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No Good Options: Analysis of Catholic School Reopening Plans in Fall 2020

Monica J. Kowalski¹ and Stephen M. Ponisciak¹

Abstract: As schools across the country made decisions about how to safely reopen during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Fall of 2020, Catholic schools reopened for in-person instruction more than surrounding public schools. This study analyzes published reopening plans from 136 Catholic schools in 18 different states to explore how schools reopened and how they communicated their plans. Results showed that Catholic schools mostly did not decide to reopen virtually, consistent with local health data trends and public school decisions. Rather, Catholic schools offered in-person education with health and safety protocols in place. Most schools in the sample did not communicate their plans in full on their websites. Plans that were accessible on websites were analyzed based on the National Standards and Benchmarks of Effective Catholic Schools for evidence of the added value of Catholic education during this time.

Keywords: COVID-19, school reopening, remote instruction

Schools that are largely or completely dependent on tuition and philanthropy for sustenance had no good options regarding their methods of reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic. In some places, they had no choices, due to state mandates requiring virtual instruction until community health benchmarks were met. A popular perspective was that schools needed to open for mental and social health reasons, and that they could be opened safely in areas of low virus transmission (Levinson et al., 2020). Additionally, many parents needed schools to be open in person in order to work. While the science regarding COVID-19 transmission by children is still developing (Couzin-Frankel et al., 2020), many public schools opted to open the school year virtually — approximately 26% of public school districts (Gross et al., 2020) and 61% of public

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school students began the year with remote learning. Urban and suburban districts were more likely to open remotely than rural public districts.

In contrast, 85% of Catholic schools opened in person (Patton & Newkirk, 2020) and have viewed this as a “wonderful opportunity” to take advantage of the “tone deafness” of public school leaders (Hays; Jung, 2020, n.p.). These openings were not without controversy. Due largely to the principle of subsidiarity, or local control of Catholic education, Catholic schools decided on their own whether to open in person, and some claimed the decision to open in person is not related to funding issues (Kirkman, 2020). Others suggested that financial issues were a concern for Catholic schools when considering whether to reopen in person (Squire, 2020; Trumbull & Robertson, 2020). In several places, lawsuits were filed to allow in-person instruction (Finn, 2020; Lopez-Villafañá, 2020). Because they opened in person, some Catholic schools increased their enrollment to the point of needing waiting lists, raising concerns among parents that space may not be available for their child to return to the school in the 2021-2022 school year because they opted for virtual learning during the pandemic (Morrison, 2020). In several states, Catholic schools required parents to sign waivers prior to students’ in-person instruction to protect schools from lawsuits (McKeown, 2020).

For a variety of reasons, some teachers did not return to the classroom (Baye, 2020; Hays, 2020; O’Loughlin, 2020; Thompson, 2020; Tufaro, 2020). Those who have returned may not feel safe raising concerns about returning due to the recent legislation regarding the ministerial exception (Dodds et al., 2020; Grindon, 2020; Reilly, 2020; Romano, 2020; Tedeschi, 2020; Zimmermann, 2020) and the lack of teachers’ unions in many Catholic schools. Some schools required teachers to sign waivers (Larson & Daprile, 2020). While some claimed that in-person learning is immoral, unnecessary, unjust, and directly contradicts the church’s teachings (Nichols, 2020). Catholic school leaders have often stated that they are more able to implement social distancing measures and other safety procedures than public schools, and that in-person instruction and interaction is important for students’ mental health and development (Thompson, 2020).

Despite these challenges, in some Catholic schools, years of enrollment decline have stopped, as parents seek in-person instruction for their children (O’Loughlin, 2020; Reilly, 2020; Roberts, 2020). Whether these trends will continue post-pandemic is unclear; the proportion of new enrollees who are Catholic has not typically been reported. Schools frequently expect that they will be able to retain these new students even if they are not attending for religious reasons, and tuition assistance is often offered to attract new students (Katinas, 2020). Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore how schools communicated reopening decisions in ways that served to attract and retain enrollment. Our research questions were twofold: 1) To what extent did Catholic schools reopen in person versus virtually, and how did these decisions align with local public health data and/or public school decisions? 2) To what extent did Catholic schools leverage reopening

documents to communicate decisions in order to attract and retain families? This exploration is important because in the absence of systematic national data collection on Catholic school reopening strategies, this study begins to tell the story of what happened to Catholic schools during this unprecedented time and can point to key learnings about the added value of Catholic education.

