Leadership Strategies for Declining School Enrollment and Equitable Learning Opportunities in Public Basic Education Schools: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRAK

Penurunan jumlah siswa merupakan krisis sistemik bagi pendidikan dasar negeri di berbagai belahan dunia, yang dipicu oleh pergeseran demografis, meluasnya pilihan sekolah, dan pola migrasi pascapandemi. Karena pembiayaan pendidikan negeri sangat bergantung pada formula pendanaan per siswa, berkurangnya siswa berdampak langsung pada defisit anggaran, pengurangan tenaga pendidik, serta tekanan menuju penggabungan atau penutupan sekolah, yang secara tidak proporsional mengancam kelompok siswa yang terpinggirkan. Penelitian ini bertujuan mensintesis temuan empiris mengenai strategi kepemimpinan administratif dan operasional yang efektif dalam mengelola penurunan jumlah siswa sekaligus menjaga kesetaraan kesempatan belajar. Tinjauan sistematis ini mengikuti pedoman PRISMA dan menggunakan sintesis tematik kualitatif terhadap literatur yang terbit hingga tahun 2026. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi tiga pilar strategi kepemimpinan, yaitu (1) peramalan strategis dan penganggaran yang berpusat pada kesetaraan, (2) desain ulang operasional dan model pembelajaran yang fleksibel, serta (3) pelibatan pemangku kepentingan yang inklusif. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa menghadapi penurunan jumlah siswa memerlukan pergeseran eksplisit menuju kepemimpinan sekolah yang berpusat pada kesetaraan, sehingga kelompok siswa yang terpinggirkan tidak menanggung beban logistik dan akademik dari kontraksi struktural.

Kata kunci: penurunan jumlah siswa; kepemimpinan pendidikan; alokasi sumber daya; kesetaraan pendidikan; pendidikan dasar negeri; tinjauan sistematis

ABSTRACT

Declining school enrollment represents a profound systemic crisis for public basic education globally, driven by demographic shifts, expanding school choice, and post-pandemic migratory patterns. Because public education financing relies heavily on per-pupil funding formulas, losing students translates directly into budget deficits, staff reductions, and pressure toward school consolidation or closure. These downstream impacts disproportionately threaten marginalized student groups and generate inequities in access to robust academic programming. This systematic review synthesizes empirical research to examine effective administrative and operational leadership strategies for managing declining enrollment while safeguarding equitable learning opportunities. Following PRISMA guidelines, peer-reviewed and scholarly literature published up to 2026 was screened, and a qualitative thematic synthesis was conducted. The synthesis identified three pillars of leadership strategy: (1) strategic forecasting and equity-centered budgeting, (2) operational redesign and flexible instructional models, and (3) inclusive stakeholder engagement. Successful leaders reject passive or purely reactive austerity and instead combine visionary, managerial, and culturally responsive leadership. The review concludes that navigating enrollment decline requires an explicit shift toward equity-centered school leadership, in which leaders actively protect marginalized student groups from carrying the logistical and academic burdens of structural contraction.

Keywords: Declining Enrollment; Educational Leadership; Resource Allocation; Educational Equity; Public Basic Education; Systematic Review

INTRODUCTION

Public basic education systems around the world are confronting a structural phenomenon that many of them were not designed to absorb: a sustained and widespread contraction in student enrollment. Localized demographic fluctuations have always been part of school administration, yet the declines observed in recent years differ in both scale and cause. They have been sharply accelerated by post-pandemic shifts in family decision making, by the growing availability of alternatives to the neighborhood public school such as homeschooling and private institutions, and by changing population densities across regions (Burtis, 2023). Taken together, these forces mean that many public schools are being asked to do the same educational work with fewer students, fewer dollars, and often fewer staff.

The fiscal consequences of this contraction are immediate because public education finance is built around students. Under standard state and federal per-pupil funding mechanisms, each departing student takes a portion of the revenue stream with them (Burtis, 2023). Costs, however, do not fall at the same speed. Building maintenance, utility networks, and the salaries of tenured staff remain largely fixed in the short run, so a school that loses a tenth of its students does not automatically lose a tenth of its expenses (Burtis, 2023). The resulting gap between shrinking revenue and sticky costs creates an operating deficit that leaders must close through some combination of reduced spending, reallocated resources, and structural change.

Districts that respond to this gap through organizational compression typically do so through program eliminations, non-selective teacher layoffs, and school consolidations or closures (Burtis, 2023; Dickason, 2023). The fallout of these decisions is rarely distributed evenly. Empirical evidence indicates that low-income districts, urban core institutions, and minoritized student populations bear a disproportionate share of the burden of structural austerity, which compounds historical opportunity gaps (Burtis, 2023; Do, 2020). Research on school closure extends this concern by showing that closures carry social and community costs that efficiency-based arguments tend to overlook (Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019), and that the consequences for displaced students depend on which schools are closed in a shrinking district (Engberg et al., 2012). The question, in other words, is not only whether a system can balance its books, but who ends up paying for the balance.

This distributional question places equity at the center of the problem. Equity in education is not achieved by treating every school or student identically; it requires deliberate attention to differences in need, starting point, and access to resources (Ainscow, 2020). Hernández (2019), in a research overview for the Spencer Foundation, examines both the challenges and the opportunities of advancing equity through education policy, which implies that equity commitments cannot be assumed to survive budget pressure unless leaders actively protect them. Declining enrollment is a context in which such commitments are at particular risk, because uniform cuts are administratively simple even though they can inherently harm high-need student groups (Do, 2020).

