8 ways parents can get the most out of their Catholic school investment

Approximately 2 million young people, from preschool to high school, currently are being educated in Catholic schools in the United States. The cost of this education is not insignificant, with the average elementary school tuition just under $4,000 and the average freshman tuition for secondary school just under $10,000, according to 2015 statistics from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. So how can parents be sure that their hard-earned money is being put to the best use? Here are some strategies for how parents can make the most of their family's investment in Catholic schools.

Do your homework

First things first, when parents have made the decision to send their child to a Catholic school, it's important to do some legwork ahead of time to make sure it's the right fit. Because not all Catholic schools are created equal, Lisa Bromschwig of Catholic Parents OnLine, an organization whose mission is to help parents with the Catholic formation of their children, advised three points when making an initial decision. First, parents should make sure an atmosphere of faith is present in the school. Consider: Is Mass offered at least once a week? Are there opportunities for confession? Are there outward signs of the Faith present, such as crucifixes and holy water fonts? Do the students pray together? Second, parents should ensure that the teachings of the Church are reflected in the lives of the faculty and staff. This may take some digging, Bromschwig said, but could be assessed through interviews with the teachers and administration. Third, parents should ascertain whether the curriculum for religion classes are in line with Church teaching. Bromschwig

recommends checking with the diocesan list of approved curriculum to make sure the school's religion textbooks are recommended by the diocese. Such efforts pay off in the long run, she said.

"I believe that you want the school to be affirming of what you're doing at home, not countering it or relaxing it at all," Bromschwig said. "It seems to me that the better monetary value for tuition money spent would result in kids that are more excited about attending Sunday Mass, and reaching out for the sacraments, and just being more enthusiastic about living Catholic social teaching, and development in holiness and virtue. These kinds of things really can't be measured monetarily, but if parents are paying tuition that would at least be something that they would expect to see – at least not to have any undermining of what the parents are trying to teach at home."

Once a school has been chosen, an important part of doing homework is reading the school's handbook to understand the mission and procedures that will be at the heart of a child's educational experience, said Heather Gossart, director of executive mentoring and coaching and senior consultant for the National Catholic Educational Association. For example, parents should familiarize themselves with drop-off and pick-up procedures at the school, understand the attendance protocol, know how to request a teacher interview and be familiar in general with the school's rules.

"All of these seem like very trivial things, but ultimately they give a powerful message to the child of the respect that you have for this school community where they spend the majority of each of their days five days a week," Gossart said.

Be involved

One of the ways parents can underscore the importance of their

child’s Catholic school education is simple: Get involved and stay involved.

“It is extremely important for young children to see their parents as part of their school experience,” Gossart said. “Children are very proud when their parents … visibly make the effort to be present, whether it’s to be a room mother or to volunteer in the cafeteria occasionally. Whatever it is, children really feel affirmed and validated when their parents are a p

art of their experience. When you have invested parents in the school community, most often you have invested children.”

Bromschwig recommended that parents look for opportunities to get involved such as joining a parent advisory committee or participating in other volunteer opportunities. She recommended going to school Masses and sitting with your child, if possible, or just being present. She also encouraged parental participation in their child’s take-home activities.

“Go through the lessons with the kids,” she said. “If they’re directly at-home lessons, be sure to do those. It shows the child how important you take his or her education and helps to reinforce what they’re learning in the classroom.”

For families with two working parents, Bromschwig recommends taking a half-day to be present at special functions.

“Even if both parents can’t be there, if one could try to go at least once every couple of months, I think it’s definitely worth it,” she said. If this isn’t possible, she recommends attending evening activities when possible and walking through assignments with their children.

“Just that little investment will help them get a lot more value and will underscore the importance of the Catholic education to the child,” she said.

Model respect

It is possible that at some point parents may find themselves disagreeing or at odds with a child's teacher or a school administration. When this happens, it's important for parents to maintain a baseline level of respect for the teacher or institution.

