



Strategic Enrollment Management for K-12



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Strategic Enrollment Management for K-12

In 1993, Michael Dolence coined the term strategic enrollment management (SEM) and described it as “a comprehensive process designed to achieve and maintain the optimum recruitment, retention, and attainment of students where optimum is defined within the academic context of the institution.”

The genesis of SEM was in higher education. Colleges and universities were forced to address the fact they exist within a competitive global environment, and there were changes occurring in the marketplace: demographic shifts, increased competition from non-traditional providers, rising costs, declining funding, and technology advances — all of which impacted enrollment and financial sustainability. Within this context, over the past 30 years, many colleges and universities have been challenged to evolve and adapt in response to these seismic shifts and to reconsider traditional models of operation across all aspects of the organization. Strategic enrollment management offers such a response, and many higher education institutions have entire offices and departments dedicated to these efforts.

The original definition, however, reflects a narrower view than modern conceptualizations of SEM. Today, we conceptualize SEM as comprehensively developed and the primary planning process for the institution. Enrollment management becomes “strategic” when it is clearly and actively integrated with the institution, as SEM helps education leaders in strategy and scenario planning within a specified framework. The implementation of SEM will help institutions effectively anticipate and respond to the dramatic changes in the education market that will likely continue to impact education and thus must be an integral aspect of overall strategic planning. SEM promotes the internal and external analysis of environmental factors that present opportunities and threats to future status and growth and promotes data-based action in the organization. Financial sustainability of the institution is a major focus of SEM because predictable financial resources, which are driven by student enrollment, are essential to delivering a high-quality education.

As noted earlier, SEM was born within the higher education world. However, there is strong evidence that the K-12 education environment is also undergoing dramatic changes in a similar fashion to higher education (e.g., declining enrollments, attractive education options, school climate concerns) and must employ SEM strategies and tactics to enrollment and other education challenges. Student enrollment in today’s K-12 education environment is more complex than ever before and has placed extant stresses on our schools and districts.

In modern times, enrollment goes well beyond simply registering a student in a class. It now includes several important aspects, such as marketing, recruitment, lotteries, special school choice, special programs, school climate, family involvement, and customer service. In many respects, forward-looking leaders see student enrollment as a highly strategic endeavor that can impact nearly all aspects of the education system, including student achievement, student engagement, access, equity, overall administrative efficiency, and financial stability. Simply stated, strategic enrollment management will drive the overall success of your institution(s).

In this white paper, we will outline a framework for SEM within the K-12 environment along with the specific strategies and tactics of SEM that school and district leaders should implement to achieve optimum performance for the organization and its students.



Why Strategic Enrollment Management is Critical in K-12

In the United States K-12 education system, student enrollment is declining in many states and districts while increasing in states with a growing general population. The state of evolving enrollment is impacted by many factors.

Historically, children have attended their neighborhood schools through residence-based school assignment systems. The greatest factors changing enrollment across the nation have been precipitated by changes in state laws that allow for open enrollment across district lines as well as the creation of independent charter schools. Within the last 30 years, there has been a proliferation of school choice options, which has dramatically changed the relationship between where a student lives and where they attend school.

The link between where a child lived and where a child attended school has greatly loosened as the number of public choice options (i.e., magnets) and charter schools have provided alternatives to attending one's zoned school. Additionally, there are other forms of school choice, such as inter- and intra-district transfer, ability-based programs (e.g., Gifted and Talented), and school voucher programs. These have contributed to ramifying housing and education markets. In a recent study, it was found that nearly 30% of families now enroll their children in a school other than their assigned neighborhood school. Not surprisingly, the percentage of students moving out of their neighborhood schools is much greater in urban areas.

Overall, this changing scenario has created an environment with a plethora of school choice options now available to families. As such, K-12 has become a marketplace, which has made student recruitment and retention more challenging. Indeed, large corporate-backed charter school organizations that span across multiple states with dozens of affiliated schools and tens of thousands of students have emerged. Additionally, some states allow vouchers to be used by families to pay for private or religious schools, thereby giving families greater flexibility of choice.

One dramatic example of declining enrollment is from the 2020–21 school year, which was greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. An analysis of data from 33 states showed that public K-12 enrollment dropped across those states by more than 500,000 students, or 2%, since the same time the previous year. That is a significant decline

considering enrollment overall in those states had generally increased 0.5% in the past. The analysis also showed that a drop in kindergarten enrollment accounts for 30% of the total reduction across the 33 states. The Miami-Dade County public schools, for example, had 16,000 fewer kindergarteners enroll than previous year. The concern raised by many is that these students may never return to public schools and will continue to access other education options. So what are the specific macro drivers that have changed K-12 education into a competitive marketplace and driven down enrollment numbers?

First, there have been a number of demographic changes in our country over the past 30 years, such as declining birth rates and population shifts away from rural and inner-city areas into more suburban regions.

Second, millennial parents view the education landscape differently and are apt to explore options, such as home-schooling and virtual schooling, and will spend a great deal of time researching and comparing data around districts and schools to meet their children's needs.

Finally, entities that offer alternatives to one's geographic school are leveraging the various forms of social media to communicate their program offerings to reach and satisfy families.



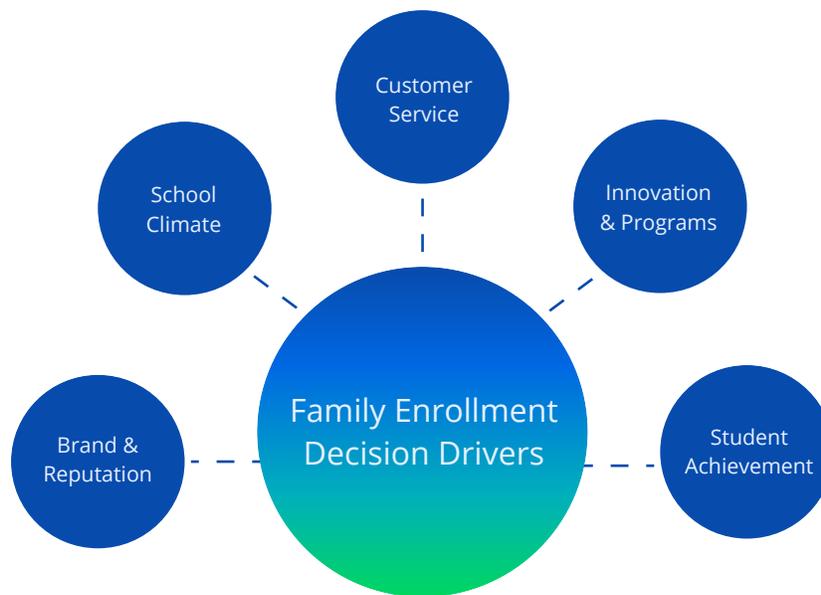
How Families Make Alternative Education Choices

1. Student achievement on a variety of academic outcome measures is often the number one factor to provoke a family to choose another education option. It is based on a simple notion: families desire schools that are generally high performing due to the belief their children will achieve similarly. The logical assumption is these high-performing schools have great teachers that individualize instruction, have lower class sizes, and will help their children reach their potential.
2. Families are attracted to innovative schools and districts that offer special programs designed to deliver specific education outcomes. Examples of these special programs abound. Some commonly seen programs are dual-language immersion programs, STEM/STEAM, and arts and music.
3. Some families seek out other education choices due to negative school climates. It stands to reason that families of students attending schools with high rates of student misbehavior, bullying, poor student-teacher relations, high teacher turnover, and low expectations often attempt to seek more positive learning environments.
4. Relatedly, schools and districts with poor communication and negative customer service often have families seeking schools that treat them as highly valued customers.
5. Families make decisions based solely on the brand and reputation of an institution and its faculty. In fact, the opinions of other families often outweigh more quantitative metrics, such as test scores, in making school choice decisions. In an increasingly competitive market, institutions have turned their attention to evaluating and managing their reputation and brand perception.

Unfortunately, families with limited resources and in undesirable schools are often the least able to access education options. In the final analysis, the quintessence of SEM therefore is to systematically address these micro factors behind the attraction and retention of students and families. Figure 1 graphically illustrates these factors.

Family Enrollment Decision Drivers

Figure 1





The Economic Implications

Together, these two surveys indicate that the potential number of charter school students in the United States is 8–8.5 million. Charter school enrollment in the United States has increased from 400,000 students in 2000 to 3.1 million students in 2017, and the number of schools increased from 2,000 to 7,200 during the same period. Taken together, these results indicate that current enrollment and potential family demand could account for nearly 17% of the 51 million K-12 students in the United States.

Given that the average yearly per-pupil funding in the United States is \$12,612 per student (up 3.4% from 2019), the current potential charter school market alone could siphon over \$100 billion per year from traditional public K-12 schools. Additionally, about 5.7 million, or 10%, of school-aged children attend private schools (78% in religious schools) and account for an additional funding source for public schools of \$71 billion.

