

# Why parents choose Catholic school

## Values and education outweigh cost of private school

Parents are faced with so many decisions that greatly impact the lives of their children, and deciding on the best school for a child's education is at the top of the list. For Rosemarie and Robert Merkel, that decision meant sending their daughter to a Montessori school for PreK and Kindergarten, then to Our Lady of Mount Carmel School in Middletown for grades 1 through 8, then on to a public school for her high school years. The Merckels say they believed a Catholic school environment for the bulk of their daughter's education would be more nurturing and

enforce the positive morals they were instilling at home.

Many parents like the Merckels enroll their children in a Catholic school based on family tradition (one or both parents attended a Catholic school as a child) and an overall support of similar beliefs.

Kathy MacGregor and her husband of Pearl River both attended Catholic schools and now, their daughter Tara attends second grade at St. Margaret School in Pearl River. "I do like the closeness you find in a Catholic school," says Kathy. "I remained friends with many of the girls that I met in my

grammar school. I also hope my daughter will carry the values a Catholic school instills with her in the future."

Eileen Kelly of Goshen, co-chair of the Parent's Club at John S. Burke High School in Goshen, agrees. "All of my children have made wonderful friends during their years at Burke. I think their Catholic school experience will stay with them for the rest of their lives. They will draw from it during their college years and as they enter the workforce."

"These are not just schools, they are educational communities," says Jacqueline Lofaro of the Archdiocese of New York. Combining common values, a sense of community and learning is at the core of a Catholic education.

"While we try to provide as good an education as possible – and I think we do a pretty good job with our limited resources – what people come to us for is shared values that we incorporate in education," says Jim DeViscio, principal of Bishop Dunn Memorial School in Newburgh. "If there's a death of a student or a parent we can pray together, whereas in a public school setting there would be a question about whether to do that."

DeViscio points out that attending a Catholic school isn't restricted to those who follow the Catholic faith. At Bishop Dunn, 75 percent of the school's nearly 300 students are Catholic. The rest, he says, are various other denominations. "It's more Judeo-Christian values," he adds.

When researching the right educational opportunities for your

child, consider the individual child's needs and the opportunities the child will have at a particular school. As their daughter approached 9th grade, the Merckels decided their daughter Katrina would find AP (Advanced Placement or college level) courses in the public school system as well as the ability to participate in a number of music-related electives that were not available in the Catholic high school system in their area. So, when Katrina graduated from 8th grade, her parents sent her to a public school.

Because they are considering a private school, parents must also consider additional school expenses, including tuition, uniforms and extracurricular activities, and transportation. The Merckels say the drawbacks of sending their daughter to a private school were tuition expenses and mandatory parent volunteering (though these policies vary by school and some have eliminated this policy altogether).

Each school may have a different total cost based on tuition, but expect to pay an annual rate of approximately \$5,000 per year for one student. Many schools offer discounts on tuition for siblings, and financial aid and scholarships may be available with guidelines provided by the school.

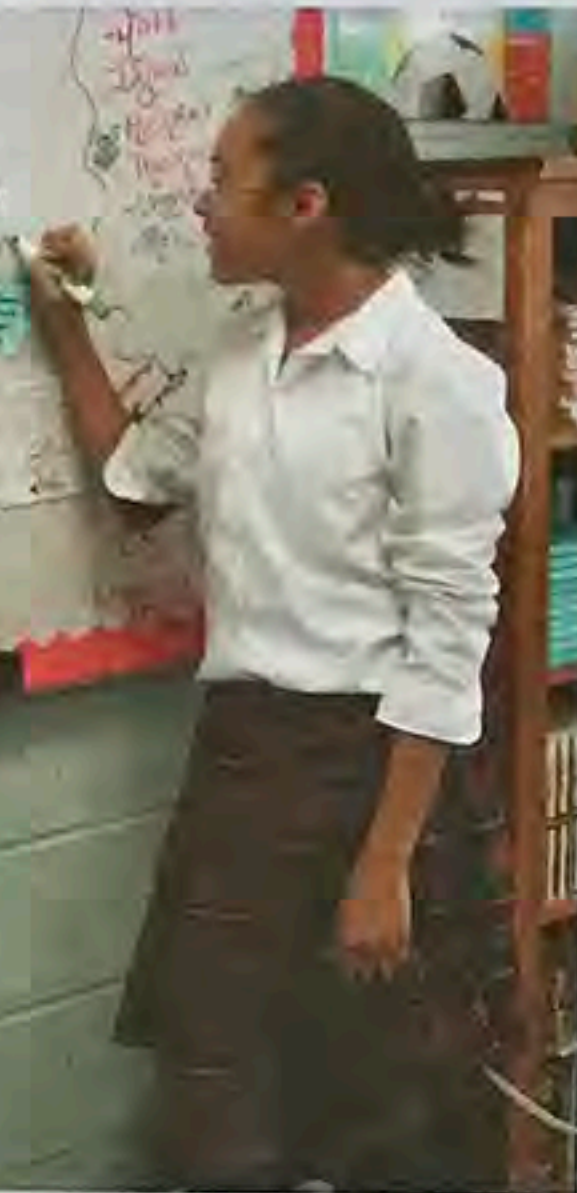
"In the '50s Catholic schools provided a good education that was affordable for the lower middle class. Now it's more costly, although we're relatively inexpensive for a private school," says Jim DeViscio of Bishop Dunn.

