

PRINTED STORY FRONT PAGE

Hazelwood district takes a lesson from private schools to fill seats

BY TERRI WATERS

Special to the Post-Dispatch

One of the largest school districts in the St. Louis region has found itself with too many empty desks.

Officials at Hazelwood schools said they built five new schools to prepare for a population surge that demographers predicted, but never happened.

Now, district officials are doing something their counterparts in private schools

do regularly — advertising and marketing to recruit students. The district is using a billboard obtained at a deeply discounted rate, as well as mailers, videos and social media to tout its strengths. Officials expect to run radio ads as well.

“We’re borrowing a page from the private sector,” Kimberly McKenzie, Hazelwood’s director of communications, told board members at a meeting on Nov. 13.

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Michelle Holmes, an early childhood education teacher in the Hazelwood School District, collects high-fives Friday from pupils. The district is trying to increase enrollment.

CHRISTIAN GOODEN • P-D



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PRINTED STORY

District promotes itself to boost enrollment

HAZELWOOD • FROM A1

“Effective marketing is the lifeblood of private schools. Parents make conscientious decisions to send their kids to those schools. We need to ask ourselves: Why would a parent choose to send their student to us?”

District officials say much of the blame for its excess classroom space can be laid on the recession that started in 2008, resulting in housing foreclosures and significant job losses at major employers in the district like Boeing and Ford.

Hazelwood has capacity for 22,000 students, but the district has never been close to that. It had 19,369 students in 2007 and has hovered around 18,100 for the past several years. This year the number dipped to 17,889.

McKenzie is leading a committee looking into why an average of 3,100 Hazelwood students leave the district every year, and what can be done to retain them. The group has found that the majority withdraw because they move out of the district, but many also leave

for private schools. So far, an equal number of new students enroll each year, but the exodus is not a trend the district likes to see.

“We have heavy recruitment of our students, mainly from the private schools,” McKenzie said. “If parents see we have been adding specialized programs, and that we have strong athletics, we think they’ll want to stay.”

The district’s three high schools added eight Advanced Placement programs last year, and the district plans to turn a middle school into one for gifted students next fall.

Officials also launched an accelerated program that allows eighth-graders to begin taking high school classes so they can graduate early or eventually earn a degree in a vocational program through St. Louis Community College.

An expanded early childhood program is also being designed with recruitment and retention in mind. The district is opening two free, full-day pre-kindergarten classes in unused rooms at Walker Elementary.

Officials plan to add classes at other grade schools this spring and next fall, with a goal of increasing preschool enrollment by 400.

Because it is funded by the state, the program is limited to students who qualify for free or reduced lunches, but district officials are considering a fee-based model as well.

McKenzie’s committee found that withdrawals tend to spike after students complete kindergarten, fifth grade and eighth grade. To ease the transition and reduce anxiety, the schools are hosting more social and mentoring activities, which give students “more points of connection and a sense of security,” McKenzie said.

For example, homecoming parades now welcome grade-school and middle-school groups like robotics clubs, dance teams and bands to join the high schoolers.

“Being able to expose students and parents to our programs really helps,” she said. “We’re trying to do a better job of telling our story.”

ONLINE STORY

Hazelwood built 5 new schools for a wave of kids that never appeared. Now it's time for salesmanship.



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One of the largest school districts in the St. Louis region has found itself with too many empty desks. Officials at Hazelwood schools said they built five new schools to prepare for a population surge that demographers predicted, but never happened.

Now, district officials are doing something their counterparts in private schools do regularly — advertising and marketing to recruit students. The district is using a billboard obtained at a deeply discounted rate, as well as mailers, videos and social media to tout its strengths. Officials expect to run radio ads as well. “We’re borrowing a page from the private sector,” Kimberly McKenzie, Hazelwood’s director of communications, told board members at a meeting on Nov. 13. “Effective marketing is the lifeblood of private schools. Parents make conscientious decisions to send their kids to those schools. We need to ask ourselves: Why would a parent choose to send their student to us?” District officials say much of the blame for its excess classroom space can be laid on the recession that started in 2008, resulting in housing foreclosures and significant job losses at major employers in the district like Boeing and Ford. Hazelwood has capacity for 22,000 students, but the district has never been close to that. It had 19,369 students in 2007 and has hovered around 18,100 for the past several years. This year the number dipped to 17,889. McKenzie is leading a committee looking into why an average of 3,100 Hazelwood students leave the district every year, and what can be done to retain them. The group has found that the majority withdraw because they move out of the district, but many also leave for private schools. **MORE**

https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/hazelwood-built-new-schools-for-a-wave-of-kids-that/article_f1b3d044-7567-5c81-85eb-487e6117cf80.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=dlvr&fbclid=IwAR3kAT-jCS7_H_Zb4Q0HaO15pyWD1ZPnlicLWMmWmqoyyZjrXIAprF81gR4

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Hazelwood built 5 new schools for a wave of kids that never appeared. Now it's time for salesmanship cont.



A flyer to inform parents of a new program in the Hazelwood School District is photographed on Friday, Nov. 16, 2018. Hazelwood aims to fill open space in their district by luring non-residents with pre-kindergarten education. COPIED **REMOVED**

A flyer to inform parents of a new program in the Hazelwood School District is photographed on Friday, Nov. 16, 2018 **CORRECTED CAPTION**

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