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EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

## Increasing Parent Faith Engagement at a Parish School

*Grace Mazza Urbanski*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Increasing faith engagement among Catholic school shareholders is a priority for school leaders. Catholic school communities can learn from this year-long project with a parish school. Sacred Heart Parish School serves approximately 300 K3-8th grade students. Like many parish schools, Sacred Heart sees a growing number of parents disengaged with the faith life of the parish and school, despite 98% of them being registered parishioners. The parent population enjoys robust and regular social activities, but report they are uncomfortable or uninterested in faith activities. The mission of Sacred Heart school is to nurture “children’s growth in the Catholic faith,” so the fact that two-thirds of parents are disengaged with or hostile to the mission is problematic. Sacred Heart’s intervention project built on the natural social strengths of parents, catalyzing parent leaders to design a wide variety of faith activities designed to overcome their peers’ discomfort and lack of interest. The peer-led interventions increased not only attendance at faith activities, but also financial stewardship to the parish and attendance at weekend liturgies. Parents responded most enthusiastically to invitations targeted to grade-level Mass experiences, so parent leaders focused future efforts on enhancing “Class Mass” initiatives for families.

**Keywords:** Parish school, faith, evangelization, discipleship, improvement science, relational authority, parent engagement, family, leadership

Modern Americans are dangerously lonesome; faith-based organizations—especially Catholic schools—can provide an antidote. Despite technology which promises to bring people together, “recent surveys have found that approximately half of U.S. adults report experiencing loneliness, with some of the highest rates among young adults” ([Office of the Surgeon General](#),

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2023, p. 9). In *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (2023), the Office of the Surgeon General equates the health risks of social isolation to smoking: “lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day” (p. 8). The report affirms that faith communities promote social connections (p. 16), but Americans currently engage less in religious activities and groups, with only 47% of adults claiming membership in a faith congregation in 2020. “This is down from 70% in 1999 and represents a dip below 50% for the first time in the history of the survey question” (p. 16). While membership is at an all-time low, engagement numbers are even lower. According to Gallup, the percentage of adults who are “fully spiritually committed” and actively engaged in their congregations is only 18% (Winseman, 2007, p. 65).

The *Office of the Surgeon General (2023)* is concerned with the erosion of health benefits associated with decreased faith engagement: “As a consequence of this decline in participation, individuals’ health may be undermined in different ways” (p. 16). The social cohesion provided by faith-based groups can “serve as a community support, provide meaning and purpose, create a sense of belonging around shared values and beliefs” and even reduce risk-taking behaviors (p. 16). Religious communities have a crucial role to play in improving the natural and supernatural health of our country.

Despite the urgent need to participate in community life, Catholic school principals and other religious leaders struggle to convince Gen X and Millennial parents to engage in faith activities. But parish schools, in particular, can unify their academic and liturgical programming to deepen social cohesion six days a week. The *Office of the Surgeon General (2023)* defines social cohesion as “the sense of solidarity within groups, marked by strong social connections and high levels of social participation, that generates trust, norms of reciprocity, and a sense of belonging” (p. 37). Targeting that sense of belonging is critical for successful engagement strategies. According to Gallup analysis, “belonging is far more likely to lead to believing. The extent to which members feel engaged in their faith communities has a profound effect on their personal spiritual commitment” (Winseman, 2007, p. 51). This reality motivates spiritual leaders to concentrate on offering a genuine welcome to their communities, as Gallup’s research demonstrates that “congregational leaders who focus their efforts on increasing members’ sense of belonging end up not only increasing their members’ engagement, but also increasing their spiritual commitment” (Winseman, 2007, pp. 51-52). When people feel like they belong in a community, they are more likely to become actively engaged and to believe. Belonging is fundamental.

Catholic school principals serve as the spiritual leaders of their school communities. They are also responsible for maintaining student enrollment and family engagement. Gallup’s research suggests that principals can support family faith formation by cultivating community belonging. When I assumed the principal position at Sacred Heart Parish School<sup>1</sup> in July 2020, I became the

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<sup>1</sup> This pseudonym is used throughout.

fifth school leader in seven years. Between 2018 and 2020, two principals left mid-contract, K3-8th grade enrollment slipped from 364 to 292, and the school community that remained was in need of social cohesion. The parish school community was also losing its identification as a congregation of faith, as Sunday Mass attendance had dipped to less than 33% (contrasted to an average 66% Sunday Mass attendance rate in the late 1980s). As principal, I wanted to cultivate belonging to the school as well as to the parish in order to promote engagement, religious belief, and long-term stability. I turned to improvement science to test which engagement strategies would be most effective.

Improvement science, championed by [Bryk and colleagues \(2015\)](#), embraces the disciplined inquiry of a PDSA cycle (Plan, Do, Study, Act). This cycle allows early change implementers to “learn fast” in a small, controlled setting, refining the change ideas and drivers on a small and more affordable scale before expanding the improvements. The initial small-scale changes reveal “gaps in understanding” ([Bryk et al., 2015, p. 121](#)) that allow early adopters to learn, revise, and repeat until new standard processes have become reliable enough to attempt at scale, even under varied circumstances. Given the school context, I used improvement science to build on the community’s strengths and increase parent engagement in faith activities.

### School Context

Almost all families at Sacred Heart School were registered parishioners. In the 2022-23 school year, 98% of the school’s 250 students identified as Catholic, and all but four of those Catholic families were registered at Sacred Heart Parish. Catholic identity was central to each school day. As principal, I began every day with the Morning Message, an engagement activity designed to encourage students, staff, and any parents who tune in (via Google Meet) to live out the school’s mission to “accept and respect Jesus in everyone.” Each faculty member was considered a minister of the Church and was required to complete annual professional development in the area of catechesis. Daily opportunities were provided to spread the message of Christianity, to form community within the classrooms, to provide prayerful experiences for all students, and to offer service to the local community.

While faith engagement abounded in the school, Sacred Heart had a parallel extracurricular track of social engagement for parents and guardians. Every year, each grade level hosted a huge party for all parents in the grade. Seasonal all-school social events also drew nearly every parent. Although this parent-bonding culture was strong, adult volunteers had not typically incorporated prayer into their gatherings, nor had they expressed interest in adding faith engagement opportunities to the social calendar. I needed new strategies to help parents feel like they belonged both to the school community and to their Catholic faith.

### Problem Statement and Causal Analysis

A challenge for the Sacred Heart community was parent disengagement with the faith life of the parish and school. Although the faculty took seriously their role as ministers in the Church,

and students responded freely to faith-based opportunities, a majority of school parents reported a negative view toward faith activities. Counts from the beginning of the 2022-23 school year estimated that less than 33% of school parents participated in weekend liturgies, and that same number—less than 33%—provided stewardship to the parish in time, talent, and treasure. This means that at least 66% of school families were not living up to the terms of their parishioner tuition agreement which they sign at the beginning of each school year, promising to attend Sunday Mass, provide parish stewardship, and support the faith formation of their children. According to [Winseman \(2007\)](#), “Gallup research has discovered a decisive link between individuals’ spiritual health levels and the amount of money they give to their congregations” (p. 38). Since financial stewardship is a reliable indicator of spiritual engagement, the majority of Sacred Heart school parents demonstrated active disengagement with the faith life of the parish and school.

