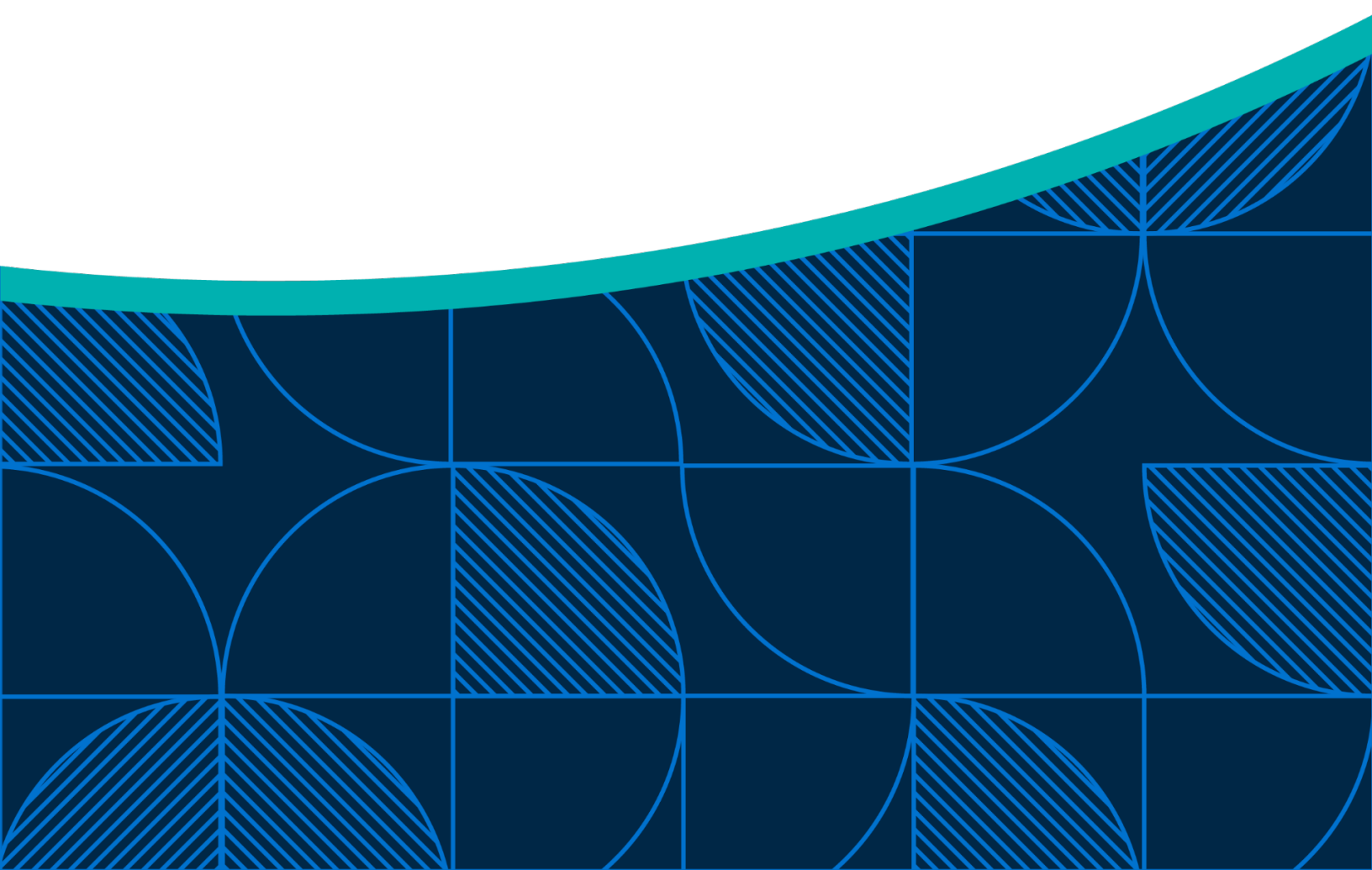




2024 EDITION

# The Voice of the Superintendent

Eight Themes From Responses to  
EAB's Annual Survey of District Leaders



# The District Leadership Forum

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## Executive Summary

**The Voice of the Superintendent Survey was launched in 2022**, at the request of superintendents seeking insight into the experiences and perspectives of peers beyond their region. They sought these insights because there is no job quite like the superintendency. The opportunity to impact lives and communities is perhaps unparalleled. But so are the demands of the role.

**For the past two years, many have considered leaving the superintendency**, as leading through the pandemic and divisive politics drove the strain of district leadership to unprecedented heights. This year, more superintendents appear to be planning to stay and fewer are “seeing how this year goes.” Many continue to report high levels of exhaustion and burnout, but the number reporting high levels of job satisfaction (83%) appears to indicate that, for most, the rewards outweigh the stress.

