



# PRIVATE SCHOOL DIGITAL MARKETING DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC



**Truth Tree**

**A month-by-month account of how Truth Tree helped position our school partners, including Oak Knoll School of the Holy Child that realized a 32% enrollment increase.**



# A COVID CASE STUDY IN DIGITAL MARKETING FOR PRIVATE SCHOOLS

BY TREVOR WADDINGTON, PRINCIPAL, TRUTH TREE CONSULTING

On January 28, 2020, I opened an email from Meghan Hodgin, the Director of Marketing and Communications at [Oak Knoll School of the Holy Child](#). Truth Tree Consulting provides search engine optimization (SEO), search engine marketing (SEM), and social media marketing (SMM) for the pre-kindergarten to grade twelve Catholic school in Summit, New Jersey. As a part of our SEO efforts, Meghan frequently sends us blogs for off-site optimization. When I opened her email, the title immediately caught my eye: Should you worry about coronavirus?

No, I thought, a few hundred people here and there might get it. Tragically, a few people might die. But I don't think there's that much to worry about, and I think this is needlessly alarmist.

I was wrong.

And like many of [Meghan's blogs](#), she was a step ahead.

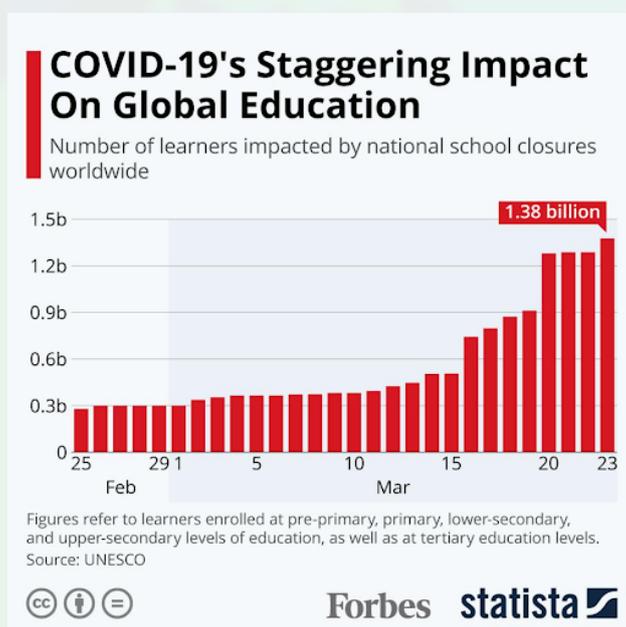
"Our goal with the blog is to provide helpful educational resources for our families," said Hodgin. "We knew at the time that there was still so little known about the coronavirus, but that it was on the minds of members of our community. That meant we needed to do our own research and understand as much as we could about it. With Truth Tree's help, we were able to spread our messaging further than ever before."

The following is an account of how Truth Tree helped Oak Knoll and our other school partners position themselves between March 2020 and September 2020, and make a positive impact on their enrollment.

## MARCH 2020

In the blink of an eye, a few states went from mandating restrictions on gatherings to virtually the entire country quarantined to their home.

