

EXCLUSIVE

EDUCATION

Amid Leon schools enrollment drop, can recruitment firm turn the tide?

Superintendent Rocky Hanna wants to know: What's working? What's not?



Alaijah Cross

Tallahassee Democrat

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Key Points

- The district has hired a recruitment firm to survey families and develop strategies to bring students back.
 - The district aims to understand why families are leaving to improve its services and rebuild trust.
 - Falling student numbers have led to significant budget shortfalls, forcing spending cuts and the elimination of positions.
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With the growing competition for students because of school choice, the Leon County school district must answer one existential question:

How does it get kids back into the traditional public school system?

To answer it, the district has hired the [Caissa K-12 student recruitment firm](#) to survey families, analyze enrollment trends and [develop strategies](#).

Caissa President Adrian Bond says he's up to the challenge. "We're very confident about being able to recruit in the district. Leon County has a lot to be proud of," he said.

The hurdles are tall: Families increasingly have left public schools for private schools, public charter schools, homeschooling and other alternatives. As the

student body contracts and state dollars go with them, administrators across the state are faced with tough choices, like whether to close or consolidate individual schools.

The majority of the School Board has resisted pursuing [what they see as a "nuclear option."](#) That leaves Superintendent Rocky Hanna and his team to figure out where the system is going off the rails. And one way to do that is by hearing the stories of those who left.

For instance, the Tallahassee Democrat asked parents on Facebook why they were leaving the public school system or staying. One parent said she pulled her son from Canopy Oaks Elementary two years ago, because the district wasn't meeting her child's needs.

They didn't give "him the services he needed based on his disability, and instead labeled him a 'problem child,' " said the parent, who has since moved out of state. Now, she said her son is thriving "in another school district willing to accommodate his disability."

Another parent offered a different experience about the virtues of the school: "That's who helped me navigate and get my son a 504 plan," she said of Canopy Oaks. A 504 plan is for students with disabilities, outlining support to help them succeed in school. "We had the best experience while my kids were there," she added.

Now, after losing access to Canopy Oaks through the district's school choice program and returning her children to their zoned school, she said she's struggling to find a school that meets their needs as effectively.

Hanna wants to know: What's working? What's not?

Hanna said the district views the Caissa partnership as an opportunity to hear directly from families about what's working and what isn't.

The district has not previously conducted a systematic effort to track why students leave, he said, and he hopes the firm can provide insights that school staff have not been able to gather.

"This partnership will ... give us the data that we need, in order to make some informed decisions about ways for us to improve instead of just guessing," Hanna told the Democrat.

The effort comes as Leon County Schools faces mounting financial pressure from declining enrollment. District officials say student losses have contributed to millions of dollars in reduced revenue because state funding follows students to charter schools, private schools, homeschooling and other options.

Last year, Hanna said rising costs and the steady loss of students accounted for roughly \$6.2 million of a \$12.5 million budget shortfall, forcing the district to eliminate dozens of positions and [make sweeping spending cuts](#). And the pain continues this year with a [proposed bleak budget](#), which is about \$32 million less than what it was last year. It also [offers little hope for a teacher salary increase](#).

And that comes as Florida's education landscape continues to transform following the passage of [HB 1](#), legislation that expanded the state's school voucher program and made publicly funded scholarships available to virtually all K-12 students regardless of income. Gov. Ron DeSantis signed the measure into law in March 2023.

Supporters have hailed the universal school choice program as one of Florida's most significant education reforms, arguing parents should be free to choose the educational setting that best serves their children. Critics contend the program diverts resources from traditional public schools and makes it harder for districts to maintain services and staffing levels.

In Leon County, district leaders say its effects are being sorely felt.

Numbers show a falling student population

According to state data, Leon County has roughly 1,100 fewer public school students than it did five years ago. Hanna said the district cannot afford to ignore the trendline.

"Now we face this new phenomenon with vouchers and allowing kids and parents access to dollars to fund private school and homeschool programs, but still our public schools (are) holding our own," Hanna said.

District leaders have discussed strategies to attract and retain families, including expanding pre-kindergarten opportunities, strengthening specialized academic programs and improving the overall student experience.

Enrollment has become a central topic in school board budget discussions, with members acknowledging that student numbers are directly tied to district revenues.

Hanna said the district's greatest asset remains its educators and the thousands of families who continue to choose Leon County Schools despite having other options.

"I think we have struck a really good balance at providing for and meeting the needs of every child, no matter what their destination is after they leave us, and so I'm very proud of our product," Hanna said.

For Leon County Schools, the challenge may be less about competing with private schools and more about rebuilding trust among families whose decisions are often shaped by individual experiences.

The parent whose son left Canopy Oaks said the move changed his educational trajectory for the better. On the other hand, the second parent said the same school provided critical support that helped her child succeed.

As Caissa's workers begins knocking on doors and making calls, district leaders hope the conversations reveal more than why families left.

They're betting those same conversations will help bring them back.

Alaijah Cross formerly covered children & families for the Tallahassee Democrat.