

2024 Education Focus Report

Addressing the Urgent, Shaping the Future of Student Learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Introduction

The U.S. education system is focused on dual goals: resolving urgent challenges and innovating the student learning experience.

Leaders are wrangling with stubborn attendance and behavior challenges.

At the same time, they are eager to implode assessment design, democratize data insights, and apply artificial intelligence (AI) to achieve office efficiencies and personalize learning.

It's a balancing act between addressing the urgent and boldly shaping the future of schooling.

Some school systems are fully consumed with pointing the arrow of attendance upward, responding to cybersecurity attacks, and addressing staff vacancies.

Others have been able to shift their posture from heels to toes—pouring focus and effort into reshaping individual learning experiences to be rich in engagement, technology, and relevant workforce and life opportunities.

To create the **2024 Education Focus Report**, PowerSchool spoke with more than 75 district leaders, teachers, parents, and students. We also deployed a national survey of U.S. educators, gathering 1,620 individual survey responses from a wide range of school and district roles.

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Leadership is essential. You can have lots of little islands of innovation, but nothing scales without leadership.

KEITH KRUEGER

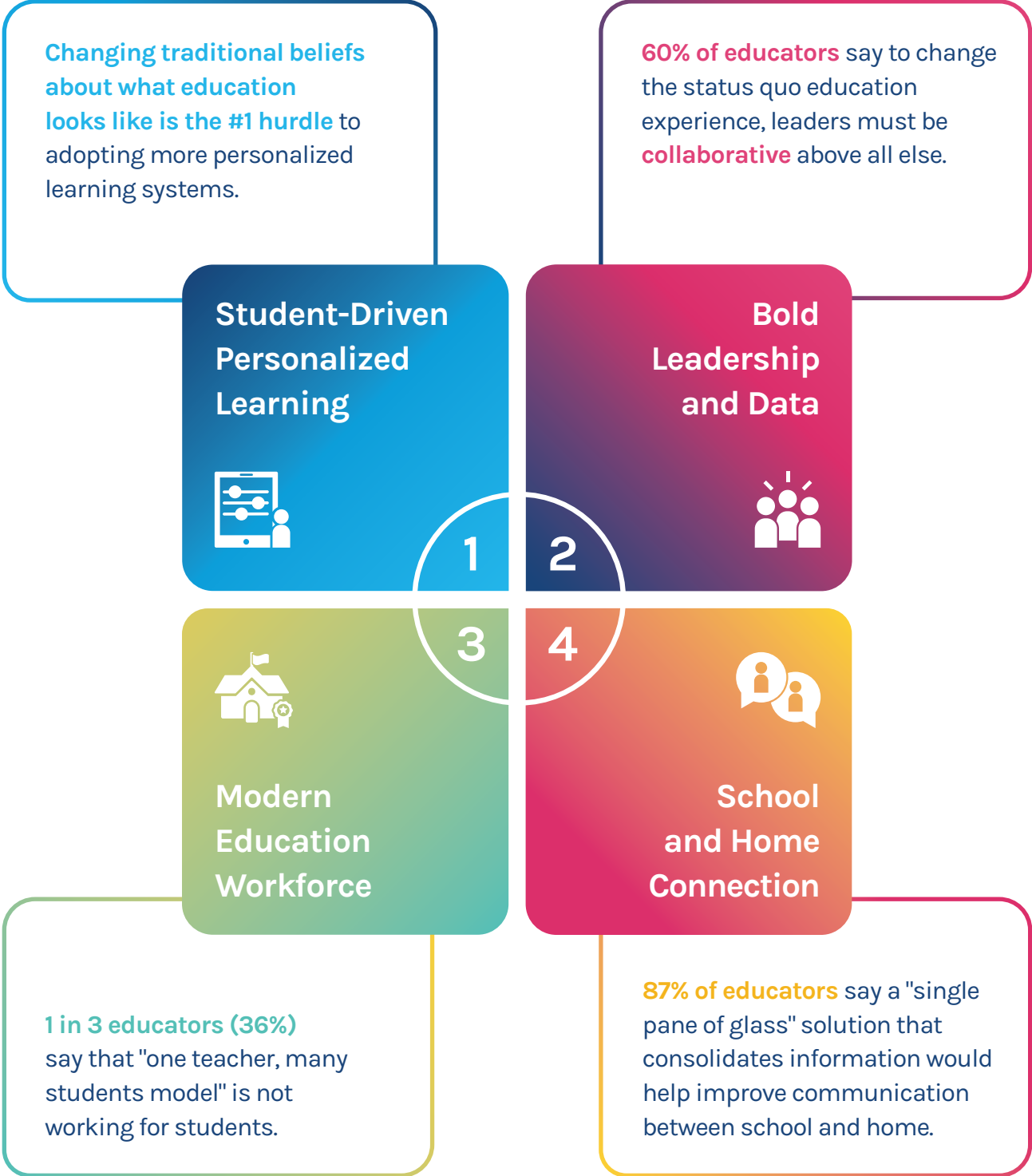
CEO, Consortium for School Networking (CoSN)

