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Reaching the Youngest Hearts and Minds: Interviews with Diocesan Leaders Regarding Catholic Early Childhood Education

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Early childhood is a critically formative stage of human development and the educational experiences of children at this young age impact their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical competencies. In the U.S., early childhood education has grown dramatically since the 1960s, both in federal and state dollars invested and in terms of overall enrollment. However, despite what is known about early childhood education in general, the picture of whether and how the Catholic education sector—particularly diocesan schools and parishes—is serving early childhood needs remains unclear. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to begin mapping the landscape of Catholic early childhood education in several dioceses across the United States. A qualitative interview protocol guided interviews with 15 (arch)diocesan administrators about their current practices regarding Catholic preschool education. Findings are grouped according to the major thematic issues covered, including issues such as curriculum, teacher qualifications, accreditation, finances, enrollment, marketing, and Catholic identity. Whereas early childhood education shows great variability in form, content, and delivery both within and across dioceses, this sample indicated an overall increase in enrollment over the previous five years, as well as a strong insistence that early childhood is an important lever for both child and family faith formation. Early childhood programming must be considered a strategically significant component of the Catholic educational enterprise.

Early childhood experiences exert a profound influence on the rest of an individual's life. Early formative development is shaped by ongoing, rapid iterations among biology, family, environment, and social contexts ranging from the immediate (i.e., home) to the distal (i.e., nation and global community). One of the most formative developmental niches

of children's early years is early childhood education. "Early childhood" is a term used to describe the developmental period generally from birth to age eight. In terms of policy and programming, early childhood education (ECE) more commonly refers to children from birth through the beginning of kindergarten, typically age five. ECE includes preschool and denotes learning experiences typically involving three to five-year-olds but varying by location, delivered prior to the beginning of compulsory education. ECE is part of a broader term "child care," which is any regular, non-parental supervisory care arrangement: but ECE more specifically includes such things as school readiness and other child development activities.

A recent issue of the journal *Science* devoted a special section, "Investing Early in Education," to the topic, noting: "Early educational intervention can have substantive short- and long-term effects on cognition, social-emotional development, school progress, antisocial behavior, and even crime" (Barnett, 2011, p. 975). Due to these beneficial impacts on children's competencies, enrollment in early childhood programming has grown exponentially, paralleled by growing attention in the state and federal policy arena. For example, the US Department of Education's well-known Race to the Top initiative prominently features an Early Learning Challenge to encourage comprehensive, state-level early learning education reform. Furthermore, significant advances in neurodevelopmental research reveal the myriad ways that the executive functioning skills of young children's brains impact both academic and social outcomes (Obradović, Portilla, & Boyce, 2012). Thus, given the prominence of early childhood as a key developmental period in a child's growth and development, and the rising embrace of early childhood education nationally, it is imperative to understand how dioceses are engaging these youngest souls in the ministry of Catholic education.

Relevant Literature

In general, early childhood education programs seek to improve outcomes for children across a variety of domains. They target academic skills such as early literacy, language development, and early foundational skills in math and science. Also important are the range of social and emotional skills that develop during children's experiences in early childhood education. An expansive research base—dating back to a few key randomized control trials commencing in the 1960s—that documents both the near- and long-term impacts of early education programs. Both the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study (Sch-

weinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, & Nores, 2005) and a randomized inquiry conducted by the Institute for Developmental Studies (i.e., Deutsch, Deutsch, Jordan, & Grallow, 1983) detected impacts on children's cognitive development and language ability. Moreover, following students longitudinally, the Perry Preschool Program delivered "persistent effects in literacy and math, as well as other positive outcomes, such as better teacher-reported classroom and personal behavior, fewer special education placements, and higher high school graduation rates" (Epstein & Barnett, 2012, p. 4).

Overall, high quality early childhood education yields significant, positive, developmental impacts for children, as documented by a growing list of rigorous studies. (See Table 1 for a brief, nonexhaustive list). Reiterating this point, editors of the seminal *Handbook of Early Childhood Education* (Pianta, Barnett, Justice, & Sheridan, 2012) noted in their preface:

All children have been found to benefit from high-quality preschool education. Claims that programs only benefit boys or girls, or one particular ethnic group, or just children in poverty do not hold up across the research literature as a whole. Children from lower-income families do tend to gain more from good preschool education than do more advantaged children. However, the educational achievement gains for nondisadvantaged children are substantial, perhaps 75% as large as the gains for low-income children. (p. xvi)

Studies have emerged as well based on data from individual states that have implemented state preschool programs. For example, from a sample of Oklahoma preschoolers attending the state's universal pre-K program, Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson (2005) found "statistically significant effects on children's performance on cognitive tests of prereading and reading skills, prewriting and spelling skills, and math reasoning and problem-solving abilities" (p. 880). Further, though there was variability by state and by outcome, a five-state impact analysis of pre-K programs detected positive impacts on children's cognitive skills (Wong, Cook, Barnett, & Jung, 2008). Similarly, in an initial report examining Tennessee's voluntary pre-K (TN-VPK) programming, Lipsey, Farran, Bilbrey, Hofer, and Dong (2010) reported positive effects for attending children versus those who did not. In fact, "the effects on the early literacy, language, and math skills of children who attended TN-VPK were all statistically significant with gains ranging from 37% to 176% greater than those of children not in TN-VPK" (p. 4).

Table 1

Key Early Childhood Program Studies

Study	Design	Findings
Head Start Impact Study	Nationally representative sample of about 5,000 children randomly assigned to Head Start or no Head Start and followed 1 year to date	Modest effects on children's literacy skills, reduced problem behavior, parent reading to children (US Administration for Children and Families, 2005)
Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey	2 cohorts of 3,200 and 2,800 Head Start children followed through kindergarten	Modest gains in children's literacy and social skills in Head Start and kindergarten years (Zill et al., 2003)
Five-State Preschool Study	Sample of 5,071 children divided between those who did and did not make the age cutoff for program entry	Improvements in children's vocabulary, print awareness skills, and early mathematics skills (Barnett & Jung, 2005)
State Preschool Evaluations	13 studies of state preschool programs	Modest effects on children's development, school performance, school attendance, grade retention (Gilliam, Lamy, & Zigler, 2001)
NICHD Early Child Care Study	Sample of 1,364 infants in 1991 with 1,000 being followed up through age 15	Higher quality child care was associated with higher math, reading, and memory test scores through grade 3 (NICHD, 2005)

Note: adapted from Schweinhart & Fulcher-Dawson (2006).

