

# Genesis or Exodus? Student Retention Strategies for Private Middle School

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## Abstract

This paper examines the issues involved in the decision to leave a suburban, private, Lutheran school during middle school, the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grades. The findings suggest that the decision arises from a variety of circumstances, but the primary motivating factor is the student's desire. Research data were collected by surveys and follow-up interviews. Needs to be about 100 words—why is this important information?

## Introduction

The research location is a private, parochial school, located in a large suburb. The school offers programs for children ranging from age 3 through the 8<sup>th</sup> graders. Recent data from the National Association of Independent Schools, suggests that approximately 10% of students enrolled in a small, coed, private middle school are likely to leave the school in any given year. Schools that have a higher rate than this may be able to improve student retention by looking initially at the reasons students leave, and secondly by instituting programs and policies to enrich the caring and supportive atmosphere of the school.

## Literature Review

The question of why students choose to enter certain schools and why they choose to leave has been the subject of a variety of studies in a variety of different circumstances. Most of the literature on the subject of departure focuses on the college student. Others look at the decision to enter Magnet schools versus regular public schools. Others look at high school populations, particularly those students who are classified as at-risk. A smaller number have looked into the choice between public and private school, and fewer still concentrate on programs for gifted students. Although studies that directly examined the middle school

population appear to be non-existent, all of the available research gives some direction and insight into this research question.

The researcher most frequently cited in current literature is Vincent Tinto. Although his research is focused on college students, many of his theories have relevance to a student entering a private middle school for the first time. He describes successful integration into and completion of a college program as having three stages: separation, transition and incorporation (1988). In the first stage, students break from past associations. During transition “the person begins to interact in new ways with members of the new group into which membership is sought” (pg. 441). Finally entering into the last phase, the student takes on new patterns of behavior and feels he or she has attained membership in the new community. Students entering a private school for the first time also may experience these stages to some degree. They have left their previous school and circle of friends and entered a new environment where the expectations, rules and standards may be very different from that with which they are familiar. They must become accustomed to the new environment, feel comfortable with it, and confident that they can succeed in meeting the goals that brought them there in the first place. A child who is not able to move through the first two stages successfully is unlikely to be happy in the new school environment.

Parents cited the happiness of the child as of primary importance to them when they made a decision about school placement (West & Noden, 1998). In this study parents who chose private school for their children rated the child’s happiness, school atmosphere and the ability of the school to suit the child’s needs above quality of education. These authors also expressed the opinion that a study of parental choice should involve both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview) aspects in order to provide the most valuable insights. Other studies concerned with

parental choice of schools found academic reasons to be the most frequently cited (Goldring & Hausman, 1999). These researchers used only a survey in collecting their data, and associated school choice with the socioeconomic status, ethnicity and educational level of the parents. Interestingly their academic category included the items “students get more individual help at the school” and “special programs such as in the arts, science, technology” (pg. 478). Such special attention and course selection would probably also make the students happy. Another recent study (Bracey, 1998) found the two most important factors were the student’s involvement in the decision to enter a new school, and the friendships (or lack of) that form in the new environment. “Stayers”, students who persisted in the special schools, were more likely to have been part of the decision to enter the school and more likely to have friends in the program.

Texas Tech University held a summer program for gifted 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders during the summer of 1989 (Kunkel & Pittman, 1991). They had a disappointing 30% drop-out rate and so a study was done to determine the causes. “Attrition patterns were found to differ significantly with school year (more seventh-grade than eighth-grade drop-outs) and instructor rating, with more highly rated students less likely to drop-out” (pg. 92). It appears that 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders are more likely to leave a school than 8<sup>th</sup> graders are because the critical stages of separation and transition have occurred during these two years, and the student has become integrated (incorporated) into the social and academic life of the school. These researchers, using the aforementioned Tinto model, found “social integration may have been a prominent influence, in that peer-group identification and a sense of belonging are typically more elusive for younger than older adolescents” (pg. 93).

A consideration of time spent on outside activities is an often overlooked variable in much of the research (Bagayoko & Kelley, 1996). College students who must spend many hours

working or taking care of family members are more likely to drop-out. This is a valid question for the middle school population as well, because some students are involved in so many extra-curricular activities such as sports, dance and scouting, that they have little time left for school projects and homework.

Sometimes students leave a school not out of choice but because they are expelled. These are usually students who have behavior problems, excessive absenteeism or academic struggles. These are the students identified as at-risk. Epp and Epp (2001) argue that it is rigid school policies and procedures that are forcing these students out, but reform and creative options can provide these students with a chance to succeed. Very few students are expelled from this school and because this research deals with the **choice** to leave, those students and their families were omitted from this research.

Strategies for retaining students whether they are at-risk, gifted, college age or middle school age are likely to be similar. Many colleges have now formed retention task forces and have instituted special staff training on the subject (Sydow & Sandel, 1998; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). They believe the key is good student-faculty interaction so the students experience support and encouragement from their teachers. Teacher support, along with positive social integration, appears to be the two most important factors for retaining middle school students in a private school setting.

### Methods

A one-page Likert type survey, included in Appendix A, was sent to the parents of any student who had attended the Lutheran school during the years 2000 to 2003, but chose to leave mid-year or declined to re-enroll during the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grades. Thirty-one subjects were mailed surveys with a brief cover letter, which outlined the research goals, and a self-addressed stamped

envelope to facilitate a response. The responses were grouped into clusters according to the importance each item contributed to the decision to leave. (Gay & Airasian, 2003) Fourteen surveys were returned, and all but one respondent was willing to participate in an interview about their child's school experiences. These parents were contacted by telephone in order to discuss their responses, but primarily to discover when specifically they first began to think about making a change regarding a school for their children.

