

Calm in the Storm: NICS/Oasis International Schools in the COVID19 Pandemonium

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Abstract:

This study looks at NICS/OASIS International Schools and how they struggled, survived and thrived throughout the COVID19 pandemic pandemonium. The purpose of this project is to consider the unique and unusual place that ICS and NICS/Oasis schools are situated in as International schools in terms of the impetus of these schools and driving motivation of their stakeholders, to analyze some factors for its success and growth. Quantitative data about enrollment from 2019 to 2022 comes from a study which analyzed data from the 16 schools throughout the network in 14 different countries around the globe. This is correlated to data collected by responses to an original Parent Motivations Survey sent to participating schools gathering responses from 94 parents in 8 schools, as well as meta analysis of data from two other parent surveys in member schools of 94 parents and 152 parents. Results show that NICS/OASIS schools have been able to weather the storm well; commitment to certain criteria exemplified in NICS/OASIS schools, especially Worldview/Values, paint a clearer picture of why. Solo Deo Gloria.

Introduction:

There are generally two motivations cited in the creation of International Schools: *Globalist* goals (economic/exploitative/colonial) and *Internationalist* goals (ideological/creating a 'one world citizenry' for its own sake) (Cambridge & Thompson, 2004), however, there are some schools on the International scene that offer a third-way as a driving and sustaining motivation - Christian International Schools. This third way has been a driving factor in the success for some schools - even through the global hardships created by COVID19.

Unique in the International Education scene is the *Network of International Christian Schools* (NICS) and their partner organization *Oasis*. While NICS/Oasis does "play on the field" of the globalist, and "speaks the language" of the internationalist - it is motivated by *neither* trying to get rich off the nations or creating a one-world internationalism for its own sake. The primary motivation of NICS is the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) - Jesus' calling to share the Gospel, helping students and families to understand and use a Biblical Worldview to find the Love of God, and similarly for Oasis, to celebrate common values established in this tradition "instilling in each student a values-based worldview in an environment of academic excellence and respect for people of all cultures and religions." (Oasis, 2022) This is done, in this context, through International Education and Community. "The mission of NICS is to establish a worldwide network of international Christian schools staffed by qualified Christian educators, instilling in each student a Biblical worldview in an environment of academic excellence and respect for people of all cultures and religions." (NICS/OASIS, 2022). This has been a very successful 'formula' for creating a network of schools, and communities around the globe. In an ever polarizing world, religious schools are often painted as being divisive and destructive to society, but the opposite seems to be true (Goodwin, 2020). Instead, these unique schools foster community and friendship within society. These communities have done much for creating and maintaining respectful and caring communities, even through adversity.

This study looks at both quantitative data and qualitative assessments to determine aspects of the NICS/OASIS approach and outcomes that are a part of the success of the network. This includes looking at some factors common to International Education, Private Education, and Christian Education. Quantitative data comes from enrollment data from the NICS/OASIS network annual report, and it shows that there has been an increase in the network enrollment globally, even despite the challenges since COVID19 started (NICS, 2022).

In Singapore the COVID19 pandemic fiasco resulted in "a drop in foreigners [that] sent its population down by the most since 1950 - 4.1% lower year-on-year as of

June 2021." (Lin, 2022) but the International Community School Singapore (ICS) of the NICS network has continued to thrive, fostering community and maintaining high numbers of expat students and keeping income above budget despite there being fewer foreigners (ICS, 2022). This Singapore example is a good one, but it is not unique in the NICS network. While many International schools globally have suffered during the COVID pandemic, NICS has been able to maintain its overall numbers, despite the closure of some schools and opening of others, with notable growth in their online school, NorthStar Academy (NICS, 2021 & NICS 2022).

ICS Singapore is the primary case study for this inquiry, but ICS is not the only school within the NICS/OASIS organization that was examined; this research looks at 10 different schools. Meta-analysis of collected data from other schools was incorporated to explore, reflect on and highlight some things that are so special about a school and mission organization that I love and have served with for a third of my life! It may also turn out to be useful as it may uncover some interesting new perspectives to consider, to grow in and thank to God for!

Literature Review

It is no secret that life has been impacted in tremendous ways in the pandemic-pandemonium years following the advent of Covid19; one group especially affected is found in those living "overseas." Many expats have fled foreign stations to return to their passport countries amidst travel restrictions, lockdowns and other challenges. Singapore is a prime example of this "expat exodus." For decades the population has been growing, especially the foreign population with a very high percentage of foreigners living, working and going to school in Singapore. That trend has been reversing since the Covid19 pandemonium with Singapore having lost 14% of its employment pass holders (expats earning the higher salaries) and seeing a total drop in population of more than 4%. In Singapore, since the covid 19 pandemic fiasco, there has been "a drop in foreigners [that has] sent its population down by the most since 1950 - 4.1% lower year-on-year as of June 2021" (Lin, 2022). This drop says a lot

about the international workforce in Singapore. There are many factors in this evacuation which include companies cutting costs and jobs, border restrictions, and the strain of overbearing policies that attempt to contain people and the virus - or as Chen Lin puts it, "Singapore's covid controls bite" (Lin, 2022).