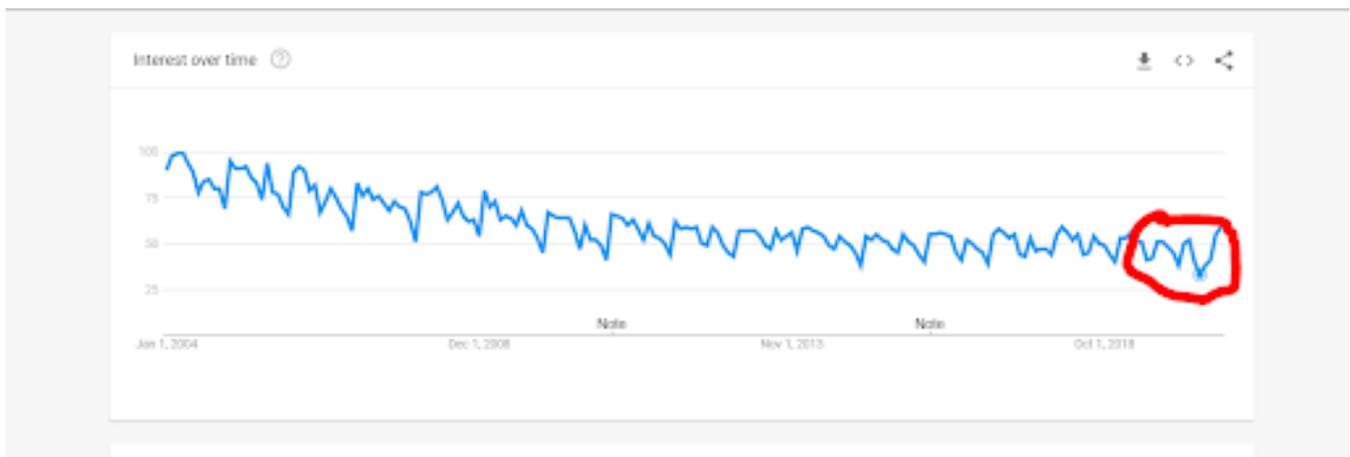
The first few weeks were a blur. We asked each of our clients, both schools and camps, how they wanted to proceed. For many of them, the belief was that they would be back on campus in a few weeks and to keep digital ads going. We did reduce our ad spend for most schools just to be cautious. We were not sure how the digital market was going to react. Our thought was we would rather slow down spending and see what trends emerged. A view mirrored by Oak Knoll.



Hodgin noted, "It was incredibly reassuring to receive very regular communication from Truth Tree to confirm our situation, to ensure we were positioned correctly and appropriately during the pandemic. We were working so hard on the ground to help our families and school community during that time, that it was very comforting to know our partner was looking out for us digitally."

Nationally, what emerged at the end of the month was the lowest rate of searching for "private school" since Google started tracking it in 2004, which we predicted. Yet, [the number of hours people were online rocketed up](#).

**PEOPLE WERE SPENDING CONSIDERABLY MORE TIME IN FRONT OF SCREENS BUT NOT ACTIVELY SEARCHING FOR LONG-TERM, HIGH-PRICED SERVICES, LIKE PRIVATE SCHOOLS.**



People were spending considerably more time in front of screens but not actively searching for long-term, high-priced services, like private schools. This signaled a shift in our daily work and approach to positioning our school partners as the validity of ad copy could change very rapidly.

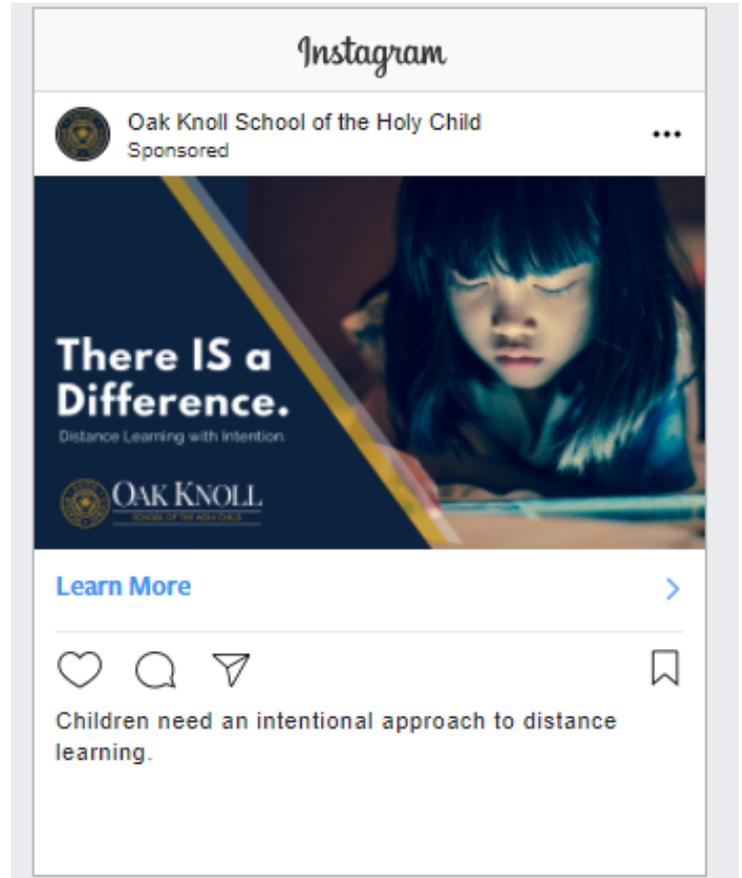
For the remainder of the month, we shifted much of the advertising spend to re-marketing existing applicants and accepted families to show them, 'we got this.' and strengthen their value in Oak Knoll School.