Since 2022, the Sacred Heart School Advisory Committee (SAC) had grown increasingly alarmed at parent disengagement. Some parishioners remembered the days when the school charged no tuition to active parishioners because the general parishioner population supported the school as a vital ministry of the parish. But as families gradually disengaged from parish life, both the financial and spiritual landscape of the school became causes for concern.

In order to improve the holistic educational experience for students, Sacred Heart aimed to increase parent engagement with faith activities in the parish and school. Although I offered many faith engagement opportunities after my arrival as principal in July 2020, very few parents attended these events. In the 2021-22 school year, one parent from the School Advisory Committee (SAC) helped me plan a year’s worth of parent engagement sessions: six evening events, from November to May, that explored topics such as faith, educational root beliefs, curriculum, internet safety, and mental health. Although all these topics connected to the school’s mission, school parent attendance was extremely low. The curriculum night and the mental health night each drew about two dozen parents (roughly seven percent of the parent population), while only four school parents attended the faith sessions (less than one percent).

When SAC members interviewed school parents about their experience of faith engagement, 72% of the responses were negative; their reactions to questions about faith opportunities included phrases like “turned off,” “too much,” “overwhelmed,” “not relatable,” “bored,” and “stressful.” A follow-up meeting with a small group of parents clarified that the content and delivery of faith topics were not significant causes of disengagement. Rather, parent discussion revealed two themes that identify root causes of faith disengagement: lack of interest in, and discomfort with, faith matters.

Parents indicated lack of interest in faith—and preferential interest in other areas—when they cited non-spiritual reasons for choosing a Catholic education, such as needing “like-minded people to go on vacation with.” The follow-up meeting also revealed that many families prioritized

non-faith activities, like athletics, simply because they are less interested in church and more interested in sports. In a recent *New York Times* editorial, [Douthat \(2022\)](#) provides insight into the mindset of many modern Catholics:

From this perspective, a key obstacle to getting modern Catholics to actually practice their inherited Catholicism isn't whether they disagree with church teachings or feel adequately welcomed (as much as those issues matter). It's that the church is in competition with a million other urgent-seeming things, and in its post-Vatican II form it has often failed to establish the importance of its own rituals and obligations.

The SAC survey interviews affirmed this claim, since, out of more than thirty survey comments, only one cited disagreement with Church teaching. For the most part, parents were not angry, or hurt, or scandalized by the Church; they merely found other social and athletic activities more interesting than faith activities.

Attracting the religious interest of parents in a busy secular world was one challenge, but helping parents feel comfortable with faith activities was another. The SAC interviews and follow-up meeting revealed that parents who might be interested in attending faith-based activities felt lost, alone, and unsure about expectations and norms. They cited fears of being judged by what one parent called "holy rollers." They imagined uncomfortable scenarios, such as walking into church for Mass and sitting in a pew habitually occupied by a long-time parishioner. The word "intimidated" came up frequently as parents described their discomfort at Mass or other faith gatherings. One parent articulated a sentiment many agreed with: "I admit that speaking about religion is something I am uncomfortable with and have been for a long time."

The dominant parent subculture, which prioritized social rather than faith activities, conflicted with the vibrant faith culture the students, teachers, and staff enjoyed in the building. The work of [Hallinan \(2005\)](#) suggested that working toward increased parent engagement is critical, since "schools with a dominant normative culture are most likely to channel the energies of students toward academic achievement and social and moral development" (p. 135). While Hallinan warns against an "adolescent subculture" (p. 135), it is the parent subculture at Sacred Heart that interfered with the move toward an engaged community of faith that could, as Hallinan suggests, improve students' academic, social, and moral growth. In *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), [Pope St. John Paul II](#) describes the family's duty to be the "first school" of children: "Hence, the family is the first school of those social virtues which every society needs. The right and duty of parents to give education is essential . . . and it is irreplaceable and inalienable, and therefore incapable of being entirely delegated to others or usurped by others" (§ 36). The family and the parish school should be deeply connected in their commitment to educating children. In keeping with a school's respect for parents as the primary educators of children, parents must embrace their obligation to "form

their children in the faith and practice of Christian life” ([Canon Law Society of America, 1983](#), Canon 774). But if parents at Sacred Heart were uninterested or uncomfortable engaging in faith activities, children lacked critical opportunities to practice their faith. A Catholic school cannot achieve alone what families are best situated to cultivate; a holistic Catholic education relies on the willing engagement of families to educate both the mind and the soul of children in Catholic schools.

### **Theory of Action**

The 2022-23 school year provided an opportunity to engage in innovative Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles to test better ways to increase parent engagement. Because faith formation is “irreplaceable and inalienable” to Catholic education, faith activities were selected for this study rather than other engagement interest areas offered in previous parent engagement sessions, such as mental health or curriculum. Two interrelated research questions were posed to achieve a better outcome than previous parent faith engagement attempts:

1. What processes establish relational authority among adult peers? In other words, how could we share ownership for faith development among actively engaged parents and parish staff?
2. What types of invitations are most successful in helping uninterested or uncomfortable adults to engage in faith activities?

### **Research Question 1: “What processes establish relational authority among adult peers?”**

The school’s 2021-22 parent engagement series attracted only small crowds, topping the charts at seven percent for the presentations on curriculum and on building resilience in children. But the faith-related topics were abysmal failures, drawing less than one percent of the school parent population. Research into generational trends provided some direction for improvement. The [Springtide Research Institute \(2020\)](#) provides quantitative and qualitative sociological research of the state of religion and young people. Their snapshot of 2020 finds that Gen Z, the country’s newest generation of adults, is motivated not so much by people in authority who have impressive credentials, but by people in relationships who make them feel included (p. 89). In fact, 65% of young people agree with the statement, “a person’s expertise doesn’t matter if they don’t care about me” (p. 62). [Springtide \(2020\)](#) calls this “relational authority,” which contrasts with “institutional authority” (p. 49). The 2021-22 Parent Engagement series, designed and implemented by the principal with limited input or support, relied on the institutional authority of the principal role to attract participants. The new 2022-23 PDSA cycle, however, placed a higher premium on relational authority and was careful to share ownership of the faith engagement process. Identifying individuals interested in sharing ownership was the first step, so they could help put into place cycles of experimentation with innovative faith engagement strategies.