School and district leaders occupy the position at which these pressures converge. Leadership research has long argued that leaders influence student learning largely indirectly, by setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and improving the instructional program (Leithwood et al., 2020). Under conditions of contraction, each of these core practices is tested: direction must be reset around a smaller enterprise, people must be developed and sometimes redeployed rather than hired, organizational structures must be redesigned, and instruction must be protected even as

resources thin. Because leadership always operates within a context (Hallinger, 2018), practices that work during growth cannot be presumed to work during decline. School administrators therefore cannot simply rely on traditional, reactive management frameworks when managing systemic contraction.

Despite the importance of the problem, the relevant knowledge is dispersed. Analyses of enrollment trends and funding formulas are located largely in economics and public policy; studies of leadership practice are located in educational administration; and work on closure and community disruption is located in the sociology and geography of education. Few studies integrate these strands into a single account of what leaders can actually do. Moreover, much of the available evidence originates from a small number of national contexts, while school-level cases from other settings, such as the study of a public senior high school in Indonesia by Helmawati (2024), suggest that managerial leadership is also central to sustaining student intake elsewhere.

This systematic review addresses that gap by asking a central question: what specific leadership strategies effectively mitigate the negative fiscal impacts of declining enrollment while simultaneously protecting and advancing equitable learning opportunities for all students? Three sub-questions guide the synthesis: (1) what primary drivers of enrollment decline are identified, and what distinguishes proactive from reactive leadership responses; (2) which organizational, instructional, and financial strategies do leaders deploy; and (3) what do the reviewed studies indicate about the consequences of these strategies for educational equity, resource accessibility, and community stability? By analyzing the convergence of resource management and equity-centered oversight, the review aims to offer basic education leaders a clear framework for navigating institutional downscaling.

The article makes three contributions. First, it consolidates dispersed evidence into three leadership pillars. Second, it translates these pillars into an integrated framework that links each leadership move to an explicit equity safeguard. Third, it identifies the limits of the current evidence base and sets out directions for future research. The remainder of the article reviews the relevant literature, describes the review procedures, presents and discusses the findings, and closes with conclusions and implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Declining Enrollment as a Structural and Fiscal Phenomenon

Enrollment decline is best understood as a structural condition rather than a temporary fluctuation. Burtis (2023) documents the decline in public school enrollment since the pandemic and links it to the interaction of demographic change, expanding school choice, and shifting family preferences. Where earlier contractions could be attributed mainly to falling birth rates, contemporary declines combine long-term demographic trends with decisions by families to leave the public system. This combination makes decline harder to forecast and harder to reverse through purely administrative measures.

The mechanism through which enrollment decline becomes a fiscal problem is the per-pupil funding formula. Because revenue is tied to the number of students enrolled, losses in headcount translate directly into losses in revenue (Burtis, 2023). Scholars of school finance emphasize that money matters for student outcomes and that the way resources are distributed shapes educational opportunity (Baker, 2018). When revenue declines, the manner in which reductions are distributed therefore becomes a consequential decision rather than a mere accounting exercise. Fixed operating costs

and tenured staffing add rigidity, so that districts face what can be described as a cost-stickiness problem: expenditures adjust more slowly than revenues, and the gap tends to be closed through abrupt measures when forecasting is inadequate (Burtis, 2023; Dickason, 2023).

Finally, enrollment decline is not experienced uniformly. Low-income districts, urban core schools, and communities of minoritized students are repeatedly identified as the most exposed to austerity measures (Burtis, 2023; Do, 2020). This unevenness is the reason that enrollment decline has to be examined through an equity lens, and it is the reason that leadership, rather than financial technique alone, is central to the problem.

School Leadership Under Conditions of Contraction

A substantial body of research holds that successful school leadership works through a small number of core practices: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and improving the instructional program (Leithwood et al., 2020). Leadership effects on learning are largely indirect, mediated by teachers, organizational conditions, and school culture. This indirectness matters for the present topic, because it implies that leaders cannot protect student learning during decline by acting on budgets alone; they must also reshape the conditions in which teaching takes place.

The literature reviewed here refers, in different ways, to three leadership orientations that can be read as complementary. Visionary leadership articulates a direction that gives a smaller organization a compelling purpose, so that contraction is framed as redesign rather than retreat. Managerial leadership concerns the disciplined planning, budgeting, and monitoring of resources, and is the orientation most directly examined in studies of funding performance and enrollment management (Helmawati, 2024; Williams Jones, 2022). Culturally responsive leadership concerns the capacity to build trust, engage communities, and ensure that decisions respect the identities and needs of the students and families served (Khalifa et al., 2016; Vedder, 2026). These orientations are presented here as an interpretive lens developed by the authors, not as a typology fixed by the sources.

A further distinction runs through the literature: that between reactive and proactive responses. Reactive responses are characterized by across-the-board budget cuts, seniority-based layoffs, and the elimination of advanced or niche programs once a deficit has materialized. Proactive responses are characterized by forecasting, organizational redesign, and early engagement of the community (Dickason, 2023). Hallinger (2018) reminds scholars that leadership cannot be understood apart from context; accordingly, the proactive approach should be seen not as a universal template but as a set of principles that must be adapted to local fiscal rules, demographic conditions, and community histories.

