THE SURGE REPORT · 2027 EDITION

The state of school enrollment is changing. Most schools haven't noticed.

A data-driven intelligence brief on the demographic, operational, and competitive forces reshaping K—12 admissions — and what the schools that will survive are doing differently.

PUBLISHED · Q4 2026 FOR THE 2027 CYCLE | READING TIME · 14 MIN |
DATA SOURCES · 27 CITATIONS | UPDATED · QUARTERLY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY · 6 KEY FINDINGS

What every head of school needs to know in the next 90 seconds.

-13%

3.61M

Projected decline in U.S. private school enrollment between 2024 and 2031 — more than 2× the rate of public schools.

U.S. births in 2025 (provisional) — down another 1% from 2024 and 17% below the 2007 peak.

70%

Of school inquiries that never receive a direct human response.

21×

More likely to qualify a lead when responding in 5 minutes vs. 30. Most schools take days.

35%

Of Americans satisfied with K—12 education quality in 2025 — a record low. Families are shopping harder than ever.

+18

Enrollments at a mid-sized school from tightening each funnel stage — with no new ad spend.

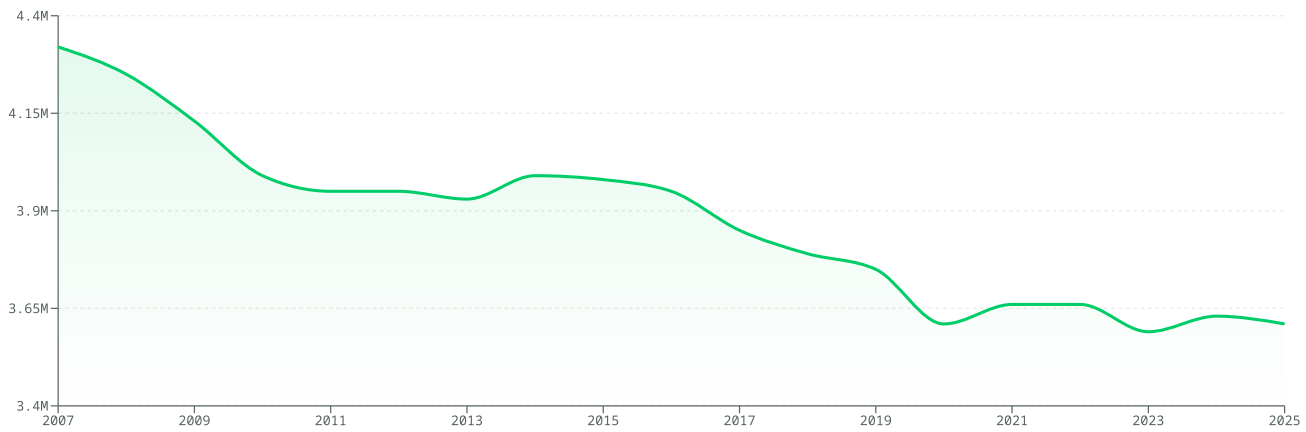
CHAPTER 01 · THE DEMOGRAPHIC HEADWIND

The *cliff* isn't coming. It's already here.

Every school in America is now competing for a smaller pool of children than at any point in modern history. Birth rates have collapsed. The shortfall is already in the kindergarten pipeline.

U.S. Annual Births, 2007—2025

Total births in millions • 2025 is provisional. The 2025 cohort is your kindergarten class of 2030.



SOURCE · CDC, NCHS · BIRTHS: PROVISIONAL DATA FOR 2025 (APRIL 2026)

PEAK COHORT

4.3M

Births in 2007 — the last large cohort. The Class of 2025 is the demographic high-water mark.

GENERAL FERTILITY RATE

53.1

Births per 1,000 women ages 15—44 in 2025 — down 1% again, a new record low.

THE OPPORTUNITY

35%

Of U.S. adults satisfied with K–12 education quality in 2025 — a record low (Gallup). Parents are actively weighing alternatives.

