

THE SCHOOL CHOICE DECISIONS OF CATHOLIC FAMILIES

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Abstract

This paper is a report of findings from a project, undertaken on behalf of the Queensland Catholic Education Commission, to explore factors influencing access to Catholic schools in Queensland for Catholic families in low socio-economic circumstances. It addresses the questions: What are the most important factors affecting the choice of school for Catholic families? How important is affordability as an issue in the school choice decision for Catholic families? The research design consisted of a two-phase, sequential, mixed-methods approach that utilised quantitative and qualitative data from surveys and interviews to answer the research questions driving the project. It would seem that all Catholic families, irrespective of income, expect much of the school environment in terms of care and concern for children and the management of school-based relationships. The most highly valued factor in school choice is teacher quality. Affordability becomes more of an issue the lower the family income is. However, it is listed by all income groups well below teacher quality, school-based relationships and religious reasons for choosing a school.

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Introduction

The number of children from low income Catholic families attending Catholic schools in Queensland is declining (Harkness, 2003). This situation concerns the Bishops of Queensland as Catholic schools share the mission of the Church to live, share and proclaim the good news of the Gospel in our everyday lives and Queensland Catholic Education Commission's (QCEC) mission to enhance the quality of Catholic education across the State in ways that proclaim the good news of the Gospel to the poor, the marginalized and other diverse groups. There appears to be a number of factors underpinning the declining enrolments.

The decrease in number of children from low socio-economic backgrounds in Catholic schools has been linked to the engendering of greater choice and competition into schooling, after the introduction of a Socioeconomic Status (SES) model for school funding in 2001 that is based on estimates of the financial capacity of the school. The SES model generates a socioeconomic profile of the school and the community using Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census data. Though Catholic schools were not initially funded through the SES model, Catholic schools were included in the 2005–2008 quadrennial span after negotiations with the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC). The changed model of funding, along with de-zoning was advanced, by the then Australian Government, as offering parents/guardians, particularly those with low incomes, a greater choice in the selection of a school for their children.

Although the current Australian Government's funding practices have changed, the SES model has continued to be contentious due to a perception that increased funding goes to wealthy private schools and less to Government schools. It is claimed that the social divide has steadily increased since the SES model was introduced (Cobbold, 2007; Preston, 2007). So, rather than increasing the choice of low income families and providing support to struggling schools, the reverse may have occurred. Many researchers, in a range of different countries, have linked choice of school to social class and have suggested that social inequalities are strengthened when choice occurs (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1996; Echols & Willms, 1995; Ladd & Fiske, 2001; Lankford & Wyckoff, 1992; Reay & Ball, 1997; Reay & Lucey, 2000; Schneider, Marschall, Teske, & Roch, 1998). It can be argued that choice is a matter of "economic privilege" with wealthier families actually exercising choice and having more choices available to them (Reay & Lucey, 2003). In Australia, it has been suggested that, reasons for declining numbers of Catholic children in Catholic schools are related to cost, distance from a Catholic school, the demand for places, criteria such as "committed Catholics" being applied to regulate enrolments and a view that some State schools have better facilities" (Harkness, 2003, p. 7).

This paper is a report of findings from a project, undertaken on behalf of the Queensland Catholic Education Commission, to explore factors influencing access to Catholic schools in Queensland for Catholic families in low socio-economic circumstances. The following research questions are addressed: What are the most important factors affecting the choice of school for Catholic families? How important is affordability as an issue in the school choice decision for Catholic families?

