

### Time For a Booster of Wellness: Focus on Students and Supporting Staff



Tim Taylor  
Executive Director  
Small School Districts' Association

As we head into the 19th month of the pandemic, certain leaders are focusing their energies on student success and supporting staff with positive and much-needed resources. This is what great leaders do, and SSDA schools have some of the best in the state.

The focus of our November/December issue is improving well-being at our schools throughout California.

That falls on the leadership of the Superintendent and Governing Board. We are all surrounded by intense and negative feedback in just about every aspect of how we communicate: social media, media, board meetings, staff meetings, and Zooms. It is time for leaders to turn the page and focus on what matters: student and staff success.

"Those who say it can not be done should not interrupt those doing it." ~ Unknown.

Eric Bonnicksen, Superintendent of Placerville ESD, has had enough of the past 19 months, so he takes a different approach. During his superintendent report, he told his governing board and community that he will focus his time, communications, and board reports on what is important. His focus is on students and the great staff at his schools, maintaining

excellent teaching and learning in the classrooms, and maintaining a caring and welcoming environment on each campus. No more COVID, masks and vaccine discussions. He will handle that through written communications and individual communications.

Here are a few tips to boost your school culture during this challenging time:

1. Make classroom visits THE priority. Set two mornings each week to be in classrooms with your staff. Work with your executive assistant to block off that time, and unless it is code red get out to your classes.
2. Your staff agenda sets the tone. Let them know you will send COVID updates via email.
3. Check COVID sarcasm at the front door. You are the leader, and what you say matters. Yes, the state and feds are inconsistent (being nice!). Yes, that group of parents is driving everyone nuts.
4. Great leaders push through it, keep it between other leaders and not with staff.
5. Celebrate your successes frequently. The only way to change culture is to focus on what is going well.

It is nice to hear many educators say they are tired of the COVID baloney and are going to quit falling into the trap. Don't rely on a boost from anyone outside your school community—it comes down to you.

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# Programming Success

## A look at one small school teacher's journey through the first year of SSDA's CS4NorCal computer science project.



The study of CS continues to be in utmost demand among the fastest growing industries. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, jobs in the computer and information technology industry — including jobs like computer programmers, database administrators, and software developers — are expected to grow [13% from 2020 to 2030](#), which is faster on average than all other occupations.

Being able to offer students an early start on a possible career in this fast-growing industry is one of the reasons why Becky York-Germann, a computer science and math teacher at Quincy Junior/Senior High School in Plumas County, jumped at the chance to be part of SSDA's CS-4NorCal program this past summer.

### Summer of CS

SSDA's CS4NorCal program is a five-year, federally-funded regional research and innovation project aimed at creating K-12 computer science pathways in small rural schools in six California counties — Glenn, Lassen, Modoc, Plumas, Shasta and Siskiyou. The program launched this past summer with Summer of CS — a week of online professional development where teams of teachers, principals, and other staff members from small and rural schools learned computer science concepts, practices, and pedagogy.

York-Germann was part of the team from Plumas Unified School District's Quincy Junior/Senior High School. Plumas USD serves about 2,200 students throughout the county. As she had taught a CS Discoveries class in the past to middle schoolers, her school had asked her to become involved when they wanted to offer a Computer Science Principles class in an effort to boost computer science training in their school and county overall.

The CS Discoveries and Computer Science Principles are curriculum provided by Code.org, a main partner of SSDA's CS-4NorCal program. The Computer Science Principles course introduces students to the foundational concepts of computer science.

Through the CS4NorCal program, York-Germann and other teachers like her learn the Computer Science Principles curriculum that they then in-turn teach to the students in their class. In this way, the teachers do not need a background in computer science themselves to learn how to teach the class.

"The curriculum ... is straightforward," York-Germann explains. "It's fun because ... the philosophy of the class is not to be

teacher-centered. They teach it to us like we're the students and then we get to immerse ourselves in it and see some of the struggles that our students would have because we're being taught it the same way. It's a really cool way to learn it."