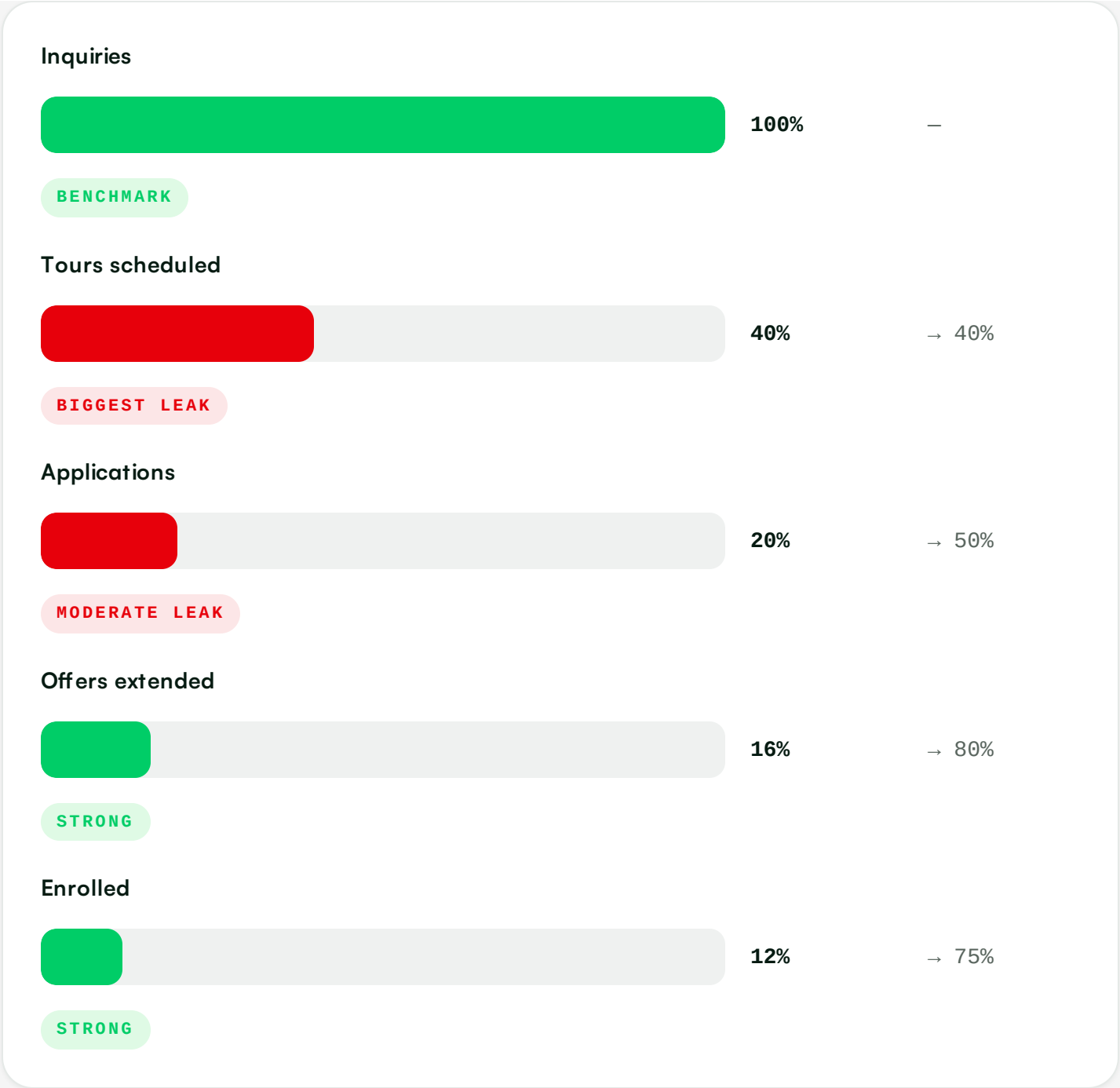
> "The long-feared demographic cliff is here. The number of high school graduates will fall roughly 13 percentage points between now and 2041, with the sharpest declines coming in the late 2020s."
>
> — WESTERN INTERSTATE COMMISSION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION · 2024 PROJECTIONS

The 17% drop in births between 2007 and 2025 is not a forecast — and 2025 fell again. These are children who already exist — or don't. By 2031, the National Center for Education Statistics projects total K–12 enrollment will fall by 5%, and private school enrollment will fall by 13%. The schools that survive will be the ones that recognize the new game: not who can reach the most families, but who can convert the most of the ones they reach.

CHAPTER 02 · WHERE FAMILIES DISAPPEAR

The admissions funnel isn't broken at the top. It's broken in the *middle*.

Most schools spend 80% of their effort on lead generation and 20% on conversion. The data says they have it backwards.



The bars show how many of the original 100 inquiries survive to each stage. The percentage beside each step is the true stage-to-stage conversion rate — and it's where families actually drop off. The Inquiry-to-Tour and Tour-to-Application steps are the biggest leaks: most institutions lose families at the very first handoffs, before applications are even on the table. These gaps are operational, not marketing — speed of response and follow-up discipline drive both.