The negative economic impacts of declining enrollments and the associated funding decreases for public K-12 schools cannot be understated as districts will be facing many hard budget decisions. Some of the more visible impacts are:

- Lowered student outcomes
- Greater inequities among students
- School closures
- Fewer program options
- Larger class sizes
- Teacher attrition
- Staffing cuts
- Negative climates
- Safety concerns
- Less innovation

The insidious aspect of declining enrollment and funding is that these negative impacts will exacerbate the potential downward spiral that may be impossible to stop. As these impacts become evident in the community, fewer families will choose the institution, leading to further diminution. Many of the costs associated with running a school district are fairly fixed, limiting options of how to deliver the same level of education with fewer dollars. On the other side of the coin, some districts and charter



In September 2017, a Phi Delta Kappa survey found that 17% of parents would choose a public charter school for their child if location and capacity were not an issue.

schools are experiencing increasing enrollment and the associated increase in available dollars. For example, one high-performing district reported that over 30% of their students are open-enrolled from neighboring districts, providing the district with even greater resources to offer excellent innovative programs for their own students as well as prospective students. The loss of a single student to a given district has a multiplier effect of total lifetime revenue, as the loss of revenue accumulates over multiple years. For example, if a student leaves a public school prior to kindergarten for their entire education career, in today's dollars, that would accumulate to roughly \$168,000.

Given these factors, new and divergent philosophies and perspectives are needed as it relates to the recruitment, enrollment, and retention of public K-12 students. There is a prevailing sentiment among many education leaders that students “belong” to their specific school or district. As has been elucidated, the fact is families have a variety of choices today (e.g., neighboring districts, charter schools, private schools, homeschooling, and virtual schools). The notion that some other entity is “stealing your students” is short-sighted and does not provide a strategy to stem the tide of declining enrollment.





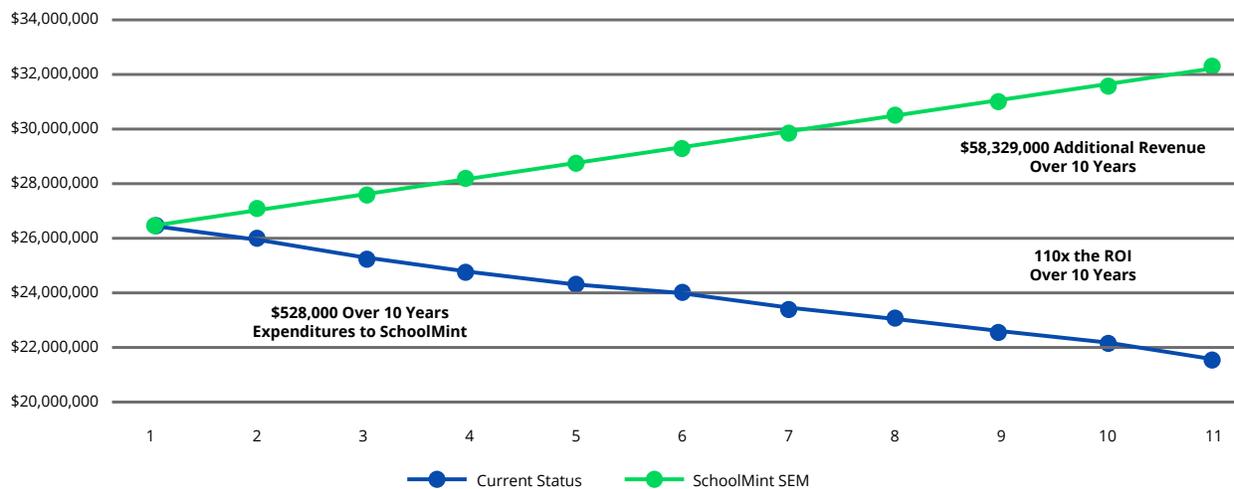
Taking a wait-and-see attitude may put an institution in peril of entering a death spiral of declining enrollment. The fact of the matter is that another education institution is offering something that is more appealing to families than what you have to offer.

Relatedly, education leaders have been abhorrent to the notion of “marketing their brand” to the public as this has been erroneously perceived by some as unseemly. However, in the new market-based education landscape, marketing and extolling the value proposition of an institution to prospective families is now a required strategic endeavor. Indeed, entire organizations have evolved to serve this need in the K-12 world with software, consultation, development, and design services.

To demonstrate the impact of declining vs. increasing enrollment, let’s take a sample smaller district of 2,300 students and compare a 2% decline vs. 2% increase in enrollment. It is important to always look at lifetime student value and the cumulative effects of enrollment losses rather than a single-year impact. Over 10 years, it would add up to \$58 million in more revenue with increasing vs. declining enrollment. Figure 2 illustrates the economic impact of enrollment trends.

Return on Investment Over 10 Years 2% Enrollment Change ± Per Year

Figure 2



The bottom line is healthy enrollment means a healthy institution where students thrive and the institution’s strong financial health can support the people, programs, and resources needed to fulfill the institution’s mission and vision.



The Big Ideas of Strategic Enrollment Management in K-12

Strategic enrollment management has the potential to positively impact an institution, families, students, and staff on many levels. There are two broad areas for consideration: (a) building and implementing a robust SEM-focused system and (b) the positive impacts of SEM for all stakeholders.

The most important aspect of building and implementing a SEM-focused system is to fully and systematically integrate SEM into the current process of strategic planning at the institution. In fact, SEM strategic planning should be the one and only strategic planning process, and as such it must not be separate, as has been done across higher education.

Undoubtedly, attracting new students and retaining current students until graduation provides institutions the wherewithal to achieve financial sustainability and, therefore, deliver on all student outcome goals. When one considers the components or solution domains of SEM strategic planning it essentially covers all critical aspects of the institution. Below is a brief summary of the solution domains that should be addressed during strategic planning within a comprehensive SEM system:

Marketing: Marketing and associated research are essential activities for institutions in today's competitive education landscape. This is an area where more institutions are focusing their efforts, yet the vast majority reject engaging in marketing efforts. Building an institutional brand that meets the needs of families, controlling the narrative of the institution, and effectively communicating the value proposition of the institution will contribute to achieving positive enrollment trends. The marketing efforts must "tell the story" of the institution in a compelling manner and provide information to the market around the innovations, special programs, positive climate, and academic outcomes of the students.

Education institutions must conduct survey research of families and the general education market to determine what families are looking for in an education experience, including virtual options. This research helps institutions gain a deep understanding of the families and students that attend the institution as well as obtain research data on the current wants and needs of potential students. This research should also attempt to determine what future education methods and programs may be demanded by the market. Effective communication with families is an important aspect of a well-designed marketing program. Frequent and

timely communication with families will greatly improve the ability of institutions to attract students, keep them in the enrollment funnel, and continue to gather valuable data with regards to continual improvement to meet family needs — thereby enhancing student retention.

Customer Service: Educators historically have not considered themselves to be in the customer service business. However, today's competitive education market interactions with families are not dissimilar to those in a commercial setting. A delightful customer service experience provides a powerful incentive to attract and retain families, students, faculty, and staff. Institutions must instill an ethos of customer service across all stakeholders groups in the organization, effectively incorporating positive personal interactions and frequent and timely communications. These interactions permeate every aspect of the institution and even how teachers interact with students in the classroom. One could argue the customer service ethos even extends to how teachers individualize instruction in the classroom to meet the needs of students.

Delighting families with a focus on customer service also extends to the digital realm. Providing families with easy-to-use software systems for enrollment and other processes fosters this feeling of delight. The most critical understanding that educators must develop is the fact that families are consumers. They evaluate and judge their education options just as a consumer might evaluate any product. If families are provided rude interactions, inaccurate or untimely information, inefficiencies, and bureaucratic red-tape, they may seek institutions that provide friendly, helpful, and efficient interactions and services. Families will factor in the quality of their interactions with the institution in making education placement decisions, which has direct impacts on enrollment numbers and the overall financial sustainability of the institution.

Finally, the creation of a customer service environment will help institutions attract and retain teachers, which is a critical problem in many circles. When all stakeholders of an institution have a mentality of trying their best to meet the needs of others, a more positive climate is developed. When staff and school leaders treat each other from a customer service perspective, this directly impacts job satisfaction and gives a perception of a positive work environment. The SEM strategy must clearly involve the development of customer service methods through specific staff training.



Climate and Culture: The creation of a positive school climate and culture is fundamental to attracting and retaining students and faculty. Families seek out institutions that provide safe and caring classrooms with a focus on student support and positive relationships. Research shows that schools that have clearly articulated expectations, consistent discipline responses, systematic positive reinforcement of behaviors, and proactive, corrective feedback engender a positive school climate and culture. These factors help create a predictable and safe environment for students, and therefore, students will enjoy their classrooms. Schools that have high rates of discipline issues and suspensions are schools that have a poor climate and culture. Families with students in these environments will seek out schools with low rates of discipline issues and positive approaches to helping students learn and exhibit appropriate behaviors. Studies also show that teachers are more likely to remain in the profession if they are in schools with positive behavior support systems in place.

Additionally, teachers in positive climates with a focus on educator coaching, professional development, and principal support, as opposed to an evaluation focus, will develop collective teacher efficacy and be more likely to remain in the profession.

Operations: Improving the operations of an institution can provide a number of benefits, such as reduced operating costs, improved efficiency, positive work environments, and positive experiences for families and students. SEM strategic planning must involve a detailed analysis of all operational systems to achieve these improvements. The strategic planning process should also include an analysis of the efficacy of current software systems and any potential gaps that may exist.

