

K-12 Recruitment in the School Choice Era

*Your Step-by-Step Playbook for
Meeting Enrollment Goals*

Mission

K-12 Recruitment in the School Choice Era: Your Step-by-Step Playbook for Meeting Enrollment Goals

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K-12 Recruitment in the School Choice Era:

Your Step-by-Step Playbook for Meeting Enrollment Goals

The Challenge

Meeting K-12 school enrollment goals is getting harder, and for many schools, much more so. And this persistent challenge is not going away.



Here's why:

MORE OPTIONS

The growth in the school-choice movement means parents have a wide range of choices within their districts as public schools, magnet schools, charter schools, and private schools vie for their attention. Inter-district options only add to the competition.

CHANGING PRIORITIES

The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools and families to explore remote schooling, and some parents discovered that the flexibility that comes with homeschooling, micro-schools, or virtual schools was a better fit. Add fears about school shootings and other risks arising in some school climates, and it's no wonder parents are looking beyond traditional brick-and-mortar options.

POPULATION DECLINE

All this is happening [against the backdrop of declines in the population of school-age children projected through the end of this decade](#). In fact, the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), the statistical agency of the U.S. Department of Education, expects the number of school-age children to fall 5% by 2031. That's millions of students.

The Takeaway

In this crowded education landscape, your school must learn to compete and break through the noise to emerge as the right school for the number of students needed to meet your enrollment goals.

The Solution

A recruitment marketing strategy gives you the tools and tactics to stand out from the crowd. Many private schools and larger charter school management organizations have embraced holistic recruitment marketing — and benefited from it — for years.

Independent charter schools as well as district and magnet schools must embrace a new set of skills and capabilities and do the same if they want to compete.

- A recruitment strategy is a framework for reaching enrollment goals using your available resources efficiently and effectively.
- It provides a clear roadmap of priorities and cadence while tracking performance and responding to trends.

What This *Doesn't* Look Like

A catchy tagline and a launch-it-and-leave-it website are not enough to move you to the top of parents' lists of school choices. Neither are fluctuating forays into social media, one-off professional videos, or inconsistent billboard or radio advertising that fails to build your brand.

What This *Does* Look Like

An effective strategy starts with an open and comprehensive, internal conversation with staff and current parents to discover why a family should choose your school. Once you have this information, you're ready to begin telling your story.

Identify and create compelling narratives that set your school apart, resonate with prospective families, and establish a strong brand and respected standing in your community.

To succeed, you'll need to tell these stories consistently and thoughtfully and introduce them to your audience again and again throughout the year — not only during peak periods of school recruitment. And you need to make all this happen with limited marketing resources.

You can do it — if you adopt an integrated, digital recruitment marketing strategy.

How to Get There

This K-12 Recruitment Playbook is a step-by-step strategic planning guide that brings all the components together and guides informed decisions.

Let's get started!

Step 1

Know Your Families: Create Model Profiles

If you think a good recruitment campaign starts with a media plan or new website, hit the brakes. Successful marketing pros, social influencers, and political advisors all know that **the initial and most important step is to know your audience**. And with school recruitment, that audience is families, particularly parents.

Whether you can identify what matters most to them can mean the difference between success and failure. **Start by creating model profiles of fictional families based on factual information.**

A family profile is the lens through which you'll develop your recruitment marketing strategy.

It is a detailed, semi-fictional description of your target families. When you begin building your school's strategy, you'll need to develop a handful of profiles that capture the distinctive traits and demographics of families you want to reach.





Top Tips for Creating Family Profiles



GATHER INFORMATION

The good news is that you already have much of the knowledge you need to begin. Your existing community of parents can provide unmatched insight into their authentic experiences. They're a gold mine of information. Conduct surveys and interviews and analyze the data and metrics around the families' journeys from interest to enrollment.

Prospective families can seem like the great unknown. You need to determine what the ideal families for your school look like and where to find them.

You'll then need to go deeper and identify the demographics, lifestyles, and behaviors that make each family unique — from ethnicity, education, occupation, and income to motivations, preferred communication channels, pain points, and goals. You can then build groups around these shared traits to create more targeted profiles.