"If a parent has a problem with a school policy or procedure or something that's going on, that should be taken directly to the school," Gossart said. "The child should not bear the burden of being a conduit for that. Children want to love their teachers. They want to feel positive about their school environment, so it's very important that kind of respectful attitude is modeled at home."

Kevin Baxter, superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and a father of six children, added that kids can identify tension.
"If there's tension about a teacher or tension about a situation, even if you're not explicitly saying something to the child, they can often pick up on that," he said. "You've got to be able to engage and have conversations if you have concerns as a parent, but you want to think about and recognize the fact that how you are talking and acting and behaving is going to impact how they view the Catholic school."

Baxter added that while it's impossible for parents or teachers to control what students remember or what has made the most impact in their lives, it's important to be mindful of what is likely to stick with them. He recommended that parents think about the transformative moments of their own education, and added that most often those moments came about because the teacher "connected with you in some kind of emotional and social way that's really significant."

In a similar way, he said, parents should remain aware of the

fact that their actions and behaviors often will be as formative for their child as their words. As a parent, “you want to be that example and that witness and that model,” he said.

Cultivate an atmosphere of faith at home

One of the most powerful ways parents can make the most of their child’s Catholic school education is by modeling at home the Faith that their children are exposed to in the classroom. This can be done in very basic ways, such as going to Mass together as a family on Sundays and holy days of obligation, praying together at home before meals and before bedtime, and reading the Scripture readings together as a family before Sunday Mass and discussing main themes.

“A lot of those things really leave an impression on your child,” Bromschwig said.

In addition to praying together, parents can reinforce the lessons their students are learning in the classroom by putting conversations at home within a Catholic context.

“If your child asks a question, try to frame (your response) from a Catholic worldview. Even subjects like math and science are excellent opportunities to talk about how God is a God of order and how he created the world and how numbers are important in Biblical interpretations,” Bromschwig said. “All of these things serve to reinforce our faith in a God who is a God of order and who brought about these things in a deliberate way for our salvation and for our well-being.”

The Faith is reinforced, too, through behavior and priorities at home when parents live the Faith themselves.

“It is a child realizing that the lessons I learn about compassion and dignity and social justice and prayer are being reinforced in my home,” Gossart said. “It’s not rocket science. It is nothing that a parent needs to have an advanced

degree to do. It’s a mentality, it’s a commitment to making the school experience a priority. It is respecting the work of the school, the lessons. It’s not difficult, but it has to be a priority. No parent, whether it’s public school or charter school or Catholic school, can simply believe that (by) writing a check for tuition or putting your child on a school bus, you’ve fulfilled your obligation and now the rest of it is the school’s responsibility.”

Part of what parents can do to model the Faith is to become more involved in their own parish communities, Baxter said.

“When parents are really connected to a parish and then a school … they reinforce what is being taught in our Catholic schools because the students really live the Faith outside of the school in addition to what they learn in the classroom,” he said. “Parents are the primary educators, and that’s our view. We’re here to really support the parent in the education of their child. We want parents to be partners and participatory in the education of their children.”

Support academics

While the faith component is critical to a successful Catholic school experience, it’s extremely important, too, for parents to support their child’s academic success as well. To do this, parents should provide their students with the quiet atmosphere and the tools that their child needs to complete their work effectively and efficiently.

“School is a child’s full-time job, and when parents respect that by affirming a positive attitude, really providing the support at home to be able to complete work in a timely, efficient manner, again they’re making a powerful statement to the student about how important the experience is,” Gossart said.

Baxter stressed the importance of reading to children, even from a young age, to help support their child’s academic

ability and success.

“If kids are younger, especially, parents should be reading to their children every single night,” he said. “It’s the number one thing research really indicates that if you want your child to be successful in school, reading to them almost from birth on a regular, consistent basis, ideally every night, really does have a profound impact on how they perform in school.”