As articulated here, SEM is complex, and specially designed software systems are available to improve efficiency and accuracy in enrollment processes and decision-making (e.g., universal online forms, lotteries). Additionally, software systems can greatly improve equity and access for all families by effectively informing families of their options at your institution and notifying families of decisions. Finally, enrollment software systems can provide a toolset to help institutions market to potential families.

Instruction: Families make enrollment decisions often based upon the actual or perceived academic performance at an institution. An important factor in creating high-performing institutions with positive student outcomes is the delivery of high quality academic and behavioral instruction in schools and classrooms. To achieve these outcomes, educators require continual improvement in their knowledge and skills around myriad education best practices. This component of SEM also includes continued innovation in learning strategies, differentiation, learning tools and software, teacher support/coaching, and personalized professional development. Another important aspect of the instruction solution domain centers around having innovative and special programs. Innovation and effective programs/services are the cornerstones of improving academic achievement, as well as behavioral and social-emotional outcomes for all students. Innovations should manifest in general program development and systems, such as providing the best practices of effective instruction to students, but also in creating specialized programs and magnet schools that are being sought by the education marketplace (e.g., STEAM, dual-language programs).

Other Considerations: Institutions should create a data-based culture and install systems to support data analyses and improvement monitoring. Data-driven decision-making is often talked about in education but, unfortunately, is not always put into practice in the strategic planning process. Many education leaders make strategic decisions based on personal experience or what they believe is best practice rather than relying dispassionately on what the data and research indicate. Data-driven systems overlay all aspects of the SEM strategic planning, such as innovations, student performance, program development, enrollment trends, teacher retention, and market analyses. Another important area to consider in SEM planning is the establishment of external partnerships to help achieve goals and objectives. When we think about attracting and retaining students, it is important to consider the involvement of entities outside our education institution. The SEM planning should examine which external partners could enhance the education experiences of students, provide greater community exposure, provide additional revenue streams, and generally advocate for the institution.



The SEM strategic planning process outlined above can provide institutions the roadmap to achieve the performance goals for students and staff all while attracting and retaining students and their associated revenue. The implementation of solution domains described above can create significant institutional impacts in a number of areas:

Positive Enrollment Trend: The essence of a positive enrollment trend in SEM is to attract new students and retain existing students, thereby creating a sustainable financial future. Declining enrollment leads to less revenue, but costs don't decline concomitantly. If revenue per pupil is variable and costs are fixed, planning is difficult. When 85% of costs are in people and the balance around operations, declining revenue leads to multiple inefficiencies that undermine the quality of service to students. Integrated strategic planning in the SEM model is the key to establishing a positive enrollment trend. A combination of knowledge, processes, and skills provided through professional services and consultation around marketing and customer service augmented by smart software systems aimed at addressing the drivers of family enrollment decisions (such as effective instruction, education innovations, special programs, and positive school climate) will set an institution on a pathway to a positive enrollment trend and financial sustainability.

Financial Stability: Public schools are funded in large part according to their enrollment, accounting for \$12,000 to \$20,000 per student. Families have more education choices in K-12. COVID-19 and other challenges have negatively impacted enrollment and therefore school funding. Stabilizing and increasing enrollment provides for a sustainable financial foundation for the institution to meet the needs of all students. SEM will help create a positive enrollment trend to drive financial stability by retaining current students and attracting new students. Families will learn to value the positive attributes of the institution in the domains of instruction, climate, innovation, customer service, and reputation and will be attracted to the institution. Improved and efficient operations will also reduce a variety of costs. Improved educator support and professional development will reduce the costs associated with teacher attrition and attracting new teachers to the institution.

Operational Efficiency: Education institutions are always looking for ways to improve their processes and accuracy, save time, and generally be more effective. Achieving improved efficiency is essential for improving the financial position of education institutions. Improving efficiencies, such as moving to online systems and providing tools to efficiently work with families, are essential. Software solutions can be used to improve the accuracy and efficiency

of student enrollment, program application, placement processes, family communications, teacher development, and related data management and analysis capabilities. These solutions save significant staff time and other material resources and provide an improved experience for staff and families.

Student Success: The SEM processes can help maximize the complex interaction of instructional best practices, positive behavioral environments, positive school climate, and teacher support and growth to deliver a trend of improving student success in both academic and social-emotional domains. As noted, delivering a comprehensive and effective learning experience requires the significant financial resources provided by positive enrollment trends. Education institutions that have stable or growing enrollments will have more resources to innovate around best education practices, provide job-embedded professional development, create special programs in addition to safe and caring environments, deliver great customer service, and retain great teachers.

Culture of Innovation: Surveys show that many families look to enroll their children in institutions that provide an innovative education experience. The SEM process seeks to instill an innovation mindset across all departments of the institution to develop and promote the newest, most effective ideas designed to enhance the attractiveness of the institution to families. These innovations can take the form of cutting-edge instructional methodologies, special technologies, flexible scheduling, or unique experiences (i.e., mentorships). Innovative education cultures that leverage teacher involvement and crowd-sourcing also engender enhanced teacher efficacy, particularly when systems are designed for inputs and feedback from all stakeholders.

Special Programs: Families are attracted to innovative institutions in general, but many families also seek out a variety of specific special programs (i.e., STEM, dual-language immersion, career pathway) to meet their children's unique education needs and goals. Districts that do not adapt to the market forces seeking these special programs will experience declining enrollments. The SEM process will help institutions analyze data about the desires of families for special programs and will help promote the programs through marketing channels. The SEM process focuses on future trends in education so institutions can provide the market the desired programs ahead of others. These unique and special programs have the potential to attract students from a wider geographic area and may provide the greatest opportunity to drive increased enrollment. Graduates of these special programs often are influential promoters of the institution in the community and, in this regard, the programs are self-sustaining for attracting new students.



Improved Teacher Retention: The teacher shortage in the nation's K-12 schools is increasingly recognized as a serious problem but is still poorly understood. Studies show that 50% of new teachers leave the profession within five years, and replacing teachers is quite costly for institutions. More importantly, students who are subjected to teacher turnover have significantly lower achievement. Schools' staffing efforts are not only challenged by teachers leaving the profession at high rates but also by the reduced pipeline of new teachers. Studies also show that teachers entering the profession today don't have the same qualifications as their peers in years past. The main reasons teachers leave the profession include low compensation, lack of training and support, and poor working conditions. The implementation of SEM processes can help create a positive environment where teachers receive great mentoring, coaching, administrative support, and professional development, all of which can greatly reduce attrition and turnover. These systems can help teachers thrive and grow professionally, increasing the likelihood they will remain in the profession. In times of declining enrollment, there are fewer resources to provide these supports to teachers, and the prospect of increasing compensation, which is a main driver of teacher attrition, is rather remote. The SEM strategic planning and innovation process also strives to involve all teachers in the process, and this professional involvement is critical to helping teachers stay engaged and in the profession.

Enhanced Education Climate: The creation of a positive school climate and culture is fundamental to attracting and retaining students as well as faculty. Families seek out institutions that provide safe and caring classrooms with a focus on student support and positive relationships. Teachers also seek positive work environments that foster involvement, open communications, and administrative support. The empirical evidence is unequivocal that a positive school climate is essential for maximizing student achievement and social-emotional status. As noted above, SEM strategic planning and the associated components will help create an environment of positive relationships, consistency, customer service, equity, and authentic involvement, which underpin the creation of positive education climates. Not only are positive climates essential for student learning and retention, surveys show that school climate plays a major role in teacher retention.

Equity and Access: Foundational to equity for families and students is that all should have fair and equal access to schools, programs, and critical information to guide decision-making. The SEM process supports improving equity for all families and students through systematic planning, creating programs to meet specific needs, creating positive and

inclusive cultures, and making sure that everyone has access to accurate and timely information. The SEM process provides for a comprehensive analysis of the needs of all families and accounts for cultural needs and differences. In the SEM planning process, resources are allocated through an equity lens, and in doing so, improved outcomes for all students can be achieved, which elevates the status of the district for prospective families. The implementation of specialized enrollment software systems as part of the SEM system can also help ensure equity for families in the enrollment process by providing access to all required information in a timely and accurate fashion, as many higher-risk families today lack the time, resources, and know-how to gather and assimilate all of the needed information about the education opportunities and options for their children. Additionally, districts and schools that run lotteries for limited-access schools or programs can ensure that these lotteries are run in a fair and equitable manner.

Administrative Efficiency: Education institutions are always looking for ways to improve their processes and accuracy, save time, and be more effective in enrollment decision-making. The SEM planning process analyzes ways to improve efficiencies, such as moving from paper and intensive hands-on labor tasks to software systems, online applications, online document storage, and providing multiple ways for district staff to efficiently answer the myriad questions from families. Achieving improved administrative efficiency is essential for improving the financial position of education institutions.

Return on Investment: The implementation of SEM requires an investment in time, talent, software, and consultative services. Institutions faced with serious financial challenges will find it difficult to allocate resources to implement SEM, but the alternative of taking a wait-and-see approach would likely result in an even worse scenario as enrollment continues in a downward spiral. Even institutions that are not currently in dire financial straits must consider taking action before future enrollment declines occur and seek to increase enrollment from current levels. Each student provides an average \$12,650 per year to the general fund of an institution. Over the course of a student's school life, that equates to \$168,000. Although the process of recapturing previous students and attracting new students requires an investment of time and fiscal resources, it is generally the case that each dollar spent will return significantly more than a dollar in recurring revenue as student enrollment increases. This is particularly true when considering the lifetime value of each student. Recall the example district noted above that could realize a 110-times return on investment over a 10-year period.

