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Public Schools Try to Sell Themselves as More Students Use Vouchers

A decline in the number of children and rise in the number of choices has created a crisis for public schools. Some are trying new strategies to recruit students.

By Dana Goldstein
Dana Goldstein traversed Orlando with a team of public school recruiters who were searching for families.

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A decline in the number of babies being born and a boom in private school vouchers and home-schooling have combined to create an enrollment crisis for public education.

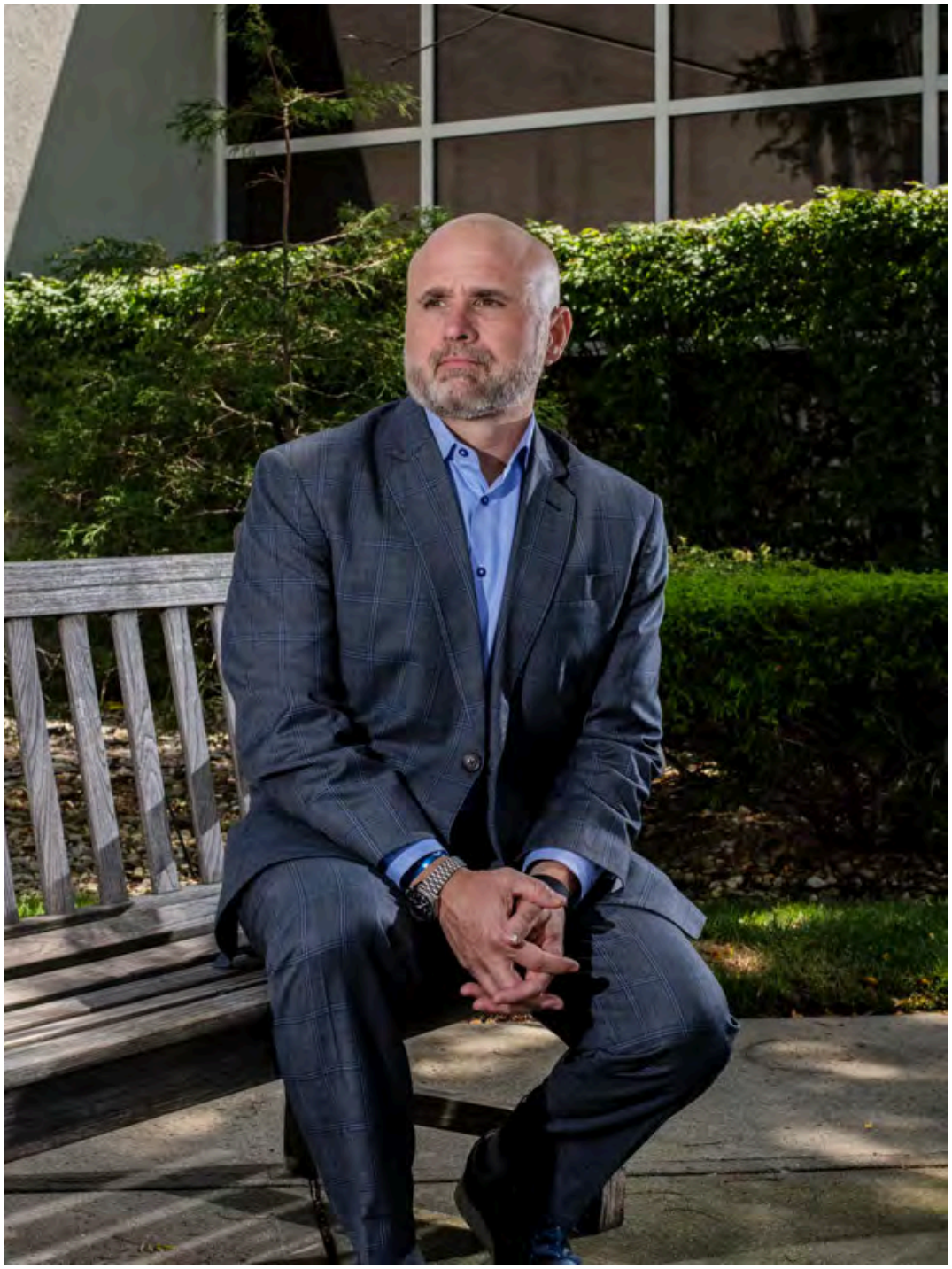
The threat is so great that some school districts are trying something that would have once seemed unthinkable.

