Trend Report

2026 Trends in K–12 Admissions & Enrollment:
Reading the Signal, Building the Response

A national and regional trends briefing for private, independent, and faith-based K–12 schools

VenturEd Solutions®

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Executive Summary

Two things are true about private and independent K–12 admissions heading into the 2026–27 cycle. First, the school choice movement has never had more momentum: a permanent, nationwide federal tax credit scholarship program takes effect in January 2027, 31 states have already opted in, and existing Education Savings Account (ESA) programs continue to expand funding and eligibility in states from Alabama to Iowa to Texas. Second, admissions funnel activity in the 2025–2026 cycle compressed noticeably — not just at the top of the funnel, but all the way through to matriculation.

This report brings those two realities together, drawing on VenturEd Solutions® and the data from its Ravenna Admissions® platform, an independent longitudinal analysis conducted by Hanover Research, and current third-party research and policy tracking. We look at what a year of data shows about the current admissions funnel, where the picture varies most by region and by funnel stage, what's likely contributing to the shift, and, most importantly, six concrete strategies, plus a set of questions for evaluating your own systems that enrollment leaders can put to work now.

The headline finding isn't cause for alarm; it's a signal, and a specific one. This isn't a broad top-of-funnel demand collapse — inquiry-to-start conversion held roughly steady nationally, and application-stage conversion improved. The real erosion shows up later: in the offer, acceptance, and matriculation stages, where financial clarity, decision confidence, and communication cadence matter most. That's a solvable problem, and a specific one.

Families are still choosing private and independent education, and policy tailwinds are only strengthening. The schools that treat this cycle as a wake-up call on late-funnel conversion, rather than waiting for volume to rebound on its own, will be the ones that come out ahead.

Introduction

Private, independent, faith-based, and parochial K–12 schools are navigating a genuinely paradoxical moment. On one hand, the policy environment supporting school choice keeps expanding. On the other, early data from the 2025–2026 admissions cycle — drawn from VenturEd's own Ravenna platform and corroborated by independent analysis — shows a broad-based pullback in admissions funnel activity that is more pronounced than anything the sector has seen since the onset of the pandemic.

At the same time, sector-wide research paints a more stable picture of enrollment overall. NAIS's 2025–2026 State of the Independent School Sector reports that independent school enrollment has held steady over the past several years, and that the median private K–12 yield rate now stands at roughly 72 percent — a sign that schools are converting a higher share of the applicants they do see.

Read together, these findings don't contradict each other so much as describe two layers of the same market: fewer families are moving through the full admissions funnel this cycle, but the ones who do are converting at a healthy, even improving, rate. That combination points to a market that's becoming more selective and more deliberate, not one that's shrinking in its underlying demand for private education.

This report is designed to help admissions, enrollment, and finance leaders read that signal correctly and respond to it — with a light look at the national numbers and regional variation, followed by a strategy set built for the market as it actually stands today.

The 2026 Enrollment Signal: What the Data Shows

Across the 2025–2026 admissions cycle, activity declined at every stage of the funnel compared to the prior year, and the decline grows sharper the further a family moves through the process. VenturEd's own Ravenna platform data illustrates the pattern:

Funnel Stage	YoY Change, 2024–25 ⟶ 2025–26
Inquiries	-16%
Started Applications	-13%
Applications Submitted	-10%
Forms Completed	-9%
Offers Extended	-20%
Offers Accepted	-29%
Matriculating Students	-53%

Independent analysis of longitudinal path-to-matriculation data, conducted by Hanover Research using VenturEd's Enrollment Insights environment, corroborates this shape: inquiries, starts, applications, offers, acceptances, and matriculation were all essentially flat or growing from 2022 through 2024–2025, then fell sharply and in tandem in 2025–2026. Renewal activity saw the steepest drop in all measured stages.

This is a back-loaded compression. Top-of-funnel softness alone would suggest a demand problem. Instead, the steepest drop-off shows up between offer, acceptance, and matriculation — the stages most sensitive to financial aid clarity, decision timelines, and the confidence a family has that they've found the right fit. That's an important distinction, because it points toward where schools can intervene most effectively.