Taken together, the tenets of a comprehensive SEM system can help institutions increase student enrollment. The financial stability achieved through increased enrollment will drive innovations in teaching and learning within the institution and improve school climates, which will result in improved academic and social-emotional outcomes for all students.



Figure 3 visually represents the components and impacts of a comprehensive strategic enrollment management system. Family enrollment decision drivers are addressed through the strategic planning process using data-based decision-making. The strategic planning process seeks to build tactics, goals, and objectives within five solutions domains that directly impact family decisions about enrollment. The software, services, and professional consultation provided by SchoolMint aligned to each solution domain are articulated, and the expected institutional impacts are outlined.

Strategic Enrollment Management for K-12 Helping Districts Attract, Enroll, and Retain Students, Families, and Teachers

Figure 3

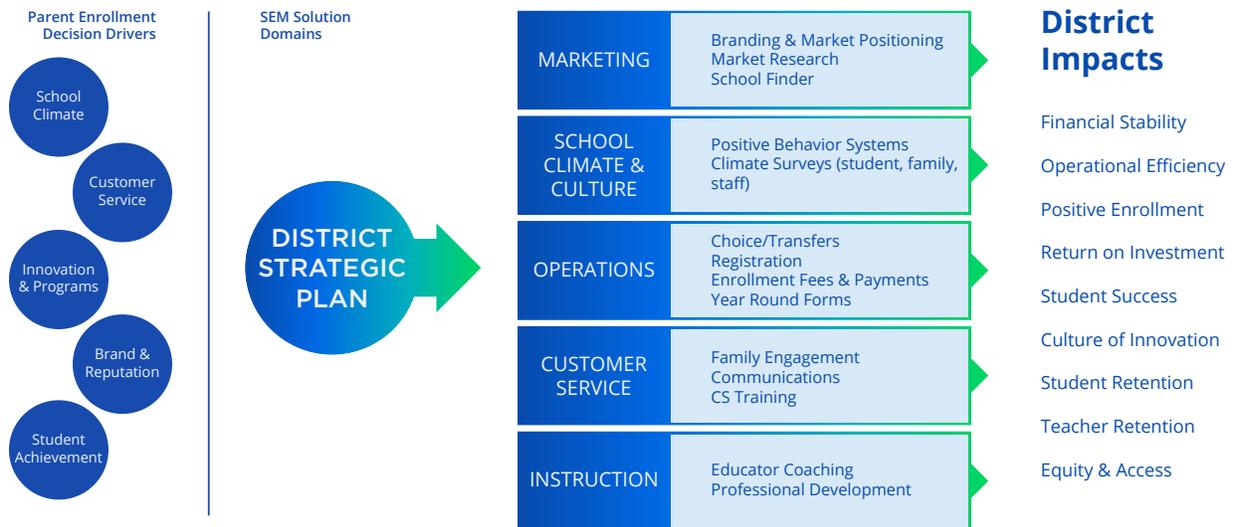
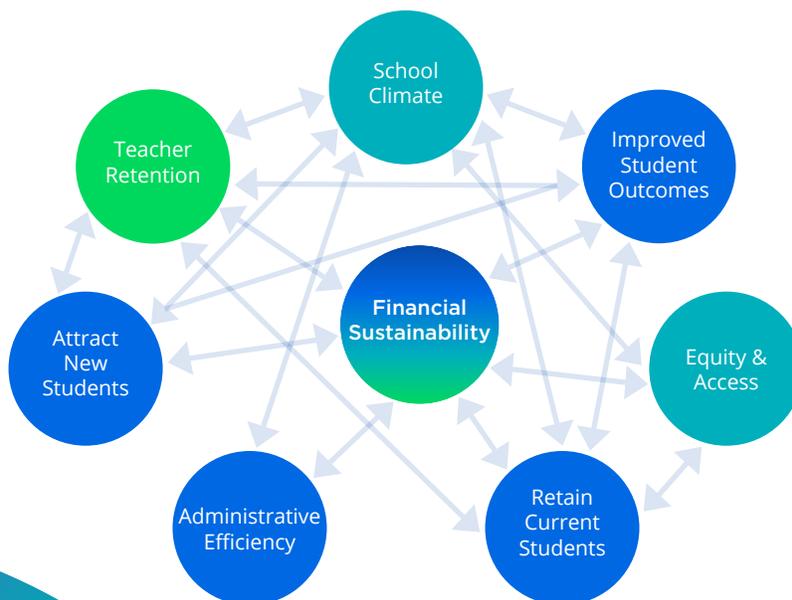


Figure 4 articulates the multiple interactions the institutional impacts have upon each other. Integral to the SEM model approach, financial sustainability is at the center of the interaction matrix. Clearly, the relationship among these factors are complex, bi-directional, and non-linear as each institutional impact reverberates multiple influences throughout the system. In simple terms, influencing one area (e.g., school climate) can impact many other outcomes.

SEM in K-12 Impact Interaction Analysis

Figure 4





Planning a Comprehensive Strategic Enrollment Management System

Strategic enrollment management (SEM) is an institution-wide responsibility and should be a central focus of the institution's overall strategic planning process. Just like overall strategic planning, SEM planning starts with the institution's focus on how to meet the needs of students to ensure their success while addressing all aspects of the institution's mission. In this regard, SEM planning approaches must be linked to the academic context and culture of the institution. Given that SEM should be an institution-wide responsibility and rooted in the academics and culture of the institution, SEM becomes a critical focus of school and district planning. Therefore, SEM is the responsibility of everyone, especially the teachers, to ensure the intended outcomes. It is all about how the institution is organized to achieve the SEM vision, goals, and objectives.

There are a significant number of theories about strategic planning, but no one model fits all situations. Each organization is different, and the planning model used must be tailored to fit the specific education environment. All planning models are sequential and linear in process and have numerous components in common: mission, vision, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, goals, and objectives. There is typically a continuous improvement and evaluation loop indicating an iterative process.

The first step in building a comprehensive SEM system is to begin with leadership, teaming, and building a culture of SEM. Leadership is what moves high-performing organizations in a common direction. Change leaders must align the vision for change with the intrinsic values and beliefs that instill passion and a sense of pride among school or district stakeholders. Also critical is the need for change leaders to build constructive relationships to influence others in achieving a common vision for change. There are a variety of change models in the literature, but many are based upon the leadership and research of John Kotter. In his 1995 book, *Leading Change*, Kotter introduced the following eight-step change-management process:

1. Establish a sense of urgency
2. Form a powerful coalition
3. Create a vision for change
4. Communicate the vision
5. Remove obstacles
6. Create short-term wins
7. Build on change
8. Anchor the changes in institutional culture

Building awareness, urgency, and the understanding for the need for change are necessary but insufficient conditions to affect major culture and operational change. Fostering a broad focus of a SEM culture based upon the academic outcomes for students necessitates more than the formulation of a SEM committee with representation from the teachers and academic division leaders. Building the basic state of readiness for change and the ability and willingness of individuals to consider and embrace change, leaders must answer a very basic yet essential question that is likely to arise from each stakeholder group: "What's in it for me?"

For example, imagine a school or district for which there is a goal to increase enrollment. From a teacher viewpoint, this could equate to larger class sizes, more papers to grade, expectations for improved efficiencies in the work performed, doing more with fewer resources, or less time for planning. Why would teachers be motivated and buy into a change agenda that could have such potential negative impacts?



In the shift to a SEM culture, leaders must demonstrate in tangible terms the commitment the institution is willing to make in building the capacity to support the people delivering on the efforts. Positive support in the change process can be shown by engaging staff and stakeholders in SEM planning and by linking resources and budgeting to the planning process. Additionally, leaders must remove constraints that impede the successful discharge of strategies in the schools. They can do this by using incentives and reward systems that align with staff passions and by holding everyone accountable for results with both positive and negative consequences — all of which requires audacious leadership.

Based upon the research in SEM, the following practical strategies for cultivating a SEM culture within the academic context have been elucidated by leaders in the field:

- 1. Cultivate a SEM Culture of Collaboration:** Within an institutional context, this involves a shift to a collaborative approach to governance and rewarding performance on the strength of group achievements. This will help build family and student loyalty and an affinity through every interaction inside and outside the classroom.
- 2. Be Driven by Research and Data:** Use research data as the dispassionate arbiter of truth. Create a “culture of evidence” in the decision-making process. Research and data serve to build the common understanding of the underlying changes for SEM. Compare the vision to the current reality, and focus on the critical performance gaps that will realize the greatest return on investment and achieve the stated goals and targets.
- 3. Inspire an Institution-Wide Focus on the Student Experience:** Cultivate family and student relationships from the initial point of contact throughout the student life cycle (which will be described later in this white paper). SEM, as noted earlier, is an essential aspect of the academic process and student outcomes. The student experience is also critical, and recruitment and retention efforts will be greatly enhanced if schools and districts provide a diverse array of extracurriculars and activities that are highly attractive to students and families. SEM within the education context focuses all institutional resources on student learning and social-emotional development.
- 4. Actively Engage All Stakeholders:** Counselors, mental health professionals, special educators, and related service providers, academic department heads, and district-level curriculum leaders should be included in SEM planning, decision-making, and discussions of changes. The central focus on the array of student outcomes helps to buttress enrollment management efforts on improving all aspects of the student experience for students with diverse and special needs in and out of the classroom. The active engagement of these professionals in SEM planning is essential.
- 5. Incentivize Change:** Set high expectations for all staff and stakeholders to drive a SEM agenda. Promote all successes and link incentives and consequences for staff based on the achievement of SEM goals and objectives. Additionally, share best practices to recognize and build on existing institutional strengths. Be aware that success can lead to complacency over time, so always focus on the next improvement goals in your process.
- 6. Visibly Lead the Charge:** All leaders in the school and/or district must be visible, actively engaged, supportive toward the goals of SEM, and highly collaborative.