BUILD MODEL PROFILES

Since you want to attract real families, your profiles should feel like real people. Give each a name and face, craft a narrative of who they are, and summarize key details.

Some Examples:

ACADEMIC-FOCUSED GUTIERREZ HOUSEHOLD

Family Structure: Two-parent household with two children (ages 8 and 11)

Age of Parents/Guardians: Late 30s/early 40s

Occupation(s): Social worker and marketing manager

Location: Suburban

Socioeconomic Status: Middle class

Educational Philosophy: Emphasis on academic rigor and college preparation.

Key Decision-Making Factors: Academic reputation, standardized test scores, quality of teachers, challenging curriculum.

Communication Channels: Email, school websites, online reviews.

Challenges: Finding a school that provides enough academic challenge and opportunities for advanced learners.

Goals: Want children to attend top universities and have successful careers.





COMMUNITY-ORIENTED JONES FAMILY

Family Structure: Single-parent household with one child (age 6)

Age of Parent/Guardian: Early 30s

Occupation: Para-professional

Location: Urban

Socioeconomic Status: Lower middle class

Educational Philosophy: Values a strong sense of community, diversity, and social-emotional learning.

Key Decision-Making Factors: School culture, inclusivity, teacher-student relationships, extracurricular options.

Communication Channels: Social media, word-of-mouth referrals, school events.

Challenges: Finding a school that reflects his family's values and provides a supportive environment.

Goals: Wants children to develop strong social skills, empathy, and a sense of belonging.

TECH-SAVVY KIM FAMILY

Family Structure: Two-parent household with three children (ages 5, 9, and 13)

Age of Parents/Guardians: Early 40s

Occupation(s): Software engineer and graphic designer

Location: Urban

Socioeconomic Status: Upper middle class

Educational Philosophy: Interested in innovative teaching methods, technology integration, and project-based learning.

Key Decision-Making Factors: Use of technology in the classroom, STEM programs, personalized learning opportunities.

Communication Channels: School websites, text messages, social media, online forums, educational apps.

Challenges: Finding a school that keeps pace with technological advancements and prepares students for the digital age.

Goals: Wants children to be creative problem-solvers and comfortable using technology.



The Takeaway

In this crowded education landscape, your school must learn to compete and break through the noise to emerge as the right school for the number of students needed to meet your enrollment goals.

Step 2

Define Your Brand

Before school choice disrupted traditional recruitment and enrollment practices, many education leaders didn't give much thought to their school's brand — what immediately comes to mind when people think about your school. But in a competitive education landscape, a strong brand is critical.

You might think of a brand as your school's colors or its team mascot, but it is much more. It is a set of expectations, narratives, memories, and personal interactions. **Your brand paints a picture in people's minds when they hear your school's name.**

Creating a strong brand for a K-12 school is crucial for attracting students, engaging families, and building a positive reputation in the community.



Top Tips for Building Your Brand



DEFINE WHO YOU ARE

Before you can make your mark with a strong brand narrative, you need to define your school's mission and vision.

Taking the time to write clear mission and vision statements can help you distill the features that articulate your brand.

A mission statement defines your school's primary purpose, goals, and means of achieving them. These should guide your branding efforts and communicate your core values.

A **vision statement describes your school's aspiration for what the future looks like**, and what drives and inspires your community of staff, teachers, and families. These statements should reflect your school's core values. They should be succinct and actionable and should be readily visible on your website and school marketing collateral.



TELL YOUR STORY

While you do need a logo and tagline to give your school an identity, and you need to use visual branding in all your public-facing interactions, that's just the start. Building a strong brand doesn't happen overnight. You must tell your story over time with consistent messaging, in many formats, and through a variety of channels. But before you can share your story, you and your staff must be able to tell it clearly and concisely.

Ask yourself key questions:



How would you describe your school in a couple of short sentences — what's your "elevator pitch"?



What are your school's strengths? What educational philosophies do you embrace?



