

# 2025 California Education Focus Report



# Introduction

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## We are excited to share our inaugural California Education Focus Report!

As a Folsom-based company, we have a special focus on California educators and students.

The purpose of this report is to illuminate the good work being done to personalize education and overcome big challenges in California education. To build it, we held in-depth conversations with over 40 California educators and surveyed 165 district leaders and classroom teachers.

### This report shares key insights unique to California, such as:

- The need for centralized data and improved family communication to tackle chronic absenteeism and academic engagement
- What it will take to optimize Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) through better data infrastructure and collaboration
- How leaders are leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) to boost student engagement while ensuring data security

As a former California school district leader, I know system change is challenging, but it is transformative when students are at the heart of the process. Good leaders know that successful change management focuses on results and continuous progress.

In considering the insights from your colleagues, remember that PowerSchool is here to support every district's goals with our technological capacity and deep understanding of education.

Sincerely,



**Jeff Pelzel, Director of Executive Leadership Engagement, PowerSchool**  
Former Superintendent, Newhall School District, CA



**PowerSchool is a proud business affiliate of ACSA and CSBA in California.**

# California Customers and Student Impact

PowerSchool partners with over 1,000 California customers.

We support 4.7 million California students across:

**380** public school districts

**21** county offices of education

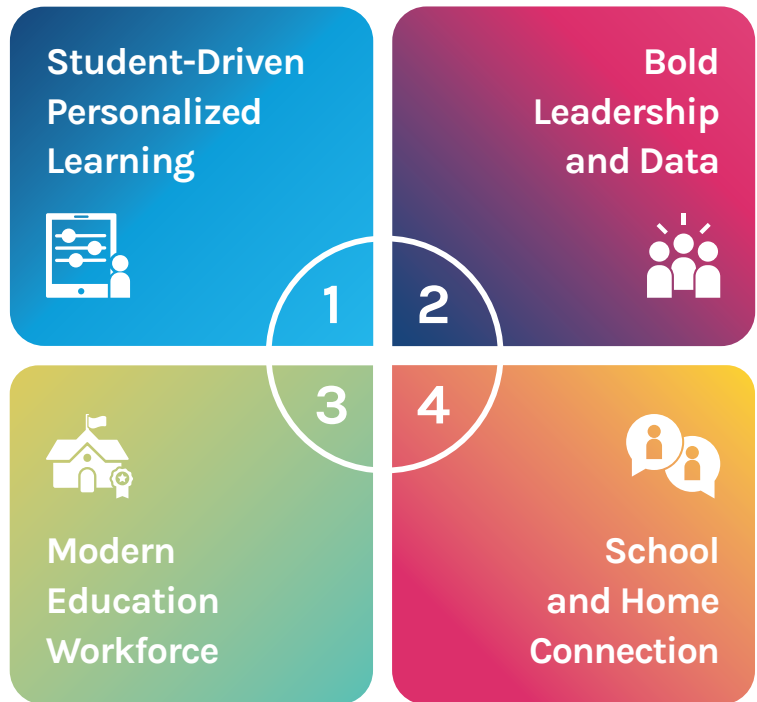
**384** public charter schools

**255** private schools



## California Education Focus Report: Focus Topics

Our research focused on the needs of California students, leaders, teachers, and families. We found overlaps and intersections across **four key areas**:



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Leadership isn't just about making decisions; it's about **fostering an environment where innovation can thrive.**

**MATT NAVO**

Executive Director, California Center for Excellence in Education (CCEE)

# Top Challenges and Priorities

## Education

### Top Challenges

- 1 Effective behavior interventions
- 2 Student attendance
- 3 Academic engagement
- 4 Effective academic interventions

Behavior interventions is the top challenge, which was second for educators nationwide (and attendance was first).

### Top Priorities

- 1 Student academic engagement
- 2 Effective behavior interventions
- 3 Improving student attendance
- 4 Effective academic interventions

Student academic engagement is the top priority, aligning to our national report findings.

## Technology

### Top Challenges

- 1 Connecting data across systems
- 2 Implementing new AI guidance
- 3 Implementing tools to promote positive student behaviors
- 4 Integrating tech solutions to facilitate personalized learning

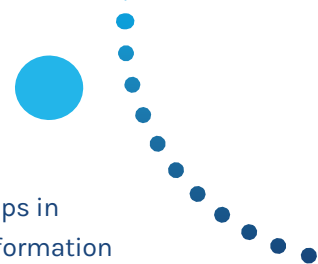
CA educators agreed with the nation overall that connecting data across systems is the top technology challenge. Surprisingly, CA educators name AI guidance implementation as a second top challenge, whereas it did not make the top four challenges nationally.

### Top Priorities

- 1 Connecting data across systems
- 2 Integrating tech solutions to personalize learning
- 3 Implementing tools to promote positive behavior
- 4 Implementing new AI guidance

Technology priorities focused on data, personalization, and AI—matching national findings. Again, technology to improve behavior is a top focus, and the same is true for educators nationally.