The first innovative strategy was an at-home prayer experiment (described in detail in the next section). It attracted the participation of 24 families. Of those families, 16 students and 15 parents returned the post-experiment evaluation, a 63% return rate. The final question on that evaluation asked participants, “Do you want to keep praying?” Of the 31 total responses, 80.6% replied “Yes,” and 19.4% replied “I think so.” No one chose the third option, “Not really.” Those results suggested a strong desire, among those who self-selected to participate in the prayer experiment, to engage in faith activities, specifically prayer. Therefore, I sent a personal follow-up invitation to all prayer experiment participants to gather for prayer and brainstorming. A general invitation to this event was also extended to the entire school community. Over 40 parents responded favorably to the invitation; nearly 30 of those—now identified as “Faith Leaders”—came together for a parent faith engagement evening.

Once Faith Leaders were identified, the research of [Horrell \(2019\)](#) suggested that shared ownership and relational authority should proceed with productive conversations about the problem of faith disengagement. [Horrell \(2019\)](#) advises, “it helps to get focused before jumping in with both feet. What problem needs to be solved? It makes sense to start locally in your community, the place where you live, work, or play. It also helps to be specific. Something needs to change! But wait. What should you do? Determining the problem to be solved becomes an essential first step” (p. 13). In order to share ownership for the entire faith engagement project, the Faith Leaders came together for an evening of guided meditation, collaboration, and discussion in January 2023. The explicit goals for the evening were to provide faith-filled fellowship among school parents and parish formation staff, to generate change ideas to increase parent faith engagement (to be implemented February-June), and to identify criteria to measure fruits of the change ideas. Meeting participants considered core statements on a continuum to guide the evening:

1. Faith is the most important element of a Catholic school/Faith is not the most important element of a Catholic school.
2. Our family prays together regularly/Our family does not pray together regularly.
3. Going to weekend Mass is a high priority/Going to weekend Mass is a low priority.
4. I am comfortable talking about God with others/I am not comfortable talking about God with others.
5. My faith shapes the way I treat others/My faith does not affect the way I treat others.

As parents entered the meeting space in the parish center, they indicated their place on each continuum, as well as where they thought most other school parents would place themselves on each continuum. This simple activity provided a dramatic visual representation of the divide they experience, which confirmed the 66% disengagement statistic originally suggested by the SAC survey. The opportunity for Faith Leaders to name the problem increased shared ownership and provided enthusiasm to form teams devoted to increasing faith engagement among their peers.



After naming the disengagement problem, the principal and parish youth director offered a “mini-retreat” to the parents, providing that experience of prayer that more than 80% of them indicated a desire to continue. The principal led an Ignatian meditation that helped parents to engage all five senses as they imagined themselves in the upper room of the Last Supper. That led directly into an “Emmanuel” prayer experience guided by the parish youth director, a prayer which invited the Holy Spirit to inspire new ideas to increase parent faith engagement. After those prayer experiences, the principal posed this question for consideration in small groups: “What should we try that could engage more parents in the faith life of the parish and school?” Small groups spent 15 minutes sharing any change ideas that had occurred to them in prayer. The principal then brought the focus back to the large group, asking tables to propose two or three of the most promising change ideas that had surfaced in small group discussion. These ideas were recorded on chart paper in the front of the room, and the summary of results was sent to all the parents who attended the meeting or expressed interest in attending. A week later, the follow-up notes were sent to the 38 Faith Leaders who indicated an interest in helping with the change process. The summary sorted the change ideas into three categories that emerged during the brainstorming, referred to hereafter as the “triple invitation”: at-home prayer experiences, small group experiences, and large group experiences. The Faith Leaders were asked to pray about the change ideas and gather again for more prayer, fellowship, and planning.

Inspired by the [Springtide \(2020\)](#) findings about relational authority and the importance of extending a genuine and caring welcome, the second Faith Leader meeting was held at the principal’s home, where refreshments and childcare were offered. RSVPs for the second planning meeting totaled about 30 of 38. This high response rate—about 79% of all Faith Leaders—may be lower than actual responses, as several married couples participated together but replied only once for both individuals. The second meeting included a summary of recent faith engagement activity. In keeping with the driver to share ownership, a parent, rather than the principal, provided this summary. The parish youth director led another guided meditation, and then Faith Leaders spread out around the house to meet in three teams corresponding to the three categories of faith engagement activities that came out of the previous meeting. Each team had two goals: to brainstorm specific tactics and events to implement, and to identify a leader to coordinate ongoing efforts. The selection of team leaders marked an important step in sharing ownership in the process of relational authority.

After teams identified leaders to head at-home, small group, and large group activities, those leaders began coordinating efforts with their various teams. Some teams copied the principal on all their email discussions regarding upcoming events, while others chose to interact on their own and update the principal as needed. The personality of each leader determined how often the team communicated with the principal, but all the teams discovered ways to take charge of their respective element of the triple invitation and stay connected to the principal for support.

## Research Question 2: “What types of invitations are most successful in helping uninterested or uncomfortable adults to engage in faith activities?”

The failure of the 2021-22 Parent Engagement series required new thinking for 2022-23 PDSA cycles. [Huntley and Mallon \(2019\)](#), leading figures in church renewal, emphasize the need for innovation in the face of decline: “We can’t keep doing what we have always been doing and just doing it in more efficient ways. But if we see in this crisis an opportunity to let go of our previous pastoral models and embrace new approaches that place our structures and processes at the service of evangelization and mission, we will see new life” (p. 14). The 2022-23 PDSA cycles allowed a new series of Parent Engagement events to emerge, events characterized by more flexible ideas—ideas generated by the parents themselves—which intentionally addressed the specific concerns of parents not yet engaged with faith activities.

Additional research revealed that the Gallup organization recommends three high-impact interventions: clarify expectations of membership, help members discover what they do best, and create small groups ([Winseman, 2007, p. 125](#)). After Faith Leaders articulated the problem of disengagement among their peers, they went on to generate dozens of antidotes, creating small-group teams to oversee the areas they liked best. Their ideas fell into the three categories of our triple invitation: at-home prayer experiences, small group opportunities, and large group gatherings. The triple invitation initiatives, which emerged organically from the January 2023 Faith Leader gathering, addressed the root causes for parent disengagement from faith activities. At-home prayer experiences offered opportunities for overscheduled families to pray in the comfort of home, where the surroundings were familiar and no “holy rollers” could judge. Peer-led small groups embodied relational authority; participants elected to participate not because an institutional authority figure commanded them to, but because a familiar parent peer invited them. Large group gatherings provided the comfort of social group interaction native to Sacred Heart School parent subculture, and they gradually introduced norms of communal faith events which disengaged parents had identified as a source of discomfort.

The subsequent March 2023 meeting of the Faith Leaders provided a prayer exercise that led them to identify which of those three areas coincided with their own greatest interests and strengths. They began meeting in those smaller teams to plan a variety of faith engagement opportunities for their peers among school families. The three faith engagement categories were calculated to address causes for disengagement identified early in the PDSA process. At-home prayer activities allowed families to experiment with prayer in a safe and non-judgmental space. Small group activities provided the belonging identified as a value by, for example, those parents who seek out a Catholic education to find like-minded vacation companions. Small groups—called “the quiet revolution” by Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow (as cited by [Winseman, 2007, p. 137](#))—also provided scaffolded opportunities to learn faith-sharing norms dreaded by parents

who expressed discomfort with faith activities. Large group faith activities, run by peers, aimed to provide high-interest social engagement that might compete with what [Douthat \(2022\)](#) describes as those “million other urgent-seeming things” vying for families’ attention.

