

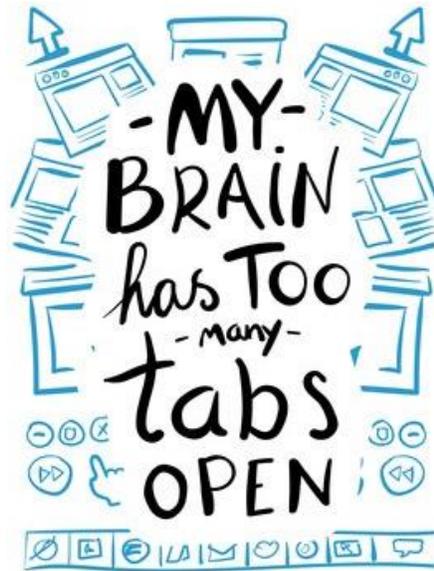
# Investing to Rebuild Attendance Post-Pandemic

By Tony Wold, Ed.D.

"I don't have the bandwidth to take on anything new right now."

Over the last 30 years in public education leadership, I have seen trends come and go and navigated fiscal prosperity and economic downturn. Through all of these times, I have witnessed the resilience of students and educators to adjust to the new challenges and modalities of how we do our work. This year, however, is the first time that I have collectively seen an entire industry feel so worn down, exhausted, and facing cognitive overload at all levels of the organization.

After not even a month of the new school year, that was what I heard daily. It was reiterated by superintendents, classroom teachers, front office secretaries, custodians, food service personnel, and every other classification of staff working at schools. As we move into June, I still hear that same statement at least once a day. Public Educators



have just gone through three consecutive school years where the delivery of instruction and the "work" that we do to educate students had to be completely changed and restructured in ways we had never worked before. Exasperated by critical staffing shortages, educators have been doing multiple jobs, bringing everyone to a point of saturation. What we do now will define a generation of students and it will require us to innovate and rebuild habits, structures, and systems of support once again.

*"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit." ~ Aristotle*

Across the nation, the level of chronic absenteeism (missing more than 10% of the instructional days) has ballooned to over 40% at every grade level. It is even more pronounced in the critical early grades from Kindergarten to Grade 3. Not only are students missing more direct instruction, but

Grade	Mar 2021 Chronic Absence Rate	Mar 2022 Chronic Absence Rate	SI&A Rate of Increase	Est. Non-SI&A Rate of Increase
KG	15.8%	37.3%	136.6%	<b>213.4%</b>
1	14.7%	31.7%	115.6%	<b>198.0%</b>
2	13.2%	27.7%	109.0%	<b>200.6%</b>
3	12.1%	25.8%	113.9%	<b>214.2%</b>
4	12.5%	24.5%	96.6%	<b>193.7%</b>
5	12.4%	24.5%	98.4%	<b>196.5%</b>
6	15.7%	26.1%	65.9%	<b>143.1%</b>
7	18.5%	27.9%	50.8%	<b>116.3%</b>
8	17.6%	28.5%	61.6%	<b>130.4%</b>
9	23.0%	37.0%	61.0%	<b>97.5%</b>
10	22.9%	40.6%	77.6%	<b>114.4%</b>
11	22.2%	41.3%	86.1%	<b>124.0%</b>
12	21.6%	43.1%	99.1%	<b>138.0%</b>

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teachers are also out more than before. Since the absences may not have overlapped, we have the situation where once again approximately 20% of all instructional days may have

attendance. Pre-pandemic 67% of students had good or excellent attendance and that number has dropped down to less than half (48%) at those levels now.



## Attendance is the number one predictor of Student Achievement

In a study done by the University of Chicago reviewing the commonalities of students who dropped out or failed courses at the secondary level, they found that over 67% of the time those students had chronic or

lost effectiveness. **In essence, imagine that every week was 4 instructional days instead of 5!** Our consistent messaging through the pandemic was to "stay safe," and "stay home if you are showing any symptoms." The messaging was effective, and we have moved to a much safer period now as we end the year.

The impact of the messaging above, however, is that we have created a lack of urgency in respect to attendance. In the scenario of 4 days out of 5 above, there would not be an issue if the school year had been extended, but for most students, it was not. We have the potential for a generational problem as we view the changes from just 3 years ago. SI&A was commissioned by the California Department of Education to look at the scope of the issue, and as you can see above those districts that had a functional Attendance Management System (AMS) had better results than those districts that were still managing attendance in a less structured manner.

It is not just chronic absenteeism that affects schools, but the top attendance students have also dropped their rate of

severe absenteeism. Factors such as income and homework had less than 10% impact on these students' behaviors. The impacts of poor attendance are widespread impacting all aspects of school operations. As a student miss more and more school many of the following behaviors begin to manifest:

- Apathy for school due to the disconnect with other students
- Avoidance behaviors that deflect attention on the fact that the student does not understand the material being covered
- Placement into intervention programs that aim to accelerate learning and remediate missing foundational knowledge. (Ironically, this concept is expecting a student who is already behind to somehow manage to learn what they missed, continue to learn what is happening now, and do so when they had not been effective in those modalities in the beginning)
- Increased discipline and disobedience with educators and peers
- Seeking out new peer groups for acceptance which open up integration with gangs and other negative interactions.

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habit.” ~ *Aristotle*

While we "don't have the bandwidth for anything new," now is the time to start planning for how we will make the next school year successful for students. This will require us to recognize that we need to instill or restore, the value of attendance on student achievement. This will require concerted, proactive messaging, and a consistent, structured, approach to Attendance Management.

"You do not get a second chance to  
make a first impression!"

As we move into the summer, and fall I encourage everyone to take a moment to rest and reflect, but then earnestly look at what we can do to enhance our educational offerings for the coming year. If we do so effectively, we may find that the solution to our issues is to focus on the foundation first and that is making a concerted effort to improve attendance behaviors. Everything great started with something small that had to be built correctly. If the ancient Egyptians had not laid down the stones correctly at the bottom, the entire pyramids at Giza would collapse upon themselves. The same is for education, we need to focus on the foundational skills first and then scaffold on top of those habits to engage the minds of our learners.

## **Ask yourself one question: How much are we spending as a district on attendance management and outreach?**

In California, with a 3-year average of Average Daily Attendance (ADA) becoming the funding model it will be more important than ever to focus on reducing chronic absenteeism and building a foundation that supports good attendance habits to be able to take advantage of the financial and student achievement benefits.

This does not include the daily task of taking attendance but is the actions you take as a district to help connect students to school and proactively build better attendance habits across the entire district.

With this context, would you spend the equivalent of one day of apportionment to build the strong foundation needed for success?

And, if you are not making that investment, the question to answer would be, why not?

*Tony Wold, Ed.D.*

Tony is an Educational Leader with over 30 years of experience as a CBO, in HR & Labor Negotiations, Student Assessment & Curriculum, and Technology Innovations, especially in the EdTech SaaS arena in particular the creation of agnostic software that links multiple data systems together that sit in silos across LEAs. He currently is serving as the CBO in Residence with School Innovations & Achievement focusing in the Achievement Initiative to support districts as we...