There is some uncertainty about how to *define* the global retreat to home-countries from these expats (expats defined as "someone who moves abroad to take up a job opportunity"). The question is about whether or not these moves resulting from covid-fallout can be considered *elective* migration or not (Rowlinson, 2020). On one hand, they are often returning to a previously known "home base" or to be closer to family, which could be a positive, but if they are doing it in response to heavy-handed "draconian" travel restrictions or lockdowns, then this is a negative. In many cases foreign employment pass holders are being forced to leave Singapore, losing jobs and employment passes, because of discriminatory/differentiated policies toward vaccination status under the "Vaccination Differentiation Measures" (Singapore, 2021) - which, while described as a public health measure, is clearly creating a coercive situation: volunteer to take the job or lose your job and access to opportunities. It could be hard to call these departing immigrants "voluntary". This is definitely one factor in driving people from Singapore.

In any case, voluntarily or otherwise, foreign people are definitely rethinking their long term plans, and many are leaving. This flight is not just from Singapore, it is something that we see globally - but the island nation is a great case study and famous social experiment. Although Singapore has seen a loss in *both* foreigners and citizens since the covid conundrum (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2022), many countries are also experiencing a decrease of inward foreign migration. On the other hand, many countries in the world have seen an increase in citizen migration coming home (Rowlinson, 2020). It is as though covid and the reaction to it by governments, businesses and individuals has created a great shake-down - and in that rattling and noise, many have returned to what is more familiar.

International schools catering to the expat demographic have felt the strain as well. Despite this, many International Schools and their parent organizations continue to

sustain or even to thrive. One organization well worth looking at is the Network of International Christian Schools / Oasis schools (NICS/OASIS). This organization operates 16 schools in 14 countries as of 2022. This study focuses on this organization as a whole, and it's Singapore school in particular, and how it has weathered the storm.

In the *Annual President's Report & State of the Mission Report* Feb 2021, there were many challenges to consider, and there was much to celebrate. Many factors have put pressure on the International School scene globally, and there have been some trends that are evident within the Network. There was the obvious factor of the decrease in expats, which means not only that there were fewer International families looking to put their students into schools, leading to a decrease in enrollment, but it also meant that there was a "decline in the teacher pool worldwide" (NICS/OASIS, 2020). There were fewer International teachers traveling onto the field, whether from travel restrictions or other factors causing hesitancy, creating "challenges of a new environment for recruiting, due in part to COVID" (NICS/OASIS, 2020). There are, however, some unique characteristics about NICS/OASIS teachers that make teacher recruitment special: teachers are sent as servant-leaders and Christian Missionaries - an intrinsic motivation unique to this brand of International Schools.

The NICS/OASIS network was able to continue to grow and increase as an organization. It saw increase in enrollment in 4 schools, including Kuala Lumpur Malaysia, Prishtina Kosovo, the online school Northstar Academy (which almost doubled throughout the first two years of covid-maina - a trend within the network that reflects a global movement towards online learning - but returning closer to but still higher than earlier numbers upon restrictions lifting) and the network's newest school in Dar Es Salam Tanzania. Twelve of the network schools experienced a decrease in numbers. Some were greater losses than others. The biggest brick and mortar school (in Seoul Korea) maintained nearly the same numbers, while the 'Far East' campus was forced to have most teachers teaching online - out of country - which greatly impacted the enrollment. One school (Nagoya Japan) closed its doors after over 20 years in the network - a sad loss. Joyfully, one school joined the family of schools, Haven of Peace in Dar Es Salam, Tanzania.

If one doesn't count the enormous growth of the online school, which helped to push the network into the area of overall positive growth as a whole, the NICS/OASIS reported a 10% decrease in enrollment at the close of the first year of covid in brick-and-mortar schools which rebounded to even higher numbers in the following year (NICS/OASIS, 2022). It is interesting that the exclusively online school grew so much in the worst year of government lockdowns, while many of the brick-and-mortar schools forced to 'go online' lost students. This trend reversed in the following year, though a schools forced online returned to the classroom. This seems to say something about parents' motivations and expectations in choosing schools for their families. Expectations are so important.

One clear expectation for one of the NICS/OASIS schools is found in its *community*. The International Community School (Singapore) has weathered the storm of covid controls, lockdowns, and diminished numbers of expat families on the island, and has managed to keep income above expenses (ICS, 2022), and has attracted a good number of students. While the school did experience a drop in enrollment, it is very interesting to note that ICS Singapore did slightly better at retaining expats than Singapore itself. The school saw a drop of around 13% in enrollment in two years since the start of the pandemic (NICS/OASIS, 2022), but the Singapore government saw a decrease of 14% of the same demographic (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2022). This study will look at the motivations of the ICS families and stakeholders.

Methodology

First, this inquiry established that NICS/OASIS has indeed done well, by analysis of data from previous studies compiled by NICS/OASIS to look at quantitative data on the enrollment from February 2019-February 2022, since the onset of international COVID19 restrictions. Next, this study correlates motivations of families joining or remaining in the schools (collected through an original *Parent Motivations Survey* collecting responses from 92 parents from 8 NICS/OASIS schools) with the network success. This survey asks parents to give personal opinions to rate the importance of six motivation criteria: curriculum, accreditation, price, worldview/values, school size, and community. Meta analysis of other similar parent surveys sent by network schools is also considered.

These quantitative and qualitative results are set side by side to make connections between parent motivations for enrolling students and enrollment numbers within the network as a group.

In particular, as a case study, the enrollment data from one NICS/OASIS school, the International Community School (Singapore) is compared with the expat population in Singapore over a period which can be described as an "expat exodus" to determine how the school fared compared to its host nation in terms of retaining expat families. This success is then correlated with responses from an ICS parent survey sent earlier in the year with 152 respondents. Data is drawn from ICS enrollment numbers, Singapore population statistics and a parent survey.