Having completed the week-long intensive training during Summer of CS and starting the Computer Science Principles class earlier this year, York-Germann and the other teachers receive an additional four workshops focused on their curriculum. They also receive another two workshops on how to integrate computer science into other subject areas, such as math, science and career-prep practices. The workshops include a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning both during the school day and after school.



York-Germann says having additional trainings throughout the year allows all the teachers in the Computer Science Principles class a chance to reconnect and learn from each other. "It's a lot of here's what you did, how did that go, are there things you would change or you'd do different, and here's the next two units that you should be doing to give us a jumping off point to be a little ahead of

our students," she adds.

### Building Confidence & Support

In addition to meeting with her Computer Science Principles group, York-Germann also meets with other small and rural school teachers through special CS4NorCal workshops. She says these meetings give her and other teachers like her an opportunity to talk about bringing computer science to their schools and districts on a larger scale.

"The CS4NorCal meeting has definitely opened my eyes to I need to do more and I need to think about ways to incorporate technology in better," York-Germann explains. "We really need to do more for our kids in computer science somehow."

York-Germann says the CS4NorCal meetings have become a great way to meet other small and rural school teachers like herself. "They know the struggles," she adds. "Getting together in a meeting with a whole bunch of people who are either going through the same struggles or who have had the same struggle once before and are trying to build on it, it's the most grounding experience because you're like okay, I'm not the only one, it's alright, we're all in this together, we're all learning,

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# Programming Success

A look at one small school teacher's journey through the first year of SSDA's CS4NorCal computer science project.

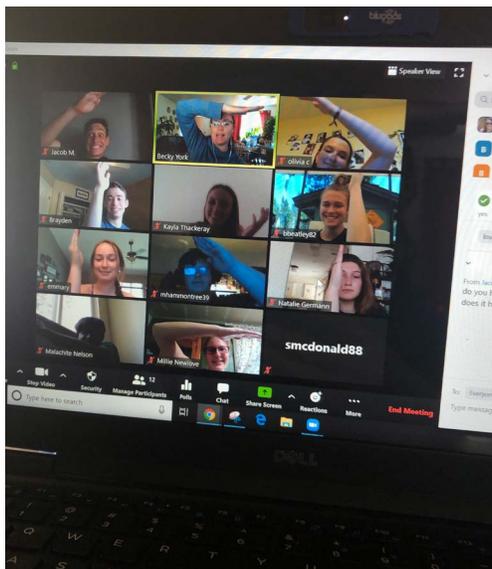


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and I'm really not doing a disservice to my students. I'm teaching them something.

And York-Germann says through both the CS4NorCal meetings and Computer Science Principles classes, the teachers are able to give each other the support they might be lacking in a small school. "Just being able to talk to someone is so amazingly reassuring that okay, we're both doing the same thing, how are your kids doing this, where are you at — kind of checking in to make sure you're in the same place," she explains. "Doing this without that ... I would have way less confidence in what I'm doing. It builds confidence in knowing I'm where everybody else is (and) we're doing the same thing."

York-Germann is looking forward to continuing learning through the CS4NorCal program and plans to work up to



Code.org's AP Computer Science A course, which is equivalent to a first-semester, college-level course in computer science. "I hope to be able to ... offer an intro to genuine computer science at our site to give our students a chance to be ready for the technological world they're diving into," she says.

And she plans on enjoying the ride and the fun the experience is giving her. "One of my favorite parts just as a teacher is growth for me because it's something I've never done before and so I'm learning," York-Germann explains. "It's amazing how much fun teaching something that I'm learning is. It's been an amazing experience for me ... and it gives me

hope and great and grand ambitions. It helps to reinvigorate the excitement for what we're doing."

By Corrie Pelc



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# Taking Flight

## Woodlake High School named a Rural Tech Project finalist for its new aviation career pathway for students.

In December 2020, the U.S. Department of Education named Woodlake High School in Tulare County one of the five finalists for the Rural Tech Project for an online aviation program they designed, earning an award of \$100,000.

Now Woodlake High School is in the middle of planning out the rest of the aviation program in hopes of being named the grand prize winner in the summer of 2023.

