

Catholic school enrollment moves steadily downward

by [Barri Bronston](#) in the [January 11, 2011](#) issue

Not much keeps New Orleans Archbishop Gregory Aymond up at night. But one thing does make him toss and turn.

In the past four years, especially after Hurricane Katrina, Catholic school enrollment has been steadily falling. Finding ways to reverse the trend has been the most challenging work of his administration. "There is a decline and there has been a decline for the last several years, nationally as well as locally," Aymond said.

Catholic schools took a hit from Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and have continued losing students since, with enrollment dropping almost 5 percent since 2007, from 40,625 to 38,434. It's down 19 percent from pre-Katrina levels, and there are 20 fewer schools.

Nationally, Catholic school enrollment has shrunk 20 percent over the past decade, from 2.6 million to 2.1 million students, according to the National Catholic Educational Association. More than 1,600 schools have closed or consolidated, with elementary schools taking the biggest hit.

In November, the Archdiocese of New York proposed shuttering 32 schools in what church officials described as the largest reorganization in that school system's history. In Baltimore, 13 parochial schools are set to close.

"It's significant, and it's disturbing," said Sister Dale McDonald, the national association's public policy director. "We're talking about a half million students."

The reasons for the decline, both nationally and locally, are numerous. Families are smaller, tuition is higher and public charter and magnet schools are more popular than ever.

The trend is especially surprising in the New Orleans area, where the percentage of students attending nonpublic schools has historically been one of the highest in the

United States.

Linda Kleinschmidt of Metairie enrolled her daughter, Eva, in the coed Haynes Academy for Advanced Studies magnet school—the state's second-ranked public high school—over the all-girls St. Mary's Dominican High School. "It was not a matter of money," Kleinschmidt said. "It was more a difference in the social and academic environment that single-sex schools cannot offer. We are happy so far with the decision."

Ben Kleban, founder and director of New Orleans College Prep charter school, said that while most of his students come from other public schools, he's seeing a rise in applicants coming from Catholic schools. "I'm hearing more and more from parents that it doesn't make sense for them to pay tuition if we can provide as good or better education than what they are getting at a parochial school," Kleban said.

Lynn Jenkins, admissions director at Benjamin Franklin High School, Louisiana's top public high school, said the number of new students from Catholic schools rose from 29 to 46 this year. Such switches are becoming increasingly common. "Charter and magnet schools have definitely affected our enrollment, and we know that," Aymond said.

While specialized public schools offer a good education, Aymond thinks families are leaving Catholic schools for economic reasons: the average tuition for elementary school is \$3,400 a year; for high school, \$8,000. "Catholic education is expensive," Aymond said. "We not only provide excellent [secular] education but we provide excellence in the teaching of the Catholic faith. It worries me, as I look toward the future. We do not want Catholic education to be something for the elite. That would go against our whole philosophy."

The New Orleans Archdiocese, like a number of other dioceses, is starting the new year with a comprehensive strategic plan, consulting with experts from Catholic University in Washington and holding public meetings. Further school closings and consolidations—steps that in the past have distressed parents loyal to Catholic schools in New Orleans and other major cities in the Midwest and Northeast—are bound to be part of the solution, officials admit. —RNS