Method

This study entailed mixed method analysis of publicly available data related to Catholic schools. The sample included Catholic schools affiliated with a service program operated by the researchers' institution. There were 136 schools located in 18 states. We collected reopening plans from the websites of these schools, and reopening status from colleagues familiar with these schools' plans. These status items were then confirmed by examining news articles and schools' social media platforms. We collected data on public school districts' reopening plans from district websites and national data. Data on county-level test positivity were collected from state and (when state data were unavailable) county health department websites; county-level case rates came from the New York Times database of county-level COVID data (New York Times, 2020).

We encountered a variety of data quality issues. States for which all county-level data were available sometimes appeared to report incorrect data (showing more new cases than tests on some dates, for example). Additionally, in three counties in Oklahoma, and one county in California, data on test positivity were not available. Some states used blatantly inappropriate measures that ignore or improperly adjust for seasonality (e.g. a 3-day moving average, when there is clearly a 7-day pattern to cases and testing). Some schools seem to have different understandings of the meaning of "hybrid." Some schools that have indicated that they were providing a "hybrid" option were actually opening in person, with a fully virtual option for those who chose it. Throughout this paper, "hybrid" means that smaller groups of students attend on alternate days in person and virtually.

We used the CDC's school safety recommendations, shown in Table 1 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), to categorize counties' risk status because some states appeared to have no recommendations for school reopening, and those with recommendations had standards that varied widely. We focused on the metrics for which we had accessible data: two core measures, the number of new cases per 100,000 persons within the last 14 days, and the percentage of positive tests within the last 14 days (which was unavailable in some states, while the type of test was unavailable in other states); and a secondary measure, the percent change in new cases per 100,000 population during the last 7 days compared with the previous 7 days (negative values indicate improving trends). Each of these measures was examined as of seven days before the first day of school for Fall 2020, when a decision about mode of school opening might be made.

Table 1*Indicators and Thresholds for Risk of Introduction and Transmission of COVID-19 in Schools*

Indicators	Lowest risk of transmission in schools	Lower risk of transmission in schools	Moderate risk of transmission in schools	Higher risk of transmission in schools	Highest risk of transmission in schools
Number of new cases per 100,000 persons within the last 14 days.	<5	5 to <20	20 to <50	50 to ≤200	>200
Percentage of RT-PCR tests that are positive during the last 14 days.	<3%	3% to <5%	5% to <8%	8% to ≤10%	>10%
Ability of the school to implement 5 key mitigation strategies. ¹	Implemented all 5 strategies correctly and consistently	Implemented all 5 strategies correctly but inconsistently	Implemented 3-4 strategies correctly and consistently	Implemented 1-2 strategies correctly and consistently	Implemented no strategies

Note. Adapted from “Indicators for Dynamic School Decision-Making,” by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020).

¹Mitigation strategies include (1) Consistent and correct use of masks; (2) Social distancing to the largest extent possible; (3) Hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette; (4) Cleaning and disinfection; and (5) Contact tracing in collaboration with local health department

Results

Reopening Decisions

In fall 2020, there were 136 schools with teachers from the affiliated program (hereafter referred to as “study schools”). Nine of these schools opted for a hybrid opening, with about half of students attending in person on alternate days; 70 schools opened for full in-person instruction in at least some grades (while typically offering online instruction for those who declined to attend in person); and the remaining 57 schools opened virtually (26 of these are in California counties with levels of virus transmission that precluded opening in person). These Catholic schools’ reopening decisions appeared to be related to the local public schools’ decisions, as only three of them could be described as “less open” than nearby public schools.