**With greater stability at the top, districts can focus on accelerating learning.** As we enter the last year of access to ESSER III funds, our results indicate that many are already seeing progress: around half of superintendents report a decrease in the number of students below grade level in ELA (English Language Arts) and Math over the past 12 months. But the other half report either no improvement or increases in the number of students below grade level. Those leading urban districts are most likely to report a greater number of students falling behind.

**However, efforts to accelerate learning continue to be hindered by a rise in nonacademic challenges.** Districts are still struggling with chronic absenteeism, with 63% reporting either no improvement or an increase in rates of chronic absence over the past 12 months (after rates more than doubled nationally from 2019 to 2022). Similarly, 57% report further increases in disruptive behavior over the past year, with another 20% reporting no improvement. Both of these challenges also connect to the continued rise in student mental health concerns, with 76% of districts still reporting an increase in the number of students needing mental health care.

**The greatest barrier to making progress on any of these issues is staffing.** District leaders echoed the results of our 2023 survey, citing recruiting and hiring qualified teachers as the most urgent issue for their district in 2024. Fifty-two percent report an increase in the number of vacancies for instructional staff over the past 12 months, and 8 out of 10 say they will need to hire more teachers from non-traditional backgrounds to meet staffing needs over the next five years.

**The challenges above are critical, but not new. The hidden story in this year’s results lies in the crucial issues that superintendents may not have time to address.**

Superintendents near-unanimously agree that A.I. will transform the way we educate students within five years, and that schools have a responsibility to teach students how to use A.I. effectively and responsibly. But just 3 out of 10 feel equipped to lead their district’s A.I. strategy and only 4% rate determining A.I. practices and policies as a very urgent issue for their district over the next year.

**We invite readers to explore these themes further over the following pages**, then use the conclusion of this report to drive discussions about the actions that will help superintendents to navigate the complex issues ahead.

# About This Survey

## Methodology

The 2024 Voice of the Superintendent Survey was distributed online from November 27, 2023 to January 10, 2024.

148 superintendents from 39 states completed the survey<sup>1</sup>, which was designed to provide superintendents with data about their current experiences, perspectives, and beliefs, and compare their experiences with peers across the nation.

Only school superintendents participated in the survey.

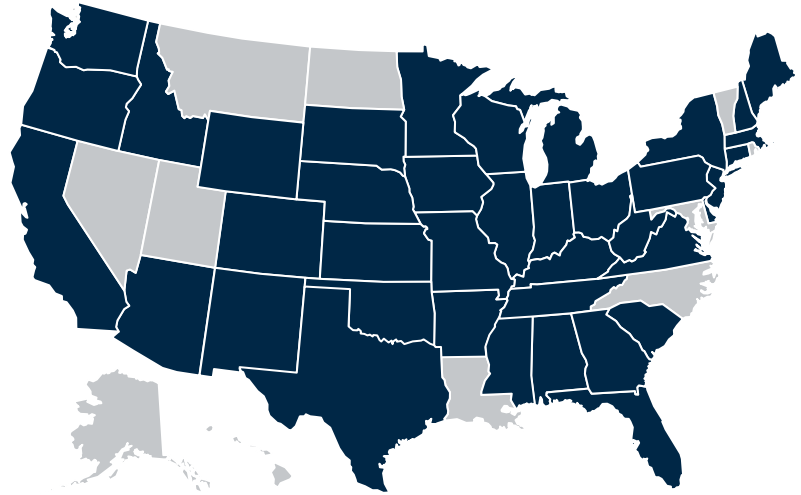
The survey instrument gathered information about respondents’:

- Personal experience and outlook
- Perspectives on current district and nationwide challenges
- Opinions on important policy decisions and the future of their organizations
- Pressing questions districts leaders have for their peers
- Advice from current superintendents to their peers

1) States are reflective of survey respondents who provided their district name  
 2) Free or Reduced Priced Lunch hereafter referred to as FRPL  
 3) FRPL does not add up to 100% due to rounding

## Profile of Respondents

■ Locations of Survey Respondents<sup>1</sup>  
 (n=148)



### Gender Identity

She/her	He/him	Other	Prefer not to answer
32%	57%	4%	7%

### Years of Experience as a Superintendent

<1 year	1-5 years	6-10 years	11+ years
5%	40%	30%	25%

### District Size

<1,000	1,000-4,999	5,000-19,999	20,000+
5%	62%	25%	8%

### Community Type

Urban	Suburban	Rural
11%	52%	37%

### Students Qualifying for Free/Reduced Priced Lunch<sup>2</sup> (FRPL)<sup>3</sup>

0-24%	25-49%	50-74%	75-100%
22%	33%	27%	17%



# **Eight Themes for 2024**

From Responses to EAB's Voice of the Superintendent Survey

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2024 EDITION

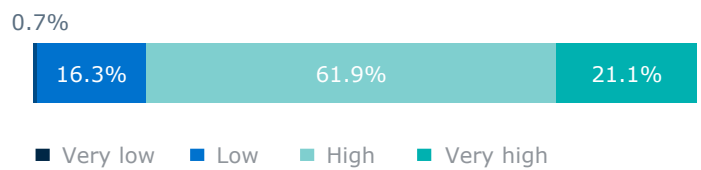
# Superintendents Feel Fulfilled, But Often Exhausted

