

Bringing Them Back

Student Attendance / Re-Engagement
Strategies for Fall 2021



Kim Wallace, Ed.D.

May, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After more than a year of pandemic living, learning, and working is beginning to subside, schools and districts are rapidly shifting gears in preparation for bringing students and staff back on campus for full-day instruction, athletics, and extracurricular activities. While there is palpable excitement at the prospect of schools opening back up, we are also aware that many students and families will need some extra support getting back into their daily routines, especially related to in-person attendance. This research report is a forward look into the potential challenges that educators all over the country anticipate will need addressing when school resumes, as well as innovative ideas and strategies to help students readjust to patterns of good attendance and work habits.

RaaWee K12 Solutions is working alongside professionals in the education field to develop real-time responses to positively impact student attendance, offer interventions, and prevent increasing rates of truancy and chronic absentee. The report that follows is an in-depth examination of the problems, as well as the solutions we can leverage to foster what's worked well in this year of growth and opportunity.

INTRODUCTION

You may have heard the conventional theory that it takes human beings around three weeks (or approximately 21 days) to form a new or break an old habit. More current research on the topic from University College London (2010) found that the average time it takes to change a behavior is actually 66 days, with individual results ranging from 18 to a staggering 254 days (Lally, Jaarsved, et. al.). Considering that most American families have been participating in school virtually or in hybrid models for the past 365 or more days, we are facing a daunting re-entry process to on-location, on-time, in-person, and full-day instruction.

A majority of adults and young people alike have left behind their past habits of rising to an alarm clock, juggling morning routines, eating breakfast on the fly, navigating rush hour traffic, and arriving at school drop-off...all before the warning bell rings. What we did almost unconsciously before COVID-19, we now have to intentionally reestablish. As our nation starts to open back up and we collectively resume some of our pre-pandemic activities, however, not everything will return to the "way it was". Thus, we need to predict, anticipate, and plan for student attendance scenarios that may have existed in the past, but have evolved in unique ways. RaaWee K12 Solutions is on the forefront of that curve and is prepared to help schools, districts, families, and children more smoothly reintegrate into their educational environments.

Attendance Issues At Stake

An article posted on the National Conference of State Legislators website noted that,

Educators responding to an October Education Week survey reported that unexcused absences doubled after the onset of the pandemic. Absenteeism is associated with other negative consequences for students, including worse performance in coursework and on standardized tests, lower college attendance rates, reduced lifetime earnings, and increased incarceration rates. Absenteeism and its negative effects were more prevalent among low-income students and students of color before the pandemic; early reports suggest that these vulnerable students are being hit harder by these challenges in the COVID-19 era as well (Brown, 3/15/21).

While significant research has already been conducted to identify student groups typically at risk of chronic absenteeism and truancy, many others--who had been attending regularly, but stopped doing so at some point within this current school year--are joining their ranks. We need to pinpoint who these new absentees consist of and how we can help them, along with their peers, find their way back to school.

One of the most pertinent issues is that before the pandemic, alternative educational models such as virtual schools, hybrid classrooms, homeschooling, independent study, and flexible scheduling lingered around the edges of public education. These options were few and far between, attended by less than 10% of the population, and often considered to be on the fringe of what was “normal”. In the “new normal” of 2020, however, those settings became the rule rather than the exception; and while we initially considered them to be temporary, we now know that they have permanently changed our educational landscape.

Though many will return to school in its relatively traditional format, we now must contend with the fact that instruction can be accessed in previously unconventional ways that several parents and students now prefer. It may make things more complicated from an organizational standpoint, but these alternatives should be celebrated as much-needed progress away from the one-size-fits-all educational institutions of the 20th century. If one good thing is rising out of the dust of the pandemic, it’s that our eyes are wider open to new and exciting possibilities for the future of K-12 schooling.

Regardless of the choices that families will soon be making on the horizon of the 2021-22 school year, there is still one non-negotiable: attendance matters. Perhaps more than ever.

In their proactive approach to capture new ways of measuring and tracking accountability, RaaWee recently reached out to a variety of stakeholders and constituents to explore two key research questions in order to craft tools, communications, and strategies regardless of the educational format or circumstances families choose to avail themselves of going forward.



The Research Questions

In their proactive approach to capture new ways of measuring and tracking accountability, RaaWee recently reached out to a variety of stakeholders and constituents to explore two key research questions in order to craft tools, communications, and strategies regardless of the educational format or circumstances families choose to avail themselves of going forward.

