News

Students compete in a game of tug of war Feb. 1, 2022, at St. Patrick School in Smithtown, N.

Students compete in a game of tug of war Feb. 1, 2022, at St. Patrick School in Smithtown, N.Y. The event was one of many special activities scheduled by the school to celebrate Catholic Schools Week. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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February 15, 2022

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WASHINGTON — Catholic school enrollment increased for the first time in two decades this school year, according to a preliminary report released by the National Catholic Educational Association Feb. 14.

The enrollment increase was from Catholic elementary schools and overall grew overall by 5.8% — primarily due to the sharp rise in the number of prekindergarten students. Catholic secondary schools' enrollment went down by 0.4% this year.

Highlights of the annual report, which will be issued in March, showed an enrollment increase of 62,000 students, or a 3.8% jump.

The increase does not put Catholic school numbers back to their pre-pandemic levels though. During the first year of the pandemic, Catholic school enrollment decreased by 6.4%, its largest one-year decline in the 50 years the NCEA has been collecting school data. Right now, Catholic school enrollment is 2.8% lower than it was 2019-2020.

The brief report credited the enrollment bump this year to Catholic schools' "dedication in safely opening classrooms and supporting their communities' needs," but it also stressed this trend must continue.

It pointed out that schools "need to continue to adapt to those needs and use the momentum to retain students and recruit new students in the upcoming years to stabilize or continue to increase enrollment."

Elementary schools were initially hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic with an 8.1% decrease in enrollment last year. The report calls this year's increase a "positive sign for long-term secondary school viability."

The number of students in Catholic school prekindergarten classes increased by 33.5% this year with nearly every state reporting an increase of students in this age group particularly Utah with a 137% increase and California with a 134% increase.

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The brief report pointed out that prekindergarten enrollment accounted for 66% of Catholic schools' increased enrollment. But this increase, just as with overall enrollment, is still lower than pre-pandemic levels, which the NCEA report said was troubling.

Last year, NCEA announced that 186 elementary schools and 23 high schools closed in 2020. This year's report says that on average over the past five years, approximately 100 Catholic schools have closed or consolidated. At the end of the 2020-2021 school year, 71 Catholic schools closed or merged.

In breaking down the data by dioceses, the report's highlights found that the largest dioceses are losing enrollment at more than double the rate of other dioceses over the past two years.

"As the population in the United States shifts away from major cities, the largest dioceses may face more school closures and consolidations. Dioceses will need to determine how they can continue to serve underserved communities in their cities as these changes occur," the report said.

The NCEA findings also noted how U.S. Catholic schools have adapted in recent years. Currently there are seven Catholic virtual schools, 71 International Baccalaureate programs and 114 dual language immersion programs.

Nationally, 6.8% of Catholic school students utilize a parental choice program and 20.2% of Catholic schools enrolled students using parental choice programs.

The report's data about principal and teacher retention found that 89% of principals and 86% of teachers returned to their school from the previous year, excluding those who retired. The report credited this high retention rate, even amid the pandemic, to the support Catholic school teachers and principals feel.

To ensure this retention rate continues, it added: "Catholic schools should continue to examine teacher pay as on average it is almost 20% below what local public school districts pay. Further, Catholic schools should offer opportunities for professional and spiritual growth for their teachers, and dioceses need to similarly support their principals."