The aforementioned impact evidence must be considered alongside the changing patterns of access to and enrollment in early childhood education. About 127,000 3- and 4-year olds attended public preschool programs in 1965. As documented by the National Center for Education Statistics, by 2009, public preschool enrollment was 2.7 million (Epstein & Barnett, 2012).

Moreover, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research, total state preschool spending neared \$5.5 billion in 2011 (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011), whereas “the federal government invested nearly \$20 billion in programs that provide a range of services, including center-based early education, special education, child care subsidies, and nutritious meals” (Hustedt, Friedman, & Barnett, 2012, p. 68). Public and private investments in early childhood programming, coupled with increasing numbers of working families turning to early childhood education means that today “most children in the United States now participate in an early childhood education program during the year immediately prior to kindergarten” (Hustedt et al., 2012, p. 48).

The Current Inquiry

Despite what is known about early childhood education in general, whether and how the Catholic education sector—particularly diocesan schools and parishes—is serving early childhood needs remains unclear. To what extent are Catholic K-8 schools offering preschool? What are the preschool enrollment trends in dioceses that offer early childhood programming? What is the curricular content of these programs? What are the educational backgrounds of those who administer and teach in them? Answers to questions like these were largely unavailable when we began the present study. In fact, Scanlan (2006) noted that Catholic educators “have failed to recognize the important role that our [Catholic] schools can play in providing early childhood education to traditionally marginalized children” (p. 26). Moreover, despite highlighting a few exemplary early childhood programs at a 2004 National Catholic Educational Association event (Dwyer, Haney, & O’Keefe, 2005), one noted expert confirmed, “There is no national picture or vision of Catholic early childhood education” (Ramski, personal communication, September 21, 2011). Acknowledging that “lessons learned in the early, formative years of preschool will be the seeds of adult life and faith” (Shaughnessy, 2008, p. 47), this project sought to better understand the dynamics of Catholic early childhood education. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to begin mapping the landscape of Catholic early childhood education in several dioceses across the United States. The current study, then, should help articulate an expert-informed and needs-based action agenda—comprised of research and outreach elements—centered on early childhood programming in Catholic schools.

Method

The present study draws primarily upon semistructured telephone interviews with 20 central office leaders representing 15 dioceses and archdioceses (hereafter referred to as [arch]dioceses) across the United States. The interviews were augmented by additional information gleaned from (arch)diocesan websites as well as from supplementary materials occasionally provided directly by participants. The following subsections offer a more detailed description of the participants, interview protocol, and study procedures.

Participants

Based on consultation with the University of Notre Dame's Center for Social Research, a pilot study approach focusing on known (arch)diocesan partners was identified as both an efficient and sound research design. Potential participating (arch)dioceses, however, were strategically selected to ensure broad geographic representation. Thus, a sampling frame was created based on two inclusion criteria: (a) familiarity with and awareness of the Alliance for Catholic Education, having sent a graduate student to the Mary Ann Remick Leadership Program; and (b) geographic representativeness based on NCEA regional descriptors (i.e., New England, Mideast, Great Lakes, Plains, Southeast, and West/Far West). Application of the first criterion was intended to increase the likelihood of study participation among sites in the original sampling frame; the second criteria sought to obtain geographic variability in the sample.

By referencing the Remick Leadership Program's database of program graduates, a contact list was derived that preserved representation proportional to the Catholic school enrollment in each region. The initial sampling list contained contact information for 30 (arch)dioceses. Representatives from 15 dioceses and archdioceses participated in a direct telephone interview, yielding a response rate of 50%. Participating (arch)dioceses are listed alphabetically, along with names and titles of study participants in Appendix A. The final sample included seven sites from the Great Lakes, four from the Southeast, two from the West/Far West, and one each from New England and the Plains.

Semistructured Interview Protocol

The focal point of this study's data collection strategy was a carefully constructed semi-structured interview protocol. Because the landscape of Catholic preschool education had been largely uncharted, it was important to pose questions that broadly covered several domains that would be pertinent to early childhood education in general and Catholic early childhood education in particular. Initial development of the semi-structured interview protocol was thus grounded in the conceptual model outlined in Figure 1, below, which presents relevant domains of interest and exemplar questions.

Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of curricula are Catholic preschools implementing? • Are the curricula standards-based?
Teachers & Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the nature of the early childhood workforce in Catholic preschools? • What are the requirements for education, training, certification?
Finances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the financial dynamics of operating a Catholic preschool? • What is the interface between overall school finances and preschool operational finances?
Regulatory/Accrediting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are Catholic preschools accredited? • Which bodies provide such accreditation?
Faith Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do preschool curricula emphasize faith development? • How do Catholic preschools serve as a form of family engagement and evangelization?
K-8 Integration & Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are preschools integrated with the K-8 school community? • Does enrollment in preschool boost subsequent K-8 school enrollment?

Figure 1. Conceptual model indicating relevant study domains and research questions regarding Catholic early childhood education.

Using this conceptual model, the research team compiled an initial draft of the interview protocol. The draft was reviewed by two faculty members in the Alliance for Catholic Education, three members of the ACE Consulting team, and one sitting superintendent. Based on feedback and critique from these stakeholders, the protocol was updated and refined. An example of added content based on expert review was several questions about marketing efforts that are responsive to the expressed needs of prospective families.

The final protocol, included in Appendix B, was used to guide a semi-structured interaction with the participants. It was comprised of (a) an opening dialogue to introduce the study, obtain informed consent to participate, and confirm permission to record the interview; (b) overview questions to assess the general state of early childhood education in each location, including size, scope, and enrollment trends; (c) domain-specific questions related to the conceptual model; and (d) a closing section to request supplementary materials (e.g., copy of a curriculum), explain the research timeline and next steps, and thank the central office staff for their time and participation.

Procedures

Once the study purpose and design were finalized, the research team submitted a proposal to the University of Notre Dame's Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. Study approval was obtained and each interviewee provided informed consent to participate in an audio-recorded telephone interview.

Fifteen scheduled interviews were conducted during July, August, and September of 2012. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with a copy of the interview protocol via e-mail. Sending the protocol in advance allowed sites to compile needed information (e.g., enrollment statistics) before the interview and to make sure that additional staff or others with pertinent expertise were present for the interview. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Individual interviews lasted between 25 and 45 minutes. Audio files were labeled, archived, and immediately reviewed by the research team.