1

What do you anticipate (or have already experienced) the impact or challenges will be on student attendance when we return to full-time in-person daily instruction (e.g., chronic truancy, tardies, readiness to learn, physical/emotional barriers, breaking bad habits etc.)?

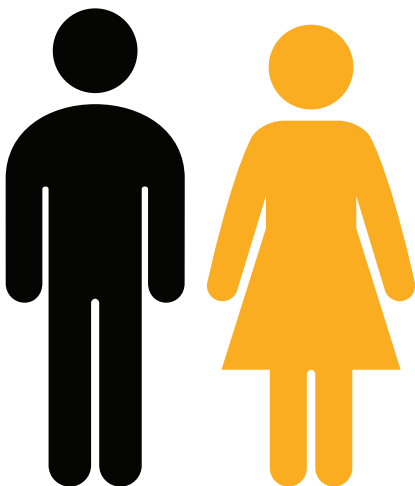
2

What would be helpful interventions, strategies, or tools that would help make the transition back easier on students, families, and staff (e.g., communications, tracking, activities, incentives, etc.)?

Interviews were conducted with several district-level administrators, school site staff, parents, and students to deepen RaaWee's understanding of attendance-related issues different groups of people may be facing now and in the near future, as well as to gather novel ideas to support transitions back to campus.

Parents & Student Voices

Laura Guajardo is the **parent of a high school junior and senior**, who also works at the Santa Clara County Office of Education and is a former continuation high school teacher herself. Her daughters have been earning straight A's for the first time in their lives while in distance learning. **Her senior candidly stated, "I miss school, but I'm going to be distracted when I go back. I'm there for the social aspect."**



If I see a sub in the classroom, I'm just not going to go in. I know I won't learn anything, so why bother?" This response underscores Whitney & Lui's (2017) finding that, "Students in secondary school skip many classes even when they are in the school. Approximately half of the days that they are not in a specific class, they attend other classes" (p.32). The fact that students are willing to physically show up at school, but vote with their feet when it comes to deciding what classes are worth attending, speaks volumes and reaffirms research that we'll later discuss on the impact of teacher efficacy on student attendance.

A middle school student we spoke with who had endured bullying and negative social interactions in the pre-pandemic world related to their gender identity, bluntly stated, “I don’t care if I ever go back.”

I finish all of my work online. Then I get to take care of my chickens, walk my dog, and draw. I see my friends on the weekend. Why go back to school?” While another 13-year-old we talked to said they couldn’t wait to get back to “meet my teachers, join the drama club, and play soccer at lunch with my friends”. These contrasting views illustrate just two of the millions of personal preferences, expectations, and experiences that shape students’ feelings about attending school.

Guajardo’s parental and professional response is that we need to shift instructional modalities so that learning is more inquiry-based, engaging, and meaningful.

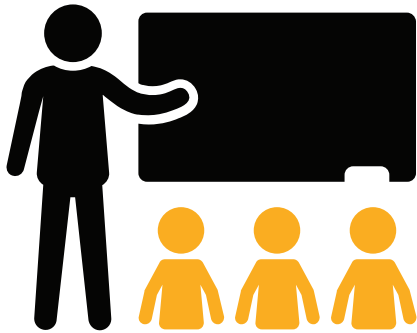
She challenges the publicly coined term “learning loss” as supporting a deficit mentality and thinks it should be rephrased more inclusively as “unfinished learning”. As for ways to spark renewed interest, she proclaims: “Harness the power of TikTok to reach kids and invite them back to school!”

In a study conducted with over 28,000 households in 2018, Rogers & Feller concluded that, “Parents severely underestimate their students’ total absences. A pilot survey of parents of high-absence students in our partner school district shows that parents underestimate their own students’ absences by a factor of 2 (9.6 estimated absences vs. 17.8 actual absences). We find that providing total absences information corrects parents’ biased beliefs, and nearly doubles the absence-reducing impact of reminders about the importance of absences” (p.4). Simply put, perception is reality until we challenge it with hard evidence and customized tools to impact individual conduct.

This is compelling evidence for both the developers of attendance tracking platforms and their end-user personnel at schools and districts.

Sharing real-time data that drills down into student-specific patterns and clearly communicating the information to caregivers will have a significant influence on changing behaviors. RaaWee understands that addressing the micro-level of student-by-student needs is just as crucial as displaying the macro-level of systemic trends so districts and school staff can plan for and respond programmatically as well.

School Site Staff Perspectives



David Thornley, principal of a high needs elementary school in Fremont, California anticipates a severe tardy problem when full-time school resumes.