## APRIL 2020

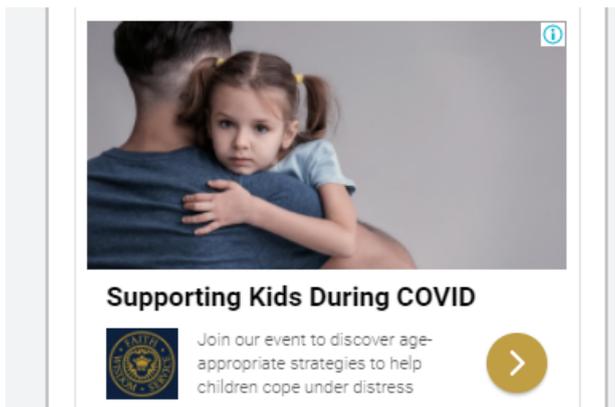
When the United States collectively concluded this was not going to be a quick recovery, coupled with the knowledge that record numbers of people were online but not shopping for what private schools were selling, we utilized the following strategies.

We dramatically shifted the advertising spend away from search ads and into display ads with little or no call-to-action for starters. We wanted to dominate screens with Oak Knoll brand awareness. Because display ads are usually less expensive than search, we strengthened their presence on social media; however, we quickly pivoted most of our ad spend back to Google Display. That is because April saw product-based companies driving up pay-per-click costs on search and social platforms to sell their “educational resources” to frustrated parents.

For Oak Knoll, April falls after the typical admission season, so we reduced the 6-7% of the total budget customarily allocated for this time of year to 3%. Our belief was the pandemic was causing an admissions bottleneck. Some families were “stuck” in varying admission stages. Without the required shadow day(s), academic testing, etc., they would not be considered for enrollment. Additionally, many families who likely would have started searching in April put their quest on hold. Thus, Truth Tree held back spending in preparation for a significant spend when the dam broke.



Our creative strategy for April depicted Oak Knoll students as actively-educated even from home, engaging with teachers and peers at their kitchen tables. They were also getting much needed movement during school hours and scenes from the “new normal.” Based on engagement rates, we promoted the most engaging content to a re-targeted audience and those identified as searching for an independent school. The results showed a 35% increase in the engagement rate. These happy, interactive, and full-day scenes seemed to contrast with the shorter, less movement-oriented public school offerings in Oak Knolls region.



## MAY 2020

The month started with the realization that on-campus learning would not happen for the rest of the school year.

Throughout the month, Truth Tree's strategy evolved as parent frustrations toward distance learning grew stronger.

To their benefit, Oak Knoll continued producing timely blogs such as [Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) and [Coronavirus Through the Eyes of a High School Senior](#). These pieces were well received across all forums and used by Truth Tree to enhance their value as a student-first educational organization. We were also able to place these and other blogs to high profile, parent-centric websites thanks to our relationships with many of the country's most successful [family-centered influencers](#).

As May trudged on, we kept close tabs on our school partners beyond the typical marketing conversations. Questions about parent satisfaction at their school and the overall sentiment in their region. From those conversations, we were able to create campaigns centered around a common theme among all of our partners - *We are prepared to educate your child no matter the circumstances.*

While some felt COVID-19 could spell the end of independent schools, we felt differently. Truth Tree believed there was a massive opportunity for schools, if positioned correctly, to increase enrollment by penetrating previously untapped markets.

First, [research emerged that showed people were questioning the products and services they were loyal to pre-COVID.](#)

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**WE'VE ALL BEEN THROUGH TOUGH TIMES, BUT NOTHING LIKE THIS. I THINK EVERYONE TOOK A STEP BACK AND EVALUATED THEIR ALLEGIANCE TO BRANDS.**

Bob Lane, Former Director of Admission and Marketing

“We've all been through tough times, but nothing like this. I think everyone took a step back and evaluated their allegiance to brands. Just look at all the money spent on 'we hope you are okay' and 'we just donated a boatload of money to...' campaigns launched by the world's major brands,” said Bob Lane, a recently retired Director of Admission and Marketing.

