

Houston-area school districts ramp up marketing, hire firms to win back students

By **Ashley Soebroto**, *Staff Writer*

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Students are picked up at the end of the school day at HISD’s Law Elementary School in Houston, Tuesday, Jan. 6, 2026. As more private and charter schools compete for students across the Houston region, traditional school districts are stepping up their marketing — even hiring private companies to help win families back.

Brett Coomer/Houston Chronicle

As more private and charter schools compete for students across the Houston region, traditional school districts are stepping up their marketing — even hiring private companies to help win families back.

At least eight Houston-area districts, including Aldine, Cypress-Fairbanks, Fort Bend and Spring Branch ISDs, have hired a private company, Caissa K12, that specializes in student enrollment.

“I think we have to be aware of what charters and others are doing in creative ways, and we have to respond appropriately,” said Linda Buchman, Spring Branch ISD’s associate

superintendent for communications and community engagement. “We realized that we needed to do a better job telling our story and making sure all the good news about our school district was out in a very transparent way.”

It's one way traditional districts are trying to keep up — and survive — amid growing school competition, now with Texas' \$1 billion voucher program for private school tuition. Districts including Alief, Fort Bend and Houston ISDs have all tried to innovate with new campaigns, from outdoor billboards and social media marketing to bonuses for principals who boost enrollment.

The risk: lose out on students — and precious state funding.

“It's impacting us, and so we have to adapt,” Cy-Fair ISD Superintendent Douglas Killian said in an interview. “We have to show off what we're doing. We do believe that we have a better product.”

A fading monopoly

The need for public schools to market themselves has become more necessary as school choice grows, said Virginia Snodgrass Rangel, an associate professor in educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Houston.

For a long time, traditional public schools had a monopoly over students: They were the only affordable education option and relied on a pipeline of students coming from their zoned neighborhoods. But when more charter and private schools began popping up, Snodgrass Rangel said it created new competition for public schools to get students.

PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT: Falling birth rates, growing school choice: Why Houston's urban public schools are losing students

“They're able to position themselves as bringing this new, exciting product to a market that has been a monopoly,” Snodgrass Rangel said. “So school districts are sort of new to this game because they haven't had to play it for very long.”

She added that traditional districts also have the disadvantage of having to follow more regulations with marketing compared to competitors. Large public systems often have to work with different departments and get approval from administrators, so it can take them longer to set up an information booth or post something on social media.

But with the rise in educational opportunities and school vouchers, Snodgrass Rangel said it's important for traditional districts to create a presence in their community and ensure families know that public schools continue to be an option. Otherwise, those schools could see enrollment decline and campus closures.

“You have to tell your story, or someone will tell it for you,” Snodgrass Rangel said.

Hiring private companies

Some districts say they contract with private companies like Caissa K12 because they don't have staff who can conduct large-scale student enrollment outreach, which is what the company specializes in.

The consulting firm, based in Memphis, Tenn., offers student recruitment services for traditional public districts, including research and canvassing efforts to get students enrolled. It uses flyers, digital ads, text messages, phone calls to families, events, visits to community centers, and old-fashioned door-to-door knocking to promote clients like Spring Branch ISD.



Groundwork DFW's Isabel Vasquez and Karina Hernandez speak with a man while canvassing a neighborhood in east Houston, Tuesday, Aug. 5, 2025. The organization was contracted by Houston ISD to do door-to-door work near under enrolled schools to teach families about pre-kindergarten school.

Jason Fochtman/Houston Chronicle

CANVASSING FOR STUDENTS: To expand HISD's Pre-K enrollment, this group is taking to the streets. Will it work?

“If we believe in choice and giving options, it is the duty of public schools to present what they offer to parents so they can actually make an informed decision,” CEO Brian Stephens said. “It’s the duty of every school to present the choice to parents of every type of school, so I think it’s our responsibility now.”

Caissa K12 has worked with over 100 districts nationally. The company charges districts a fixed amount — ranging from \$935 to around \$1600 for every student they help enroll. That means districts don’t have to pay until Caissa K12 enrolls a student.

The company often targets students who have previously left the district for other schools or those who have recently moved into the district.

Stephens said with the push for private school vouchers in Texas and across the country, his company has seen more demand for their services. In Florida, which dramatically expanded its voucher program in 2023, some public school districts have turned to Caissa K12. Over 400,000 Florida children use public dollars from the Sunshine State’s voucher program to pay for some form of private schooling.