All 136 study schools were in counties that landed in the two highest CDC risk categories for 14-day case count one week before the first day of school: 64 were in counties in the “higher” category, and 72 were in the “highest” category. There was a bit more variation in 14-day test positivity, as 8 schools were in the “lowest” category, 26 were “lower,” 56 were “moderate,” 8 were “higher,” and 29 were “highest,” with 9 missing due to lack of positivity data. Finally, on the secondary measure

of percent change in 7-day case count, 52 schools were in the “lowest” risk category, while 9 were “lower,” 10 were “moderate,” 15 were “higher,” and 50 were “highest.”

CDC recommended that schools in counties where the risk is moderate, higher, or highest consider hybrid or virtual only instruction (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). We found limited evidence that these recommendations were followed. In subsequent analyses we removed schools in California, due to their state mandates restricting school reopening according to local health data (except Orange County, where schools did open in person). We were thus left with 111 schools that could choose to reopen. Chi-squared tests of a school’s mode of opening (in person, hybrid, or virtual) compared with the CDC risk category for each of the three measures listed above were all non-significant, although the test of a school’s mode of opening compared with the 14-day case count risk category was nearly significant ($p=0.062$), suggesting there was a weak association between the county’s risk category for 14-day cases and the school’s mode of opening. However, a chi-squared test of study schools’ reopening status compared with neighboring public schools’ reopening status was statistically significant. That is, there is an association between local public schools’ reopening status (in person, hybrid, or remote) and study schools’ reopening status. There were 20 study schools whose local public school districts opened in person; all 20 of these study schools also opened in person. Eight study schools’ local public districts opened in hybrid format; four of these study schools also opened in hybrid format, while three opened virtually and one opened in person. Finally, there were 83 study schools in areas where public districts opened virtually. In this group, 29 study schools also opened virtually; five opened in hybrid format; and the remaining 49 opened in person. Hartney & Finger (2020) found that public districts located in counties with many Catholic schools were more likely to open in person; we have found that an inverse of this result was also true.

Logistic regressions of whether a school reopened fully virtually, with CDC risk categories as predictors, confirmed these findings. Schools that were in the “highest” 14-day case risk category were more likely to open virtually than those in the “higher” group. Paradoxically, schools whose counties fell into the “highest” and “higher” 14-day positivity categories were not significantly more likely to open remotely than schools in the “lowest” category (in fact they were slightly less likely to open remotely), while those in the “moderate” and “lower” categories were more likely to open remotely than those in the “lowest” category. A school’s 14-day case risk category remained a significant predictor of virtual reopening when 14-day positivity category was added to the model (while the paradoxical relationship of reopening status with 14-day positivity remained). However, these two risk categories together left 90% of variation unexplained. Adding the secondary risk category that describes risk related to the percent change in 7-day case counts improved the model slightly, but still left 88% of variation unexplained. Thus, these schools do not appear to have relied strongly on the CDC’s risk categories when deciding how to reopen.

If we step back and examine the underlying statistics on which these categories were based, we find results with a bit more explanatory value. A county's 14-day case rate per 100,000 was a significant predictor of whether schools open virtually, and so was the county's 14-day positivity rate (though the 14-day case rate was the stronger predictor). These two measures were highly correlated (with a correlation of 0.74), however, so adding the 14-day positivity rate to the model did not improve it. Further, the change in 7-day case rate was not predictive of whether schools reopened virtually. If we included both the 14-day case rate and an indicator of whether local public schools opened virtually (but no interaction term), the coefficients of both of these predictors were statistically significant. Catholic schools that were near public schools that opened virtually had odds of opening virtually that were 6.2 times higher, while an increase of 100 cases per 100,000 was associated with 1.7 times greater odds of opening virtually. However, a model that included an interaction of these two terms showed that the 14-day case rate on its own was not a significant predictor of opening virtually, nor was the reopening status of local public schools. The interaction of these two terms (while not statistically significant) showed that a difference of 100 in the 14-day case rates in areas where public schools were opening virtually was associated with 2.2 times higher odds of opening virtually. Thus both data and peer pressure were required to convince Catholic schools that they should open virtually. In the absence of these factors, most Catholic schools opened in-person (Thompson, 2020).