Finally, a bonus observation was obtained somewhat serendipitously (through an earlier, poorly designed survey which attempted to collect *parent motivations* reported by network school leaders, but instead collected leaders *perceptions* and estimates about parent motivations). Data on *NICS/OASIS Leadership Perceptions* about parent motivations was collected from *estimates* by leaders about parent motivations, gathered from a survey of 10 leaders from 7 network schools. It is compared with parent responses from the original parent motivations survey, and other collected parent surveys on motivations.

Results

Data - Enrollment Data Network:

NICS/OASIS schools were able to weather the COVID19 storm despite many challenges, ultimately maintaining Network growth in both enrollment and economic terms (Fig 1). There was a notable rise in enrollment a year into COVID19 due particularly to a dramatic increase in the online school, NorthStar Academy - which began to wane in the following year returning to similar enrollment numbers as before, when restrictions were beginning to lift. Throughout the entirety of the pandemonium, total network enrollment was higher than at the outbreak of COVID 19.

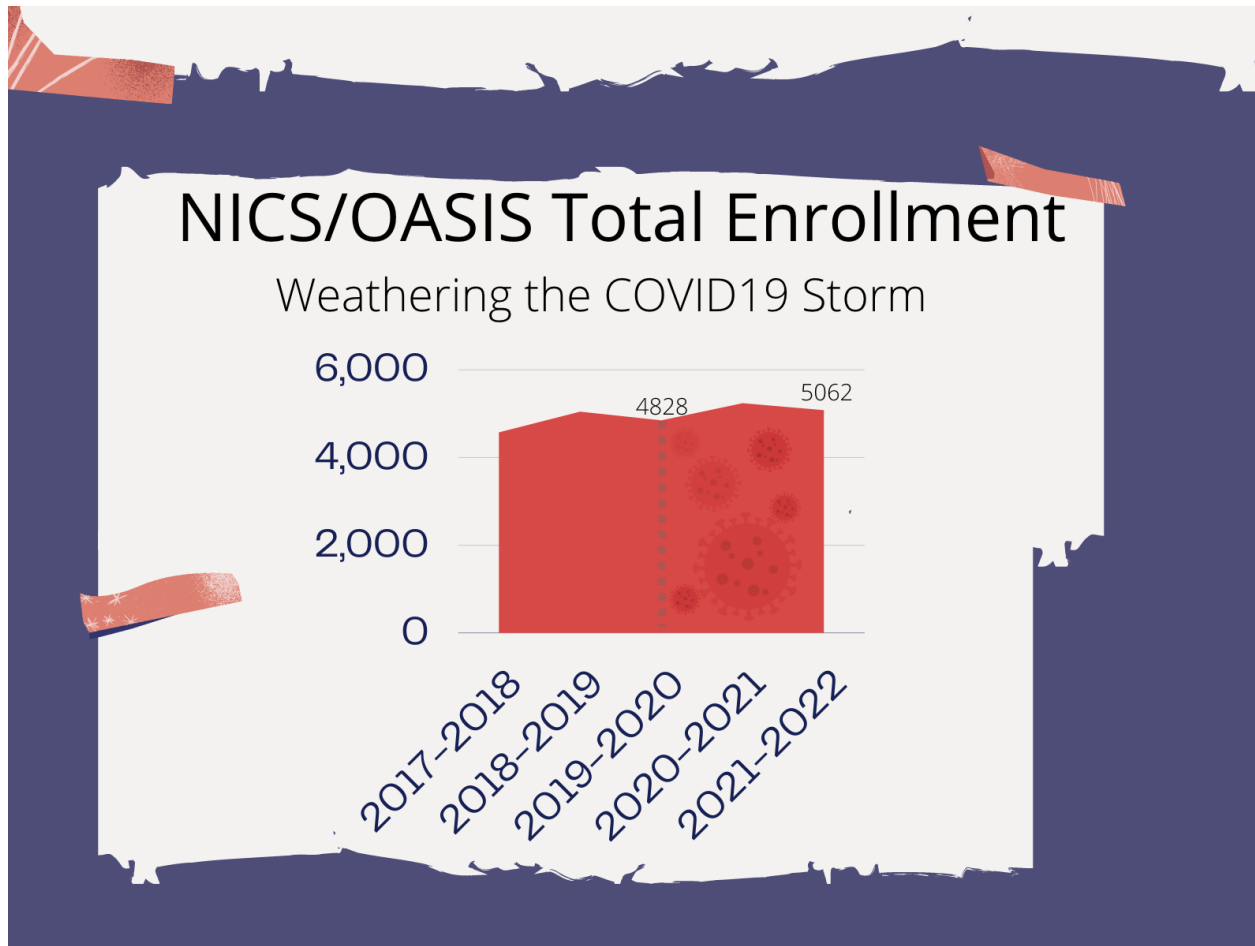


Figure 1: NICS/OASIS Enrollment Data from 2021-2022 Annual State of the Mission Report

Data - ICS Enrollment and Singapore non-resident population:

ICS Singapore did experience a decrease in enrollment relative to, but slightly better than, Singapore itself at retaining expat families (Fig 2). Singapore experienced an "expat exodus" in which it saw about 14% of its employment pass holders (foreign workers earning higher salaries - and the primary demographic enrolling students in International Schools in Singapore) hitting the road (Lin, 2022). Singapore international schools remain closely linked with foreign population. ICS did only slightly better than its host nation, Singapore, at retaining expat families.

