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At the Epicenter of School Choice, Arizona Public Schools Battle Existential Crisis

Educators fight back against falling enrollments and rising competition. One idea: mimic restaurant-industry focus on customer service.



Educators gathered recently in Arizona to come up with ways to improve perception of public schools.

By Matt Barnum [Follow](#) | Photography by Cassidy Araiza for WSJ

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PHOENIX—Public school leaders in Arizona recently convened a summit to combat an existential crisis.

Across the state, enrollments at district public schools are falling. Last month, superintendents gathered in Phoenix at the “Traditional Public Schools Messaging Summit” to strategize ways to improve the perception of public education. The goal: woo families and bolster political support.

In an opening brainstorming session, educators shouted out benefits of public schooling. “We welcome all!” said one person. “We represent the community,” added another. There are “comprehensive choices” in public education, chimed in a third.

Arizona is at the leading edge of a reckoning in public education. Nationwide, declining birthrates and rising competition—from alternatives like charter schools, private education and home schooling—have eroded student bodies at the regular neighborhood schools that generations of Americans attended.

The number of U.S. first-graders in public schools in 2023, the most recent year available, was the smallest since the early 1990s (excluding one pandemic-disrupted year), according to federal data. Twenty-one percent of children didn't attend a traditional public school in 2023, up from 17% in 2019, according to a Brookings Institution report.

“A lot of people have the perception that we’re failing,” said Mike Winters, the superintendent of a rural public school district west of Phoenix. “The hundreds of thousands of positive things that happen in our public schools every day are staggering. We don’t do a good job of advertising them to the public because we’re educators.”



Mike Winters, center, superintendent of a school district west of Phoenix, said public schools don't do a good job of advertising.



Summit attendees brainstormed ideas to help with marketing.

In 2022, Arizona became the first state to allow any family to use public funding for their child to attend a private school or support home schooling. The move came as public schools across the country faced intense criticism over Covid precautions and practices related to diversity, equity and inclusion.

A surge of similar voucher initiatives followed in Republican-led states. The federal government will soon launch a program to subsidize private education costs, although states will have to opt into it.

Competition heats up

Arizona also has a large sector of charter schools, which are publicly funded and overseen, but privately run. More than one in five public school students attend a charter, the highest share of any state.

Parents today are inundated with pitches from these alternative schools. One Instagram ad touts an online private school where “your child will learn twice as fast as the average student.” A mailer for another private school says that tuition is now free because of the state subsidy.

The Basis Charter Schools tout high academic standards and leaders say it is a place where “nerds are cool.” A banner on its Phoenix campus encourages families to “enroll at the nation’s #1 public school network.” Most Basis schools in Arizona have more applicants than seats available, a spokesman said.

Brightmont Academy, a private school network that emphasizes one-on-one instruction, recently ran an ad targeting families whose public schools have closed in the wake of declining enrollment.

We're "trying to just make sure families know they have options rather than now go to a school that has 32 kids in the classroom," said Karen Buckner, Brightmont's chief executive.

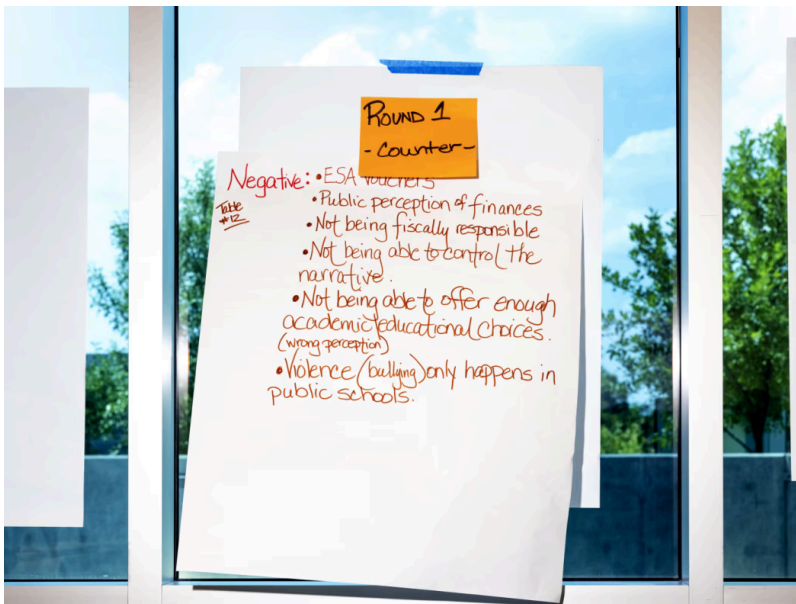
'We have to combat that'

The recent messaging summit on traditional public schools was the brainchild of Winters and another superintendent, Kim Guerin. It was inspired by a shared frustration over how public schools have been negatively seen and portrayed. "We have to combat that," said Guerin. Summit leaders plan to launch a marketing effort, with private dollars, to highlight the benefits of public schools.

Nationally, confidence in American education has reached new lows—with only 35% of adults satisfied according to a recent Gallup poll—even though most public-school parents still give their own child's school high marks.



Kim Guerin leads a Phoenix school district that has built out its marketing department.



Summit attendees listed negative perceptions about public schools in an effort to counter them.

The Madison Elementary School District in Phoenix, which Guerin leads, has built out its marketing department, from just one person over a decade ago to four today. The team runs digital ads to recruit parents and promotes the district on social media.

The district offers a range of specialized schools—including a Spanish immersion program, an arts-focused school, and a “traditional academy” with uniforms—that enable “families to choose the type of education that is right for their child,” according to Madison’s website.

Scott Menzel, the superintendent of Scottsdale Unified School District east of Phoenix, believes that promotion and marketing are essential. “Anyone who doesn’t see it as part of the job doesn’t understand the landscape,” he said. The district targets families with social-media ads and recently launched an annual expo for parents to learn more about its schools.

Menzel encourages his staff to read the book “Unreasonable Hospitality,” which offers lessons from the restaurant industry in going above and beyond in customer service. The goal, Menzel said, is to ensure customers—parents and students—are satisfied with their school, and then spread the word to other families.

Menzel has honed his pitch, too: that the district has a variety of programs to match any student’s interest and needs. “We talk about ‘Scottsdale Unified’—but not uniform,” he said.

School leaders emphasize that the best marketing tool isn't advertising, but quality schools. Advocates for school choice say that competition pushes public schools to up their game, which some Arizona educators acknowledged.

Some public school leaders emphasize that promotion cannot overcome the basic mathematical challenge. With fewer children and more schooling options, "there's only so much we can do—we can market all we want," said Cedric Collins, a high-school teacher and school board member in the Phoenix area.

Despite their promotion efforts, both the Scottsdale and Madison school systems experienced dips in enrollment as this school year began.

Katy Clark, principal of Madison Meadows Middle School, says most weeks during the school year she gives a tour or two to prospective families. She prefers to do them herself rather than delegate the task.

"We are the head of the school, just like the CEO is the head of the company," Clark said.

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Matt Barnum is a former reporter The Wall Street Journal, where he covered K-12 education from New York.

Matt joined the Journal in 2023 after several years as a national reporter at the education news site Chalkbeat. While there, he covered a range of issues including the education policies of two presidential administrations, the far-reachin...

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