# Student-Driven Personalized Learning

## Big Questions:

- What hurdles stand in the way of personalizing education in California?
- How is Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) going in California? What do educators need most?
- How are California schools considering uses of AI, and why? What AI innovations are most promising?

California educators are increasingly focused on leveraging technology to create personalized learning experiences for students that promote more engaged learning and proactive supports.

Connecting data across systems, integrating technology, and implementing new AI guidance are all top imperatives for California superintendents, and for tech leaders in particular.

## Filling Tech Gaps to Achieve Student-Centered Pathways

All state and district leaders in our focus groups and interviews support personalized learning as a goal and practice. Specifically, leaders want to customize students' learning paths.

But they also point out that current gaps in technology infrastructure—student information systems and behavior and learning analytics to name a few—limit their ability to create flexible, student-centered learning experiences.

“We’re running into roadblocks with our systems that don’t allow us to be flexible in how we track students’ individual progress. This is especially tough with hybrid and flexible models,” says April Rennie, Principal, [Western Placer Unified School District](#).

**“The technology doesn’t support individual education within the current paradigm... It’s too cumbersome to manage flexible pathways for students.”**

**ROGER SPRIK,**  
PowerSchool Administrator,  
Green Dot Public Schools

There were several calls for better integration between different systems, such as those used for MTSS and broader student information systems. The lack of seamless data-sharing is a significant barrier to creating more personalized learning opportunities for students.

In our conversations with California educators and education leaders, we heard that many school systems have multiple systems that don’t talk to each other, which is a significant challenge when trying to provide cohesive support for students. Our interviews also surfaced the sentiment that if data could flow seamlessly between systems, leaders and staff would be in a much better place to support students at every MTSS tier.

Truly personalizing learning will depend on technology partners investing and prioritizing data bridges, meaningful integrations between products, and ultimately, functionality for educators and students.

## MTSS in California

### Hitting “Reset” to Flip the MTSS Pyramid (the Right Way)

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework is vital for putting in motion personalized learning at scale and supporting students based on their needs.

MTSS operates on multiple tiers, starting with universal interventions that apply to all students, followed by targeted support for those who need it, and intensive interventions for students with significant challenges. This tiered approach allows educators to monitor progress and adjust strategies based on data-driven insights, ensuring that interventions are timely and effective.

Many California district leaders note that the pandemic has disrupted how their MTSS frameworks are structured. Schools are now struggling to rebuild and define clear tiers of support, particularly Tier 1 universal supports. This has resulted in confusion and a lack of consistency.

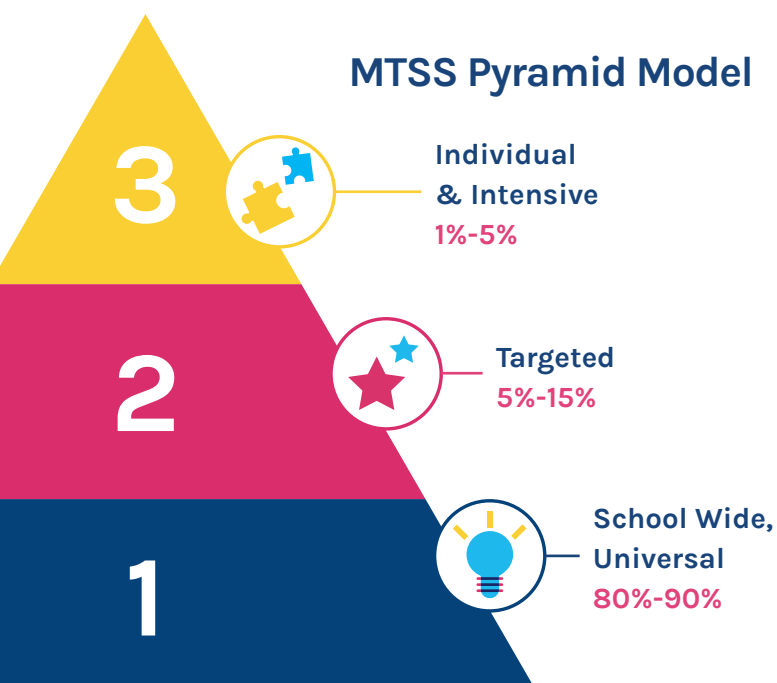
“Post-pandemic, we’re in this strange spot where we’re trying to create the tiers again, but it’s not functioning as it should. We’ve had a lot of trouble defining who falls under universal support and who needs targeted interventions,” says Cassandra Kessler, Director, Student Information and Systems at **Aspire Public Schools**.

The concept of an inverted MTSS pyramid came up multiple times in our conversations with educators who report that students are receiving tiered interventions meant for fewer students, while universal support, which should be the foundation, is not robust enough.