School systems in Orlando, Newark, Memphis and dozens of other cities and towns have hired consultants who aggressively woo parents to convince them to enroll their children in local public schools.

Brian J. Stephens has built a business around this new reality. Mr. Stephens, a political consultant based in Memphis, runs Caissa K12, a consulting firm for public school districts with the tag line “We recruit students.”

Caissa K12 has taken off, with over 100 district clients. Its popularity illustrates some of the challenges facing public education.

Two-thirds of traditional public schools lost enrollment between 2019 and 2023, according to federal data. Low fertility rates mean that the number of children in the United States is starting to shrink. At the same time, policymakers have introduced more competition than ever, meaning many families have options beyond their neighborhood school.



Brian J. Stephens, who runs Caissa K12, argues that public school districts must offer slicker tours, better customer service and a compelling argument that they are better than the growing number of alternatives. Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

Even public schools in Florida, one of only a handful of states with a growing population of children, are facing significant declines.

Families have been attracted there by the warm climate, new housing construction and the increased ability to work remotely.

They can now choose from an array of alternatives to public education. Florida has the nation's largest school voucher program, known as a universal education savings account, and over 400,000 Florida children now use public dollars to pay for some form of private schooling.

The program is part of Governor Ron DeSantis's larger agenda to remake education. He has attacked what he calls liberal orthodoxy in the public school curriculum and restricted what schools can teach.

In Florida, 71 percent of children continue to attend a district school. But that share has rapidly declined as enrollment in charter schools, home-schooling and private education increases.

Similar demographic shifts could come soon to the rest of the country. Republican-leaning states are quickly expanding access to private-school vouchers, and, in July, President Trump signed into law the first national voucher program, funded by a federal tax credit. Some Democrats are urging their own party to reconsider private school choice, arguing that vouchers appeal to working-class voters.

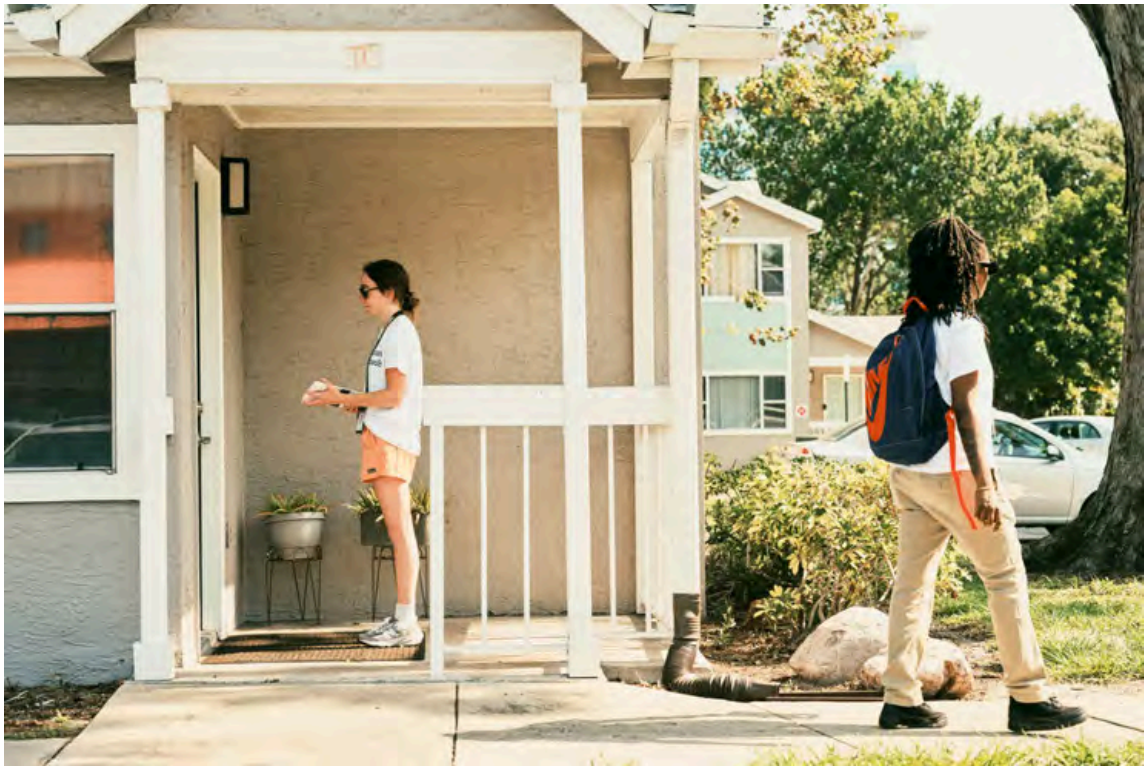
Orange County, Fla., home to Orlando, expects a 25 percent drop in district kindergarten enrollment this fall, even though the county's school-age population has grown by 5 percent since 2020.