Strategic Enrollment Management Planning Process

Stage 1: Plan to Plan

Institutional Support for Planning: It is up to the superintendent (or similar role) to be the initiator and leader of the strategic enrollment management planning process. This is vital to the success of the process. What is often overlooked in the literature on planning is that the planning process has to be ardently supported by the other members of the senior administration as well. The assistant superintendents, directors, and principals have to be as firmly committed as the superintendent or else this weak link will cause the process to fail.

Form Planning Committee: In order for the SEM planning process and the resulting action to be effective, broad school and district involvement is vital as opposed to a top-down or bottom-up process. It is critical that SEM planning committee be formed and that it be comprised of individuals from all segments of the school or district. It is also a good idea to have a senior teacher or a union leader who is widely respected to co-chair the committee so that all voices are heard. It is further recommended that members of external constituent groups be included on the SEM planning committee. External members may be in a position to provide resources and support for the goals, and they will bring significant input to the process and will more than likely bring different perspectives.

Design Planning Process: The SEM committee needs to lay out the process and communicate it to all school and district employees. This is the point where the institution gets its first input from stakeholders, through open forums or town meetings, where the initial draft is presented and attendees are given the opportunity to ask questions, make comments, and offer suggestions.

Set Timeframes: This is where the process becomes operationalized as responsibilities are assigned, goals for the process are set, and timeframes for meeting the goals are established. Setting goals, timeframes, and specific responsibilities for the planning process keeps the process on track, creates a sense of ownership, and lets the broader institution know what to expect and when.

Commit Resources to Process: The leadership now needs to commit the resources necessary to make the process work. There should be a significant resource commitment around time and talent. This resource commitment should also include staff support, such as clerical and research and data analysis functions. Without this support, the planning process cannot function, and a clear message is sent regarding the lack of priority given to strategic enrollment management planning.

Stage 2: Institutional Framework

Formal Requirements: These are the legal constraints within which the institution must function and include the following questions:

- What are the must-haves which have significant impact on the institution and can dramatically influence SEM planning?
- Are there specific legislative restrictions or requirements that schools or districts must address?
- What laws apply, and what must the institution do when it applies for and/or receives government funds?
- What control does the state and/or governing board have over the future direction of the institution?

It is important for the SEM planning committee to be familiar with these requirements because they shape part of the environment in which the institution must operate.

Informal Expectations: What are the social and cultural expectations placed on the institution from all stakeholder groups in the community? This can range from expected services to provide the community to how schools manage visitors and inquiries from prospective families. These types of expectations, while not legally binding, have a significant impact on an institution.

Philosophical Underpinnings: People make decisions about utilizing a philosophical framework often on an unconscious basis based upon a set of core beliefs and values. It is important that there is congruence between each person's beliefs relative to SEM and the stated SEM mission statement of the planning committee. SEM organizational beliefs will change over time, and the "collective consciousness" of the institution may remain static, which can lead to confusion among stakeholders. Therefore, a clear understanding of the institution's core beliefs and values will lead to consistency and wider support.



Mission Statement: It is at this point that a draft of the mission statement needs to be created. It is assumed an existing mission statement is in place so the committee may elect to use the existing institutional mission statement or it may decide to draft an SEM mission statement. It is first important to determine if the current mission statement is still appropriate. If yes, move on to the next step. If not, determine how the mission statement should change based upon an open discussion. As noted earlier, recall that SEM flows from the institutional mission.

Stage 3: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT)

The analysis here should take the perspective that SEM is part of the entire education process and is reflected in student outcomes. There are various sources of institutional information which focus on identifying strengths and weaknesses, such as student achievement metrics, attendance data, enrollment trends, discipline data, school climate data, special program inventory, etc.

Institutional Strengths: Comprehensive internal program reviews can be useful, where the collective wisdom of a range of people in the schools is leveraged. Also, the use of opinion surveys across all stakeholder groups can provide insights into strengths. People working in the schools and classroom will have enormous insights into your strengths. The point is to leverage the institutional strengths as part of the SEM plan so you can promote the positive aspects of your institution in your marketing and outreach efforts.

Institutional Weaknesses: Similar to the analysis of strengths, surveys and program reviews can provide insights into areas needing improvement. Relative to enrollment status, it is important to survey families to understand why they are making decisions to avail themselves of other education options. Critically, there must be an analysis of why certain enrollment trends are occurring. Leaders must also include an analysis of customer service to families, climate, marketing efforts, administrative efficiency, and financial stability. Finally, it will be important to take inventory of the technology and software systems currently in use to support robust SEM initiatives.

Note: Here the focus shifts to understanding external emerging trends and projecting them into the future to shape your planning. This is known as environmental scanning. It provides a method to identify and monitor what is happening in the external environment that will impact your SEM goals so that institutions can adjust strategies accordingly.

External Opportunities: Relative to and compared to other education options in your sphere, in what areas is your institution providing better programs and services? What are the characteristics and qualities of your institution that you can leverage to “tell your story” to current and prospective families? Does your environmental scan project gaps in programs and services that your institution could fulfill in the future?

External Threats: Relative to and compared to other education options in your sphere, in what areas is your institution providing lesser programs and services? Given an analysis of the future, what threats must you prepare for today? Other external threats may also include legislation and funding streams.

Stage 4: Strategic Vision

Vision Statement: Developing a vision statement is a rather straightforward brainstorming activity guided, but not mandated, by the superintendent’s view of the future. It requires that all members participate and allow creative and divergent thinking to occur. Initially, the team should review and reaffirm the results of the fore-going steps in the strategic planning process to keep that information fresh and relevant for developing the vision. Once this review is completed, ask yourself some questions, such as, “What is it we want to achieve or create?” or “What is the central purpose of the institution?” The question posed is not as important as the discussion that follows.

Establish Agreement on Vision: The committee needs to establish agreement on the vision and part of that process is to review prior work to ensure the vision is realistic and congruent. The vision must be realistic or the stakeholders will never accept it. If incongruencies are surfaced among organizational goals, the mission statement, SWOT analysis, and the vision, the team should review the process and work through each step until the team can endorse. These incongruencies may become apparent as the process develops and as new insights come to light.



Stage 5: Consensus Building

Set Strategic Goals: There are a variety of models around goal setting (i.e., SMART goals) but the most straightforward way to proceed is to start a brainstorming process with questions around the data from your SWOT analysis, such as, “What major initiatives must the institution address in order to achieve the vision?” or “What internal weaknesses should we address?” Of course, when brainstorming, no suggestion is left out nor are there any limitations on input. As the process unfolds, the participants should group similar suggestions together and start developing categories within the SWOT framework. Once all the suggestions are determined, review the categories for completeness. Start with one category, and refine the suggestions into quite general goal statements.

Share the Plan Across Stakeholder Groups: Determine the method of delivery for each group. This might include a town hall meeting or a comprehensive document. Part of this process would be a plan for soliciting feedback for the committee.

Make Appropriate Modifications: As the plan is shared, collected feedback should be reviewed by the committee, and warranted changes should be made. Failure to do this will send a message to stakeholders that their input was ceremonial only.

Establish Agreement on Goals: Once all suggestions have been written as goals, collapsed into broader goal statements, and incorporated, the committee needs to proceed through the goal statements, one at a time, until consensus is reached on each.

Stage 6: Operational Plan

Operational Plan for Each Strategic Goal: This stage involves developing action plans and tying the overall SEM plan to the institutional strategic plan, addressing institutional budgeting, decision-making, policy development, and key performance indicators. Each goal then has to be assigned to one or more individuals who will oversee the development of the operational plan to achieve it. This provides ownership as well as a certain level of accountability and sends a clear message that the overall strategic plan has priority.

Establish Specific Objectives: For each SEM goal, there will be one or more specific objectives. Performance indicators around objective attainment should focus on using specific phraseology, such as, “The institution will...” and measurable outcomes, such as, “will increase X from Y to Z over the next year.” The development of performance indicators should be determined relative to the baseline data, if available.

Establish Specific Strategies: Each objective will have one or more specific strategies that will be developed and implemented to achieve the goals. This is the “how” of achieving the objective and in turn the broad goals. Consider that a series of goals are often shorter term steps to achieve the broad goals. The planning document must outline the actions and activities that will be undertaken toward objective attainment. The planning document should outline who will deliver the strategy, under what conditions, and timelines.

Establish Target Metrics: Determine the data sources and how data will be collected and analyzed to determine progress toward objectives. Data must be reliable and valid for decision-making purposes in addition to being accessible and meaningful.