Data were entered into a matrix that cross-tabbed the major inquiry domains of the conceptual model (e.g., enrollment, curriculum, finances, marketing, etc.) with the participating sites. Key content and verbatim quotations were extracted from each interview to correspond with the inquiry domains. In this manner, the research team could ascertain the dynamics of a particular construct—curriculum, for example—across all participating sites.

Findings

This section draws upon the breadth of data contained in the interviews. Because this content area is a largely unexplored domain of inquiry, frequent tabular presentations of data provide site-by-site information to share as much descriptive detail as possible.

Preschool Programs: Prevalence, Scope, and Enrollment

In total, the 15 (arch)dioceses participating in this review enrolled 20,139 children across 498 preschool programs during the 2011-2012 academic year. Table 2, below, provides an overview of each location by noting the number of school affiliated and standalone preschool programs in each (arch)diocese. Participants consistently made this distinction, using “stand alone” to describe preschool programs that were located in a parish without an elementary school. For school-affiliated programs, on average, 30 preschool programs ($SD = 11.6$) were operating in each of the sampled sites. The fewest number of school-affiliated preschool programs were operating in the Archdiocese of Atlanta ($n = 6$). In this sample, the largest number of programs ($n = 47$) was operated in the Archdiocese of Hartford.

Table 2

Number of School-Affiliated Preschool Programs and Percentage of Elementary Schools with a Preschool

Site	School-Affiliated Preschool Programs	Stand Alone Programs	Elementary Schools	% Elementary Schools with Preschool
Arlington	30	5	39	77
Atlanta	6	29	15	40
Cincinnati	41	-	91	45
Columbus	28	-	42	67
Ft. Wayne-South Bend	30	-	37	81
Grand Rapids	24	2	27	89
Hartford	47	-	54	87
Lafayette	15	-	18	83
Madison	39	-	42	93
Oklahoma City	19	-	19	100
Omaha	44	-	59	75
Orlando	31	-	31	100
Phoenix	29	10	29	100
St. Augustine	25	-	25	100
Toledo	44	-	78	56
Overall Sample	452	46	572	80

The data in Table 2 also provide insight on the extent to which preschool is part of primary level education across these (arch)dioceses. On average, four out of every five elementary schools have preschool programs. In the (arch)dioceses of Oklahoma City, Orlando, Phoenix, and St. Augustine, all elementary schools have a preschool program. With the exception of the Archdioceses of Atlanta and Cincinnati, more than half of the elementary schools in the participating sites offer preschool. In Atlanta, standalone programs greatly outnumber school-affiliated programs; there are 29 preschool programs that are located at parishes without a school, enrolling over 3,000 students. In Cincinnati, the Archdiocese has articulated a focus in its strategic plan for Catholic schools to expand their preschool offerings; the Archdiocese has already added three programs this year and is planning to open four more next academic year.

Interviewed (arch)dioceses showed great variability in the ages served via their school-affiliated preschool programs. Although all sites indicated that their programs for four-year-olds were the most plentiful, some locations served children from birth to age three. For example, two-year olds were served in the (arch)dioceses of Arlington, Cincinnati, Columbus, and Orlando. A single diocese might predominantly have programs for four-year olds, but a school or two might serve three-year-olds, indicating local discretion about which ages are served.

Table 3, below, compiles data on the 2011–2012 student enrollment in preschool programs. The enrollment span in sampled (arch)dioceses ranged from 634 in the Diocese of Lafayette to 3,090 in the Archdiocese of Atlanta. Enrollment trends are apparent in Table 3 as well. Four sites were unable to provide enrollment data from five years ago in order to assess enrollment increases or decreases. Of the 11 that did, eight sites (73%) increased in enrollment over the last five years, while three (27%) decreased in enrollment during that time frame. The largest enrollment increases were recorded in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and the Diocese of St. Augustine, at 44% and 38% respectively. In contrast, some enrollment declines were also evident. A descriptive review of the data indicates, however, that the size of the enrollment gains appeared to be outpacing the size of the enrollment declines. Taken as a whole, for the 11 (arch)dioceses that tracked enrollment data over the five year window, total preschool student enrollment increased by 20% from 11,131 to 13,334.

Table 3

Preschool Enrollment in 2011-2012 and Five-Year Enrollment Trend

Site	2011-2012 Enrollment	Five Year Enrollment Trend
Arlington	1,721	↑ 16%
Atlanta	90; 3,000	Not Available
Cincinnati	1,800	↑ 44%
Columbus	1,230	Not Available
Ft. Wayne-South Bend	997	↑ 26%
Grand Rapids	833	Not Available
Hartford	1,555	↓ 7%
Lafayette	634	↓ 4%
Madison	1,004	↑ 21%
Oklahoma City	720	↑ 12%
Omaha	1,126	↑ 6%
Orlando	1,507	↑ 62%
Phoenix	915	↓ 13%
St. Augustine	1,232	↑ 38%
Toledo	1,775	Not Available
Overall (11 Sites with Comparison Data)	13,334	↑ 20%

Note: In Atlanta, 90 students were enrolled in six preschool programs affiliated with a parish school, whereas 29 parish preschool programs enrolled 3,000 students.

(Arch)Diocesan Support for Early Childhood Education

Participants were asked to describe the degree and content of direct support provided by the central office with regard to early childhood education. Responses indicated that planning and delivery of professional development for preschool directors, teachers, and staff were the primary mechanism of direct support provided by (arch)diocesan central offices. As noted in Table 4 (see Appendix C), nearly all central offices provided professional development. Another support role, as in Atlanta and Phoenix, for example, is to serve as a point of contact with the pertinent state authorities regarding licensing.

Although one archdiocese had a position dedicated solely to early childhood, oversight of early childhood programming most commonly was included as part of the overall portfolio of either the superintendent, or an associate/assistant superintendent. On the whole, preschool operations are a local, parochial concern with the bulk of planning, decision making, and oversight occurring at the parish level.

