

Schools compete to keep parents in KC

Public and charter schools take on challenges of stemming suburban flight

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“I probably shouldn’t say this.”

Steve Green, the recent superintendent of Kansas City Public Schools, paused a moment on the phone, some 800 miles away now at his new job in Georgia.

On his mind was the struggle his former school district is waging — sometimes with and sometimes against independent public charter schools — to win the confidence of a pivotal millennial generation. The stakes are high for a city aiming to end the exodus of families with school-age children.

Census data sorted by The Star show that people 20 to 34 years old are packing the city's central core between the state line and Troost Avenue, from the River Market through the Crossroads and midtown and south beyond the Country Club Plaza.

Green knows what city planners know, what residential property developers know and what the competing charter schools know:

These new and potential families want to stay, and they are pressing for school options.

There's a reason popular charters like Academie Lafayette can't expand quickly enough, said Mike Zeller, a former board member for the French language immersion school.

"The tide wants to come in," he said. "The second half of the past century — where people were moving away from the center — was an anomaly. We just need to remove the barriers."

But Green worries about complicated dynamics between communities and schools as they repair decades of lost trust in public education.

So he says it.

"There's an opportunistic component to it," Green said. Competing schools are making a wedge for a "millennial generation that likes the urban city environment ... but wants a 'carve-out' that gives them a unique opportunity, but still in the heart of the city."

"They want the best of both worlds."

Call it a wish for controlled diversity. Tension has followed efforts by charters and the district to reach these potential customers west of Troost. The public schools'

longtime patrons — who are often low-income families of color — have felt excluded while popular support lined up behind speculative schools promising classrooms more economically and racially balanced.

The census data also show that while more young people may be living in the western corridor between the state line and Troost, the highest numbers of families with children within the Kansas City school district boundaries still more often live to the east.

Major expansion plans in Kansas City's charter schools project to add some 3,000 in enrollment combined between Crossroads Academy and the new Citizens of the World charter within 12 years. These schools downtown and in midtown may be increasing the overall public school enrollment, but they also could be taking more students from the district.

When he was superintendent, Green worried about a "tipping point" when a move of too many students from the district into charters could compromise too much of the district's fiscal health.

That's why, he said, his administration pushed for district-sponsored charter schools, or negotiated for hybrid collaborations, and at times held back vacant district buildings from charters as "bargaining chips."

The district's enrollment is holding above 14,000, while expansion figures possibly to again boost charter enrollment that has been holding above 10,000.

"New opportunities can be threatening," said Aaron North, vice president of education at the Kauffman Foundation.

The foundation, which operates a charter school and also distributes grants in support of district, charter and private school programs, is no stranger to the conflicts. Kauffman is developing a "harbormaster," an independent office that would offer help to schools navigating these waters.

But managing these opportunities “is not just coordinating the logistics around buildings,” North said. “It’s about answering the question ‘What are we trying to do? Where are we trying to get to?’ ”

This work has to be shared among the district, the charters and private schools, he said.

“I’d love to know what those census maps are going to look like 10 years from now,” he said.

“We’re going to earn whatever we get 10 years down the road.”

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

Johnson County, right?

It struck Jessica Rosell just how quickly neighbors and peers assumed where she and husband Evan were headed when they were packing up their Brookside home five years ago.

No. Midtown.

The Rosells were thinking about starting a family, and they knew only a bit about the complications around Kansas City school options.

“But we loved where we were,” she said. “We loved the culture, the new restaurants, the museums, the walkability ...”

South Hyde Park parent Andrew Johnson felt the same way as he was “doing the twenty-something thing” living in the city.

But as his crowd got a little older and began thinking about schools, he and wife Kristen were surprised “how quickly the conversations turned negative,” he said.

“Without even really thinking about it, some hopped across the state line.”

The Rosells and Johnsons would become part of the original parents coalition that teamed up with Los Angeles-based Citizens of the World to plan a new midtown charter school.

Other families worked with the school district to reopen Hale Cook Elementary School in the southwest part of the district, placing their faith in a district that has regained provisional status and is nearing full accreditation.

The new energy is being felt in private schools as well, said Jill McGee, admissions director for St. Paul’s Episcopal Day School in midtown. The growing presence of families is notable.

