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*Leveraging Effective Marketing
to Improve Public School Enrollment
in the Era of School Choice*



Leveraging Effective Marketing to Improve Public School Enrollment in the Era of School Choice

School districts across the nation have been struggling with declining enrollment, even in communities with growing populations. Competition from charter schools, and new voucher programs taking effect across the nation will compound enrollment challenges.

In Texas, the proposed increase to the basic allotment will help some districts, but the \$395 increase significantly lags the growth in costs from the last time the allotment was raised in 2019. An inflation-adjusted basic allotment from 2020 (\$6,160) in 2020 would exceed \$7,585 today. In short, even with the increase, districts are receiving less than what is needed.

Any further loss in enrollment to charters or private schools will not be offset by these small increases in state funding, so districts must compete to attract and retain students to maintain district personnel and fulfill their obligations.

As regional leaders in enrollment marketing strategy and engagement, our firm has observed how school vouchers and charter networks are reshaping the educational landscape. This white paper explores how traditional public K-12 school districts across the country are responding to increasing competition through evolving marketing strategies.

Enrollment Statistics Reveal Patterns and Opportunities

There are three phases when effective engagement can maximize enrollment – prekindergarten and kindergarten, the transition to middle school, and high school retention.



Prekindergarten and Kindergarten

Almost every school district in Texas has the opportunity to enroll more children in prekindergarten and kindergarten. Texas remains one of the fastest growing states in the nation, and routinely has the second-highest number of live births after California.

Many families, however, remain unaware of the options available to them to enroll their children in prekindergarten, and the opportunity to access free prekindergarten or kindergarten in Texas, based on eligibility. Driving awareness around prekindergarten capacity and eligibility can increase enrollment which can result in improved future-year enrollment.

Partnerships with pediatricians, social service agencies, nonprofit organizations and religious institutions are an excellent connector and validator for families to understand how to identify their options.





The Transition to Middle School

Many families move their children out of public schools and into charter or private schools in the transition from elementary to middle school. The reasons vary by region and neighborhood, and charter schools have done an excellent job of positioning themselves as more structured settings and offering specialized programs. Public school districts offer many of the same and even superior opportunities - yet many families lack awareness of the high-quality options available to them.

School districts need to encourage retention through the intentional targeting of families with students in fourth and fifth grades and exposing them to the middle school experiences and opportunities. The ability to retain students within the middle school ecosystem is essential – as it impacts overall enrollment and district revenue for at least three years.

High School Retention

Almost every school district in Texas experiences growth from eight to ninth grades. Many charter and private schools do not offer high school, and families and students are seeking athletic or other extracurricular opportunities to maximize post-secondary options.

However, many of these same districts also see significant losses in the transition from freshman to sophomore years. Yes, “life happens” for many students and their families, but districts have an opportunity to focus on engagement campaigns to retain these students across their high school years.





Marketing Public Schools in the Era of Vouchers: A Landscape Analysis

Across the United States, the rapid expansion of charter schools and voucher programs will fundamentally alter the competitive landscape for K–12 public education. With public funding increasingly available for use in private and charter schools, public school districts are now required to actively market themselves to retain and attract families.

We have reviewed enrollment marketing efforts by districts across the nation. Districts in Arizona¹, Florida², Indiana, Ohio³, and Wisconsin⁴ ‘woo’ families with comprehensive, professional campaigns to communicate value, accessibility, and unique offerings. Key strategies in this landscape include:

- Professional Marketing Campaigns**
 Districts like Des Moines⁵ and Indianapolis⁶ have hired marketing firms to create branded campaigns using TV, radio, billboards, print, and digital ads to promote their schools and programs.
- Advertising and Social Media**
 Newark⁷ and Des Moines have invested in traditional media and platform-specific video ads highlighting school offerings.
- Personalized Outreach**
 Milwaukee schools are using text messages, calls, and door-to-door engagement to reintroduce themselves family-by-family.⁸
- Targeted Retention**
 Districts are using data to pinpoint and address drop-off points in enrollment. Some are tailoring messaging by grade band or neighborhood.
- Program Differentiation**
 Districts are emphasizing their unique programs – usually with regional industry partners - to set their public schools apart from competitors.
- Community Engagement**
 Districts cannot rely on word of mouth any more – and many are hosting open houses, festivals, and local sponsorships to create grassroots visibility.

