



SUMMARY AND BACKGROUND

Despite consistent population growth in St. Cloud, Minnesota between 2016 and 2023, enrollment in ISD 742 has been steadily declining over the same period. On average, the population in St. Cloud grew by 258 people, while enrollment in the district declined by an average of 438 students annually. The District hired Captivate Media + Consulting in November 2023 to support a comprehensive eight-month campaign focused on increasing student enrollment and eliminating misperceptions about the school community. District leaders offered anecdotal evidence about factors that may be contributing to the decline, including increased competition, false information about safety, and perceived biases in the community surrounding race, religion, and other historically marginalized groups. Previous data gathered through community surveys was more than ten years old. While the district had made efforts to increase enrollment, they did not have the desired results. Through research, we determined deeper work needed to be done. Enrollment data from the start of the 2024-2025 school year showed an increase of 170 students compared to the previous year, and current enrollment data shows an increase of 566 students compared to 2023. These numbers drastically exceeded our goals of retaining 210 students (5%). Not only did the district stop losing students year-over-year, but they increased enrollment. This increase accounts for more than \$4M in additional revenue for the district in year one and more than \$20M over the next five years.

RESEARCH

We began by meeting with district leadership, gathering anecdotal data and perceptions, as well as quantitative data like enrollment trends. We compared enrollment data to local census data, which showed that while the community was growing, enrollment in ISD 742 was declining, especially at the secondary level. On average, the population in St. Cloud grew by 258 people, while enrollment in ISD 742 declined by an average of 438 students annually. We gathered information about their current and past communication strategies and tactics to incorporate them into our communications plan. We then conducted 16 in-person and virtual focus groups with students, staff and families to determine what perceptions existed among different constituent groups, and to gain more insight into which narratives were backed by reality, and which narratives were mainly rumors.

Focus Groups:

We held 16 focus groups, being very intentional about including a representative cross-section of the district and including affinity groups that are historically under-represented. Whenever possible, we attended regularly scheduled meetings to help improve attendance and engagement. [Focus group questions](#) were aimed at uncovering the strengths and weaknesses of the district, as well as the narrative in schools and throughout the community. We compiled summaries of each focus group using our notes and transcripts, and we provided the district with a [key findings document](#) to share with board members and cabinet members.

Focus Groups Conducted:

- Elementary Families
- Middle School Families
- High School Families
- African American Families
- American Indian Families
- LatinX Families
- LGBTQIA+ Families
- Pre-K/Prospective Families
- Somali Families
- Special Education Families
- Apollo High School Students
- North Jr. High + Kennedy Students
- South Jr. High Students
- Tech High School Students
- Elementary Staff
- Secondary Staff

Focus Groups– Key Takeaways:

- Many families leave the district for private and charter schools as well as neighboring public schools. There are many options in the area that compete with the district.
- Concerns about safety and a decline in academic rigor drive much of the enrollment loss at the secondary level. We found that these narratives were largely based on misconceptions.
- The district's language immersion programs are a strength that should be highlighted, and the immersion families and staff are major advocates of the district.
- Some staff believed the district could be doing more to market the positive attributes of the district.
- When we entered schools and district buildings, we observed varying levels of customer service ranging from poor to great. While customer service was not part of our initial research plan, it became apparent that this inconsistency could impact enrollment.

Our research underscored the need for an intentional, long-term enrollment strategy focusing on traditional face-to-face interaction, relationship building and storytelling. We also identified internal work that needed to be addressed before implementing the enrollment communications.





PLANNING

Captivate Media + Consulting collaborated with district leadership to develop a comprehensive [communications plan](#). The plan incorporated historical data, anecdotal feedback, key messaging, and a timeline of tactics for implementation. We included the district's existing tactics, building on them when necessary, and added new tactics and timelines.

Key Objectives:

- Retaining current students by addressing misperceptions and increasing trust.
- Attracting new families by showcasing the district's strengths.
- Providing consistent and transparent communication to stakeholders to build trust and engagement, leading to increased enrollment.

Our strategy included a mix of new and existing tactics to broaden our reach. This included a focus on digital, print, and in-person engagements, and building community partnerships with organizations such as realtors, local government, businesses, and colleges. Since the district lost a large percentage of students after elementary school, one of our key recommendations was to audit and improve the student and family experience as students transitioned to middle school. We recommended developing standards so that each school hosts similar events, follows similar timelines, and has the same standard of marketing materials. We also recommended increasing opportunities for families to tour schools to help dispel rumors related to lack of safety.