“And this millennials group are very research-oriented,” she said. “They go do their homework.”

The rising perception of the public schools is helping, she said. “We all benefit from having more families in the area.”

The schools are chipping away at a long-embedded perception among many people that disfavors public schools in Kansas City.

The city started an annual satisfaction survey among business owners in 2014 throughout the city and received generally favorable marks in most areas.

The large majority of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the city’s overall image. The majority were satisfied or neutral regarding their feelings of safety.

But 65 percent said they were dissatisfied with the overall quality of the education system.

The good sign? That negative percentage fell to 56 percent in 2015, said Kansas City economic development analyst Katherine Carttar.

“And that’s significant.”

The new workforce wants to live in the city, she said, and there are indications that improving attitudes toward school options are helping clear what has been “a giant hurdle.”

“The problem we want to solve is stopping people from moving out with their first child,” Carttar said.

To that end, Citizens of the World intends to deliver a unique school with a diverse enrollment, said its Kansas City executive director, Kristin Droege.

She sees the school layering in with others, private and public, giving families choices between schools “with meaningful differences.”

“I strongly believe that what we’re doing will keep families in the midtown area.”

CALLING FOR EQUITY

To the east, tucked into a tight neighborhood near 39th Street and Emanuel Cleaver II Boulevard, Melcher Elementary School goes about its work more like an education island — far from the center of the city where charter schools and private schools tend to cluster.

It’s a full building of nearly 400 students, supported by Vineyard Neighborhood Association volunteers.

Vineyard’s Virginia Flowers can think of some other schools somewhat in reach of the neighborhood’s families — the Genesis Promise Academy charter and a small Christian school.

But she can also count the schools that have been closed — “Meservey, Ladd, King.”

“I’d love to see neighborhood schools,” she said. “More schools would mean more families.”

Churches and schools, said Calvin Wainwright, are “the pillars of the community.”

Wainwright volunteers every morning at Melcher.

“Inside those doors I see positive energy,” he said. “I see a lot of hope. I see involved parents. ... I see kids enrolling in after-school programs, joining chess clubs.

The schools “don’t get the positive attention they deserve. If we as a city would pull out the positive things, you’d see people moving into your neighborhood.”

Similar sounds of concern rose from points to the east in the district when it reopened Hale Cook and much more so when it proposed the now-dormant plan to open what would have been another selective-enrollment high school at Southwest High run by Academie Lafayette.

“It ran against a historical backdrop with a root system of issues around class, race and geography,” Green said.

“It created a challenge for those conversations to resume east of Troost and west of Troost, and that was not a bad thing.”

The city should keep watch on educational equity as the district and charters continue reaching for new growth, he said.

If charters were to outpace the district in enrollment, that would be fine, Green said, as long as the district and the charters offer strong schools across all neighborhoods.

It won’t work, he said, if some neighborhoods go unsupported and their schools serve “as dumping grounds.”

NEED FOR COORDINATION

What worries Kansas City interim superintendent Al Tunis as he looks at the road ahead isn't the competition.

"Competition can be good," he said.

He wonders how this array of independent public education administrations and boards will manage the limited public resources.

"My concern is saturation," he said. "There needs to be a coordinated effort so we are responsible in how we serve students. If you look at it holistically, there are an awful lot of facilities for the number of students being served. ... High schools are expensive. Our buses are passing each other on the street."

Some of this coordination will need to come from the state level, he said.

At home, amid the competitive environment, there are also many shared moments where district schools, charter schools and their teachers and staffs are collaborating, hoping to learn from one another.

"We want to live in a good ecosystem of schools," said Dean Johnson, executive director of Crossroads Academy. "I do believe good schools can be contagious. If a school is well liked by its parents — if kids are getting good results — it should have no sense of threat. Good schools are going to thrive."

Crossroads principal Tysie McDowell remembers cooperation last year between schools in a joint training sponsored by several community foundations. Crossroads teachers visited the school district's Trailwoods and Banneker elementary schools, and their teachers visited Crossroads.

"Teachers are teachers," she said. "There are so many opportunities to train together and to study together."

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