Early Childhood Curriculum Standards

Participants were asked about the nature of the curriculum implemented in the preschools in their respective (arch)diocese. Table 5 (see Appendix C) shows the responses. Of the 15 sampled sites, nine (60%) indicated that no single comprehensive (arch)diocesan preschool curriculum was in place. In these locations, early childhood curriculum varied across local sites, relying upon parish discretion to discern the best curricular approach. In some cases, central office leaders reported that individual preschool programs used the state early childhood academic standards as guidelines. In other cases, individual preschool program directors reported consulting with kindergarten teachers at the same site in order to deliver content at the preschool level that would fulfil the expectations for entering kindergarteners. One site that did not have an archdiocesan curriculum explained that it would be a strategic priority to develop and implement one in the next two years.

In contrast, six (40%) participants specified that there is a standard (arch) diocesan curriculum for early childhood programs. Appendix D contains hyperlinks that provide direct access to some sample preschool curricular standards. For example, the Archdiocese of Hartford developed curriculum standards in Fall 2011, as the Superintendent wrote:

It is my hope that schools with early childhood programs will implement these standards, promote the critical developmental skills vital at this level, and also educate our students by informing, forming, and transforming them with wonder and meaning of Christian faith. (p. 2)

The Archdiocesan standards are aligned with State of Connecticut Preschool Assessment Frameworks, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Early Learning Standards, and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) Preschool Standards.

Similarly, comprehensive standards in the Diocese of Arlington were introduced with the explanation:

The Diocese of Arlington has adapted the standards developed by the State of Virginia, adding a Religion component to reflect the total development of the child. The value of early education and early intervention is imperative to young children's future spiritual, intellectual, physical, social and emotional development. (2009, p. 1)

In presenting and framing its standards based curriculum, the Diocese of Phoenix opened with this preamble:

The schools of the Diocese of Phoenix believe quality faith-based early childhood education is of great benefit to young children and their families. Child-centered programs for young and older preschool children provide opportunities for discovery, exploration, observation, and experimentation in the manner in which young children learn best through the vehicle of play. Play is the work of the young child and is supported through standard based curriculum. Curriculum strives to address the needs of the total child and provides age/developmentally appropriate activities and interactions that foster human growth and development on a continuum. With focus on the child growing in community, faith and Catholic identity are a part of daily activities that demonstrate best practice in programs for young children. We serve a vital role in our work in partnership with families to support parents as the child's first and most valuable teachers. Together we work to build communities strong in Gospel values, faith, and life-long love of learning. (2011, p. 9)

Participants were also asked whether the preschool standards contained a religion curriculum. Each of the sites that had an (arch)diocesan-wide curriculum also had specified religion content standards as part of that overall curriculum. However, as Table 5 indicates (see Appendix C), three sites that did not have a specified curriculum for standard content areas have developed and provided standards for religion. As an example of ECE religion standards, see the standards for three- and four-year olds published online by the Archdiocese of Hartford. (See Appendix D).

Preschool Teacher Qualifications

The semistructured interviews sought to understand the nature of the early childhood education workforce in Catholic preschools by probing about teacher credentials and licensing requirements. Table 6 in Appendix C gives an overview these requirements. Across sites, there is a mixture of practice, though the standard minimum requirement appeared to be an associate's degree in early childhood education. Some sites required a bachelor's degree and state certification; in other sites the state certification was optional.

Financial Structure

Participants were asked to describe the financial dynamics in the operation of preschools in their (arch)diocese. On the whole, this proved to be a difficult area of inquiry for them to address with any specificity since the variation in practices in any one (arch)diocese could be so great. Central office leaders noted directly that an in-depth (arch)diocesan-level investigation would better uncover local patterns and trends. However, participants were able to share some insights describing issues of budgeting, tuition, and financial operations.

Given the wide geographic and economic diversity, it was difficult for participants to make blanket statements about overall financial operations. For example, (arch)dioceses in the sample were almost evenly split in whether budgeting for the preschool was included as part of the elementary school budget or as a separate line item within the parish. One central office leader explained financial practices in the diocese to be a "hodgepodge," with the preschool budget sometimes broken out separately and in other cases included in the elementary school budget.

In terms of the costs of operating a preschool and whether these costs are recouped via tuition, again there was variability both across and within participating sites. Participants voiced comments ranging from an expectation of self-sufficiency to acknowledgement that preschools could be profit generators. On one end of the continuum were observations indicating that preschools should be cost neutral, such as "We're asking schools to make sure that the preschool is sustainable on its own," and "Preschools are designed and operated to break even; they are not designed to be subsidized." The continuum's other pole was characterized by acknowledgements that a few preschools might be profitable, such as "In general, programs are not bleed-

ing money out of the school. On the contrary, there are some cases in which income from the preschool is subsidizing the operations of the K-8 program. Sometimes they can be a cash cow,” and “Some preschools break even, and that’s ideal. Some use the preschools as an income generator.” Although a minimum expectation of self-sufficiency seemed to be common across the board, a few superintendents noted exceptions. One described how some parishes heavily subsidize preschools because there simply is great need, and the preschools do yield highly into the elementary school’s kindergarten classes. Another superintendent acknowledged the need for more fiscal patience regarding new preschool programs, citing that whereas such programs may not cover their costs initially, a balanced budget is expected by their third year of operation.

Finally, there was wide variance in participants’ descriptions of how closely preschool tuition tracked with elementary school tuition rates. Roughly equal parts of this sample indicated that preschool tuition was higher than that of the elementary school; tracked evenly with the elementary school; or was generally lower than that of the elementary school. As already noted, there were exemplars in each category within a single (arch)diocese. Parish location, socioeconomic status of parishioners, and local market conditions for early childhood competition all factored into establishing fair and competitive preschool tuition rates.

Accrediting Bodies and Licensing

Interview participants provided details about the accrediting agencies and licensing bodies with jurisdiction over their preschool programs. Table 7 in Appendix C presents a summary of that information. These data indicated two primary pathways for accreditation and/or licensing. When preschools are naturally linked with an elementary school, they tend to be accredited as part of the larger school accreditation. For example, in the Diocese of Arlington, the Virginia Catholic Education Association accredits preschools along with the elementary school. Likewise, elementary schools in the Diocese of Grand Rapids pursue accreditation from the Michigan Non-Public Schools Accrediting Association and preschools are contained under the umbrella of an individual school’s accreditation.

If an (arch)diocese operates preschools that are not affiliated with a school, but instead are operated as a parish ministry, the most appropriate licensing

channel is through the appropriate state licensing authority, such as the Department of Job and Family Services in Ohio, or the Department of Health and Human Services in Nebraska.