### Why Aviation?

Woodlake High School is part of Woodlake Unified School District — a small school district of about 2,100 students. According to Rudy Cardona, assistant principal at Woodlake High School, under the motto "creating pathways for success," the school features a variety of career and college readiness pathways for students, including agriculture, computer science, and multimedia graphics.

"We (look) for ways that will bring relevance into the classroom where students can learn from those career tech education avenues to better understand math and science," Cardona explains. "And we have a lot of English learners here on our campus, so it gives them opportunities to speak and have fun in the classroom, learn a career option, and better understand the core classes that they're taking."

Last year, the high school was looking for an additional STEM-based pathway to add to the others they already had for students. As Cardona served in the United States Air Force for over 24 years and holds a masters in aeronautical science, he suggested an aviation program. And when the school learned they could apply for Rural Tech Project grant opportunity, that sealed the deal.

In addition to being a personal passion for Cardona, he says there is a real aviation career opportunity for Woodlake High School students in their community. He outlines aviation needs for the agricultural focus of the surrounding community, using planes to fight forest fires in the nearby Sequoia National Park, a new Amazon distribution center that has opened in nearby Fresno,

as well as the deliveries that go in and out of their community's various smaller airports.

"We're thinking it's a win-win situation if we can bring in something that we are observing the labor market and economy (for), and something that are students need to be able to contribute to once they graduate high school," Cardona adds.

### Setting the Flight Plan

The online aviation program Woodlake High School developed is a two-year career and college readiness pathway. The first year of the program, which was implemented this 2021-2022 school year, is a "Math for Aviation" class, which Cardona says is equivalent to Integrated Math II and open to sophomores and juniors. "This year is their math requirement and principals of flight, so how an airplane flies and applying that math knowledge to principals of flight and aviation," Cardona explains.

As students learn the various math principles, Cardona says they are able to apply them through the six flight simulators the school was able to purchase with the \$100,000

grant they received. "With those simulators, we have some fantastic programs on there," Cardona says. "We have it preset to Woodlake Airport here and the graphics are phenomenal. They can see our local lakes and city and identify key features, and they really enjoy that when they're flight planning."

Woodlake High School received approval for the first year curriculum of the aviation program as an A-G college preparatory-level class for both the University of California and California State University. They are currently working on getting approval for the second year curriculum, which is part of phase two of their program.

For phase two, Cardona and his team are working on building the curriculum for an elective class for the 2022-2023 school year that goes more in depth into aviation training. This class will also prepare students to take Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) certification tests, as one of the primary objectives of the avia-



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# Taking Flight

## Woodlake High School named a Rural Tech Project finalist for its new aviation career pathway for students.

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tion program is to have students graduate with not only a high school diploma, but an FAA certification as well.

Also during phase two, Cardona and his team will be introducing the students to drone operation. Woodlake was also able to purchase 10 drones with their grant money. Cardona says drone operation is another career pathway that is needed in their community.

"In the ag world, drones are being used more and more, whether that be to monitor crops or to spray, and not just for crops but for cattle," Cardona details. "And in our area, oil is big just south of us — oil and gas is a big industry so (drones) are being used to monitor the pipelines. Our students can really jump into college and careers in these areas using that crossover between agriculture and aviation."

### Staying On Course

As Woodlake High School is currently working on phase two of their program for the Rural Tech Project, another addition Cardona is working on is acquiring dual enrollment college credit



for Woodlake students who go through the aviation program. Cardona is working with Reedley College — a community college about 30 minutes from the school.

"A lot of our students have never even thought about going to college," Cardona says. "We now have students saying I know what I want to do, so the excitement is there. A student could graduate from here with college credit and they've already launched (their college experience)."

Cardona says Woodlake has 28 students enrolled in the aviation program for this first year. He hopes as interest grows to be able to add more classes to accommodate additional interest. "We're just going to keep growing every year ... it seems to be very popular," he adds.

And if Woodlake is named the grand prize winner of the Rural Tech Project in the summer of 2023, Cardona says the additional \$100,000 would be used to further enhance the program and purchase additional flight simulators and drones.