Couple the above information with the fact that most in the income range who can [afford private schools](#) were not as financially affected by the pandemic. With the money saved on transportation, clothing, aftercare, and more, they may feel more confident in investing in private education.

These facts and observations cemented our strategy to go big on display ads delivering invaluable brand awareness when other schools stopped marketing online altogether.

The below screen grab shows the stat line of one of Oak Knoll’s more successful micro-campaigns between May 1 and August 24. With a cost of \$7.96 per conversion, we were pumped.

Ad type	↓ Clicks	Impr.	CTR	Avg. CPC	Cost	Conversion:	Cost / conv.
Responsive display ad	5,717	537,502	1.06%	\$0.08	\$461.53	58.00	\$7.96

But as we always say at Truth Tree, at the end of the day, it’s not about quantity; it’s about quality. So how would all of this brand awareness impact their enrollment for the coming 2020-21 school year? Time would tell whether we would provide the necessary quality to convert inquiries to students.

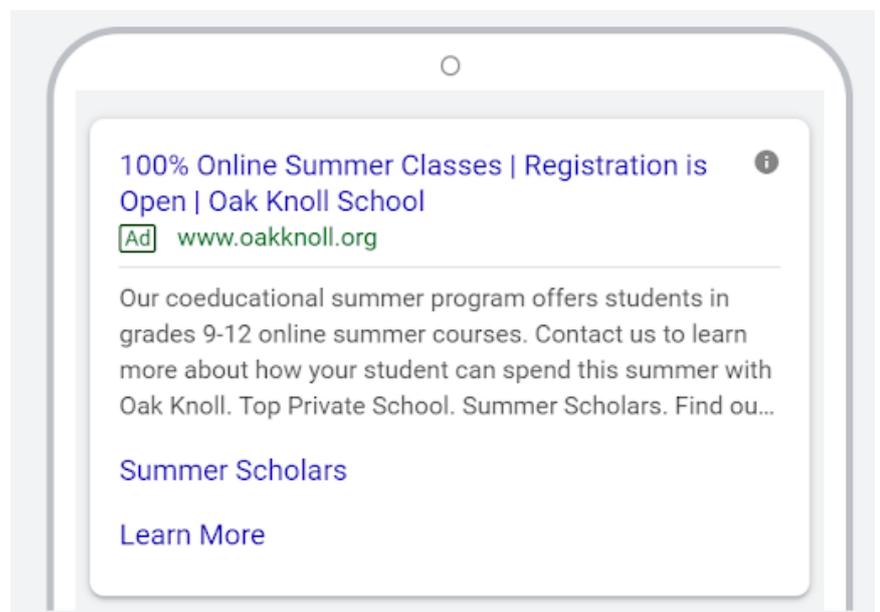
## JUNE 2020

At the end of May and the beginning of June, we gleaned another wave of businesses attempting to sell goods and services to parents because of the [loss of summer camps for kids](#). This coincided with the apex of parent frustrations. The result was a parental title wave to find something, anything, for kids to do over the summer. Among the largest trends was an uptick in searches for online tutors.

Understanding this trend and the loss of summer income for teachers who work at summer camps, we advised our partners to form online tutoring services. By using the school’s brand [Your School Name Online Tutoring Service],

- teachers could supplement their expected income,
- the school would be able to recoup some lost revenue, and
- parents would get what they were searching for online.