Because schools are funded on a per-pupil basis, the loss of 3,000 of the district's 200,000 students could amount to a $28 million funding decrease. The district is considering consolidating and rezoning schools. It has also hired Caissa K12 to help it recruit back families tempted by other options.

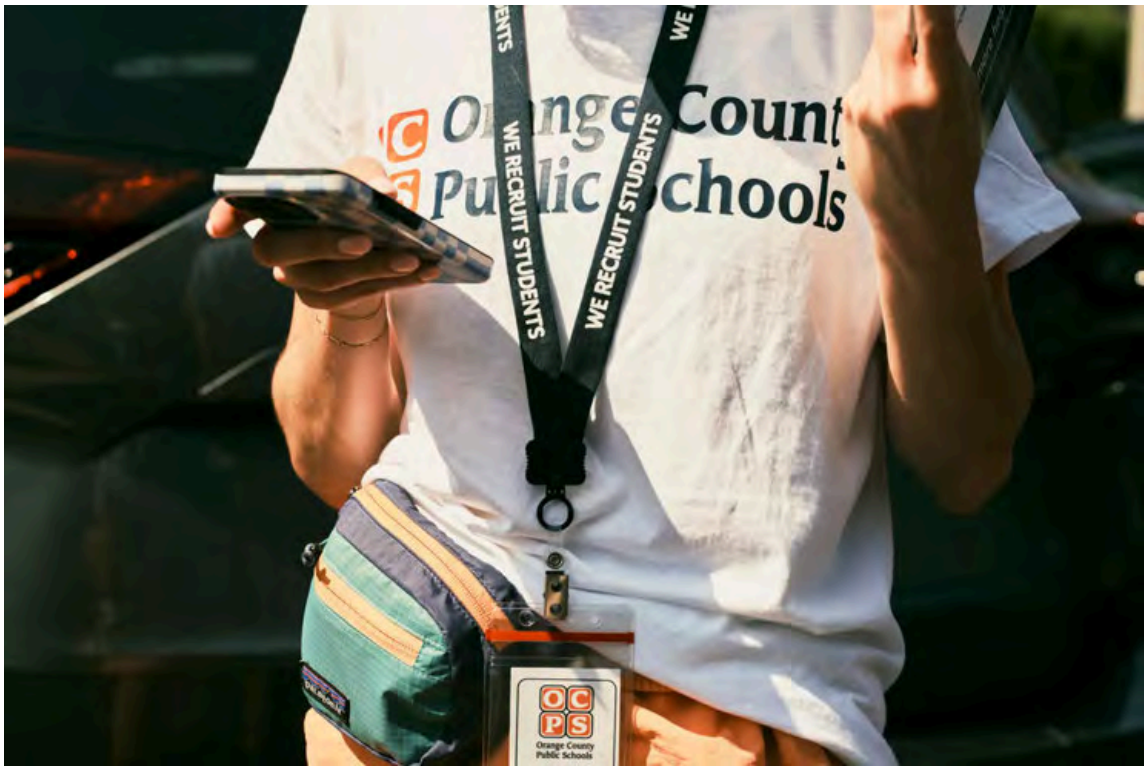
"We, ourselves, have to look at how we have not been able to tell our own story," said Maria Vazquez, the superintendent.

Mr. Stephens of Caissa argues that school districts must offer slicker tours, better customer service and a compelling argument that they are better than the growing number of alternatives.

“The monopoly is over,” he said.



Canvassers from Caissa K12 go door to door to recruit students in Orlando. Zack Wittman for The New York Times



Caissa staff members, who can earn performance bonuses, might contact a parent 10, 20, even 30 times to prompt them to complete school-enrollment paperwork. Zack Wittman for The New York Times

In mid-May, Caissa's team of paid canvassers fanned out across Orange County, looking for parents. Caroline Christian, a 25-year-old with a degree in marketing, set up a table at a Boys and Girls Club after-school program.

Destiny Arnold, a former police officer, looked for garden apartments with children's bikes parked out front.