By Corrie Pelc





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# Legislative Update: 2021 Legislative Session Wrap-Up



Caitlin Jung  
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Sunday, October 10th was the deadline for Governor Gavin Newsom to act on the hundreds of bills sent to him by the Legislature. In total, of the 836 bills that made it to his desk, the Governor signed 770 of them and vetoed the other 66. Below is a look at some of the major legislation affecting education that was signed into law this year.

## New Laws

**New layoff and notice procedures for classified employees.** [AB 438](#), by Assembly Member Eloise Gómez Reyes (D-Grand Terrace) applies the same layoff notice requirements for certificated staff to permanent classified staff. This includes requiring a local educational agency (LEA) to provide notice to a classified employee by March 15 and allowing a classified employee to request a hearing to determine if there was cause for the decision not to renew their employment. Late in the legislative process, the bill was amended to allow an LEA to issue a layoff notice outside of March 15 if a classified position must be eliminated as a result of the expiration of a specially funded program, provided the employee is given at least 60 days written notice prior to the effective date of the layoff. The new requirements take effect January 1, 2022, meaning LEAs will be required to comply with the new procedures on March 15, 2022.

**Liability for disallowed retirement compensation placed solely on employers.** [SB 278](#) by Senate Education Committee Chair, Connie Leyva (D-Chino) shifts full liability to employers when compensation on which an active member or retiree's pension is based is later disallowed by the California Public Employees Retirement System (CalPERS), regardless of whether or not the compensation was included due to employer error. Under the bill, when compensation reported for an active member is determined by CalPERS to be "disallowed compensation," any contributions made on the compensation that were paid on behalf of the member shall be returned to the member by the entity who reported the disallowed compensation.

For a retiree whose final compensation was based on disallowed compensation, CalPERS will permanently adjust the retiree's benefit to reflect the disallowed compensation and the entity who reported the disallowed compensation will be required to pay CalPERS the full cost of any overpayment made to the affected retired member as a result of the disallowed compensation. Additionally, late amendments to SB 278 removed the requirement for employers to pay the retired member a lump sum or an annuity based on the disallowed compensation and instead now requires the employer to pay a penalty equal to 20% of the amount calculated as a lump sum.

Under the bill, 90% of the penalty will be paid as restitution to the affected retired member and the remaining 10% goes to CalPERS.

The bill distinguishes between disallowed compensation as it relates to an active member and a retiree. In order for the repayment and penalty requirements to apply to a retiree, the following conditions must be met:

- The compensation was reported to the system and contributions were made on that compensation while the member was actively employed.
- The compensation was agreed to in a memorandum of understanding or collective bargaining agreement between the employer and the recognized employee organization as compensation for pension purposes and the employer and the recognized employee organization did not knowingly agree to compensation that was disallowed.
- The determination by the system that compensation was disallowed was made after the date of retirement.
- The member was not aware that the compensation was disallowed at the time it was reported.

**Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement for Class of 2030.** [AB 101](#) by Assembly Member Jose Medina (D-Riverside) requires LEAs serving grades 9-12 to offer at least a one-semester course in ethnic studies beginning in the 2025-26 school year. In addition, the bill adds the completion of at least one semester of ethnic studies as a graduation requirement for the Class of 2030. Pupils can fulfill the requirement by completing any of the following: a course based on the ethnic studies model curriculum adopted by the State Board of Education (SBE), an existing ethnic studies course, an ethnic studies course taught as part of a course that has been approved as meeting the A-G requirements, or a locally developed ethnic studies course approved by the governing board of a school district or charter school.

**Student mental health prioritized.** Senator Anthony Portantino (D-La Cañada Flintridge) authored companion bills related to youth mental health. [SB 14](#), an urgency measure that took effect upon the Governor's signature on October 8, adds "for the benefit of the pupil's mental or behavioral health" to the list of categories of excused absences for purposes of school attendance. SB 14 also requires the California Department of Education (CDE), by January 1, 2023, to recommend best practices and identify evidence-based training programs for schools to address youth behavioral health. The language that would have required LEAs to train their staff utilizing these programs was removed from the bill late in the legislative process due to associated costs.

