

Student Retention, Attrition, and a Culture of Belonging in Private Schools™



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Student Retention, Attrition, and a Culture of Belonging

After working as a public school math teacher for nine years, Anna Maria was ready for a change. She wanted to continue to follow her passion for teaching, only with smaller class sizes and more flexibility in lesson planning, so she applied to an independent school nearby.

When the head of school offered her the position, he asked her to join the Retention Committee. He explained, “We work to keep our students and their families engaged because they choose whether to stay or re-enroll every school year. We want to build and maintain a culture of belonging. I’ve appointed a cross-departmental team of faculty and staff committed to keeping students in our school. With your fresh perspective, you may see things that others overlook.”

He added, “We need to address our melt. Sometimes a student is admitted or re-enrolls, the family pays the deposit in the spring, and then the student doesn’t show up when school starts in the fall.”

“Melt” meant that the school wouldn’t collect that year’s tuition, a classroom seat would be empty, and a valuable member of the school community would be missing. Anna Maria had coached the MathCounts team at the public school. She knew that those students had been more engaged in all their school activities because of their interest and involvement with the team. She also knew how losing one student from that team would have impacted her small group. She looked forward to working with others at the school to help students and their families feel a sense of belonging and decide to return year after year.

Retention Committee Kickoff

As introductions were made at the first retention committee meeting, Anna Maria noticed the members included other faculty, a coach, the director of enrollment, staff members from marketing, advancement, IT, and the business office, and the front office receptionist. This meant the committee was composed of staff and faculty with diverse “touchpoints” for students and families and could include a variety of perspectives.

Eric, the director of enrollment, kicked off the meeting by sharing vital statistics from the Enrollment Management Association (EMA), which showed that more than half (52%) of independent schools had seen increases in voluntary attrition in the last three years. In another report, EMA found that two-thirds of parents were actively searching for a new school while currently enrolled in an independent school. In addition, independent schools are facing increasing competition, not only from other private schools but also from public schools (32%) and charter and magnet schools (8%).

Cheryl, the school's marketing and communications coordinator, said, “In the marketing world, finding a new customer can cost up to five times more than keeping a customer. It's typical to have a 60 to 70 percent success rate in selling to a current customer but only 5 to 20 percent to a new customer. So it's a lot easier to work to keep the families we already have.”

Eric asked the group to brainstorm answers to two questions, working in pairs. When they shared their thoughts with the whole group, these ideas surfaced:

Why do families stay in an independent school?

1. **Inertia.** It's easier to stay in a school than to research and apply to other schools and deal with changes in uniforms, transportation plans, after-school programs, and related items.
2. **Connections.** Families may feel connected to a school community, especially if parents, relatives, or older siblings attended or friends or colleagues have children there. They may have made friends with other families by working on a school activity or attending a school event. Nationally, three-quarters of families have prior private school experience.
3. **School values.** The family's goals and beliefs align with the school's mission, especially in schools with religious affiliations.
4. **Academics.** The teachers nurture the child's love of learning, providing excellent academics and specific attention to each student's strengths and weaknesses.
5. **Whole child.** Beyond academics, the school helps each child develop soft skills such as empathy, compassion, self-control, and communication.
6. **Extracurricular activities.** Clubs, sports, and activities offered match the interests of the child.



Why do families leave an independent school?

1. **Value.** Families compare the cost of the school with what they think they are getting and hope to get “more for their money” elsewhere or believe they can get almost the same value from a free public school education.
2. **Academics.** There’s an academic mismatch between the school and the student who finds the work too hard or too easy.
3. **Family move.** The family is moving to another city for a new job or another non-school reason.
4. **Expectations.** Expectations are not being met in some way. Perhaps the school doesn’t offer the enrichment activities the family wanted, or the academic program has more homework than the family expected. Maybe there’s less emphasis on something the parent highly valued, such as foreign language instruction, or recent graduates aren’t getting into prestigious universities.
5. **Unhappiness.** The child is unhappy at school. There may be a family issue, the child may have a problem with a particular teacher or situation at school, or the child hasn’t made friends.
6. **Finances.** Something drastically changes the family’s financial situation—such as a layoff, death, illness, or divorce—and they don’t think they can afford the school and haven’t considered asking for more financial aid.
7. **Commuting time.** Transporting students to and from school is considered too long or complicated.
8. **Loss.** The student’s favorite coach or teacher leaves, and the student wants to go to that coach or teacher’s new school.