Educational Equity and Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Educational equity concerns the fair distribution of opportunity, with resources and support allocated in relation to need (Ainscow, 2020). In school leadership scholarship, equity has been closely associated with culturally responsive leadership, which builds on the idea of culturally relevant pedagogy, the proposition that schooling should affirm students' cultural identities while sustaining academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Khalifa et al. (2016), in a synthesis of the literature, describe culturally responsive school leadership as a set of behaviors that include critical self-reflection, the promotion of culturally responsive curricula and inclusive school environments, and the engagement of students, parents, and communities in their own contexts. Vedder (2026) extends this line

of work by drawing lessons from the habits of award-winning principals.

Trust is a recurring mechanism in this scholarship. Bryk and Schneider (2002) identify relational trust among teachers, parents, and leaders as a core resource for school improvement. In periods of contraction, when proposals to reduce, merge, or relocate are likely to be viewed with suspicion, trust becomes especially valuable. The reviewed studies similarly present trust and inclusive management as conditions for institutional stability (Helmawati, 2024; Takeuti, 2025; Vedder, 2026).

School Closure, Consolidation, and Community Disruption

Research on school closure complements the leadership literature by identifying what is at stake when contraction culminates in structural change. Tieken and Auldridge-Reveles (2019) review closure research through the lens of spatial injustice, arguing that closures reshape the geography of opportunity and impose costs on communities that technical assessments may not register. Engberg et al. (2012) examine closures in a shrinking district and ask whether student outcomes depend on which schools are closed, underscoring that the design of closure decisions, and not merely the fact of closure, matters for students. Together, these studies suggest that leaders confronting contraction are also making decisions about community life and the distribution of educational opportunity across space.

Conceptual Lens of the Review

Three ideas organize the analysis that follows. The first is the distinction between reactive and proactive leadership, which structures the comparison of strategies reported by the reviewed sources (Dickason, 2023). The second is a distributive understanding of equity, in which the central question is who bears the burden of contraction and whether resources are allocated in relation to need (Ainscow, 2020; Baker, 2018). The third is legitimacy: decisions to reduce, redesign, or consolidate are more likely to be accepted, and therefore more likely to succeed, when affected stakeholders regard the process as fair and the leaders as trustworthy (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

These ideas function as sensitizing concepts rather than as hypotheses to be tested. They generate three expectations against which the literature was read: that effective strategies anticipate decline rather than merely react to it; that they protect the resource base of high-need students explicitly rather than assuming that equity will be preserved by default; and that they invest in the relationships and communication that allow difficult decisions to be understood and accepted. The synthesis reported below is organized around the pillars that emerged from the sources, and the three ideas are used to interpret how the pillars relate to one another.

Research Position

Existing scholarship therefore offers three partial perspectives: fiscal analyses that explain why enrollment decline creates budget pressure, leadership frameworks that describe how successful leaders work, and equity and closure studies that describe who bears the consequences. The present review positions itself at the intersection of these perspectives. It treats leadership as the mediating variable between structural contraction and equitable opportunity, and it asks which leadership strategies, documented in the available literature, allow public basic education systems to downsize or restructure without transferring the burden to the students who can least afford it.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a systematic review design with a qualitative thematic synthesis, structured in accordance with the Preferred

Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021). A systematic review was selected because the research question concerns what is known across a dispersed body of work about leadership responses to a complex organizational problem, rather than the measurement of an effect in a single setting. A narrative, thematic form of synthesis was chosen over statistical pooling because the included sources differ markedly in design, context, and outcome measures, which makes quantitative aggregation inappropriate.

Search Strategy and Data Sources

Electronic searches were performed across leading indexers, including ERIC, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Scopus, supplemented by select academic publisher repositories. ERIC and Scopus provided coverage of education research; Google Scholar and publisher repositories were used to locate dissertations, institutional reports, and recent open-access articles that formal indexes may not capture; and PubMed was included to capture research on the psychosocial dimensions of school restructuring. Search strings merged Boolean operators with specialized terms organized around three explicit dimensions, namely context, phenomenon, and action or mechanism, as summarized in Table 1. Terms within a dimension were combined with OR and the dimensions were combined with AND. The search covered literature published up to 2026.

Table 1. Search Dimensions and Terms

Dimension	Search terms
Context	“public basic education”; “K-12 public schools”; “district-level education”
Phenomenon	“declining enrollment”; “student population loss”; “school consolidation”; “budget contraction”
Action/Mechanism	“leadership strategies”; “resource allocation”; “educational equity”; “culturally responsive leadership”

Source: Authors’ search protocol.

Eligibility Criteria

To capture relevant, high-quality insights, explicit eligibility parameters were enforced, summarized in Table 2. Sources were eligible when they addressed leadership in public basic education during periods of student demographic or fiscal decline. Because the topic is addressed both in scholarly journals and in institutional research, the eligible source types included peer-reviewed empirical studies, systematic reviews, qualitative and quantitative inquiries, doctoral dissertations, and academic or policy toolkits and reports issued by recognized research institutions. Literature centered solely on higher education, speculative essays lacking empirical backing, non-English publications, and studies exploring general school improvement independent of enrollment contraction or resource restriction were excluded.

Table 2. Eligibility Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Source type	Peer-reviewed empirical studies, systematic reviews, qualitative/quantitative inquiries, doctoral dissertations, and academic or policy toolkits and reports from recognized institutions	Purely speculative essays lacking empirical backing
Education level	Public basic education (Pre-K–12 and equivalent)	Literature centered solely on higher education
Focus	Leadership during periods of student demographic or fiscal decline or resource restriction	General school improvement independent of enrollment contraction or resource restriction
Language	English	Non-English publications

Source: Authors' review protocol.

