



D21 President's Report

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Last article I wrote about youth bridge being a ray of hope. It is wonderful and exhilarating to see, but the reality is that the numbers, while growing, are still small.

This month will be different. The trigger for this article is that the ACBL Advisory Board asked the District Presidents for feedback. I want to cover much of my reply to the Advisory Board. In developing the reply, I took a chunk of a recent D21 board meeting to solicit opinions from the rest of the board.

There are two things that heavily influenced the reply:

1. Unit 497 (Berkeley-El Cerrito-Richmond) died, and its members have merged with Unit 502 (East Bay). We have other units that have become quite small, so this kind of unit merger may happen again.
2. Between 10 April 2025 and 7 October 2026, District 21 membership fell from 6606 to 5968 – a loss of almost 10% in less than 18 months.

The first thing the Advisory Board requested was our top priorities. Board member “Ant” (Anthony Toto) immediately proposed:

1. Membership Growth.
2. Education.
3. Retention.

A great reply – I used it!

Then they asked for District Challenges:

1. Falling membership – mostly through death or disability.
2. Recruiting new members.
3. Retaining new members, especially newly recruited members.

The last section of the reply was “Local Vibrancy & ACBL Support,” with two sections:

1. “Top Local Priority.” Education! This answer is interesting because it is effectively covering two of our top priorities. The American Bridge Teachers’ Association (ABTA) offers training courses and certification on a highly effective method of teaching, so our education priority is covered. The second priority that gets covered is through the Boost program from ACBL. The Boost program offers experienced, ABTA-certified instructors free ads on Facebook. For people in the Baby Boom generation, Facebook is the number 1 social media platform, so these ads are an incredibly effective recruiting tool. The problem that we have is that many D21 units do not have working ABTA-certified teachers, so they aren’t able to get the larger pool of recruits available to ABTA-certified teachers. At least one unit doesn’t have a working teacher at all, which is a major problem for the unit.
2. “How ACBL Can Help.” We need an ACBL-wide intervention program for units that do not have working teaching programs. Districts cannot develop the expertise on how to get units to train teachers when they will execute that expertise only a few times. We need an expert at the national level who implements this many times, so they have the



critical knowledge to persuade units to recruit multiple teachers. (Why multiple teachers? In Unit 505, we found that simply training someone with the proper technique does not automatically make a great bridge teacher. There is an element of native talent to teach that is also required. But the combination of those two is fantastic.)

A second way the ACBL can help is through adding specific training for teachers and directors that “zero tolerance” is expected. Retention of newer players is a serious problem for us. All too often a newer player encounters a more experienced player who is either unpleasant or pushes on a new player, taking advantage of their inexperience. Sadly, newer players do not know that the director is, or at least should be, their friend and will protect them. Training teachers to teach civility at the table and directors to enforce it is essential.

Our rapidly declining membership is a dire warning, so “desperate times call for desperate measures.”

A final note – one of our D21 Tournament Directors, Jo Levy, passed away recently. Our deepest sympathy to her husband, Rob Johnson, her family, and friends.

Jim Coke
ACBL District 21 President