Campaign Goal

Retain existing students, especially in transition points (moving from elementary to secondary, etc.) and attract new families by addressing misperceptions in the community and sharing the district's strengths with a wide audience. The long-term goal is to change the narrative about the school district and repair its image in the community.

Objectives

- Identify the factors affecting enrollment, provide strategies to prevent more families from leaving the district, and increase new enrollments. Build/rebuild trust with the community to drive support, engagement and ultimately enrollment.
- **Measuring the Return on Investment:**
 - Retaining **15 students (less than 1%*) = \$109,215 in year one** and **\$1,092,150+ over 10 years.**
 - Retaining **210 students (about 5%*) = \$1,529,010 in year one** and **\$15,290,100+ over 10 years.**
 - **Note:** calculations are based on the district's current per-pupil spending of \$7,281 and the number of school-aged children in the district boundary area who enrolled elsewhere. *At the time of our research, approximately 4,200 school-aged children in the district boundary area were enrolled elsewhere. With the passing of a referendum or increased funding, the return on investment would increase.
- Address misperceptions internally and throughout the community to create a culture of trust, engagement and support.
- Improve customer service experience across the district to increase the likelihood of families enrolling after visiting a school or the district office.

IMPLEMENTATION

Captivate Media + Consulting worked with district leaders to develop key messaging that reflected the district's values and strengths. We created a comprehensive two-year communications that built upon the district's existing tactics with our recommendations for new tactics and improvements. While we developed marketing strategies and materials, we also addressed inconsistencies with customer service. We witnessed varying levels of service provided to students, families, and staff by public-facing staff members of the district. We know the experiences current and prospective families have in schools tie directly to the district's efforts to attract and retain families. We led customer service training sessions with secretaries, teaching assistants, nutrition services staff, bus drivers, custodians and other public-facing roles to ensure everyone knows how to provide excellent customer service and can help create an environment where everyone feels safe and welcomed. Once key messages were approved, we began by introducing the campaign to [Cabinet members](#) and the [District Leadership Team](#) through interactive, in-person presentations. We presented leadership with an overview of the background information and research before introducing the key messages with suggestions for how to incorporate the messaging into their every day communications. We included interactive surveys and breakout discussions to facilitate deeper conversation. As our contract was coming to an end, we also attended a [school board meeting](#) to present a recap of our work and an overview of the two year communications plan.

Key Messages

- “We are one district, bringing communities together to serve all students.”
- “Everyone belongs here. We welcome, love and support all of our students, families and staff.”
- “We offer a world of opportunities, empowering our students to create the future of their dreams.”
 - Academic excellence
 - Career and college pathways
 - Language immersion programs
 - A variety of athletics and activities

Communication Channels + Tactics

- **In-Person Engagements:**
 - Coffee and Conversation with the Superintendent
 - Superintendent presentations at local organizations like Lions, Chamber of Commerce, etc.
 - School Board meetings and study sessions
 - Focus groups and stakeholder meetings
 - Ongoing meetings with affinity groups
- **Digital Platforms:**
 - District website and enrollment page
 - Social media campaigns
 - Digital signage across district facilities
 - Email and text message updates to families and staff
 - Monthly district feature in existing newsletters
- **Traditional Media & Print:**
 - Press releases and op-ed pieces
 - Printed newsletters mailed to residents
 - Informational materials distributed at events
- **Advertising & Outreach:**
 - Paid social media and search engine advertising
 - Direct mail to new residents, parents, and realtors
 - School banners promoting district enrollment
- **Customer Service:**
 - Point of service training for guest experience improvements

Regular Community Engagement Meetings/Presentations

- Monthly “Coffee and Conversation” with Superintendent
- Monthly Superintendent interview with local radio station
- Monthly updates at School Board meetings
- Enrollment “road show” at community meetings (Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Lions Club, etc.)
- Monthly Affinity Group Meetings: African American Families, American Indian Families, LatinX Families, LGBTQIA+ Families, Somali Families, Special Education Families

Deliverables Included:

- Social media templates and examples
- Graphics and templates for digital signs across the district, including translated examples
- Digital media content calendar (social media + digital signs)
- Two videos and a video rollout plan
- Calendar of monthly radio interview topics
- News releases/letters to the editor
- Handout for district leadership:
 - [Keys for effective communication](#)
 - [Canva training video](#) for front office staff who create content for newsletters, etc.

