocesan-wide school processes, systems, programs, and protocols
7. The professional development for teachers and administrators is limited or lacking
8. There is limited partnership between Diocesan schools and the University of San Diego

The findings from this study suggest the competitive environment needs to be replaced with a collaborative system of schools working towards the same mission of educating all Catholic youth, regardless of their socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, or academic level. Particular attention is warranted in each of these theme areas in order to address the issues and challenges that the system currently faces. Per the request of the Committee and Bishop Flores, this report also includes recommendations for the Diocese and the Office of Schools to consider in order to address these issues and challenges and develop a sustainable and effective state of education in the Diocese of San Diego Catholic school system. These recommendations, each of which is detailed in the full report, are:

1. Solidify the mission and vision for the future of Catholic schools
2. Develop a funding foundation to financially support schools and families in need
3. Create a center in the foundation to provide development and support to schools
4. Reorganize the governance of schools from a parochial system to networks of schools
5. Make significant changes to the role and authority of the Office of Schools
6. Develop a Diocese-wide mandatory financial support system for Catholic schools
7. Implement a Diocese-wide marketing campaign for Catholic education
8. Centralize supplies and resources to cut operating costs
9. Address tuition issues by setting Diocese-wide protocols for rates and increases
10. Effectively address schools in low-resource areas that are on the precipice of closure
11. Provide effective professional development to teachers and administrators
12. Increase program offerings for students and families
13. Publicly recognize the value of teachers, administrators, pastors, and volunteers
14. Support teachers through a salary schedule and reduced tuition rates for their children
15. Build strong partnerships with both Catholic universities in San Diego
16. Continue to research, collect data, and make evidence-based decisions
17. Communicate this entire research process to all stakeholders

This study is intended to serve as a foundation for the Diocese to continue to refocus its work to better achieve its goals and vision for the future of Catholic education in San Diego. Through a better understanding of the current state of the Catholic schools in the Diocese, Bishop Flores, the Strategic Vision Committee, and the Office of Schools can develop and implement strategies and action plans to address the issues and challenges faced by Diocese schools. Significant steps have already been taken to this end, but much work remains.