

TUSD Enrollment: Education, Errors, and Exits

For Leah Mercer, the quality of her children's school is important. Her two children, Alex and Rebecca, both attend University High School, part of the Tucson Unified School District. The school boasts a 100 percent graduation rate and was ranked the 27th best high school in the nation by U.S. News in 2010. Mercer gives back to the school through her role as president of University High School's Parents Association.

Despite her devotion to her children's school, she has her doubts about the way TUSD is being run and briefly removed her children from the district.

"They started doing some things my husband and I believed shouldn't be tampered with in terms of learning," said Mercer. "There wasn't a lot of breadth and depth in the programs they were offering...so we left and we're back because there is a lot of opportunity here."

Mercer was not alone when she removed her students from TUSD. According to statistics provided by the district, TUSD has shown a decline in enrollment every year since the 1997-1998 school year, when total enrollment exceeded 62,000 students. The district currently has 52,175 students and has dropped by nearly 8,000 students since the 2005-2006 school year. The Mercer family left the district and returned. The statistics indicate that many families left and never came back.

TUSD is the largest school district in Pima County with over 100 schools, yet its enrollment has experienced a 15 percent decrease since 2005. This reflects the inconsistency of

public school education in Arizona, altered by the growing influence of charter schools, economic issues, and a poor reputation.

As TUSD's enrollment continues to drop, many are pointing the finger at the emergence of Arizona charter schools as the root cause of the problem. Adelita Grijalva, member of the TUSD Governing Board, said the "predominant reason" for decreased enrollment in the district is the charter school movement, which she said is propelled by the lenient charter school policies allowed by the state of Arizona. Grijalva said as a result, TUSD has faced market competition for the first time. This competition has made Grijalva realize the need to "change gears" on how to approach customer service by being "much more responsive to parents and individuals."

"TUSD was never positioned to be prepared to deal with competition," said Grijalva. "The assumption was if you lived in a TUSD area you're coming to our school. That's not the case now."

Charter schools were first created in Arizona through legislation in 1994, and there are now over 500 charter schools in the state. They are state-funded schools but can be funded through private contributors. In order to start a charter school, the State Board for Charter Schools, the State Board of Education, and the school district in whose boundaries the school will reside must first approve the school.

One rising charter school within the TUSD boundaries is Presidio School. Presidio emerged in 1996 as one of the initial charter schools in the state. It began as a high school but has since changed to include enrollment for kindergarten through 12th grade. Presidio has seen much acclaim including winning the elusive Blue Ribbon Award of Excellence in 2007, which rewards high student achievement and significant improvement from one year to the next. Presidio is at capacity with 400 students enrolled and has a waiting list for prospective students.

“We all got together and decided to form a school just because there was a lot of youth and community that were not being served by traditional schools that we saw falling through the cracks,” said Tom Drexel, who co-directs the school with Terry Garza.

Drexel said his school cannot offer “flashier” elements such as big sports programs, but can offer internship and transitional programs, as well as programs TUSD has been forced to marginalize due to budgetary issues, such as art and dance programs. He said individualized instruction, highlighted by small class sizes, is the key to maintaining a well-balanced education.

“You’re going to come here and you’re going to get a quality education that is very well rounded and balanced,” said Drexel. “It’s a place where you’re going to see your child thrive and learn and be happy.”

TUSD administrators have realized the impact charter schools have had on their district. John Pedicone, who has worked as district superintendent since January, said that increased options for education are affecting enrollment across the state. However, he said increased options have led him to address issues in retaining students.

“I think we hurt ourselves by not providing an appropriate customer service attitude, where we encourage students and parents to continue to go here,” said Pedicone.

TUSD has an open enrollment policy where TUSD students can choose to attend any school in the district regardless of their proximity to the school. Pedicone said that he encourages parents to first look at all the schools available to the parents in the district before leaving the district.

TUSD Director of Accountability and Research David Scott said the number of students attending charter schools is increasing and is a reason for concern.

“Absolutely they’re taking some of our students. Charter schools enroll 10 percent of all public schools in the state of Arizona,” said Scott. “That’s larger than any other state.”

Scott said that though charter school enrollment is a concern, there is no reason to panic and that TUSD should focus on the other 90 percent of students not enrolled in charter schools.

“Yes, it is a competitive part of the education market but it’s not a crisis and the sky is not falling,” said Scott. “They exist and for a good reason, they serve certain needs that large districts can’t always offer. But you have to understand they are in many ways those frill kinds of schools with limited quality of property and charge heavy fees.”

Scott, who is in his 20th year working for TUSD, does not believe charter schools are the primary cause for enrollment drops within the district. Rather, he said economic issues are to blame.