DIALED-IN FUNNEL · SAME 100 INQUIRIES

TYPICAL

100	→	40	→	20	→	16	→	12
INQUIRIES		TOURS		APPS		OFFERS		ENROLLED

WITH A SYSTEM

100	→	65	→	45	→	38	→	30
INQUIRIES		TOURS		APPS		OFFERS		ENROLLED

Same 100 inquiries. Tightening each stage takes enrolled students from 12 to 30 — a 2.5× lift with no new ad spend.

Illustrative model based on NAIS and industry admissions benchmarks. Individual results vary by institution, market, and starting funnel. Not a guarantee of specific outcomes.

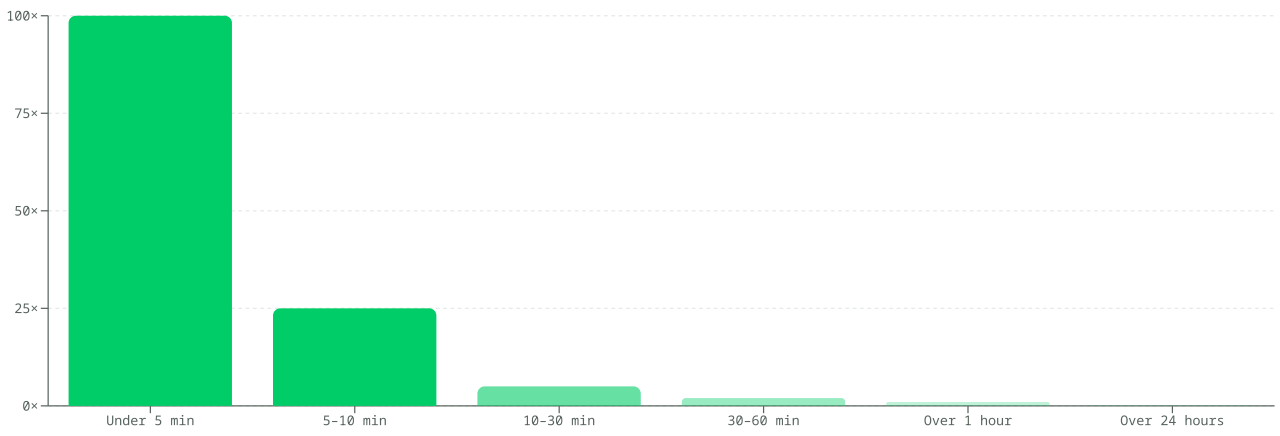
CHAPTER 03 · THE 5-MINUTE RULE

The first school to *reply* wins the family.

A decade of research across 2.24 million sales leads says the same thing. Speed of response is the single highest-leverage variable in conversion — not pitch, not price, not brand.

Response Time vs. Lead Qualification Rate

Probability of qualifying a lead, relative to a 5-minute response.



SOURCE · HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW · MIT / OLDROYD ET AL., 2011

MAKE CONTACT · 5 VS 30 MIN

100×

More likely to make contact with a lead when responding in 5 minutes vs. 30 (HBR / Oldroyd, 2.24M leads).

FAMILIES EXPECT A SAME-DAY REPLY

75%

Three in four prospective students and families expect a response within a day — and many within minutes. Nearly half take a slow reply personally.

QUALIFY A LEAD · 5 VS 30 MIN

21×

More likely to qualify a lead when responding in 5 minutes vs. 30. Less than 1% of businesses hit the 5-minute window — the bar is on the floor.

> "Firms that tried to contact prospects within an hour were nearly 7× as likely to qualify the lead. The 5-minute window is the single most critical factor."
>
> — HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW · ANALYSIS OF 2.24M SALES LEADS

Now apply that to school admissions. A family submits an inquiry to four schools. The first to respond books the tour. The first to tour usually wins the application. Yet up to 70% of school inquiries never get a direct human response at all. The opportunity isn't to be the best school. The opportunity is to be the first one in the inbox.

CHAPTER 04 · THE OPERATIONAL GAP

The schools winning right now have one thing in common: a *system*.

Enrollment used to be a marketing problem. Now it's an operations problem.

WHAT MOST SCHOOLS DO	WHAT WINNING SCHOOLS DO	THE OUTCOME GAP
Reply within 24—72 hours	**Reply within 5 minutes (automated + human)**	**9—21× higher conversion**
One generic email	**7-touch nurture sequence (email + SMS)**	**40—60% tour show rate**
Tour booking via phone tag	**Self-serve booking with reminders**	**2× tour completion rate**
No visibility into funnel	**Weekly pipeline dashboard**	**Diagnosis becomes possible**
Annual enrollment review	**Weekly review with admissions team**	**Problems caught in days, not seasons**

None of this requires hiring more admissions staff. It requires installing the right infrastructure — the kind of operational system that B2B sales teams have used for two decades, now applied to enrollment. The schools that figure this out first will compound their advantage every cycle.