**“The pyramid is inverted. We need to redefine the tiers, but everyone needs universal support right now, and we’re just not set up for that... We’re finding ourselves applying Tier 3 interventions when universal support would suffice if it were stronger.”**

**CASSANDRA KESSLER**

Director, Student Information and Systems,  
Aspire Public Schools



Ryan Reynolds, Senior Director of Assessment and Evaluation at **Modesto City Schools**, describes his district’s MTSS implementation as uneven, with some schools fully embracing the model while others struggle to develop clear processes for intervention. He notes that while pockets of success exist, there is no district-wide consistency.

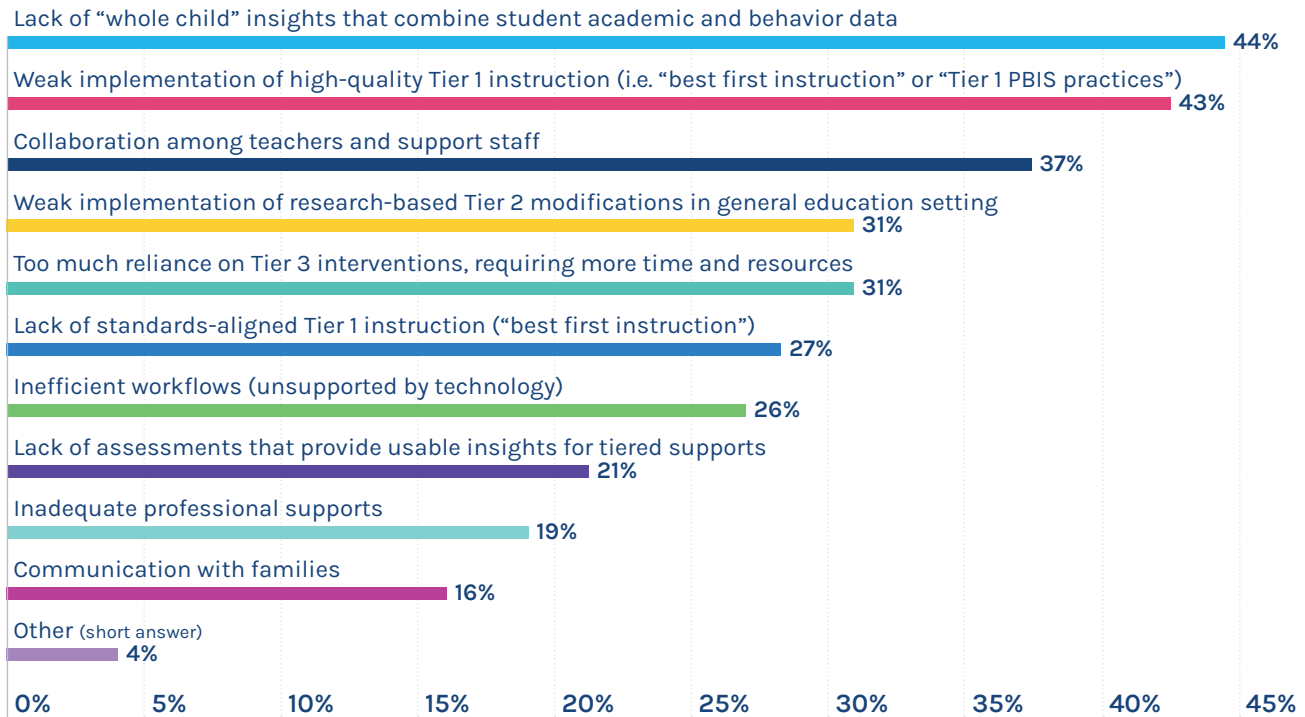
Reynolds shares, “We have strong MTSS programs in certain schools, but they exist in isolated pockets. When I ask about the referral process, it’s often met with silence. Our schools are excelling with reading intervention and DIBELS but often lack clearly defined intervention strategies.”

## Top MTSS Challenges According to Educators

Three top points of frustration are common among California educators:

- Lack of whole-child insights that combine student academic and behavior data
- Weak implementation of high-quality Tier 1 instruction
- Collaboration among teachers and support staff

Select the **TOP THREE** current challenges to implement a tiered system of supports for your school system (whether MTSS, RTI, or similar).



Structured collaboration time is essential for discussing teaching, learning, and data gathered from student assessments. **This helps address both instructional and behavioral issues.**

**MATT NAVO**

Executive Director, CCEE

## Technology Underutilized for MTSS in California

We surveyed California educators about how technology has helped support MTSS workflows and decision-making among school teams. **Here's what they said:**



**33%**

say they have not used technology specifically to support MTSS



**19%**

say technology has provided the ability to view patterns across schools



**17%**

say technology has organized the entire workflow in one cohesive system



**16%**

say technology has brought multiple data sources together to view the whole child

### Collaboration Is the Foundation

MTSS succeeds or fails based on the degree of collaboration among educators and the data they review, discuss, and act on. Good collaboration generates a cohesive and responsive educational environment, enabling personalized learning to thrive. Poor or no collaboration leads to siloed approaches to meeting student needs.