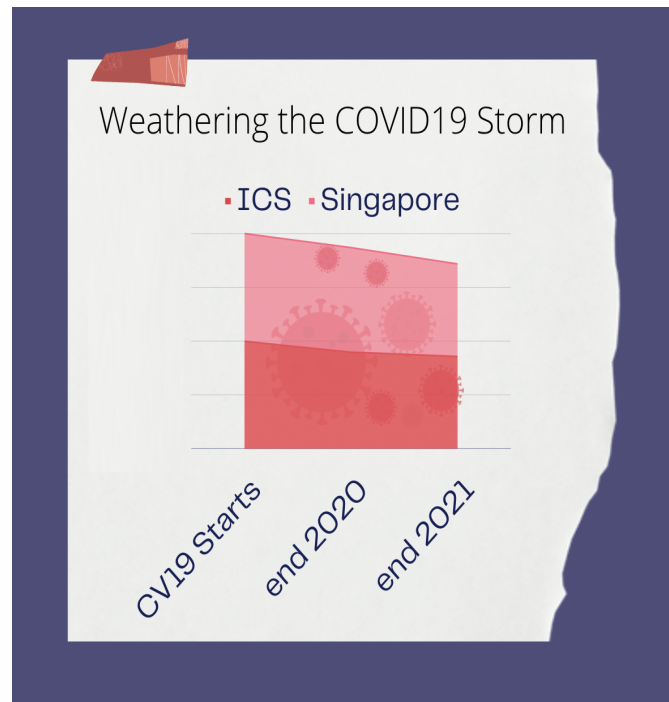


Figure 2: Comparison of Singapore expat population decline with ICS enrollment percentages.

Results - Network Parent Surveys:

In a Parent Motivations survey that attracted 92 responses from parents at 8 different network schools in 7 different countries, *Worldview/Values* clearly emerged as the top motivator for parents within the network (Fig. 3). This was true, not only of the network schools surveyed as a whole but also for all 8 of the individual schools reporting: Brasilia, Lima, Prishtina, Seoul, Uijeongbu, West Nairobi, Dar Es Salaam, Kuala Lumpur (Fig. 3 & Fig. 4).

ICS Singapore data was collected from an independent survey measuring similar criteria; *Christian Education* was the top motivator by a vast lead (Fig. 5). The online school NorthStar Academy measured similar criteria and came up with the same top motivator, termed *Christian Worldview/Values* (Fig. 6). *Worldview/Values* came in neck and neck with *Curriculum* as a top motivator at the school in Kuala Lumpur, OASIS KL (Fig. 7).

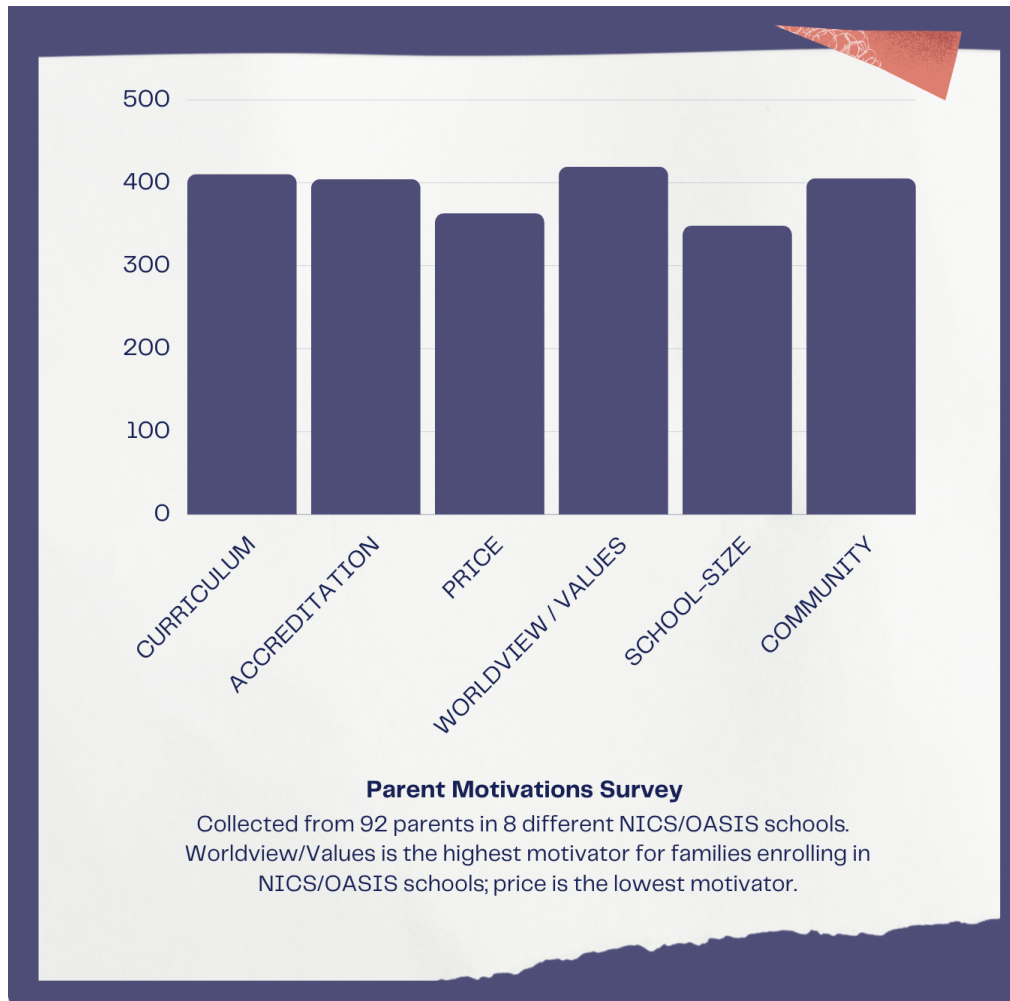


Figure 3: Moore, S., 2022, NICS/OASIS Parent Motivations survey.

