LOS Angeles schools celebrated a historic moment recently but not one the district officials would care to trumpet.

The history made was that student enrollment, which has been falling for years, finally dropped below the 700,000 mark to 694,288.

About 14,000 more students left the LAUSD since last school year ended than were replaced with incoming students. Some graduated, some dropped out, some transferred - and many more never arrived to take their places.

If this were a one-time deal, it wouldn't be much to worry about. But LAUSD enrollment has been declining for more than five years, and not only because of a corresponding dip in birth rates. Many students have been lost to the LAUSD because the district itself has lost its way in the mission of education.

In fact, many of those lost students didn't go far. They're in charter classrooms down the street or across town. Even while the LAUSD has been losing students, charter schools within the district and across the state have been enjoying a boom. Charter enrollment accounts for 6 percent of the LAUSD-eligible population and is expected to continue to grow.

Meanwhile, the school district is still barreling through its bond money to build schools for students who might not exist in a few years, while denying charters that really need class space the use of vacant district school sites.

If the LAUSD were a ship, it would be sinking. Not in a dramatic Titanic-type catastrophe, but gradually, from small leaks that from neglect have been allowed to grow.

Maybe it's a good thing the LAUSD has a former naval commander at the helm who can understand the urgency to attend to even a slowly sinking vessel. Superintendent David Brewer III has already made some overtures to turn the behemoth that is - for now - the country's second-largest school district by working with the mayor's reformers and breaking off the worst performing schools into what are essentially new districts.

It serves no one for the LAUSD ship to sink altogether.