What programs or opportunities set you apart? (e.g., STEM focus, arts integration, strong athletics, character development)

Build your narratives around differentiators and remember that storytelling can be most compelling when it comes not only from school leaders but from students, parents, alumni, and teachers. They are the ambassadors who can build your school's brand and reputation, online and in the community.



NAIL YOUR MESSAGING

Identify 3-5 key messages that get at the heart of what you want parents to know. Include your stand-out offerings, like rigorous academics, a diverse and inclusive student body, or experiential learning opportunities. And be sure to stress how these features will benefit their child, such as college preparation or career readiness. Keep messaging consistent throughout your branding and reinforce it with your storytelling.



MAKE YOUR PRESENCE KNOWN

Building your brand requires a strong presence online and in real life. Develop an easy-to-navigate website, an active social media presence, and informative, relevant marketing content targeted to your audiences. And be sure to tap into the singular power of community and word of mouth. You can build and strengthen your brand by encouraging parents, alumni, and community members to participate in school events and activities, and to actively engage with prospective families.

Successful K-12 School Brands:

- Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP): Focuses on college preparation and character development. [KIPP University Prep](#)
- Thematic Magnet School: Focused on a specialty area, emphasis on self-directed learning and problem solving. [Marine Science Magnet High School](#)
- Montessori: Highlights individualized learning and hands-on experiences. [Guidepost Montessori](#)

The Takeaway

A strong brand provides instant recognition, a shortcut that quickly helps people believe that your school is the best choice for their child. And once you establish your brand, you can easily retell this story, expanding your reach and reputation.

Step 3

Go Digital-First

The research is very clear. When evaluating school alternatives, parents rely on the web.

In fact, a school's web presence is one of the two leading sources of information that parents use when making their school choice decision (community networks is the other). They search online for the "best schools near me." They navigate to the school website. They check social media sites to see what's going on at your school and educational sites like Niche.com and GreatSchools.net to see your school's reviews. Digital-first marketing starts with getting your online house in order.

Digital-first marketing doesn't wait for a parent to find their way to your online properties. It allows you to meet parents where they are — on social media, in online parenting groups, on streaming services. You can get started quickly and cost effectively with search marketing, social media outreach, online and streaming media buys, emails, and texting. Digital delivers the right message at the right time — at each stage of the recruitment and enrollment process.

Better yet, a digital-first approach offers extensive audience targeting. Among the many targeting parameters are geographic targeting down to the neighborhood level, interests, the age of the parents, and whether they have kids in the household.

Digital channels also provide free data reporting and powerful analytic tools. This informs what messages are working, what isn't, and how best to recalibrate.



Top Tips for Digital-First School Marketing



BUILD A STRONG ONLINE PRESENCE

A strong school website is integral to going “digital first,” as it is one of the two leading sources of information that parents use when making their school choice decision. (See Step 4 for the other.) When parents type “the best schools near me,” you want your school’s website to rise to the top of the list and make that first impression count. Ensure your website is modern, mobile-friendly, and easy to navigate with key information about curriculum, admission processes, tuition, contact info, etc., front and center.



USE SOCIAL MEDIA

Maintain active profiles on platforms your target audience uses. Share student achievements, upcoming events, photos from recent events, teacher and student spotlights, and behind-the-scenes glimpses of school life. And don't forget videos, which bring high online engagement and can be created without large expense or sophisticated software.

Get this content in front of the right audiences by tapping into the platform’s paid advertising programs, and create targeted ads based on demographics, interests, and behaviors. Once you set your budget, you can bid on ad placements.



ONLINE REVIEWS

Encourage satisfied parents and alumni to leave positive comments on school review websites and other relevant platforms. Respond promptly and professionally to any negative reviews that pop up so future visitors see that you have addressed concerns and welcome feedback.



DON'T FORGET TO EMAIL AND TEXT

Respond promptly to inquiries and rely on more than one method to be sure your messages get to the recipients and they can readily see them. Ensure that automated texts and emails make it easy for families to connect with key staff. Show that you're listening and care about your online community. Let them drive how they want to engage — text messages vs. emails, for example — and communicate consistently.