Faith Development and Family Evangelization

As the earlier section on curriculum noted, preschool standards often included standards for religious education and faith development. Most sites described education in the Catholic faith as woven into the preschool programming, permeating all that transpires in the early childhood classrooms. One participant captured this sentiment well in responding to a prompt about faith development:

Every day, every decision that they make, all that they do must be based on faith development. We cannot profess to teach the whole child without including the faith dimension and the spiritual development of the child and I truly believe that's what makes our programs so successful.

Individual participants highlighted specific programs designed to deliver religion content. For example, *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, a religion formation program based on Montessori educational principles, was mentioned on a few occasions. Most (arch)diocesan leaders said that students in their preschool programs regularly visit the chapel and receive visits from the parish priest. Some preschool programs routinely attend school Mass with the primary grades or with the whole school, sometimes with preschoolers paired with a middle school "Mass buddy." Across interviews, preschool classrooms were described as conducive to faith instruction, featuring a prayer corner or even a phone to call God.

Interview participants offered several insights supporting the notion that preschool education is a tremendous vehicle for parent and family evangelization. One superintendent noted that, "No one ever just drops a child off at a Catholic preschool," going on to cite numerous ways of building parent engagement, including picnics, Advent events, special Masses, Thanksgiving celebrations, and liturgical celebrations. The omnipresence of the faith dimension at such school functions led one superintendent to remark, "Some-

times I think we're catechizing parents just as much as well." Several other comments were in this same vein; one participant commented,

This is the perfect opportunity to interface with parents after Baptism. This is their opportunity to pull them into the parish life. They see this as a very strong opportunity. It helps to build the parish life from an early onset.

Similarly, another comment stressed this opportunity to engage parents in matters of faith:

Many families are young and are a bit lost in their faith. They may choose the Catholic school for other reasons, but once they're there and they see the faith component and how it strengthens them and strengthens their child, that's how we evangelize them, and we bring them in and they are formed and transformed in that way. Parents have to be enabled and empowered as the primary educators. They are so young; they are almost searching for the faith as much as their child.

One participant summarized this opportunity for evangelization clearly: "We're building not just the faith component of the child, but the family as well." As these statements attest, Catholic preschools ardently commit to teaching young children about their faith and to fostering a relationship with Jesus, but the concomitant benefit is (re)engaging parents in the Catholic faith. Preschools remind parents that they are to be respected because they are primary educators of their children. As one participant summed up, there are countless "chances for building of community at the preschool level and this can be part of the new evangelization and introducing parents to Catholic culture and identity."

Integration of Preschool with the K-8 Elementary School

Another topic area that interview participants engaged with concerned the level of integration between preschool education and elementary education in their respective (arch)dioceses. On the whole, interview data indicated that there is a decided inclination toward full integration of preschool program-

ming with the elementary school enterprise. One explained, “Our schools see them as an integral part of the total school program.” Several participants described that integration—to the extent possible and feasible—was already the norm: “they are fully integrated,” or “they are part of the school-wide family.” In explaining such integration, several participants referred to the accreditation process, in that the preschool is an inseparable part of the whole-school accreditation status.

Still, a few said they would like to deepen the linkage more intentionally. One explained, “We’re trying to do that more and more,” providing an example of one site whose preschool has moved into the K-8 building (from an adjacent site) to feel more a part of the school. Another superintendent said that while “building one community” is the goal, there is unevenness in how that is playing out in the diocese. Because they may be adjacent but not directly attached to the elementary building, some preschools operate fairly autonomously.

Diocesan leaders described an array of programs and activities that ensure on a day-to-day basis that the preschool is integrated as a coherent part of the elementary school. Many times 7th- and 8th-grade students serve as buddies for the preschoolers, sometimes pairing with them to sit at Mass. Preschoolers will attend some liturgies and Masses, occasionally assisting with Mass roles. They are often present for all-school assemblies and events and in some cases have overlapping lunch periods. One archdiocesan official explained that middle school students serve as pen pals or reading buddies for the preschoolers. Another pointed out that preschool faculty are not distinguished from the rest of the K-8 faculty, as they attend all faculty meetings and professional development offerings.

An area highly germane to the integration of preschool into the elementary school concerns enrollment. That is, do preschools exhibit a high yield of students into the kindergarten program of the elementary school? Unfortunately, answers to this question were largely anecdotal, and the pattern varied greatly from school to school, revealing extensive variability within a single diocese. A high estimate from one diocesan leader was that 90% of preschool students across the diocese yield into kindergarten. One participant, a former principal, recalled that his preschool sent 97% of children into the kindergarten class. Another put the diocesan-wide figure at 85%, explaining that preschool programming has absolutely boosted kindergarten enrollment. Likewise, one respondent offered the following:

It certainly varies by program and place. There are some places in the suburbs where parents know that if my child doesn't get into preschool it will be difficult to enroll at kindergarten. Some preschools attract parents because they know it's a high quality program, but they will not remain for elementary school. On the whole, though, if we get them for preschool, they stay.

Another diocesan leader offered a similar take:

We really try to emphasize with the principals that the more that the preschool students are part of the working everyday function of the school, the more likely the parents are to stay. The more we can make them a part of the school community, the better. We really try to integrate them into the larger life of the school.

Illustrating the variability within one (arch)diocese, though, one participant pointed out that some schools were seeing retention in the 85–90% range, with others reporting a 30% yield. Others firmly expressed the need to improve on collecting and analyzing such data in order to move beyond the anecdotal hunch that preschools are boosting elementary enrollment. In response to this interview question, one said, “We really should track those data; that would be extremely valuable for us.”

Marketing

(Arch)diocesan leaders were asked to describe how preschools were marketed. About one-third of sites described engaging in some degree of diocesan-wide preschool marketing, although the effort might be time-limited (e.g, during Catholic Schools Week) or quite focused, like an insert in the diocesan newspaper. One diocese described a regional marketing effort for a cluster of elementary schools and preschools. The more typical response was that marketing efforts occurred primarily at the local level, taking the form of flyers, notices in the parish bulletin, the parish/school website, open houses, or ads in education-related magazines. One parish sent postcards to potential families and another placed an ad via a sticky note in the local newspaper. In terms of local marketing, general agreement was that word of mouth is the single “most influential and most powerful” marketing tool.