The importance of Worldview/Values as a motivator for enrollment becomes especially very clear when responses are broken-down and separated so that we can see how many parents chose it as their "most important" motivator (Fig 4). Interestingly, this was also the only category that registered any responses in the "not important category" (though they were very few). *Curriculum*, *Accreditation* and *Community*, in descending order of importance, are nearly tied for second. *Price* and *School-Size* were the factors that received the least passionate responses from the parent community.

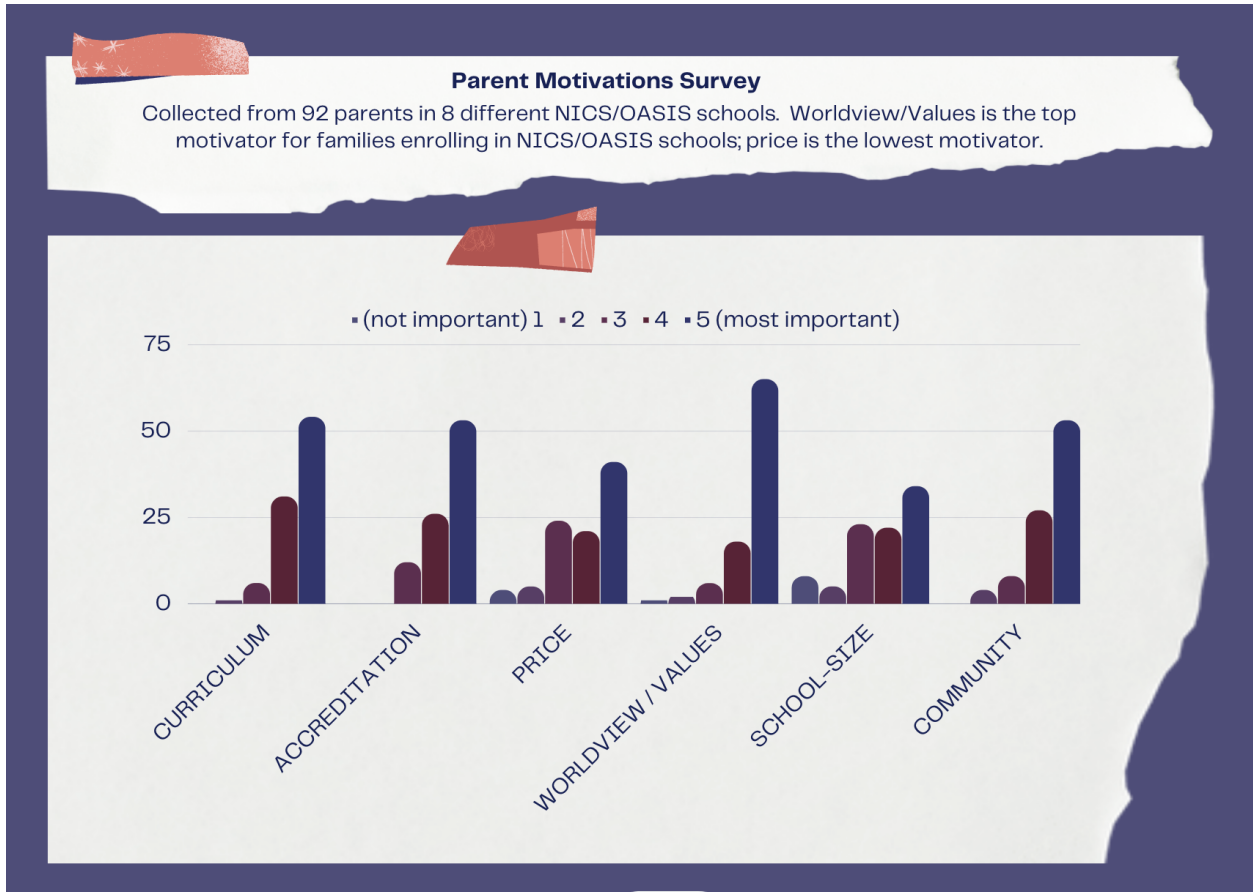


Figure 4: Moore, S., 2022, NICS/OASIS Parent Motivations survey, broken down to see all responses.

Results - Singapore Parent Surveys:

Singapore parents also echo the sentiment of parents throughout the network: Worldview/Values, expressed in the 2020-2021 ICS Parent Survey question 6 as *Christian Education*, was clearly the top motivator for parents enrolling students at ICS. More than 44% of parents declared that it was "most important" to their family - this was almost 4 times more than almost all other motivators - *High Academic Standards* came in as approximately half as important as a top motivator for parents. (Fig 5). 152 parents responded to this question, and none skipped this question.

Q6 Understanding that each of these aspects of our program are critical to the ICS experience, please rank them based on their importance to your family, where 1 is MOST Important and 5 is LEAST Important.