The Takeaway

The best way to raise awareness that generates interest in your school and ultimately leads to growing enrollment is through [integrated, digital-first marketing](#) and cultivation.

Step 4

Play The Community Ground Game

While integrated digital-first marketing may be new to many K-12 schools, engaging with your community comes naturally. Expanding on and strengthening connections outside of your school's walls is [a great way to accelerate the growth of your brand and reputation and build enrollment](#).

You'll find plenty of opportunities in existing community networks, which should be a key part of your recruitment strategy. These informal networks are often parents' trusted, go-to sources of information.

That's why you must find ways to get out into the community and show what you have to offer. A community-based ground game can be a powerful way to connect with potential students and families.



Top Tips for Playing the Ground Game



MARKETING THE OPEN-HOUSE

The first step to building strong community connections is getting people through your doors. Introduce yourself to prospective families, collect information to keep you connected, and invite them to events and activities.



MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

Remember, busy families often don't have the time to go looking for you. Meet them where they are by getting out to the places where people congregate — libraries, recreation centers, boys and girls clubs, etc. Ask these organizations to let you give presentations about the important work your school is doing and let parents envision it as a place to send their child.



BUILD A BUZZ

Word-of-mouth can be a powerful recruitment tool. Families often listen to what trusted members of their networks have to say. The good news is that these “influencers” are already out there, and you likely already know them. Ask yourself: Which parents are the most active volunteers? Which people are most connected with others across segments of your community? Who leads the programs and organizations that are most important to families? Engage these “influencers” to tap into the power of [word-of-mouth marketing](#).



GIVE BACK

Have staff participate as a team in charity events like road races where they can volunteer, talk up your school, and share swag with participants. Arrange for students to volunteer with local nonprofits, offer tutoring, and open your school to use for community events.



BECOME MEDIA SAVVY

Keep local media informed about school happenings, student achievements, or new programs through press releases or by fostering relationships with education reporters.



EMPOWER YOUR ALUMNI

While you likely turn to them for fundraising, they can play an even more important role in your recruitment strategy. Consider your alumni as a turnkey network of people with a positive mindset about your school. They can tell the story of their experience and share it with others who may then share it with friends and family. Many private schools prioritize staying connected with their alumni, who are credible brand ambassadors. District, public charter, and magnet schools need to do the same.

The Takeaway

Target your efforts by identifying the specific needs and interests of your community. Develop genuine connections with businesses and service organizations. Be consistent, follow through, and determine what outreach efforts are most effective.

Step 5

Recruit Year-Round

Marketing experts know the importance of communicating with their audiences throughout the year. A year-round marketing plan is a strategic tool that provides the advantages of focused, thoughtful planning, effective deployment of staff and resources, the time needed to develop high-quality communications, and opportunities to respond to trends or change tactics when things don't go as planned.

K-12 schools are no different, yet they often make the mistake of limiting their recruitment marketing to seasonal events. That means your school drops off the radar of busy families making crucial decisions about their child's education.

You can avoid this mistake with a 12-month recruitment marketing calendar.

Top Tips for Year-Round Recruitment Marketing



MAP IT OUT

Create a [detailed, year-long roadmap](#) outlining all marketing activities and aligning them with your enrollment goals.





STAY TOP OF MIND

Look beyond fall or spring open houses for prospective families, homecoming weekends, and application and acceptance deadlines. Think of a 12-month calendar, not a school calendar, and plan recruitment activities and events throughout the year.



TAKE TIME TO TAKE STOCK

A consistent and compelling year-round recruitment approach provides breathing room to nurture relationships and gain insights into your audience. It also allows you to stay nimble and make data-driven decisions to adapt to changing circumstances and new information.



PUT FAMILIES FIRST

Year-round recruitment marketing is a great tool for easing families through the process from an initial school visit to pre-application inquiries and application processes, to enrollment and the first day of school.

The Takeaway

A consistent and compelling year-round recruitment approach gives you a competitive edge. It keeps your school top of mind for parents and can be a key tool to move families from “inquiring” to “enrolled.”