“You have to understand what the economic impact has had on the community in terms of the number of children. There are areas in our district where there are empty houses now,” said Scott. “To ask what strategies do we have to bring kids back? I’d say ‘what kids?’”

The economy may be hurting the district, but the numbers do not indicate that students are leaving the county and state in droves. 152,223 students were enrolled in Pima County schools for the 2010-2011 school year compared to 153,505 students for the 2009-2010 school year, according to statistics from the Arizona Department of Education. The number of students in Pima County has actually increased since 2008-2009 by over 3,500 students. Statewide, the number of enrolled students decreased by less than one percent from 2009-2010 to 2010-2011, and actually showed a slight increase since 2008-2009.

However, Scott finds these statistics to be misleading. According to Scott, Tucson has the highest vacancy rate of family homes and rental properties in the country. Additionally, he said

that TUSD has fewer kindergarteners from one year to the next and that as students promote and leave the district, there is not a big enough influx into the district to account for its losses.

“The fact of the matter is many of the families that had school aged children have left the community,” said Scott. “Until more houses go into the ground or more industry goes into the community the jobs that those people held don’t exist.”

The economy has taken its toll on the district with budget cuts being felt at every school. Total budgeted revenues for the district dropped by over 30 percent from fiscal year 2010 to fiscal year 2011, according to statistics released by TUSD. Scott recognized the relationship between enrollment and budget and how TUSD is caught in a cycle of having insufficient funds.

“It’s kind of a cyclical process because our budget goes down when our student enrollment goes down,” said Scott. “When our budget capacity goes down it’s harder to provide services to kids and to parents and you don’t see the quality as high as it used to be.”

Superintendent Pedicone noted the extent to which the district has felt budget cuts and how it is affecting students within TUSD.

“There’s only a couple of ways you can solve those problems. One of them is to either reduce the number of options you have that are not essential and eliminate them, in some cases schools,” said Pedicone. “Or you increase the number of students in classrooms and thereby reduce the number of teachers you need.

Pedicone said TUSD resorted to both options and referenced nine schools the district closed down within the last year. Most students remained in the district and were distributed to other TUSD schools that were closed. Additionally, some elementary schools were closed down but paired up with middle schools to form a kindergarten through eighth grade school, as was the case with Fort Lowell Elementary School and Townsend Middle School. Still, Pedicone said the

decision to close the schools was a difficult but necessary decision for a district with 9,000 vacant seats.

“It costs a lot of money to keep schools operating,” said Pedicone. “Because of economic reasons and because we basically have too many schools for the number of students we have, as enrollment declines the district has to confront these types of decisions- and we did.”

Though it was a last resort, Pedicone said closing the schools has allowed the district to continue implementing some of the programs they see as necessary, such as full day kindergarten.

“The impact of that’s being experienced as a positive sense in terms of the amount of operation and money we are saving,” said Pedicone. “We were able to withstand some of the revenue cutbacks last year and still be able to implement some things the district believes are important.”

Robert Young, Head of the International School of Tucson, was one of the beneficiaries of the closing of Jefferson Park Elementary School. Though Young does not think he directly competes with TUSD, his school has obtained the rights to the vacant building where Jefferson Park, one of nine TUSD schools closed last year, used to reside. After putting in a bid and through much public consultation and discussion, the TUSD board voted unanimously to give IST a temporary lease on the building.

Young believes he has a leg up on TUSD because of his school’s ability to cater to the individual in a way that TUSD, with over 50,000 students, cannot.

“We’re much more driven by market forces. We have to deliver what we promise... There’s a lot more transparency and a lot more accountability than you’d find with some of the other programs, because the forces that shape them are much different,” said Young.

Young's International School of Tucson is in its seventh year of operation as a pre-kindergarten through fifth grade school. The school offers an international program and has students representing 30 different nationalities. He believes his school has a "very narrowly defined niche" in that it caters to international education, focusing on teaching other languages and value based programs.

"Local standards are irrelevant. Our children are not competing with Oro Valley and Green Valley, but with London and Paris," said Young.

IST has experienced enrollment growth every year. Young plans to move his school to the new site once details of the plan are finalized, and hopes to increase his enrollment from 150 to 350, the current capacity at the Jefferson Park building.

Looking forward, TUSD may have to close more schools if the current enrollment trends continue. Board member Grijalva acknowledged that there is a conversation to close Santa Rita High School, but also said a few more elementary schools would likely go before that plan came to fruition.

"The problem is the school is right on the border of other districts and the likelihood of retaining those students is less than in some of our elementary schools."

Population shifts and budgetary woes are intangible aspects beyond the control of TUSD administrators. With schools being forced to close down, TUSD is looking for answers as to what they can do internally to stop the bleeding. Overwhelmingly, TUSD administrators said there needs to be a conscious effort to help the district's reputation.