Governor Newsom also signed Senator Portantino's [SB 224](#), which requires districts, county offices of education (COEs) and charter

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# Legislative Update: 2021 Legislative Session Wrap-Up

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schools that provide health instruction to students in middle or high school to include instruction in mental health. The bill outlines the various requirements of this instruction, and states that materials used must be appropriate for all races, genders, sexual orientations, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, pupils with disabilities, and English learners. SB 224 also requires that, by January 1, 2024, CDE develop a plan for expanding mental health instruction in California public schools.

**Groundwork laid for shift to universal school meals as early as 2022-23.** Building on legislation over the past few years aimed at removing the stigma around school meals and increasing student access to nutritious meals, [AB 130](#), the K-12 Education Omnibus Trailer Bill, included language providing that, beginning with the 2022-23 school year, all schools will be required to provide two free nutritiously adequate meals to every student who requests one, regardless of whether they are eligible for a free-and-reduced price meal. However, the bill also made this requirement contingent on funding being appropriated in the budget for this purpose, meaning that no school will be required to comply with this requirement until the state provides funding to address the increased cost. Once funded, the state will reimburse an LEA for “all non-reimbursed expenses accrued in providing United States Department of Agriculture reimbursable meals to students.” In order to be eligible for this additional reimbursement, an LEA must participate in the National School Lunch Program and the National School Breakfast Program, but the requirement to provide two free meals still applies to schools that do not participate in either federal meal program.

In an effort to ensure schools are drawing down as much federal school meal funding as possible, and therefore reducing the cost to the state of implementing universal meals, AB 130 also requires any school district or county superintendent of schools that has a high-poverty school in its jurisdiction to apply to operate a universal meal service provision, like Community Eligibility Provision or Provision 2, on or before June 30, 2022. Unlike the requirement to provide two free meals, superintendents must comply with this requirement even if funding is not provided for universal meals in next year’s budget.

**State begins shift to eliminate separate reading instruction assessment for teacher credential candidates.** After years of discussions surrounding the Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA), and the barrier many in the field feel it poses to prospective teachers, [SB 488](#) by Senator Susan Rubio (D-Baldwin Park) requires the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), by July 1, 2025, to ensure that approved preliminary multiple subject and education specialist credential Teacher Performance Assessments assess all candidates’ reading instruction competency. SB 488 is a dramatic shift from current practice, which requires those credential candidates to pass the RICA.

SB 488 is just one of the many changes made this year aimed at eliminating barriers to obtaining a credential by providing alternatives for teaching candidates to meet their credential requirements. AB 130 also included language to allow candidates to use qualifying coursework to demonstrate their basic skills and subject matter competency, in lieu of taking the California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST) and the California Subject Examinations for Teachers (CSET), respectively.

**New criteria for Williams inspections conducted after June 30, 2022.** The culmination of three years of effort and two previously failed legislative attempts, [AB 599](#) by Assembly Member Reginald Jones-Sawyer (D-Los Angeles) will update the criteria used by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) to identify schools for inspection to determine compliance with standards contained in the Williams settlement regarding the sufficiency of instructional materials and school facilities. Current law requires the SPI to identify a list of schools using the Academic Performance Index (API) every three years, despite the fact that the API was last used to identify low-performing schools in 2013 and was repealed in 2018. As a result, the same schools have been subjected to Williams inspections year after year. Under AB 599, schools will now be identified if they meet either of the following criteria:

- All schools identified for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) or additional targeted support and improvement (ATSI) under federal law; or
- All schools where 15% or more of the teachers hold permits or certificates that are lesser certifications than a preliminary or clear California teaching credential.

AB 599 requires the SPI to use 2019-20 data to create an initial 2021-22 fiscal year list of schools to be inspected, which will be updated in 2022-23 and then every three fiscal years after that. However, the old API-based list will still be used for the 2021-22 school year, with the new list of schools to be used by County Superintendents beginning July 1, 2022.