Screening and Selection

Records retrieved from the databases and repositories were screened in stages. Initial screening of titles and abstracts filtered out redundant or out-of-scope entries. The remaining full-text articles then underwent rigorous appraisal against the eligibility criteria. Eight sources satisfied all criteria and were retained for synthesis; they are described in Table 3.

Quality Appraisal

Full-text sources were appraised for relevance to the research question, clarity of purpose, transparency of method or evidence base, and the extent to which conclusions were supported by the reported evidence. Because the corpus combined academic articles with policy reports and a dissertation, appraisal was used to judge the weight each source should carry in the synthesis rather than to exclude sources mechanically. Reports from recognized research institutions were treated as informative about system-level patterns, whereas single-case studies were treated as illustrative of school-level practice.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

A structured extraction frame was applied to every included source. Data extraction focused on isolating four elements: (1) the primary drivers of enrollment decline; (2) the nature of the leadership response, whether reactive or proactive; (3) the specific organizational, instructional, or financial strategies deployed; and (4) the observed outcomes regarding educational equity, resource accessibility, and community stability.

A qualitative thematic synthesis was then used to cluster independent study findings into distinct overarching leadership pillars. Guided by the logic of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the extracted material was read repeatedly, coded for recurring strategies and rationales, grouped into candidate themes, and refined until each theme could be described coherently and linked to its supporting sources. This process yielded three pillars, which are reported in the next section.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

The trustworthiness of the review was supported by explicit eligibility criteria, a uniform extraction frame, and the transparent linkage of every theme to the sources that support it. The study used only published secondary sources and involved no human participants; formal ethical clearance was

therefore not required. Source material has been paraphrased and attributed throughout.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the thematic synthesis and discusses them in relation to the wider literature. It first describes the included sources and the drivers of decline they identify, and then reports the three leadership pillars that emerged: strategic forecasting and equity-centered budgeting; operational redesign and flexible instructional models; and inclusive stakeholder engagement. It concludes with an integrated framework, implications, and limitations.

Characteristics of the Included Literature

The eight included sources are heterogeneous in type and context, as shown in Table 3. They comprise policy research papers and reports, a systematic review, a doctoral dissertation, and journal articles, and they address public basic education in different national settings. Most of the system-level evidence on enrollment and funding relates to public school districts that depend on per-pupil funding, whereas the school-level case evidence includes a public senior high school in Indonesia (Helmawati, 2024) and a state-level case in Brazil (Takeuti, 2025). This diversity is a strength in that it permits cross-context reflection, but it also means that the findings are best read as converging patterns rather than as the output of a uniform body of evidence.

Table 3. Sources Included in the Synthesis

Source	Type	Focus	Contribution to synthesis
Burtis (2023)	Policy research paper (The Hamilton Project)	Post-pandemic enrollment decline and its fiscal effects	Drivers of decline; fiscal pressure; unequal burden
Dickason (2023)	Report/toolkit (ERIC)	Navigating declining enrollment	Pillars 1–3: forecasting, redesign, engagement
Do (2020)	Policy report (Learning Policy Institute)	Adequate and equitable school funding	Pillars 1–2: equity-weighted funding; resource tracking
Helmawati (2024)	Case study article	Managerial leadership to sustain new student enrolment in an Indonesian public senior high school	Pillar 3: inclusive leadership and trust
Hernández (2019)	Research overview (Spencer Foundation)	Challenges and opportunities of advancing equity through education policy	Equity framing
Takeuti (2025)	Systematic review	Education reform policies and learning outcomes, state-level case in Brazil	Pillar 3: democratic, inclusive management
Vedder (2026)	Journal article	Habits of culturally responsive school leaders (award-winning principals)	Pillar 3: trust and community assets

Source	Type	Focus	Contribution to synthesis
Williams Jones (2022)	Doctoral dissertation (Walden University)	Leadership strategies to enhance funding performance in Pre-K–12 public districts	Pillar 1: aligning goals and resources

Source: Authors' analysis.

Drivers of Decline and the Nature of Leadership Responses

Regarding the first extraction focus, the sources converge on three drivers of enrollment decline: demographic shifts and changing regional population densities, the expansion of alternative school choices such as homeschooling and private institutions, and post-pandemic migratory and enrollment patterns (Burtis, 2023). Regarding the second focus, the sources distinguish sharply between reactive and proactive leadership. The reactive pattern, in which leaders wait for deficits to materialize and then apply uniform reductions, is repeatedly associated with program eliminations, non-selective layoffs, and closures (Burtis, 2023; Dickason, 2023). The proactive pattern, in contrast, is characterized by anticipation, redesign, and engagement (Dickason, 2023). The finding that successful leadership models reject passive or purely reactive austerity measures is the premise of the three pillars discussed below.

Pillar 1: Strategic Forecasting and Equity-Centered Budgeting

From reactive budgeting to multi-year forecasting

A foundational attribute that distinguishes successful school leaders from those in struggling districts is the shift from short-term, reactive budgeting to proactive, multi-year strategic forecasting. The reviewed literature establishes that resilient districts begin by compiling five-to-ten-year demographic and programmatic density projections (Dickason, 2023). The value of such projections lies in the clarity they provide: data-driven foresight allows leaders to anticipate fiscal cliffs rather than reacting abruptly after a budget has already failed to balance (Dickason, 2023). A horizon of five to ten years is significant because it exceeds the typical annual budget cycle and therefore reveals trends that year-to-year planning conceals.

