

# Study delves into how Catholic school teachers balance monetizing of education, meeting vocational call

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Many teachers would attest they were called to the profession to educate students and prepare them for life, not just to provide an economic

service. Yet, as education is increasingly politicized and monetized, many educators are pulled between providing an economic good and doing what they love. A new University of Kansas study found that to be especially true for Catholic school teachers, who have developed strategies for balancing their calling and profession.

Education has been influenced by neoliberalism and post industrialism in the last two decades, which places an emphasis on measurable results, standardized testing and steady enrollment. The debate of whether [education](#) should be viewed as a commodity or [public good](#) is present in all schools, but Heidi Hallman was interested in how it played out in Catholic schools, whose mission is to educate students, but also to guide them through the church's teachings and to provide a public good for all students, though they rely on tuition.

During the pandemic, Hallman, professor of curriculum & teaching at KU, heard about families, including non-Catholics, who sent their children to Catholic schools that maintained in-person teaching.

"I wondered how these [teachers](#) perceive the challenges that they face in comparison to their public school counterparts," Hallman said. "I did hear some lamenting the loss of community. We have sports, or the online community where we can reach around the world, and I think that has been tough for religious schools to accept, especially with the closing of so many Catholic schools and the loss of neighborhood and community."

Hallman interviewed 35 elementary, [middle school](#) and secondary Catholic school teachers and administrators for the study, published in the journal *International Studies in Catholic Education*.

As many Catholic schools kept their doors open during the pandemic, the schools often saw increases in enrollment. Many new students were

not Catholic, but the schools have stated missions to educate all and felt like their spiritual component could offer something for the families they might otherwise be missing. However, it also added to the perception of education as a commodity, Hallman said.

"Because of education 'being on the market,' we tend to have a view of education as a product. That happens in [higher education](#) as well," Hallman said. "We don't want to treat students as customers, but there were people happy to have students and families coming to their schools, but also a skepticism, as if people were just shopping for schools."

The study participants revealed three themes in their responses to balancing teaching and vocation and how they dealt with the neoliberal and postindustrial influences on American education and policy.

First noted was technocratic professionalism. With a constant focus on [professional development](#) and skills, American education has emphasized that this type of training will develop the best educators. However, several of the teachers, especially the younger ones in the study, questioned that approach. Respondents often wondered if allowing them to draw on their faith and love for working with [young people](#) would make them more effective educators than continuously taking skills training classes.

Respondents also noted competition from the marketplace. Teachers could feel there were many outside forces pulling students away from the community provided by a Catholic school. Educators noted the pull of athletics outside the school or non-school related activities and options available via the internet and social media that resulted in a "watering down," or de-investment, of activities and teachings of the school and church. Even though schools often continued in-person education, church services were often canceled or reduced in frequency, and educators noted many people, including families of students, have

not come back. They also reported fearing that students would leave the schools as public schools returned to in-person learning after the initial stages of the pandemic.

Finally, respondents reported being concerned with optimizing the [student](#) experience. In addition to state-mandated curriculum, Catholic school teachers are required to impart the teachings of the church. That part of the job often appealed to those saying faith helped bring them to the job, and that it could be a way to serve everyone, but also could ring hollow.

"If a family didn't have a [religious identity](#), the teachers mentioned how maybe the school could offer them that, but there was also a concern that faith might simply be an add-on, or like going to the grocery store to get something you need," Hallman said.

The educators were not territorial, she added, and often looked for ways to make non-Catholic students and families feel welcome.

The findings provide insight into how Catholic school teachers and administrators view their roles in society, a topic which has been largely overlooked by academic researchers, Hallman said. Their dedication to their work, and especially reluctance to view education as a commodity while drawing on their faith as a way to help better serve students, can provide a model for preparing teachers for all schools. As opposed to simply relying on teaching a set of skills and insisting they meet mandates and measurable results, teachers could be viewed more holistically, in a way that allows them to use what inspires them, whether religious or otherwise, to be better teachers and continue to grow, she added.

"It gave me hope that [religious schools](#) can seek their religious mission, but also welcome others and maintain their commitment to the common

good, even among pressures to keep enrollment up and seeing neighboring Catholic schools close," Hallman said. "These teachers were very hopeful. They often had lower wages but were very dedicated to their vocation, and I found that refreshing to hear from people in the pandemic era, when there are so many pressures on teachers."

**More information:** Heidi Hallman, At the crux of vocation and profession: teachers' work in Catholic schools, *International Studies in Catholic Education* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/19422539.2022.2035977](https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2022.2035977)

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