The initial change idea involved an at-home prayer activity called the “3-for-3 Prayer Experiment,” which I wrote and published several years before coming to Sacred Heart. Using a vetted tool to implement the first change idea was essential to respectful and successful faith engagement. The “3-for-3 Prayer Experiment” went through many iterations before its publication. The 3-for-3 Prayer Experiment responded to both research questions, as it relied on classroom parents to invite peers into the experiment (relational authority) and offered the faith encounter in the comfort of each family’s home (triple invitation). One classroom parent would send a message to the rest of the classroom parents, explaining the experiment and inviting families to participate. The principal would then distribute the booklets to interested families. The prayer experiment guided children and their parents to set aside three times to pray (morning, lunchtime, and evening) for three days in a row, then to reflect on the experience. Specific prayers and reminders were included in the booklet, and families were asked to submit a post-experiment evaluation found at the back of the booklet or via a QR code. Ultimately, 8 of 19 separate classrooms (K4-8) extended an invitation to participate in the prayer experiment.

The other change ideas included additional at-home prayer experiences, sunrise hikes for men, Lenten small groups, a family Chaplet gathering, and a Class Mass for first grade (see [Table 1](#)).

**Table 1**

*Variety of 2022-23 Change Ideas Grouped by Type*

Activity Type	Change Idea
At-Home Experience	3-for-3 Prayer Experiment (November-January) Holy Week “Missionaries At Home” Activity (March) Family Rosary Activity (April/May) Pray and Play Challenge (June)
Small Group	Lenten Book Clubs (Lent) Sunrise Hikes for Men (March-June)
Large Group	Family Chaplet (March 25) Class Mass for 1st Grade (May 7)

The triple invitation’s variety allowed the Faith Leaders to gather data on the success of each change idea before committing to a sustainable plan of continued faith engagement offerings for parents.

## Method of Measurement

To answer the two research questions, multiple methods of data collection were designed and employed. Relational authority was identified through the PDSA framework as a main driver of parents' sense-of-belonging and intent to engage in faith activities. Therefore, this project measured both faith engagement—the main outcome of interest—and relational authority to evaluate the efforts made by the principal to influence the faith culture at Sacred Heart School. The successes of different faith engagement activities were also assessed through attendance, surveys and interviews. Data was collected both qualitatively and quantitatively over a period of six months in spring of 2023.

### *Quantitative Measures*

Faith Leader and school parent engagement was measured quantitatively through counts of collaborative parent contributors in faith engagement activities in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years as well as parent response rates to and across the at-home, small-group, and large-group levels. Attendance was also recorded for the March Family Chaplet and May Class Mass events as well as at weekly Mass (estimated).

### *Qualitative Measures*

Qualitative data was captured in a series of structured interviews and open-response surveys. First, the SAC conducted an initial round of interviews to create a baseline for school parent engagement. About 16% of the school parent community participated in these personal interviews. The same percentage participated in end-of-year interviews in June of 2023 to measure change. Interviews were guided by three questions:

1. What sorts of faith opportunities is your family hoping for in the parish and school?
2. Of the opportunities recently offered [a list was provided], which have worked for you?
3. Share a little about why these opportunities have/have not worked for you.

Responses to these interview questions were collected in a spreadsheet and reported back to the SAC. Qualitative data was captured again at the initial and final gathering of Faith Leaders (January and June of 2023), in the form of live surveys, as described earlier. Faith leaders were given a number of statements regarding faith engagement at Sacred Heart and asked to plot themselves and their typical peers on a continuum showing comfort levels with faith issues.

Pre- and post-Lent surveys captured interest in the small group faith activities offered to school families in conjunction with parish staff in February through March, 2023. Faith engagement activities closed with evaluation surveys where parents recorded open-ended responses to faith questions on comfort in faith discussions, closeness to Jesus, etc.

### *Other Data Sources*

In November 2022 through January 2023, eight classrooms invited families to participate in the initial change ideas, and evaluation surveys were collected from participants. This measure provided feedback on the Prayer Experiment tool itself as well as indications of parents' interest in continued faith engagement opportunities. Qualitative data was also collected, both formally and informally, through photographs and follow-up conversations.

### *Assessment of Change*

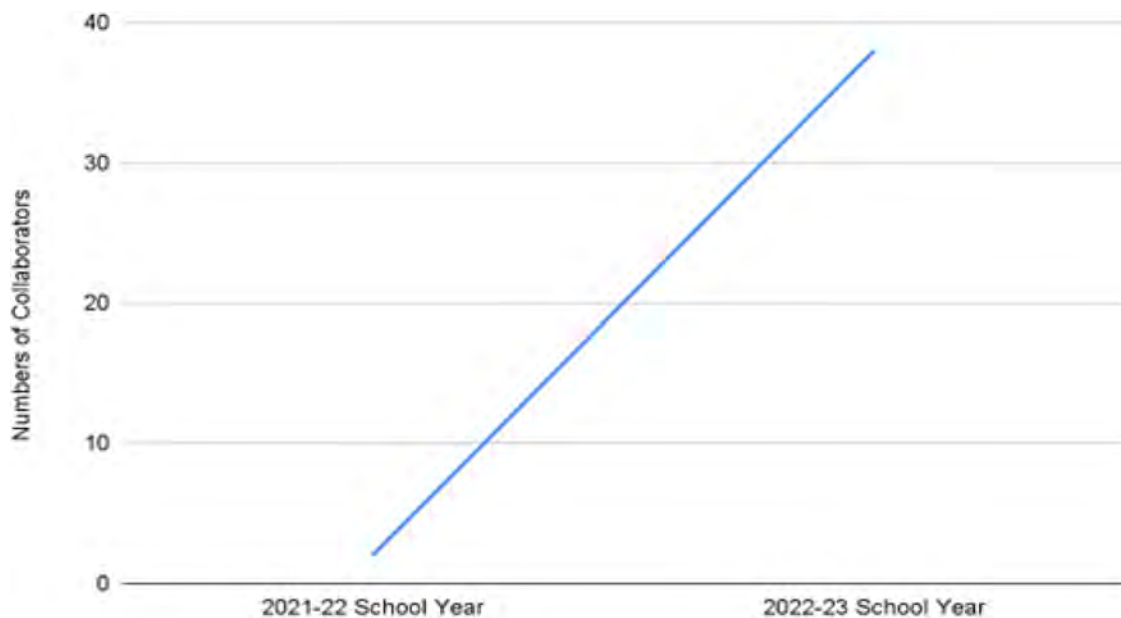
A follow-up meeting was held with SAC members who had conducted the parent interviews. To determine if faith engagement increased over the year, baseline data was compared to both quantitative and qualitative data gathered between March 2023 and June 2023, especially attendance at spring 2023 faith-based events, year-end parent interviews conducted by SAC members, and reflections from Faith Leaders at their June 2023 gathering. The quality and nature of Faith Leaders' contributions was also assessed, tracking what percentage of event planning and execution belonged to various leaders throughout the year. While both the SAC and the Faith Leaders helped to generate and assess data gathered throughout the spring of 2023, the Faith Leaders took responsibility for using the results to determine next steps in the PDSA cycle.