In practice, projections of this kind typically combine information about birth cohorts, housing and migration patterns, and the rate at which families choose alternatives to the local public school, although the specific inputs vary from one system to another. What matters for leadership is less the technical sophistication of the model than the decisions it enables. A district that knows it will lose a given proportion of its students over a decade can phase staffing changes through attrition and retirement, plan facility use years in advance, and consult communities while options remain open. A district that learns of the same decline only when enrollment counts fall must make the same adjustments under time pressure, with fewer alternatives and a greater likelihood that cuts will be applied indiscriminately. Forecasting thus converts enrollment decline from a shock into a managed trajectory.

Aligning goals with reimagined resource allocation

Forecasting alone does not protect equity; it must be tied to how resources are allocated. Effective leaders align district goals directly with reimagined resource allocation methods (Dickason, 2023; Williams Jones, 2022). This alignment means that budget decisions are derived from stated educational priorities rather than from the historical pattern of spending. The doctoral

study by Williams Jones (2022), which focuses on leadership strategies to enhance funding performance in Pre-K–12 public school districts, is consistent with this reading in treating the management of funding as a matter of leadership and not merely of technical accounting. The implication is that budgets are expressions of values: where a district chooses to protect spending during contraction reveals what it regards as essential.

Equity-weighted budgeting

A central finding concerns the contrast between uniform across-the-board cuts and equity-centered budgeting models. Uniform reductions appear fair because they treat every school identically, yet they inherently harm high-need student groups, who depend most heavily on the additional services that are often first to be reduced (Do, 2020). Equity-centered models instead weigh funding formulas to favor students from low-income households, English language learners, and children with learning disabilities, protecting their resource bases even as total district funding shrinks (Do, 2020). This weighting echoes the broader argument in school finance research that the distribution of resources, and not only their total quantity, determines whether opportunity is equitable (Baker, 2018).

The logic of weighting can be illustrated with a simple comparison. Suppose a district must reduce its budget by a given percentage. A uniform cut reduces every school's allocation by that percentage, which means that a school serving many students with high needs loses the same proportion of resources as a school serving few. A weighted approach first identifies the resources on which high-need students rely, shields them, and then locates reductions elsewhere. The second approach is administratively more demanding because it requires reliable data on student need and transparent criteria for protection, but it is the approach that the reviewed literature associates with the preservation of equity (Do, 2020).

Auditing spending and protecting revenue

Leaders also focus on auditing current operational spending, protecting existing revenue sources, and maximizing federal or state-level equity grants to offset local per-pupil deficits (Dickason, 2023; Do, 2020). Structural spending audits examine where the fixed costs of a shrinking system are concentrated, such as buildings, utilities, and administrative overhead, and thereby allow leaders to right-size operations without decimating core student services. The pursuit of external equity grants is an important complement because it recognizes that local leaders cannot close a per-pupil deficit entirely through internal reallocation. Taken together, the first pillar describes a sequence: forecast the trajectory, align goals and allocations, weight resources toward need, and audit and supplement revenue.

Discussion of Pillar 1

The first pillar speaks directly to the fiscal mechanism identified by Burtis (2023). Where per-pupil formulas transmit enrollment loss into revenue loss while fixed costs persist, leaders cannot eliminate the gap, but they can control its timing and its distribution. Forecasting controls timing; equity-weighted budgeting controls distribution. The pillar also reveals a tension that the literature acknowledges only implicitly. Protecting some categories of students inevitably means that reductions fall elsewhere, which makes the criteria for protection a matter of legitimate public contestation. This observation connects the first pillar to the third, because weighted budgeting is sustainable only when stakeholders understand and accept the reasons for it.

Pillar 2: Operational Redesign and Flexible Instructional Models

When student enrollment drops, traditional and rigid school operating structures become financially unsustainable.

A school organized around a standard number of sections, a fixed staffing ratio, and a full course catalogue designed for a larger student body cannot maintain that structure with fewer students without either unsustainably small classes or the elimination of programs. The review identifies that expert leaders proactively lean into school and system redesign rather than allowing decay to dictate terms (Dickason, 2023). Table 4 contrasts the traditional or reactive responses with the adaptive, equity-centered strategies identified in the reviewed literature across three leadership focus areas.

Table 4. Reactive and Adaptive Leadership Responses to Declining Enrollment

Leadership focus area	Traditional/reactive response	Adaptive/equity-centered strategy
Staffing and scheduling	Strict seniority-based layoffs; cutting advanced or niche courses	Flexible scheduling, shared-staffing models across sites, and cross-training of personnel (Dickason, 2023)
Instructional delivery	Standard lecture-based classrooms with unsustainably low student numbers	Innovative digital or blended models, multi-grade academies, and personalized mastery learning pathways (Dickason, 2023)
Resource allocation	Reductions that ignore student demographics	Intentional weighted resource tracking to preserve interventions for marginalized subpopulations (Do, 2020)

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Dickason (2023) and Do (2020).