Video

Video is a powerful storytelling tool that connects with the audience in ways other media cannot. We used video to highlight the district’s values, voice, and energy while showing off the modern facilities, rigorous academics, and the safe and supportive atmosphere.

- [St. Cloud Brand Anthem](#): This video weaves in the key messages we developed and sets the tone for how we wanted others to talk about the district.
- [Tech High School](#): This video was created as a way to highlight the rigorous learning opportunities for prospective students and families.

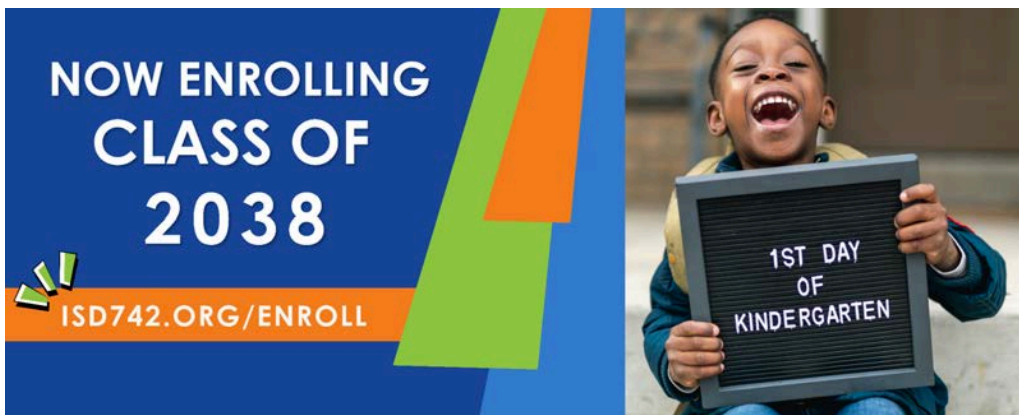
Social Media

- We positioned the district for success after our engagement ended by creating social media templates in Canva for administrators and communications staff to use in future campaigns, including translated examples.
- We provided [examples](#) of graphics, captions, which accounts should post, etc. as well as explanations about choosing the right imagery.
- Shared expertise about when to post, how to drive engagement, using stories, etc.
- Currently the district is primarily utilizing Facebook. We advised them to utilize Instagram as well.

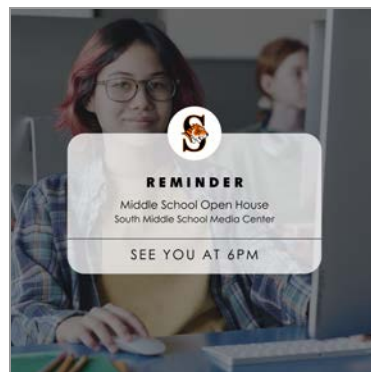


Click the thumbnail to view the St. Cloud Brand Anthem Video

KEY GRAPHICS



Digital signage to be displayed at each school building
We utilized stock imagery and advised communications staff to capture similar images of their students. These images were provided as templates so communications staff could rework them for future use.



Social Media Examples

We utilized stock imagery and advised communications staff to capture similar images of their students. These images were provided as templates so communications staff could rework them for future use.



District Leadership Team (DLT) Presentation
We led in-person presentations before the start of the school year to deliver key messages to key communicators throughout the district and to introduce the upcoming customer service training. The presentation included live polls and small group instruction.

EVALUATION

The enrollment campaign for St. Cloud Area Schools utilized multifaceted communications that were well-received by the school community and the target audience of current and prospective families. Face-to-face engagement played a key role in building trust and fostering community with many stakeholders expressing appreciation for being involved in the campaign development process. In addition, the implementation of a variety of communication tactics from video to social media to customer experience improved significantly for the district through this campaign. We recommended an ongoing contract to support the district’s communications team in implementing the long-term communications plan, however due to budget limitations this was not possible. Because of this, the district has not implemented some of the more in-depth tactics that were recommended for long-term community engagement and sustained enrollment increases.

Enrollment data from the start of the 2024-2025 school year showed an increase of 170 students compared to the previous year, and current enrollment data shows an increase of 566 students compared to 2023. These numbers drastically exceeded our goals of retaining 210 students (5%). Not only did the district stop losing students year-over-year, but they increased enrollment. This increase accounts for more than \$4M in additional revenue for the district in year one and more than \$20M over the next five years.