It's also worth noting that school participation changes on the platform; schools joining or leaving do not explain this pattern. Growth from newly active schools has partially offset the decline in the topline numbers, meaning the underlying pullback among returning schools is, if anything, understated by the headline figures. And because 2025–2026 activity reflects year-to-date data as of the spring, some of this cycle's later-stage numbers (matriculation especially) will continue to settle before the cycle closes — but the trajectory through the funnel is a real, actionable signal today.

Where the Funnel Is Actually Compressing

Looking at conversion rates, not just raw volume, sharpens the picture considerably. Several early-funnel conversion metrics were flat or improved even as raw volume fell, which is the strongest evidence that this isn't a broad demand problem:

- Inquiry-to-start conversion held essentially steady nationally (around 0.22), meaning the inquiries that do come in are just as likely to turn into a start as in prior years — there are simply fewer of them.
- Applied-to-started conversion actually improved, climbing from roughly 1 percent in 2024–2025 to 3.37 percent in 2025–2026, and complete-to-applied conversion held steady around 90%.
- The erosion becomes visible from the offer stage onward: offer-to-complete conversion fell from about 52% to 47 percent and accepted-to-offer conversion fell roughly five percentage points to about 28 percent — both of the sharpest single-year moves in the four-year dataset.

Takeaway:
The problem isn't getting families in the door — it's keeping their confidence through the offer, financial aid, and decision stages that follow. That's exactly where the majority of strategies below are aimed at.

Regional Deep Dive: A Story That's Far From Uniform

The national trend masks meaningful regional variation, both at the census-region level (per Hanover's analysis) and at the metro level (per VenturEd's own platform data). No two markets are moving the same way, which makes regional benchmarking more useful this cycle than in most years.

By Census Region

Region	Applications YoY	Offer/Complete Rate, 25–26	Matriculation YoY
Midwest	-38%	-38%	-39% (smallest decline)
Northeast	-9%	-9%	Declined; (steepest renewal drop)
South	-15%	-15%	-64% (largest decline)
West	-7%	-7%	Tracked closest to national average

The Midwest tells the most counterintuitive story. It saw the steepest percentage drops in raw applications, forms complete, and offers of any region, yet its offer-to-complete conversion rate climbed to 84 percent, up sharply from 65 percent just two years earlier, and it posted the smallest matriculation decline nationally. Read together, Midwest schools appear to be working from a meaningfully smaller pool but converting it far more effectively than they were two cycles ago.

The Northeast saw a milder application decline than the national rate, but its acceptance and renewal rates fell more sharply than most regions — a sign that the families getting to "yes" are having second thoughts, or being pulled toward other options, more often than in prior years. The steep renewal drop may indicate the notion of joining a private school from kindergarten to graduation has weakened in many communities here.

The South was the most broadly challenged region: declines showed up at every stage of the funnel, and its matriculation drop was the steepest in the country. This is also the region where school choice funding has expanded the fastest over the past two years — worth watching as an early test of whether expanded funding access is translating into steadier enrollment or arriving faster than admissions offices can adapt their processes to it.

The West tracked closest to the national average on most metrics, with comparatively smaller year-over-year movement in either direction.

Metro Spotlight

At the metro level, VenturEd's own application data across thousands of private schools nationwide shows a similarly uneven picture. Boston Area, Chicago Area, Atlanta Area, and Dallas Area saw application declines well into double digits — Chicago's was the steepest of any major metro. New York Area and San Francisco Bay Area were comparatively resilient in applications, down only slightly.

But even in those resilient metros, matriculation fell substantially, down roughly a third in both New York and San Francisco Bay, reinforcing that this cycle's real vulnerability sits later in the funnel, in every market, not just the ones with steep top-of-funnel losses.

Takeaway:
Benchmark your school against your specific region and metro, not the national average. A Midwest school converting well from a smaller pool and a South Atlantic school seeing broad-based softness need very different playbooks.

What's Behind the Signal

It's worth sitting with the apparent contradiction here for a moment, because it shapes which levers actually matter. Sector-wide, the picture looks stable or even strong: NAIS reports independent school enrollment has held steady for years, with a median yield rate now around 72 percent. Policy support is also accelerating on every front — the newly enacted federal tax credit scholarship program takes effect in January 2027 with roughly 31 states already opted in, and states like Alabama, Iowa, and Texas continue to expand ESA funding and eligibility even in 2026's slower legislative season for brand-new programs.