In terms of meeting the needs of the local market, interview participants explained that families generally want educational environments that are safe, secure, caring, nurturing, happy, intellectually engaging, and that “allow the child to grow in faith.” Other direct comments to this point included:

- “Parents are looking for programs that are going to provide a Catholic, caring environment that supports their most basic beliefs. They want programs that are focused academically but attentive to what is developmentally appropriate.”
- “Anecdotally, parents want safe, vibrant, happy places where kids come to learn how to treat one another, are intellectually engaged, and that lay a foundation for a lifetime of learning and catechesis.”
- “Families are looking for socialization, reading readiness, academic advantage (to get a head start), faith formation...some want them because they’re simply cheaper than day care. They’ll consider class size, family environment, and whether their child will feel welcome.”
- “Parents expect a developmentally appropriate program with a faith formation dimension.”
- “Families are looking for a safe learning environment; parents are concerned about school safety and want a clean, nurturing school.”

Participants noted an existing tension between the academic press (Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999) and rigor of a program and a healthy balance with developmentally appropriate practice. Some families and markets desire a safe environment with a focus on developing key socialization skills; others express more demand for reading readiness and intellectual challenges that can lead to later academic advantage. As one participant put it, in some places, “They are looking for early academic preparation. In the center city, it might be a greater demand for day care, a safe place for their child.” Another remarked that “Parents have increased expectations on the academic side of things; they don’t just want ‘mother’s morning out.’” (Arch)diocesan leaders and preschool directors are challenged to deliver a high quality academic experience that likewise accomplishes other important educational goals. As one stated, “We work really hard to balance it socially, emotionally, and religiously.”

A final prompt in the marketing realm dealt with defining local competition for attracting and enrolling families interested in early childhood educa-

tion. Several diocesan leaders mentioned public districts that offer preschool programs as certain competition. They insisted that public schools would continue, in many states, to invest in and develop early childhood education as a growth area. Christian, faith-based early childhood programming competes with Catholic programs in some areas, as do privately operated centers.

Discussion

Though a small-scale pilot study, this investigation yielded an initial portrait of the nature and contours of Catholic preschool education in a sample of (arch) dioceses across the U.S.. Among the sites studied here, the study revealed that early childhood education is already viewed as an integral part of a developmental approach to Catholic education that meets the needs of the faithful across the lifespan. Participants characterized this early educational engagement with families as an important encounter with the church after baptism.

Noteworthy Themes

The following represents an initial list of discussion points and recommendations.

Enrollment gains. Early childhood programming serves a growing number of children across the country, and it is clearly a growth area in Catholic education. Considering the widespread contraction in the enrollment landscape in US Catholic education over the last decades, the enrollment gains in the preschool sector are striking. From a purely numbers perspective, early childhood is an area of Catholic education that is experiencing demand, interest, and growth.

Curriculum. It appears that while most (arch)dioceses provided curriculum standards to guide early childhood programming, these were not engrained in all interview sites. It is likely that the entire population of (arch) dioceses offering early childhood programming contains many that are operating without diocesan-wide curriculum standards. With Common Core Standards becoming the norm, there will likely be only greater and greater press to articulate and define the learning expectations for preschoolers.

Family engagement and evangelization. Study participants were vocal and enthusiastic about this particular facet of ministry in Catholic education. There was a sense that helping these youngest hearts and minds grow in the Catholic faith was a particularly life-giving ministry, but one that also reaches deeply into parental faith development and catechesis. All Catholic

school stakeholders must think deeply about how best to engage young families and deepen their connections to Catholic schools and the Church. This investigation suggests that early childhood education is a particularly rich context in which to do so, and one that decidedly meets the call of the New Evangelization (Pope Benedict XVI, 2010).

Strategic planning. Some (arch)diocesan participants described either current or completed efforts to better understand and articulate the role of early childhood education in the local vision for Catholic schools. However, there was not an overwhelming sense that (arch)diocesan participants had considered the strategic role of early childhood education in the growth and strengthening of Catholic education. There was little mention, for example, of systematically assessing the professional development needs of the early childhood workforce or of conducting a comprehensive market analysis of potential growth.

Elementary principal preparation to lead preschool programs. This study revealed a large degree of local, parochial control and management of preschool programs, coupled with the fact that many preschool programs are highly integrated into the elementary school. These two observations combined lead to questions about the preparation and formation of Catholic elementary school principals to lead early childhood education programs. Are current leadership preparation experiences designed to provide the requisite skill set and knowledge base to effectively lead in the context of early childhood?

Attentiveness to issues of budget as a reflection of mission. Variability was observed in the approach to budgeting for early childhood education. There is a clear need to isolate and identify budget parameters for purposes of planning, growth, contraction, and so forth.

Measuring quality of programming. There was little mention of measures of quality—although such a prompt was not included as part of the interview protocol. In the public domain, demands for accountability are woven into the state legislation that funds state preschool education. Often, systematic and rigorous attention is paid to program implementation, assessments, and tracking of causal impacts (Gilliam & Frede, 2012). Based on the findings from this set of interviews, more attention to program evaluation as a vehicle to regularly assess quality is warranted. The only measure of quality voiced by participants was whether and to what extent preschoolers remained at the school for kindergarten. Whether or not preschool programs contribute to

K-8 enrollment growth remains an empirical question in need of systematic investigation.

Need for continued research. Although the body of research on public early childhood education is vast, much less research exists on private, faith-based early childhood education, and even less focusing on the Catholic context. More descriptive information is needed as a first step to more accurately and transparently define curriculum standards, teacher hiring practices and credentialing, type and nature of program offerings, and so on. There are numerous and still unanswered questions across each of the inquiry domains originally presented in Figure 1. What is the overall financial impact on the parish in the operation of preschools? What best practices underscore the role of preschools in family evangelization? How do school affiliated versus stand-alone programs compare in terms of their operation and achievement of desired outcomes? How does “state-by-state” variability in terms of early childhood education contribute to differences in Catholic preschools located in various jurisdictions? In the study of this educational niche, these and other questions could benefit from interdisciplinary inquiry that draws upon a range of fields including economics, theology, psychology, education, and child/family development. In addition, contrasting the methodology of this study, a detailed, multi-case study approach of a few (arch)dioceses is a recommended next step to understanding the within-diocese variation reported so often in this inquiry.