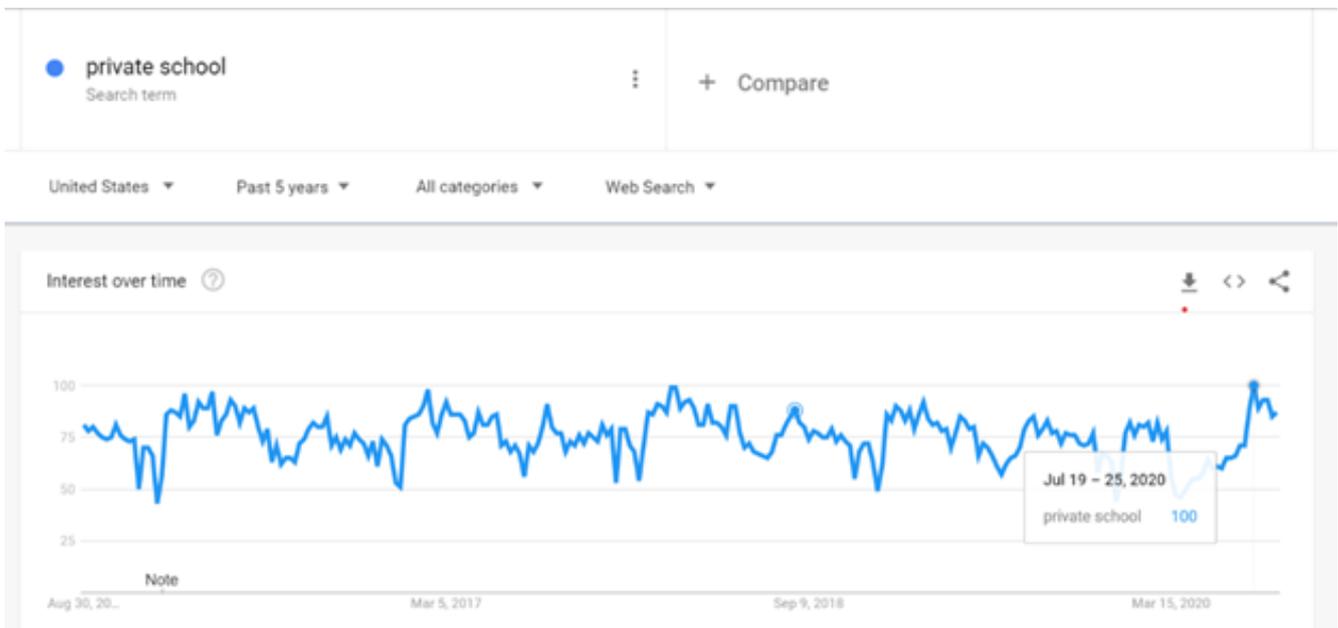
Well before June, Oak Knoll was promoting online summer experiences for all ages. The school had robust summer offerings, and a major hit to accrued revenue would be understandable but disappointing.



As we learned more about how the virus spreads and how to combat it, along with the easing of restrictions in the state of New Jersey, Oak Knoll pivoted once again, providing safe outdoor activities to younger students who were not able to take advantage of the online high school courses. We pivoted with them and were able to ride the wave of parents searching for something to keep their kids occupied.

## JULY 2020

If March’s moniker is in like a lion, out like a lamb, July 2020 was in like a lamb and out like a pride of hungry lions. That is because the last two weeks of July saw the highest volume of people searching for “private school” in the last five years.

As we started to see this trend emerge after the July 4 holiday (normally the time of year with the lowest volume of searching), we began to move ad dollars back to search and away from display.

Simultaneously, we were seeing the same trend on our two company-owned preschool and private school search sites, [DCschoolHUB.com](https://www.dcschoolhub.com) and [NYmetroSchools.com](https://www.nymetroschools.com) (think [Niche](#) and [Private School Review](#), but hyper-regional). To dig deeper, we used our proprietary reach to contact parents using the sites to determine why they were searching now and what they wanted.

We surveyed 211 users who completed an inquiry form bound for a school. Of those we surveyed, 132 responded to our request to answer a few questions. 41 of them indicated they were looking for pre-school or private school for the first time in the last six months and answered both questions.

1. Why are you looking for a preschool or private school now?
2. What kind of learning environment appeals to you?

#### **Why are you looking now?**

- 63% - Looking now because they were not confident that their current educational option would adequately educate their child.
- 21% - Planned on starting to search earlier but got sidetracked by the pandemic.
- 16% - Started now because they didn't realize the preschools and private school application process occurs several months ahead of the school year.

#### **What are you looking for? (answers varied but the statement below is a summary statement based on the responses)**

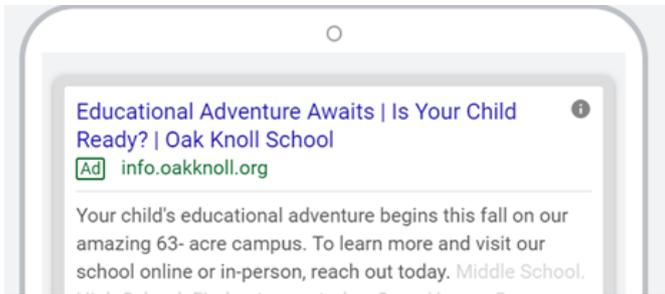
- 39% - Provide safe, in-person learning at the beginning of the school year, alleviating the pressure on parents to stay home.
- 21% - Provide a flexible in-person or distance learning combo that allows parents to decide based on personal comfort.
- 19% - Provide a full-day, online learning experience for students vs. an 'hour or two a day' with little direct interaction with teachers and peers.
- 21% - Not sure yet, but something better' than what their child experienced in the spring.