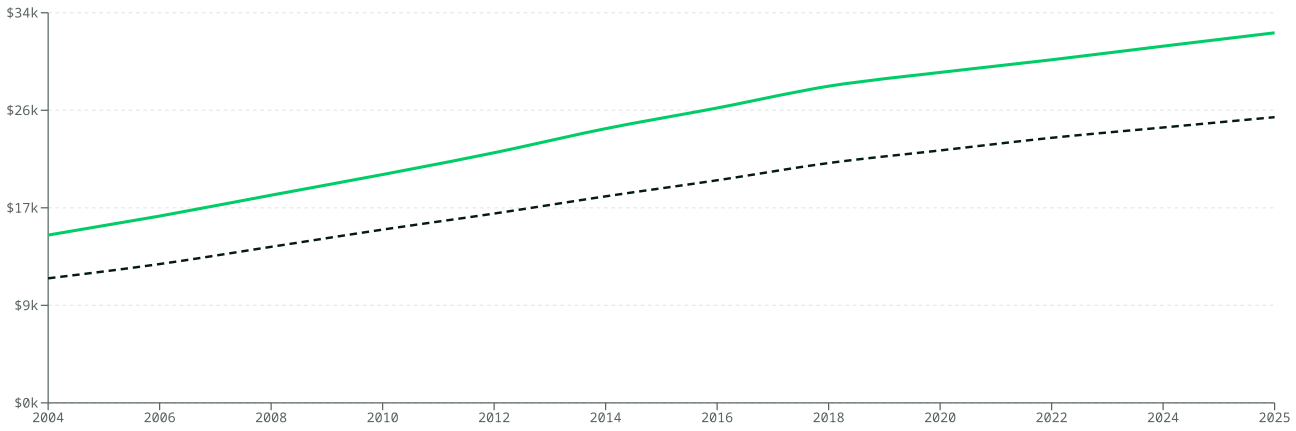
CHAPTER 05 · THE FINANCIAL PRESSURE

Tuition is up. Net revenue is flat. The math is getting harder.

Even the schools that hit enrollment goals are seeing margins compress.

NAIS vs SAIS Day Tuition Growth, 2004—2025

Median day-school tuition in U.S. dollars.



SOURCE · NAIS FACTS AT A GLANCE 2024-25 · SAIS FASTSTATS (2025 SAIS VALUE ESTIMATED FROM TREND)

AVERAGE DAY TUITION

$32,251

NAIS member schools, 2024—25 — more than double 2004's $14,622. Grade 9 median is now $37,135.

ON FINANCIAL AID

26.4%

Median percentage of students receiving aid at NAIS schools.

REVENUE TRAJECTORY

−1.4%

CAGR of total private school revenue 2020—2025, per IBISWorld.

Raising tuition was the easy lever for 20 years. That lever is now nearly tapped. The next decade of revenue growth has to come from filling more seats with mission-fit families — not charging more to fewer of them.

CHAPTER ★ · WHAT CHANGES IN 2027

More families with funding. More schools to compare. Less *patience*.

Three shifts that make the 2027 admissions cycle different from every cycle before it.

FEDERAL SCHOLARSHIP TAX CREDIT GOES LIVE

Jan 1, 2027

Taxpayers can claim up to $1,700 for gifts to scholarship granting organizations. 30 states had opted in for 2027 as of September 2026. More families will arrive with funding — and more choices.

UNIVERSAL SCHOOL CHOICE ELIGIBILITY

19 states

Every K—12 student qualifies for a choice program in 19 states, and ESA and voucher participation keeps climbing (North Carolina passed 100,000 students; Arkansas tripled). Families now compare schools like consumers.

FAMILIES ASK AI BEFORE THEY ASK YOU

AI search

Parents increasingly shortlist schools through AI answers and search summaries. If your website, reviews and tuition facts aren't clear and current, you may never make the shortlist.

Choice money expands the pool of families who can consider a private or independent school — but it also means every one of those families is comparing more options, faster. In 2027 the advantage goes to the school that answers first, clearly and personally.

CHAPTER 06 · THE 90-DAY PLAYBOOK

What to do in the next 90 days, in order of impact.

Seven moves, ranked by ROI. Most can be implemented in under 30 days.

The Surge 7-Step Diagnostic

Run this audit on your own admissions process this week.

01 **Measure your current response time.**

Submit a mystery inquiry to your own admissions office. Track how many hours pass before a real human responds. Most schools are shocked.