At the end of that first committee meeting, Eric assigned tasks to different members in preparation for the next one. He asked two committee members who had worked in other independent schools to find out what their former schools were doing to drive retention. Anna Maria and a few others were asked to dive into some data he provided. Everyone was to think about ways to build community and a sense of belonging. He thanked everyone for participating.

“Only about a third of independent schools have a formal retention committee,” he said, “And this is the first time our school has created one. I know we can make a difference here!”



65%

of families actively search for a new school while currently enrolled in an independent school

—EMA’s Ride to Independent Schools



\$3,677

median cost-per-enrollment of a new student in independent schools

—NAIS Cost-Per-Enrollment Study

“Language, identity, place, home: these are all of a piece—just different elements of belonging and not-belonging.”

—Jhumpa Lahiri

Examining the Attrition Data

At the next meeting, Eric started by analyzing the attrition data. The school's attrition rate of 9% was just a bit more than the national average of 7.8%. Before the pandemic, the rate was closer to 7%. Some students left because of family changes or moves, some chose to attend another independent school, and some left for affordability concerns, choosing public school instead.

Anna Maria had helped calculate what that meant for the school budget. Not only do they lose an average of \$11,000 in tuition per student, but to fill that empty seat, they also need to increase their marketing costs by \$3,258 per student lost. She determined this estimated cost per enrollment—what it took to attract and acquire one new student—by taking the school's admissions marketing expenses and dividing it by the number of new students attributed to that marketing.

Eric suggested looking at which grades seemed to have the most significant attrition. It was logical that "entry points" like 9th grade might be when families would change schools, but the attrition was higher elsewhere. Lower school students had the highest rates of attrition.

He noted that since the pandemic, the number of applicants had increased at their school, as it had nationally. Median enrollment in NAIS schools decreased by nearly 3% between 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 but

rebounded by 4.6% between 2020-2021 and 2021-2022. In that same period, 66% of schools increased their enrollment. Recovery in lower grade levels, particularly in prekindergarten, was crucial to growth in total enrollment during 2021-2022.

Fostering a Culture of Belonging

"When students are with us for summer camp, they become more committed to staying in the fall," noted one committee member. "They feel like they belong here. We can build upon that." She used the example of how Hackley School in Tarrytown, NY, has summer programs for children from kindergarten through 12th grade that help create a year-round culture of belonging. Three-fourths of summer registrations come from currently enrolled families.

Peter Sawkins, director of auxiliary programs at Hackley, said that summer programs—led primarily by the school's teachers—are very much a service. "Being flexible, compassionate, and easy for families is key." When approached with a sense of service, this engagement can deepen connections with the school, increasing retention. In addition, almost half of the summer students who weren't previously at the school show interest in enrolling. One parent commented, "Although our children were the only ones in their group who did not attend Hackley, they felt at home from day one. They truly enjoyed the program and the friends they made."

National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) Data and Analysis for School Leadership

2022-2023 Median Attrition Rates

Schools serving only elementary grades — 11.7%

Schools serving only secondary grades — 4.7%

Schools serving elementary and secondary — 7.8%

Schools serving more than 700 students — 5.2%



Eric clarified that the committee should incorporate proven practices and be open to new concepts. “Look for ideas we can adapt or adopt to build a culture of belonging,” he asked the committee.

He shared his sister’s experience with a lower school in central Illinois. After her children were admitted, her family was invited to a spring welcome meeting with the school and parent group. Over the summer before school started, new families received constant communication. They were matched with a “buddy family” already involved with the school to help answer questions. In September, the grandparents were invited for a special day. At the start of the year, the school created “animal family” groups of students from different grades. Each child was assigned to an animal family with names like Bear, Eagle, or Wolf. This multi-age grouping, which stayed together for years, allowed older students to mentor and model behaviors for younger ones.

Eric said his sister particularly liked how teachers worked with students to develop a love of learning, social-emotional skills, and a sense of responsibility, which were essential values for her. “She and her kids really feel at home there,” he commented.