Additionally, our research pointed to the urgency and importance of finding something very soon. Predicated on this data and tentative reopening plans for Oak Knoll and our other schools, here's how we once again repositioned our school partners. With urgency comes shallow searching. Parents were only "shopping" on the first few pages. This meant we had to change the bid strategy to secure ad placement on page 1. Not only that, but with a strong bid to be above the fold at least and optimally at the absolute top if certain keywords were triggered by what data showed were likely "urgent shoppers."

With this data, we wanted ads to look more organic and be very direct. We adjusted ads to read more like organic listings with facts and statements rather than benefits.

**ADDITIONALLY, OUR RESEARCH POINTED TO THE URGENCY AND IMPORTANCE OF FINDING SOMETHING [A SCHOOL] VERY SOON. WITH URGENCY COMES SHALLOW SEARCHING. PARENTS WERE ONLY "SHOPPING" ON THE FIRST FEW PAGES. THIS MEANT WE HAD TO CHANGE THE BID STRATEGY TO SECURE AD PLACEMENT ON PAGE 1.**

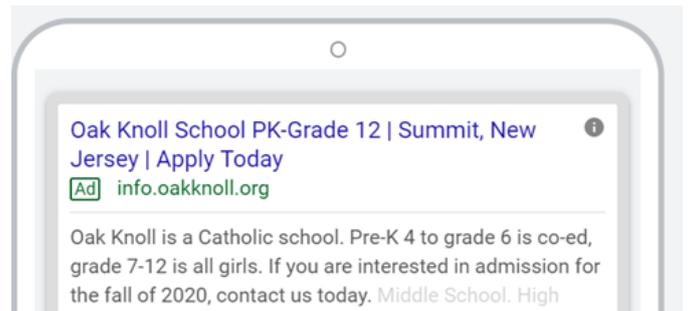
### Successful Google Ads prior to late July:



Women Who Lead With Faith | All-Girls School 7-12 | Oak Knoll School  
[Ad info.oakknoll.org](http://info.oakknoll.org)  
 We prepare one-of-a-kind women for one-of-a-kind futures. & there's just 1 you for 17 Advanced Placement courses, 43 clubs, and 15 varsity sports.  
 Middle School · High School · Find out more today · Open House  
 Courses: Pre-k, Kindergarten, Primary Grades, Middle Grades, Intermediate Grades, Upper Grades

### Successful Google Ads in late July and early August

PreK-Grade 12 Catholic School | Accepting Applications 4 Fall  
[Ad info.oakknoll.org](http://info.oakknoll.org)  
 Whether we are online, in-person, or somewhere in between. Our team and staff are ready. Your child's future is more important than ever. Do not delay. Space is very limited.



## AUGUST 2020

*To be (in-person) or not to be, that is the question?*

Early August saw the continuation of high-volume searching for private schools. Therefore, we pushed our school partners, especially those that were under-enrolled, to ratify their reopening plan as soon as possible. Once their plan was official and information was present on their website, we got to work.

We also understood that this faculty and staff back to campus period was going to push the bandwidth of those people we work with at the schools. No one exemplified that more than Monica Jennings at [St. Edward's School](#) in Vero Beach Florida.

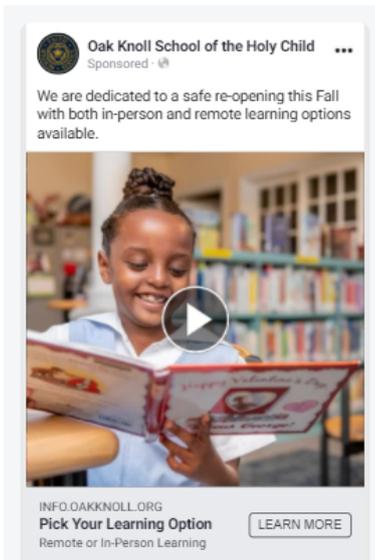
Monica was a bit of out touch in mid-August because, as all good marketing directors do at that time, she was shopping for shower curtains. Trips to Target, IKEA among others were on her schedule to help keep students safe in the classrooms, on the buses, and in the lunchroom.



