

PARENT AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

Introduction: Happy Parents are the #1 Recruiters for Catholic Schools.

Parent Ambassador Programs have helped Catholic schools across the country to improve their enrollment through an organized word of mouth campaign. Word of mouth promotion is often referred to as the “least expensive and most effective form of advertisement.” This maxim holds true today more than ever as hundreds of millions of customers constantly search online for product, restaurant, movie, and many types of reviews before spending their valuable dollars.

In a similar manner, parents are constantly seeking and receiving input from one another on nearly every matter of raising children (education choices are an especially popular topic among parents of children approaching Pre-K, K, 6th, and 9th grade). Both personal testimonials and second hand information have enormous power to influence decisions, so each interaction with parents (current or prospective) is an opportunity to positively promote the school.

It comes as no surprise when a school with happy parents has healthy enrollment, but there are also schools that struggle with enrollment and have plenty of happy parents. Factors that may include the culture and physical location of the school can enhance the visibility of a school or work against it. Many people can remember a favorite restaurant that was a “hidden gem,” over time a hidden gem is either discovered by more patrons or closed for lack of business. Catholic schools cannot be “hidden gems,” the very nature of Catholic schools requires them to be pillars of their local community.

Happy parents must understand the importance of their role in the health of the school. They should understand the vision leadership has for the future, what it will take for the school to reach that vision, and what the end result will look like. When parents believe in the vision for a school they are able to help make it a reality.

Combined with the previous work by the Committee, this Parent Ambassador Program Guide will assist school leadership to:

- Advance leadership’s vision for the school
- Organize, launch, and manage an effective word of mouth campaign
- Recruit, motivate, and train effective Parent Ambassadors
- Enroll more kids in great Catholic schools

Guiding Concepts for the Parent Ambassador Program

Connect the Vision for School's Future to the Annual Enrollment Target:

- Continually share the vision of the school's future with parents and the community.
- Communicate annual the year's Enrollment Target as step towards that vision.
- Focus on 1-3 main "Areas of Focus" for Parent Ambassadors to achieve Enrollment Target.

Get the Right People and Make Personal Invitations:

- Always make personal invitations, via phone or in person, to parents who represent the school best. Outgoing, positive, well-spoken, and faith filled people make great ambassadors.
- Everyone has something to offer, but be very selective and clear when assigning leadership roles. Intentionally match skills with responsibilities and find ways for all to help.

Congruency and Collaboration:

- Design a program that will fit the culture and vision of the school.
- When possible, work in concert with existing organizations like Parent Clubs.
- Reach out to other schools to gain insights on creative strategies.

Service Hours:

- Encourage parents to view initiatives as opportunities to fulfill service hour requirements.
- Hold parents accountable to meet service hours, promote the many opportunities.

Drop-In Volunteers:

- Develop a list of tasks for volunteers that drop-in unexpectedly during a school day.
- Reference the Area of Focus: Office Support, School Help, & Facilities section for examples.

The Parent Ambassador Guide is organized into four main parts:

1. IDENTIFY AREAS OF FOCUS (page 35)

Determine 1-3 Areas of Focus aligned to the enrollment target.

2. PLAN PROGRAM KICKOFF (page 42)

A directed and energetic kickoff event will tone and create momentum.

3. PERSONALLY INVITE ATTENDEES (page 43)

Get the right people in the program by personal outreach.

4. TRACK RESULTS AND CELEBRATE WINS (page 44)

Track progress to goals, create a culture of success, and grow each year.

1. IDENTIFY AREAS OF FOCUS

The Principal and Committee Lead should review this section together before introduction to the broader committee. School leadership should consider the vision for the school, the Enrollment Target for the year, and the culture of the school community.

Effective Parent Ambassador Programs are limited in their scope. **It is highly advised that school leadership limit the focus of the Parent Ambassador Program to 1-3 Areas of Focus per year.**

It is important that the committee determine Areas of Focus for the school's Parent Ambassador Program. Each of the following areas is discussed in greater detail in this section:

- Admissions Events and Foot Traffic (page 36)
- Parish Presence and Outreach (page 37)
- Multi-Cultural Outreach (page 38)
- Office Support, School Help, & Facilities (page 39)
- Religious Education Outreach (page 40)
- Mentors for New Families (page 41)

A discussion led by the Committee Lead, should answer the following questions:

- Does this Area of Focus fit into the vision that leadership has for the school?
- Will this Area of Focus help us toward our Enrollment Target?
- Will parents bring an authentic positive energy to this Area of Focus?
- Which activities would be most helpful?
- Who are the specific parents that will make this successful?
- How can this Area of Focus be adapted to our school culture to make it more exciting?

Areas of Focus
ADMISSIONS EVENTS AND FOOT TRAFFIC

Principals generally have a high degree of confidence in enrolling prospective families once those families visit campus. Increasing the amount of regular foot traffic by prospective families and ensuring high quality admissions events each year is of utmost importance for enrollment health.