Methods

The research design consisted of a two-phase, sequential, mixed-methods approach that utilised quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research questions driving the project. Phase One involved the administration of a survey instrument designed to collect data from parents/guardians of children in Catholic schools in year seven and prep/pre-schools, parents/guardians from Catholic parishes across each of the Queensland dioceses and Australian Catholic University students who are parents/guardians. This phase also included the administration of the survey in a range of shopping centres in each of the dioceses. To ensure that the 'voices' of parents across Queensland were represented, surveys were distributed evenly across the five Queensland diocese. The Bishop and the Director of each diocese were consulted and nominated a person who was familiar with all areas within the diocese to perform the role of research assistant. Surveys were also distributed at parish masses, shopping centres and offered on-line to access Catholic families with children not attending Catholic schools. The sites for data collection centred on areas that were identified as low-socio-economic according to current Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data. The research assistants followed strict guidelines regarding the distribution of the surveys and participants were provided with envelopes to seal their surveys in to either hand back to the research assistants or mail back to the university.

This process followed common research data collection procedures. The on-line version of the survey was developed and advertised extensively for families to access through a number of Catholic agency websites. Controls were put in place to prevent individuals responding to the on-line version more than once. Phase Two involved interviewing a small but representative sample of volunteers in each diocese of the state. The focus of this paper is on survey or Phase One data.

The following table outlines the total possible sample of participants for Phase 1 of the study.

Table 1
Sample of Phase 1

Component	Data collection sites	Sample	Possible Sample Size
1	Primary schools	Parents with children in Catholic and government primary schools (Pre-school and Year 7)	1600
2	Shopping Centres	Parents with children who may or may not be in Catholic schools	300
3	ACU (Brisbane)	ACU students and community who may or may not have children in Catholic schools	60
4	Parish church	Parents who may or may not have children in a Catholic school	700

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument employed in Phase One consisted of three sets of items. Set One consisted of 29 items, each of which related to a particular school choice issue identified in the research literature. For each issue, respondents were asked to indicate the degree of importance to your school choice decision. A five-point fixed response format was employed for all Set One items: not important at all, slightly important, moderately important, highly important, and extremely important.

Set Two had three items, each of which had space provided on the survey instrument where the respondent could write answers. The purpose of these items was to provide respondents with the flexibility to move beyond the fixed-response issues of Set One.

Set Three items were designed to collect demographic data to allow group comparisons of Set One and Set Two items.

Survey instrument is attached as Appendix A.

Survey Sample

The final sample of parents/guardians who responded to the survey instrument consisted of 896 adults who had children in Queensland schools. This represented 33.6 % of the target sample. Table 2 shows analogous data for two variables: religion/religious tradition and total household weekly income.

Table 2
Description of Sample according to Religion and Weekly Household Income

Demographic Variable and Sample Size			
Religion/ Religious Tradition	Sample	Total Weekly Household Income (\$)	Sample
Anglican	111	1 – 149	4
Catholic	556	150 – 349	16
Lutheran	13	350 – 499	41
Uniting	60	500 – 649	88
Other Christian	58	650 – 799	104
Non Christian	5	800 – 999	160
No nominated religion	87	>1,000	422
Missing Data	6	–	–
		Missing Data	61
Total	896	Total	896

Note. Missing data: This information was not provided by these respondents.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (e.g. frequencies, means, standard deviations and cross-tabulations) are the main form of data analysis that has been used. However, where appropriate, tests of statistical inference were employed. For example, each Set One item provided ordinal data on a school choice issue. As such, parametric tests (e.g. t-tests, analysis of variance) could not be conducted when comparing groups on these issues. Accordingly, non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests (for comparison involving two groups) and the more general Kruskal-Wallis H test (for three or more groups) were performed.

Findings

In this paper the findings from analysis of the survey data namely, 29 Set One items affecting school choice for Catholic families are presented along with the refinement of rankings of importance provided by survey Set Two, Item Two as well as written responses in Set Two. Set Three items are used to group participants according to religious affiliation and income.