Staffing and scheduling

The reactive response to falling enrollment in staffing is strict seniority-based layoffs together with the cutting of advanced or niche courses. Seniority-based layoffs are non-selective: they remove staff according to years of service rather than according to the instructional needs of the remaining students, and they commonly eliminate the specialized offerings that few students take but that matter greatly to those who do. The adaptive alternative consists of flexible scheduling, shared-staffing models across sites, and the cross-training of personnel (Dickason, 2023). Shared staffing allows a specialist teacher to serve several small schools rather than being released from all of them; cross-training broadens the range of courses a teacher can offer; and flexible scheduling makes it possible to combine small cohorts without sacrificing instructional time. In the language of leadership research, these practices exemplify the redesign of the organization as a core leadership function (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Instructional delivery

In instructional delivery, the reactive pattern is to continue standard lecture-based classrooms with unsustainably low student numbers. The adaptive response draws on innovative digital or blended models, multi-grade academies, and personalized mastery learning pathways (Dickason, 2023). Each of these models changes the relationship between class size and instructional viability. Blended models allow a small group of students to access courses that could not be staffed in person; multi-grade academies pool students across grade levels so that groups reach a workable size; and mastery learning pathways allow students to progress at their own pace within a shared setting. These models are not merely cost responses. They reposition a small school as a place where individualized learning is possible, which can convert a perceived weakness into an educational strength.

Resource allocation

The third focus area returns to the logic of the first pillar. The reactive pattern consists of reductions that ignore student demographics, whereas the adaptive pattern uses intentional weighted resource tracking to preserve interventions for marginalized subpopulations (Do, 2020). Resource tracking makes the distribution of resources visible at the level of student groups, so that leaders can verify whether reductions are in fact falling on those least dependent on them. Without such tracking, equity commitments remain declarations; with it, they become auditable.

Preserving curricular breadth

By leveraging flexible scheduling and innovative pedagogical models, leaders preserve access to robust, diverse curricula, such as advanced placement, arts, and specialized STEM tracks, that would otherwise be eliminated under standard staffing frameworks. This outcome carries particular equity significance. When advanced and specialized courses disappear from small public schools, families with the means to do so can seek them elsewhere, including in private institutions, which may in turn accelerate enrollment decline and concentrate students with fewer options in the remaining public schools (Burtis, 2023). Preserving curricular breadth is thus both an equity measure and an enrollment-stabilization measure.

Discussion of Pillar 2

The second pillar demonstrates that redesign and austerity are not synonyms. Cost reductions achieved through redesign are intended to preserve educational function, whereas austerity reduces function in order to reduce cost. Nevertheless, redesign is not automatically equitable. Digital and blended models, for example, presuppose access to devices, connectivity, and supportive adult guidance, which vary among households; multi-grade and shared-staffing models can burden teachers with additional preparation and travel if they are not supported by planning time. The reviewed literature presents these models as strategies, but the evidence on their effects for marginalized students remains limited, a gap that is taken up in the section on limitations. Leaders implementing redesign should therefore pair each structural change with the weighted resource tracking described above, so that its effects on high-need students can be monitored.

Pillar 3: Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement and Managing the Human Dimension

School downsizings, closures, and consolidations are not merely technical adjustments. They are deeply disruptive events that cause intense emotional distress for families, educators, and the broader community (Dickason, 2023). A school is often a center of neighborhood identity, a place of employment, and a source of continuity for children; its reorganization therefore affects relationships and belonging as well as budgets and timetables. Tieken and Auldridge-Reveles (2019) make a similar point in their analysis of school closure as spatial injustice, in which the costs borne by communities are easily underestimated in technical, efficiency-based decision making.

Democratic and inclusive management

The systematic review of education reform policies in Brazil by Takeuti (2025) indicates that managerial efficiency fails if it is not balanced with democratic, inclusive school management. This finding reinforces the point that financial and operational solutions, however well designed, depend on the consent and cooperation of those who must live with them. A plan that is technically sound but imposed without consultation is likely to meet resistance that erodes its benefits.

Trust and culturally responsive leadership

Culturally responsive school leaders recognize that building public trust is a core requirement for maintaining institutional

stability (Helmawati, 2024; Vedder, 2026). This conclusion aligns with the classic finding that relational trust is a core resource for school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and with the synthesis by Khalifa et al. (2016), which identifies leadership behaviors such as engaging students, parents, and communities in their own contexts. Rather than delivering top-down mandates, successful leaders integrate community assets and establish transparent communication pathways through community town halls, participatory planning committees, and collaborative on-site supports (Dickason, 2023; Vedder, 2026).

Inclusive leadership practices also counter community dissatisfaction and mitigate internal friction (Helmawati, 2024). Because Helmawati's case concerns managerial leadership aimed at sustaining new student enrolment in a public senior high school, it suggests that engagement is not only a response to closure but also a means of retaining the confidence of prospective families before decline becomes severe.

Welcoming protocols and psychosocial support

When closures or consolidations become completely unavoidable, effective leaders deploy structured "welcoming school" protocols and localized psychological support networks to proactively address the human side of systemic displacement (Dickason, 2023). Welcoming protocols are significant because the outcomes of displaced students depend not only on the decision to close a school but also on the circumstances in which students are subsequently placed (Engberg et al., 2012). Orientation, relationship-building, and continuity of support help displaced students and staff to be integrated rather than merely transferred. Psychological support networks recognize that transitions of this kind are emotionally taxing and that unaddressed distress can interfere with learning and with staff retention.

