

EVOLVING FROM A BUREAUCRACY TO A CUREAUCRACY: 10 IDEAS TO REVERSE ENROLLMENT DECLINES

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A consistent topic at schools across the nation lately is about enrollment declines, and more importantly, innovative ideas to reverse this trend. Know that this is happening at all types of schools in many parts of the country - charter public schools, district public schools, private schools, and parochial schools - so you're not alone. Whether this happened to your school or network due to The Great Migration during the pandemic, increased competition from other schools in your neighborhood, families having fewer children, or any other reason, maintaining enrollment levels that your budget is based on is of the utmost importance.

Here are 10 ideas to reverse enrollment declines to mitigate risk and keep your school seCURE:

1. Know where student enrollment stands at all times. Sometimes your staff member in charge of student recruitment is inundated with so many other operational responsibilities that staying on top of enrollment levels becomes challenging. During check-in meetings, prioritize enrollment-related efforts above the other urgent matters, due to its importance to your budget being balanced. Include a student enrollment budget vs. actual report in your monthly financial reports and be sure to demonstrate the financial impact of being under-enrolled or over-enrolled (if you're lucky enough to be in this position).

2. Be ready to drawdown quickly from your waiting list. Your school may have a waiting list, which is a good position to be in, but the true length of that list may be deceptive. Parents may hedge their bets, apply to multiple charter schools, and have their students on multiple waiting lists. Their child(ren) may have been accepted at another school, which they are happy with and may either decline accepting your spot or not respond to your outreach. Review and update your waiting list in advance, which will indicate its actual length. Be ready to drawdown from it quickly and have clear policies about the timeframe that families have to accept or decline can mitigate potential disappointment or getting off on the wrong foot.

3. Revisit your enrollment policies. Some schools stop enrolling students after a particular date in the school year. While the potential disruptions to classroom dynamics may occur, worse disruptions can happen as a result of being under-enrolled. Your school/network may not want to dip into savings and/or face a deficit at year-end, which can necessitate expense reductions during the school year. The typical method is to reduce staff headcount, which causes ripple effects with the rest of the staff wondering "who's next?" This, in turn, impacts staff culture and may cause families to move their students to more stable environments. Discuss and consider whether enrolling students throughout the school year is a better approach given the current circumstances with enrollment declines.

4. Consider extending your school day. Childcare is another hot topic across the U.S. Until the powers that be at the federal, state, and local levels figure out how to solve this challenging reality, families have to be innovative with childcare. Weigh the costs and benefits of extending your school day academically and assess the financial impact. There's also the possibility of burning out your staff, the potential of overtime or stipends to in-house staff as well as the costs of hiring an afterschool agency to factor into the mix. Discuss and decide what's best.

5. Increase family engagement efforts. A famous quote from President Teddy Roosevelt is "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." When students are truly nurtured and that care is extended to their families, that love is felt and word of mouth to prospective families typically follow. Doubling down on your existing family engagement efforts can result in "an invisible student recruitment team" bringing your school more students to keep enrollment levels where they need to be to help balance your budget and honor the commitments in your charter agreement. There are also family engagement consultants to hire who can evolve these efforts and leverage this investment of time and money.

6. Pilot social media efforts and update your website. Some schools are experiencing success with social media campaigns which can target the exact demographics where ads about your school can show up on the respective feeds of parents/guardians who are interested in a new school for their child(ren). Fees are usually reasonable and are tied to the number of clicks, where the return on investment can be huge if these efforts bring your school at least one student, if not more. Update your website to reflect newsworthy events, which may attract more families to apply after seeing your school culture in action.

7. Consider adding more grade levels, including Pre-K. If students and families adore your school, you may want to hold onto them longer to keep that lovefest going. Some schools are adding Pre-K, elementary school, middle school and/or high school grade levels or additional sections within existing grades, provided they have space in their facilities and their authorizers bless this material change to your charter agreement.

8. Pound the pavement. When you first launched your school, you likely visited places of worship, HeadStart programs, playgrounds, and anywhere else families bring their children in order to spread the word about your new school. If that worked, why not continue with these efforts now? A face-to-face connection is often the best way to encourage a new family to send their child(ren) to your school/network.

9. Translate your marketing materials into multiple languages. With the U.S. being the great melting pot, an invitation welcoming families of all backgrounds is usually all that stands in the way. If language is the barrier and you know the demographics in your neighborhood, consider translating your marketing materials into additional languages (if you haven't already) and make them available on your website. When demonstrating your inclusive approach, hopefully the magic of (international) word of mouth takes off!

10. Consider merging with another charter school (if all else fails). Some charter schools are merging when they see the writing on the wall due to declining enrollment. It's much better to have two, close by, under-enrolled schools join forces than shutdown. Willingness and approval by your board and authorizer far in advance, along with compromises will be important, especially because decisions like these impact so many students, families, and staff members.

Hopefully these ideas helped re-engage your innovative muscles. If you're interested in more proven practices, there's a new resource available that can help your school/network.



Our book, **fiscally seCURE: prepare, protect & propel your CHARTER SCHOOL with responsible financial management** was published recently in an effort to help schools/networks to remain financially sustainable in the short- and long-term. You can learn 10 CUREs and 50 Remedies for the corresponding 10 causes and 50 symptoms of financial mismanagement. School/network leaders, board members, financial/operations professionals, authorizers, auditors, funders, lenders and other stakeholders who have read it say it's "a must-read" for all 8,000+ charter schools across the nation. It's available on [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com).

Here's pictures from our book launch a few weeks ago in NYC:



Stay tuned for future articles about topics on the minds of many leaders and board members!