Catholic Families and School Choice Issues

In Table 3 the 29 Set One items/issues related to school choice for Catholic families are ranked in terms of the proportion of respondents who endorsed highly important or extremely important for that issue. For example, Table 3 shows that 96.4% of respondents answered highly important or extremely important for the item teaching quality. While most issues had quite high endorsement proportions, it is instructive to consider those issues at the top of the rankings because they provide evidence of the key issues when parents/guardians make school choice decisions. It is clear that teaching quality, safety of my child, and relationships (teacher-student, student-student and parent-student), the level of care and concern in the school, public image of student behaviour, and school reputation and image are all critically important to school choice decision-making. Issues that recorded the lowest levels of importance were school’s extracurricular activities, cultural/ethnic mix of the school, child’s school preference, outside school hours care, and non-refundable deposits for a place in the school.

Table 3
Ranking of School Choice Issues for Sub-Sample: Catholic (498 ≤ n ≤ 556)

Ranking	School Choice Issue	Endorsement proportion (%)
1	Teaching quality	96.4
2	Safety of my child	95.1
3	Teacher – student relationships: how teachers and students “get on with each other”	94.4
4	Level of care and concern in the school	93.3
5	Student – student relationships: how students “get on with each other”	90.6
6	Teacher – parent relationships: how teachers and parents/guardians “get on with each other”	88.5
7	Public image of student behaviour in the school	84.9
8	School reputation and image	82.4
9	How your family would be welcomed in the school	81.5
10	How your family would fit into the school	77.6
11	School facilities	76.5
12	Subjects taught in the school	75.6
13	School’s academic performance	71.4
14	The school/prep where you presently have your children	69.0
15	Religious denomination of the school	62.8
16	The values of your religious denomination/ group	62.4
17	Personal religious reasons	54.9
18	The local community of your religious denomination/ group	47.6
19	Location of school	46.7
20	School fees and other costs (Overall affordability)	45.8
21	Type of School (e.g. P-12, Coed)	39.4
22	Child’s existing friendship groups	36.8
23	Transport to/from school	35.1
24	School’s extra curricular activities e.g. plays, clubs, dances, social events	32.8
25	School’s sporting performance	31.7
26	Cultural/ ethnic mix of the school	31.0
27	Child’s school preference: where they wanted to go	27.8
28	Non-refundable deposits for a place in the school	16.9
29	Outside school hours care	16.6

Note. Ranking is based on aggregated endorsement proportions for Highly Important & Extremely Important response categories for each issue.

School Choice and Religious Affiliation

Frequency distributions were computed for each Set One issue for each of three groups of participants according to religion. The sub-samples were: Catholic, 498 ≤ n ≤ 556; Other Christian, 211 ≤ n ≤ 242; and Other Religion/No Nominated Religion, 75 ≤ n ≤ 87. Variations in sub-sample sizes are due to respondents not answering all items. To test whether there were statistically significant differences among the rankings according to the three religion groups, a series of 29 Kruskal –Wallis H tests were conducted with a Type 1 error rate of .0017 after application of the Bonferroni inequality. Four of these tests were statistically significant: religious denomination of school ($\chi^2_{(df=2)} = 167.40, p < .001$), personal religions reasons ($\chi^2_{(df=2)} = 121.03, p < .001$), the values of your religious denomination/ group ($\chi^2_{(df=2)} = 118.68, p < .001$), and the local community of your religious denomination/ group ($\chi^2_{(df=2)} = 117.22, p < .001$).

A review of the school choice issue rankings revealed that Catholic families ranked the four issues related to religious affiliation, much more highly than did the other two groups. For example, while Catholic families ranked religious denomination of school at 15, the Other Christian group ranked it at 26 and the No Nominated Religion group ranked it at 27. Endorsement proportions for these groups were: 62.4%, 25.3% and 16.1% respectively. A similar pattern held for the issue of personal religious reasons. The rankings were 17 (Catholic), 24 (Other Christian) and 28 (No Nominated Religion) with endorsement proportions for these groups being 54.9%, 26.4% and 12.9% respectively. Thus nominated religion did influence the ranking and endorsement of religious denomination of school as a school choice predictor.