These efforts are about more than advertising and reflect a larger movement to align district operations with customer experience models. Effective enrollment strategies increasingly rely on direct engagement, position students as the key communicators, and use authentic storytelling.

Marketing Budget Allocations: Public vs. Charter vs. Private

It costs money to drive enrollment to get more funding. Historically, charter and private schools have far outspent public districts on marketing. Some public schools are narrowing the gap:

Public Schools

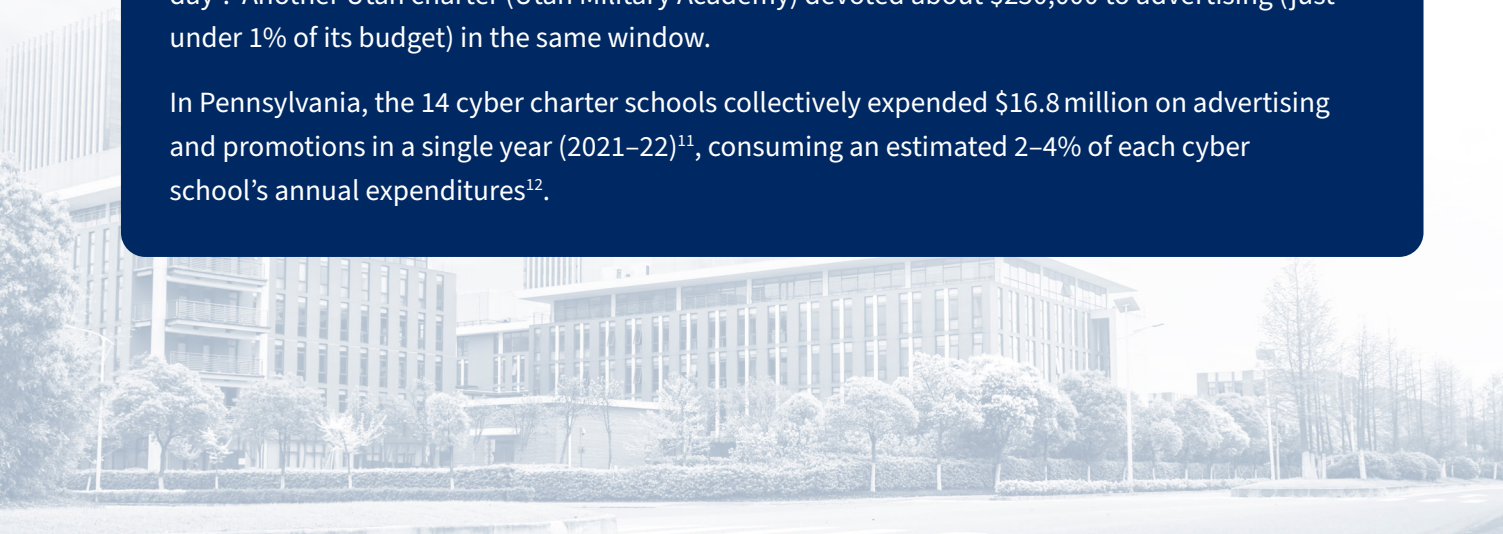
Traditional public school districts devote only a sliver of their budgets to marketing, especially compared to charters and privates. For example, Des Moines Public Schools (Iowa) budgeted roughly \$300,000 for marketing and communications in 2023 – just ~0.05% of its \$600 million total budget⁹.

