

CAMPUS TECHNOLOGY SPECIAL

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SCHOOL INNOVATIONS & ACHIEVEMENT

ATTENTION2ATTENDANCE KEEPS CAMPUS SOLUTIONS IN MIND



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SCHOOL INNOVATIONS & ACHIEVEMENT

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By Ed Goldman

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othing we do here should be unique,” says Jeff Williams, founder, president, and CEO of School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A).

“We’ve designed a product with the end-user in mind—principals and their staff—it’s got plenty of district-level oversight, but our product is all about connecting schools and parents.”

He smiles. “We’re thrilled to be named among this year’s 20 Most Promising Campus Tech Solution Providers. That’s always been our mission,” he says. “We respond to our customers quickly and thoroughly; we innovate like crazy; and we take our work, but not ourselves, seriously.”

“Innovation and improvement—that’s our mantra here,” says Susan Cook, the COO who’s been with the company since its founding in 2003. “Innovation and improvement for our clients is a given and an absolute. We’re spontaneous, we’re always questioning ourselves and we have a lot of fun doing it—that’s our vibe.”

SI&A’s origins, like those of all superheroes, were modest. The company began as the back-office facilitator—eventually for nearly all of California’s school districts and county offices of education. It grew into the creator of the unparalleled software and services solution, Attention2Attendance (A2A), a patented package that’s been deployed in school districts in



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California, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, New Mexico, Oregon—and most definitely, Texas.

“A2A’s creation is somewhat typical of our company in that everyone who works here feels he or she ‘owns’ it,” Williams says. That’s not surprising, given that Williams and Cook designed SI&A’s Sierra foothills headquarters to provide spaces throughout the floorplan where line-staff and developers could meet spontaneously and compare notes when a new notion pops into their heads.

“This isn’t what you’d call a quiet place,” Cook says, laughing. “That vibe I mentioned is always friendly and sometimes hilariously raucous. Most of the employees have been with us for a minimum of ten years.”

How it Works—And Continues to Win Awards

Attention2Attendance is an early-intervention, attendance tracking, and letter/conference management system. A web-based application that integrates with any school information system, A2A allows campus users to easily control interventions (sent in 34 home languages), warehouse documents, pull student-detail reports and run self-serve ad hoc reports straight from the program.

The A2A team delivers data reports semi-annually that identify key absenteeism patterns, highlighting areas with the greatest attendance concerns. Best of all, the A2A package continually adds new features to give districts an even sharper, more pinpointed focus on all types of student absences.

“We’ve patented our system and method for student attendance management and our software is fantastic,” says Lexi Nutting, the company’s executive director of technology. “But our secret sauce is our unique service model. We love and support our campuses. Working with our school partners, we’ve been able to reduce truancy by 27 percent, excused absences by 30 percent and chronic absenteeism by 50 percent.” Voted Top 100 Products by its end-users, A2A’s comprehensive service package has been a Readers’ Choice winner in District Administration Magazine for the past four years.

Nutting, who’s been with the company since its founding in 2003, says A2A has “a service component the size of Texas.” She says, “A2A allows school staff to spend time with their students and parents rather than on mundane administrative work—it’s creating a bridge with communication, getting absent students back in school and back on track.”

A Tale of Two Ericas

Helping to make SI&A’s expansion into Texas with A2A smooth and mutually responsive, the company is relying on two Ericas—Erica Rouse, the firm’s Houston-based regional sales manager, and Erica Peterson, the company’s national education manager who’s been with SI&A for more than 13 years.



Erica Rouse,
Regional Operations Manager

Rouse is working with company representatives throughout the state, covering more than 1,000 school districts, from her base in Houston (which happens to be her hometown). “We made wonderful inroads here before even having a local team on the ground, which we do now,” she says. “We think every district in Texas is a potential partner for us. Being here will help us focus our sales efforts. A2A is such a dynamic package that all it usually needs is exposure—its results do the rest. Have you seen how A2A’s closing the graduation gap?” (See chart on pg-13.)