Apart from these four school choice issues (viz. religious denomination of school, personal religious reasons, the values of your religious denomination/ group, and the local community of your religious denomination/ group) the data reveal little variation in rankings across the three groups. Teaching quality, safety of my child, relationships (teacher-student, student-student and parent-student), the level of care and concern in the school, public image of student behaviour, school reputation and image and how your family would be welcomed into the school were the nine critically important issues, irrespective of religion. There are some slight permutations in the ranks of these issues but the similarities are very clear. Endorsement proportions for these highly ranked issues were very similar. For example, the endorsement proportions for the level of care and concern were 93.3% (Catholic), 92.9% (Other Christian) and 96.6% (No Nominated Religion).

At the lower end of the rankings, there was little variation in rankings. The school's extracurricular activities (e.g. plays, clubs, dances, social events), cultural/ ethnic mix of the school, non-refundable deposits for a place in the school, and outside school hours care all featured in the lowest 10 rankings of each religion group. Despite some slight variations in rankings, endorsement proportions were very similar for some issues. For example, while school's sporting performance was ranked 25 (Catholic), 20 (Other Christian) and 21 (No Nominated Religion), the endorsement proportions were similar: 31.7%, 32.7% and 35.6% respectively. The Catholic group had higher overall endorsement proportions than the other two groups. In particular, the mean endorsement proportions for the religious data were 60.88% for Catholic, 56.11% for Other Christian and 57.00% for No Nominated Religion. Thus Catholic families, in contrast with other families, did have religious reasons for selecting schools for their children but in addition, shared the same overall desires to have their children in reputable schools with good teachers and high levels of care and concern.

School Choice and Catholic Families whose Children do not attend Catholic Schools

Thirty-four responses were received from Catholic families who did not have children in Catholic schools. To compare the responses of this group with the full sample, a series of 29 Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted. To control for inflated Type 1 error rate, the Bonferroni inequality was employed in which the level of statistical significance for each test was adjusted from .05 to .05/29 (i.e., .0017). Only two of these tests were statistically significant: transport to/from school ($Z = -3.48$, $p < .001$) and student-student relationships: how students get on with each other ($Z = -3.29$, $p < .001$). Interpretation of the frequency distributions revealed that, compared to the full sample, significantly more families from the non-Catholic school families considered transport and student-student relationships to be important school choice issues. However in an overall sense, these 29 analyses indicated little variation between the non-Catholic school families and the full sample.

School Choice and Income for Catholic Families

Income has often been considered a major predictor of school choice. That is, families on low incomes do not have the choices and options that families on higher incomes have at their disposal. To study the influence of income, the 29 Set One school choice issues for Catholic families were ranked according to weekly household income of respondent (Set Three, Item Two variable). The income bands employed in the survey instrument were collapsed to form three groups: below \$500 per week ($57 \leq n \leq 61$), between \$500 and \$1,000 per week ($316 \leq n \leq 352$) and above \$1,000 per week ($369 \leq n \leq 421$). All families with an income of less than \$1000 per week are considered to be in low socioeconomic circumstances by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and accord with Centrelink's criteria for eligibility for low-income health cards. Table 4 shows the number of respondents in each income group.

Table 4
Cross-tabulation of Religion by Income (N = 832 responses)

Religion	Weekly Household Income			Total
	<\$500	\$501-\$999	>\$1,000	
Catholic	33	220	267	520
Protestant	22	90	113	225
No nominated religion	5	38	39	82
Non-Christian	-	2	3	5
Total	60	350	422	832

Notes. Missing values data are not included in this table.

In Table 5 below, the ranking and endorsement proportion for each Set One school choice issue are arranged according to Catholic family income group.