Activities for Admissions Events and Foot Traffic:

- Develop school marketing packets to give to prospective families during visits and tours. Include materials that promote the value propositions of the school and develop positive expectations of membership in the school community.
- Develop a roster of parent volunteers to give tours to prospective families. Keep track of visiting families and follow up with personal phone calls.
- Build phone and email lists of current parents in each grade or classroom that could act as good representatives to prospective parents. This list can be handed out to families considering enrollment, leaving a good impression about the openness of the school community.
- Help plan, promote, and staff Admissions Events. When an admissions event is around the corner, enlist parents in promotion efforts via email, phone calls, social media, and web.
- Develop new events to draw people to the school in creative ways (e.g., breakfast with Santa, Easter Egg Hunt, Family Fun Night, Literacy Night, Movie Night, Bingo, and Game Night). Seek partnerships with existing parent organizations to assist in the creating, promoting, and staffing.
- Develop a list of families with children between the ages of 1-12 who might be interested in the school. Determine an appropriate call to action and organize a phone-a-thon or social media campaign to invite new families to the school.
- Consider connections to community groups or organizations that may be able to assist in recruiting. Real estate brokers, for instance, may know when new families move into town.
- Share good news among current parents and tell them to notify the principal if they learn information that is important to know.
- Reach out and distribute school marketing pieces to local daycares, pre-k centers, and other places that parents and children gather. Act as a point of contact for other parents who may wish to ask more questions about the school. Consider other outreach to the local community, including businesses, with a call to action to attend an event.
- Promote the school to other parents whose children participate in extracurricular activities with their children.

Areas of Focus

PARISH PRESENCE & OUTREACH TO PARISHES WITHOUT SCHOOLS**

Parishioners are an important audience for enrollment and fundraising efforts, they should hear about the positive things happening in the school. Parent Ambassadors can be a consistent source of help in this area, especially when they are active members of the parish.

Activities for Parish Presence and Outreach:

- Schedule informal meetings with the Pastor and members of the Parent Ambassador team (e.g., take the Pastor to breakfast). Look for ways for Parent Ambassadors to help the parish and develop more positive interactions with the Pastor. Involve key parish staff.
- Develop procedure for parish outreach. Learn the process and deadlines to schedule Mass announcements, submit bulletin entries, and host an information table. Consider other religious services in your region.
- Determine available opportunities inside the parish to reach out to prospective families (e.g., baptism lists, new parishioners, and parish groups).
- Create and execute a calendar of speaking engagements at the parish and other parishes in the area. Host events for parish families.
- Create school flyers and distribute after Mass. Include a call to action like an open house invite, special event or school tour. Have students in uniform hand out parish bulletins.
- List the closest Catholic and non-Catholic churches without schools. Determine if any current parents are members of these churches and if they are willing to help create a new connection. Enlist the help of the school's Pastor, when appropriate, to assist with this outreach.
- Schedule time for the Principal and a Parent Ambassador to meet with pastors at local parishes without schools. It is especially helpful if your pastor is willing to help in this area.

*****Be sure to: Ask permission first and remain respectful of the Parish and the Pastor.***

Areas of Focus

MULTI-CULTURAL OUTREACH

Depending on the demographic makeup of the school's surrounding community (or certain features of parish life such as Mass in other languages), a real opportunity for better inclusion of multi-cultural communities may exist. Despite Catholic education's long and unmatched track record of success in educating poor minority students, some communities harbor a belief that Catholic schools are highly exclusive. Parent Ambassadors can work against these dangerous misconceptions.

Activities for Multi-Cultural Outreach:

- When appropriate, find parents who can act as translators for families with limited English during tours and Open Houses. Offer times during school hours when parents or volunteers can answer and make phone calls in a given language. Promote this offering in school marketing materials.
- Speak at non-English Masses in the appropriate language. Invite communities to consider and tour the school.
- Assess whether the school and staff has experience with cultural diversity and determine if there are areas to improve a spirit of welcomed inclusiveness.
- Host listening sessions for multi-cultural communities that participate in the parish, but choose not to enroll in school (common among Hispanic families). Seek to understand reasons for disparities and create a plan with a community to create a more inclusive environment.
- Host events for multi-cultural communities on campus.
- For parents interested in enrolling, but hesitant, allow a family to try the school for a day or week.

Areas of Focus

OFFICE SUPPORT, SCHOOL HELP, & FACILITIES

Any type of volunteer assistance can make a big difference for the school. For some parents, acting as a vocal ambassador may be outside their comfort zone or skill set. Find ways to make sure parents feel welcomed to volunteer in many different ways.

Activities for Office Support:

- Anticipate parent volunteers coming to school unexpectedly and looking to satisfy service hours. Always have a number of options that would be helpful and lessen the load of the paid staff. Include a strategy for parents who may not be able to make it into the school, but can accomplish helpful tasks from home.
- Seek out technology assistance such as website help, marketing materials design, and production from parents with the appropriate skills, talent, and resources.
- Keep track of parents visiting the school for tours and admissions events. Enter the information into a database and create call lists for follow up.
- Organize and execute mailings to current and prospective families. Ensure a call to action, such as an invitation to an admissions event.
- Identify and complete grant applications to secure new programs or financing for the school.
- Answer phone calls from prospective families, give tours on campus, and meet privately with prospective families. Provide a level of welcoming and accessibility that is consistent with the culture and vision of the school.
- Obtain the school's press release template and send weekly school news and high-resolution photos to the local media sources about school activities.