After a year of developing bad habits, kids may struggle with waking up and getting to school. “Even if we try to accommodate them by offering flexible schedules, it creates additional burdens on working parents who may not have the ability to drop off or pick up students at non-traditional times of day.”

He believes we should incentivize a growth model with clear lines and expectations from the start. Rephrasing our communications to parents, especially related to the SARB process, as well as having a digital platform connected to the Student Information System (SIS) that evaluates patterns and trends would be a tremendous help to him as a principal. RaaWee’s variety of prevention and intervention tools make this work easier for leaders like Principal Thornley. At a few clicks of a mouse, the data is revealed and can be immediately applied into practice.

As a person whose sole job is to focus on attendance, elementary site attendance clerk in Hayward Unified School District, Drielle Brown, worries that the ever-changing plans districts have been experiencing due to evolving state and county directives, may confuse matters for parents and children.

That, in combination with the fact that many of the youngest students will be completely unfamiliar with school routines as well as proper social interactions, she expects that we will need to help shore up their resiliency.

Since they started in distance learning, Brown notes that her school’s chronic absentee rate has diminished, but believes it will likely shoot back up even higher when in-person instruction resumes. She also predicts that for some children, sitting in class for five-six hours a day may result in rebellious behaviors that distract others from learning. Her solutions to the re-entry dilemmas include bolstering the face-to-face relationships that have dropped off over the past year and painting a realistic version of what kids are coming back to in the fall. Along with the needed safety protocols, she also thinks that providing incentives, goals, extra recess time, and holding class outdoors might be good strategies to support the transitions.

To Brown's point, RaaWee K12 provides districts with the ability to track and identify more than traditional absenteeism, including issues such as "Present, but Not Engaged", which has lately become the "new absent." By focusing on emerging trends such as these, RaaWee's Truancy & Drop-out Prevention System (TDPS) also puts recommended resources and collaborative ideas at the fingertips of staff. What many schools and districts are spending countless hours doing manually, RaaWee has systematized automatically.

While it may seem like a given that classroom teachers make an immense and lasting impact on young people's growth, development, and ability to reach their goals and potential, but not many have explicitly linked it to the significant influence on student attendance. Liu & Loeb (2019) confirmed: "Overall, we find that teachers have large effects on student attendance. A student would have approximately 44 percent fewer unexcused absences in math classes and 54 percent fewer in English classes, if she had a teacher who is one standard deviation above the average in value added to attendance than if she had an average teacher, holding other variables constant" (p.4). They also noted that, "A teacher who has high value-added to attendance can engage students in class and motivate the student to pursue higher academic goals. Not surprisingly, benefits from these teachers are more salient for students with low prior attendance and low prior achievement" (p.33). This is particularly relevant to the vast research that the student groups who struggle most respond more positively attendance-wise when possessing strong relationships with their teachers.

Classroom teacher, Ramon Reyes, from Boise Idaho corroborates this theory. He has worked with at-risk young people in a variety of settings and knows the importance of strong relationships. Using techniques such as texting encouraging words to his students, checking in via office hours online and by phone, and sharing his own personal struggles with school as a teen help him forge connections with students on the verge of dropping out. **He operates from the perspective of, "We know they are out there. And that they need us. How can we find them and bring them back?"** Technology has been very helpful during distance learning in this vein and he underscores services like the ones the RaaWee offers would support his outreach efforts immensely in that he could simply and easily customize messages to individuals or groups of students with similar attendance issues to "bring them back".

Thus, we should encourage teachers to build those personal connections, exhibit authentic care, and intentionally leverage the magnitude of their favorable effects on student attendance outcomes. RaaWee regards knowledge as power, which is why they have developed and refined their products to communicate data to teachers in digestible ways so they can act on the information and consciously work on improving student attendance outcomes.

View from the District Office

Few have a better finger on the pulse of student attendance patterns than District Office Student Support Service Directors.

Jose Almazan from United ISD in Laredo, Texas, Dr. Tracy Piper from Hemet Unified in California, and Dr. Chaunce Powell from East Side Union High School District in San Jose California all shared their projections, insights, and proposed interventions with RaaWee.

Constantly contending with the misinformation proliferating on social media is something that Jose Almazan didn't initially realize would become a full-time job.

Combating the stigma that it's not safe to return, counteracting the myths about the vaccine's efficacy, or working against inertia and complacency are uphill battles he's ready for. He believes that the district must do their best to counter-message the rumors and instill the emotional security that schools are the safest and most structured environments for students to be in. Almazan stated, "We need to realize that we are not in the same people or in the same place as when we left. We need to look forward, and not past." Professional development is also needed for teachers and support staff to address the stressors and shift the negatives to the positives. Sports, counseling, clubs, and school activities can all be leveraged to re-engage and re-socialize students in school culture.