Table 5
Comparison of Ranking and % Endorsement of School Choice Issues for Catholic Families across Three Income Groups

Rank	School Choice Issues: Income < \$500/week	Endorsement %	School Choice Issues: Income \$500-999/week	Endorsement %	School Choice Issues: Income >\$1000	Endorsement %
1	Teaching quality	100.0	Teaching quality	97.3	Teaching quality	95.2
2	Teacher – student relationships:	100.0	Teacher – student relationships:	95.0	Safety of my child	95.0
3	Teacher – parent relationships:	97.0	Safety of my child	94.9	Teacher – student relationships:	93.3
4	Level of care and concern	94.0	Level of care and concern	94.1	Level of care and concern	92.5
5	Safety of my child	91.0	Teacher – parent relationships:	91.3	Student – student relationships	90.3
6	Student – student relationships:	90.9	Student – student relationships:	90.9	Teacher – parent relationships:	87.3
7	Public image of student behaviour	84.8	Public image of student behaviour	86.2	Public image of student behaviour	83.3
8	School reputation and image	78.8	How your family would be welcomed	84.1	School reputation and image	82.5
9	How your family would be welcomed in the school	78.8	School reputation and image	82.7	How your family would be welcomed	80.5
10	How your family would fit	78.8	How your family would fit into the school	81.4	School facilities	76.0
11	Current school	74.2	Subjects taught in the school	80.0	How your family would fit	74.4
12	Subjects taught in the school	72.8	School facilities	78.4	Subjects taught in the school	72.3
13	School's academic performance	69.7	School's academic performance	71.8	School's academic performance	72.0
14	School Religious denomination	69.7	Current school	70.0	Current school	66.4
15	Religious values	68.7	School Religious denomination	65.4	Religious values	60.9
16	Overall affordability	66.7	Religious values	64.6	School Religious denomination	60.4
17	School facilities	66.6	Personal religious reasons	57.8	Personal religious reasons	53.2
18	Personal religious reasons	60.6	Overall affordability	57.5	Local religious community	45.8
19	Local religious community	54.6	Location of school	51.3	Location of school	45.3
20	Child's existing friendship groups	51.5	Local religious community	50.4	Type of School (e.g. P-12, Coed)	35.1
21	Cultural/ ethnic mix of the school	48.5	Type of School (e.g. P-12, Coed)	43.2	Child's existing friendship groups	35.0
22	Type of School (e.g. P-12, Coed)	43.7	Transport to/from school	40.4	Transport to/from school	32.1
23	Location of school	40.6	Child's existing friendship groups	36.8	Overall affordability	31.6
24	Non-refundable deposits	40.0	School's extra curricular activities	35.9	School's extra curricular activities	31.3
25	School's sporting performance	36.4	School's sporting performance	32.8	School's sporting performance	29.7
26	Child's school preference	33.4	Cultural/ ethnic mix of the school	31.8	Cultural/ ethnic mix of the school	28.6
27	School's extra curricular activities	33.3	Child's school preference:	29.2	Child's school preference:	25.9
28	Transport to/from school	31.3	Non-refundable deposits for a place in the school	20.9	Outside school hours care	16.7
29	Outside hours care	27.3	Outside school hours care	16.1	Non-refundable deposits	11.5

Set One questions required respondents to indicate the degree of importance they placed on a fixed set of items/issues when choosing schools for their children. Respondents were able to rate issues from 'not important at all' to 'extremely important'. The responses for Set One items/issues were then ranked in order according to the endorsement proportion given to each issue by the parents/guardians who responded to the question as either 'Highly Important or Extremely Important'. These endorsement proportions were reported as percentages. The analysis of data according to Catholic family income revealed very similar items ranked in the top 4-6 and with more than 90% endorsement. These items were: Teacher Quality; Teacher-Student Relationships; Teacher-Parent Relationships; Level of Care and Concern; Safety of my Child; Student-Student relationships.

