

Catholic Schools Really Do Matter

CARA researcher Mark Gray says one of the most frequent questions he hears is “Do Catholic schools matter?” While few would question the ability of Catholic schools to prepare their students academically, a more fundamental question is how well these schools do in passing on the faith to the next generation.

Parent surveys reveal that the top reason for choosing to enroll children in Catholic schools is for “quality religious education” followed by a “safe environment,” and then “quality academic instruction.” Thus, when trying to measure “benefits,” perhaps the top concern is how well Catholic schools provide religious education and the eventual formation of knowledgeable and active Catholic adults.

It is easy to compare all Catholics who went to a Catholic school to those who did not in CARA’s national surveys. However, there are significant differences in the proportion of Catholics who attended these schools by generation. In CARA’s most recent surveys of adult Catholics, a majority of the Pre-Vatican II Generation (born before 1943) and the Vatican II Generation (born 1943 to 1960) attended a Catholic primary school (51 percent). However, only 37 percent of the Post-Vatican II Generation (born 1961 to 1981) and 23 percent of the Millennial Generation (born 1982 or later) attended a Catholic primary school at some point.

Perhaps the most straightforward test is to examine the effect of Catholic schooling on Mass attendance. The accompanying figure shows Mass attendance by generation and by previous enrollment in a Catholic school as a child (the schooling groups are not mutually exclusive, so a person might have attended both a Catholic primary and secondary school). Generally, in each generation those who attended a Catholic school attend Mass more frequently than those

who did not. The differences become more pronounced among younger Catholics. Most Millennials did not attend a Catholic school, and only 5 percent in this group overall attend Mass every week, whereas a third or more of those who did attend Catholic schools are weekly attenders.

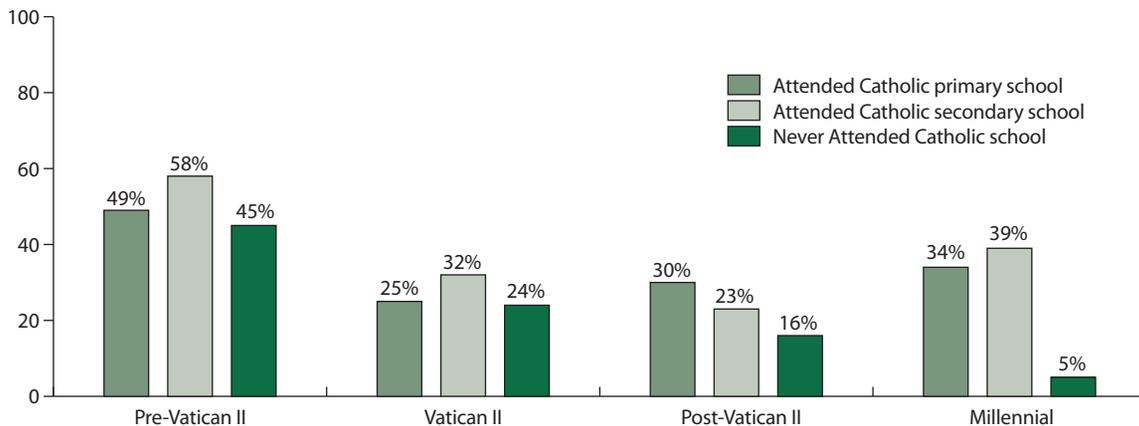
Further, a 2003 CARA Catholic Poll estimated that nearly eight in ten Americans raised Catholic who had attended Catholic schools (primary and/or secondary) still self-identified as Catholics as an adult. By comparison, fewer than seven in ten of those raised Catholic who did not attend a Catholic school remained Catholic as adults.

Catholic schools are also part of a pipeline that provides a major source of vocations and lay ministers. Half or more new priests (50 percent) and brothers (55 percent) attended Catholic primary schools, as did 41 percent of new sisters and 45 percent of younger lay ecclesial ministers. Without Catholic schools, the next generation of Church leaders would be more difficult to recruit and form in the numbers that will be needed for a growing Catholic population.

In the broadest view, the long-term benefits of Catholic schools likely outweigh many of the short-term financial difficulties Catholic schools currently face. The Catholic Church would be weakened significantly by continued closing of Catholic schools. Failing to build Catholic schools where they are needed most would likely result in Catholic retention rates falling to levels of many Protestant denominations—where fewer than half of people raised Methodist, Episcopalian, or Presbyterian remain affiliated as adults.

“Do Catholic Schools Matter?” by Mark M. Gray, June 13, 2104 appears in 1964, the CARA Blog (nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com)

PERCENTAGE OF ADULT CATHOLICS ATTENDING MASS WEEKLY OR MORE OFTEN BY GENERATION AND CATHOLIC SCHOOL ATTENDANCE



Source: CARA, *Catholic New Media Use in the United States*, 2012