Vivi Watt is in her 13th year at TUSD and is in her first year as principal of Pueblo Magnet High School. Watt said Pueblo Magnet has been losing anywhere from 100 to 200 students per year, with many students dropping out due to low attendance. The school has less

than half of its senior class with a passing score on the state administered AIMS test and has a less than stellar reputation.

“What we really need to do and what every school needs to do is to start working immediately on the freshman class so they don’t get behind in credits and so they are prepared to pass the AIMS test,” said Watt. “We’re trying to cut down our failures and raise our standards at the same time.”

Watt said she pulled both of her children out of public schools and that public school is not realizing the needs of each student, especially those that are not traditional learners. However, she said that there has been a fundamental shift in the focus of the district since superintendent Pedicone took office in January.

“The bottom line is schools change when there is effective classroom instruction. The district’s focus is on instruction and that’s where it needs to be,” said Watt.

Watt also said that Pueblo Magnet surprised her because it had much more to offer than was its reputation.

“TUSD does not have a good reputation and neither does Pueblo,” said Watt. “That’s one of my jobs as principal is to change that perception. In my opinion, when I came here I was really surprised because there’s so many good things happening in this district and so many good things happening at this school that we need to get that message out.”

Janet Jordan, principal of Sam Hughes Elementary School, noted that TUSD has a poor reputation but is trying to overcome it.

“From our perspective, the bad rap comes from both within and outside of TUSD. The outside part puzzles me because TUSD is such a big piece of this community,” said Jordan.

Three years ago, Jordan almost had to close the doors of Sam Hughes for good. Sam Hughes has a capacity of only 300 students, which is the threshold for school closure considerations. As a result, Jordan helped to increase Sam Hughes' enrollment, which now sits at 108 percent of capacity. Jordan said that over her 31 years as a part of TUSD, she has seen "practices that were less than stellar." However, she said that she is confident in her school and in the district that she believes is on the rise.

"I see the leadership now that we have and our superintendent is so honest and there's such an integrity and transparency that I wish other people could see," said Jordan.

Perhaps Cara Rene can help make that happen. The newly appointed director of communications began working for TUSD this month and will help to create tools to help better market the district.

Rex Scott, principal of Catalina Magnet High School, said the reasons behind hiring Rene were "very reasonable".

"Not only in terms of trying to get people from outside the district to consider all that we have to offer within TUSD, but to encourage people who live within the district to stay with us through 12th grade," said Scott.

Charles Bermudez, principal of Grijalva Elementary School, is in his first year at TUSD but came to the district because he was aware of some of the changes occurring within TUSD.

"TUSD is coming together as a district with the leadership it has right now," said Bermudez. "It's never been as strong and as powerful as it is right now."

Bermudez said although internally there is an awareness that TUSD is making positive strides, outsiders have been kept in the dark, making Rene's position all the more important.

“Most people in our district don’t know about the great things happening in our district because they don’t have access to the schools. I think it’s a great position because people will hear about the great things happening in TUSD, more so than ever before,” said Bermudez.

For others, such as Janet Jordan, the feeling is that there are more useful ways to get the word out about the strengths of TUSD. Jordan believes the burden should be on the members of TUSD to let the public know that this district is making serious changes.

“We need to be spokespeople, we need to speak up. It’s not like we need a publicity department to do that for us, we need to do it,” said Jordan. “I think that grassroots piece, people talking to their neighbor about how they feel about their school district or its accomplishments is so much more powerful.”

TUSD, like many school districts in Arizona, is very much in flux. The rise of charter schools has created a competitive market force for education. Economic woes have driven many families away from their homes within TUSD boundaries and into the boundaries of other districts. For the remaining families, budget cuts have led to more difficulties in giving students what they need in the classroom- and has even caused some classrooms to be shut down. Despite all of this, administration is staying positive. With a new superintendent, director of communications, and many more administrators looking to change the district’s reputation, TUSD is not giving up without a fight.

Superintendent Pedicone, still in his first year as superintendent of TUSD, said the first step forward is recognizing the issues that have plagued the district in the past and then working to overcome them.

“We have achievement issues across this district that we’ve got to address that are serious, that we need to get our arms around and do something about- and we are.”

Leah Mercer could have left TUSD forever. But she came back and has taken a leadership role, striving to help make the district what many of its administrators claim it to be. This is the essence of TUSD. Though many leave and issues persist, there will always be those loyal to the district fighting to make it right.

Mercer said she now has great faith that her children are receiving a proper education.

“They value their students, the students value themselves, and they just work and integrate with each other,” said Mercer.

Despite people like Mercer, many families have left TUSD never to return. Many of TUSD’s losses can be attributed to elements outside of their control. However, the question moving forward is whether or not TUSD can adapt to rapid changes in the “education marketplace”, and what will be done if enrollment continues to drop.