Parents also can support their children academically when they make school a family priority. This may mean that they have to adjust schedules or limit other activities in order to prioritize studies. Though these decisions may be difficult, the message that it sends to the child about the importance and priority of academics is “powerful,” Gossart said.

Encourage self-sufficiency

A Catholic school investment will multiply in dividends when parents help their child become self-helpers and problem solvers, thereby preparing them for life long-term.

“That is something inherent in what we do in Catholic schools,” Gossart said. “We really teach our children and attempt to empower them to become problem solvers.”

This means parents must resist the urge to respond to small issues that might come up day-to-day at school, instead leaving it to their child to resolve.

“I think that parents give their children a remarkable gift when they give them the gift of becoming their own self-advocates at appropriate levels,” Gossart said. She added that sometimes very loving and well-meaning parents just blanket the child in so much parental support that the child never emerges to feel confident enough to handle a challenge on his or her own. “We really want to create classrooms and climates in our Catholic schools where our young people feel that they

have the ability to address challenges that come from living and working together and to be strong self-advocates.”

The methods of this strategy vary at age-appropriate stages, she added.

Counter the culture

One of the benefits of sending children to Catholic schools today is that they can be a safe haven amid the many challenges of today’s culture, so much of which champions what the Church teaches against. But for the lessons taught at a Catholic school to have long-term impact, they must be reinforced at home.

“We live in a world today where our children are exposed to what even 20 years ago we would have been aghast at through media (and) social media,” Gossart said. “The balancing factor in all of this is children who come from homes where prayer and spirituality and faith are at the forefront of the family unit. They deal with it so much better.”

Baxter warned particularly of the dangers of social media, saying it has the result of making the user more self-oriented rather than looking outward and being more concerned about others, as Jesus teaches in the Gospels. Again, for parents, leading by example is essential.
“Simple things like making sure that you’ve got time away from devices and unplugging a little bit and just kind of being as a family” are critical, he said. “It is a great challenge just because it is so ubiquitous, it is so all-consuming, and it takes great effort.”

In addition, it’s important for parents to have conversations with children and talk through issues in the culture that may arise and provide opportunities for reflection, particularly after potentially traumatizing events.

“The value Catholic schools bring is that parents can feel

confident that the Catholic schools at least are teaching similar concepts and ideas to their children in the school as they'd be teaching at home," Baxter said. "There is that connection, and that's often, I think, what a lot of parents are looking for: that sense that there's an alignment between the school and what they're teaching at home."

Believe in the long-term benefits of working together

Finally, parents can get the most out of their child's Catholic education when they remember the long-term benefits of not only sending their child to Catholic schools, but of committing to reinforce those values taught in the classroom at home.

"Catholic education prepares us for this world and for the next," Gossart said. "In this world, it prepares us to be people of moral conscience, social justice, community. The things that make it possible for us as adults to enter into our communities and bring with us those things that make us contributors to a better society. And the life that we live today prepares us for the next life."

In addition, she said, children are better equipped with skills that prepare them for adulthood when parents and Catholic school work in tandem.
"Children who come from a home where faith is in the forefront tend to be less anxious about the world around them, they tend to be more willing to take risks, they tend to be more outgoing and confident, and they tend to have more hope," Gossart said. "That's the power of our Catholic education: that it's more than lessons from a textbook; it's lessons in life. It teaches us how to live this gift that God has given us (and) to live it well."

Parents may feel discouraged at times about the many struggles that they face in raising their children to be holy young men

and women, but working with Catholic schools can help, Bromschwig said. “I think that the hope for parents is that the darker the culture around us gets, the brighter the light of Christ shines,” she said. “We will always have our faith; no one can take that away from us. There may be restrictions on how we express it legally, but we will always stand apart as long as we always cling to the truth. That’s the task that is entrusted to us as Catholic parents, and Catholic educators are entrusted with that as well: To teach the truth and to pass on the Faith as it was delivered to us.”

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