Jacqueline Lofaro of the Archdiocese agrees that enrollment been on the decline because several schools have closed. She adds that the flagging economy in recent years has been an issue as well. "Middle and upper-middle income families have had a harder time economically. It's been a struggle for parents. We try to keep tuition costs where they are."

*"As a mother of a tween, I want to make sure during these critical years she has the best environment and moral foundation for making the right decision."*

**MIRANDA KNOWLTON**


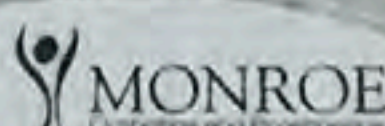
Mother of Destiny Thomas, who attends Bishop Dunn Memorial School in Newburgh



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Though mandatory fundraising is mostly a thing of the past, additional costs have been absorbed into the overall expense of the student's education. These charges will be listed in the school's information package or brochure. At Our Lady of Lourdes in Poughkeepsie, for instance, optional fees may include band, SAT prep course, driver education, and Summer Regents review sessions. Dutchess County Community College courses and AP courses are also not included, but are available.

While uniform costs may run up to \$250 per year, some educators like Jim DeViscio say "it saves money in the long run than having to clothe a child."

How a student feels about wearing a uniform is another matter. Katrina Merkel felt wearing a uniform as a young child was not a problem, but once old enough to have a stronger opinion, she wanted to show her own identity in clothing choices.

Transportation may be provided to and from the school via the student's public school district, but is not required. Urban settings may provide students with passes for public transportation. A student may have a longer overall day since they must first ride the public school bus to the public school followed by the shuttle to the Catholic school.

Marybeth Reinfried of Montgomery is a co-chair of the Parent's Club at Burke and has advocated for her children by contacting the public school district to request improved bus routes, with limited success. The original pick up time for her son to attend Burke was 6:10am at the start of this school year, but has since been modified

## How religious instruction compares

Remember, children will be exposed to basic religious beliefs and themes as part of the curriculum at any age. A student can begin as early as nursery school or after completing a public school education through the 8th grade, may take a T.A.C.H.S. (Test for Admission to Catholic High School) exam and attend a Catholic high school. For more information about the exam, go to [www.tachusinfo.com](http://www.tachusinfo.com) or call 1-866-61-TACHS. Many nursery school or Pre-K programs may be available in cooperation with your community's Catholic Church.

The main differences outside of the religious instruction between a Catholic and public school are:

- Catholic (or any private schools) are not required by the NYS Education Department to schedule a 180 day instructional calendar
- Teachers are not required to be certified
- The school is not required to use State curriculum materials
- Most Catholic schools have smaller class sizes with better student/teacher ratio than public schools
- May include required retreats or other educational trips held during non-school hours.

Similarities include:

- A Regents competency or equivalent exam must be given in: reading, writing, math, science, global studies, and U.S. history & government
- Gym or physical education is required (Data courtesy of [www.emsc.nysed.gov](http://www.emsc.nysed.gov)).

Catholic schools are not required to submit all of their cohort information including graduation rates, college enrollment, test scores and student costs to the general public as printed in local newspaper report cards for public schools. The information may be privately obtained through the individual school and some data may be researched at [www.ncea.org/news/catholicschooldata.asp](http://www.ncea.org/news/catholicschooldata.asp). In order to determine if the school you are considering is accredited, check out [www.accreditedschools.org](http://www.accreditedschools.org) or [www.css-msa.org](http://www.css-msa.org) and confirm the type of school, if the school is a member of the Archdiocese of New York school district, the student/teacher ratio and other related information about the school. The more information obtained, the better decision you will be able to make for you and your child.

For More Information:

- [www.allprivateschools.org](http://www.allprivateschools.org) - information regarding a variety of private schools by area
- [www.nystart.gov](http://www.nystart.gov) - For public school and district report cards
- [www.admynschools.org](http://www.admynschools.org) - The Superintendent of Schools Office for the Archdiocese of NY - users can search for elementary or high schools in their area.

to 6:40. Reinfried feels the distance between the family home and school may interfere with parental involvement and attendance at school events.

### Weigh your options to make the best choice

Harriman resident JoAnne Califano's son, Daniel, graduated from Burke. "Although some might consider the cost of parochial school a drawback," says the Harriman resident, "we believe the benefits of the superior education our son received far outweighed the financial hardship."

"Regardless of the cost, parents are choosing Catholic schools because the academics and infusion of values are superior," says Lofaro. "We provide a sound education in a safe, nurturing, predictable environment."

A predictable environment is one of the biggest reasons Newburgh mom of three Miranda Knowlton sends her daughter Destiny to Bishop Dunn. "I chose to send my daughter to an area Catholic school where I know classes are smaller, and it is considerably safer," she explains. "These are the years when my daughter is the most impressionable and most influenced by peers. I want to make sure during these critical years she has the best environment and moral foundation for making the right decision when faced with a problem."

Rosemarie Merkel says the best way for a parent to decide if Catholic school is right for their child is if the program is the right fit for the child's needs at that time. The key is to research the best situation for your child and his future.

Sharon MacGregor is a freelance columnist and writer living with her family in Orange County. Her work appears regularly in Hudson Valley Parent magazine.

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