While it was apparent that Catholic schools across the country opened in-person more often than not, we do not know the exact decision processes for these schools. We suspect that schools opened in person when possible mostly to satisfy their families who desired an in-person schooling experience for their children in order for the parents to work. While generally unsaid, funding issues were also a likely component of the decision: one rough estimate stated that about 80% of Catholic schools' funding came from tuition, with the remainder from fundraisers and donations (Gjelten, 2020); with a decline in the latter sources, tuition becomes more important. Therefore, opening in person, with health and safety protocols in place, allowed Catholic schools to retain families and perhaps to attract new families to their schools. Our next step was to explore how schools communicated these decisions to current and prospective families through their reopening plans.

Reopening Plan Communication

We performed qualitative document analysis on reopening plan documents downloaded from school websites. Reopening plans were normally accessible from the home page of a school website, though sometimes they were on a separate tab such as "School Information" or even a tab created specifically for COVID information. We considered a document a reopening plan if it included details for protocols and modes of learning for the Fall of 2020. Plans from Spring transition to e-learning were not considered as reopening plans.

Of the 136 schools in the sample, 76 (55%) did not have a school reopening plan for Fall 2020 clearly accessible on their websites. We assumed that these schools shared similar documents or video explanations with their school families through email, social media, or through private learning management or school communication systems. It was unclear why a school would want to share this information privately rather than making it publicly available on their school's website. It was possible that for many schools, this was a decision based on convenience of communication through other channels due to the cumbersome process of website updating, especially considering that many Catholic schools had outdated static websites that had not been updated for years. Schools may not update their websites because they know that current parents and other stakeholders were more likely to get information from other sources, such as social media sites.

From a marketing perspective, an updated website is essential to attract new families to a school. A parent seeking a school for their child would want to be able to access all pertinent information in one official place, and also may not be able to access private social media accounts that are available to currently enrolled families. In the case of Fall 2020, if Catholic schools wanted to leverage their reopening strategies to draw in new families, primarily those seeking in-person schooling for their children, it would make sense to include their plans on school websites.

Sixty schools in our sample did have reopening plan documents readily available on their websites. We used the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012) as a framework for our analysis of these plans. These standards, abbreviated as NSBECS, were developed through a collaborative of researchers from Loyola University Chicago and Boston College and have been used extensively to assess and improve Catholic education.

Each plan was coded for evidence related to each of the standards. We were not necessarily expecting all standards to be addressed in any given plan, nor were we evaluating plans as better or worse based on their inclusion of any particular standards. Rather, we were exploring the extent to which schools leveraged reopening plans to promote different features of their schools that might be considered as an added value of Catholic education.

The NSBECS standards are listed in Table 2, along with the frequency of code occurrence and representative example passages from the plans in this sample. Two of the standards, numbers 6 and 12, were deemed as universally applicable to these plans and so were not explicitly coded. Standard 6 refers to qualified school leaders or leadership teams who communicate with school families. All of the plans were considered to be a form of communication from school leadership, so this code was not necessary. Similarly, Standard 12, regarding maintenance of school facilities and technology, was universally evidenced in the plans.