Navo highlights that, without dedicated time for collaboration, the effectiveness of MTSS practices is significantly hindered.

Often schools don't design time for teacher collaboration during the school day. Navo explains, "Many schools only allocate prep time, which is insufficient for meaningful collaboration." This issue is compounded by the need for additional professional development focused on MTSS. He states, "We need more than just time. We need structured opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning communities."

### Data Infrastructure and Support Make MTSS Durable and Successful

Efficient data utilization is another critical aspect of MTSS. Navo points out that districts need to develop systems to easily access and analyze data.

"Creating data teams or learning networks is crucial to interpret data and provide insights to teachers and administrators," Navo says. This ensures that the data collected is not just stored but actively used to inform instructional strategies that address behavior, academic, and social-emotional learning interventions.

In summary, effective MTSS practices in California school districts hinge on structured collaboration, efficient data utilization, comprehensive professional development, and bold leadership. Navo concludes, "Overcoming these challenges will require innovative approaches and a commitment to continuous improvement."



# The State of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in California Education

## AI for Personalized and Engaged Learning

We spoke with dozens of educators about the potential of AI to engage students more effectively by personalizing learning experiences. Resoundingly, they shared that AI tools could help adapt instruction to student interests and needs, leading to more engagement and motivation.

“If technology can change the lesson to my likes—whether it’s football or horses—that’s going to be a big component for engagement. Tailoring it to students is key,” shares Erik Negroe, Data Analyst, [San Marino USD](#). “We hope AI will help rephrase questions or present material differently so students can understand better. That way, it’s not about replacing teachers, but enhancing what’s already happening in the classroom.”

## Using AI in Schools

California school districts are split; more than one in three districts are not aware of using AI in any way. The remaining two-thirds are using AI for a variety of needs—namely curriculum and lesson planning, virtual assistants for student support, and AI for personalizing student and staff learning.

Reynolds shares, “We are very careful about student data privacy ... but personalized learning is at the forefront. We’ve already started work across the entire district with PowerSchool PowerBuddy™ ... seeing how that can be used, and we’re working with our edtech liaisons to figure out how we can have a larger rollout.”

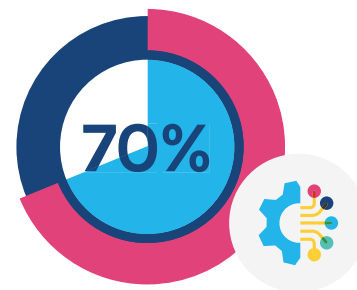
### Top Forms of AI with Greatest Potential to Advance Personalized Learning

- Adaptive learning and assessment platforms
- Generative AI
- Conversational AI

## California Educators’ Optimism on Potential of AI Similar to National Results

Our [2024 National Education Focus Report](#) found that 70% of district leaders agree or strongly agree with the potential of AI to enhance teaching and learning, which is a 17 percentage point jump from 53% in 2023.

California educators align exactly with this national finding, showing clear optimism about the potential of AI in education.



**70% of district leaders agree or strongly agree with the potential of AI to enhance teaching and learning.**



## Top Hurdles for AI in Schools

While AI holds potential, both district leaders and teachers have concerns. For example, they suspect that AI could erode student effort (especially in writing) and wonder whether it would interfere or usurp teachers' duties in the classroom.

Negroe also shares that “Teachers are concerned that AI will lead to students just plagiarizing or not really thinking. But we see it as a tool to enhance learning, not replace it.”

Gil Mara, Chief EdTech and Information Services Officer at **Torrance Unified School District**, shares, “There’s fear that AI will take over, but we’re trying to show them how it can complement their work, not take away from it.”

Indeed, staff and community perceptions about AI, and lack of experience with it, are two of the top three AI hurdles that California educators identify in our statewide survey. The other is data privacy and security concerns.

In many ways, connected data is vital to personalizing learning. We discuss top challenges, priorities, and lessons learned in the next section.