Right now, we're doing a project where we choose our group of worldwide problems, and we research and write about them. So, I'm excited. **I like choices in my learning.**

KATALEYA

5th-grade student

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



Top Challenges and Priorities— Education

National survey data from both school and district staff align almost completely on challenges and priorities, with some minor differences in order. The challenges that fell to the bottom this year— "access to understandable data to inform student supports" and "student access to technology devices" among them—inspire optimism about how K-12 is resolving some key issues that were at the top of the list a handful of years ago.

Top overall education priorities in many ways reflect the moment K-12 is in. In the clarity of post-pandemic, there's a recognition that attendance and academic engagement challenges are symptomatic of a system ripe for revisiting what is valuable in schooling.

One insight became a leading theme in our conversations with educators: bold leaders don't let "now" challenges stifle future work. Present challenges that surface, such as school quality measures and absenteeism, can easily delay shifts to new learning designs.

Balancing the now and sequencing system change effectively is *the work*.

Top Challenges

School

- 1 Keeping students academically engaged
- 2 Improving student attendance in school
- 3 Effective student behavior interventions
- 4 Effective student academic interventions

District

- 1 Improving student attendance in school
- 2 Effective student behavior interventions
- 3 Keeping students academically engaged
- 4 Addressing teacher/staff vacancies

Top Priorities

School

- 1 Keeping students academically engaged
- 2 Effective student academic interventions
- 3 Improving student attendance in school
- 4 Effective student behavior interventions

District

- 1 Improving student attendance in school
- 2 Keeping students academically engaged
- 3 Effective student behavior interventions
- 4 Effective student academic interventions

Top Challenges and Priorities— Technology

If getting students to school and engaged in learning while delivering tiered supports are the overall top priorities, K-12 technology challenges and priorities are a response to "how" to do these things.

At the school level, **using technology tools to promote more positive student behaviors** topped the challenges list, followed by **attendance tools** and **AI guidance development**. AI guidance landed in the top five for districts as well, showing that school leaders are grappling with the path forward to harness AI for teaching and learning while safeguarding student data and security.

Connecting data across systems is the top challenge at the district level and has a vital connection to AI work. Technology leaders are widely realizing that effective AI is rich in context and leverages local data. If the right data is not connected, the capabilities and benefits of AI are diminished.

Top Challenges

School

- 1 Implementing tools to promote more positive student behaviors
- 2 Implementing attendance tools to address chronic absenteeism
- 3 Implementing new AI guidance
- 4 Integrating technology solutions to facilitate personalized learning

District

- 1 Connecting data across systems (integration)
- 2 Implementing attendance tools to address student absenteeism
- 3 Integrating technology solutions to personalize learning
- 4 Cybersecurity and protecting student data privacy

Top Priorities

School

- 1 Integrating technology solutions to personalize learning
- 2 Implementing tools to promote positive student behaviors
- 3 Implementing new AI guidance
- 4 Implementing attendance tools to address student absenteeism

District

- 1 Integrating technology solutions to personalize learning
- 2 Connecting data across systems (integration)
- 3 Implementing attendance tools to address student absenteeism
- 4 Implementing new AI guidance

Focus Area One: Student-Driven Personalized Learning



As an educational community, we need to consider how our schools are meeting the needs of students who have had a **student-centered experience** versus students who have had a traditional experience. **What are the pros and cons of both?**

SUSAN MOORE

Director of Technology & Curriculum,
Meriden Public Schools, CT

Hurdles to Change the Status Quo Education Experience

Numerous definitions of personalized learning abound, mostly centered on customizing learning according to student strengths, needs, and interests, promoting student agency in learning; and leveraging technology to adapt the learning experience for individual learners.ⁱ

