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Public school enrollments will continue to decline unless they become customer-focused, Rice study suggests

HOUSTON – (Feb. 28, 2024) – In September 2023, Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona issued a [warning call](#) stating “Public schools are approaching a ‘make or break moment.’” This week, several [North Texas schools](#) announced potential school closures and staff position eliminations. Nationally, public schools lost over 1.2 million students to private and charter schools over the first two school years of the COVID-19 pandemic with Texas witnessing a 2.2% decline.

Public schools can reverse this decline and revitalize themselves by embracing customer focus, according to a [study](#) of more than 10,644 K-12 parents by researchers from Rice University and the University of Texas at San Antonio.

The researchers conducted qualitative research with more than 200 school-district stakeholders (parents, teachers, principals, superintendents and other school-district leaders) and supplemented that with a nationally representative survey of K-12

parents. The study then collated the survey data with actual school performance outcomes including standardized test scores and school's state rank percentile.

"Despite good intentions, superintendents, school boards and their advisors are caught in a vicious downward spiral of stakeholder appeasement, initiative proliferation and patchwork strategy based on salience and intuitive leaps," said study co-author [Vikas Mittal](#), the J. Hugh Liedtke Professor of Management-Marketing at Rice's [Jones Graduate School of Business](#). "Lacking a clear definition of customer focus, they continue spending money on wasteful initiatives and interventions leading to bureaucratic sprawl and a whirlwind of administrative requirements."



According to students, parents, district employees and teachers, school district leadership lacks a clear definition of who is their customer.

“Ideally, every school’s customer should be the family—the student and their parents. Instead, leadership has become internally focused trying to appease different power brokers and stakeholders, including board members. Such schools give primacy to sports and extracurricular activities, endless interventions that act as band-aids to failing policies and initiatives designed to appeal to stakeholders who exert influence on the board and superintendent,” Mittal said.

Using statistical techniques that control for differences in race, gender and family income, the study found that parent value gets the highest lift from schools that have teachers who are attentive to children’s education, high academic and learning standards, engaging the community with a high degree of transparency, safe schools and an administration and staff that has humility when dealing with families. Schools that can prioritize these drivers of value not only have higher student re-enrollment and parental recommendations but also better standardized test scores and state rankings, Mittal explained.

“Superintendents privately recognize the power of customer focus, but they are often held hostage by board members and powerful stakeholders with private agendas,” Mittal said. “They want superintendents to continue on the same old path of stakeholder appeasement. After all, relentless spending on initiatives—programs, new software packages, additional trainings for teachers, emphasizing tutoring even as in-class teaching degrades, tracking metrics for the sake of data collection and reporting, more and new curricula and exams—creates an aura that ‘something is being done’ even as the status quo continues.

“To succeed, superintendents and school leaders need to embrace science and customer focus rather than continue to rely on stakeholder appeasement, equating strategy with interventions and relying on retired superintendents who bring the same old ideas to the table. K-12 schools have been doing the same things for the last couple of decades. COVID-19 ripped the wounds exposing the disease. Customer-focused strategy is the best way for K-12 schools to reclaim their health.”

The paper, “Revitalizing educational institutions through customer focus,” which is published online in the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, was co-authored by Jihye Jung of the University of Texas in San Antonio. It can be downloaded at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11747-024-01007-y>.



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