## Each year, we begin our survey with a “pulse check” on the state of the superintendency.

Because the length of a superintendent’s tenure has been shown to correlate with improvements in student achievement within a district, we pay special attention to levels of job satisfaction and levels of exhaustion or burnout. This year, the good news is that most respondents (83%) indicate high levels of job satisfaction. However, overall job satisfaction appears to decline in correlation with length of tenure. This is likely driven by the sheer strain of the role: As shown at the bottom of the page, despite the pandemic being (mostly) in the rearview mirror, rates of exhaustion remain high and show little sign of improvement.

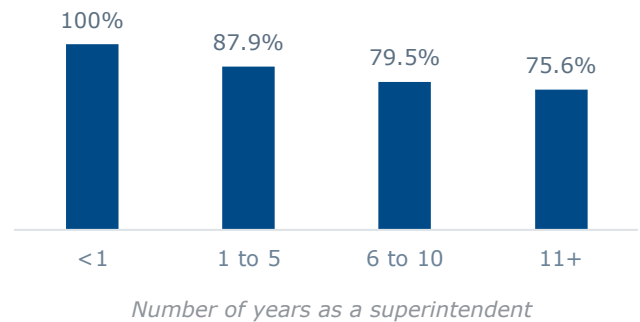
### 83% of district leaders report high levels of job satisfaction today

How would you rate each of the following personal elements today? (2023-24):  
Overall job satisfaction



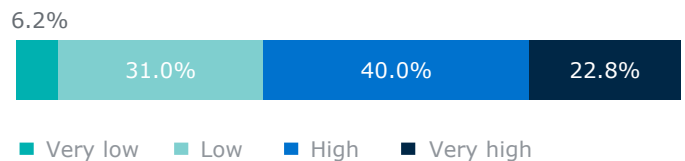
### But likelihood of satisfaction in the role decreases with length of tenure

This chart shows the total percentage of respondents who rated their “overall job satisfaction” as either “high” or “very high,” disaggregated by the number of years they have been a superintendent

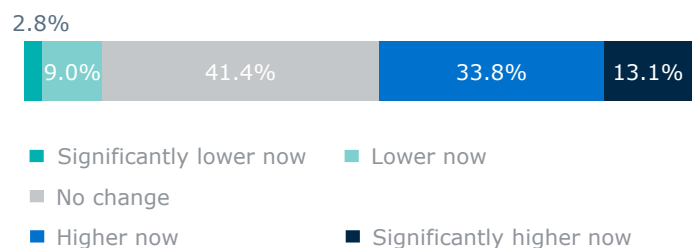


### And rates of exhaustion or burnout remain high, with few reporting improvements

How would you rate each of the following personal elements today? (2023-24):  
Level of exhaustion/burnout



How have the following factors changed in comparison with last year? (2022-23):  
Level of exhaustion/burnout