Determine Assessment and Continuous Monitoring: Determine the short-term progress review dates and processes. If progress to the stated goal is below criteria, the team should initiate measures to increase the effectiveness of the strategies or implement new strategies.



Creating a Student Retention Culture

School climate and culture hold immense power for any institution to impact student academic performance, family decisions, and student enrollment. There are two primary domains that require attention when creating a retention culture:

1. Student performance and outcomes
2. Customer service

First, a retention culture is one that views the needs of the “whole child” from a developmental perspective in terms of their academic, intellectual, social, behavioral, emotional, and physical needs. Another important aspect of this retention culture related to the whole child is a strong focus on equity. Each student requires their own level of support to achieve their potential. Some students will require more or less than others. Therefore, schools and districts must have available systems of interventions and programs to meet the unique needs of all students across the developmental spectrum.

Second, a retention culture has a systematic focus on customer service for all employees of the institution and is based on providing a delightful customer service experience to all families and students. The retention culture understands that families and students are customers. Their happiness and satisfaction with all aspects of their education experience bears directly on the financial sustainability of the organization.

When institutions provide this type of positive climate, “whole child” support, and customer service, there is a significantly higher probability that families will choose to remain at the institution and not seek alternatives. Furthermore, highly satisfied families are likely to promote your institution positively to others.

How do education leaders go about instilling this mindset of a retention culture across the organization?

While it is true that student retention is necessary to secure the institution’s financial health or reputation, it will often not resonate with classroom teachers. Most educators understand that declining enrollment can result in fewer class sections, teacher layoffs, and concomitant larger class sizes, but that knowledge may not motivate action or changes in behavior. Alternatively, if the institution is experiencing increasing enrollment, it is necessary to promote the positive aspects to staff and how it will make their professional lives better. To engender the shift in the culture to one that is retention-focused, you must demonstrate how the institution will reward the personal investments of time and effort to achieve retention and SEM goals. As for staff, they are motivated by recognition from their colleagues, supervisors, and institutional leaders. The type and value of rewards will vary across schools, but your SEM leadership team should make this one of their strategies developed through the planning process.





Strategies for Improving Student Retention Through Student Performance

Here are 10 strategies to improve student retention through enhanced school climate, meeting the individual needs of all students, and general academic achievement gains. These strategies do not operate in isolation. They are interactional. For example, positive climates are created by managing positive classroom behavior, igniting passions, and fostering a sense of belonging. Recall that at the heart of a retention culture is an ethos of trying to meet each student's individual needs.

1. Praise Individual Effort Rather Than Performance

Based on the psychological research around attribution theory and mindsets, student reinforcement should be focused on the effort rather than the performance. Relatedly, with growth and improvement being the goal, failure should be viewed as an expected part of the learning process. Punitive grading practices that are based on using curves and averaging scores across the learning attempts rather than mastery serve to devalue effort-based progressive learning.

2. Reinforce Attendance

Student attendance is a major challenge for schools. The reasons as to why students fail to attend are many and beyond the scope of this white paper. If students have poor attendance, that is a warning sign that school is an aversive place. It may also be a warning sign to that student choosing another education option. Two powerful tools at schools' disposal within a SEM lens are creating a positive learning climate and building positive relationships with staff and other students.

3. Positive Classroom Behavior

Students and families will seek other education options if schools and classrooms have a lack of behavioral management or if discipline is administered inequitably. Implementation of positive behavioral supports (PBIS) provides a science-to-practice approach to delivering positive behavior in the classroom. It begins with setting clear expectations, acknowledging positive behavior with reinforcement systems, and providing behaviorally specific feedback. In many cases, students need to be taught appropriate behaviors (i.e., dealing with conflict). There are SEL and social skill programs available for that purpose.

4. Provide Academic Feedback

From a SEM perspective, families will make alternative education choices based on the performance of the overall student body and their own student(s). Feedback is one of the most important tools in the learning process, and students require frequent, early feedback to maximize mastery. Additionally, academic work should be within a student's zone of proximal development. In simple terms, their work should not be too easy or too hard. Paired with feedback are positive cognitive statements about how effort is most important and that failure is part of the learning process.

5. Multiple Opportunities to Practice

A corollary of feedback is the notion that students require many chances to practice new learnings and should not be held unduly accountable for grading in the early stages of learning. When teachers use averaging methods, students are punished for lower performance in the early learning stages. This causes a precipitous drop in motivation. Practice opportunities should be distributed over time for great retention of knowledge rather than mass practice at one point in time. Aversive, inequitable, and punitive grading practices can lead to student attrition and declining enrollment.

6. Leverage Mentors

The human relationship factor is one of the most powerful variables in student retention. Research has demonstrated the consistent impact of student mentoring on student achievement and on the reduction of dropout rates. At your institution, mentors are not defined by organization position or job descriptions. They can be superintendents, faculty, advisors, custodial staff, administrative staff, other students, and alumni — anyone willing to invest time and effort caring about a student. Impactful mentoring manifests through a meaningful relationship grounded in mutual trust as mentors invest themselves in building trusting, supportive relationships. Students and families who are involved in highly supportive relationships are unlikely to leave for another education institution.



7. Connect Students with Others in Academic and Social Settings

Vincent Tinto authored a book, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. It describes how the academic and social relationships build upon one another to create a social milieu that directly impacts student retention. The notion is that students need personal connections inside and outside the classroom to create an environment that is positive and satisfying. Unfortunately, the students who need these connections most often fail to seek them out. However, institutions with a retention culture can work to reach these students by creating opportunities for meaningful relationships through an array of curricular programs and extracurriculars. These relationships cause a student to develop a deeper connection with the institution and reduce the likelihood of them departing.

8. Ignite Their Learning Passions

Every student is more motivated to learn if they are learning about something for which they are passionate. The institution should strive to understand the passions of their students and develop programs and learning opportunities aligned with those passions. As part of the process, it is vitally important to put students at the center of their own learning. You can provide them opportunities for autonomy in choosing their learning pathways and how to demonstrate mastery.

9. Foster a Sense of Belonging

Related to students connecting with others in meaningful ways is the notion of belongingness, which lies at the heart of human motivation and engagement. Humans have an innate desire to fit in and be accepted. It is imperative for the institution to create an environment that is welcoming and accepting with particular attention to under-represented student groups. Retention-oriented organizations actively pursue opportunities to promote a sense of belonging with every encounter they have with the students they serve. This helps them feel part of something larger than themselves.

10. Adapt to the Changing Learning Needs of Students

As noted earlier, families often seek out alternative education options when their current school fails to provide for the learning needs of their students. Institutions must, as part of their environmental scan, project what types of programs and services will be attractive to existing families. Relatedly, many enrollment decisions are made based upon opportunities to enroll in special programs, such as STEM/STEAM, so institutional leaders must continue to innovate and adapt. Static education environments which maintain the status quo will atrophy and perhaps face declining enrollments, while the innovators will be highly attractive to families.





Strategies for Improving Student Retention Through Customer Service

The notion of educators being in the customer service business is quite foreign to most. In reality, many of the interactions with families are comparable to working with commercial customers. Of course, there are differences, the primary one being that schools must develop deeply personal relationships with students and families. This is not the case in the commercial realm, where the customer service provided is superficial and transactional. The most crucial understanding that educators must develop is that families are consumers and are evaluating their education options just as a consumer might evaluate a new flat-screen television. If families are provided with rude interactions, lack of information, inefficiencies, and bureaucratic red-tape, there is a high probability they may seek institutions that provide friendly, helpful, and efficient interactions and services. In this regard, families will factor in the quality of their interactions with the institution in making education placement decisions, which has direct impacts on enrollment numbers and the financial sustainability of the institution.

Here are six suggestions for providing high-impact customer service in schools.

1. Be Digitally Efficient

Families today expect all organizations, including education institutions, to be efficient, streamlined, and have delightful experiences with digital and online interactions. Today's consumers expect easy-to-navigate websites, self-service options, and quality digital tools. For example, families don't expect to repeatedly fill out paper forms when digital tools are much more efficient. Families should also not have to repeatedly enter the same data. Customers don't like to be burdened to contact you for items that could easily be provided on a self-service basis. Families don't want to wade through organizational silos trying to find the right time, place, and person to accomplish a task. Education leaders should evaluate their processes from the perspective of a prospective family to identify and rectify any potential pain points.

2. Over-Deliver

Great customer service must be delivered on date and on time. For example, if families expect grade reports on a certain date, they must not be delayed. Today's families are used to speedy responses, such as those provided by Amazon and Uber. Looking to great companies outside of education for inspiration will improve your performance at school in terms of quality, efficiency, and service style.

3. Apologizing is Good

In the process of interacting with customers, things will go wrong from time to time. Given this expectation, systematically prepare for this emotionally as well as operationally. Apologies serve to repair broken relationships and let the family know that you care and they are important. It also sends the message that you are the type of person who is working to improve and puts the customer first. Apologies are important and of high value, even if you are apologizing for a situation you did not cause. The bottom line is that positive relationships are essential in retaining families and students.

4. Get the Little Things Right

Hellos and goodbyes are key moments in customer service. Train all staff to provide authentic, warm greetings and goodbyes by helping them understand the impacts of non-verbal communications, such as eye contact and voice tone. Also pay attention to the "pre-service" contacts, such as parking lot signage, office hours postings, cleanliness of the building, etc.