Step 6

Make the Journey Truly Welcoming

That first interaction between families and your school sets the tone for what follows, for better or worse. Ensure subsequent interactions are welcoming, personalized, and responsive. Quickly and clearly establish the steps along the journey from curiosity to commitment — school visits, application, and ultimately, enrollment.

From that first encounter — whether by email, phone, text message, or at an open house — prospective families want to be assured that they are a priority. Offer individualized guidance through application and enrollment processes.

Ensure clear, personalized, and consistent communication throughout this journey.



Top Tips for the Welcoming Journey



INQUIRY & INITIAL INTEREST

Your first touchpoint should be an immediate email reply — within hours — to an interested family. Be sure to mention what makes your school stand out from the crowd, include links to relevant resources, and close with an invitation for a phone call or visit. A follow-up text message within a couple of days brings a more casual and personalized approach.

You can then follow up with a phone call to answer parents' questions, to gather information about the family's needs and priorities, and to determine next steps. Keep communication going through the families' preferred channel.



APPLICATION & CONSIDERATION

Use text messages to send a gentle nudge about an upcoming deadline or to remind them about an invitation to an open house. Immediately confirm receipt of a student's application by email and outline next steps and deadlines. Based on what your admissions staff has learned about the family, send targeted emails related to their specific interests.



ADMISSION & ENROLLMENT

Send a formal notification of acceptance and spell out next steps. Provide a welcome packet with a personalized letter along with logistical and practical information, including deadlines. Host a welcome event for newly admitted families where they can meet teachers, staff, and other accepted students.

The Takeaway

Ensure all communications throughout the journey are personalized — use parents' and students' names and provide content that appeals to their interests. Be responsive, clear, and accessible.

Step 7

Get Personal with Marketing Automation & CRM Technology

A high-touch personalized recruitment strategy can sound daunting. You might be wondering how your already strapped staff will find the time to implement this approach. Enter the power of digital technology.

This might sound counterintuitive. But with the right technologies, you can deliver the human touch and cultivate personal relationships with prospective families, new enrollees, alumni, and other members of your community – all while saving you time.

With Customer Relationship Management (CRM) technology, you can free up your staff to provide families with the kind of personalized attention that can mean the difference between choosing to enroll their child in your school or going elsewhere. A CRM platform is a software tool that helps you manage your relationships with families and other key stakeholders. [It can provide data storage, automate marketing efforts, manage fundraising campaigns, track interactions with families and other supporters, and respond to their concerns and questions quickly.](#)