**Free menstrual products to be required at more public schools.** [AB 367](#), a measure that received national attention and was authored by Assembly Member Cristina Garcia (D-Downey), will require all public schools maintaining any combination of grades 6 to 12 to maintain an adequate supply of free menstrual products in all their women’s and all-gender restrooms, and at least one men’s restroom. Named “The Menstrual Equity for All Act of 2021,” AB 367 also requires schools to post a notice regarding the bill’s requirements in every restroom required to stock products. AB 367 builds upon earlier legislation authored by Assembly Member Garcia that applied to Title I eligible schools serving the same grades. The provisions of AB 367 must be complied with on or before the start of the 2022-23 school year.

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# Legislative Update: 2021 Legislative Session Wrap-Up

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**Brown Act flexibilities for teleconference meetings extended through 2023.** In the early days of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Governor Newsom signed Executive Order (EO) N-29-20, which, among other things, allowed public agencies to conduct meetings virtually without having to comply with certain provisions of the Brown Act, including that every teleconference location be accessible to the public. With these flexibilities set to expire on September 30, 2021, [AB 361](#) was signed by the Governor on September 16 and took effect immediately. Authored by Assembly Member Robert Rivas (D-Hollister), the bill, until January 1, 2024, exempts local legislative bodies from certain provisions related to teleconference public meetings under the Brown Act, including the Act's teleconference quorum, meeting notice, and agenda requirements, during states of emergency.

Unlike the Governor's executive order on this subject, AB 361 requires additional procedural steps before a legislative body can hold a meeting using the teleconference exemption. The exemption under AB 361 is also not limited to the COVID-19 Pandemic and may be used during any declared state of emergency, if either of the following conditions are met:

- State or local health officials have imposed or recommended

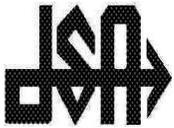
measures to promote social distancing; or

- The legislative body has met and determined by majority vote that meeting in person would present imminent risk to the health or safety of attendees.

Once the body has met the requirements to use the exemption to meet virtually, AB 361 also requires the body to verify every 30 days by majority vote that the exemption from the Brown Act's teleconferencing requirements is still necessary. Additionally, even if a legislative body decides to use the teleconference exemptions, it must still provide timely notice of the meeting and allow the public to access the meeting and directly address the body in real time.

## What's Next?

With the 2021 legislative session over and the bill signing deadline having passed, focus turns to the Governor's January Budget and potential legislative issues for the coming year. Currently on Interim Recess, the Legislature will reconvene in January for the start of the 2022 legislative session. Along with the introduction of new legislation, since 2021 was the first year of a two-year session, 2022 could also see the revival of any bills that did not reach the Governor's desk in 2021.



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# Early Retirement – Important Cost-Saving Tool During These Unprecedented Times

Many school districts across California are still facing budget deficits, cash flow issues, and uncertain or declining enrollment. During unpredictable times like these, school districts have used tools offered by PARS to alleviate some of their fiscal and personnel concerns. Most commonly, districts have explored the use of early retirement incentives, otherwise known as **Supplementary Retirement Plans (SRPs)**.

Districts implement **SRPs** in order to:

- Encourage concerned (and often highly compensated) senior employees to retire early
- Retain skilled employees (who may have the new technology or other skills districts need)
- Restructure/reorganize the workforce
- Achieve budget savings
- Avoid or reduce the need for layoffs

**Why** offer an early retirement incentive program using the PARS SRP

- Design Flexibility - Based on the district's demographics, projected fiscal savings obtained through the PARS Analysis, and overall objectives, the plan can be designed to address specific organizational and budgetary needs.
- Consultative Approach - PARS has over 35 years of experience helping districts design and evaluate the feasibility of SRPs and a reputation of being honest and straightforward in their recommendation of whether a district should move forward with a plan.
- Flexible Funding - Districts have the flexibility to fund the plan for up to five years following separation of service to meet their cash-flow needs.
- Tax Advantages - Both the participant and the district benefit from the tax benefits of offering an incentive through an IRS approved tax-deferred retirement vehicle.

- Payout Options - PARS provides an array of distribution options to participants, ranging from fixed-term (period certain) to lifetime payouts. Some options allow for IRA rollover for further tax deferral.