5. Smooth Hand-Offs

In any large organization, a customer will begin an interaction with someone who is not well-suited to address their question or need. A helpful and smooth handoff is critical in maintaining great customer service. The handoff should point the customer to the right person or place and instill accurate expectations in the customer. The details of the customer's needs must be accurately conveyed to the person who was handed the customer. You may not be the person to fulfill a customer's needs, but you can contribute by following through to ensure they are satisfied.

6. Come from a Place of "Yes"

Customer service-centric organizations approach every customer question from the perspective that the answer is yes and it is just a matter of how to get there. Too often, organizations are comfortable saying "no," "that it is not my department," "we have never done that before," or similar. Many institutions have people who have become domain masters within their province and exercise absolute power when possible. It is incredibly important to modify their mindsets to start with "Yes!"



Strategic Enrollment Management and Marketing

Strategic enrollment efforts and marketing share an interdependent association to drive institutional or brand awareness and the overall vision of the institution. It is a simple fact that to attract and retain students, institutions must “tell their story” in an effective and compelling manner using marketing best practices. To this end, many K-12 institutions across the country engage in marketing efforts to attract families and students to their institution and to control the narrative of their schools.

Although it is rapidly changing, many education leaders fail to understand the need to have a savvy marketing approach in the current competitive education landscape. All too often, the marketing efforts are not tightly aligned with the organization’s overall vision, and they fail to analyze the efficacy of the marketing efforts. This situation can be counterproductive. Indeed, the negative outcomes of this misalignment include a non-descript or negative institutional image in the community, failure to meet enrollment targets, declining financial sustainability, administrative inefficiencies, poor communication with the market, and general internal confusion. Any institution operating under these conditions will not fully optimize their enrollment potential.

Institutional Branding

The institutional brand refers to the global perception of what people think of and expect from your institution. Institutional branding has as its primary objective to create a brand that is positive, attractive, and compelling. Institutions without clear branding can suffer from being non-distinct at best, or at worst being viewed negatively by the public. In the education space, there are a variety of uncontrolled informational sources that drive your institution’s brand such as word of mouth and websites (i.e., Niche). The problem is this information is unvetted and often inaccurate. Marketing efforts put the institution in control of the narrative and provide accurate information to be consumed by current and prospective families. There are five domains that must be developed to effectively build and market an institutional brand:

- **Understanding the needs of families**
- **Segmentation of the K-12 market**
- **Identifying the institutional brand attributes**
- **Positioning the brand effectively among competitors**
- **Communicating the quintessence of the brand relevant to all market segments**

The initial process begins with establishing your institution’s brand through a deep analysis of your current and prospective students’ learning and developmental needs. Using surveys, interviews, focus groups, and a review of available student performance data, institutional leaders can determine the needs of their students. This will shape how they approach marketing efforts according to what the market is seeking. The data analytics should help the team address questions, such as:

- **What are the learning and development needs of our students?**
- **Who do we serve?**
- **What are the education goals of our students?**
- **How can we best meet the needs and desires of our students?**

This process provides the information to construct a value proposition of the institution for current and prospective students along five dimensions:

- **Basic learning and developmental needs for current students**
- **Differentiators from competitors for prospective students**
- **Relevant education programs and personalized experiences**
- **Positive and reliable customer service**
- **Positive personal relationships**





There are a number of different ways to conceptualize and position the institutional brand through marketing-based comparative analysis with competitor institutions. These are the four most common positions for K-12 institutions:

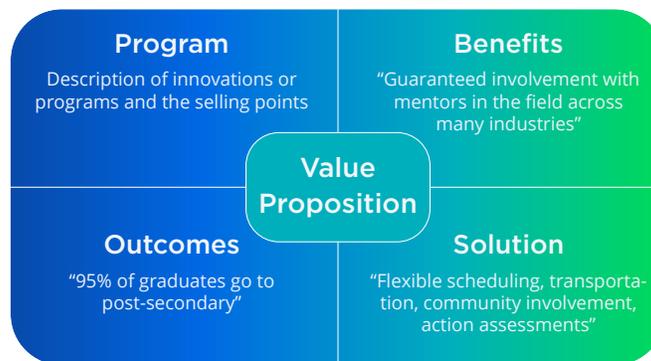
- **Outcomes:** Focuses on telling the story of long-term performance outcomes for students as a result of attending the institution. Comparisons to competitors might be based upon colleges attended, awards won, jobs obtained, field experiences, and alumni satisfaction rates.
- **Status:** This position touts the academic prestige, academic rigor, quality of teachers, and quality of programs compared to others.
- **Campus Attributes:** This approach celebrates factors such as campus attractiveness, quality of facilities, safety, extracurricular activities, and the social and recreational environment. In the current environment, medical safety is of paramount importance to some families.
- **Supportive:** This position emphasizes that the institution is student-centered, provides personalized instruction, has small class sizes, has a positive climate, and students are physically safe from bullying.

When the institutional position has been identified and the relative position among competitors established, the next task is extolling the strengths and allaying the weaknesses and gaps among other institutions. Keep in mind the differentiators you identify do not need to be unique to your institution. You can capitalize on competitors’ failure to exploit a similar benefit. Your marketing approaches can also combine aspects of the four main positions noted above to create a very distinctive presence. Another method is to highlight how your institution has provided a solution to an identified problem in the community or for a special group of students.

Finally, it is important to repeat your messaging frequently across multiple channels to penetrate the potential enrollment market. The communications must be relevant, focus on the needs of families and students, and be delivered at the proper time in the decision-making process to provoke action. One way to create relevance is to translate the offerings, benefits, and outcomes in a manner that solves a problem for the family and student. This must go beyond just providing a description of an academic program. Figure 5 shows how you can communicate the value proposition to existing and potential families. By describing the benefits, the outcomes, and the solution into a coherent value proposition, families are much more likely to respond to the institution’s messaging and seek more information about enrolling.

Value Proposition Solution Matrix

Figure 5



Using the institution’s brand promise as a lens, define value propositions for new and existing students. These value propositions should be unique to each high-value student population — essentially a version of market segmentation, which will be discussed later. Value propositions are based on your best understanding of family and student needs. They can be translated into relevant, audience-specific communications as well as into strategies as conveyed in the lower portion of the matrix. The overall result of such a process are highly focused, impactful communications and strategies that will yield optimal enrollment outcomes.



Delivering the Brand Promise

A brand promise is, in many respects, an abbreviated mission statement. In this regard, a school's mission statement, vision, and core values should be the foundation for the brand promise. The brand promise states in greater detail what the institution will commit to consistently delivering to families and students. Mission statements rarely change, while brand promises more rapidly evolve. The brand promise should be inspiring and bold yet credible. Some brand promises use words like "quality" and "excellence." Many sound quite similar. To differentiate effectively, claim something profoundly different or even life-changing, and create a sense of passion and excitement. Inject the institution's personality, and expound upon how the institution goes beyond what students and others expect. Finally, the brand promise should set you above and apart from your competitors.

The brand promise is meaningless unless everyone at the institution passionately and consistently demonstrates the tenets of the promise. Although it is possible that some may consciously attempt to undermine the brand promise, more likely people may not be aware of the promise and how to demonstrate it. Most employees are not inherently aware of what behaviors are needed to live the brand promise and generally behave and interact with others based on their personalities. To help faculty and staff make the shift from simply brand awareness to brand champions, leaders must facilitate the change. There are five areas that have been identified to help education leaders create and deliver on the brand promise for their institution.

1. Define the Brand Promise

As alluded to above, the process of defining the brand promise should be consistent with the institution's personality and congruent with institutional behavior. The institutional community must define desired expectations and behaviors associated with the promise. The brand promise should be relevant and meaningful to faculty and staff. Some standards should be established while allowing some individual interpretations and behaviors when demonstrating the brand promise. To aid in universal adoption, work with the various stakeholder groups to define the standards in such a way that it fits with their personalities.

2. Live the Brand Promise

Everyone in the organization is an institutional ambassador in all contexts, such as encounters with students in the classroom, in the office, school events, online, in person, or on the phone. Each experience either enhances or weakens the trust your customers have in your institution. The fact is students, families, alumni, and others you serve will desire a relationship with your institution only if they trust you.

3. Operationally Define the Brand Promise

To operationalize means to clearly define in concrete, observable terms how each person and role in the organization demonstrates the brand promise across a variety of situations and contexts. This includes overt behavior as well as internal attitudes and beliefs. In this regard, the brand promise must be embodied through the myriad interfaces you have with your customers (i.e., families and students). One negative interaction with a current or prospective family can have significant, reverberating impacts on the institution, so if you identify promise gaps, work to improve them using some combination of people, processes, pedagogy, and technology.

4. Deliver Brand Promise to All

Not only should the brand promise be consistently delivered to customers, it must also extend to the employee experience. For instance, if a staff member feels mistreated by the institution, there is a high probability that an individual will not effectively represent the brand promise to the students and families they serve. The improvement of brand promise delivery will be enhanced if it creates an environment that values the contributions of all individuals and proactively enhances human capacity. This will serve to create a feeling of passion about the organization and its brand promise.