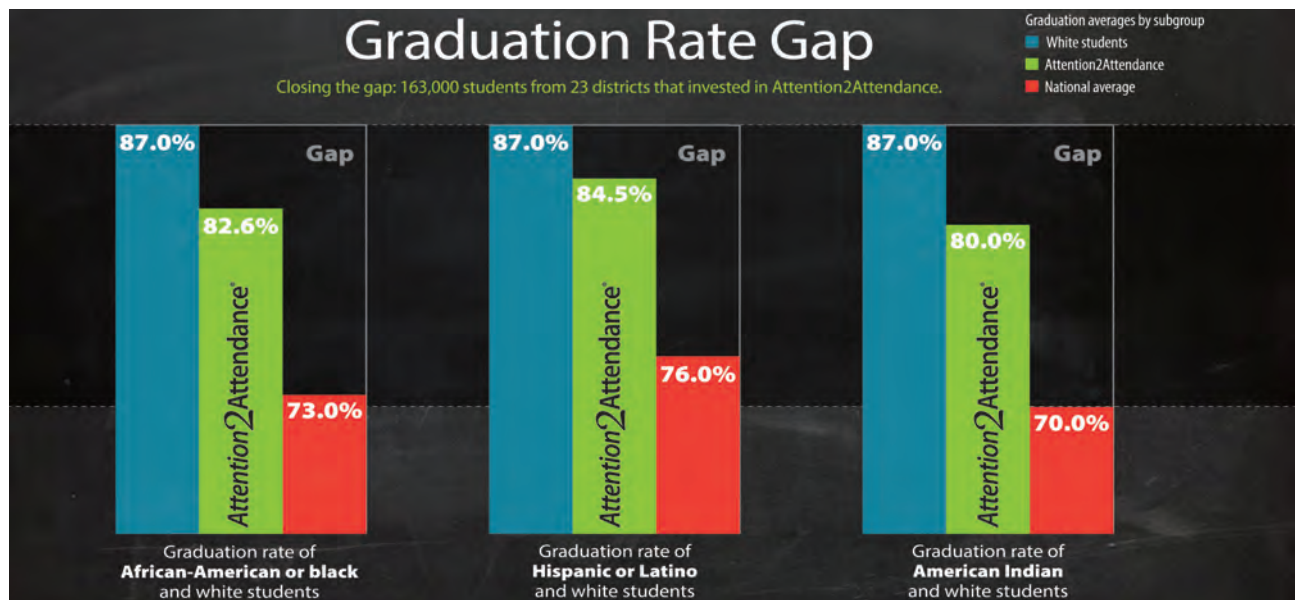


Erica Peterson,
National Education Manager

Peterson, meanwhile, an A2A expert, is “helping to expand and replicate the business model that’s been working for us in other states,” she says. “You might say I’m the one who goes to the new market first and plants the flag.”

Appropriately for someone in the education sector, Peterson says she believes in doing her homework. “My job is equal parts reconnaissance and matchmaking,” she says.

“I research every district we talk to long before we do,” she continues, “to determine where its specific challenges may lie and what the climate is there—not the weather, but the media climate, the stakeholders climate, who’s telling the district’s story, how accurate it is and how effective the messaging is, which will become the next level of our services package after A2A begins.”



Comparative Graduation Rate Chart

Two From Texas

The rave reviews are pouring in.

Dr. Howell Wright, superintendent of the Huntsville Independent School District just north of Houston for two-and-a-half years, began deploying A2A last September. “Attention2Attendance really helps us stay on top of problems in our schools, and even anticipate them,” says Dr. Wright. He says the product-and-services package “really helped us administratively. It gave us a tool we’d never had before, a way to more comprehensively review the data and, even more so, identify patterns.”

“As a school superintendent, you’re always trying to drill down and see not only if there’s a problem with a student’s attendance,” he says, “you also want—and need, really—to fully understand the underlying cause or causes.”

In another Texas town, 30 miles east of Dallas: “When I started my job here, the district’s attendance record was already excellent,” says Kara Carter, truancy specialist for the Rockwall Independent School District. “After a few years using A2A, it went all the way to amazing.”

“We started using A2A in the 2013-2014 school year,” she recalls, “and back then our attendance was already at 95.8 percent, which we all thought was just great. Then, in 2015-2016 we jumped to 96.6 percent, which we loved.