Competency- and mastery-based education models embed these concepts of personalized learning heavily, but comprehensive adoptions are rare despite a strong consensus among education leaders that these approaches can drive stronger student engagement and outcomes.ⁱⁱ These models represent a dramatic shift in the pace and design of learning. **Every state in the U.S. is now offering some or broad flexibility to implement these models of personalized learning.**ⁱⁱⁱ

We asked educators across the country what hurdles must be addressed for the adoption of competency- or mastery-based education models. The number one response was: **Changing traditional beliefs about what education looks like.**

Michael Horn, who has researched and written extensively on how to change education systems to be more personalized, shares that leaders who achieve change "don't try to tackle everything at once. Instead, they focus on a specific problem shared by educators, students, and parents. They keep this problem at the center, aiming to solve practical issues like helping kids pass math exams rather than broad goals like 'personalizing learning.'

Schools that succeed tend to lead with widely agreed-upon goals and offer optional programs for those interested, rather than forcing everyone to adopt new methods."

Assessments Need to be Rethought

In speaking with leaders across the U.S., we noticed one clear truth: very few are happy with how we currently assess students for purposes of school accountability. We asked leaders to reflect on whether the current ways we assess learning and measure school quality put students at the center.

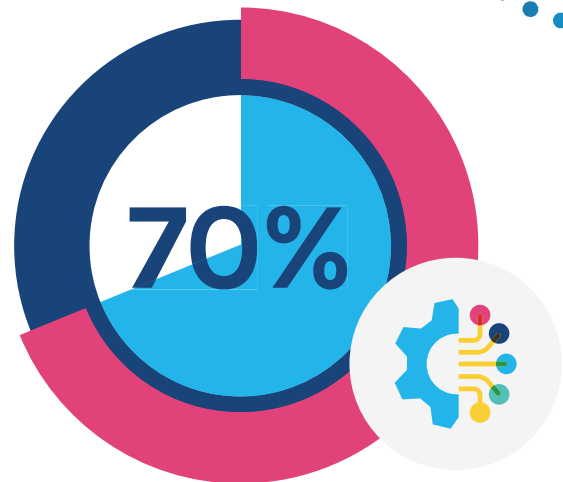
The resounding response was, "No, they do not."

Some leaders pointed out that assessments for measuring school quality could incorporate elements of tests that inform instructional decisions, and less emphasis should be placed on once-a-year assessments. **Many educators insisted the future of assessment is formative, adaptive, and multi-modal and places high value on timely feedback to students, teachers, and parents.**

Increasing Optimism, Exploration of AI

School- and district-level educator optimism about AI has risen measurably since early 2023 when newly released generative AI set the education world abuzz.

Education leaders are cautiously embracing AI, productively exploring best uses for administrators and practitioners, and pressure-testing for stringent data privacy, security, and data governance.



70% of district leaders believe AI can enhance teaching and learning—up from 53% in 2023—a 17 percentage point jump.

Dr. Christine Diggs, Chief Technology Officer of Virginia's Albemarle County Schools, shares, "Our superintendent down to the teachers are using AI for administrative tasks. Our learning technology team has partnered with our instruction team to publish AI guidelines for the school division. We're also developing professional development for teachers on using AI with students. We're embracing AI and moving forward cautiously."

Focus Area Two:

Bold Leadership and Data

We spoke with education leaders and K-12 experts extensively about the importance of leadership and the values and skills vital for changing the education experience to make it more learner-centered.

As it turns out, educators have strong perspectives on leadership. Here are takeaways from what they told us:

- Bold leadership is about building effective and committed teams willing to take on new ways of work, not simply making bold decisions.
- Trust is a challenge in our society now. The use of data can build transparency, enabling trust between K-12 communities to enact change.
- Schools went through significant upheaval during the pandemic. In the current moment, there's a need for leadership that is bold, but in a way that aligns change with educators' ability to implement it.

Top Data Priorities Point to Comprehensive Understanding of Students through Connected Data

We asked what data priorities were top of mind in 2024 for K-12 leaders, and they pointed to whole child analytics (visualizing student behavior data), data integration as a service (connecting data for ease of insights), and learning analytics (visualizing student academic data).

While progress has been made on student academic insights, leaders are now prioritizing insights on student behavior and durable skills for graduates. For district leaders, data as a service climbed to the #2 data priority spot in 2024 from #3 in 2023.