The committee divided up to brainstorm actions that could help create a culture of belonging from three perspectives: students, families, and faculty and staff. When they reconvened, the ideas included these:

Students

1. **New student onboarding.** Create a student leadership team to contact new students before school starts in the fall, help plan and deliver the new student welcome ceremony and orientation, and give campus tours.
2. **New student “lunch bunch.”** Invite small groups of new students early in the school year to have lunch with a counselor, enrollment officer, or Head of School. Help them feel part of the community and meet others new to the school. Ask them to share their experiences in the first weeks, what tips they would give others, and what you could improve for next year’s new students.



3. **Welcome team.** Have administrators and faculty members take turns at the carpool point to welcome students with a smile and a positive comment. This could happen daily, weekly, or monthly. This allows students and families to meet and connect with more adults at the school.
4. **Student focus group.** Invite a small diverse group of students to discuss what’s working and provide space for them to voice their concerns or desires for change. Be prepared to hear criticism and be open to making rational changes.
5. **Student affinity groups.** Form affinity groups to give students who share an identity a safe space to celebrate and support each other. Other schools nurtured belonging through affinity groups for Black students, Latino students, Jewish students in a

Catholic school, LGBTQ+ students, and more. These groups allow students to discuss mutual concerns and help each other navigate school dynamics.

Families

1. **Ask why.** During the admissions process, ask families what is most important for them in a school and why they're specifically interested in yours. Keep track of the answers from those who enroll and those who don't. Both will be telling.
2. **Parent pairings.** Offer new families the opportunity to be paired with a family with a child of similar age who has been at the school for a year or more. The new family will have someone who can provide insight and advice and help understand what's in store during the year. Pair bilingual or multilingual families to foster that sense of belonging.
3. **Volunteer opportunities.** Hold a Family Volunteer Coffee event, during which current families share opportunities with new ones. How can they sign up to chaperone a field trip, help with a reception, run the book fair, help make costumes, or visit a classroom on career day? A parent association may lead this activity. Family involvement increases their perception of the school's value and deepens their sense of belonging.
4. **School ambassadors.** Create an ambassador program with your most involved families. Word of mouth is priceless in the admissions process and beyond. When families have a role to play and feel their contributions are valued, they become a vital part of the community.
5. **Family meetings.** Plan for the Head and other administrators to have one-on-one meetings with families to ensure they feel heard.
6. **Community day.** Get the whole family involved in a community outreach day where the school tackles a volunteer project. Work with a local nonprofit organization to sort food in a food pantry, clean up a park or beach, paint a community center, or plant trees and flowers at a retirement home. Upper school students could work with a Habitat for Humanity, ReStore, or Eagle Scout project. Hosting a schoolwide volunteer day can give everyone a sense of shared purpose. In addition to creating a common focus, you'll gain valuable visibility in the local community.
7. **Sharing student work.** Display student art and other work throughout the school to provide a sense of dynamic inclusion and build parental pride. All school families love seeing photos of their children in the classroom and knowing what they learn each month. Seeing work from older students helps families understand what's next for their younger children.

Faculty and staff

1. **Faculty and staff workshops.** Help teachers, staff, and coaches recognize signals that a student may be an attrition risk, share opportunities and roles that are available to them, and gather case studies. Often, they will know when students feel out of place, when families are unhappy or disengaged with the school, or when a family change may impact finances. School staff may be the first to see issues arise, especially at the reception desk, lunch room, or helping with after-school activities.



Additional Resources:

[Marketing for Admissions in K-12 Private Schools](#)

[Leveraging Social Media for Recruiting and Retention in K-12 Schools](#)

2. **Grade-level meetings.** Conduct quarterly or monthly grade-level sessions to offer teachers and advisors time to discuss students and share concerns and praise. The counselor, academic dean, or division head can run the meeting, compile a list of students, and decide how to use the information.
3. **Enrollment updates.** Keep faculty and staff informed about enrollment. Tell them about programs and plans for retention. Ask those who have helped with admission and enrollment to share their perspectives. Help everyone working at the school feel connected to enrollment efforts.
4. **Collect information.** Create an online form for teachers and staff to submit concerns about students at risk of leaving. Include the student's name, why they might be at risk—academic difficulty, financial matters, bullying, a social issue, etc.—and how they learned about it. Create an at-risk list and assign individuals to start a conversation with the family or check in on the student.