Engagement via university partnerships and outreach. What might Catholic higher education do to contribute effectively to these emerging trends in Catholic early childhood education? Consideration should be given to engagement activities such as:

- a workshop, program, or institute to prepare teachers or principals;
- a research-based, interdisciplinary degree or certificate in early childhood education/leadership;
- a consulting service to gauge need and provide strategic planning;
- summer programming or webinars;
- diocesan-focused services or programs.

Limitations

A larger and more comprehensive study can build upon these findings by drawing from a larger sample of dioceses across the country. In addition, a stratified random sampling procedure wherein proportionality by geographic region is guaranteed would bolster confidence in the representativeness of these data. Additional research can likewise delve deeper into these macro level findings through diocesan-specific analyses in order to garner rich, multilayered site-based data. Moreover, onsite interviews, observations, and reviews of program materials can extend the interview methodology that was primary to the current investigation.

Conclusion

This investigation revealed that early childhood programming is already a key component of the Catholic educational enterprise. Program offerings are wide-ranging and mostly decentralized, and much variability exists in terms of curricular offerings. However, enrollment appears to be trending upward, presenting a moment of great opportunity for family faith development and evangelization. This inquiry highlights a need for systematic thinking in Catholic education about providing a seamless, developmental, continuum approach to human development and education. This initial portrait of Catholic early childhood education confirms that there must be an on-going and strategic focus on how best to support and strengthen this valuable ministry, a ministry that touches and forms the very youngest hearts and minds.

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Appendix A

Participating Sites and Central Office Leaders

Site	Participant and Title
Diocese of Arlington, VA	Sr. Karl Ann Homberg, SSJ, Assistant Superintendent
Archdiocese of Atlanta, GA	Dr. Diane Starkovich, Superintendent
Archdiocese of Cincinnati, OH	Dr. Jim Rigg, Superintendent
Diocese of Columbus, OH	Kitty Quinn, Associate Director of School Leadership Maria Phillips, Associate Director of Special Populations
Diocese of Ft. Wayne-South Bend, IN	Dr. Mark Myers, Superintendent
Diocese of Grand Rapids, MI	David Faber, Superintendent
Archdiocese of Hartford, CT	Valerie Mara, Director of Curriculum Design
Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana	Marie Williams, Director, Pastoral Office for Education
Diocese of Madison, WI	Michael Lancaster, Superintendent
Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, OK	Diane Floyd, Associate Superintendent
Archdiocese of Omaha, NE	Marilyn Wiebelhaus, Administrator, Assessment & Curriculum
Diocese of Orlando, FL	Mr. Henry Fortier, Secretary of Faith Formation and Superintendent of Schools Jim Cooney, Associate Superintendent
Diocese of Phoenix, AZ	Mary Beth Mueller, Superintendent Sr. Melita M. Penchalk, OSBM, Assistant Superintendent
Diocese of Saint Augustine, FL	JoAnn Leskanic, Curriculum Coordinator
Diocese of Toledo, OH	Mr. Chris Knight, Superintendent Martha Harthen, School Consultant Kathy Taraschke, Coordinator of Professional Development

Appendix B Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

I. Descriptive Information

Key Informant Contact Information:

Date:

Interview Start/End Times:

Name of Audio File:

II. Opening

- Thank you for participation and collaboration
- Outline purpose of study
- Oral presentation of consent, specifically requesting permission audio record

III. Overview Questions

- Is preschool or early childhood programming offered by the schools in your (arch)diocese?
- How many schools in your diocese offer pre-school? Out of how many total?
- How many children were enrolled last academic year? How many were enrolled 3 years ago? Five years ago? Is the enrollment trend, increasing, decreasing, or level?
- What other guidance and support does the central office provide?
- Should I follow up with anyone else in your (arch)diocese who has a leadership position for early childhood?

IV. Domains and Key Questions

Curriculum

- Is there a standard (arch)diocesan curriculum for early childhood or preschool? For some content areas or all?
- Are the curricula standards-based?
- Are we able to access a copy?

Teachers & Staff

- What are the requirements for education, training, certification?
- Are there aides in the classrooms? What is the student to teacher ratio?

Finances

- Is there a state tax credit or subsidy parents take advantage of?
- What are the financial dynamics in the operation of a Catholic preschool?
- What is the interface between overall school finances and preschool operational finances?
- Are preschools budgeted on the same budget as the K-8 program or are they responsible for a separate budget or line item? Does the preschool break even or is it subsidized? How closely does preschool tuition track with K-8 tuition? Do your programs have a wait list?

Regulatory / Accrediting Considerations

- To what extent are Catholic preschools in your diocese accredited?
- Which bodies provide such accreditation?

Faith Development

- Do the preschool standards have a religion/faith component? To what extent do preschool curricula emphasize faith development?
- How do Catholic preschools serve as a form of family engagement and evangelization?

Integration with K-8 Schools & Enrollment Impact

- To what extent are preschools integrated with the K-8 school community?
- What percentage of the overall elementary school enrollment are preschool students?
- What ages are the preschools open to (e.g., 4 year olds only or 3 and 4 year olds)? Any programs for toddlers?
- What percentage of preschool students remain in the school into kindergarten?
- Do you sense that preschool programs have boosted Kindergarten enrollments?

Marketing

- How are families made aware of Catholic preschools?
- What qualities of a preschool are desired/expected by prospective families?
- What does the public school system offer in the form of early childhood education? Is it tuition-based or free? What are the other competitors in the preschool market (i.e., other religious schools, co-ops, Montessori schools, etc.)?

Final Questions

- What do you see as the major issues facing early childhood education in your (arch)diocese?
- Innovative practices? Programs that you're especially proud of? Why?
- Anything that we should be asking superintendents that we haven't thought of?