When properly analyzed, SRPs create a “win-win” for both the district and its employees. Many districts who have used this tool during the pandemic have noted a boost in morale. The following is a possible timeline for completing a SRP by the end of the school year:

- December & January – Contact PARS to begin the analysis.
- January & February – Finalize the analysis, determine plan design and open an enrollment window.
- February & March – Distribute employee informational packets and hold virtual orientation meetings.
- April & May – Close the enrollment window and conduct the “Post Analysis” based on the actual SRP enrollment. The District can elect to move forward with the SRP if it achieves the anticipated cost-savings and objectives.
- June – Participating employees resign and/or retire.

In addition to SRPs, PARS can also assist districts in setting up IRS-approved 115 Trusts to address their growing OPEB (retiree medical) and pension (STRS/PERS) obligations. This tool allows districts to potentially achieve a greater rate of return on their assets due to flexible investment options and serves as a “Rainy Day Fund” for challenging economic times such as these.

If you are interested in learning whether an early retirement incentive can work for your district, PARS is ready to provide you with a complimentary analysis. **There is still time to implement a SRP for the 2021-2022 school year.** Contact us by emailing [info@pars.org](mailto:info@pars.org) or by calling (800) 540-6369 x 127.

By [PARS](#)



# 8 Tips for Successfully Growing Your Independent Study Program

Increased interest in Independent Study (IS) is here to stay. That became evident when learning environments shifted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it's even more true now with California's AB 130 mandating that every CA district offer an Independent Study option while placing new, complex requirements on IS as a whole.

At [School Pathways](#), we've spent 20+ years helping educators master Independent Study from set-up and instruction to compliance. We pulled together learnings from our own experiences and our expert customer base to develop these time-tested tips for managing IS—whether you're building a new program or expanding an existing one.

## 1. Create an Accessible Toolkit with Online Learning Platforms

It's essential to make sure that your students and families have easy access to all courses, materials, grades, and any other touchpoints for engagement. A good way to address this is by assessing your program needs and building a toolkit of online platforms.

Facilitating learning through centralized, online platforms provides streamlined access and helps eliminate missed messages, delays in learning, and overall confusion.

## 2. Outline and Simplify Your Pathway for Family Communications

Having a support system at home to help provide oversight and check-ins is a core aspect of Independent Study. Now, with AB 130, there are additional requirements, including tiered re-engagement communications. The best thing you can do here is to create email templates and [established workflows for re-engagement practices](#).

The more you can streamline communications and organize the process the easier time everyone will have—and the more these communications will serve their purpose of keeping students on track with their learning.

## 3. Establish a Proactive Relationship with Your Auditor

While the guidelines for Independent Study include in-depth specifics, there is still some variation in how certain requirements get applied in practice. This is why one of the biggest pieces of advice for IS is to establish a relationship with your individual auditor—and the sooner, the better.

You're all working toward the same mission of ensuring positive, productive education. So work together, pro-actively. Aligning on expectations will simplify your compliance and auditing process, minimizing stress and allowing you to put more time and focus on other matters.

## 4. Invest in Technology to Streamline Management and Scale with Ease

One big pain point for Independent Study programs facing new growth is how to manage more students and more cumbersome requirements without overburdening staff or negatively impacting students' experiences. Investing in technology to specifically streamline program management and compliance is a key way to address that.

By bringing processes like [master agreement management](#) and [student activity tracking](#) online you can simplify the work required of teachers and administrators and actually enable your program to grow enrollment while reducing the time needed to oversee operations.

### Read More

Check out [SchoolPathways.com](#) to read the [full list of eights tips for growing your IS program](#) and view additional resources for Independent study.

If you'd like help problem solving or you're interested in learning more about our [unique software solution](#)—we would love to chat!

By [School Pathways](#)



# Forecasting Major Issues in 2022



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Since March of last year, the Legislature has been consumed by Pandemic response, which involved distributing record-breaking sums of money to schools, and trying to find the right balance between accountability and leniency in the face of an unprecedented public health event. Now, with COVID in hopefully steady retreat, we anticipate the Legislature's focus will be on dealing with COVID's aftermath, and the havoc it wreaked on students, school staff, and district operations. Below are some of the emerging issues that will dominate the 2022 legislative and budget year.

