

DECLINING CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENROLLMENT AND VARIOUS  
WAYS THAT CATHOLIC  
EDUCATIONAL LEADERS ARE ADDRESSING THE TRENDS

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to

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Introduction

##### Purpose

The purpose of this research is twofold: 1) to determine which Catholic dioceses in the United States have a Catholic elementary school population that is declining at a rate greater than the demographic shifts indicated by the U.S. Census within the same diocese and 2) to survey what Catholic Church leaders are doing to address the growing problem of the loss of Catholic elementary school students in the dioceses that a Catholic elementary school population that is declining at a rate greater than the demographic shifts indicated by the U.S. Census.

##### Problem Statement

The population of the Catholic elementary schools has been on the downward trend since 1965 (DeFiore, 2011). Dioceses within the United States have been addressing this trend in a number of ways. The difficulty for Catholic educational leadership is to determine what is an effective manner to deal with this trend within their own diocese.

## Background Information

The Catholic elementary school system has been an integral part of the education system in the United States. “The bishops have repeatedly called on the entire Catholic community - clergy, religious and laity - to support Catholic schools, not just those parishes that currently sponsor a school (DeFiore, Convey and Schuttloffel, 2009, p.6).” The declining enrollment in the American Catholic school system has given rise to new strategies for addressing this trend. “From 2000 to 2009, Catholic school enrollments decreased by over 17 percent from 2.65 million students to 2.19 million students, a loss of 460,000 students in just nine years (DeFiore, et al., 2009, p.9).” This nationwide trend is set against of backdrop of major demographic shifts in the country (Hughes, 2010) Given these two occurrences, it is possible that the reconfiguration of Catholic schools, particularly on the elementary level, may be addressed differently in differently dioceses. For this reason it is important to examine how Catholic dioceses in the United States, with Catholic elementary school student populations that are shrinking at a rate slower than the corresponding rates of the U.S. Census, are addressing this problem.

## Significance

This study may inform Catholic educational leaders of the various processes that have been utilized by Catholic dioceses throughout the United States to address the declining Catholic elementary school enrollment trends within their respective dioceses. By better understanding the various ways that declining enrollment trends are being addressed, future Catholic Church leaders may be better equipped to make informed decisions.

### Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the analysis:

- 1.) Which Catholic dioceses in the United States have seen a decline in enrollment in Catholic elementary schools between 2005 and 2010 that is greater than the demographic shift in the same diocese?
- 2.) What are the processes the Catholic elementary school leaders are using to address the Catholic elementary school enrollment trends within their dioceses?
- 3.) What are the similarities and differences in the strategic plans used by the dioceses that needed to change the structure of their Catholic elementary schools?

### Definition of Terms

Catholic elementary school - grades K to 8

Strategic plan -

Diocese

Catholic educational leaders

### Limitations

Catholic Dioceses within the United States have been forthcoming in the publishing of their strategic plans for Catholic elementary education. These plans are the product of a strategic planning process held within the diocese. The process whereby these plans have been developed is rarely shared with the public. The end product of these processes is what this study will examine.

Hughes, J (2010, January). *The Coming Waves* [PowerPoint slides]. Presented at the St. John's

University January Conference Day, Oakdale, NY. Retrieved from

[http://web.me.com/ktdunlop/Site/Courses\\_files/Waves.pdf](http://web.me.com/ktdunlop/Site/Courses_files/Waves.pdf)