Set against a longer horizon, school-age population growth is also flattening or reversing in much of the country, a dynamic which industry analysts flagged as a multi-billion-dollar pressure point for public and private budgets alike by the turn of the decade. None of this points to fading interest in private education — if anything, the funding and policy environment has rarely been more favorable. What it does point to is a market where families have more options, more funding sources to evaluate, and more reason to take their time before fully committing —the schools that make that process fastest and clearest for families will pull ahead of the ones that don't.

Six Strategies to Strengthen Your Enrollment Funnel

The data points to where to focus: this cycle's losses were concentrated less at the very top of the funnel and more in the conversion stages that follow. These six strategies are built around that pattern.

1. Tighten the Front Door: Convert More Inquiries Into Starts

Inquiry-to-start conversion is the widest-ranging metric by region, which means it's also the most improvable. Even though national conversion held roughly steady, the Midwest's example, where this rate nearly doubled over three years, shows how much headroom exists for schools willing to invest here.

- **Audit response time on every inquiry channel** (web form, phone, email, event sign-up) and set a measurable target, such as same-business-day first contact.
- **Replace single automated replies with a structured, multi-touch nurture sequence** that adapts to how a family is engaged (open house RSVP vs. cold web inquiry vs. referral).
- **Stand up a concierge-style first contact for your highest-intent inquiries**, including sibling applicants, referrals, and campus-visit requests, rather than routing them through the same generic queue as everyone else.

2. Remove Friction Between Start and Complete

Application abandonment is still often a design problem, not a demand problem, and the funnel data shows this stage held up better than most this cycle — which is exactly why it's worth protecting.

- **Review your application for redundant fields and unnecessary document requirements;** every additional field is a chance to lose a partially engaged family.
- **Confirm save-and-resume works reliably on mobile**, not just desktop, given how much of the admissions journey now happens on a phone.
- **Instrument your application to show exactly where families stop** — then fix that one step first, rather than redesigning the whole flow at once.

3. Close the Offer-to-Accept Gap with Faster, Clearer Financial Conversations

Offer and acceptance conversion fell further than any other stage this cycle, which makes this the single highest leverage fix available to most schools right now.

- **Pair every offer letter with a same-week financial aid or affordability conversation**, rather than sending an offer and letting families wait on aid news separately.
- **Use integrated tuition and aid platforms** so families see a complete, real cost picture at the moment of decision — not estimated ranges they have to reconcile later.
- **Flag offers where financial fit is uncertain** for proactive, human outreach from your team instead of waiting for the family to ask.

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4. Make School Choice Funding Part of the Pitch, Not an Afterthought

With a nationwide federal tax credit scholarship program set to take effect in January 2027, roughly 31 states already opted in, and existing state ESA and voucher programs continuing to expand funding and eligibility (Alabama's CHOOSE program alone is on pace to nearly double its participants this year), families increasingly expect schools to help them navigate layered funding sources rather than figure it out alone.

- **Build a plain-language ESA and scholarship eligibility guide** specific to your state into your admissions and financial aid communications.
- **Train admissions and business office staff to speak fluently** about how state and (starting 2027) federal funding stacks with your school's own aid — before families ask.
- **Get ahead of the federal program's January 2027 launch** by building your family-facing materials and staff training this year, not next fall.

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5. Protect the Back End: Re-Enrollment and Matriculation

Renewals and matriculation saw the steepest declines of any funnel stage this cycle, including in metros where applications held up well — which means every school, not just the ones seeing top-of-funnel softness, should treat this as a priority.

- **Treat the window between acceptance and matriculation as its own managed stage**, with a calendared sequence of touchpoints, e.g., welcome events, faculty introductions, peer-family connections, rather than a single congratulatory email.
- **Build a lightweight "melt risk" check-in for accepted families** who haven't taken a next step (deposit, forms, welcome event RSVP) within a set window.
- **Apply the same discipline to spring re-enrollment for current families** — renewals fell even further than new-family matriculation this cycle, and it's a stage schools often under-invest in relative to new admissions.