## Funding Stabilization

Districts, charters, and county offices of education (COEs) across the state are facing enrollment and ADA decreases. For school districts, declining enrollment protections will provide relief in 2021-22, but charter schools and COEs are not entitled to the same declining enrollment protection, which allows districts to claim the greater of current or prior year ADA (in this case, the prior year is effectively 2019-20). It remains to be seen if the students who have left the public school system will return, but in the meantime, it's clear that LEAs will need funding stabilization of some kind for at least the 2022-23 school year, and likely beyond that.

SSDA is actively engaged in conversations with the Legislature and Administration, and will partner with other statewide management associations and im-

pected member districts to work towards a solution. Ideally we'll know in the Governor's January Budget Proposal if the Administration is willing to incorporate this into their spending plan, as districts will need to make important budget and staffing decisions early next year. We have already heard that many prominent members of the State Senate have expressed interest in working on this issue, which bodes well for the level of attention it will receive.

We will be looking to SSDA members to provide feedback on the various solutions being considered. While it's unlikely that the Legislature will adopt an enrollment-based funding model, the door is now open to explore and discuss the shortcomings of the way we fund schools.

## Vaccination Requirements for Students and Staff

Despite the abundant misinformation on the matter, there is not currently a statewide vaccine mandate for students who want to attend school in-person. The Governor, instead, announced a plan to put that requirement in place after full Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval of the COVID-19 vaccine, expected in the first half of 2022. Under the Governor's plan, parents will be able to claim a personal belief exemption (PBE) and continue to send their child to school for in-person instruction. Several members of the Legislature have expressed interest in legislation that would do away with that PBE, leaving only medical exemptions, which would result in an even messier legislative battle than we have seen play out with previous vaccination legislation.

The unknown variable is going to be the state of COVID in mid-2022, when we anticipate the first requirement for students to take effect. It's going to be a

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difficult for the Governor to sell his plan if transmission rates, especially among our young people, remain low. Even harder still will be a legislative play to do away with the PBE. While we expect a bill will be proposed to do just that, we think it's unlikely that bill would garner the support needed to pass in 2022 (absent a dramatic development in COVID related impacts to young people.)

Additional concerns have been voiced about the staffing impacts the student vaccine mandate might have. The Administration has indicated that the testing option for staff will disappear once the student requirement takes effect, and given the ongoing and worsening staff shortages, we have heard from

many small district leaders who are concerned about what those changes will do to their already strapped workforce. Which leads us to our third big issue for next year...

## Tackling the Workforce Shortages

The shortage of staff on school sites, while not new, has been notably amplified during COVID. Increases in retirements, additional duties such as conducting contact tracing, offering Independent Study, and child care issues have all contributed to the shortages schools are facing from bus drivers and custodial staff, to teachers, principals, and superintendents. Though the state has provided billions to recruit, support and retain educators in recent years, a problem this broad

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won't have a single solution. We anticipate a range of proposals, ranging from additional investments to ongoing flexibilities for the teaching workforce.

Policy makers have no doubt heard from their local school leaders about the crippling staff shortages they're experiencing, but don't seem to have retained that information while actually making policy. This year's state budget, for example, included a significant increase to the concentration grant funding amount, but those dollars are tied to staffing increases which some districts will find difficult if not impossible to achieve. Additionally, the expansion of Transitional Kindergarten, expanded learning, and school meals will put even more pressure on a sys-

tem already under duress. Unless something drastic occurs that supplements the field with tens of thousands more qualified employees, these big-name programmatic expansions seem destined to suffer from turbulent takeoffs.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of what's to come, and there will be plenty of other legislative priorities in which SSDA will engage. Moving into the second year of two-year legislative session, authors will also be able to move bills in 2022 that stalled in 2021. SSDA's Legislative Committee will continue to represent the Association on bills of high importance to small districts, and the Capitol Advisors Team is here to help any SSDA members navigate the latest out of Sacramento.



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