## **Findings**

The overall aim of this project was to increase parent engagement with faith activities in the parish and school. Data suggest a positive relationship between improvement science interventions and increased parent engagement. In the baseline 2021-22 school year, the principal collaborated with parents and parish staff in a limited way on faith engagement opportunities. One parent on the SAC helped to plot out a calendar for parent engagement events, and another SAC member designed a flier to promote the offerings. The events drew small crowds, especially the December 2021 faith activity, as noted above. Moreover, the principal lacked assistance in room setup, hospitality, and other event planning details. The workload was not sustainable for one person, and the resulting small events seemed hardly worth the trouble.

### *Establishing Relational Authority*

The 2022-23 drive to share ownership produced a surge in relational authority, transforming the faith-event landscape. After the 3-for-3 Prayer Experiment identified candidates for a parent Faith Leader team, the principal went from collaborating with two individuals on the SAC to 38 individuals who consistently affirmed their desire to remain on the Faith Leader teams (see [Figure 1](#)).

**Figure 1***Parent and Parish Staff Collaborators in Faith-Based Activities*

The quality and nature of parent collaboration increased throughout the project. One noticeable difference between the January and March Faith Leader meetings was the prominent role of the parents themselves as organizers. Because the parents felt confident taking over the faith engagement projects, the principal spoke much less often at the second meeting a ratio of 4:1 (based on the agenda and meeting notes). At the third Faith Leader meeting in June, the principal essentially spoke only at the end of the meeting, in order to summarize the brainstorming of the parents who attended.

Starting with the November 3-for-3 Prayer Experiment and culminating in the final faith activities in May (Class Mass) and June (at-home prayer challenge), Faith Leaders' relational authority grew dramatically. When launching the 3-for-3 Prayer Experiment in November 2022, the principal approached parents in certain grade levels to ask if they would send out the invitations to their peers to try the experiment. After they sent the invitations, responsibility fell back on the principal to collect the names, copy and distribute the prayer booklets, and collect the evaluations. By the time the 2023 Lenten small groups developed, however, parent and parish staff collaborators took over every task associated with organization, communication, and hospitality. The principal needed only to share the pre- and post-Lent surveys. An innovative parent-led small group materialized after a brief conversation between a parent and the principal. The parent, father of three current Sacred Heart students, had long been wanting to invite fellow dads to join him on

a sunrise hike and prayer experience. The faith engagement project gave him the courage to launch the group, and he hosted three hikes, from April to June. The principal approved of his efforts but was not required to provide assistance.

The shift from principal-led tasks to collaborator-led tasks was swift and thorough not only in small group planning, but also in at-home and large group activities. Starting in March 2023, the at-home activity team sent one activity a month home to all 155 Sacred Heart School families. The principal merely edited the activity and printed the copies. By June, the parents chose an at-home activity (a “Pray and Play Challenge”), asked the principal to approve, made the copies, organized their distribution to all families, and arranged to have the prayer challenge included in the final newsletter for the school year.

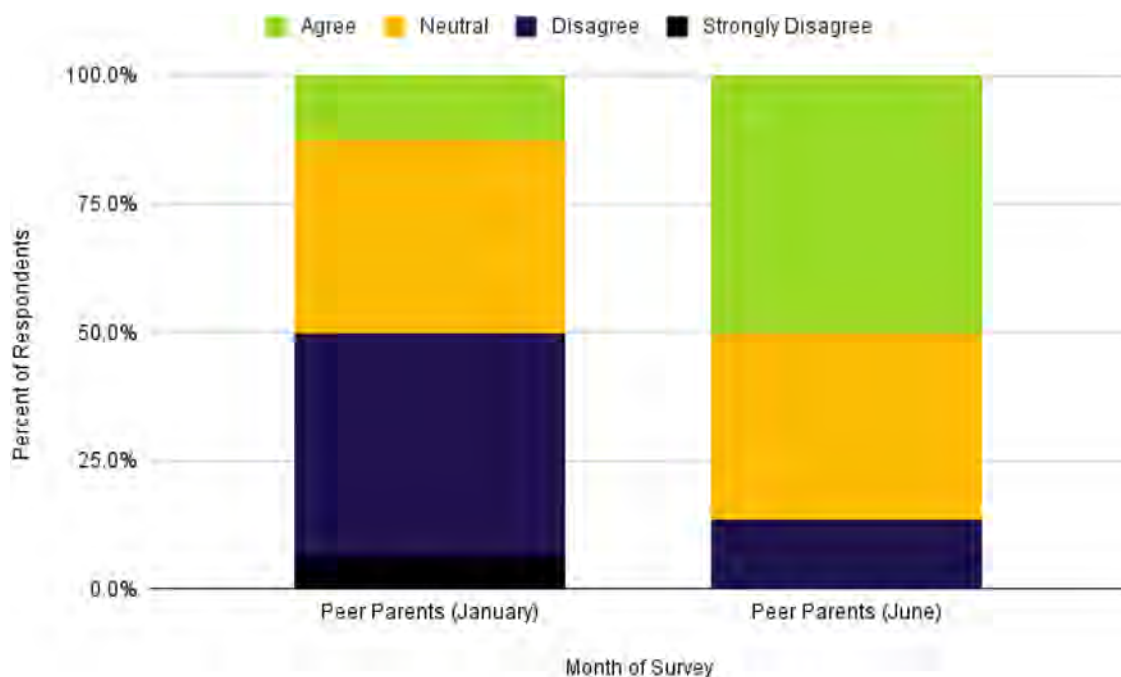
The May 2023 Class Mass also demonstrated massive contributions on the part of parents. Faith Leaders prepared the invitations and RSVP form, spoke to the parish and maintenance staffs about any needs, advertised the event in three different ways (email reminder, school newsletter, and weekly teacher updates), scheduled the associate pastor’s time, prepared the food and beverages (including unique hand-crafted rosary cookies), decorated the venue, emceed the event, and cleaned up afterward. The principal merely unlocked the door, attended Mass and the event, and offered the prayer before lunch.