6. Benchmark Locally, Act Regionally

Because this cycle's trend is so regionally uneven (the Midwest, Northeast, South, and West are each telling a genuinely different story), national benchmarks alone will mislead as many schools as they help.

- **Use zip-code and regional data to understand your specific market's trajectory** rather than assuming the national numbers in this report apply directly to you.
- **Compare your funnel conversion** (stage by stage, not just total applications) against peer schools in your own region.
- If you're in a region seeing fast-expanding school choice funding (the South, in particular), **revisit whether your admissions timeline and staffing can keep pace with a potentially larger and more funding-diverse applicant pool.**

Five Questions to Ask About Your Enrollment Technology

Given where this cycle's losses concentrated, it's worth evaluating whether your current admissions, financial aid, and communication systems are built for a market that rewards speed and efficiency in the middle and late stages of the funnel — not just a clean front-end application.

1. **How quickly can your team see and act on a stalled applicant?**

   If a family stalls between offer and acceptance, or between acceptance and matriculation, does your system surface that automatically, or does it depend on someone remembering to check?

2. **Can families see a real, complete cost picture at the moment of offer?**

   Given how much this cycle's losses concentrated around financial decision-making, a system that separates admissions and financial aid into sequential steps is working against you. Look for tools that let families see tuition, aid, and eligible funding sources together.

3. **Does your platform make ESA and scholarship eligibility visible, not just possible?**

   Many systems can technically accept ESA or scholarship payments but do little to help families understand eligibility earlier in the process. With federal funding arriving in 2027, this gap will only become more visible to families.

4. **Can you see funnel conversion by stage — not just top-line applicant counts?**

   This year's story was invisible in raw volume alone; it only showed up in stage-by-stage conversion. If your reporting can't break out inquiry-to-start, offer-to-accept, and accept-to-matriculate separately, you're missing exactly the signal this report is built around.

5. **Is your re-enrollment process held to the same standard as new admissions?**

   Renewals saw the steepest decline of any stage measured this cycle. If your current-family re-enrollment workflow gets less attention, automation, and staff time than new family admissions, that imbalance is worth revisiting.

Checklist for Enrollment Resilience

This Month

- Audit inquiry response time across every channel and set a target (e.g., same business day).
- Map your application's start-to-complete drop-off points and fix the single-worst step first.
- Pair every offer with a same-week financial aid or ESA-eligibility conversation.
- Pull your school's funnel conversion rates by stage and compare them to your regional peers, not just the national trend.

This Cycle

- Build a lightweight "melt risk" check-in for accepted families who haven't taken the next step within a set window.
- Create a formal, calendared communication plan for the acceptance-to-matriculation window.
- Apply the same re-engagement discipline to current family re-enrollment, not just new admits.

Before January 2027

- Build a one-page "how to use school choice funding at our school" resource for families, covering both state programs and the incoming federal tax credit scholarship.
- Train admissions and business office staff to speak fluently about how state and federal funding options stack with your school's own aid.
- Confirm your enrollment and tuition systems can surface funnel-stage conversion data, not just total applicant counts.

Looking Ahead

The 2025–2026 cycle is a signal, not a verdict. Policy momentum behind school choice is stronger than it has ever been, and families continue to choose private and independent education at healthy rates once they engage. The schools that treat this year's funnel data as a call to sharpen late-stage conversion, rather than wait for volume to recover on its own, will be best positioned as the federal tax credit scholarship program and continued state ESA expansion bring even more funded families into the market over the next several cycles.

Expect the next 18 months to bring more, not less, complexity to how families pay for private education: more states opting into the federal program, more layered funding sources for admissions and business offices to explain, and a growing expectation that schools, not just state agencies, will help families navigate it. Schools that build that capability now will be the ones families point to as easiest to choose.

VenturEd's suite of solutions — covering admissions, enrollment, and financial aid — is built to help schools act on exactly this kind of funnel-stage insight, from first inquiry through tuition planning and re-enrollment. Reach out to the VenturEd team to talk about how these strategies apply to your school's specific data.

Transform Your Admissions & Enrollment

Get Started

Sources

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7 Ballotpedia, "State participation in the federal K–12 education tax credit program" and "School choice in the United States."

8 The Bush Center, "An Overview of School Choice: Charters, Magnets, Educational Savings Accounts, and More," 2026.