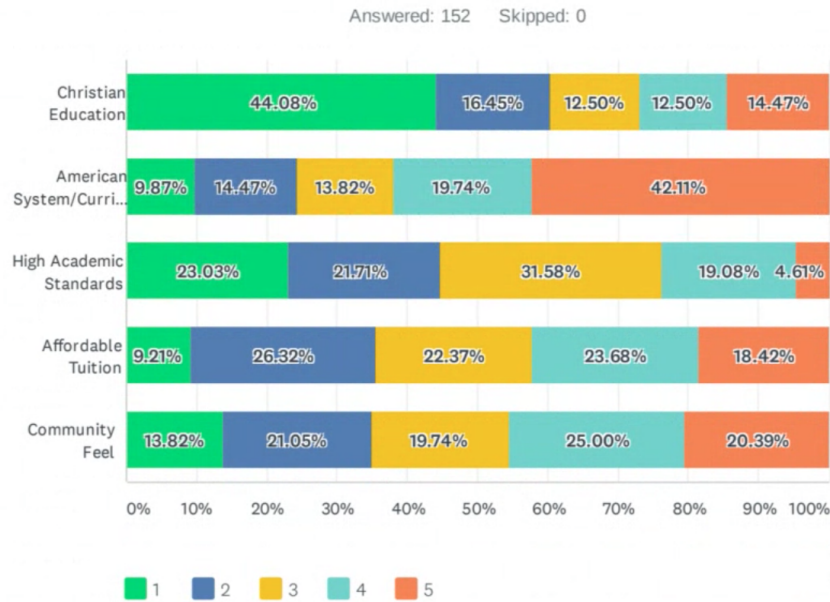


Figure 5: International Community School (Singapore), adapted from 2020-2021 Parent Survey, Q.6

It is interesting to note that *Price*, or *Affordable Tuition* was the least selected motivator - nearly tied with *American System/Curriculum*. In fact, *the American System/Curriculum* criteria got the most scores in the "least important" ranking - with nearly half of parents calling it so. This is interesting to note that ICS is one of just 3 International Schools offering American System/Curriculum out of 64 international schools in Singapore (Sonsin, Ma, Moore, 2022), vastly overshadowed by the Cambridge and IB systems.

NorthStar Adademy (online) - Survey Results:

NorthStar Academy resulted in a top score of 4.5 out of 5 for the criteria *Christian Worldview/Values*, factors like *Course Options*, *AP classes* and *Cost*, were not as important to parent stakeholders (Fig.6).

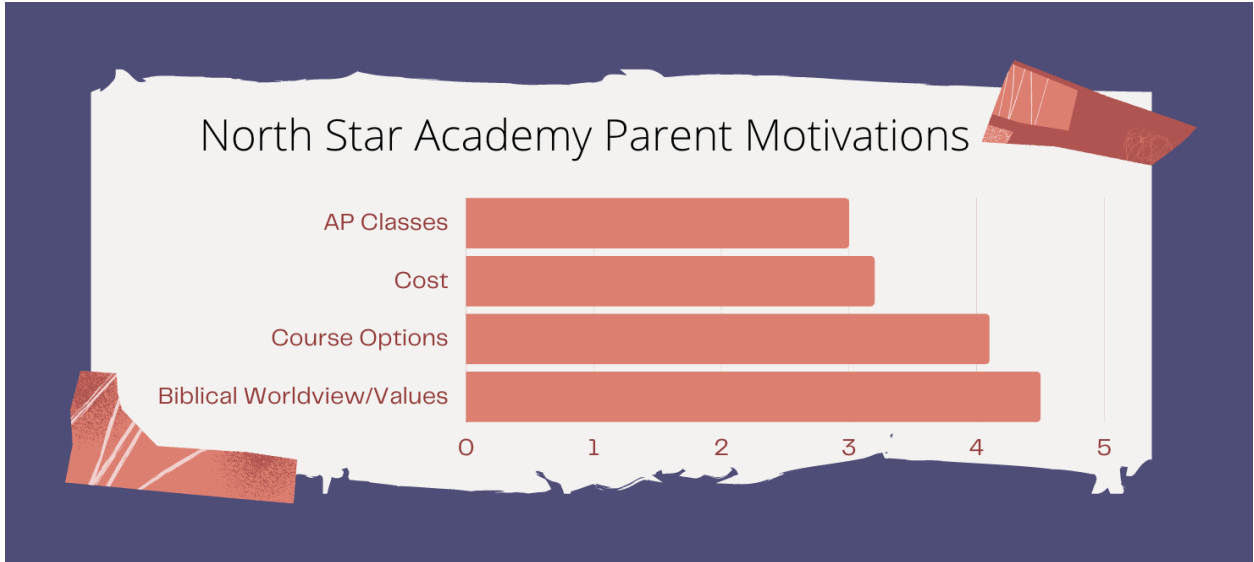


Figure 6: NorthStar Academy Parent Survey, 2021-2022.

