



# BEYOND THE SHRINK

## BUILDING SUSTAINABLE ENROLLMENT STRATEGIES

**It wasn't a dramatic drop in enrollment or empty classrooms. Ben Churchill, Ed.D., said the first warning signs at Poway Unified School District in San Diego County actually showed up years earlier in places that can be easy to overlook. Fewer birth announcements. Housing prices that put home ownership out of reach for young families. Neighborhoods that didn't turn over when children graduated and moved on.**

In districts like Poway, those subtle shifts became the real data points worth watching. It is why Dr. Churchill, Superintendent at Poway, says enrollment pressure takes shape long before a single student fails to show up on the first day of school. The escalating situation forced him and his team to ask deeper questions about the forces beyond district boundaries. How are younger generations thinking about family? Are fewer children a matter of affordability, lifestyle choice, environmental concern or something more complex?

Each conversation reframed how Poway thinks about the future, moving planning away from year-to-year assumptions and toward longer-range scenarios. "Understanding those forces helps us plan for what's next, rather than reacting after a trend has already taken hold," Dr. Churchill says. "The goal is not to predict what comes next with certainty, but to understand emerging norms early enough to respond with intention rather than surprise."

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— Tracy R. Reed, Ed.D., Superintendent, Reynoldsburg City Schools

Understanding these norms—and being able to react to them—is becoming increasingly familiar to K-12 leaders across the country. While higher education has been sounding alarms about the demographic cliff for years, school districts are beginning to feel its early effects in ways that are slower, more complex and just as consequential.

For administrators like Dr. Churchill, waiting for enrollment decline to appear in classrooms is already too late. Planning has to start upstream, before trends harden into outcomes. “We’re paying close attention to broader cultural shifts. That perspective has shifted our planning from a year-to-year exercise to a longer-term, scenario-based approach. The goal isn’t to predict the future perfectly, but to avoid being caught off guard when what once felt like a fringe idea suddenly becomes the norm.”

As enrollment pressure grows, districts are also confronting the hard truth that families have more choices and more information than ever before. “We’re talking about a retention strategy, and that strategy hasn’t changed,” Dr. Churchill says. “Nothing retains families more effectively than a caring, skilled teacher. The daily experience students have in classrooms remains the most powerful driver of confidence and commitment a district can offer.”

Dr. Churchill says that communication supports this foundation by making care visible and consistent. “We prioritize two-way communication that is timely, responsive and clear, while remembering that communication is far more than an email or a newsletter. It shows up in many forms (report cards, classroom updates, school newsletters, safety notifications and districtwide messages). Together, these touchpoints shape how families experience the system as a whole.”

That’s why Dr. Churchill believes communication is an ecosystem. It means schools must invest in the professionals, tools and channels that help ensure messages are aligned and coherent, so families aren’t receiving mixed signals depending on the source. Supporting consistency across administrators, principals and teachers is essential, especially when information is complex or evolving. “When students experience caring and high-quality teaching and communication remains constant and clear, trust is reinforced and retention becomes a natural outcome rather than a separate initiative.”



### **EARLY SIGNALS, EARLY RELATIONSHIPS**

In Reynoldsburg, Ohio, Superintendent Tracy R. Reed, Ed.D., is focused on a different, but equally telling indicator: kindergarten enrollment. Where long-range demographic shifts frame the challenge of some K-12 districts, Reynoldsburg is seeing how early family decisions and timing can shape staffing, resources, and trust before the school year even begins.

“Kindergarten enrollment is our focus,” Dr. Reed says. “We recently had new legislation passed to allow students to enroll in kindergarten if they are five by the first day of school, which for us is Aug. 20, 2026. We need parents to enroll early to ensure we are appropriately staffed for the school year.”

For Reynoldsburg City Schools, early enrollment is not just an operational concern. It is a trust exercise. “Families appreciate honest, open communication,” Dr. Reed says. “We share information frequently on many

## 1 WATCH EARLY SIGNALS

Birth rates, housing affordability, and family mobility shape enrollment years before numbers decline.

## 2 PLAN UPSTREAM

Move from year-to-year assumptions to scenario-based, long-range planning.

## 3 BUILD TRUST FIRST

Clear communication, follow-through and daily classroom experiences matter more than marketing.

## 4 ALIGN FOR IMPACT

Evaluate programs for value and sustainability, not just cost or tradition.

## 5 ENGAGE EVERYONE

Teachers, staff and administrators all play a role in retaining families and telling the district's story.

*Source: Ben Churchill, Ed.D., Superintendent, Poway Unified School District; Tracy R. Reed, Ed.D., Reynoldsburg City Schools*

different platforms and have it translated to suit the diverse needs of our families.”

Dr. Reed says that transparency is paired with relationship-building. “Developing relationships and identifying shared goals are important. Schools may not realize that parents are very committed to their students’ success, so we have to remember that.”

Like Poway Unified, Reynoldsburg is using enrollment pressure as an opportunity to sharpen its focus. “We are reviewing and modifying our programs to eliminate redundancy,” Dr. Reed says. “We solicit input from business partners and the community to support college and career readiness.”

At Reynoldsburg, communication is not a centralized function, but a shared responsibility. “Personal relationships provide real stories that parents and community members can connect with,” Dr. Reed says.

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“Everyone plays a role in being a recruiter for our district, whether it is for students or staff. Ask yourself, where do you see your district in five to seven years and set goals to achieve annual milestones. Capitalize on your current success.”

Today, declining enrollment is no longer a temporary disruption to manage, but a long-term reality that demands intention, clarity and trust. Districts willing to look beyond headcounts, listen closely to families, and align their programs, communication, and culture around what truly matters, are discovering that sustainability is built long before enrollment ever slips. ■