### Results

The percentage of survey items scored as a 4 or 5, indicating very important in the decision to leave the Lutheran school, are listed below in Table 1. Of particular interest for this study is the fact that 64 % of the parents reported their student's desire was a very important reason, while only 43 % ranked their own desire as highly. These results indicate the primary reason the parents in this survey decided to leave the Lutheran school was the desire of their student.

Fifty-seven percent of the parents ranked philosophical differences as very important in their decision. The comments regarding differences fell into two main categories, religious differences and teaching strategies. Children are taught Lutheran doctrine in the school, and as the students get older, the differences between the teachings of the Lutheran church and their own congregations are more apparent. For many students and parents this became a concern. Some parents felt their children were beginning to "feel bad" or confused about their religious beliefs. Others were hoping for more flexibility and accommodations for their students, especially students with learning differences. Some parents felt certain teachers were unwilling to adjust assignments, assessment tools or disciplinary measures, resulting in unfair treatment of their student.

The third highest category, cited by 43% of parents, was the lack in extra-curricular activities. Some students had a strong desire to pursue activities in sports, dramatic arts and music beyond the levels available to them at the Lutheran school.

**Table 1**

**Percent of Responses Ranked Very Important**

<b>Financial concerns</b>	<b>14 %</b>
<b>Convenience/location</b>	<b>0 %</b>
<b>Academic concerns</b>	<b>36 %</b>
<b>Lack in curriculum</b>	<b>14 %</b>
<b>Lack in extra-curricular activities</b>	<b>43 %</b>
<b>Philosophical differences</b>	<b>57 %</b>
<b>Personality conflicts</b>	<b>36 %</b>
<b>Student's desire</b>	<b>64 %</b>
<b>Parent's desire</b>	<b>43 %</b>

The telephone interviews were extremely informative and enlightening, with all of the parents being helpful and cooperative. It was expected that people would be critical of the school and faculty given their decision to leave, but responses were exactly the opposite. Without exception, the parents had many positive comments and fond memories about their experiences at the school. The single common thread in the conversations, which also came as a surprise, was in each case the parents began considering a change in schools far before their children reached the middle school grades. For most the idea began in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grades, even if their children remained in the school through 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup>. This indicates that the decision to leave was not a hasty reaction to a particular event or person but rather a decision the parents struggled with over an

extensive period of time. One parent describes her decision this way, “[the school] offers an incredible curriculum, but personally we felt work load was too heavy...[our child] began to question some of the Lutheran teachings with what our family believes to be true...we wanted [him/her] to experience a school environment where there is more flexibility to allow for extracurricular activities, but mostly to be amongst peers who have a love for Christ...I must say I am forever grateful for [this school]. God met our need during her 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades there.” Another parent saw social problems developing over time. Her concern was, “As the class got smaller, the social problems increased to a point [that our child] lacked opportunities to ‘trade’ friendships-if on the ‘outs’ with the ‘group’, there was nowhere to go. The ‘Big Duck/Little Puddle’ became a real problem. She is so happy in a bigger puddle.”

### Conclusions

Middle school students are at an age when they are experiencing tremendous physiological and psychological changes. They feel insecure about themselves and generally look outside of themselves for acceptance and affirmation. A successful middle school will provide such an atmosphere of caring and nurture. This research suggests three areas of action for improving the school environment: communicate, congregate and connect.

Build time into the day for regular informal communication between teachers, administrators and students. A short session at the opening of the school day would provide the opportunity to share important school news and address student concerns. It could also be a time to recognize student achievements and celebrate the special events in their lives. Parental communication is also vital. It must be done in a timely and personal manner, especially when there are concerns or problems to be addressed (Lindle, 1998)

Social interaction is important for the middle school student as they attempt to understand who they are and who they want to become. Programs must be offered that encourage the talents, abilities and interests of all students. This may be a major reason large schools have a lower attrition rate, as larger schools are able to offer more activities, more chances and choices for the student to find a place where he/she feels important and valued. In addition to organized activities, students need places to just hang out and talk to each other. Offering a scheduled break time during the morning classes would provide this needed time for students to congregate

Schools that provide plenty of opportunities for communication and interaction among the students, faculty and administration will have naturally formed the basis for students to make the important connections to the school and their peers. Students who feel connected are more likely to be happy and to desire to stay in the school. Finally, form connections with parents by involving them in school activities and offering educational programs designed to help them understand their almost teenager. It is also extremely important to inform the parents before enrolling their child that the educational and behavioral standards that brought them to the school in the first place, may manifest themselves in lower grades for their student and/or disciplinary actions they may not have encountered before

Finally, as the results of this study indicate, the student's experiences in the upper elementary grades have a profound impact on the decision to stay or look elsewhere. Particular care must be given to problems and concerns that arise during these years so that parents will have confidence in the school's ability and willingness to meet the needs of their children.

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Appendix A

Please rank the following as to their importance in making the decision to leave [this] School.

The decision to leave \_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran School was due to:

	not important		somewhat important		very important	
1. Financial concerns	0	1	2	3	4	5
2. Convenience/location	0	1	2	3	4	5
3. Academic concerns	0	1	2	3	4	5
4. Lack in curriculum	0	1	2	3	4	5
5. Lack in extra-curricular activities	0	1	2	3	4	5
6. Philosophical differences	0	1	2	3	4	5
7. Personality conflicts	0	1	2	3	4	5
8. Student's desire	0	1	2	3	4	5
9. Parent's desire	0	1	2	3	4	5

If you responded with a 4 or 5 to any item, can you please explain?

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In your opinion was there any attempt made on the part of the school staff to address your concerns?

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Would you be willing to discuss your responses in person? \_\_\_\_\_

If so, please give me your name, your number and the best time to contact you.

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Thank you very much for participating in this survey.