“But then, in 2016-2017, we went all the way up to 96.8 percent. You don’t get this close to 97 percent attendance unless something’s working great—our teachers, administrators, caring parents, motivated students and A2A. What a combination!”

The Vibe at SI&A

There’s an electric, eclectic, eccentric energy happening at the office campus of School Innovations & Achievement in El Dorado Hills, California. The software developers are high-fiving the QA and data analyst teams in celebration of their most recent campus technology solution award.

“I wanted a fast-paced company that felt like it was a daily family reunion,” says founder Williams. “People walk in and out of Cook’s office all day long. It’s almost like she’s everyone’s favorite big sister, the one who helps keep you on track, but makes you feel like you’re the most important person in the room.”

Cook laughs at that. “Well, we certainly have an openness here,” she says. “Of all the places I’ve worked, this has got to be the most invigorating.” Those places are formidable. A respected industry expert in line management operations, Cook served as the general manager for AT&T Business Systems and as vice president and general manager at ARC, Inc. Immediately prior to joining SI&A, Cook owned a successful consulting business that provided CEO coaching, executive and management training, and organizational effectiveness and design.

When Williams founded SI&A, he knew Cook shared not only his corporate values but also his sense of mischief. They crack each other up repeatedly during interviews for this article.

Not that Williams isn’t a serious guy. He brought a career’s worth of business and accounting acumen, strategic thinking and background in education to SI&A. As a business accountant, he specialized in rapidly growing small businesses, working with some of the profession’s most prestigious firms, including Ernst & Young and Shultze, Wallace & O’Neil.

Williams and Cook think one of the company’s differentiators is that it actively encourages employees to be the innovators. “What we do for a living is all about children and parents and educators, and providing a mutual pathway to success,” he says. “We know our employees care about these things when we see the campus-focused enhancements they bring to the table. So we embrace their ideas and watch as our in-house developers improve A2A once again.”

“If we have crazy priorities, so be it,” he adds. “But they seem to work for our company and, most importantly, for our clients. Under those circumstances, I’ll take ‘crazy’ anytime.” **CR**

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Campus Technology Special

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20 Most Promising Campus Tech Solution Providers - 2017

In the face of mounting costs and progressively tech-savvy students on campuses, education now is on an expeditious pace of transformation. As artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning gain traction, schools and colleges can harness these technologies to provide round-the-clock support to all user groups within their campuses. Powering AI and machine learning in the higher education landscape is natural language processing (NLP). Several campuses have already started integrating NLP into their e-learning applications to upgrade the process of education. By the same token, gamification is increasingly adopted by organizations as an engaging and interactive mechanism for learning and teaching.

Meanwhile, new forms of human-computer interaction like augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) are jazzing up classroom environments while fostering education among young learners. A relevant example is

the introduction of Chatbots to help students with campus-related information. From an operations standpoint, many of these campuses rely on IoT for intelligent mechanisms such as building alarms, parking space monitoring systems, lighting controls, etc.

Institutions striving to climb higher in the education value chain look for the best solution providers. To help CIOs navigate this flourishing landscape, a distinguished panel of selectors, consisting of CEOs, CIOs, VCs, industry analysts, and CIOReview's editorial board has shortlisted the top campus technology solution providers that are at the forefront meeting the urgent needs of the industry. The listing offers a look into how these solutions are put to use, thereby enabling you to gain a deep insight as to how they will optimize businesses.

We present to you CIOReview's 20 Most Promising Campus Tech Solution Providers 2017.

School Innovations & Achievement

recognized by CIOReview magazine as



An annual listing of 20 companies that are at the forefront of providing campus technology solutions and impacting the marketplace

Company:

School Innovations & Achievement

Description:

Develops innovative software and programs that can be up and running in no time to improve student attendance

Key Person:

Jeff Williams
CEO

Website:

sia-us.com

School Innovations & Achievement

recognized by **CIOReview** *magazine as*

20 MOST PROMISING

CAMPUS TECH

SOLUTION PROVIDERS - 2017



*An annual listing of 20 companies that are at the forefront of providing
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