The principal’s time and input decreased as dramatically as the variety of activities increased. Even if engagement happened mostly with families who already had some comfort level with faith, those families participated in greater numbers than in the 2021-22 school year, which saw top participation levels at 4 parents (in a year with 292 students enrolled). By comparison, the 2022-23 Faith Leader group included 38 members (in a year with 251 students enrolled), demonstrating that the number of parents willing to take on leadership roles in faith engagement dwarfed the number of parents who merely attended faith-based activities in the previous year. While Sacred Heart saw a fundamental increase in parent engagement with faith activities in terms of participation numbers, parents’ comfort level with faith also increased. One measurement of comfort levels came from a survey conducted in January and repeated in June 2023. In January, 21 Faith Leaders responded to the survey question as a part of the initial Faith Leader meeting. In June, 22 Faith Leaders submitted new responses to the same survey items. The first item asked parents to plot themselves on a continuum gauging their comfort with talking about God with others. The second item asked parents to plot their fellow Sacred Heart parents on the same continuum, based on their observations and experiences of conversations with their typical peers—school parents who were not helping to lead faith activities. The results show that Faith Leaders reported greater comfort speaking about faith themselves, and they also noticed less discomfort among other school parents outside of the Faith Leader group (see [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 2 shows that, in January, parent leaders in faith engagement estimated that only about half of their typical peers would be comfortable having a conversation about God. By June, their perception had shifted. After six months of leading faith engagement opportunities, their experience with other parents led them to suggest that merely 13.6% of school parents would avoid a conversation about God.

**Figure 2**

*Comfort Levels with Faith Conversations: “My parent peers are comfortable talking about God with others”*



The strong response to the first PDSA tool (the 3-for-3 Prayer Experiment) inspired the principal to follow up with participating parents not only out of enthusiasm for their engagement with the tool, but also out of a need for their help. The principal’s original aim was to increase faith engagement among parents, and the focus was on actively disengaged parents. The parents who volunteered to serve as parent leaders were already highly engaged with faith activities, so this project might have been able to ignore them as outside the scope of the intervention. On the contrary, sharing ownership through relational authority demonstrated that building off their already strong engagement made the original aim possible.

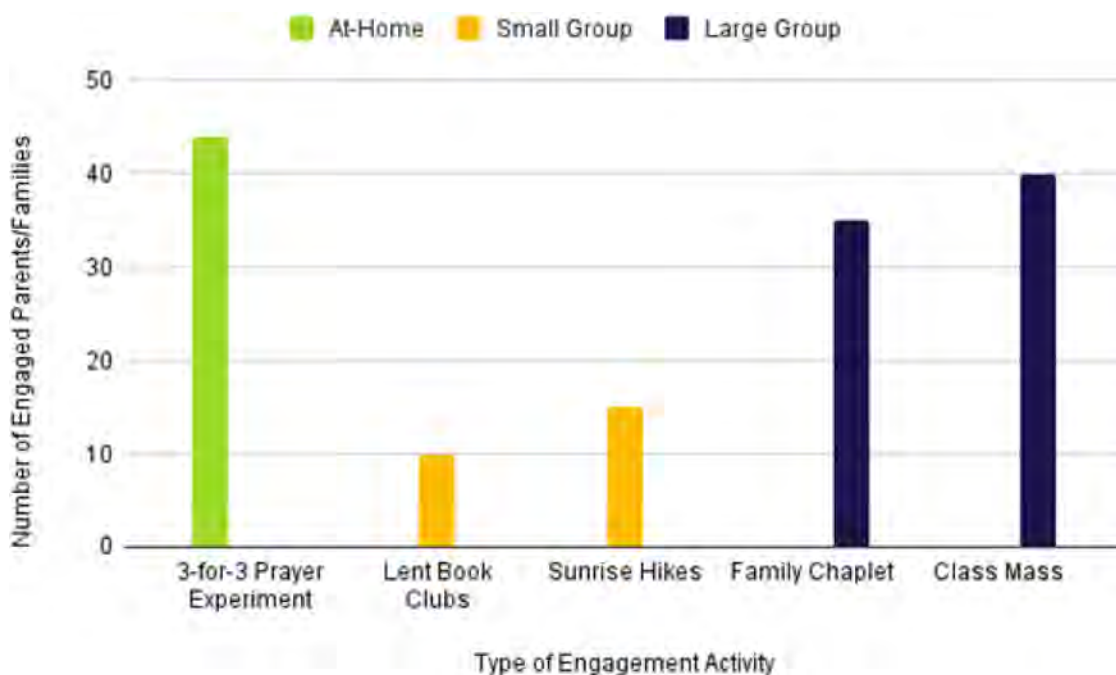


*Triple Invitation: Identifying tools that maximize engagement*

The 2022-23 school year invited parents to engage in a wider range and number of faith activities: four at-home prayer opportunities, two small-group offerings, and two large-group events (both combined with social activities and food/beverages). [Figure 3](#) shows parent participation numbers for these offerings.

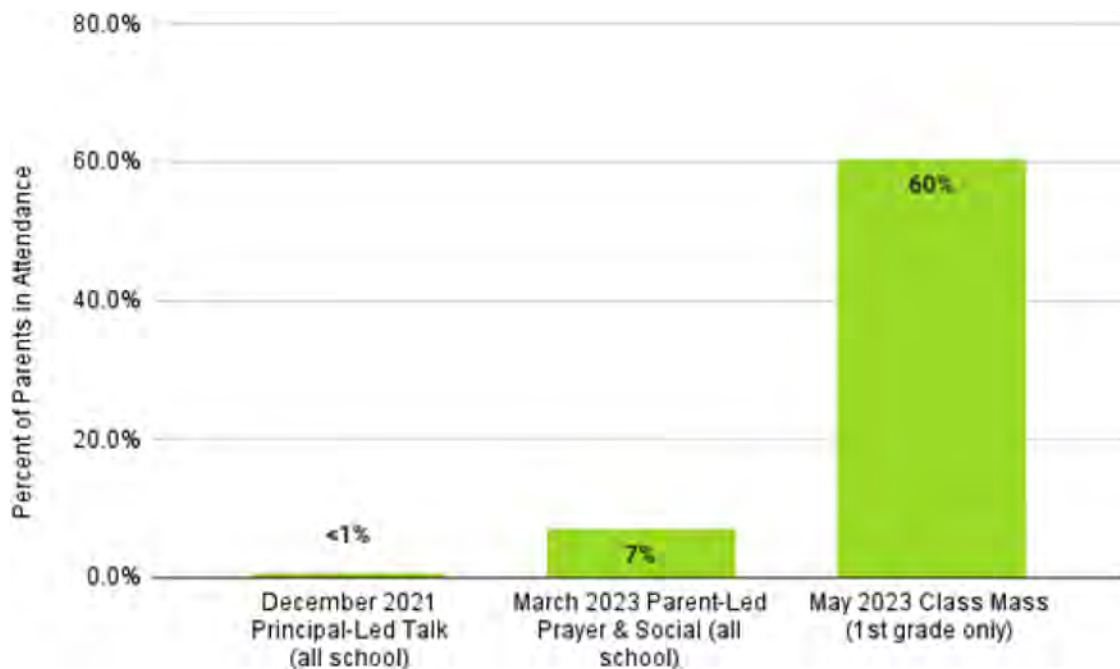
**Figure 3**

*School Parent Participation in Faith Activities in the 2022-23 School Year*



*Note:* March-through-June at-home prayer experiences were distributed to all 155 families, but participation was not tracked.