The team also visited a homeless shelter and a church preschool.

They gave parents fliers advertising the district's arts and career-education programs. They also asked parents for their phone numbers. Caissa staff members, who can earn performance bonuses, might contact a parent 10, 20, even 30 times to prompt them to complete school-enrollment paperwork.

They urge parents to visit district schools, no matter what they've heard or read about them. They also try to address what Mr. Stephens argues are misconceptions about the superiority of private education.

"Take class size," Mr. Stephens said. "There's no solid data evidence that a smaller class size equals a better adult."

If a child whose parent has been in touch with Caissa shows up for public school in the fall, Caissa will be paid. In Orange County, the company will earn $935 for each former student the firm attracts back to the district, about 10 percent of state and local per-pupil funding for that child. The company has recruited 200 students in Newark since 2022, and last year it found about 1,000 for schools in Memphis, according to the districts. Those numbers can translate into millions in revenue for schools.

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Some education experts have pushed for other responses to dropping enrollment,such as closing underutilized schools.

When the Newark Board of Education debated a $277,000 contract with Caissa last year, one member, Crystal Williams, argued that paying consultants to pressure parents to come back to the district was an unwise use of funds. She said that it would divert money from students already in district classrooms.

Caissa's work can be slow going. At the Boys and Girls Club in Orlando, one mother who asked that her name not be included, quickly rejected the suggestion that her daughter should attend her zoned school in a low-income neighborhood. The mother believed the school was rife with behavioral problems.

Caissa also conducts parent surveys for districts, which have shown that perceptions of safety and academic quality drive school-choice decisions.

"Our job is to adjust the perception," Mr. Stephens said. "There's always some positive stuff in every school."

Mr. Stephens seems to fervently believe in the product he is selling. He grew up in Central Florida, and said public school helped him transcend a speech impediment. Like other advocates for public education, he sketches a vision of an ideal public school: a diverse setting in which children learn together across differences of race, class and religion, and where students with disabilities have a legal right to services.

He added that his team had never encountered a district school that they wouldn't push to parents, no matter how much it was struggling.

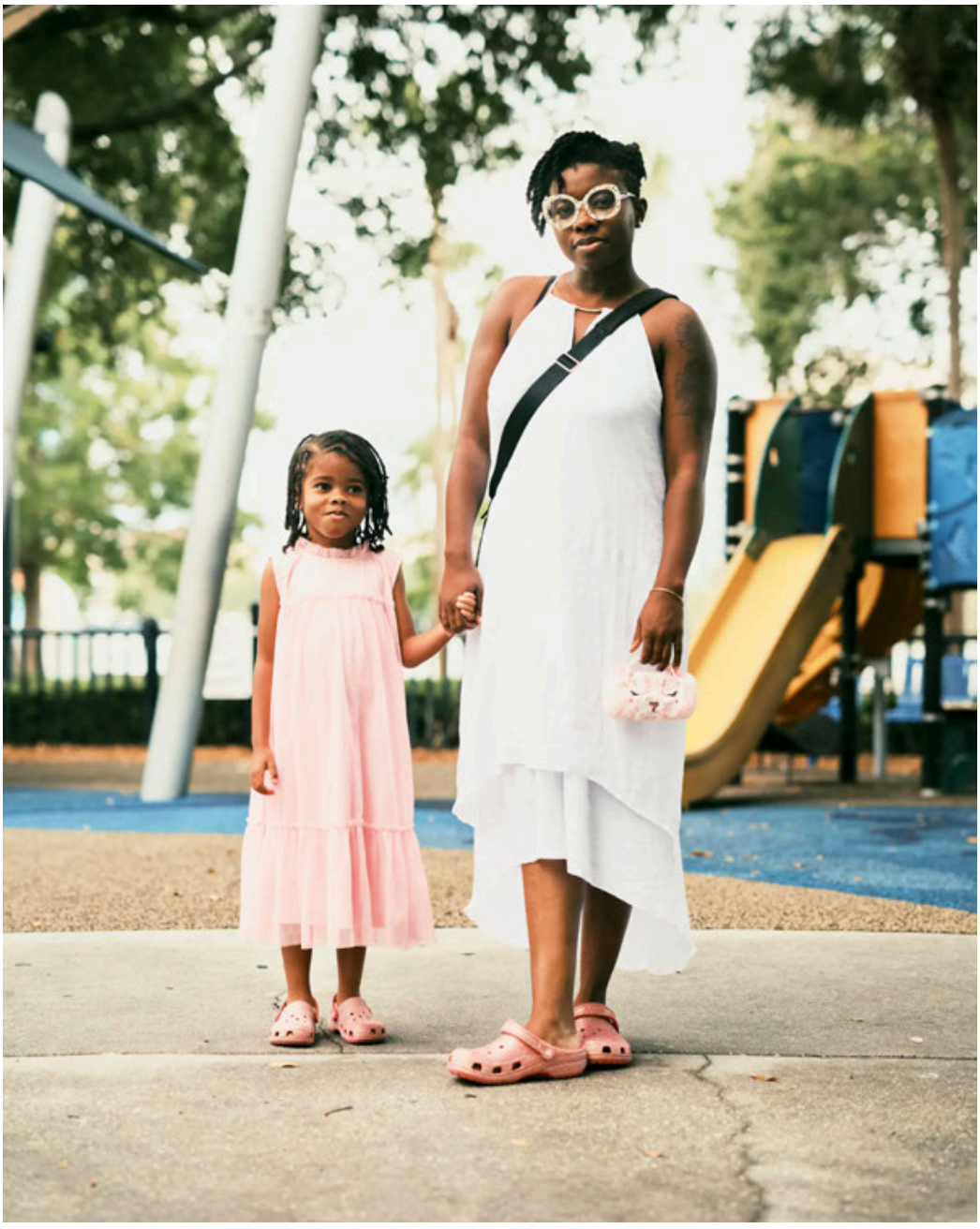
It is true that a school's quality and its enrollment trend line do not always match up. Three-quarters of Orange County public schools earned an A or B on Florida's school-accountability score card this year. Dr. Vazquez, the superintendent, also touts the system's early-childhood literacy reforms, and options for high school students to earn college credit.