### Top hurdles using AI in California:

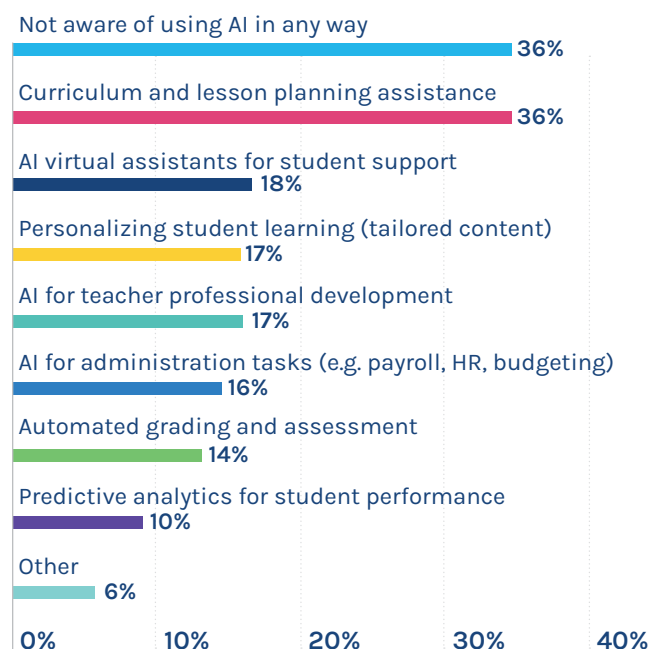
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**1** Lack of skilled staff with expertise in AI/ML
- 

**2** Data privacy and security concerns
- 

**3** Staff or community perceptions

### Select all the ways your school system is using AI currently



# Bold Leadership and Data

## Big Questions:

- What are the top data priorities for K-12 leaders in California?
- How easy or difficult is it to gather and analyze LCAP data, and what are the leading breakdowns or gaps? How can edtech help?
- What needs to happen with data and insights for personalized learning to progress?

### Top Data Priorities

- 1 Whole-child analytics
- 2 DaaS (Data as a Service)
- 3 Providing training to use data

## Making Data Meaningful

In conversation with district leaders, many note how challenging it is to make data actionable and engaging for school teams. Data needs to be visual and interactive to prevent staff from becoming disengaged or overwhelmed, which is often the case when raw numbers are presented without context or clear applications.

“Educators are juggling so much already. Presenting numbers alone isn’t enough—if it’s overwhelming, the conversation ends before it begins,” Reynolds shares. “We’re focused on changing that narrative by ensuring data tools drive meaningful instructional shifts, not just serve as superficial tools.”

Whole-child data, in particular, remains a north star for district and school leaders. Bringing attendance, behavior, learning, and workforce planning data together is happening at a faster pace than ever before, but not without its pains.

## The Need for Centralized Data

Across California, nearly all data and information leaders voiced the necessity of a centralized data system that can pull from various sources to create a comprehensive view of student learning.

Dr. Vernell Deslonde Ed.D., Director of Student Support Services at **Fontana Unified School District**, describes her district’s goal of integrating everything into one platform, emphasizing that an integrated system would reduce confusion and improve efficiency.

“We needed one place where everything is stored,” Dr. Deslonde says, “so that we can see what is happening across the district and act on it. That’s the whole idea of us partnering with PowerSchool using the Analytics and Insights solution to grab everything from everywhere so that it can give us that data visualization we need to see and manipulate.”

## Real-Time Access and Usability

Continuing the theme about usable dashboards, leaders describe the empowerment that comes from giving teachers the data tools that allow them to make informed decisions for their classrooms.

This move has helped align teachers with the data-driven approach being implemented at the district level. As Reynolds states, “Teachers were jealous before, saying, ‘How come all the principals get a dashboard and we don’t?’ Now they get one too, and that’s been empowering for them.”

Leaders frequently emphasize the need for real-time data, saying that current systems often provide outdated information that hampers decision-making. “We need access to data in real-time. Right now, we’re getting data that’s months old, which doesn’t help when we need to make changes now,” shares Natali Garza, Director of Finance at **Visalia Unified School District**.

Understanding how innovation supports change management is vital.

Matt Navo notes, “Leaders must think outside the box to create positions and departments that can manage data effectively and support instructional shifts.” This includes negotiating with unions and restructuring salary schedules to attract and retain data expertise.

## Future Data Prospects with AI and the Human Side

Our conversations also touched on the potential role of AI in democratizing data analytics.

Navo remarks, “AI can handle much of the data processing, but there will still be a need for human expertise to interpret the results and ensure the data’s accuracy and relevance.”

Bold leadership will be essential in overcoming these challenges and ensuring that data is used effectively to drive instructional shifts and improve student outcomes.



“

If we could instantly access real-time data on attendance rates, suspension records, and student progress, **it would transform our decision-making process.**

**SAVITRI NAIDU**

Modesto City Schools, Director, Information & Educational Technology Services

## Struggles with Data Literacy

A recurring theme was the lack of data literacy among school leaders, which has a significant impact on their ability to make informed decisions. Many district leaders said interpreting data correctly is a skill that is lacking among staff, and this gap leads to missed opportunities to effectively support students.

“We’re asking teachers and principals to make data-driven decisions, but it’s very challenging to consolidate and interpret the data they’re seeing,” shares Serena Arias, Director, Human Resources Development, **Visalia Unified School District**.