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02 **Install a 5-minute auto-response.**

Every inquiry gets a personalized acknowledgment within 5 minutes — with a calendar link to book a tour. This single change moves the most needles.

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03 **Build a 7-touch nurture sequence.**

Family inquires → 5-min reply → Day 1 personal email → Day 3 SMS → Day 5 value content → Day 7 tour reminder → Day 10 personal call → Day 14 final follow-up.

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04 **Move tour booking to self-serve.**

Stop the email back-and-forth. Calendar link with auto-reminders 48 hours and 2 hours before the tour. Tour attendance jumps 30—50%.

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05 **Build a weekly pipeline dashboard.**

Track inquiries, tours booked, tours completed, applications, enrollments — every week. You cannot fix what you cannot see.

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06 **Prepare for scholarship-funded families.**

If your state opted into the 2027 federal scholarship tax credit or runs an ESA, publish a plain-language page on how families can use that funding at your school.

07 Re-engage aged inquiries.

Most schools have 100—500 inquiries from prior cycles sitting cold. A targeted re-engagement campaign typically pulls 5—10% back into the funnel.

CHAPTER 07 · FURTHER READING

The data behind this report.

Every chart, statistic, and pull quote in The Surge Report is traceable to the primary sources below.

PRIMARY REPORT

2025—2026 State of the Independent School Sector

NAIS · DASL RESEARCH

FOUNDATIONAL STUDY

The Short Life of Online Sales Leads

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW · OLDROYD ET AL., 2011

DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Public School Enrollment Continues to Fall

RESEARCH BRIEF

K-12 Public School Enrollment Declines, Explained

STATELINE · NCES DATA, 2025

FUTUREED · GEORGETOWN, 2025

DATA ANALYSIS

Tuition & Affordability in Independent Schools

SAIS FASTSTATS · 2004–2024

FINANCIAL BENCHMARK

Commonfund Study of Independent Schools FY2025

COMMONFUND INSTITUTE · 2026

FEATURE ARTICLE

The Enrollment Cliff

AGB TRUSTEESHIP MAGAZINE · 2025

POLICY ANALYSIS

How Record-Low Fertility Rates Foreshadow Budget Strain

PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS · 2025

FREE FOR HEADS OF SCHOOL & ADMISSIONS DIRECTORS

Get your school's *Surge Audit*.

A 30-minute, no-pitch diagnostic of your admissions funnel. We'll calculate your exact lost revenue from unfilled seats, show you where families are dropping off, and hand you a written 90-day recovery plan.

Book Your Enrollment Audit →

Download the PDF report

METHODOLOGY

Citations & Methodology

All 27 primary and secondary sources referenced throughout this report.

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02 NAIS, "The Impact of School Choice on Financial Sustainability," October 2025.

03 Stateline, "Public school enrollment continues to fall," July 2025.

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05 CDC National Center for Health Statistics, "Births: Provisional Data for 2025," April 2026.

06 WICHE, "Knocking at the College Door," 2024 projections.

07 Pew Charitable Trusts, July 2025.

08 Oldroyd, McElheran, Elkington. "The Short Life of Online Sales Leads," HBR, 2011.

09 Lead Response Management Study, Dr. James Oldroyd, MIT.

10 Ruffalo Noel Levitz, Online Student Recruitment Report, 2025.

11 NAIS, "2025—2026 State of the Independent School Sector."

12 NAIS DASL, "2024—2025 Facts at a Glance."

13 SAIS FastStats, "Tuition & Affordability in Independent Schools."

14 Commonfund Benchmarks Study of Independent Schools FY2025.

15 IBISWorld, "Private Schools in the US Industry Report," November 2025.

16 Cube Creative Design, "Private School Admissions Funnel Benchmarks," 2026.

17 Niche, "K—12 Admissions Funnel Strategies."

18 Finalsite, "How to Grow Your K-12 Admission Funnel."

19 Ruffalo Noel Levitz, "Funnel Metrics and Conversion Tracking."

20 Velocify Research, conversion benchmarks.

21 AGB Trusteeship, "The Enrollment Cliff," November 2025.

22 Walton Family Foundation—Gallup, "Record-Low 35% Satisfied With K-12 Education Quality," September 2025.

23 IRS, "Federal Scholarship Tax Credit (FSTC)" participating states for 2027, September 2026.

24 EdChoice, "2026 EdChoice Participation Rankings," February 2026.

25 EdChoice, "Universal School Choice" state tracker, 2026.

26 EdWeek, "K-12 Enrollment Headed: Population Trends," 2025.

27 Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, fertility rate analysis, 2025.