

Placing faith in learning

The start of the school year is fraught with anxiety for many families, as parents embark on choosing the best school for their child in the following academic year and applying for a place. It is vital to be prepared

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THE START of the new academic year invariably brings a mix of excitement and anxiety, as students start their new school years or join new schools, colleges or universities. But the tension is probably never greater than among those families doing the rounds of primary or secondary schools ahead of making applications for places by November (secondaries) or January (primaries). For those seeking places in Catholic schools, with their famously high standards, and consequent oversubscription, the fears of not finding a suitable place for one's child frequently verge on desperation. This may well be mitigated in coming years by the news announced this month that the cap on faith-based admissions to free schools and new academies will be lifted. But parents setting out on the open-evening circuit in pursuit of the right school for their child will still do so with trepidation.

This process of visiting as many schools as possible should provide a celebration of Catholic education at its best, but it is also a challenge to families to revisit what they really want and hold most dear. It can be both confusing and daunting. Websites, Ofsted reports, performance tables, opinions of friends and neighbours and what's being said at the school gate all shed light on how a school performs; yet the nagging question remains: is this the right school for my child?

Admission policies and application criteria are pored over, with some parents trying every trick in the book to get their child into a top-ranking school – make no mistake about it, Catholic schools generally outperform other schools at an impressive level. The 2015 data from the Catholic Education Service (CES) demonstrates that Catholic schools make up 10 per cent of the national total of maintained schools. Thirty-seven per cent of pupils in Catholic maintained primary schools are from ethnic minority backgrounds (30 per cent nationally); 17 per cent of pupils at Catholic maintained secondary schools live in the most deprived areas (12 per cent nationally). Eighty-three per cent of Catholic secondary schools have Ofsted grades of good or outstanding (75 per cent nationally). At age 11, pupils in Catholic schools outperform the national average English and Maths SATs scores by 6 per cent. At GCSE, Catholic schools exceed the national average by 5 per cent.

To do

PARENTS AND PUPILS: get clear, informative and reflective guidance to help you make the best school choice possible.

SCHOOLS: help to support and guide parents during the application and admissions process.

PARENTS: don't be swayed by a school's reputation. Is it right for your child?

Oversubscription of many Catholic schools places both the governors who make up the admitting body and the families in challenging situations. Each year, my parish priest asks me to address over 250 parents on the purpose of Catholic education. There are some aspects of these evenings I find heartbreaking. Our local primary school has an admissions number of 60 a year. What can I say to the other 190 hopefuls?

Last year, as the numbers applying to this outstanding school soared, we realised that we had to present the full picture of what Catholic education is all about – the transformation of the person for the transformation of society. Furthermore, we had to stop talking just about the school in our parish and promote the whole family of schools throughout the deanery. Together we are educating and forming our young people to find their God-given gifts for the world and have the knowledge, skills and wisdom to know when and how to use them.

Repeatedly Pope Francis challenges the youth of today “to be revolutionaries – I ask you to swim against the tide”. But, how many parents want their child to be that “revolutionary”? Do they really know what is meant by this revolutionary call? This was one of the main reasons why EducareM was prompted to develop a resource for parents and clergy, *Choosing a Catholic School: a practical guide*, to assist families in this important discernment. Academic excellence, situated in a holistic approach that deals as much with the formation of the person as with academic achievement, is the entitlement of every pupil in a Catholic school.

The book includes interviews with parents about their choices of schools and these are particularly illuminating and encouragingly

honest. Young people from primary, secondary and sixth-form colleges speak about their education and school life. These interviews were for me extremely encouraging as their responses to my questions often went much further than anticipated.

The integration of beliefs and values in the pupils' reflective answers to wide-ranging questions, particularly on issues of social justice, clearly reflected a mature understanding that they were not just being educated for the market place. I saw this very clearly with a group of Year 5 pupils who launched into a critical analysis of what the Prime Minister needs to focus on, instead of, as one pupil said, “being rude and silly in Prime Minister's Question Time”.

Across the board, one sees the ability to link learning with what needs to be challenged in society today. The question “How will a Catholic education prepare my child for the world of today?” often surfaces in parents' meetings. The responses are positive but not without some thoughtful challenges for schools. Helping parents and carers to understand what Catholic education is all about, what to look for in a school, to know the school's expectations and what they as parents can expect from the school, is clearly outlined in the publication.

With adult education in short supply in most parishes, many head teachers will bear testimony to the often scant knowledge parents have of church teaching, the sacraments and prayer (including the scriptural background to prayers and the liturgical life of the Church). They need a resource that endeavours to offer help and guidance in supporting their young people as they prepare to go to school as well as throughout their school life.

One parent recently told me that she had visited a very popular secondary school for her daughter. She applied for a place and was successful in securing it; but she decided not to take it. She told me that she came away feeling that her daughter would have to fit the mould and that is not what she needs – or what they want for her. I couldn't help recalling the words of Oscar Wilde: “Be yourself. Everyone else is taken.”

Sr Judith Russi SSMN is the director of EducareM. *Choosing a Catholic school: a practical guide* is published by Redemptorist Publications, price £9.95.