Nevertheless, of 132 district elementary schools, 107 have had declining enrollment since 2020. The trend cuts across demographic divides, affecting schools in Washington Shores, a low-income neighborhood west of downtown Orlando, and Doctor Phillips, an affluent area near the Universal theme park.

Enrollment declines can push schools into a downward spiral, as funding plummets and enrichment programs are cut, driving even more families to withdraw.

It is not clear whether students who use vouchers to leave public schools tend to fare better academically. Recent studies have come to varying conclusions.

But in Florida, which offers families of all income levels $8,000 per child each year to pay for tuition, many parents seem enthusiastic about the wider array of choices they now have.



Jasmine Robinson, a 36-year-old photographer, was in the process of moving her 6-year-old, Arden, from public to private school using a voucher, because Arden had announced, “I’m bored.” Zack Wittman for The New York Times

At a playground overlooking Lake Eola, in downtown Orlando, almost all the parents said they were considering something other than their zoned public school. Many mentioned academic rigor.

Marcus Clarke, a 23-year-old who works in door-to-door sales, said he believed his toddler daughter would gain stronger reading and writing skills in a private elementary school with smaller class sizes.

Jasmine Robinson, a 36-year-old photographer, was in the process of moving her 6-year-old, Arden, from public to private school using a voucher, because Arden had announced, "I'm bored."

Ms. Robinson said she believed district schools were overly focused on preparing children for standardized tests. She loved the fact that when she visited the private school, she saw first graders learning fractions.

In public education, she said, "a lot of programs are not geared to really pushing the envelope with kids."

In Orlando, district leaders are trying to adapt as best they can, including by trying to access some of the voucher money themselves. This year, the district will begin accepting voucher dollars from home-schooled students, who can use the funds to pay for classes à la carte. One of the common arguments for private school choice is that competition could force public schools to improve their offerings. And indeed, Dr. Vazquez, the superintendent, is considering other big changes.

Many parents fear middle school, so Dr. Vazquez is exploring creating more K-8 or 6-12 schools. She is also investigating whether the district can start its own micro schools built around themes attractive to parents, such as screen-free education.

Hiring Caissa was an easy add-on to her agenda, she said, since the company's fee will be drawn from the per-pupil revenue it generates. And school administrators, she readily admitted, are not proficient at sales or marketing.

Mr. Stephens is. He calls himself "politically agnostic." But as more states embrace vouchers, his business stands to benefit.

"I believe in choice," he said. "If you're going to be a good American — Republican, Democrat, whatever you want to be — then let everybody compete."

Steven Rich and Francesca Paris contributed reporting. Alain Delaquérière contributed research.
Dana Goldstein covers education and families for The Times.