Family Migration Patterns

Eric also shared a study about family migration patterns in the United States. South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Arizona, and Florida saw in-migration in 2022, which helped stabilize or even increase enrollment in independent schools. As more employers allowed remote work, warmer locations with favorable tax structures gained population. Some schools had more interest from families than spaces available. Conversely, out-migration from Illinois, California, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Michigan made it harder for schools to maintain enrollment numbers.

For example, one Illinois K–8 independent school with more than two applicants for every open spot in 2023 briefly considered expanding the school. However, after looking at local population trends in birth rate and out-migration, they decided they would rather have too many applicants this year than too few in four or five years and incur the capital costs for more classrooms.

The Community and Belonging Survey of Students

With more than 22,000 students from 80 U.S. and 16 Canadian upper schools, this survey provides some insight into the student experience. The top five statistically significant predictors of “I feel a strong sense of belonging at the school” accounted for about 56% of the variability for both U.S. and Canadian students. The top four statements for both groups were:

1. I feel that I gain meaningful positive value from being a member of the school community.
2. I feel respected and valued at school.
3. I feel emotionally safe while at school.
4. I have at least one close friend at school.

Among U.S. students, the fifth statement was: **I am enthusiastically involved in out-of-classroom activities.**

Among Canadian students, the fifth statement was: **I feel that I make a meaningful positive contribution to the experience of others within the school community.**

The survey report provides extensive charts and graphs offering insights into student attitudes and experiences in upper schools. A school considering a student survey should note the structure and type of questions asked.

The opposite was true for a K–12 independent school in North Carolina that had enrollment drop at the start of the pandemic. When new students started enrolling in 2021, the head of school was concerned that they were “short-timers” who wouldn’t stay. To his delight, they have had a surge in applications and will be building classrooms to accommodate more students. They are benefitting from the in-migration of families.

Other Retention Strategies

A school housed in and ancillary to a religious community may offer a small tuition discount for community members. This also may help families meet other families who share their values, become more involved in the group’s broader mission, and nurture a sense of belonging.

Families who select a school when a child is four years old may need to be “resold” on the school a few years later when that child is ready for middle school. What is most important for a preschooler differs significantly for a preteen or teen. Families usually know very little about the curriculum, opportunities, or special programs available as the child advances through the school.

In the retention committee meeting, Eric shared that one independent school in the area had a “moving up” ceremony at the start of the spring semester for students moving to the next grade in the fall. The focus was on students moving from lower school to middle or middle school to upper, as these were attrition points for them. The timing was set before the admissions process was in full swing, to engage families before they left.

The Buddy System

Families and students may be misinformed about “what’s next” in their school journey. Pairing them with an older student, such as having a middle school student paired with an upper school student, is one way to show them where the curriculum is headed and provide insight and guidance for their next steps.

Even when a child has attended a school for years, the family will need information and encouragement to



re-enroll for the next school year. Re-enrollment is not a given, and a school should be proactive in retaining students by nurturing relationships with other students along the way. During admissions season, other schools will paint a glowing picture of what they offer, and your school will need to provide a compelling reason to stay.

Multicultural Belonging

The director of world languages at the school said that their international students, while a small group, needed some additional consideration to help them with belonging. Several students are with their families in the U.S., while others live with host families while attending the school. It was essential to be aware of their cultural and religious holidays and leverage those to broaden all students’ knowledge and experiences. For students who

were still learning English, she said that having a buddy who was compassionate and good in English was helpful.

“The language around the lunch table is quite different from the language in textbooks,” she said, which got a few laughs. She added: “We use slang at lunch and more formal language in class, and for newer English speakers, it’s almost like learning two languages. Having a friend who can help explain things helps so much.”

She suggested checking to see if the students missed certain foods that might help them feel more at home. She recalled an exchange student from Germany who wanted tuna pizza. After calling around, she found a local pizzeria that would make it and ordered it once a month for the student to share at lunch. “It was a little thing, really,” she said, “but it made such a difference in her happiness.” She said it was also essential to communicate with the international student’s family back home so they could see their child in a game or performance through video clips or live streaming.