5. Convey the Brand Promise

The brand promise must not be defined by external sources and the negative experiences of a few people. Do not allow an information vacuum to develop. In that scenario, negative perceptions can flourish. The institution must deliver the brand promise message through ongoing internal and external campaigns. It requires careful management of stakeholders' expectations and intentional efforts to build institutional loyalty over time. There are a number of barriers to effectively deliver a brand promise above and beyond the time and resource limitations. Institutions may encounter inadequate staffing, inadequate technology, inefficient business processes, poor communication structures, a culture against continual learning, lack of information and data, lack of employee incentives, and lack of accountability systems. All of these factors should be addressed within your organizational strategic planning activities outlined earlier in this paper.



Market Segmentation

Market segmentation is a method of identifying the characteristics of families and students with the most potential for new enrollments and to analyze the patterns of applications and enrollments of current students. There are essentially four market segmentation categories to consider in the K-12 environment:

1. Geographic

In the K-12 enrollment marketplace, this is the most salient market segment. Students typically attend the district in which they live and the school nearest their home address based on county, city, and municipality boundaries. In the case of open enrollment, charter schools, and private schools, distinct district boundaries are less of a factor but are germane from the perspective of how far and how much time it would take to transport a student to a specific school. Institutions should segment the geographic domain in a granular method and create specific geo-markets across a region. The value of a geo-market approach is the opportunity to hone messages, target recruitment outreach, and advertise strategically to these geo-markets. For example, institutions may recruit new students who live within district boundaries with a different message than prospective students who live in another district at some distance.

2. Demographic

Segmenting the marketing in this manner may have the institution consider differences such as gender, age, race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, occupation, education levels, and religion based on the nature of the institution. For example, if an institution is attempting to build their preschool programs, they would segment the market for families with students in the 3–5 year range. Or in a school that serves high school students, the market would be segmented for students ages 15–18 years old.

3. Psychographic

This segment is very influential, albeit difficult to implement as it focuses on a student's lifestyle and personality. The difficulty is due to the inherent lack of accurate information about student-specific characteristics in these areas. The only approach is to ask families and students and, again, this is a hard area to probe. You will often see the psychographic factors manifest when families and students say the school “just feels right” or doesn't. What are those personality and lifestyle variables that elicit a “feels right” response? If you can ascertain a type of psychographic profile associated with satisfied families and students, you can customize communication and outreach activities.

4. Behavioral

Behavioral segmentation focuses on learner outcomes in the K-12 environment.

a. Career-Oriented Segment

Characterizes students who are attending an education institution to prepare for future careers. Institutions that have opportunities for field experiences in certain vocations would be able to tap this segment.

b. Curiosity-Driven Segment

This segment will have students whose thirst for knowledge represents their ultimate goal. This would be seen in institutions that provide innovative programs that tap into the learning passions of students, such as STEM/STEAM.

c. Socio-Economic Advantage Segment

This group would include students seeking the status of attending a high-quality institution as a stepping-stone to acceptance into a prestigious university or degree program. Institutions with a reputation for a high percentage of students getting accepted into Ivy League Universities, for example, would appeal to families in this segment.

d. Dual-Purpose Segment

Students interested in pursuing their primary objective (e.g., athletics, performing arts) along with general academics would fall into this segment.

By knowing the learner's objective — that is, which market segment they fall into — the marketing communications will be more meaningful and impactful to the recipient.



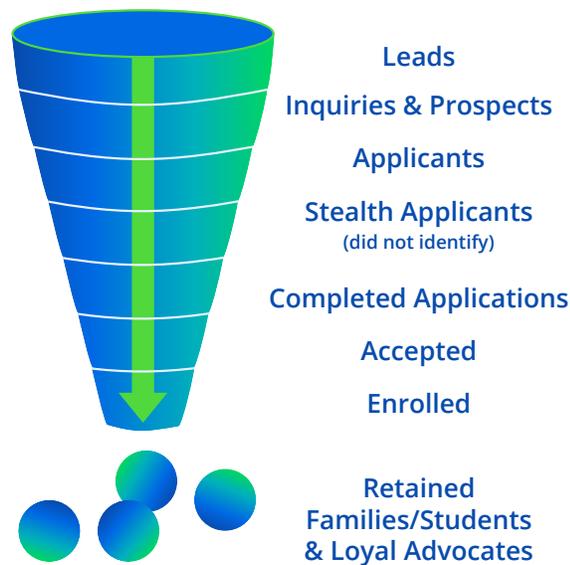
Strategic Enrollment Management and the Student Life Cycle

In the K-12 environment, the phrase “student life cycle” is not as commonly used as on college campuses across the country. The life cycle model looks at the journey that students, and by extension families, go through during their time in a school or district. In the higher education realm, institutional leaders analyze ways to improve the success rate of students as they move from freshman to graduate to help increase retention. The life cycle analysis takes into consideration a variety of factors that could either positively or negatively contribute to a student’s enrollment persistence and achievement over time.

In the product and services world, sales executives utilize the notion of a sales funnel (figure 6) to engage in specific sales and marketing activities based upon where a lead is within the funnel. The sales funnel encapsulates the initial phases of the student enrollment life cycle. This life cycle begins when an institution researches their potential market and identifies all “leads” for outreach marketing as described in the brand segmentation section. The lead research will indicate that a family is living within your boundaries or has a strong potential to attend your institution. Today, families as leads have a variety of education choices. Consequently, schools and districts do not “own” students merely because they live within their geographic boundaries.

K-12 Enrollment Funnel

Figure 6



Once a family inquires about the institution and is giving at least some consideration about learning more, this family is considered a prospect just as they would be considered by a company selling a product to a potential customer. The analogy with product sales is an accurate one when applied to the K-12 student life cycle. These prospective families will inquire about the process for enrolling, often prior to kindergarten, and begin to learn about the characteristics of the institution through a variety of sources (some accurate and some inaccurate). It is at this point it is important to cultivate that inquiry with positive information about the institution to compel families to move forward with the registration and enrollment process.

In the K-12 realm, there may be “stealth applicants” who inquire and apply without you being aware of them as a lead. Stealth applicants make admissions and recruitment planning more difficult. Projecting your enrollment for the year is inaccurate without knowing how many prospects you have, and it can greatly impact planning for particular programs. After the inquiry has been cultivated to the point a family is comfortable, they may begin the formal registration and enrollment process, and the student will be admitted to the institution. As families move down the funnel and become formal applicants and hopefully enrollees, it is important to increase your contact and information provided to the families to maintain a high level of interest so they can be converted to enrolled. Once enrolled, the focus shifts to retention strategies within the student enrollment life cycle and is implemented across the institution to meet the academic and cultural expectations of the family set forth during the inquiry stage.

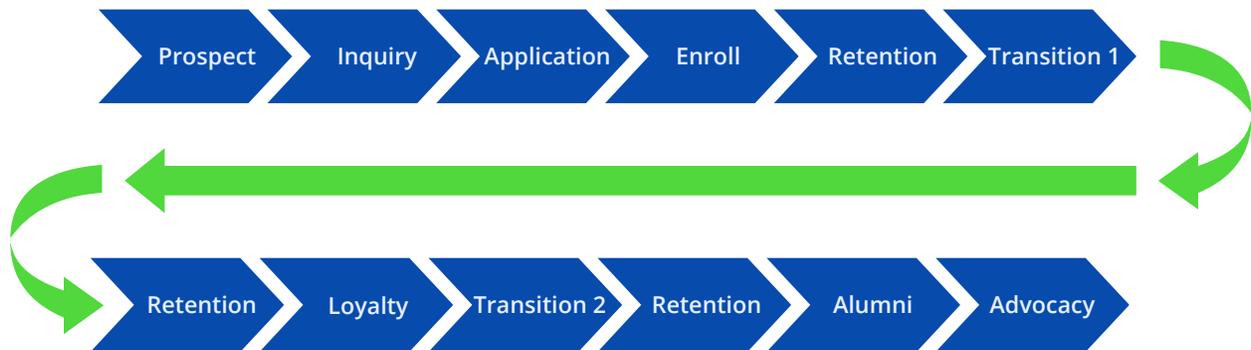
In figure 6, we denote retained families and students. However, students often depart from an institution when natural transitions in the education journey occur, such as from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school. These transitions are critical times in the student enrollment life cycle. Institutions must pay attention to the changing developmental needs of their students and provide families with greater information on the benefits of their institution. In the K-12 environment, it is critical for institutions to understand the developmental progression of students in general but to also take into account the different cultural backgrounds and financial situations for different students. Students will have different needs throughout the developmental stages, requiring a flexible system. Consider creating different pathways for students through their K-12 life cycle to match their evolving interests, strengths, and sense of success while paying particular attention to transition points.



In this regard, teachers should partner with students to design learning experiences that will produce improved engagement and passion for learning, as will be evidenced in student performance outcomes. One key factor impacting student success, and therefore retention, is the importance of a positive climate and feeling connected with purpose. Positive relationships with teachers, peers, and the overall learning community might be the most powerful factor across the student life cycle and eventual student retention. Taken together, these approaches will enhance student retention and loyalty. The following diagrams extend the enrollment cycle funnel to include the broader longitudinal journey students follow within your institution (figure 7) as well the institutional strategy sequence (figure 8) over the same student enrollment life cycle.

K-12 Enrollment Funnel

Figure 7



K-12 Enrollment Funnel

Figure 8





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