The overall aim of this project was to increase parent engagement with faith activities in the parish and school. Because at-home and small group opportunities did not exist prior to the 2022-23 school year, only large group events of a similar nature could be used to reveal growth in participation numbers. [Figure 4](#) shows a significant increase in parent attendance for large group faith activities.

**Figure 4***Parent Attendance at Large-Group Faith Activities*

Note: Percent represented is of parents *invited* to participate.

Figure 4 shows a tenfold increase in parent attendance for the March 2023 event compared to the baseline December 2021 event. The December 2021 event, planned and promoted by the principal, was an Advent faith activity attended by over 30 parishioners, but only 4 school parents (less than one percent of the school parent population). After the PDSA cycles had generated Faith Leaders to implement the various elements of the triple invitation, the large group parent leadership team planned and promoted the March 2023 Family Chaplet gathering, which drew over 100 people—adults and children—including at least 35 school parents (about seven percent of the school parent population). That same Faith Leader team decided to target their next event, limiting the focus and the invitations to first graders and their families. That May 2023 event, a “Class Mass,” invited all 29 first grade families to sit in a certain section of church for the regular Sunday Mass, then meet in the school afterward for hospitality and a brief talk on the rosary by the associate pastor. The response rate was strong, with only six families not submitting an RSVP to the invitation’s QR code. Twenty first graders attended Mass and the event, along with their parents and siblings, a total of 97 people. Those findings suggest that the 2022-23 PDSA approach successfully reached its aim of increasing parent engagement with faith activities, at least in that particular example of large-group gatherings.

The 3-for-3 Prayer Experiment collected post-activity evaluations. Qualitative data from that tool show an increase in faith engagement, as shown in [Table 2](#).

**Table 2**

*Evaluation Responses After 3-for-3 Prayer Experiment*

“Do you feel closer to Jesus?”	“Why or why not?”
A little	We pray together often at home so it wasn’t too different from our regular routine. The lunchtime prayer was added and that was good.
Yes	I feel much closer to God when I prayed this prayer because . . . . . . because of how they made me feel like God was always there. . . . because I prayed more, I felt happier . . . because I prayed more than I usually would . . . because I usually don’t pray every day . . . the midday focused check in with Jesus was not something I routinely had done but I found it a perfect reminder to stay close all day
Yes!	It was a beautiful addition to my prayer routine. These are all prayers I had wanted to do but they seemed intimidating. It was awesome getting the “kid” version to make starting them easy/unintimidating/low pressure. It was fruitful having time to recollect how Jesus was present/active during the day and also how I cooperated—or didn’t. Taking time to let the beautiful moments of the day “pop up” was a lovely way to increase awareness of how good God is and how active in my life. It was a great way to feel God’s closeness and fall more in love!

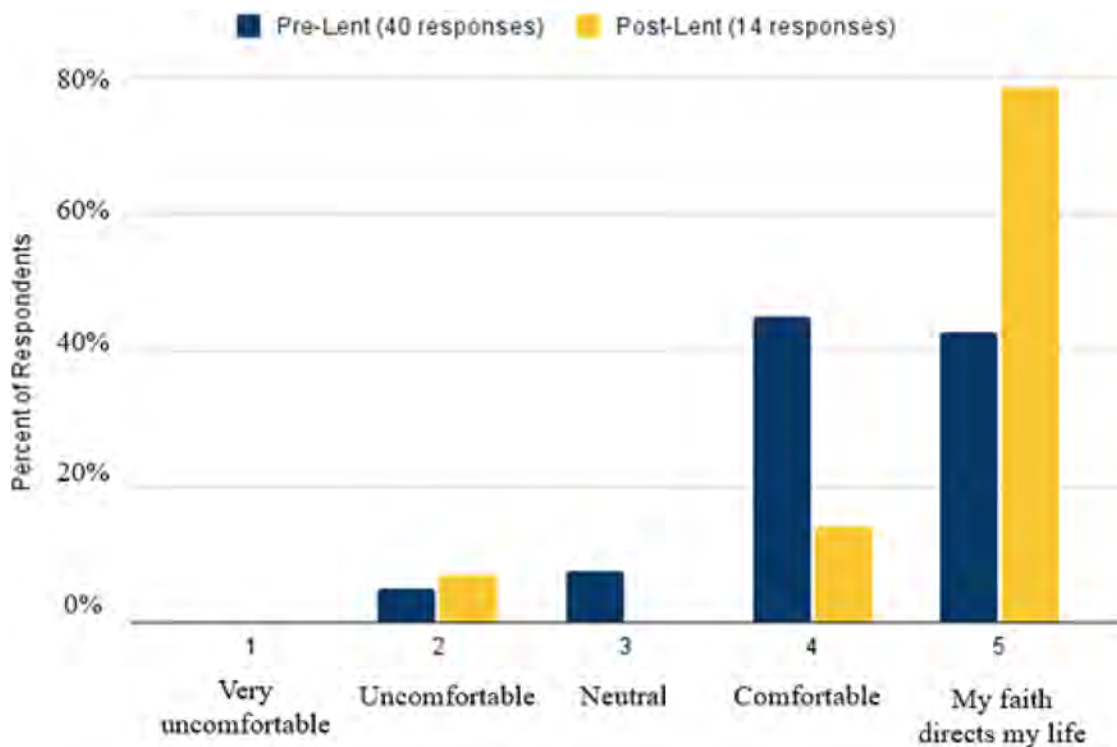
Data from the post-Lent survey for small groups demonstrates that individuals who registered for small groups already felt highly engaged in their faith, but their comfort level with faith matters increased as a result of the small group project (see [Figure 5](#)). Fourteen participants returned the “Post-Lent Survey” (23% return rate). One question on that survey asked, “How engaged am I with my faith?” Responses were plotted on a continuum from 1 (“Very uncomfortable with faith matters”) to 5 (“My faith directs my life”).

The Lent small group data indicates strong levels of faith engagement, showing that the first round of small groups seemed to be effective in ministering to already-engaged parents. Even engaged parents experienced an increase in comfort levels after the small groups.

Another data source to track parent engagement with faith activities is the in-person interviews SAC members conducted with fellow parents. The SAC submitted 32 interview reports in October 2022 and 24 in June 2023. In October, only 15.6% of comments included positive

**Figure 5**

Small Group Responses to “How Engaged Am I with My Faith?”