OASIS KL - Parent Survey Results:

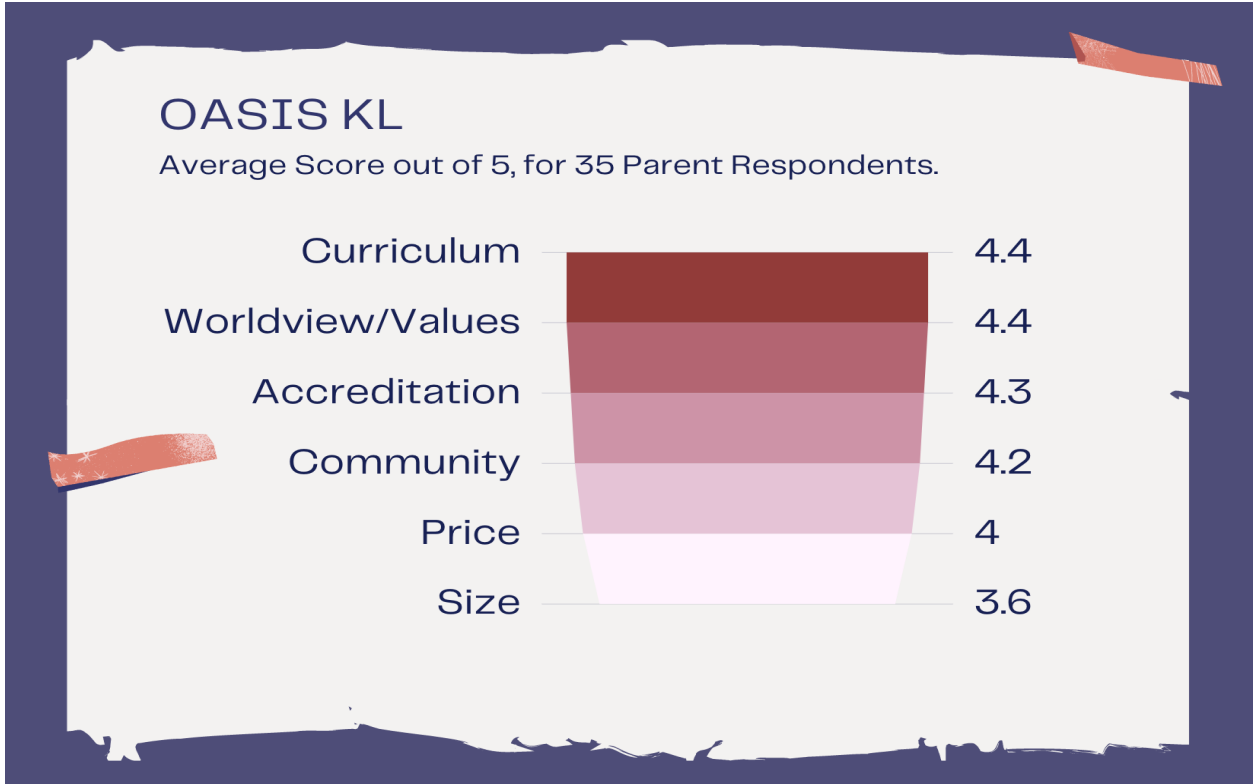


Figure 7 - Curriculum and Worldview/Values scored equally high in the school in Kuala Lumpur. Price and size were the least important factors.

NICS/OASIS Leadership Perceptions Results

Leaders responded to 5 of the same criteria and gave intuitive responses and estimates about what they thought parent motivations might be (Fig. 8). When these are compared with the actual parent responses, we see that there are some areas where leadership was close in guessing parent motivations (*Curriculum* and *Accreditation*) and one especially notable miss (*Worldview/Values*).

