

Visions for Excellence Early Childhood Education Conference debuts as part of NCEA 2019 Convention & Expo

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Early childhood educators can begin making plans to attend the 2019 NCEA Visions for Excellence Early Childhood Education (ECE) Conference which will take place on a designated day during the NCEA 2019 Convention & Expo in Chicago April 23-25. Attendees will have the benefit of not only attending a specialized conference and networking with those who share a passion for ECE, but will also be able to take advantage of convention sessions on the non-ECE conference days, enjoy convention liturgies, attend special events and visit the exhibit hall.

Early childhood education programs are an integral part of Catholic schools across the country. Results in the *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2017-2018: The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing* report, show that 171,421 students or 13.2% of students enrolled in Catholic elementary schools are in preschool. This number represents preschool programs that are part of the Catholic school or a separate center that provides an educational program under the control of the school (some are PK3 and some are PK4). The data indicates this is the largest grade level for elementary schools, up from 152,980 in 2007-2008 reflecting 12% growth. Additionally, the percent of overall elementary school enrollment represented by preschool students was up from 9.3% in 2007-2008 and 10.9% in 2012-2013. When considering all



grade levels, preschool to grade 8, preschool is the only group showing enrollment growth between 2007-2008 and 2017-2018.

A look at the *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 1996-97: The Annual Statistical Reports on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing* report shows preschool enrollment of 67,637 students for 1987-1988 representing 3.4% of the students enrolled in Catholic elementary schools. In the 30-year period between 1987-1988 and 2017-2018, preschool enrollment has increased by 153%. In comparing the 1987-1988 and 2017-2018 data, all other elementary grades reflect a decline in enrollment.

Based on the data, Catholic school

educators have a great opportunity to capitalize on the trend of increasing preschool enrollment and develop strategies to retain those students as they matriculate into kindergarten.

When planning how to attract and retain preschool students, there are many factors to consider. One of the top priorities is defining what constitutes a quality ECE program and then implementing the supports and structures needed to ensure a quality program. There are a number of sources for working through this process.

First, let us consider the priorities of those we serve. Results from a recent national market research study conducted by the National Catholic

Educational Association (NCEA) and Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (FADICA) indicate that today's parents are savvy, informed customers who want to ensure their children are well positioned for a successful future. As such, it is critical that high quality programming is on the forefront. The more parents believe that the school offers a balance between academics and religious teachings, an environment where everyone is welcome and places an emphasis on character development, the more likely they are to consider a Catholic school for their children.

Catholic ECE programs are uniquely positioned to respond to the priorities of current and potential Catholic school parents. Imbued in the faith, ECE programs nurture the faith life of the students and Catholic virtues provide a strong foundation for character development. Catholic schools have long had a reputation for excellence in academics and must share their success as part of the overall effort to retain current families and attract new ones.

Second, the National Benchmarks and Standards for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS) provide guidance on "how the most mission-driven, program-effective, well-managed, and responsibly governed Catholic schools

operate." Those whose passion is early childhood education will benefit from the defining characteristics and performance benchmarks of Catholic schools outlined within the NSBECS.

Finally, many early childhood educators are familiar with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Early Learning Program Standards. These standards, found on the NAEYC website, identify key areas of best practices for ensuring a quality ECE program. While there is some overlap between the NSBECS and the NAEYC standards, early childhood educators will benefit from guidance on developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) for early learners.



As Catholic school educators look to the future, they can be heartened by the growing number of students enrolling in ECE programs in Catholic schools across the country. In times of declining enrollment, this is a bright spot. Let us all work together to identify strategies to maximize the enrollment of these students by retaining them beyond the preschool years and identify strategies to continue to grow this population of students. What better time to begin the conversation than at the 2019 NCEA Visions for Excellence Early Childhood Education Conference taking place during the NCEA 2019 Convention & Expo in Chicago in April. We hope to see you there!

Why Attend NCEA 2019?

NCEA 2019 Convention & Expo will take place April 23 - 25 at the McCormick Place in Chicago, IL and is the largest private-education association gathering in the nation, held in fellowship with the Archdiocese of Chicago. NCEA invites you to join us for this one-of-a-kind event that brings together Catholic and other religious educators from across the United States, Canada and other countries to exchange ideas and debut cutting-edge research and technologies related to education.

Those participating represent all aspects of Catholic and faith-based education from preschool, elementary, secondary, adult education, colleges and universities to local parish pastors, priests, parish volunteers and more. Enjoy more than 200 professional development sessions, beautiful liturgies, and special events. Be sure to save time to visit the Expo Hall to get the latest in educational technology, products and services.