Table 2
Frequency and Representative Examples of Codes

Standard	Plans	Example Passage
1. An excellent Catholic school is guided and by a clearly communicated mission that embraces a Catholic identity rooted in Gospel values, centered on the Eucharist, and committed to faith formation, academic excellence, and service.	20	“Everything we do, we do purposefully with the Light of Christ guiding our way. This is the fundamental difference. So regardless if we educate your child from home, school or a combination of both the Light of Christ is there. Trust in the Lord, and trust in us to hold this mission as paramount.”
2. An excellent Catholic school adhering to mission provides a rigorous academic program for religious studies and catechesis in the Catholic faith set within a total academic curriculum that integrates faith culture and life.	4	“[We will] continue to infuse lessons with Catholic social teachings and values.”
3. An excellent Catholic school adhering to mission provides opportunities outside the classroom for student faith formation, participation in liturgical and communal prayer, and action in service of social justice.	17	“Weekly school Masses are essential to the life of our community. For the near future, students, faculty, and staff will remain in the classrooms and view the livestream of the Wednesday Masses”
5. An excellent Catholic school has a governing body which recognizes and respects the role of the appropriate and legitimate authorities and exercises responsible decision making in collaboration with the leadership team for development and oversight of the school’s fidelity to mission, academic excellence, and operational vitality.	6	“A local Task Force was formed to accomplish the creation of a Reopening Plan...We are extremely grateful for the time, expertise and vision shared by these men and women.”
7. The curriculum adheres to appropriate, delineated standards and is vertically aligned to ensure that every student successfully completes a rigorous and coherent sequence of academic courses based on the standards and rooted in Catholic values.	17	“As a small and inclusive community, we are proud to be able to offer a distance learning program that provides rigorous academics and individualized support to our students. Our teachers have done an incredible job transforming their curriculum and lessons to be more conducive to online learning.”

Continued on next page

Table 2 continued

Standard	Plans	Example Passage
8. An excellent Catholic school uses school-wide assessment methods and practices to document student learning and program effectiveness, to make student performance transparent, and to inform the continuous review of curriculum and the improvement of instructional practices.	7	"All courses will provide frequent and varied formative and summative assessments serving both On-Campus and At-Home learners. "
9. An excellent Catholic school provides programs and series aligned with the mission to enrich the academic program and support the development of student and family life.	15	"We recognize that different families need different supports and we endeavor to give every child and family the tools they need to be successful."
10. An excellent Catholic school provides a feasible three to five-year financial plan that includes both current and projected budgets and is the result of collaborative process, emphasizing faithful stewardship.	1	"Though we have lost many sources of our funding due to the current global pandemic, we are honoring the tuition published for the 2020-2021 school year... We have worked with families whose job loss has created new hardships and will continue to do so. All enrolled families who have not already done so, are expected to begin monthly payments in August."

Note. Standards 4, 6, 11, 12, and 13 are intentionally omitted from this table. Zero instances of Standards 4, 11, and 13 were coded in the data. Standards 6 and 12 were deemed to be universally applicable to the plans and were, therefore, excluded from coding.

Every plan included details on building and safety protocols, such as sanitation plans, health screening policies, mask requirements, and quarantine guidelines. These were rather formulaic, including embedded information or links to health department or CDC guidelines and details about prevention and containment of the virus. Interestingly, 24 of the plans (40%) only included this type of health, safety, and logistical information, without any information that could be coded with regard to any of the other NSBECS standards.

In the plans that included more than COVID-19 health and safety protocols, the most frequently coded standard was Standard 1, related to the Catholic mission of the school. Several plans included introductory material that emphasized the mission or incorporated mission-related language or quotations. Some were rather perfunctory mentions, such as "Our mission to educate children to their greatest potential as images of God remains the same. In order to continue this work amidst COVID-19, in an in person, at school environment, we have established a set of protocols." Others drew upon the mission more deeply: "We are, primarily, a Catholic school, and our mission is and

continues to be doing all that we can to produce young people who are formed in God's love and mercy. Let that noble cause guide all of us in these stressful times and may we all grow closer to our Creator and Lord through our trials and victories." Several included quotes from the Bible or from Catholic leaders, such as a recent prayer from Pope Francis: "Lord, may you bless the world, give health to our bodies and comfort our hearts." Including these references to mission and spiritual inspirations in the introduction to plans sends a message that the school is guided by a commitment to a shared purpose, even amidst the challenges of a pandemic.

The next most frequently coded standards were related to the faith life of the school and the academic curriculum. Almost all of the plans coded for Standard 3, regarding faith formation, included descriptions of how Mass would be included in the weekly school schedule. Schools planned to keep the community safe while still celebrating the liturgy either through live streaming, having priests come to classrooms, or having small groups take turns attending Mass in the church. Some schools also indicated plans to offer retreats and community service opportunities. As one school summarized, "We will be working to organize faith experiences for the students that are meaningful and follow social distancing." Plans that included these details signaled to the community that the faith formation of students was important enough to emphasize along with the logistics of reopening their buildings.