*St. Edward's Physical Plant Administrator, William Stribling, poses after installing shower curtains on one of the School's buses.*

Like many of our school partners, Oak Knoll School painstakingly created and recreated plans to provide in-person and distance learning opportunities for students.

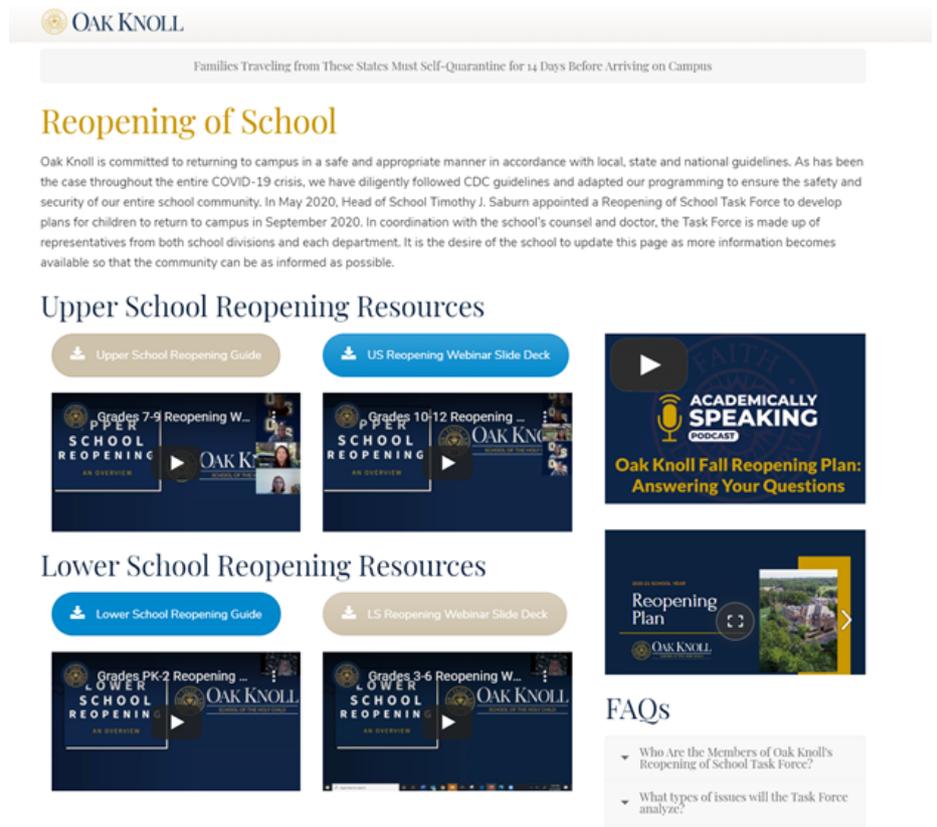
With this and several layers of information at our disposal, we crafted ads for all platforms including Google search and display, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. Each ad spoke to what parents were looking for or provided them with the options available.



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**IN TOTAL, OUR APPLICATIONS ARE UP 50% AND OUR ENROLLMENT IS UP 32%.**

Meghan Hodgin, Director of Marketing and Communications, Oak Knoll School



What will the fall of 2020 and beyond look like? Only time will tell. What we at Truth Tree know is that the support of our independent school partners helped them achieve improved new enrollment, including Oak Knoll School of the Holy Child.

“In a comparison from the previous year, we saw a slight decrease in overall inquiries. However, LS [lower school] applications are up 93% and US [upper school] are up 18%. In total, our applications are up 50% and our enrollment is up 32%. We credit Truth Tree for a big part of our enrollment success. They pay attention to what we are doing and it makes working with them easy and seamless,” concluded Hodgin.

Truth Tree is dedicated to helping independent schools and summer camps design their ultimate enrollment through digital marketing strategies.

If you are interested in learning more and partnering with Truth Tree for market research, enrollment management, and digital marketing, [please contact us](#).



# Truth Tree

*Design Your Ultimate Enrollment*



Truth Tree Consulting helps independent schools and summer camps design their ultimate enrollment through digital marketing strategies.