District leaders noted that attracting on the order of only 40 additional students (at about \$8,000 in state funding each) would fully recoup that investment. Even large urban districts make modest marketing outlays: in 2024, Newark Public Schools approved a \$276,790 contract with an outside firm to recruit 311 new students, essentially a drop in the bucket relative to its \$1.3 billion annual budget. Similarly, Indianapolis Public Schools spent about \$270,000 of one-time federal relief funds on a two-year student recruitment campaign – less than 1% of its \$217 million in COVID relief aid. These figures underscore that public districts’ marketing expenditures remain minimal as a share of overall spending.

Charter Schools

Charter schools (especially virtual and statewide charters) tend to allocate a larger portion of their budgets to marketing and student recruitment (often on the order of 1–3% of total expenditures, far above district levels). A 2019 investigative report in Utah found charters there had spent a combined \$2.1 million on advertising since 2015. One online charter, Mountain Heights Academy, alone spent nearly \$900,000 on ads (primarily Facebook campaigns) over that period¹⁰ – an amount its director equated to roughly “the cost of a cup of coffee per student per day”. Another Utah charter (Utah Military Academy) devoted about \$250,000 to advertising (just under 1% of its budget) in the same window.

In Pennsylvania, the 14 cyber charter schools collectively expended \$16.8 million on advertising and promotions in a single year (2021–22)¹¹, consuming an estimated 2–4% of each cyber school’s annual expenditures¹².



Private Schools

Private schools also invest in marketing, particularly as voucher programs expand and unlock new pools of students. Many private institutions historically allocate anywhere from a few percent up to around 10% of their revenue for admissions and marketing efforts (far more than public schools).¹³ Recent voucher expansions have spurred new outreach initiatives by religious schools eager to attract voucher-bearing families. For example, in Ohio’s Cleveland area, one Jewish day school emailed all parents strongly encouraging them to apply for the newly expanded state vouchers (worth roughly \$6,000 per child) to help offset the school’s ~\$18,000 annual tuition¹⁴. Likewise, after Florida enacted universal private-school vouchers in 2023, faith-based schools there hung banners and posted yard signs proclaiming “Vouchers Accepted Here” to entice prospective families. Catholic dioceses in Florida even expanded school capacity and actively promoted the state’s new scholarships among parish communities to draw in more students. In other states like Arizona (which recently made all K–12 students eligible for Education Savings Accounts), microschoools and private academies have begun advertising on social media and via neighborhood signs, leveraging public voucher funds to broaden their marketing reach. These examples illustrate how, as school-choice funding grows, private schools are ramping up recruitment efforts in turn¹⁵.

Comparative Marketing Expenditures:

Sector	Example (Location)	Marketing Spend (Year)	Share of Budget
Public District	Des Moines Public Schools (IA)	~\$300,000 on marketing & communications (FY2023)	~0.05% of ~\$600 million total budget
Public District	Newark Public Schools (NJ)	\$276,790 contract for student recruitment (2024) ¹⁶	~0.02% of ~\$1.3 billion budget ¹⁷
Public District	Indianapolis Public Schools (IN)	~\$270,000 two-year recruitment campaign (2022-23) ¹⁸	<0.1% of \$217 million relief funds ¹⁹
Charter School	Utah Charter Schools (combined)	~\$2.1 million on advertising (2015-2019) ²⁰	~1% of annual expenditures (varies by school) ²¹
Charter School	Mountain Heights Academy (UT, online)	~\$900,000 on ads (2015-2019) ²²	“Cost of a cup of coffee per student per day” (\$0.50) ²³
Charter School	PA cyber charters (combined)	\$16.8 million on advertising (2021-22) ²⁴	~2-4% of each school’s annual budget
Private School	Jewish day school (Ohio)	Email campaign urging voucher applications (~\$6k/student)	Voucher covers ~33% of ~\$18k tuition
Private School	Religious schools (FL & IN)	Yard banners: “Vouchers Accepted Here” (2023)	Minimal cost - highlights new state scholarships
Private School	Catholic dioceses (Florida)	Expanded capacity & promotions for universal vouchers	(N/A - aimed to draw in public-school families)

While many public districts still face political and budgetary resistance to advertising, competition is forcing a reconsideration. Measurable improvements in enrollment demonstrate the value of well-executed campaigns. Spending to attract or recover a student can pay for itself many times over, especially if the student remains enrolled for more than one academic year.