For the three Catholic family income groups, Religious Denomination of the school and Values of your Religious Group were ranked similarly around fourteenth and fifteenth. However, while 'Overall Affordability' was ranked sixteenth and eighteenth respectively for the low and very low income groups, it was ranked much lower at twenty-third by the group with incomes over \$1,000 per week. The Catholic families with income below \$500 per week gave a far greater endorsement proportion of 66% to 'Overall Affordability' of Catholic schools than other Catholic groups. Catholic families with income above \$1,000 per week had a much lower endorsement proportion for 'Overall Affordability' of only 31.6%. These findings show clearly that Catholic families with very low income levels do have concerns about the cost of Catholic schooling for their children. However, despite level of income, the majority of parents/guardians ranked Teacher Quality, Safety of their Children, Positive Relationships in the school environment and Level of Care and Concern as critically important to their choice of school.

Interestingly, the specific findings for the whole group of respondents, including both Catholic and Non-Catholic families, who identified as being reliant on Government support (80 respondents) indicated the same four key issues affecting their choice of school for their children as those not reliant on Government support and placed "Overall Affordability" at a similar level. The group reliant on Government support ranked 'Overall Affordability' as fifteen with an endorsement level of 67.6% and the group not reliant on support ranked it as seventeen with a smaller endorsement of 45.7%.

Therefore, all respondents ranked highly the quality of teachers, a learning environment characterised by positive relationships and care and concern, but the Catholic parents/guardians ranked the Catholic nature of a Catholic school more much more important than did the other groups. Lower income Catholic families ranked Overall Affordability more highly than other groups and with a higher endorsement, but it was not as important as other choice issues.

School Choice Factors Nominated by Catholic Families

As the above analysis of data from the Set One items on the survey showed, there was a high degree of concurrence between different groups of respondents as to what were the most important issues regarding choice of school. Given that parents/guardians may have responded to these 29 items from a values perspective rather than from the reality of their families' choice, Set Two, Item Two was designed to emphasise to participants an interest in how their choice of school had actually been made. This item also allowed respondents to include factors important to them that were not in the original list. To analyse this item, written responses were categorised. As the full sample consisted of 896 responses, the maximum possible pool of responses was 2,688. The total number of responses collected and categorised was 1,626. Ten school choice issues were identified from the responses: location of school, religious denomination of school, affordability, school reputation, teaching quality, discipline, values, size of school, care, and outside school hours care. Table 6 shows these responses ranked according to frequencies. Location of school, its religious denomination and reputation were the three issues noted most frequently by respondents.

Table 6
Ranking of School Choice Issues Noted by Respondents (Set Two, Item 2) for Full Sample (N = 896)

School Choice Issue	Full sample (N = 896)	
	Ranking	Proportion of sample who recorded this issue (%)
Location of school	1	31.3
Religious denom. of school	2	30.7
School reputation	3	29.6
Size of School	4	22.8
Teaching quality	5	22.8
Values	6	13.4
Discipline	7	10.5
Affordability	8	10.0
Care	9	9.2
Outside school hours care	10	1.3

Another useful analysis involving Set Two, Item Two compared responses according to income bands. Of the 1,626 responses, 1537 could be grouped according to income band: below \$500 per week (n = 97), between \$500 and \$1,000 per week (n = 653) and above \$1,000 per week (n = 787). A chi square test revealed no statistically significant differences between the responses for the three income bands groups ($\chi^2_{(df=16)} = 17.97, p = .33$). This finding suggests that income did not influence responses to Set Two, Item Two.

Items such as religious denomination, location of school and affordability were much more highly ranked in this set, that asked for actual factors taken into account in a particular choice of school, rather than how important a range of issues are to parents/guardians. Because the findings from analysis of Set Two Item Two were somewhat different from the analysis of Set One Item One, a need arose to examine the written comments of parents/guardians. The section that follows shows the range of responses from Catholic parents/guardians who had incomes below \$1000.00 per week, that is, parents/guardians in the first two income levels represented in Table 7.

Written Responses from Families

When this same group of parents were asked to comment on the issues regarding their school choice, they commented on the importance of a school environment where a values-based approach was evident, children were supported positively and discipline was enforced so that bullying was not an issue. They also commented on affordability and the situation for Catholic families in rural and remote areas of Queensland.

