

When Enrollment Drops

A magnet school strategy for districts committed to excellence, equity, and diversity

Many states and districts across the country are facing declining student enrollment, and with it, declining per pupil funding from state and federal revenue sources.

They are simultaneously experiencing the “fiscal cliff” that occurred when billions of dollars in federal Covid-relief funding ran out in 2024. This is a difficult time for those whose job it is to balance a school district’s budget.

Districts often turn to school consolidations / closures in times of financial stress. Often described as “consolidation” by district leaders, they are felt and described as “closures” by communities, educators, and students. While consolidation can increase access to resources and opportunities otherwise not available to students in under-enrolled schools, they do not always save as much



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money as hoped, and the underlying school closures disproportionately hurt students of color (especially Black students) and students living in poverty.

This brief offers district leaders a different approach: protecting schools in high-poverty neighborhoods from closure and instead increasing enrollment by transforming them into innovative, theme-based, and diverse whole-school magnet programs that serve all neighborhood students as well as attracting others from across the district.

To be clear, this is not a silver bullet or holistic strategy to address the multitude of challenges accompanying declining enrollment. For instance, districts cannot shift demographic declines or economic trends causing families to flee geographically; but they can work toward making district schools more appealing compared to private, parochial, or homeschooling options. Furthermore, magnet schools will be more helpful in some contexts than others. (For example, districts that already have a charter-heavy or lottery-based approach to operating public schools may not find this idea new or relevant.) But it is a concrete idea that could provide leaders in many traditional districts a real alternative to some of the most commonly used and problematic approaches.

Here are three broad steps district leaders can take to pursue this strategy:

1. Frame the issue.

This is a districtwide challenge to be met with districtwide solutions driven by the district's mission and values.

Explain: The district—as a whole—has a budget to balance, a student body to support. Avoid the temptation to frame the challenge as underenrollment in a few schools, which biases the conversation about solutions toward closing those schools, and is an oversimplified description that leaves out any discussion of the districtwide policies and practices that led to underenrollment in those schools. Instead, in line with

the district's mission, values, and dedication to providing excellence for all, commit to not close or consolidate schools in the most high-poverty, marginalized neighborhoods, and instead support and, where necessary, improve them.

2. Learn what would keep—and entice back—the district's students and families.



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What to learn: What, structurally, do families want from their schools? What themes or programs would be exciting? Dual language immersion programs? Science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) themed schools? Arts academies? Montessori programming? PK-2 schools that are designed especially for younger students? Project-based learning? International Baccalaureate (IB) schools? An early college high school? Are there any schools/programs elsewhere in the district that families would like to see expanded, replicated, or relocated to other neighborhoods?

What to do: Ask. Use simple surveys in multiple languages, phone calls at hours that accommodate families on different schedules, and community engagement sessions. Make sure to reach all the communities in your district, including those where engagement has been low in recent years, and weigh their input equitably.

3. Create whole school magnet programs in under-enrolled, under-resourced schools.

This, of course, is a complicated undertaking that will require many pieces, including but not limited to the following.

Identify schools located in the district's most under-resourced communities that have the capacity to serve additional students. **Commit to keep them open, and to invest in them to attract additional students from across the district.**

Explain to your entire community that while the district may need to close/consolidate some other schools due to the district's financial challenges, any student whose

neighborhood school changes due to school closure/consolidation will be offered a spot (on a voluntary basis) in the new, innovative whole school magnet program.

Plan collaboratively with educators and local stakeholders to create, expand, or relocate themed magnet school opportunities that district families say they want. These should be schoolwide magnet schools that serve all students in the building; do not create a “school within a school” that will segregate students and provide unequal educational opportunities. Ensure that all parents—including local neighborhood parents—have a clear and ongoing mechanism to inform decisions about the programming. District leaders should also ask the community of the school that will host the new magnet program what aspects of the current school (staffing, pedagogical approach, traditions, school name, etc.) are important to keep.

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Expanding the definition of the school community to serve a wider swath of the district makes family engagement critically important. Families participating in a lottery and selecting this magnet program instead of their zoned school are self-selected in a way that makes them likely to seek out higher engagement. This can be a strength, but it also means that the district and school must continually check-in to ensure that families in the immediate neighborhood, whose children will all attend this school, are being heard as well.

Create a strategic, multi-year timeline. Open new themed programs in historically underserved communities in the same year as the closure of other schools in the district, so that any student facing a change in their zoned school due to consolidation also has exciting new opportunities. Some types of magnet schools can likely be planned and implemented using the personnel and facilities you already have, while others might require advanced planning, training, hiring, or renovation. If you have the budgetary flexibility to do so, consider a multiyear phase-in.

Design a controlled choice lottery system to allow students from across the district to access the magnet schools; it should:

- Guarantee seats in each magnet school for students who live in the school's current attendance zone;
- Guarantee seats for students in any (intentionally lower-need) communities whose schools were identified for closure.
- *Not* include any elements of selective admission (no applications, essays, tests, GPA requirements, auditions) or fees.
- Advance diversity and inclusion. Consider adopting the "50/50 school" approach the Dallas school district has pioneered, using separate lotteries to ensure 50 percent of students in a school are Economically Disadvantaged, and 50 percent are not. Consider using more in-depth Census community-level data combined with free and reduced-price lunch designations.

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Improve transportation. Optimize bus routes to minimize commute times and ensure bus drivers' time is used most efficiently. Be creative on ways to meet needs with resources available (e.g., in the case of bus driver shortages, how can carpool networks, rideshare apps, walking groups, etc. help fill the gap?).

Advertise and Explain. Once your plans are firm, plan to spend substantial time advertising and explaining the new, exciting opportunities to families from around the district, and especially from the neighborhoods most directly impacted by any necessary consolidations.

Apply for a federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program grant and/or Fostering Diverse Schools grant (pending availability) to support the work. ■

Messaging tips

When possible, school district leaders should put racial and socioeconomic equity and diversity at the center of their planning for school enrollment changes and the potential opening of new magnet schools.

After all, integrated schools give children the opportunity to learn how to work with people from different backgrounds —just like they will in their future jobs and communities.

Brown's Promise has [messaging research](#) on discussing the benefits of well-resourced, integrated schools that can help.

However, the current federal landscape and state and local contexts can make this challenging in many communities. Luckily, there are also many ways of framing this conversion around academic excellence and access to resources that we believe can be fruitful even in political environments where a framing rooted in equity and diversity does not currently feel tenable.

Want to Talk About it?

Send us a note at info@brownspromise.org and bridgescollaborative@tcf.org. If we can't help, we will try to connect you to someone who can.

Check out [Magnet Schools of America](#) to learn more about magnet schools and reach out to support@magnet.edu for additional information.

Additional Reading

- Miami-Dade is [using](#) magnets as a strategy to combat declining enrollment, and the district has two federal grants to support their work ([Magnet Schools Assistance Program](#) and [Fostering Diverse Schools](#)).
- Dual language immersion programs are being used across the [country](#) to combat declining enrollment.
- Wake County, NC's [approach](#) to magnet schools is one example to learn from, and they, too, have received multiple federal grants.
- [Dallas ISD](#) created new magnet-like choice schools to draw students back into the district from surrounding suburbs in response to survey data about the types of schools parents were interested in.
- Nashville [successfully](#) added an arts magnet program, supported by a federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program [grant](#), to help attract more students and improve performance at a school that was at risk of closure.