Top 4 Data Priorities

School

- 1 Whole child analytics
- 2 Learning analytics
- 3 Providing training on using data to make informed decisions
- 4 Data integration as a service

District

- 1 Whole child analytics
- 2 Data integration as a service
- 3 Learning analytics
- 4 Providing training on using data to make informed decisions

Leadership in a Time of Changing Budgets

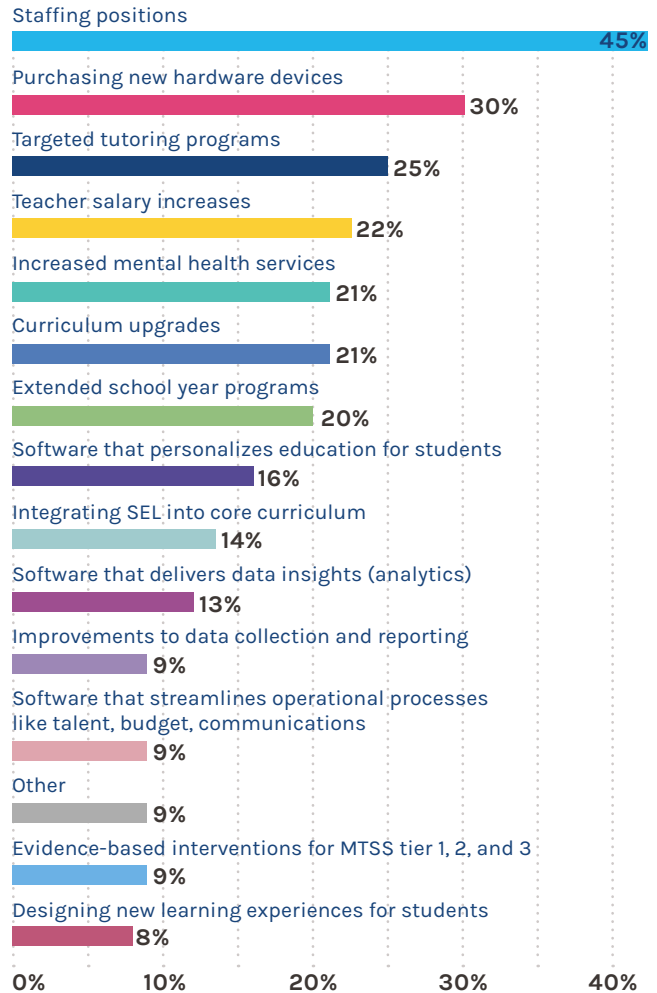
"Start with the best interest of students, organization, then adults," Justin Hunt, Deputy Superintendent of Instruction at Epic Charter Schools shares. "Get rid of the things that don't serve those three, and work with the willing."

Bold leaders also share that sometimes they must say "no" to certain investments or initiatives to prioritize impact for students and eliminate processes that don't deliver.

Among the top items to taper off or cut back, high on the list were staffing positions, purchasing new hardware devices, and tutoring programs. **And while software to streamline operational processes was low on the "consolidate or stop entirely" list, there is a need to rein in the multiple edtech tools that exploded on the scene during the pandemic.**

As Kris Hagel, of Washington's Peninsula School District 401, shares, "We need to do a better job of not allowing all 1,400 edtech applications that teachers decide they're going to bring into the classroom be the standard and focus on the top 50 that make a difference."

Pandemic relief funds are sunsetting. What initiatives are you most likely to consolidate or stop entirely in school year 2024-25 and beyond?



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It goes back to this idea of leadership. We must develop strategic agility—where we see the **connection between systems-level regulations or policies to what happens in the classroom** and vice versa. Change cascades down and flows up.

JEAN-CLAUDE BRIZARD

President and CEO, Digital Promise

Focus Area Three:

Modern Education Workforce

Leaders of school talent are seeing the need to break from tradition to meet the changing profession of teachers. A new generation of teachers seeks a sustainable work/life split, the chance to work in teams and grow in their profession, earn a good wage, and use technology that opens new possibilities for student learning.

Specifically, teachers want to:

- Grow without leaving the classroom
- Exercise voice and choice in their learning
- Use intuitive tools that achieve tactical value from data and AI

Top Talent Priorities and Teacher Workloads

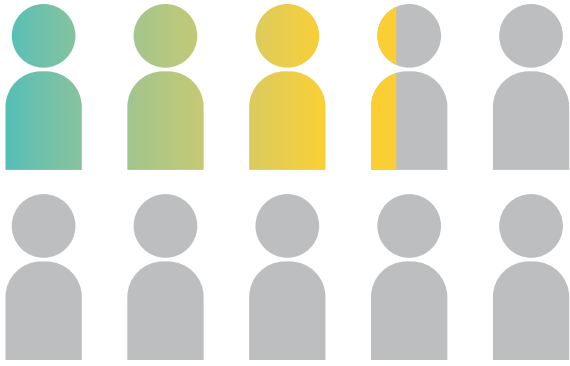
Many districts are still tackling persistent teacher and staff vacancies and working to offer flexible professional development (PD) to support the key science of reading, as well as whole child supports that address disruptive student behaviors.