Leaders stress the importance of shifting the focus from simply generating reports toward making data a tool for instructional improvement.

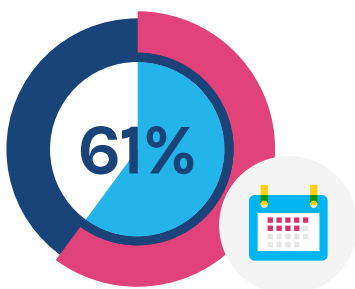
### Top Hurdles to Using Data in California Schools (Statewide Survey Findings)

- **Limited data integration among various systems**
- **Lack of staff skills and professional development to analyze data**
- **Lack of time to engage with data**

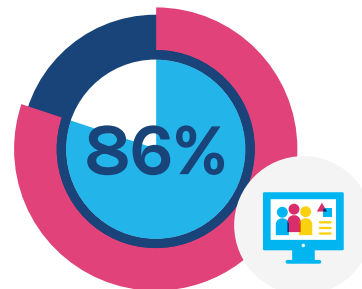
## Local Control and Accountability Plan: Opportunities

The LCAP, and the burden of collecting and monitoring the many data points collected to inform the plan, was a focus in our conversation with California education leaders about data. We also asked them how they use LCAP data.

**We uncovered two key takeaways:**



**61% of educators** say they’re able to use LCAP data to make mid-year adjustments. 11% disagreed, and a whopping 29% felt neutral.



**86% of educators** agree or strongly agree that having one place to store and visualize all LCAP information would help them take action on data.





# Modern Education Workforce

## Big Questions:

- What are top talent challenges in California, and how do leaders' talent priorities align?
- Is technology improving educator recruitment and onboarding?
- How can teacher teaming models support a new generation of teachers and offer leadership opportunities for veteran teachers?

The first and biggest talent challenge that California school system leaders identify in our conversations is teacher shortages. There are simply not enough teachers to serve students' needs. Teacher vacancies place extra burdens on current staff but also affect classroom dynamics and student learning experiences.

Dr. Collyn Nielsen, Assistant Superintendent, Human Resources at **William S. Hart Union High School District**, expresses concerns about the appeal of the teaching profession, noting that “the pipeline of teachers has kind of dried up a little bit over the last couple of years.”

He shares that decisions at the state level often have unforeseen consequences at the district level that impact teachers:

### BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES:

California policies aiming to reduce suspension rates have introduced “behaviors that teachers previously might not have had to manage in a general education setting,” says Dr. Nielsen. There has been a shift in responsibility to general education teachers for managing diverse student needs, sometimes without adequate support or resources.

### IMPACT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICIES:

California education policies that have shaped alternative pathways to diplomas for students with disabilities have also introduced new and complex challenges for general education teachers. “Teachers are working with groups of students that they previously have not,” and “this work requires new training and supports that leaders are trying to provide,” says Dr. Nielsen.

## Talent Priorities

The top talent priorities tie directly back to the top challenges of teacher vacancies and navigating new policies that require additional educator training and support.

### Top Talent Priorities

- 1 Evidence-based professional development
- 2 Teacher pipeline programs
- 3 Supporting teacher mental health and wellbeing

## Strengthening Talent Pipelines

Teacher shortages—particularly in special education and dual-immersion programs—are driving district leaders to pursue innovative recruitment strategies, including residency programs and internal career pathways, to address workforce gaps.

Serena Arias shares, “Residency programs with high-quality mentors are part of our strategy to have a pool of prepared teachers ready to fill positions when they open up.”

Several districts are exploring incentives and new recruitment strategies, such as leveraging social media and targeted digital ads, to attract candidates. Retaining teachers through residency programs and other internal career pathways was also emphasized.

**“We’ve started to use targeted ads and digital media like social media channels to engage in passive recruitment, hoping to reach people who might not otherwise consider applying. Unless you work in K-12/ public sector, you wouldn’t be familiar with the job listing sites, like Edjoin.org or Governmentjobs.com. So, we do what is necessary to proactively recruit classified and non-classified candidates.”**

**GIL MARA**

Chief EdTech and Information Services Officer, Torrance Unified School District

“We’ve successfully used incentives to motivate our classified staff to transition into teaching positions, effectively filling vacancies internally,” says Savitri Naidu, Director, Information & Educational Technology Services at **Modesto City Schools**.

The need for flexible professional development also stood out as a key priority in our research. Teachers are looking for opportunities to grow without leaving the classroom and want access to intuitive tools that support their daily work.

This aligns with national findings, where educators emphasize the importance of reducing workloads and providing professional development that supports key skills, such as the science of reading and whole-child supports.

# Managing Talent Workflows with Technology

Dr. Nielsen shares, “If you compared our talent processes now to 40 years ago, consider hiring, onboarding, and evaluation. It would look very similar to today. We’re still pen-and-paper in so many ways.”



