



The Rule of Three Asks

Ask parents for money only three times in any given year:

Ask One: tuition/fees

Ask Two: the school's annual fund as part of annual giving

Ask Three: an opportunity to give to annual giving through an event / experience

The reality is that the vast majority of your donors are parents and/or people connected to them such as grandparents. A few of your donors are parents of graduates and a few are the graduates themselves. You have very few donors from the general population – with the exception of schools that have a traditional church sponsoring community. Even in the latter case, the generation of church-goers that routinely gave to the school is dying and giving way to a generation that doesn't think the same way.

If this is your reality, that parents are the vast majority group of your donors, then we have to consider what treating them with honor and respect (the Mary Principle) means. What we have learnt over the years is that our parents truly dislike/hate being nickel and dimed to death. They want to know what the cost of tuition is upfront – don't constantly send me a bill for this fee and that fee as we go through the year. They want to know (and not be taken by surprise) that they won't be asked for a donation over and over again. Whether in tuition or in philanthropy, 99% of parents want to be approached as few times as possible, and they want to know how that works from the start of their relationship with the school. Too many schools fail to address philanthropy in the admission process; too many schools fail to create a total 'tuition' cost that literally includes everything the parent will have to pay.

The simple reason for this is that our parents have an annual income, an annual budget, and an annual budget-line for their giving. Let's imagine that our family has a median household income - \$68,703 in 2019 for the USA and \$62,900 in 2019 in Canada. And let's suppose that our Christian family tithes or gives 10% of its gross income to charity, an amount a little over \$6,000. They have made a decision to pay their mortgage, their utilities, to put food on the table and clothing on their children, to take one holiday, and to send their children to a Christian school. They have also decided upfront how much they are going to give of what God has given them to their church, their school, and probably one to three other charities that they support. It doesn't matter how many times you ask them for money, they will still give you the amount they decided upon at the beginning of their financial year. The more you ask them, the more irritated they become. They don't become more generous. They become more irritated. Once they've figured out how many times you are going to ask them for money, they just split up their gift into that many pieces. Asking them once means that you are being respectful of their budget process, spending far more time on celebrating what is happening in the life of

their child than in asking constantly for money, and appreciating that their relationship with the school is about their child, not about the money they give you.

Step One

Count all the times you ask parents for money. Think of the following: tuition, annual fund appeal, golf tournament, auction. But then go further. Think of examples such as these: fee for the class retreat, yearbook cost, school photos, bring in tissue for the classroom, Christmas gift for the teachers, fee to pay an after school sport, the envelope in the Annual Report, the speech at Back-to-school night, Giving Tuesday, donation for the food bank, Booster Club events, pizza night for the choir, bring in three binders for this semester, Library book sale, special Board appeal for scholarships etc.

We typically find 30 – 80+ asks in every school year when we create a calendar together.

Step Two

Split all the asks into:

1. what is programmatic
2. what is annual giving
3. what is student philanthropy
4. what is a legitimate parent expense

Step Three

Programmatic asks: bundle everything together with tuition and charge as a single number (even if you identify and split out the fees to make them clear). A simple example is to charge everyone for a yearbook. Notice that eliminating separate collections also eliminates significant time and focus the business office or teachers should profitably be putting elsewhere. Several schools we have worked with asked teachers to ‘collect’ funds and signed pieces of paper for everything from photographs to the cost of the field day. What a waste of teachers’ time! Their job is to attend to their children’s growth, not manage the bureaucracy of the school. Make everyone’s life easier and your teachers’ focus clearer. Ask once and once only for anything relating to the education of the child.

Annual giving asks: educate your families from the admission process onwards that they will receive a request for a donation to provide those things tuition cannot. Assure them it will not be to fund the ‘gap’, as if telling your parents that no donations means the school will close in April is a powerful motivator! Assure them instead that the school is well run and that donations will be spent in very specific ways such as helping families attend the school, an investment in the science program, an upgraded scoreboard, teacher professional growth etc. etc. And they will be asked respectfully once in the Fall – and invited to an annual giving event in the spring.

Student philanthropy: never ever use children to raise money for the school. If they raise money at all, it should point them to the needs of others, not their own needs. Ideally, children doing service is not about money but about time and commitment. This is explored further in the chapter on student fund-raising.

Legitimate parent expenses: these might be identified as idiosyncratic expenses that are specific to their own children. Examples might include AP exam fees, a voluntary trip over Easter, participation in an after-school program. If it during the school day, it must be included in the tuition.

Step Four

Strategically and tactically, move over time to the place where you are only talking with parents three times a year about money. Remember always that money is the one argument you can never win with parents. Sending your children to a Christian school is expensive and is not affordable. Parents choose to give their children this opportunity as an incredible investment in their lives. Each of the four areas above can be approached in a different way and on a separate timeline. Over time, though, they should all align so that every family will clearly and succinctly understand what the school is asking them to do and the opportunity that will provide for them and for their children, for every child at the school, and how that will bless future generations as well.

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