According to national survey results, district leaders' top priorities are recruitment, evidence-based PD, and flexible PD. We also asked what top three things must be addressed to make the teaching profession more sustainable. **Leaders said, "Reduce teacher, student intervention, and parent communication workloads."**

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I am all about embracing the workforce that we have to create ways for them to integrate and teach. I don't think we should hold on to this traditional image of an educator. **We may actually need to change the concept of education to align to this new generation of teachers.**

DR. ELAINE HOWARD
Superintendent, Sharyland ISD, TX



36% of educators say the "one teacher, many students" model is not working for students, and another 36% felt neutral. Only 29% said the model was working to personalize learning for students.

Top three talent priorities for your school/district.

- 1 Recruitment strategies to fill key vacancies
- 2 Evidence-based professional development
- 3 Flexible professional development via blended learning

Top three things adding to teachers' workloads that must be addressed for the profession to be more sustainable.

- 1 Disruptive students behavior/crisis response
- 2 Student intervention planning
- 3 Parent communication and engagement

Beyond Teaching and Even Co-Teaching: Considering Teacher Teaming

We dug deeper, thinking systemically, and grew inspired by recent work to rethink classroom instructional design—namely, teacher teaming models. These models provide students with deeper and personalized learning by building teams of educators with distributed expertise, and they offer new ways for educators to enter the profession, specialize, and advance.^{iv}

The "one teacher, many students" model is the industry standard for classroom design, but we wanted to verify. We asked district leaders what model they would see if we walked into their schools.

Over seven in 10 responded that the "one teacher, many student" model is the mainstay. However, nearly three in 10 respondents indicated alternative models were in place where two to three teachers (or more) were collaborating to deliver instruction.

These numbers tell us that not only are the conditions ripe for change, but there's an appetite among K-12 leaders to change the teaching model in schools.

Focus Area Four:

School & Home Connection

Home has always been the first place of education. It has never been truer that parents and educators must work together in the interest of students to achieve the developmental and academic goals they share.

Communication is vital to this end. Caretakers are busy and must navigate a complex stream of information about their child's education daily. For this year's report, we interviewed parents and caregivers about their experience communicating with schools. We also discussed attendance challenges and ways they like to converse with, or receive updates from, their schools.

Simplified, Streamlined Communication

Families and caregivers told us they would like to see more personalized and streamlined notifications from schools about schedules, policies, and key milestones. Ideally, they said, this all would be available through **one tool, not many.**

Parents and caregivers also expressed that they are rarely asked about communication preferences. For example, some shared they receive texts for one child and emails and physical mail for another child, but their schools did not invite input on what is best for them.

Parents told us that schools should periodically ask them to confirm or update their contact preferences.



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We have a huge number of apps, systems, and processes. And it's not only classroom communications going out. It's also attendance, grades, and behavior. **It would be great to have a single spot for this that also includes alignment with things like transportation.**

DR. PHIL BOLTZ

Director of Accountability,
Reporting, and Data, Muncie
Community Schools, IN

To Improve Attendance, Engaging Learning Experiences and Family Connections Are Needed

According to our national survey, **seven in 10 educators agree that student attendance has been a significant challenge in their school system since the pandemic.** Disengagement, lack of family support, and mental health issues were cited as root causes.

Many districts have implemented reward systems, accountability measures, and family engagement strategies to improve attendance. Many have achieved progress, blunting the sharp impacts of the pandemic, but still experience higher than pre-pandemic absenteeism rates.