VOUCHERS: Texans think high-income families will dominate school vouchers. Is that true?

In the Houston area, Caissa has worked with at least eight districts: Aldine, Alief, Cy-Fair, Fort Bend, Houston, Klein, Spring Branch and Spring ISDs, according to a company spokesperson.

Killian said that while charter schools may have an in-house group for student marketing outreach, it made more sense for Cy-Fair ISD to outsource.

“Our money is kind of dedicated to our programs and the staffing that we need, so the idea of going to a third party that might have some expertise in reaching out and helping us market our campuses and our programs was really good,” Killian said.

In Spring Branch, Buchman said Caissa K12 helped enroll 164 students in 2024-2025 and 223 the next year.

While the district received \$6,160 per student from the state, it paid \$935 of that to Caissa K12 for each student. After giving the company their cut, Spring Branch saw a net \$856,900 boost in funding from the partnership in 2025.

However, Buchman said the district has since paused its contract with Caissa K12 as it researches how many students would have returned to Spring Branch, even without the company’s services.

SCHOOL CHOICE: More than 30K school voucher applications submitted on day one of Texas launch

Getting creative

In addition to outsourcing recruitment efforts, other districts have looked to online campaigns and other efforts.

Houston ISD spent \$350,000 on billboards to celebrate improved school ratings and is offering principals up to \$6,000 in bonuses for boosting enrollment.



Houston ISD has a billboard campaign to congratulate students and teachers for academic gains at the beginning of the 2025-26 school year.

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In Fort Bend ISD, the district launched an online campaign called “It’s a Win to Choose Fort Bend” to highlight “innovative programs, dedicated educators, and the deep sense of community that sets our district apart,” according to the district.

Killian said Cy-Fair not only hired a private consulting firm to expand their presence in the community, they've also invested more in marketing over the years to convince families to stay enrolled. That involves branding and informing families about unique programs in the district.

Cy-Fair ISD has had a streak as one of the fastest growing districts in the state. While it still is the third-largest district in Texas, its enrollment has stabilized at roughly 117,000 students and is expected to decline over the next 10 years.

MORE ON ENROLLMENT: Cy-Fair's streak as one of Texas' fastest-growing districts will end soon as enrollment stabilizes

Killian said it's critical to retain current students and maintain the district's "high quality" programs.

"We really need to make sure we have the student enrollment and student body to (maintain those programs)," Killian said. "That's one of the things when I got here two years ago I really appreciated about the district, where there's a commitment to every high school having all the programs."

One downside to the school competition and focus on marketing, Killian said, is taking potential funds away from programs or services.

"Dollars that would have otherwise been used to maybe make a better product or hire the best teacher you possibly could attract," Killian said.

Social media campaigns

Kevin Brown, executive director of the Texas Association of School Administrators, said he expects traditional school districts will have to keep getting more creative and aggressive to retain families, especially with the rollout of Texas' vouchers.

"That's just what the environment is requiring because you've got some charter schools that are ... paying big bucks to go out there and market," Brown said.



YES Prep Northline Secondary, 441 Little York Rd., in Houston is shown Thursday, July 31, 2025.
Melissa Phillip/Houston Chronicle

CHARTERS: Texas autism charter school blends therapy and academics amid high demand

While charter schools often use billboard ads and direct mail pamphlets, public schools often rely on social media for what Brown calls “the go public campaign” — boosting districts’ presence online, with frequent posts about academic achievements or videos of a unique activity.

Houston ISD took that to a new level when it launched a \$2 million promotional show to highlight school programs, academic successes, philanthropic initiatives and athletic accomplishments.

Killian said Cy-Fair has created a social media initiative where the district’s communication team films videos of him visiting campuses or attending classes like welding and woodworking to showcase their programs.

“We’re putting those things out in small little snippets to make it convenient for people to go in and see what makes Cy-Fair tick and what makes it special,” Killian said.

Killian said he realized the district needed to do something different when parents said in a survey they wanted a robotics program even though the district already had one. He said it

showed that the district can't assume parents know what's available when "making selections for their kids."

"We needed to be proactive in our marketing and how we outreach with parents," he said.

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Photo of Ashley Soebroto

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