Leaders widely agree that a digitized approach to managing talent processes would be more effective and efficient. They’re also more collaborative, especially when it comes to observations and evaluation. Teachers can upload artifacts, and leaders can access a usable set of data to employ professional development. “Currently you have a stack of evaluation paperwork that you can’t easily understand or manage,” Dr. Nielsen shares.

Technology is being increasingly utilized to unburden teachers and streamline administrative tasks, but there are still opportunities for improvement. One California talent leader shares, “Teachers are using technology a lot more. Digital solutions save them time. But there’s real opportunities to modernize talent systems.”

Unfortunately, only one out of three talent leaders report that they have technology that provides insights to make data-informed decisions about educator support, promotion,

retention, or hiring. Another third feel neutral, and the remaining third disagree.

We asked district talent leaders to consider the potential benefits of AI to provide teachers feedback on their teaching. Leaders are optimistic.

A California talent leader shares, “I like the idea (of an AI coach) because it offers a non-threatening support system for new teachers. With a coach, the principal and coach communicate, but AI acts as a neutral observer. It can give feedback without the pressure of a supervisor, making teachers more open to receiving it.”

## Technology and Reducing Teacher Burdens

Dr. Nielsen suggests that leveraging technology, including AI, could help alleviate some of the burdens on teachers by streamlining administrative tasks. He says, “I think maybe that might be a way to help with teachers’ workloads in other areas,” which underscores the potential role of innovation in addressing some of the systemic issues in education.

In addition to priorities focused on supporting existing staff and building a modern education workforce, state educators noted that engaging families is a key component to a successful learning environment.



# Connecting School and Home

## Big Questions:

- Does attendance remain a top challenge in California? How are educators addressing it and is technology helping?
- How do educators know they're reaching families in ways they prefer? Are current strategies working?

The pandemic revealed the critical importance of strong school-home connections, and this remains a top priority for California educators, especially with continued escalated rates of absenteeism in the state.

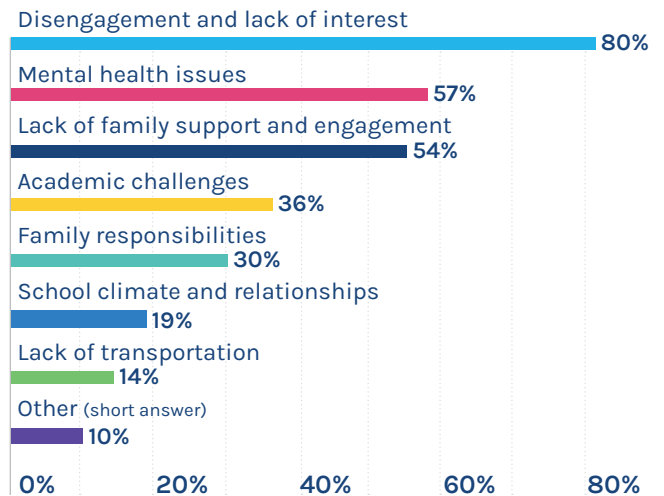
Leaders share that they are still facing the challenge of helping parents understand the importance of daily attendance following the pandemic. All too often, parents believe that students can get the work when they return to school and don't understand that missing an average of just two days a month means a student is chronically absent and has lost a significant amount of instructional time.

76% of educators in California say that student attendance remains a significant challenge in their school system.

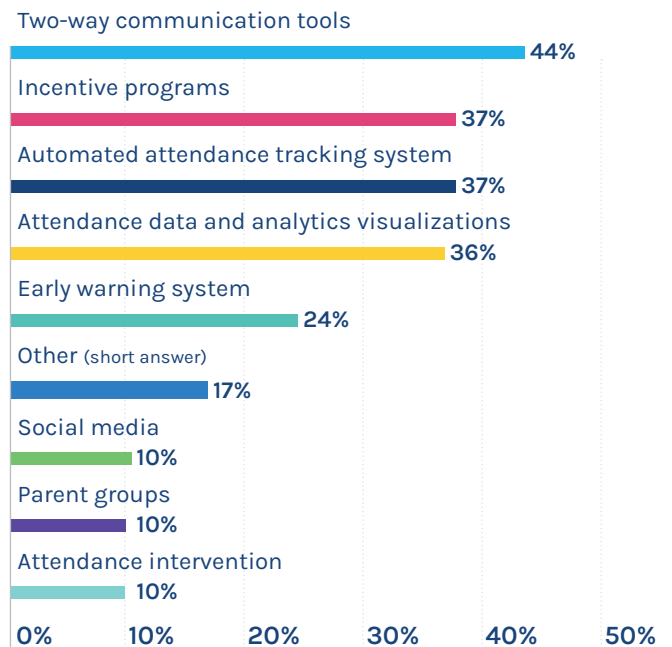
### We also asked about the top root causes of absenteeism. Educators note:

- Disengagement or lack of interest
- Mental health issues
- Lack of family support and engagement

### Select the TOP THREE underlying reasons for absenteeism in your school or district



### Which types of technology have helped improve student attendance? Select all that apply



Leaders note the need for streamlined, centralized communication tools that can provide families with real-time updates on student progress, attendance, and behavior.