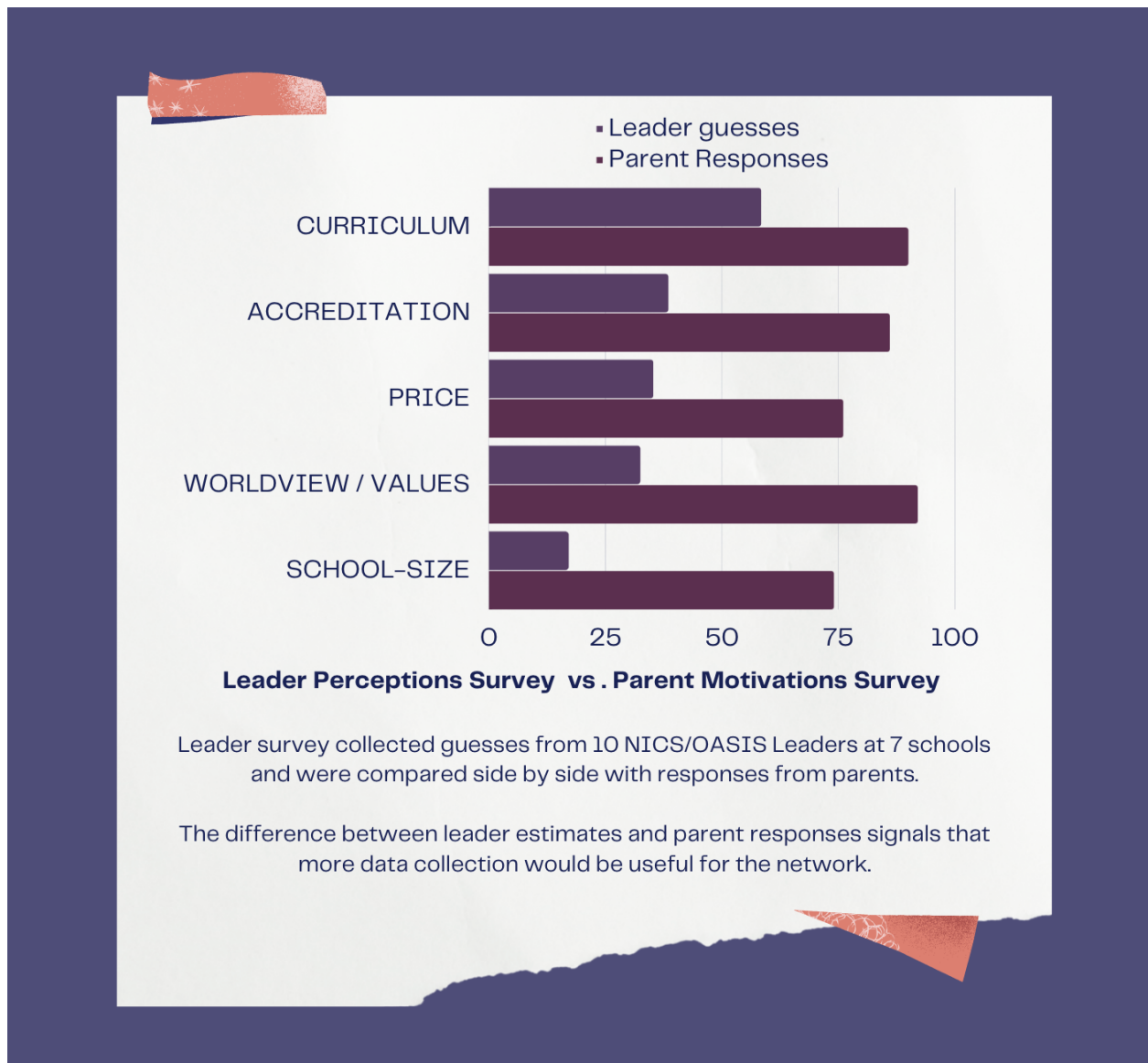


Figure 9: Comparison of the Leadership Perceptions survey and the Parent Motivations Survey.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The NICS/OASIS network of schools managed to weather the onslaught of COVID problems. It makes sense that parent motivations would play a big factor in that. ***Worldview/Values was the top motivation cited by families in all of the NICS/OASIS schools surveyed.*** It should not come as a surprise to anyone serving at one of these schools, or if it does then it is a pleasant one - because it is commonly understood that *our greatest strength is not our own*. "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging" (Bible, New International Version, 1984). NICS/OASIS teachers and leaders are doing what they do because of a higher calling. This remains the core strength of these schools, it is what is taught and modeled, and for it all glory goes to God. *Solo Gloria Dei*.

Recommendations for NICS/OASIS

These recommendations address "the three legged table" central to NICS/OASIS, consisting of Financial stewardship, Educational Excellence and Faithful Christian Ministry (D. Lugar, personal communication, n.d.). Recommendations for NICS/OASIS schools include:

1.) encouraging, strengthening and advertising Worldview/Values - the top motivation cited by parents 2.) maintaining academic excellence through curriculum and accreditation and 3.) looking into making adjustments in tuition/school fees for opportunities for growth.

- 1.) Because *Worldview/Values* was cited as the top motivation for parents in every school and in the network as a whole, could this be something for NICS/OASIS marketing and communication teams to take greater note of to share and advertise more? Should this be something that leadership is made more aware of? The accidental discovery that school leaders *greatly*

underestimated the *value* of *Worldview/Values* as the top motivation for parents choosing NICS/OASIS schools is revealing, not only that more data collection should be recommended for marketing, communications and decision making purposes, but more importantly that leaders and those they serve (parents, students, teachers and staff) would be greatly edified and encouraged in being reminded of this, and learning of this data! The greatest strength in the network is from above. This holds, it seems, even in a context of marketing the schools. How can this data revelation be used to strengthen and encourage those serving in NICS/OASIS schools in the most important work of *keeping the main thing the main thing*? How can this strengthen the organization and its individuals in the mission and purpose of sharing the Worldview/Values that make NICS/OASIS schools eternally relevant?

- 2.) *Curriculum* and *Accreditation* were the second most important motivators in the network for parents surveyed. Leadership seemed to be able to intuit that this was an important motivation, as it was their top guess.

- 3.) Because *Price* was the one of the lowest cited considerations for parents in choosing NICS/OASIS schools, not only for the network as a whole, but for almost every individual school surveyed, could this be an area to rethink for strategic growth? Do some parents not care about the fees because they are so low that they are not a burden? Is it because families have their fees paid by their companies? Would they willingly pay more? Would it matter if the fees changed? Could this open up scholarship or other opportunities for increased enrollment and growth? If schools charged more tuition but were able to give more scholarships, could this open up opportunities for greater economic diversity amongst the network families and student body?

Recommendations for Further Research

It would be an interesting study to compare how ICS did in relation to other international schools in Singapore, and to make these comparisons based on both curriculum type (American, IB, Cambridge systems or other systems) and other factors like school size, etc. Since greater numbers of expat families have left Singapore than we see reflected in ICS enrollment, it would be interesting to see which schools suffered the most decrease in enrollment. Could it be that schools, like ICS, that offered American curriculum did similarly well? How did the other systems fare? Because *Curriculum* and *Accreditation* were cited as the second and third motivations for families, it is likely that the other schools with similar accreditation and learning systems did similarly - but did they?

It would also be interesting to do this type of study for each of the other network schools. This type of comparative study would vary by region as network schools hold different types of accreditations and use different systems, and because each of the schools have different relationships to their host nations and populations served. It would be interesting to look at the NICS/OASIS approach to accreditation and education systems within the network as divergent and convergent - a unique form of multilateral internationalism, with stakeholders coming together from different systems to compare how different systems of curriculum used within the network are valued by parents.

It would be an interesting study to see how NICS/OASIS schools did in relation to other schools teaching Biblical Worldview/Values around the globe.

It would be very interesting to look at outcomes of NICS/ICS/Christian School graduates in a global context.

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