Areas of Focus

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OUTREACH

Many parishes throughout the Archdiocese have healthy enrollment levels in religious education programs. In some cases, parish families with children in religious education programs have never been contacted by Catholic schools.

Religious Education Outreach Activities:

- Reach out to the Pastor, in coordination with Parish Presence team, for approval. Set up a time to connect with the Religious Education Director.

- Learn the registration process for religious education students and the calendar of the program including the times and places that they meet. Determine a good time to contact families and invite them to school events. Find out if there are any opportunities for religious education families to participate in school events. If none exist, create some?

- List neighboring parishes with religious education programs to contact and write testimonial letters to families in the programs.

Areas of Focus
NEW FAMILY MENTORS

Parent Ambassadors can assist in enrollment management efforts beyond recruitment and can play a critical role in retention. Many current parents serve as mentors to new families, especially if the Parent Ambassador played a large role in the new family's decision to enroll.

New Family Mentor Activities:

- Reach out to new families before the year starts and answer potential questions
- Host a new family welcome event at the school
- Meet in advance of the school year for children to meet and parents to get acquainted
- Serve as communication liaison between school office and families
- Function as "parking lot" monitors
- Act as "Room Parents"

2. PLAN PROGRAM KICKOFF

The work of the committee to this point has determined focus for the Parent Ambassador Program that will help to improve enrollment at the school. Now it is important to plan an exciting kickoff event that will generate a level of excitement and momentum necessary for successful program.

Sample Agenda- (meeting should last no more than 2 hours)

- I. Introduction and Welcome
- II. The School Vision and Enrollment Targets
- III. Overview of the Parent Ambassador Program
- IV. Areas of Focus
- V. Open Forum
- VI. Next Steps and Meeting Date

Goals for the Parent Ambassador Kickoff:

- Positive and exciting atmosphere
- Share the vision for the program and the school
- Demonstrate proper communication of school value propositions
- Provide overview of the program:
 - Power of Word of Mouth Promotion
 - This Year's Specific Enrollment Target and Areas of Focus
 - The Community Benefit of Healthy Enrollment
 - Needed Time Commitments (As little as 3 hours per month make a difference)
 - Incentives for Ambassadors (if applicable)
 - Communicate Plan to Share Progress to Enrollment Target
- Open Forum: Ideas and suggestions from current parents
- Next meeting date set

3. INVITE ATTENDEES

In order to ensure a high turnout, the Committee can assist in planning and promoting the event. Sample call scripts are located in the Appendix.

Parents' first impressions about the Parent Ambassador Program are important. Share the excitement the Committee has for the organization and develop some interest in the kickoff event. Consider serving food and be sure to host the event on a night that parents will attend. Try to avoid scheduling an event that coincides with other major dates to ensure the maximum turnout.

Identify the parents that the program cannot do without and make phone calls to personally invite them. This is the most effective means of recruiting ambassadors and an easy way to ensure strong participation and leadership. Even if some may be unable to attend or participate, the act of personal outreach will communicate the value school leadership places in their community involvement. This type of outreach may reap unforeseen benefits in the future. It is recommended that the Committee Lead consult *the personal call script sample in the Appendix as a guide, but it is recommended that callers speak in their own words as much as possible.*

Plan the event for a date, time and location that will ensure maximum turnout, especially among parents who received a personal invitation.

Look to identify key traits in potential Parent Ambassadors that meet the needs of the Areas of Focus. Parents with helpful skills or traits, ethnically diverse parents, parents with children in a range of different grade levels, parishioners, and other local organizations.

Send an email, a note to take home and a notice to the entire school to inform parents about the start of the Parent Ambassador Program. Be sure to invite anyone else that may be interested in improving enrollment at the school. A general invitation to all keeps parents from feeling excluded and may bring people and resources to light that had not been considered.

4. TRACK RESULTS AND CELEBRATE WINS

REMEMBER: Happy Parents are the #1 Recruiters for Catholic Schools.

Celebrate every success as it happens to build a sense of accomplishment among Parent Ambassadors. The morale of the group will be very important, taking time to recognize the helpfulness of a Parent Ambassador by enrolling a new family or staffing an event helps develop positive momentum. At the end of the year, regardless if the school reaches the Enrollment Target, keeping a positive and appreciative tone for the hard work of all volunteers will make an enormous difference.

Parent Ambassador Programs should not have to be re-invented each year. Consider the following ways to ensure the long-term sustainability of the group:

- An end of the year parent appreciation event; either a lunch, dinner or party.
- Include successes of the program in the school newsletter and parish bulletin to enhance community activity and generate interest among other parents and volunteers.
- “Promote” your top ambassadors at the end of the school year to lead specific Areas of Focus for the next year.
- Give Parent Ambassadors clothing with school logos, make them identifiable at school events and visible ambassadors outside of the school environment.
- Celebrate a Mass specifically for the Parent Ambassador Program.