Marginalized communities as co-architects

The equity implication of this pillar is that marginalized communities should be co-architects of reorganization rather than casualties of it. Because low-income and minoritized communities are the most exposed to the consequences of closure and consolidation (Burtis, 2023; Do, 2020), their participation in planning is not a courtesy but a safeguard. Participatory planning committees and transparent communication create channels through which the criteria for weighted budgeting, redesign, and consolidation can be examined and, where necessary, challenged by those affected. Participatory approaches to budgeting extend the same logic to the allocation of funds.

Discussion of Pillar 3

The third pillar supplies the legitimacy on which the other two depend. Forecasts and weighted budgets are persuasive only when communities understand them, and redesigned schools succeed only when families choose to remain in them. Engagement is therefore not an optional addition to technical strategy but one of its conditions of success. At the same time, engagement has costs: it requires time, skilled facilitation, and a willingness on the part of leaders to share decisions. The reviewed literature offers limited guidance on how to conduct participation in ways that avoid domination by the most organized or most vocal groups, which is an area that deserves further research.

Observed Outcomes for Equity, Resource Accessibility, and Community Stability

The fourth extraction focus concerned the observed outcomes of the strategies for equity, resource accessibility, and community stability. A careful reading shows that the reviewed sources more often describe strategies and their rationales than report measured outcomes, and this distinction is important for interpreting the findings. The evidence is strongest at the level of mechanism: it explains how particular

decisions are expected to protect or harm particular groups, and it is weaker at the level of demonstrated effects.

With respect to equity, the sources indicate that equity-weighted budgeting and resource tracking are intended to protect the resource bases of low-income students, English language learners, and children with learning disabilities, in contrast to uniform cuts that inherently harm high-need groups (Do, 2020). With respect to resource accessibility, the sources indicate that flexible scheduling, shared staffing, and blended or multi-grade delivery preserve access to diverse and advanced curricula that would otherwise be eliminated (Dickason, 2023). With respect to community stability, the sources associate transparent communication, inclusive leadership, and trust-building with the mitigation of dissatisfaction and internal friction, and they associate welcoming protocols and psychosocial supports with the human side of displacement (Dickason, 2023; Helmawati, 2024; Vedder, 2026).

Taken together, these observations suggest that the three outcome domains are connected. Protecting equity depends on resource accessibility, since weighted budgets are meaningful only if the services they protect can actually be delivered in a smaller school. Resource accessibility in turn depends on community stability, since redesigned schools can retain students only if families trust them. The limited availability of quantified outcome data nevertheless means that these connections should be treated as plausible and well-motivated, but not as conclusively demonstrated.

An Integrated Equity-Centered Leadership Framework

The three pillars are interdependent rather than sequential. Forecasting and weighted budgeting generate the data and criteria that give engagement something concrete to discuss; redesign supplies the educational content that makes a smaller school worth choosing; and engagement secures the legitimacy without which the first two cannot be sustained. Table 5 integrates the pillars by pairing each core leadership move with an explicit equity safeguard and the risk that follows if the pillar is neglected.

Table 5. Integrated Framework of Equity-Centered Leadership Under Declining Enrollment

Pillar	Core leadership move	Equity safeguard	Risk if neglected
1. Strategic forecasting and equity-centered budgeting	Multi-year demographic projections; audited spending; goal-aligned allocation	Weighted funding for low-income students, English language learners, and students with learning disabilities	Fiscal cliffs; uniform cuts that deepen opportunity gaps
2. Operational redesign and flexible instruction	Flexible scheduling, shared staffing, blended and multi-grade models	Weighted resource tracking; continued access to advanced and diverse courses	Rigid structures; elimination of niche and advanced courses
3. Inclusive stakeholder engagement	Transparent communication, participatory planning, welcoming protocols	Marginalized communities as co-architects; psychosocial support	Distrust, dissatisfaction, and displacement

Source: Authors' synthesis.

The framework also clarifies how the leadership orientations introduced earlier are distributed across the pillars. Managerial leadership is most visible in the first pillar,

where planning, auditing, and allocation are central. Visionary leadership is most visible in the second, where a smaller school must be reimagined as a coherent and attractive educational proposition. Culturally responsive leadership is most visible in the third, where trust, community assets, and inclusion determine whether change is accepted. Effective leaders draw on all three, which is consistent with the view that successful leadership consists of multiple core practices rather than a single style (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Finally, the framework reframes the problem. The reviewed literature suggests that declining enrollment should not be viewed as an inevitable catalyst for systemic decline. Where leaders forecast, redesign, and engage, contraction can function as a strategic window to rebuild public school systems into leaner, more responsive, and more inclusive learning environments. Where they do not, the burden of contraction defaults to those with the least capacity to bear it.

Managing Decline Versus Managing Growth

The framework also illuminates why leaders trained and rewarded during periods of growth may find decline difficult to manage. Growth conditions reward expansion: hiring is the dominant staffing decision, capital investment is directed toward new facilities, and success is measured by rising enrollment. Decline reverses several of these assumptions. Staffing decisions become decisions about redeployment and retention, facility decisions become decisions about consolidation and shared use, and success must be redefined in terms of quality, equity, and stability at a smaller scale. Because leadership is always context-dependent (Hallinger, 2018), the skills that served leaders well in growth, such as expansion planning and the promotion of new programs, are not automatically the skills required to navigate contraction.