Dr. Tracy Piper echoes Jose's concerns and adds a few of her own. She fears that a group of previously-engaged students have become permanently disengaged over the past year and will eventually drop out.

"If we don't maintain flexible options via hybrid or online offerings, we will lose them. Especially kids who don't fit in for myriad reasons and have found a home online where they can be themselves and not worry about being picked on or harassed for their differences." She claims that this is our opportunity to change our perspectives of what a school day is. Flexible scheduling is key to solving attendance issues.

There is no reason to miss school even if a student is sick if they can log in from home to participate in instruction. RaaWee has been at the forefront of recognizing and validating different modes of instruction and, as a result, have built into their platform ways to track and report attendance in multiple modalities.

Caregivers have been flooding Dr. Chaunce Powell's office with requests for support disclosing that their kids are refusing to go back and that they don't know how to handle it.

She says that attendance has actually increased from 94% pre-pandemic to over 97% during distance learning: "There are a whole different group of students that this model is working for and we don't know if they will come back. The complete shift in routine plus the emotional shift to having to deal with face-to-face relationships can be anxiety-provoking." To help with the transitions, East Side has started doing site tours with incoming 9th & 10th graders to build connections to the campus, familiarize them with the staff, and foster peer connections. Making personalized phone calls to those they perceive might be at risk is another avenue to invite students back in. One way she sees RaaWee as a support is to have them blend the chronic absentee and truancy lists to make one concise contact to families in need as well as continue to offer additional Tier One supports for all students.

Superintendents like Dr. Daryl Camp of the San Lorenzo Unified School District in the San Francisco Bay Area are doing the yeoman's work of balancing fluctuating mandates

coming down from the state and federal governments, being responsive to local politics and culture, negotiating with employee bargaining associations, and creating plans A, B, C through Z, to prepare for their students' return. Dr. Camp states that the key to success is remaining flexible. The world has changed dramatically and, "Educators need to be sensitive to and reflective on the lessons we've learned during the pandemic. We know that students have taken on part-time jobs and other responsibilities that we should take into consideration when creating master schedules. If we want to retain our older students, our attendance system has to adjust to their emerging realities." He also proposed rethinking our concepts of accelerated learning via competency-based achievement instead of logging "seat time". We have opportunities here that we can leverage like no other time in history, due to a year's worth of technology-based learning and distance learning experiences.

Fiscal Implications

The nuances and structures for funding public education are complex, but can be primarily boiled down to ADA or Average Daily Attendance. All over the nation, districts and schools receive a majority of their funding based on formulas for positive student attendance. The higher the ADA, the more money they get. As we exit a year of pandemic-related triage, it remains to be seen whether the former models of attendance tracking and data collection will persist or necessarily evolve to meet our diversified needs. **The Federal and most state governments already recognize these changes and have instituted temporary “Loss of Learning” funding initiatives to get schools back up and running.** What will be in place for the long term, remains to be seen.