V. Closing

- Timeline for study completion and next steps
- Reiterate contact information for follow-up or additional clarification
- Note that we may contact with a follow-up verification of any site-specific write-up
- Thank you for participation and collaboration

Appendix C
Tables 4 - 7

Table 4

Brief Descriptions of Central Office Support for Early Childhood Programs

Site	Support Services
Arlington	Provides professional development and in-service opportunities; offers guidance and support in regard to Virginia Catholic Education Association guidelines
Atlanta	Director of Parish Preschool Programs is provided by the Office of Catholic Schools. Provides oversight, guidance, and information; serves as liaison with State of Georgia, and facilitates creation of new programs
Cincinnati	Newly created position in Archdiocesan office that provides oversight and support to preschool programs
Columbus	Serves as a liaison with Ohio Department of Education, primarily in regard to licensing
Ft. Wayne-South Bend	Provides information on best practices to preschools
Grand Rapids	Assistant Superintendent leads professional development efforts; a diocesan-wide marketing effort will focus on preschool
Hartford	Provides professional development
Lafayette	Provides professional development
Madison	No direct support
Oklahoma City	Provides informational support regarding state early childhood trends and accreditation standards
Omaha	Provides professional development
Orlando	Provides professional development, support services for preschool teachers to pursue/maintain certification, including catechist certification
Phoenix	Hosts preschool director meetings several times per year; provides professional development; acts as liaison with state authorities regarding licensing
St. Augustine	Provides informational support and professional development
Toledo	Contracts with a consultant to provide professional development and technical assistance regarding state licensure

Table 5

Early Childhood Curriculum across Sites

Site	Diocesan Curriculum	Notes and Description
Arlington	Yes	Diocesan wide curriculum outlined in VCEA guidelines. There is also a standards based curriculum modelled on Virginia's Foundation Blocks for Early Learning, which are comprehensive standards for 4 year olds. Religion component has been added to the state guidelines
Atlanta	No	Preschool directors and teachers consult with Kindergarten teacher to backwards plan preschool expectations. For parish based programs, each parish chooses their own curriculum
Cincinnati	No	Early childhood programming is a strategic priority in the diocese so a preschool curriculum will be developed in the next few years
Columbus	No - except for religion	State provides content standards and social and emotional learning standards for early childhood. Highly suggested by the diocese that preschool programs have curriculum
Ft. Wayne-South Bend	No	No specified curriculum for content areas or for religion
Grand Rapids	Yes	Curriculum covers all subject areas as well as religion. Currently under review by diocesan office for updating
Hartford	Yes	Standards-based archdiocesan curriculum that covers all content areas as well as religion
Lafayette	No - except for religion	Diocese encourages reference to Indiana state guidelines on academic standards for young children. Newly developed religion standards in the diocese include preschool standards
Madison	No	Diocese encourages reference to Wisconsin state guidelines
Oklahoma City	Yes	Oklahoma state standards and National Association for the Education of Young Children standards were reviewed in developing local standards
Omaha	No	Diocese encourages reference to Nebraska state standards
Orlando	No - except for religion	No specified curriculum for content areas but there are standards for religion in preschool
Phoenix	Yes	Standards based curriculum for content areas as well as religion
St. Augustine	Yes	Standards based curriculum for content areas as well as religion
Toledo	No	Diocesan offers guidelines and each site develops curriculum that must be aligned to state curriculum standards

Table 6

Teacher Educational and Credential Requirements

Site	Teacher Requirements and Description
Arlington	Bachelor's degree or Child Development Associate (CDA) credential required. Preschool teachers are not required to maintain state certification but they are required to fulfil state in-service requirements
Atlanta	For teachers in Pre-K4 programs affiliated with elementary school, state certification in early childhood is required. Parish preschools require that teachers have a degree but not necessarily certification
Cincinnati	All early childhood teachers must be state certified, which requires at least a bachelor's degree. Preschool teachers must be Catholic since there is religious education in the preschool programs
Columbus	Teachers must have at least an Associate Degree in early childhood education or a Bachelor's degree. A Pre-K to Grade 3 license is offered by the state of Ohio, though this is not required
Ft. Wayne-South Bend	Preschool educators are state-licensed teachers
Grand Rapids	Preschool teachers are licensed by the state. Minimum level of certification in Michigan is an Associate Degree with particular coursework
Hartford	Preschool teachers are licensed. There is also a state early childhood certification
Lafayette	Variable, since some preschools are under parish jurisdiction
Madison	Preschool educators are licensed teachers with certification in early childhood
Oklahoma City	Preschool teachers are state certified in early childhood
Omaha	Preschool teachers are state certified and have an early childhood endorsement
Orlando	Preschools teachers have a minimum of an Associate degree in Early Childhood or a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education with at least 6 credits in Early Childhood. Teachers can pursue state certification in Early Childhood, though it is optional and the Florida Catholic Conference (accreditor) does not require it
Phoenix	Bachelor's degree is required for lead teachers as well as an early childhood certification
St. Augustine	Preschool teachers have a minimum of an Associate degree in Early Childhood or a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education with at least 6 credits in Early Childhood. Teachers can pursue state certification in Early Childhood, though it is optional and the Florida Catholic Conference (accreditor) does not require it
Toledo	Preschool teachers should be licensed and should at least have an Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education. Program directors are state licensed and have a state teaching license as well

Table 7

Accreditation and Licensing across Sites

Site	Accrediting or Licensing Body	Notes and Description
Arlington	Virginia Catholic Education Association (VCEA)	Preschools are accredited as part of the elementary school. For stand-alone programs, there is currently not an accreditation requirement
Atlanta	Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS); State of Georgia	Preschools are accredited as part of the elementary school. All preschools are licensed by the state
Cincinnati	State of Ohio	Licensed through the Department of Education or the Department of Jobs and Family Services
Columbus	State of Ohio	Preschools are licensed by the state
Ft. Wayne-South Bend	State of Indiana, Department of Education	Preschools are accredited as part of the elementary school
Grand Rapids	Michigan Non-Public Schools Accrediting Association; State of Michigan	Preschools are accredited as part of the elementary school
Hartford	New England Association of Schools and Colleges	Preschools are accredited as part of the elementary school
Lafayette	No diocesan wide standard	
Madison	Wisconsin Religious and Independent Schools	Preschools are accredited as part of the elementary school
Oklahoma City	Oklahoma Conference of Catholic Schools Accrediting Association	Preschools are accredited as part of the elementary school, completing an early childhood self-study component
Omaha	State of Nebraska	Preschools are accredited as part of the elementary school. Parish-based preschools receive certification from the Department of Health and Human Services
Orlando	Florida Catholic Conference	Some preschools also pursue accreditation through NAEYC

Site	Accrediting or Licensing Body	Notes and Description
Phoenix	Western Catholic Education Association; State of Arizona Department of Health	Preschools are accredited as part of the elementary school
St. Augustine	Florida Catholic Conference	Preschools are accredited as part of the elementary school
Toledo	State of Ohio	Department of Education or Department of Jobs and Family Services

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