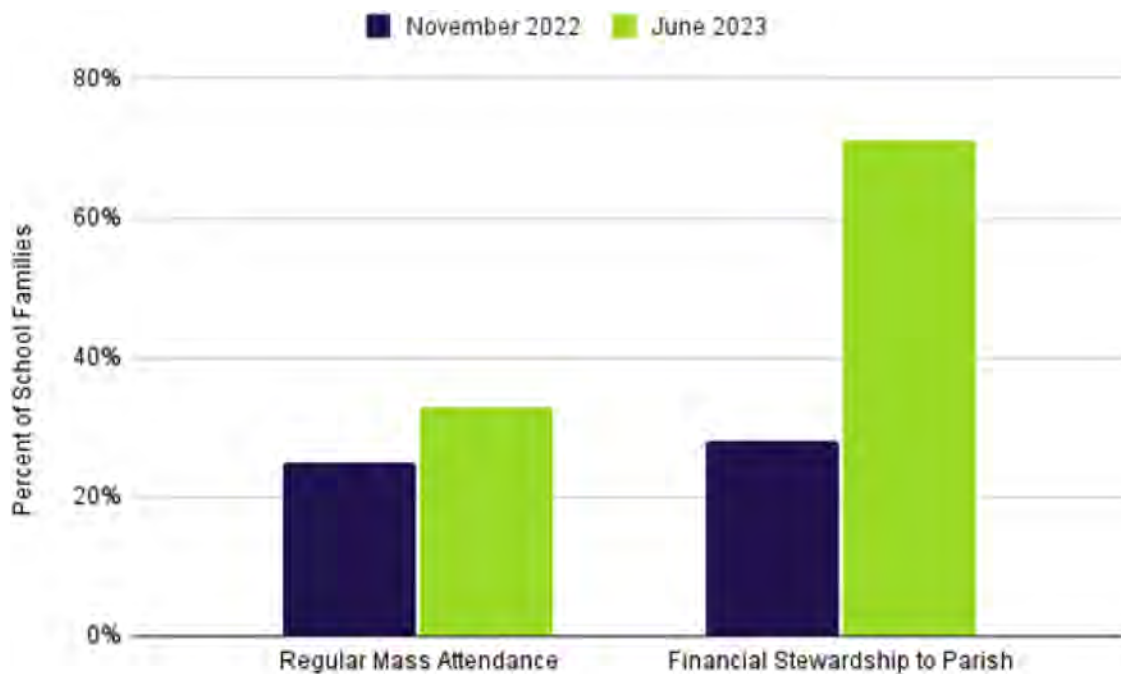


feedback about faith opportunities in the school and parish, while 72% of the 32 parent responses contained negative comments about faith activities in general: phrases like “turned off,” “too much,” “overwhelmed,” “not relatable,” “bored,” and “stressful.” The June interviews demonstrated a subtle shift in attitude: 29.2% of comments rejoiced in the year’s faith offerings, while the remaining 70.8% of comments were more specific in their criticism. For example, one parent objected to repeated reminders to contribute financially, four comments identified a poor connection with the pastor, four more expressed discomfort or a lack of connection with the wider parish community, and six negative comments were practical critiques regarding the timing or location of events.

The pastor of Sacred Heart Parish has noticed increased school parent engagement in weekend Mass attendance and financial stewardship to the parish. In November 2022 and again in June 2023, he provided estimated numbers for weekend Mass attendance based on his own anecdotal observations. [Figure 6](#) depicts those pastor estimates as well as the hard figures from parish records tracking financial giving from school parents. These results indicate that the Sacred Heart Parish School community responded well to the change ideas implemented by Faith Leaders. Regular weekend Mass attendance increased by nearly 10%, and financial stewardship to the parish jumped 43%.

**Figure 6**

*School Family Engagement with Weekend Mass and Parish Stewardship*



Since Gallup research affirms “a decisive link between individuals’ spiritual health levels and the amount of money they give to their congregations” (Winseman, 2007, p. 38), the precipitous increase from 28% to 71% of school families participating in financial stewardship should correspond to an improvement in healthy faith engagement.

Faith Leaders met with parish adult formation director and me on June 8, 2023 to pray together, reflect on the change ideas they had organized, review data, and make recommendations for the 2023-24 school year. The parish adult faith formation director led the group in a *lectio divina* prayer experience rooted in the upcoming Gospel reading for the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ: “My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink” (John 6:55). Inspired by this prayer, and by the National Eucharistic Revival established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Faith Leaders acknowledged that their most successful change idea in 2022-23 was the Class Mass in May. They concluded that the targeted invitations to parents at the same grade level prompted its robust response and attendance rate. Furthermore, the encouragement from the grade level teachers with their students in the classroom helped parents appreciate their children’s enthusiasm for the upcoming Mass.

Therefore, Faith Leaders determined that large group initiatives for 2023-24 would focus primarily on inviting families to targeted liturgies and helping reduce barriers to Mass. Their

recommendations can be helpful to other Catholic schools working to increase parent engagement in faith activities.

### **Recommendations**

Inviting families to targeted liturgies, where they can feel secure in the company of their peers, normalizes Mass attendance in a variety of ways. The Sacred Heart Class Mass initiative expanded to include one Class Mass per month over a two-year schedule (eleven grades, K3-8, assigned to September, October, January, February, March, or May). Promoting adult engagement at school-day Masses was also highlighted, making sure to publish the calendar identifying which homerooms prepare each Mass. Additionally, I worked with the Athletic Director to encourage coaches to attend Mass together with their athletes and to arrange with the pastor to offer a special blessing after Mass. The chair of the Parent Engagement committee (known as “Home and School” in many schools) alerted all leaders of school-related social activities of a new priority: after every parent-led social activity, the parent coordinator should send follow-up (pictures, thank-you, etc.) that also says, “Our family will be at the \_\_\_\_ Mass this weekend—see you there!” Finally, the parish liturgist agreed to continue to produce high-quality orders of worship with helpful cues and explanations to make all participants and visitors feel welcome.

Faith Leaders agreed to prioritize Mass engagement in 2023-24, but the other, most successful elements of the triple invitation would continue, such as the Family Chaplet large group gatherings, Lenten small group communities, Sunrise Hikes, and monthly at-home prayer activities. The monthly at-home activities were revised to make sure each activity has some way to measure engagement. For example, some months have tear-off prayer intention slips children can complete and place into the collection basket at weekend liturgies.

The parent faith engagement project injected new life into the parent culture of Sacred Heart parish school. Furthermore, it allowed the school and the parish staff to launch genuine adult collaboration in completely novel ways. A Catholic school exists, above all, to fulfill Jesus’ great commission to “make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded” (Mathew 28:19-20). This project, aimed at increasing faith engagement among the parents who have chosen a Catholic education for their children, supports Jesus’ mission. Sacred Heart hopes that other Catholic schools can learn from our improvement work to tap into the relational authority of parents to offer genuine, frequent, and diverse invitations to their adult peers. A mission-aligned course of continuous improvement increases belonging and belief and contributes to a healthy parent culture which supports student learning, both academically and spiritually.

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