



## Catholic Microschools

What does it mean to “right size” a Catholic School? In the 2019-20 school year, the NCEA reported that fully 25% of Catholic schools had enrollment of 150 students or fewer. There was a time when dioceses such as ours and recommendations for a minimally viable K-8 school. Usually something like “over 200” or “not under 180,” or some similar threshold. While fundamental truths will always exist, for example the need to generate enough revenue (through tuition, fundraising, or other means) to attract and retain great teachers, strict definitions of size need not necessarily be firm and bureaucratic. Strategies such as multi-age classrooms, creative staffing, personal learning technology, etc. can enable a school to be intentionally small and still deliver on the core purpose of “constant reference to the Gospel and a frequent encounter with Christ” (The Catholic School, Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, n55).

The **microschool movement** has been around for a long time, focusing on creating small, personalized learning environments with flexible curricula and a community-centered approach. Microschools prioritize individualized instruction, in cohorts as small as 5–15 students per group, blending teaching methods like project-based learning and mixed-age classrooms to meet diverse student needs. Many have long operated outside traditional school systems, and the movement has gained significant momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic, as families sought options. There is much that Catholic schools have learned and continue to learn, especially during this rapid period of educational change since the pandemic era, when it comes to size and personalization.

According to the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), a **Catholic microschool** is defined as “a sustainable Catholic school that is rooted in the tenets of Catholic faith and that has employed excellence in education.” This definition emphasizes the school's commitment to Catholic teachings while maintaining high educational standards and the fact that it is sustainable at whatever size meets the community's needs.

In recent years, the NCEA has recognized the growing presence of microschools within Catholic education, aiming to accurately reflect the evolving landscape of Catholic education and address the unique needs of these institutions. They may be smaller than neighboring schools, but if the ratios are sustainable, then the school can find a way to continue to serve the population of the community.

Kevin Baxter, who recently delivered the keynote address in our innovation summit, co-author the book with Jill Annabelle called **Greatness in Smallness: A Vision for Catholic Microschools.**

“It's funny because some of our smaller schools have been small and thriving forever,” said Jill Annable, co-author of the research in the podcast linked below. “They've been by design that size and there's so much to learn from that. And that's what people will read in our book too, is the examples,” such as “a school that's been at 120 students for the last 30 years. What are they doing right?”

What it comes down to may be a paradigm shift for those who have been in the vocation of operating schools for some time: enrollment is not ALWAYS a proxy for quality. To be fair, if your school is unintentionally small in an environment replete with potential students – for example, the middle of Cleveland, for example, the problem is NOT demographics. However, outside of our heavy population centers, there are numerous places in our diocese where numbers can be a challenge. The concept of a microschool challenges the “norm” of focusing on a minimum number of students, to instead focus on the appropriate ratio of students to staff, creatively arranged. The key is finding a way to remain viable.

Multi-age classrooms can be a strength of a school. Similarly, it can be a strategy for opening a new school and scaling up. To find more, visit these resources:

- View and [order the book](#), Greatness in Smallness: A Vision for Catholic Microschools from NCEA.
- Listen to the [NCEA Podcast](#) about the book Greatness in Smallness by the authors, Kevin Baxter, Ed.D. and Jill Annable.
- [View a recording](#) of a NCEA Convention 2021 virtual session about Microschools by the authors.