The Austin ISD Model: Branding, Events, and Canvassing in Action

After years of enrollment declines, Austin ISD implemented a districtwide effort to reintroduce its value proposition to the community. Using [federal ESSER II and ESSER III funds in 2022](#), Austin ISD designed an enrollment and community engagement effort to reverse enrollment losses and reclaim students²⁵.

The program included upgrades to the district-wide enrollment system, market research, parent communication support, community-facing collateral development, a summer enrollment initiative, creative production, event planning, canvassing, and paid media across the academic year.

Strategy Starts with Listening: Our ‘Research Drives Design’ Framework

Every district has unique needs relative to the quality of its schools and programs, the demographics of the families the districts serve, and the economics of the region and neighborhoods which comprise the district. It is therefore essential to understand the contours of your market to best align engagement – focusing on the messages families need to hear, and reaching them through the channels they use.

We use key stakeholder interviews, focus groups with families (both current and families of students who have left the district), and online surveys to gather intelligence about how people perceive the district. We also inquire how they gather information to make their decisions about where to send their children – the kind of information they use, and how they find it. These insights guide the design of content and delivery strategies.

Families Research Online, but Make Confident Decisions in Person



Our research in Austin ISD revealed the range of resources families used to make decisions. Most of the research was conducted online – with families evaluating the quality of the schools in their neighborhoods, evaluating the size of the school, the types of programs available, the supports for students, and the reputation of the school. They look to school ratings, social media commentary, and District news to understand their options.

More discerning families use school visits to evaluate quality. Some families shared how they choose a school based on their personal interactions with the principal, the conditions of the school, or how they experienced the general behavior of students already in the school. They want their children to be safe, welcomed, and challenged, which they feel they get from in-person visits or direct conversations.

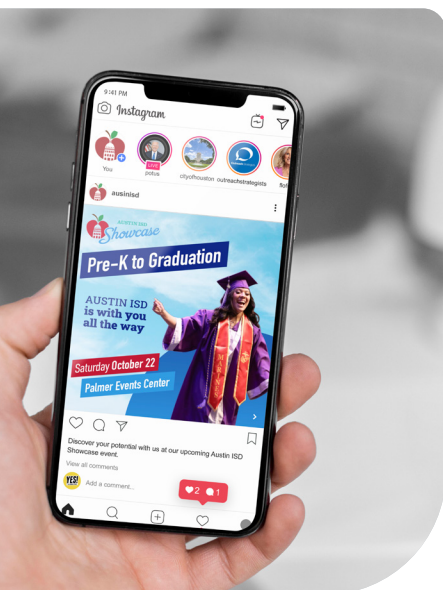
Word of mouth remains the most potent point of information for families – what they hear from other families about a district or specific campus is a major driver of their enrollment decisions.



Designing an Interactive, Multi-Channel Campaign

The research informed the design of a comprehensive campaign to provide families with information, and offering the opportunity to engage in person. The district was transitioning to a new school enrollment portal, and our work informed the content hosted on the site. This included:

- Creating bilingual print and digital enrollment guides, which included one-page profiles of every AISD campus, detailing the location, programs, and grades served, along with a short narrative description of the school.
- Producing short video “fly-overs” and “walk-throughs” for each campus, which were posted on the campus webpage and in the enrollment portal. These videos provided families with a glimpse of campus facilities and programs.
- Supporting the design and production of a district-wide school showcase, where representatives of every campus attended a one-day event to answer questions for families, and to process on-site enrollment.
- Producing and placing bilingual paid media across digital, social, radio, and print platforms to drive awareness and traffic to the district website.
- Integrated canvassing with district staff to support real-time enrollment and referrals.



The Power of the Knock: Canvassing To Convert

Direct contact with families is one of the most effective outreach strategies. Authentic, in-language, in-person conversations help address barriers and drive action. This is particularly important when it is unclear why a student is no longer enrolled. Visiting with the family can sometimes help reset the relationship between the student and family and the district.