Continuous Enrollment

A committee member from the Admissions Office commented that the school had just instituted continuous enrollment to make re-enrollment easier on families. “Our continuous enrollment means a student is automatically enrolled in the coming year unless the parents opt out by March 15th. Families still must reapply for financial aid every year, but families don’t have to complete a new enrolment form, etc. It saves them time,”

he said. “It’s what universities do, so it’s not a completely foreign concept,” he added. “And we’re in a state that allows this automatic contract renewal, but not all states do. We’ve also given families the option to pay tuition monthly year-round. It’s been a game-changer in reducing tuition delinquencies.”

In their research, other committee members found that Houston Academy in Dothan, Alabama, had a 95% rate of continuous enrollment, and The Oakwood School in Greenville, NC, had a rate of 93%. The Oakwood School, a co-ed school for PK3-grade 12, started using the continuous contract in 2021.

“It has saved time for our parents, who don’t have to fill out more forms or paperwork,” reported Head of School Dan Quesnel. He said that it’s also saved time for the school because the staff isn’t trying to figure out which families they are in danger of losing vs. which are just late in returning paperwork. “We have more certainty as we try to project enrollment, make a budget, and hire staff, too,” he said.

Financial Aid Workshops

Knowing that finances were a leading reason for families to leave independent schools, a committee member from the business office suggested holding financial aid workshops to guide families through the process and provide additional information about local foundations and state programs that can help with tuition and other



school costs. These workshops could help assuage family anxiety about the affordability of their school.

Using Technology to Build Community

A member of the IT department pointed out that the school had started using Blackbaud Enrollment Management System™ as part of its school technology stack. “Tracking families’ decisions has gotten more precise. I think the connection between Enrollment Management and Financial Edge NXT™ helps the school know exactly how many students have opted out, how many spots remain at each grade level, and the effect on the school’s bottom line,” he added.

They then noted that Blackbaud’s post-pandemic survey indicated that 60% of private school families felt that technology had strengthened their relationship with their child’s school compared to its pre-pandemic impact. Much of that was attributed to the frequency of communication and availability of information. The most popular technology among respondents was their parent portal, where they could log in anytime to see grades and assignments, update their contact information, and view class schedules.

In that same survey, families indicated they wanted more frequent communication from their school. That is where software like Blackbaud’s Total School Solution shines. In that portal, families can indicate whether they prefer

email or text and choose what notifications they want and how often. Families can communicate with teachers, coaches, and advisors all in the same place they pay tuition and make donations to the school.

A neighboring school did their own quick monthly surveys using software that could quickly compile results, providing charts and graphs. They queried different groups each month on topics from food in the cafeteria or cleanliness of bathrooms to academic questions and athletic and extracurricular topics.

The feedback from families and students helped the staff understand their frustrations as well as areas where the school was highly successful. As changes were made in response to survey results—the first on cafeteria food—the sense of “being heard” grew at the school.

Accessibility and Belonging

Technology also has a critical role in making learning accessible and enjoyable for students with disabilities. With the right tools, these children can learn side-by-side with their peers and meet the same outcomes as students without disabilities. From text-to-speech and hands-free interfaces to tools that enable remote learning for students unable to attend classes in person, schools that embrace accessible technology and have staff trained to help are more likely to attract and retain families who need those services.



Getting Everyone Involved with Retention Efforts

The committee realized that everyone in the school had the power to impact retention, so they formed a plan to disseminate their information and get the rest of the school involved:

- 1 **Faculty meetings:** Ask teachers to use 10 minutes in each meeting to compile good news for the school to share in e-newsletters and through the parent portal; discuss which families are not responding to teacher outreach
- 2 **All-hands meetings:** Share retention numbers, why they are important to school sustainability, and how to identify students at risk of leaving
- 3 **Support staff:** Emphasize how they are often on the front lines of family engagement and their role in creating a welcoming environment
- 4 **Finance/business office:** Evaluate which families are behind on tuition payments or showing signs of disengagement, such as suddenly not responding to school emails or no longer giving to school fundraisers
- 5 **Athletic staff:** Poll coaches about any students struggling socially, having school-related challenges, or considering another school for its athletic program

After just a few meetings of the committee, Eric and the head of school agreed that faculty and staff had more energy and insight into retention and attrition and an understanding of why they all needed to be involved. They had some good ideas and started prioritizing which ones they would try to implement immediately. Eric promised to provide updates in the monthly all-hands meetings. The committee members would continue collaborating with their peers in other schools and follow best practices from NAIS, EMA, and other educational resources and publications.

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