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## Enrollment stress? Use the 'librarian method'

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore December 20, 2024



Remember when the school librarian was your secret weapon?

They could find you exactly the right book, no matter how obscure the topic—from dinosaurs who build skyscrapers to underwater basket weaving for beginners. A good librarian had something of interest for everyone, knew what each reader liked, trusted those who checked out a huge pile of books and knew what your family would find appropriate for you.

A good superintendent today needs to be like that librarian: acting as the “human card catalog” of your school system—knowing what’s available, what’s appropriate and what families want. Superintendents can encourage school leaders to help families search for the perfect fit, even if that fit temporarily takes the family or student away from their systems.

In the evolving landscape of American education, “school choice” isn’t a passing trend — it’s the new normal. Superintendents, who have traditionally resisted this reality out of fear of dwindling enrollment, now face a pivotal moment: adapt to family expectations in the new normal or risk becoming the educational equivalent of a dusty microfilm machine.

The incoming presidential administration’s support for school choice makes one thing clear: this is now a bipartisan playing field.

### The old playbook? Time to shelve it

Historically, school districts have used a few tried-and-tired tactics to resist school choice:



- **Marketing blitzes:** Shiny brochures and school flyers won't make families change their minds. You can't slap a new book cover on *Moby Dick* and call it "Finding Nemo."
- **Budget woes appeals:** Telling parents that choice hurts the budget is like telling library patrons that overdue fines are keeping the lights on. They're more focused on what's best for their kids.
- **Lobbying legislators:** Trying to block choice through policy is like fighting over the last copy of a Harry Potter novel— it's going to get checked out anyway.

These strategies haven't worked. Public school enrollment declined by 3% between fall 2019 and fall 2020, representing over 1.4 million students (NCES, 2022). The money following each of those students was—or will be—lost to those districts, costing jobs and resources. It's time for superintendents to adopt a new, more flexible approach to student enrollment management.

## Bounce-back effect: Relationships are the best bookmark

Despite the decline, there's a hopeful twist: students do come back. About 55% of those who left public schools during the pandemic re-enrolled by fall 2021.

The bounce-back rate was 62% for kindergarteners (who probably realized mom and dad's "homeschool" lacked a decent snack bar) and 40% for high schoolers (who discovered that algebra is hard everywhere) (Fordham Institute, 2022).

The districts most likely to see students return are the ones maintaining strong relationships with families—even after those families checked out other options. It's about being the kind of librarian who says, "Take that book home, try it out—I'll be here when you're ready for the next one."

## Case studies of superintendents playing the long game

Here are a few districts shelving the resistance tactics and embracing family choice:

- [Sunnyvale School District's](#) multi-platform communication: Sunnyvale utilizes texts, emails and public web pages to keep families informed. This transparency fosters trust and ensures families remain connected to the district, even if they explore other educational options.
- [Hurst-Euless-Bedford ISD's](#) "schools of choice" programs: This Texas district offers unique electives focused on international skills, attracting families by giving them diverse educational options without leaving the district.
- [Minneapolis Public Schools'](#) changing school options initiative: By restructuring into regional zones with magnet options, Minneapolis offers choice within the district, keeping families engaged and reducing transportation costs.
- [Albuquerque Public Schools](#) offers a wide menu of magnet schools and choice programs, some within neighborhood feeders and some district-wide.

## Winning strategies: Be the guide, Not the gatekeeper



1. **Transparent communication:** Keep families informed about all available options, like a librarian who knows exactly where the good stuff is shelved. Use this evidence-based school choice guide to get started.
2. **Inclusive events:** Host family nights, resource fairs and after-school programs to stay connected, even if families are exploring other shelves. Invite all community members, not just current families, to school events. You never know when an abuela, auntie or neighbor might encourage a family to learn more about what you offer.
3. **Support services:** Offering free tutoring, counseling and after-school activities shows you're invested in their child's success, no matter what. Free tutoring helps with the bounce-back effect and most states require open access to after-school activities like sports, so you might as well claim that as an olive branch.
4. **Personalized outreach:** A well-timed phone call or note can remind families that you care—and that the library door is always open. Use the research on effective parent communication to help.

## Vision for the future: Collaborative educational ecosystems

The future belongs to superintendents who embrace school choice and see themselves as educational guides rather than gatekeepers. It's the job of the superintendent to watch out for and advance every student in their community.

By offering options, maintaining relationships, and supporting families through every decision, public schools can position themselves as the go-to resource — even if families temporarily wander off to explore other shelves.

In this new era, superintendents have a chance to redefine public education. Not by resisting change, but by leading with empathy, flexibility, and a commitment to student success. Because like any good librarian knows: it's not about keeping books on the shelf — it's about making sure everyone finds the story they need.

**Click on this ["Choice in the Marketplace"](#) one-pager for some guidance on making the case for choosing your schools.**

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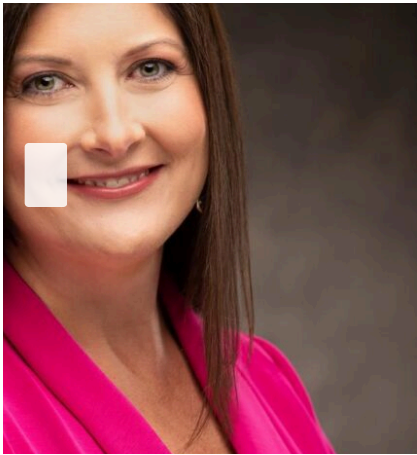
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