Standard 7 focuses on the academic curriculum, and evidence of this standard was included in 17 of the reopening plans. Many of these plans focused on distance learning options, explaining how content would be delivered either synchronously or asynchronously and describing learning management systems that would be utilized. Teacher professional development was also often mentioned in the plans, specifically related to increasing capacity for online teaching. Finally, some plans provided additional details about the aims of their academic programs. For example, one school explained, "Our curriculum promotes both challenge and joy in learning. We are prioritizing reading, writing, math, and Catechism. Our work will continue to be challenging, meaningful, active, and collaborative."

Fifteen plans were also coded for including evidence of Standard 9, which is related to offering non-academic programs and services. Extra-curricular activities, clubs, and athletics were sometimes mentioned in plans in terms of whether or not they would be offered, but the majority of these codes were for passages detailing counseling or student wellness services, acknowledging that there is a greater need for mental health support than perhaps ever before due to the stress of the pandemic. One school summarized:

...there has been a heightened level of stress and anxiety for us all. It is extremely important that we all remember to seek help and support if the level of stress and anxiety becomes overwhelming. This is especially important for our children...If you feel like your student needs assistance, please reach out to our Guidance Counselor."

Some schools referred specifically to programs and services for students with IEPs or other learning needs and how these services would be impacted by the health and safety protocols.

Other standards that were evidenced in the plans included Standard 8 regarding assessment practices, Standard 5 related to governing bodies (in this case, usually Task Forces assembled to develop reopening strategies), Standard 2 regarding religious education, and Standard 10, focused on finances and stewardship. Standards 4, 11, and 13 related to adult faith formation, human resources, and development, respectively, were not found to be included in any of the plans. Again, we were not necessarily expecting all of the standards to be included in any of the plans, we were simply using the standards as a framework to understand what was included in these documents.

Conclusion

In this study, we sought to explore reopening decisions and documented plans of Catholic schools across the country in the Fall of 2020. Knowing that Catholic schools had more autonomy over reopening decisions than surrounding public schools, we found that most schools opened in person with health and safety protocols in place regardless of local health data trends and surrounding public school reopening decisions. Most did not publish reopening plans on their websites, and of those that did, many were simply basic COVID health and safety protocols. Plans that included more compelling information, based on analysis of plans with regard to the National Standards and Benchmarks of Effective Catholic Schools, may have served to communicate the added value of Catholic education during a challenging time.

We contend that Catholic schools, like any other school, had no good options for reopening in the Fall of 2020. The option of opening in person presented risks of viral spread and challenges of quickly putting into place structural and logistical protocols to keep students and staff as safe as possible, and the option of opening remotely presented challenges of remote teaching and learning that were felt acutely in the previous Spring. However, unlike their public school counterparts, Catholic schools faced the additional challenge of being tuition-dependent. In order to retain current students and potentially attract new students, schools had to weigh the risks of reopening in person with the benefits of satisfying families (and possibly staff) who desired students in the buildings. With the local control offered by the principle of subsidiarity in Catholic education, schools were able to make the choices that served their communities best, mostly offering a choice for in-person Catholic education for as many students as possible.

This study was limited in that it only considered a sample of Catholic schools. Although the sample included schools throughout the country, it was not fully nationally representative, nor was it a random sample of schools. Additionally, the study only considered publicly available data. Future research may include alternative methods, such as interviews or surveys of school leaders, to

develop further understanding of decisions to reopen schools in person. Enrollment trends during and after Fall 2020 could also be investigated in future work.

The full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Catholic education in the United States will likely not be realized for quite some time. This initial exploration of reopening trends highlights that there is much to learn about how and why schools responded to the pandemic with regard to modes of and communication about reopening in Fall 2020. When there were no good options, Catholic schools remained a viable option for families across the country.

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