



# Lighting the Way

PITTSBURGH CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

## Lighting the Way

*How Pittsburgh's Catholic Schools Reversed a Ten-Year Decline and Increased Student Enrollment During the Peak of a Pandemic*

### SITUATION ANALYSIS

Enrollment in Catholic schools in the United States dropped 6.4% from 2020-21 amid the pandemic and economic distress — the largest single-year decline in the 50 years. As a result, more than 200 Catholic schools closed or consolidated when families impacted by Covid-19 faced tuition averaging \$5,000-\$10,000 or more, according to the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA). As a result, the number of Catholic schools in the U.S. has dropped from 11,000 in 1970 to less than 6,000 today.

The Diocese of Pittsburgh was no exception to the impacts of Covid-19 and declining enrollment. In 2021, they sought a proactive strategy to reverse the downward trend in Pittsburgh's Catholic schools.

**The Challenge** — The Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh, like most Catholic dioceses across America, had endured at least a decade of declining enrollment in its schools (pre K-12). The result of a declining population of school-aged children, the rise in popularity of charter schools in Pennsylvania, and rising tuition, enrollment diocesan schools was in a long, steady freefall. And the National Catholic Education Association called Covid-19 an “accelerant” in the longstanding challenges facing Catholic education. School closures, mergers, and consolidations were occurring on an annual basis in the Pittsburgh diocese, resulting in job losses for teachers and staff, with no end in sight.

**The Solution** — The Diocese of Pittsburgh's *Lighting the Way* campaign overcame years of declining enrollment by aggressively communicating a market-

driven message platform that reinforced the traditional strengths as well as attributes of a 21<sup>st</sup> century Catholic education that matter most to parents today.

### INSIGHTS AND ANALYSIS

OPR Group LLC was engaged to design, develop, implement, and manage a solution to reverse this long decline and help increase enrollment in Pittsburgh's Catholic schools.

A team was assembled in the areas of market research, media planning, social media, public relations, marketing communications, and advertising to develop an integrated communications plan.

#### *Pre-Campaign Marketing Research*

- **Primary Research**
  - *Parents Survey* — A total of 678 adults living in the Diocese of Pittsburgh participated in an online survey. This poll has a margin of error of +/-4%. Where applicable, these results are benchmarked to a survey of 2,335 parents with children currently enrolled in Diocese of Pittsburgh school. This survey has a margin of error of +/- 2%.
  - *Focus Groups* — Four focus groups with 40 residents living within the Pittsburgh Diocese were completed, each group representing a different Catholic school experience.
- **Secondary Research**
  - *National Survey Benchmarks* — A national survey of student enrollment conducted by the NCEA was contrasted with the local findings in order to provide a comparative contrast in findings.

**Research Findings** — The research informed message development and campaign storytelling. We found that parents were most interested in learning about **strong academic curricula** and opportunities in Pittsburgh's Catholic schools, particularly in STEM subjects. Similarly, **academic results, as measured by graduation rates, GPA, and college acceptance** were of particular importance to parents and families. **Small class sizes** and the fellowship that thrives in a Catholic school **community** were viewed as strengths compared with that of public schools. Parents also stressed the importance of **diversity** among faculty and students at all levels (pre-K through grade 12).

Using psychographic and demographic segmentation, it was determined that a **target market population of 68,000 households** in the Diocese of Pittsburgh

would be willing to consider enrolling their children in one of Pittsburgh's Catholic schools.

## PLANNING

### Objectives

- Identify a **community of families** who would be most disposed to enrolling their children in diocesan schools.
- Achieve at least **5% growth** in enrollment in the 2021-22 academic year over 2020-21.
- Create a program that can become the **foundation for future enrollment growth** and serve as a model for ongoing enrollment marketing.

### Strategies

- **Engage families** with details, discussion, and consideration of a Catholic education
- Communicate the opportunities for **tuition assistance**.
- Consistently **apply key messages** to parents and families in an **integrated campaign** of marketing communications in the key enrollment period leading up to the 2021-22 school year.

## EXECUTION

- **Social Media Influencer Network** — A team of **social media micro-influencers** called the "*Pittsburgh Catholic School Believers*" was created to extend the reach of the campaign and amplify key messages through new and ongoing authentic photography and storytelling. This private Facebook group was a forum where parents and staff of the Pittsburgh Catholic Schools would engage in conversation around campaign topics and provide new assets that could be used in social media posts.
- **Digital Media** — A dedicated **website landing page** was created on the Diocese of Pittsburgh website to enable interested parents to find a diocesan school in their community and complete a form to begin the enrollment application process. **Digital ads** were targeted at the primary target audience through a variety of **social and digital platforms** with strategic messaging for the sole purpose of **driving traffic to the landing page**.
- **Marketing Collateral Fulfillment** — Upon completing the form, users received a case brochure via email, "*A Parent's Guide to Pittsburgh's Catholic Schools*" which made the strongest possible case for a Catholic education focused entirely on the key messages of the campaign. Additionally, a **brochure layout template**

**was created to enable each elementary school to customize for itself**, creating a consistent brand identity and messaging through the campaign.

- **Paid Media** — A **television and social media advertising** campaign was produced and executed, featuring six Pittsburgh Catholic school alumni, each of which focused on one of the key messages identified in the research. View the TV spots [here](#).

## EVALUATION AND RESULTS

According to the Diocese of Pittsburgh's own enrollment data, enrollment for the 2021/22 school year **increased 12.4%** over the previous year, far surpassing the stated goal of a 5% increase for the *Lighting the Way* campaign. **This includes an increase of 16.9% for grades K-8 and a 6.8% increase for high school.** By comparison, public and private school enrollment in the Diocese of Pittsburgh region continued to decline, even when adjusted for Covid-19-related impacts. And Catholic school enrollment nationwide increased only 3% and public schools by 1% during the same period.

- **Social Media** — Managed posts on social media reached approximately **16,000 discrete users**. The "Pittsburgh Catholic School Believers" influencer network generated **over 600 post engagements** on our dedicated Facebook page. A "social listening" analysis was performed to measure aggregated mentions of the Diocese of Pittsburgh before and during the *Lighting the Way* campaign. This measurement tool found that while the "volume," or frequency of social media mentions remained relatively constant throughout the pre- and during period, **"positive" mentions increased from 8% to 18%**, and included increased conversations about "schools," "students," "parents," and "Catholic schools," an **increase of 122% over the pre-campaign level**.
- **Digital Media** — In driving new users to the dedicated [web landing page](#), the campaign generated **16,168 new users**, which led to an increase in new student applications over the 2020-21 levels. Impressions and user views of the video and digital assets were **50-100% above the index benchmarks** for the target demographics.
- **Paid Media** — The television advertising campaign generated **3.58 million impressions specifically in the target demographic** (women, aged 35-54, who attend religious services at least once per month) over an eight-week period, **53% above the index benchmark** for the target demographic in this market. Total impressions were 34.2 million.