Table 7
Frequency of Issues Underpinning School Choice for Catholic Families with Income below \$1,000

Issues	Frequency of Response
Wanted a Catholic school with Education in the Faith	90
Reputation	76
Location	55
Liked small size of Catholic schools	55
Affordability	35
School environment-	31
Values driven, sense of welcome, positive relationships	
Child to be safe/No Bullying	24
Resource Concerns	8
Discipline	6

The following comments, taken from Set 2 Question 1 and Question 3 provide further insights into the perceptions of these Catholic families and their desire for a Catholic education for their children. Comments made under other headings are used in the Discussion that follows to assist with interpretation of quantitative data.

For us selecting a school was very much about the school reflecting our values and standards with regard to academics, behaviour, ethics, social justice & spirituality. It was also important for our children to be given a wide array of sporting and cultural opportunities given we live in a small rural town.

Yes I am a practising Catholic so (a) is important to me for my boys as is (b) for the emphasis of learning; self esteem; a huge factor that needs to be accentuated for students in school

School is close and the values/beliefs of the school is a fair representation of our personal values. The staff listen to us and makes us feel part of our child's education

My children have attended same Catholic school over 14 years. For the first time this year was made to feel it was a privilege that they accepted enrolment of one of my children. Did not appreciate this attitude as have never had issues with school.

Discussion

When Catholic families completed their ranking of the 29 school choice issues in Set One of the survey they differed from the overall sample in only one way. The Catholic nature of the school, its religious values and teaching were more important to them than to the other respondent groups, Other Christian and No Nominated Religion/Other Religion.

In comparing the Catholic respondents with one another with respect to income group, no statistically significant differences were found. Each group ranked teacher quality and a range of issues related to school-based relationships and caring at the top of the rank order. Thus, in answer to question one, these were the most important factors affecting school choice for Catholic families. For all groups, religion and religious values were ranked around the mid-level of the list. The group with the lowest income, ranked Overall Affordability 16th with an endorsement of 66.7% compared, for example, with those who had incomes of over \$1000 per week who ranked this item 23rd with an endorsement rate of 31.6%. Thus although affordability is more of a barrier to access for those with low incomes, these Catholics share the same set of values and desires for their children's educations as do all other parents/guardians. In other words, affordability is only of moderate concern for those with low incomes, but is certainly more significant for them than for others. Comments made indicated that while some could not afford to choose Catholic schools, others found the sacrifices worthwhile but sometimes wondered if they would be able to maintain the stress on their budgets in the long term. Several examples of different types of comment are listed below.

Do not like the idea of non-refundable deposits for a place in the school if on a pension.

Due to financial situation we cannot afford to send our children to a private school.

May change schools due to - cost! Prep fees \$471-20 per term, school bus \$250 per term, per term total \$721-20.

My only child feels safe and happy at St M's Primary. The financial sacrifices are well worth it as it is an investment in my child's future giving her a better education.

Sometimes the school fees are very hard to pay due to financial crises

As grandparents/guardians raising grandchildren, we have financial concerns as we get older. Our children may reach high school age and we might find that fees are too expensive.

Other issues that emerged as important were the location of the school and the student-student relationships sometimes expressed in terms of bullying or a need for discipline. Location did not rank highly in the analysis of Set One Items, but was one of the top issues listed in Set Two when parents/guardians gave the three issues actually used to make a school choice. It could be assumed from the importance given to school choice factors related to teacher quality and school-based relationships, that where location was used to make a choice, these other factors were already in place. That is location became important only if parents/guardians believed that the school lived up to their other expectations. For example one respondent said:

St J's was a good school - by reputation and close to my work

For one group of families, those in rural areas, location had a different impact on their choice of school for children. Some parents could not, for example, send children to a Catholic high school because the only available school was too far away, for example:

Students in this area can only access primary to Year 7. Grade 8 is too young for children to move away for high school, so we then have no choice but to enrol the children into the local state high school which is clearly not up to standard on many levels.