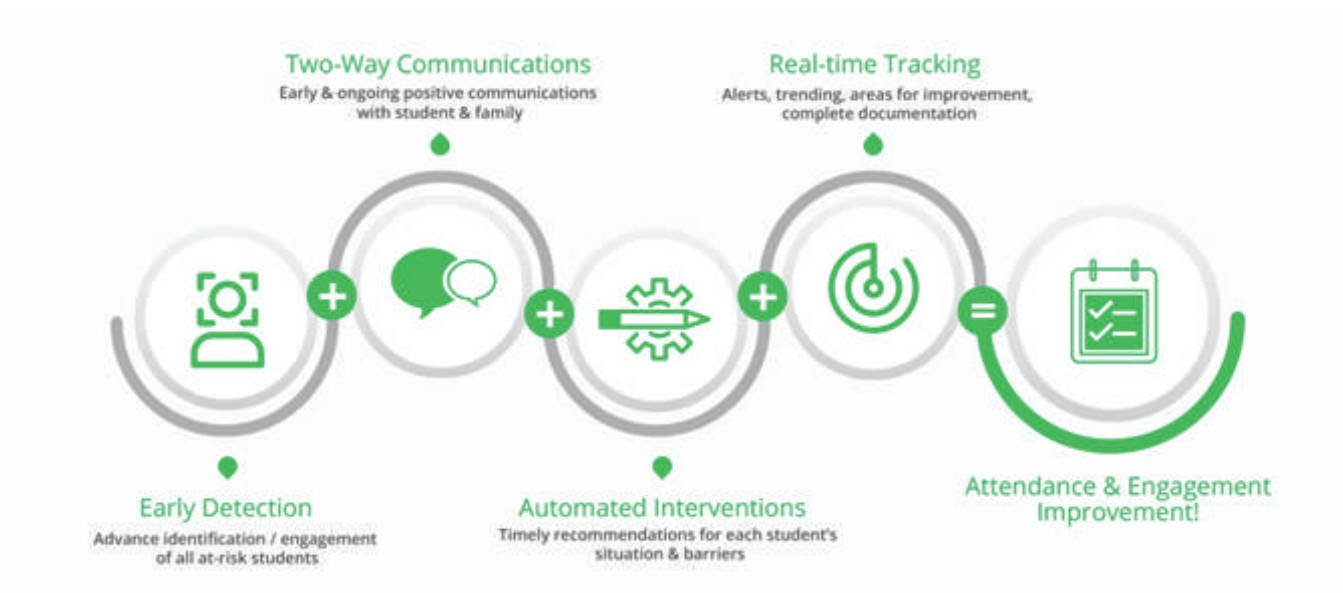
Regardless of whether we call it “Loss of Learning” or prefer to frame it more affirmatively, any requisite funding initiatives around curriculum adjustments, revisions and technologies will be ineffectual if students fail to attend school regularly. Hence, RaaWee helps schools to ensure their Loss of Learning Initiatives become successful by helping them to keep students engaged in their schoolwork. In a recent blog post, Chang & Jordan underscore that point:

The stimulus bill just approved by Congress requires states to spend money on summer learning and extended school day programs, among other approaches. But students won’t benefit from these programs—or the tutoring initiatives launching around the country—if the students don’t show up in the first place. Reducing chronic absenteeism, which has spiraled during the current crisis, must be an essential part of recovery efforts...Given the magnitude of the problem, districts and schools can’t solve this on a case-by-case basis. Instead they need to invest in broad strategies that work at scale to help students overcome barriers to attending class and re-engage with learning (March 18, 2021).

RaaWee has just the solutions to help districts help staff to help students and families systematically and compassionately, including:

- Designating earliest identification and interventions for students as the most important success point.
- Valuing collaboration among stakeholders as the pathway to higher success, which is the core of the TDPS.
- The research-proven practice that prevention and intervention goals can be accomplished by building two-way communications with students and families.
- By making the administrative aspects of intervention easy to manage, it leaves all stakeholders more time for personal interaction with the students that need it
- Knowing that time is of the essence. Real-time updates ensures that all caregivers and educators have the most current information on any and all students.

RaaWee's Core Support Structure



Conclusion

RaaWee K12 Solutions celebrates the resilience and commitment of educators, especially during the last twelve months. Looking back, we didn't know what we didn't know, but banded together to find the tools, resources, and strategies to support staff, children, and families all over the state. As so many districts are moving back into school site operations and in-person learning, we realize that there are still many unknowns as to what the future holds.

But we do know that our students are truly fortunate to have you on their side, creating innovative environments, growth opportunities, and providing engaging 21st century learning activities on a daily basis. Educators are optimists. We couldn't do the tireless, rewarding, yet often heart-breaking work we do otherwise. The light at the end of this tunnel is beckoning. Let's keep heading toward it together...

Sources Cited:

- Chang, H. & Jordan, P. (March 18, 2021) How Covid Relief Dollars Can Help Improve Attendance. Blog post originally published on the FutureEd website.
- Lally, Phillippa & Jaarsveld, Cornelia & Potts, Henry & Wardle, Jane. (2010). How are habits formed: Modeling habit formation in the real world. *European Journal of Social Psychology*. 40. 10.1002/ejsp.674.
- Liu, J., & Loeb, S. (2019). Engaging Teachers: Measuring the Impact of Teachers on Student Attendance in Secondary School (EdWorkingPaper No.19-01). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <http://annenberg.brown.edu/ai19-01>
- Olneck-Brown, Benjamin (March 15, 2021). Public Education's Response to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic. National Conference of State Legislatures.
- Rogers, T. & Feller, A. (2018). Reducing student absences at scale by targeting parents' misbeliefs. *Nature Human Behaviour*.
- Whitney, Camille.R., and Jing Liu. (2017) "What we're missing: A descriptive analysis of part day absenteeism in secondary school." *AERA Open* 3, no. 2: 2332858417703660.



www.raaweek12.com