Engaging families more effectively in their children's education is seen as a key strategy for addressing this issue. To improve

attendance, leaders are exploring creative solutions to re-engage students and better educate families about the importance of consistent school attendance.

Several leaders shared their approaches to tackling this challenge, most of which involve staff outreach and involvement. A major challenge with this process is cost and the limited ability to engage all EL families in their native language.

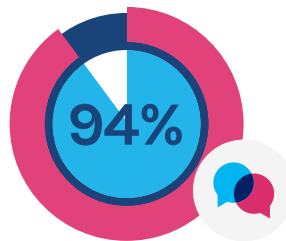
## Consolidated Engagement Technology

As part of our 2024 national survey, we learned that parents must navigate an average of 3-7 school systems to understand their students' progress and needs.

We asked California educators, "How important would a 'single pane of glass' technology solution that consolidated all information in one place be to improving home communication?" We found that 94% of educators say a consolidated solution would improve home communication.

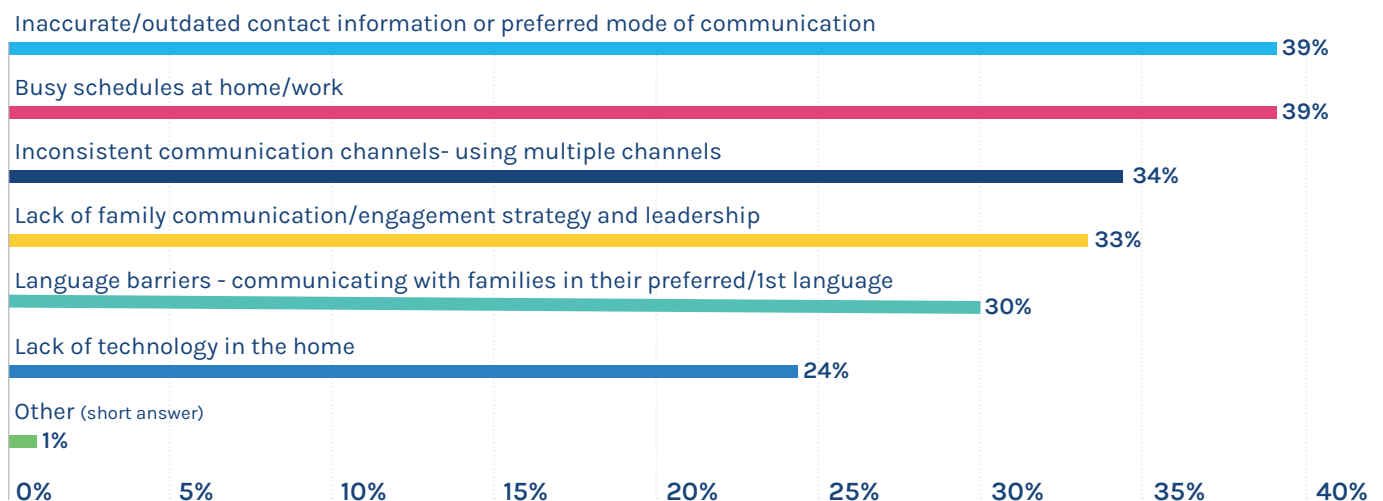


This is in line with what California educators share regarding top barriers to communicating with families: inaccurate contact information or preferred mode of communication, busy schedules, and inconsistent communication channels—all of which would be better with a consolidated system.



**94% of educators say a consolidated solution would improve home communication.**

### Select the TOP TWO barriers encountered to communicate with families





# How PowerSchool Can Help

PowerSchool helps California schools and districts to empower students, support educators, modernize operations, and engage families.

- **To empower students**, we help you boost student engagement and outcomes with [curriculum and instruction](#), [student success](#), and [career counseling solutions](#).
- **To support educators**, we help you build an effective and passionate workforce with [HR and PD solutions](#).
- **To assist administrators**, we help your teams modernize operations, securely manage information, and coordinate resources with [data management](#) and [resource planning solutions](#).
- **To engage families**, we help you connect and communicate with students and their families through streamlined [communications products](#).
- **Plus**, we can help you make truly informed decisions with [analytics solutions](#), [data tools](#), and [AI-based innovations](#) you need.

For nearly three decades, PowerSchool has innovated to meet the needs of education. We started as a student information system (SIS) company. As needs changed, PowerSchool evolved to serve everyone in K-12 education. From the central office to the classroom to the home, we have a solution to help your students and staff thrive.

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