However, some bypassed a school they felt was unsatisfactory and travelled to a Catholic school, for example:

I have a State School 1 km from my home but choose to have my children travel by half bus/half car travelling 25 km one way. You need good education from young ages with good teachers. A great principal with good morals which will carry them through life later on

It seemed from parent/guardian comments that student-student relationships were of great importance because of their relationship to discipline, bullying and safety of children. Respondents, who believed that their child had been bullied, tended to see a pastoral response to misbehaviour as inappropriate.

They need to vastly improve their bullying process. My son has been bullied and the school took a soft line.

Other parents/guardians were appreciative of the support their child received.

My son has special needs and we feel so supported at St T's.

The issues of child safety, discipline and student-student relationships were highly rated by all income groups of Catholic parents. One parent saw a link between being Christian and having high expectations of student behavior.

Discipline and strong set of rules are important to me, along with Christian beliefs.

Conclusion

It would seem that all Catholic families, irrespective of income, expect much of the school environment in terms of care and concern for children and the management of school-based relationships. However, the most highly valued factor in school choice is teacher quality. Parents/guardians comments show that teachers not only provide academic standards but are also responsible for setting the caring tone and underpinning Christian values. Catholic parents/guardians do consider the fact that the school is Catholic to be important, but only after these other choice issues are taken into account. Thus we provide evidence that Catholic schools should continue to enrich and develop teachers' consciousness of the Church's mission and ethos as a foundation for learning and teaching.

Affordability is listed by all income groups well below teacher quality, school-based relationships and religious reasons for choosing a school. However, it becomes more of an issue the lower the family income is. This supports the findings of researchers such as Ladd & Fiske (2001) and Reay & Lucey (2000) who claim a relationship between available school choices and level of family income. Comments made by respondents with low incomes seem to fall into three categories: That they are not able to afford a Catholic school; that the financial sacrifices involved in sending children to a Catholic school are worthwhile; or that, although children attend a Catholic school, there are ongoing concerns about their ability to meet the costs.

It can be concluded from this evidence that, financial support systems that are in existence do work for some families, but may need to be more widely advertised to prospective parents. In addition, school communities need a degree of sensitivity to the financial stress that economic downturn and school extras, such as transport, place on some families. Such measures are important, as Catholic families of low socioeconomic status desire the same experience of care, commitment and quality teaching, as others who seek a Catholic education. Further such measures are important to stem the decline in the numbers of poorer Catholic children attending Catholic schools (Harkness, 2003) and if a Catholic school is to uphold its mission to be "open to all who seek its values especially the poor and the marginalised".

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Appendix A: **Survey**

Set 1 Questions

There are many issues that could have influenced your choice of schools for your children.

For each issue in this list, please indicate the importance of that issue to your actual school choice decisions by placing a cross in one box for each row. There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in how you made your decision.

Issue	Degree of importance to your school choice decision				
	Not important at all	Slightly important	Moderately important	Highly important	Extremely important
Location of school					
Transport to/from school					
Outside school hours care					
Type of school (e.g. P-12, Co-ed)					
School's academic performance					
School's sporting performance					
School facilities					
Schools extracurricular activities e.g. plays, clubs, dances, social events					
School reputation and image					
Public image of student behaviour in the school					
The school/Prep where you presently have your children					
Subjects taught in the school					
Cultural/ethnic mix of the school					
Level of care and concern in the school					
Teaching quality					
Teacher-student relationships: how teachers and students 'get on with each other'					
Student-student relationships: how students 'get on with each other'					
Teacher-parent relationships: how teachers and parents 'get on with each other'					
How your family would be welcomed in the school					
How your family would fit into the school					
Child's existing friendship groups					
Child's school preference: where they wanted to go					
Safety of my child					
School fees and other costs (Overall affordability)					
Non-refundable deposits for a place in the school					
Religious denomination of the school					
Personal religious reasons					
The values of your religious denomination/group					
The local community of your religious denomination/group					

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