In our work with Austin ISD, we identified students who had left school for unknown reasons (Leaver Codes 98) and visited those homes. In many instances there were specific family circumstances and those students and their families were not aware of alternatives and options to continue their education.

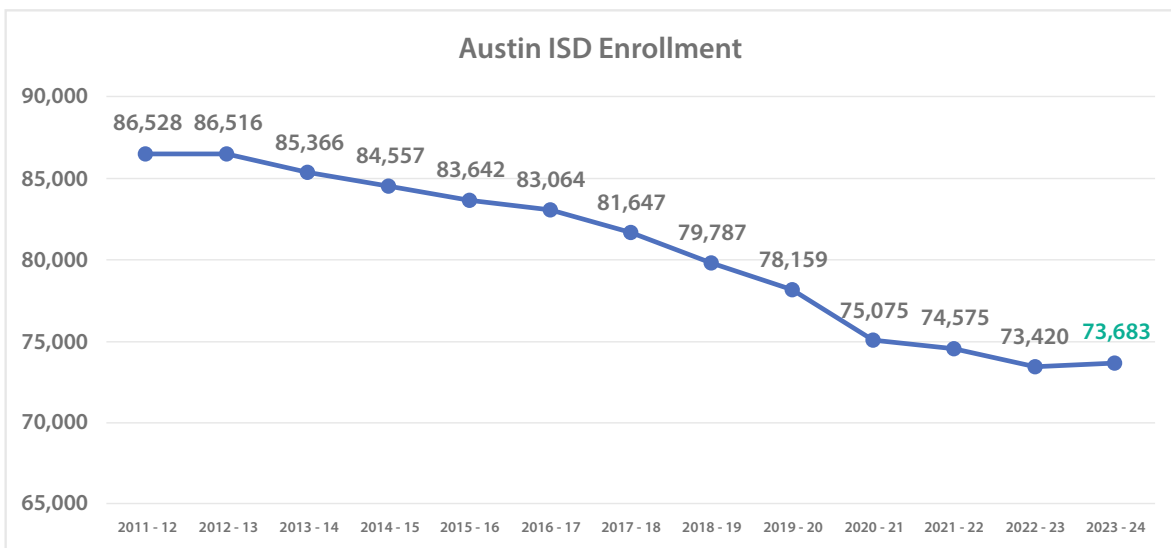
The key to the approach was to pair a trained, culturally competent canvasser with a district employee who could speak with authority about the programs and supports available within the district. This created confidence and made it easier to pull the students back into the district.

We were also able to ascertain whether a student had moved away (out of the district, state, or country) which enabled the district to clean its data and remove these former students from its lists.



Investment Brings Growth

By investing during the 2022-23 school year, Austin ISD was able to recover students during the school year, and experience its first year-over-year enrollment growth in more than 15 years. In fact, Austin ISD had averaged a loss in enrollment of 1,310 students over the previous ten years, and actually gained 263 students for the 2023-24 school year.



Due to the efforts of district leaders and great teamwork, Austin ISD stopped the trend of decline in its tracks and actually increased enrollment.

Results Matter

Given the strong connection school district budgets have to enrollment, finding ways to attract and retain in an increasingly competitive enrollment landscape is essential.

We've delivered results for Austin ISD, and supported enrollment and retention campaigns for districts across Texas and the United States (insert logos)

Alief ISD, Spring Branch ISD, Alamo Colleges, PreK4SA, Stone Child College, HCC, and Guilford County Schools.



Recommendations for School District Leaders

- 1 Start with research to understand perceptions, motivations, and opportunities.
- 2 Invest in people – canvassers, storytellers, neighborhood leaders, and media experts – to build trust.
- 3 Think like marketers and build an engagement system. Strategize how to do more than push information out, but consider how to pull partners, families, and students in.

If your district is navigating similar challenges, this paper may serve as a useful tool to reflect on trends, benchmark strategies, and evaluate areas where a community-centered, data-driven marketing approach could support your enrollment goals.

Footnotes

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