



Enrollment Retention & Advancement Program *Operating a School District as a Business*

In today's day and age, public school districts of all sizes across the country are seeing a similar phenomenon: an increase in competition for enrollment. Through various open enrollment programs, public school districts not only compete amongst themselves, but are now up against more and more alternative educational institutions ("AEIs"), such as charters, magnet schools, and even private schools.

As parents are becoming more apt to research alternative pathways and programs for their children, it has become imperative for public school districts to examine the driving forces behind those parent and student decisions in order to combat potential losses in current or future enrollment.

Cooperative Strategies works with public school districts that range from rural single-facility districts, to some of the largest urban and suburban districts in the nation. Many of our clients have experienced this trend of student mobility with parents willing to travel beyond their neighborhood schools to find that perfect fit. In order to help our clients understand and combat this trend, we've begun asking **why** this is occurring.

The answer is not that simple. Public school districts have recognized competition for some time from private schools, such as faith-based or Montessori education models; however, these new AEIs are typically competing on alternative educational programs such as STEM/STEAM,

Visual & Performing Arts, Dual Language Immersion, Core Knowledge, Early College, Expeditionary, Waldorf, and many others. Additionally, these AEIs are capturing students at the elementary school level and expanding to the middle/junior high school levels.

In some areas, we have seen AEIs offer these alternative educational programs at the high school level. Whether you call it an "educational pathway" or a "vertical alignment/articulation", parents are focusing on their kids' interests and how to provide them with employable skills.



For example, we've seen a recent client offer a Dual Language Immersion program at the elementary school level, which was very well supported by a number of parents throughout the school district. Unfortunately, the program ended at the middle school level. The school district then identified an underutilized middle school and high school which could accommodate the program. Even though the schools that offered the program did not feed into each other, parents and students were accepting of the inconvenience to have this educational pathway from kindergarten thru twelfth grade.

This is a great example of a simple way that public school districts can use their own resources to identify and expand upon successful programs in order retain students throughout all school levels. In this instance, had our client not made an effort to offer the program at all levels, local AEIs may have been able to capitalize on

this in an attempt to use their own offerings to attract students away from their assigned public schools.

To be clear, we believe different educational models, along with diverse program offerings for students, are vital to education since every student learns in different ways, but in order for traditional school districts to continue to succeed, they need to look for ways to adjust in this new landscape.

With a solid understanding of how, when and why AEIs are able to attract students, public school districts need to examine the impacts that will occur from this loss in enrollment. Our clients who have lost students have experienced the following effects:

- **Decrease of General Fund dollars**
- **Increased costs per student for operations**
- **Decrease in efficiencies of teaching students (combination classes)**
- **Challenge in offering alternative educational programs**
- **Decrease in school/district performance**
- **Challenge in retaining/attracting top administrators/teachers**
- **Potential need to close facilities**
- **Decrease in community identity**

These are significant impacts that can seriously hinder a public school district's finances as well as day-to-day operations.



Top 10 States Experiencing an Increase in the Number of Charter Schools

RANK	STATE	% INCREASE ^[1]
1	<i>Utah</i>	1275%
2	<i>Oregon</i>	950%
3	<i>Louisiana</i>	611%
4	<i>New York</i>	553%
5	<i>Ohio</i>	477%
6	<i>Florida</i>	340%
7	<i>California</i>	290%
8	<i>Wash. D.C.</i>	239%
9	<i>Texas</i>	239%
10	<i>Wisconsin</i>	213%

[1] Based on data sets collected from 2000-2015. Percentage represents the aggregate increase in the number of operating charter schools over the 15 year period.

With this in mind, a second question we have started asking our clients is: **If you thought of your school district as a business, what would you do?** Just as a savvy business markets its assets to potential recruits for the purpose of investing in long-term relationships; so should public school districts – with students as their "recruits" and programs and pathways as their "assets".

Conceptually, a business model to curb enrollment loss is straightforward and builds on a public school district's existing strengths. Practically, deciding exactly which strategies to select, how and when, is where things get complicated. While this starts with district management, the real answers are held by the community.

This makes community outreach the logical first step in understanding exactly why your school district is losing students in order to create a solution. Through public forums, some of the answers your school district may be given include:

- **Negative stigma of the school/school district**
- **Lack of alternative educational programs**
- **Absence of specialized curriculum options**
- **Desire for alternative school level configuration**
- **Need for designated curriculum specific facilities**
- **Proximity to home/daycare**
- **Condition of school facilities**
- **Safety/security of schools**
- **Flexibility for parent/community involvement**

From these answers, you will be able to conceptualize a plan that effectively accomplishes the following.

FIVE STEPS TO SUCCESS:

1

ESTABLISH THE "MUST HAVES":

What is your school district missing that AEIs may be offering? Getting community input will help you decide the programs and activities that you need to incorporate.

2

COMBAT NEGATIVITY/FALSE PERCEPTIONS:

Are there safety/security issues, facilities condition problems, or other negative public perception surrounding your school district? Understanding this negativity will help your school district to address false perceptions through public relations and fix problems that influence decisions to leave the school system.

3

ADDRESS YOUR FACILITIES:

Compiling answers from the above steps will help you to review your facilities and create an improvement plan that will support the items that the community needs to see. Public school districts typically have resources that AEIs do not, so this is your chance to use that to your advantage.

4

MARKET THE PLAN:

Once you have a plan in place, tell your community! Parents want to see action, and continually conducting outreach will help keep parents and students up to date on implementation statuses and ensure your hard work doesn't go unnoticed.

5

MEASURE SUCCESS:

As with the private sector, each endeavor or special pursuit needs to be gauged against the basic principle: Return on Investment ("ROI"). The key metric that school districts will measure against is changes in student enrollment. A successful program's ROI will be realized through curbing enrollment loss and retaining a higher number of students as they transition through grade levels.

While the above steps are very rudimentary, formulating a specific business plan for your school district can be very complex. This plan must be unique, implementable, and sustainable. Achieving this requires all levels of the school district and all facets of the community to fully support the plan. This is where retaining the services of an expert with national experience can help with the development and implementation of an **Enrollment Retention and Advancement Program™ ("ERAP")**.

Through our experience with thousands of the nation's school districts, one concept holds true: collaborative planning builds the most successful school systems.



Cooperative Strategies is a nationwide educational consulting firm with expertise and customized services in facilities planning/demographics, financial advisory, special tax/assessment, and program implementation. Over a 25-year history the firm has helped over 2,000 Local Educational Agencies provide quality facilities for America's students.

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