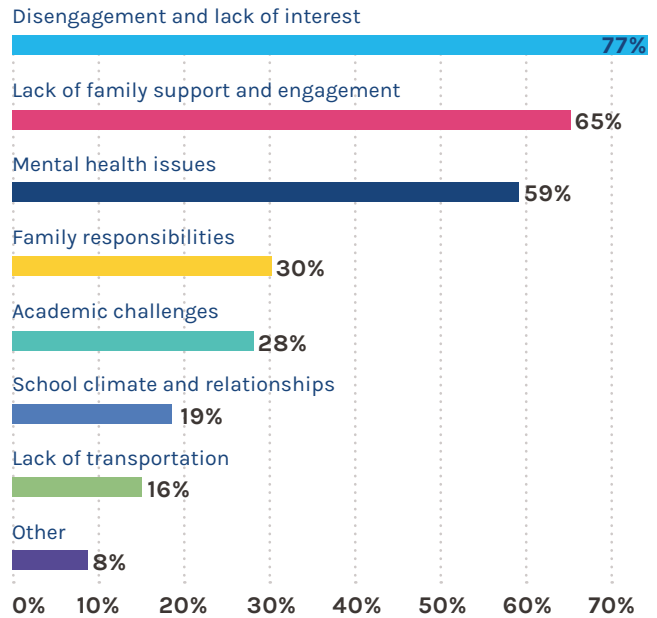


Busy schedules make school

and home communication challenging, but language barriers, inaccurate contact information, and multiple channels can all be solved through technology—**preferably a single solution.**



What are the underlying reasons for student absenteeism in your school or district?



We have a huge chronic absenteeism problem, and if we can't support getting kids here, we can't do any other things. We're figuring out creative solutions for how to get kids to come and want to come. And then considering how we educate families around that.

JULIE POWELL

Director of Instructional Technology,
Palatine Community Consolidated
School District 15, IL

How PowerSchool Can Help

At PowerSchool, we're guided by an inspiring purpose: every student deserves to learn in a way that's right for them. Through our research for the Education Focus Report each year, we listen intently and strive to innovate effective edtech solutions that address the needs of educators today and help empower the future.

Our PowerSchool Clouds combine all the digital tools needed for each role in education.



Student Information Cloud—

Manage student information, enrollment, organizational data, and special programs while addressing cybersecurity and data privacy challenges.



College, Career, & Life Readiness Cloud—

Provide support to help students prepare for their futures with robust tools to drive career exploration, college and military research, and workforce development skills.



Personalized Learning Cloud—Move closer to a personalized, competency-based model of teaching while leveraging assessment, learning management, curriculum planning, and instructional content tools.



Talent Recruitment & Retention Cloud—

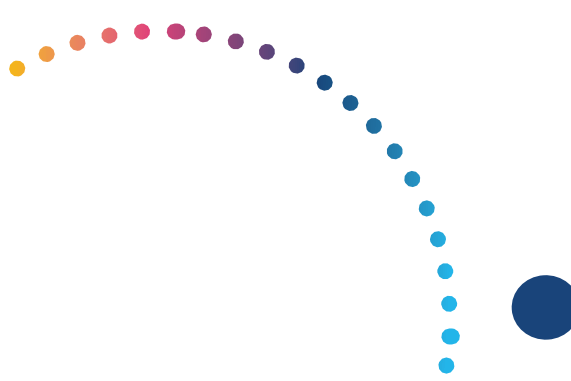
Attract, hire, and develop effective educators leveraging streamlined recruitment processes, a modern candidate experience, advanced data analytics, and the ability to transform real-time instructional coaching data into personalized goals and professional development recommendations.



Student Success Cloud—Reduce chronic absenteeism, promote positive behavior, and provide tiered instruction (MTSS) to boost attendance and engagement.



Resource Planning Cloud—Optimize finance and HR operations to allocate resources that best support students in transforming and modernizing processes and reporting for budget, finance, payroll, and other critical administrative and HR functions for schools and districts.



PowerSchool also supports engagement, informed decision-making, and personalized learning.



MyPowerHub and Communications—

Empower better school-to-home communication by providing families with a single access point for their student’s academic information.



Analytics & Insights—Integrate transactional data so you can securely share and access both governed data and analytical data with role-based dashboards to provide critical insights so staff can take actions that improve student outcomes.



PowerSchool AI—Leverage AI responsibly to personalize education and help students learn in a way that’s right for them.



Connected Intelligence K-12—Use K-12’s first Data as a Service (DaaS) platform to centralize data, ensure data security and governance, and give the ability to build a foundation for AI.

Scan the QR code to access the full report.

Available July 2024

Read more about what we’ve heard from educators, administrators, families, and students.



www.powerschool.com/edtech-focus-report-2024



i <https://slejournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40561-020-00140-9>

ii <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/central/Ask-A-REL/20015>

iii <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/every-state-now-lets-schools-measure-students-success-based-on-mastery-not-seat-time/2023/05>

iv <https://workforce.education.asu.edu/meeting-the-challenge>

Education Insights Advisors

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