This contrast helps to explain the persistence of the reactive pattern identified in the literature. Across-the-board cuts and seniority-based layoffs are the familiar tools of administrators who have not been prepared for sustained contraction; they are quick to apply and easy to defend as impartial, but they forgo the possibilities that redesign and engagement offer (Burtis, 2023; Dickason, 2023). Professional preparation and development for school leaders may therefore need to include forecasting, equity-weighted budgeting, organizational redesign, and community engagement under conditions of decline as explicit components.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings carry several implications for school and district leaders. First, leaders should treat enrollment projection as a standing function and not as a response to crisis, extending planning horizons beyond the annual budget cycle. Second, budget reductions should be preceded by an explicit identification of the services on which high-need students depend, with weighted criteria published in advance. Third, structural redesign should be pursued as an educational project and not only as a cost measure, with attention to curricular breadth and to the conditions that make blended or multi-grade models workable. Fourth, engagement should begin before decisions are made, and should include channels for those most affected to influence the criteria applied. Fifth, where closure or consolidation cannot be avoided, welcoming protocols and psychosocial support should be planned and resourced as part of the decision, not added afterward.

The pillars can also be read as a practical sequence, offered here as the authors' synthesis rather than as a protocol validated in the sources. Leaders might begin by diagnosing the trajectory through multi-year projections and a structural spending audit; then identify and protect the services on which high-need students depend; then redesign scheduling, staffing, and

instructional delivery to sustain curricular breadth; and engage the community throughout, from the first disclosure of projections to the evaluation of outcomes. Monitoring the distribution of resources by student group at each step provides a means of detecting when a well-intended measure begins to disadvantage those it was meant to protect.

For policymakers, the findings suggest that funding formulas and accountability arrangements shape what leaders are able to do. Where per-pupil formulas transmit enrollment loss directly into revenue loss, the ability of leaders to plan is constrained, and transitional arrangements that smooth the pace of adjustment may give leaders time to redesign rather than merely cut. Support for data systems that track resources by student group would enable the weighted approach described above, and the availability of equity-oriented grants is itself a lever that leaders in the reviewed studies are advised to use (Do, 2020). Because equity advancement through policy involves both obstacles and opportunities (Hernández, 2019), such measures are best accompanied by monitoring of their distributional effects.

The implications must be adapted to context. In settings where public basic education is shaped by national funding rules and centrally determined staffing, such as those familiar to the authors, local leaders may have less discretion over formulas but retain considerable influence over scheduling, instructional design, communication, and the treatment of high-need students within the allocations they control. The Indonesian school-level case examined by Helmawati (2024) indicates that managerial leadership and inclusive practices can matter at the school level even where system-level levers are limited. Whether and how the pillars transfer across settings is an empirical question that the current evidence base cannot fully answer.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations qualify the findings. First, the corpus is small and heterogeneous, and it includes policy reports, a dissertation, and single-case evidence alongside peer-reviewed articles; the pillars therefore represent converging patterns rather than tested causal claims. Second, the evidence is concentrated in a limited number of national contexts, and much of it is descriptive or practice-oriented, which constrains generalization to other settings. Third, the review was restricted to English-language sources and to published literature, so relevant work in other languages or in unpublished form may be missing. Fourth, outcomes related to equity, such as access to advanced courses or the experiences of displaced students, are seldom measured over time in the reviewed sources, which limits conclusions about the long-term effects of the strategies described.

These limitations point to several directions for future research. Comparative studies across national funding systems could clarify which strategies depend on specific fiscal arrangements. Longitudinal designs could trace the effects of weighted budgeting, redesign, and engagement on the outcomes of marginalized students. Research in the Global South and in rural and island contexts, where enrollment dynamics and community structures differ, would broaden the evidence base. Finally, studies that include the voices of students, families, and teachers would address a gap in the current literature, in which the experiences of those affected are more often described by leaders and analysts than by the affected groups themselves.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review set out to identify leadership strategies that mitigate the fiscal effects of declining enrollment while protecting equitable learning opportunities in public basic education. The synthesized findings demonstrate that declining school

enrollment poses an institutional threat that cannot be resolved by conventional, reactive cost-cutting. When public educational leaders respond to shrinking per-pupil revenues with uniform budget cuts, they inadvertently worsen historical opportunity gaps, leaving vulnerable student groups to bear the consequences of underfunded, understaffed, and resource-depleted environments.

Three leadership pillars emerged from the reviewed literature. The first anchors district operations in multi-year demographic projections and in audited, equity-weighted resource allocation. The second embraces structural redesign that leverages flexible staffing, alternative scheduling, and innovative instructional delivery to maintain high-quality learning options. The third prioritizes inclusive, culturally responsive stakeholder engagement so that marginalized communities are co-architects, rather than casualties, of the reorganization process. The integrated framework presented in this article shows that these pillars reinforce one another and that each must be paired with an explicit equity safeguard.

Theoretically, the review contributes by bringing together fiscal, leadership, and equity perspectives that are usually treated separately, and by positioning leadership as the mediating factor between structural contraction and equitable opportunity. Practically, it offers leaders and policymakers a set of concrete moves and safeguards for managing downsizing. Ultimately, declining enrollment should not be treated as an inevitable catalyst for systemic decline. Managed through visionary, proactive, and equitable leadership, it can serve as a strategic window to redesign public school systems into leaner, highly responsive, and deeply inclusive learning environments. Given the limits of the current evidence, future research should test these strategies across contexts and over time, with particular attention to the students who are most at risk of bearing the costs of contraction.

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