

Catholic High School: Is it right for my child?

Introduction

Six years ago, my wife and I were excited to finally visit the school we were dreaming of sending our oldest daughter to since the time she was 5. We had heard great things about this school that was built specifically to be the more 'catholic' of the catholic high schools in our area. Then we had our visit and as we drove home together, something just wasn't right. We began to look in earnest at all other options and I dug in to figure out if there was merit to our feelings. In the end, for five primary reasons we chose not to send our children to a traditional 5 day a week catholic high school that has all the bells and whistles. In the sections that follow, I'll go into my own experience as well as the evidence about what was a difficult choice and ultimately where we are at today.

1. Time Famine: Erosion of Family Life

On that ride home after our visit, there was a phrase that had stood out during our tour that had really struck home: "Your child will spend far more of their time here than they will with you." We had not honestly evaluated or even thought about the time and impact on our family. The sheer number of hours each day and week demanded to get the dream experience was a little alarming. An early start time, long commute, lengthy school day, and extra curricular activities meant that most days our daughter would be gone by 7am and arriving home at 7pm or later and still needing to do homework. When would we talk? How much would she sleep? I researched and found the evidence overwhelmingly states that this situation makes the school setting the primary teacher of culture and erodes the primal authority of the parents in favor of coaches, peers and teachers. Additionally, the impact on sleep, family fragmentation, and lack of downtime is a major contributor to rising rates of teen depression and burnout.

2. Arms Race: Technology & Sports

A personal device issued by the school was the next concern we had during our visit. The responses to our questioning about the reasoning for the devices and how central they had become to the student's daily life was a little alarming. None of the decisions for the devices were because it improves the education of the student. Would having to read on a device screen be too distracting or awkward? Would social media, games or other addictive options on the device become a problem?

Our daughter isn't huge into sports but they made sure we knew about the amazing campus facilities for athletics and all the other extra curricular options. There was plenty of talk about desiring to educate the whole student, grow virtue, etc...but we walked away feeling like we were being offered a little bit of religion on top of the experience at a large public high school my wife had attended.

3. Deficient Curriculum via Digital Textbooks

Another question we had right on the heels of learning how central to the education the device would be was "What about the books?" Where can we go to learn more about the details of the

curriculum and what is being taught? We learned that there was an extensive course catalog, but that many of the textbooks came from major publishers via licensing contracts and could be updated anytime. If the textbooks were online now, what makes them any better than wikipedia for content? Furthermore, it sounded like it was exceptional for a teacher to be focusing on primary sources for informing the students. The potential for propaganda and politicization of content wasn't a strong consideration. The over-reliance on textbooks, especially digital ones, made us worry that our daughter would be ill equipped for defending her faith and worldview against the secularism she was certain to encounter in college years and beyond.

4. Cost to Educate

Going into our visit we were well aware of the costs associated with the school we were visiting and had been prepared to make it work. While not extremely wealthy, we are blessed and had been planning to give up certain luxuries in order to pay for the school. The tuition was inline with most catholic high schools so expensive but not outrageous. Would it be worth it? Could there be a more cost effective way to get an education experience more like the one we wanted for our daughter?

5. Catholic Results

Overall we ended up concerned that this was another case where the culture was transforming the school and not the other way around as it should be with catholic institutions. My wife was concerned about the short skirts, the novels being chosen, the kissing in the dramas, and other cultural issues where we know parents feel helpless. My own experience going through a similar catholic high school over 20 years ago and seeing all of my friends leave the faith may have made me overly skeptical. However, there's also plenty of evidence showing that students graduating from catholic high schools show little difference in moral behavior or mass attendance compared to public school peers. Twenty years from now, what were the chances that we would end up feeling like we had just been paying for an elite school with some crucifixes? If our number one goal in raising our children was to support the catholic faith, would sending them off every day to fend for themselves in this environment be worth the investment from a risk/reward standpoint?

Conclusion:

Ultimately, we explored many alternative options. We had already tried homeschooling but struggled and went back to catholic elementary. We looked at a classical catholic 5 day a week school. We looked at some well established hybrid options both catholic and evangelical. In the end, we chose to be a part of the first St Catherine's class in 2022-23. The results for our daughter and our family have been everything we had dreamed!