Top Tips for Using CRM Technology



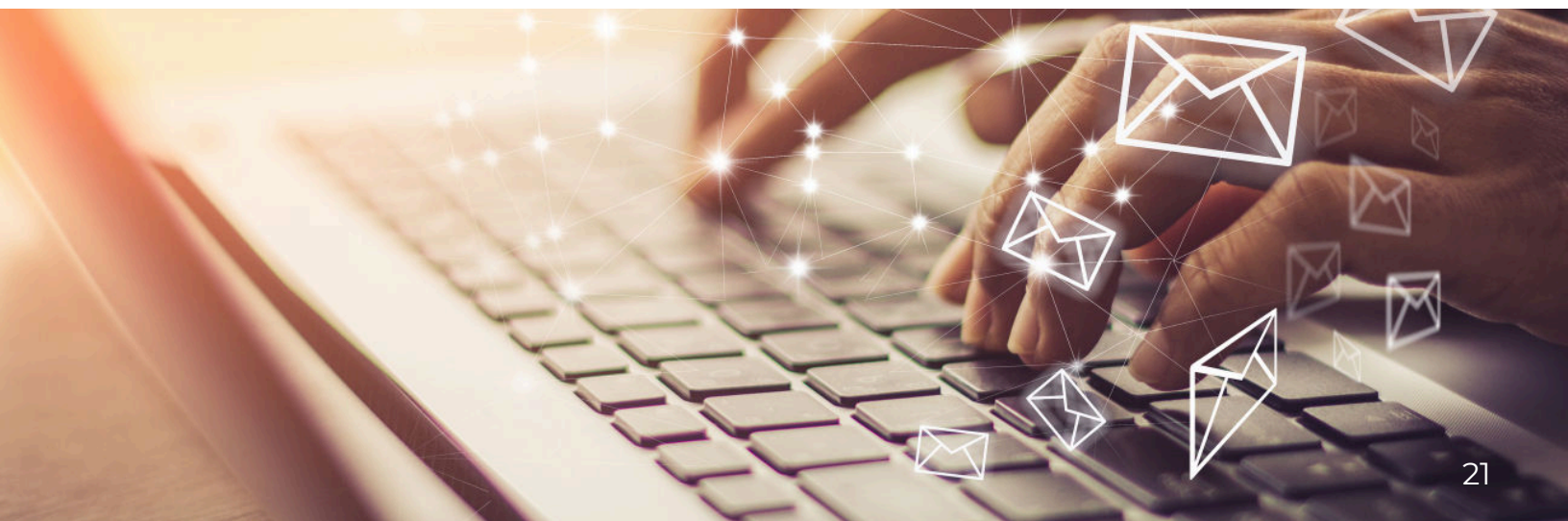
A CENTRALIZED PLATFORM

Let this technology manage all applicant data, interactions, and communications in one place. This eliminates data silos and provides a 360-degree view of a prospective family and student.



PERSONALIZED ENGAGEMENT

Use it to tailor outreach based on interests, demographics, and academic history. Automated touchpoints and personalized content increase engagement and build relationships.





STREAMLINED APPLICATION PROCESS

A CRM can simplify online inquiries and applications with forms, document uploads, and real-time status updates. This improves the experience for families and reduces administrative burden.



AUTOMATED WORKFLOWS

Automate manual tasks like communication triggers, notifications, and application reviews. This frees up staff time to focus on student support and relationship building.



ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

Benefit from the tracking of key metrics like application rates, yield, and enrollment trends. Data-driven dashboards identify areas for improvement and optimize strategies during each recruitment phase and from year to year.

The Takeaway

Make the most of specific features that aid in recruitment marketing and enrollment, including the collection of essential information, personalized communication plans, user-friendly application portals, recruitment event management and tracking, and robust reporting and analytics.

Step 8

Track & Trend Results

Effective recruitment and enrollment in K-12 education doesn't stop and start with the dates on your school calendar. It is an ongoing process that requires careful monitoring and adjustment. Data management plays a critical role and can inform every phase of your recruitment strategy to help you identify and build on successful tactics and strategies — and drop the ineffective ones.

These insights allow you to adjust your approach during your recruitment cycle to improve outcomes before minor weak spots become bigger problems.

This flexibility is increasingly important as schools compete for students amid changing demographics, preferences, and other external factors. Data also helps you assess your recruitment strategy within a larger context so you can take measure of where you started, how far you have come, and how far you need to go, year-over-year.



Top Tips for Tracking Results



TRACK WHAT MATTERS

Begin by defining Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) — such as enrollment numbers, application rates, website traffic, and event attendance.



HARNESS TECHNOLOGY

Use tools to analyze website traffic, conversion rates, social media performance, and email open rates.



ASK AND LISTEN

Gather feedback from students and parents, and act on their concerns or pain points to refine your strategy.



VISUALIZE DATA

Use charts, graphs, and dashboards to make data easy to understand, track trends, or share with key stakeholders.

The Takeaway

Ultimately, when your recruitment strategies are shaped by data-driven decisions, you can better attract and retain students and build a vibrant community and strong reputation.

Put It All Together

Follow this playbook from Step 1 to Step 8, and you will have created a customized, actionable and effective recruitment marketing strategy for your school. It's time to get started!

Now that you know **what** to do to implement a successful recruitment marketing strategy, find out **how** to do it.

**Want to learn how to run the recruitment playbook?
iMission is here to help.**

[Contact us today to get started.](#)


Mission

What We Do

iMission Institute is a social sector marketing agency and a nonprofit technology consulting firm that offers nonprofits and K-12 magnet, charter, and public schools the power of integrated marketing and technology systems. We help our clients raise awareness, build their brands and attain the goals that matter.



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