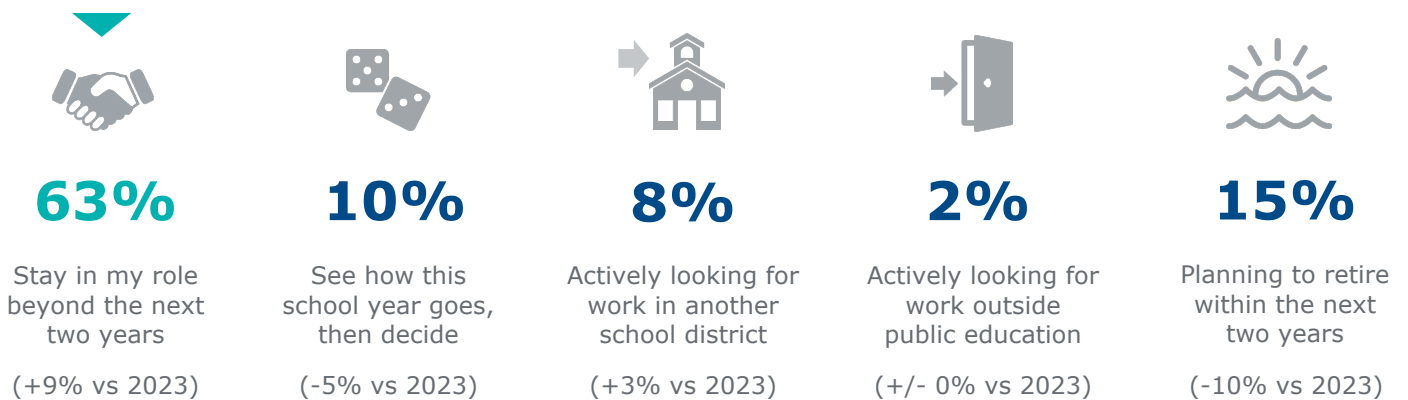


# Thankfully, Fewer Are Heading for the Exit

**For the past two years, districts nationwide have been on red alert for mass turnover among superintendents.** Many simply had nothing left in the tank after the demands of leading schools through the COVID-19 crisis and navigating the constant tightrope of political tensions. This year, 63% of respondents say they plan to stay in their district beyond the next two years, a 9% improvement over our sample group from 2023. This improvement is hugely important for districts trying to build stability and realize progress on multi-year initiatives. What makes this incredibly demanding role “worth it” for today’s district leaders? You can find a summary of their responses at the bottom of the page.

## This year, more superintendents are planning to stay (vs 2023)

Which of the following best describes your plans for the next two years (n=148\*)?



\* 2% of respondents declined to answer the question

## And many chose to share what they find most satisfying about the role



### The Impact

- "Witnessing the successes and accomplishments of our students."
- "Passing a bond to build new facilities that replace 70-year-old buildings in our district."
- "Helping to turn around a situation that was so bad folks were giving up on it."



### The Relationships

- "Engaging with students, staff, and families reminds me of our WHY each day."
- "Helping teachers be successful in and outside of the classroom."
- "Interacting with students and parents. Personal connections and relationship building are the best parts of this job."



### The Challenge

- "The ever-changing issues that come up are always challenging. It's never boring. I love it!"
- "Working directly with students to discuss their concerns and problem solve together."
- "Being a leader in difficult times...willing to lead when the silent majority isn't heard."



## Wise Words for New Superintendents

Question: What's the best advice you can give to new superintendents this year?

### 1 Slow Down and Breathe

- "Be patient, be flexible, and have a sense of humor."
- "Take a breath and avoid the social media drama."
- "Try to stay out of the political fray."
- "Make sure you take care of yourself."
- "Take your time to get to know the history of the system you are joining."

### 2 Lead By Listening

- "Listen, listen, listen."
- "Make yourself available and visible to your community."
- "Take time to listen and find the voice of your students, staff, and parents/community members."
- "Be visible at events, listen, and be supportive."
- "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

### 3 Invest in Relationships

- "Take the time to get to know your community, families, and staff."
- "Make sure you understand your board/board members and their motivation."
- "Build friendships before you need them."
- "Establish trust and open lines of communication."
- "Build relationships at every stakeholder level."

### 4 Remember Your "Why"

- "Identify your vision and communicate it loudly and often."
- "Keep the main thing the main thing - KIDS COME FIRST!"
- "Stay true to your core values and principles."
- "Learn to stay focused on the big picture - student growth and achievement."

### 5 Build Your Support System

- "Build a network of peers that you can lean on for assistance, advice, a listening ear, etc."
- "Hire a cabinet that you trust and a cabinet that will push you."
- "Make a strategic and long-term investment in getting to know your board members."
- "Seek out a mentor and have regular meetings."
- "Make a friend! The paperwork and compliance reports can bury you and pull you from what's important."

### 6 Expect the Unexpected

- "Stay open to continual change and be willing to meet the needs of the school community."
- "Even when you think you know a lot, you know very little until you spend some time in the District. Be patient."
- "Buckle up. The role is not what we learned in school. Be prepared to be wrong. Own it. Support your staff."

**New to the superintendency?**  
Find your support network at [eab.com/k12](https://eab.com/k12)

# Mixed Reports on Efforts to Accelerate Learning

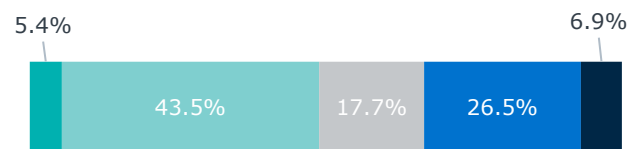
**With obligation of ESSER funds due to end in September 2024, huge questions still loom around the efficacy of efforts to accelerate learning** and help students catch up from missed instruction during the pandemic. According to superintendents who participated in our survey, results are mixed. The good news is that approximately half of respondents report a decrease in the number of students below grade level in English and Math over the past 12 months. On the other hand, around 18% report “no change” in both categories, 1 out of 3 reports increases in the number of students below grade level in Math, and more than 1 out of 4 cite the same for students in ELA (English Language Arts). Those leading urban districts are most likely to report more students falling behind in both subjects.

## Approximately half of respondents report overall progress in ELA and Math

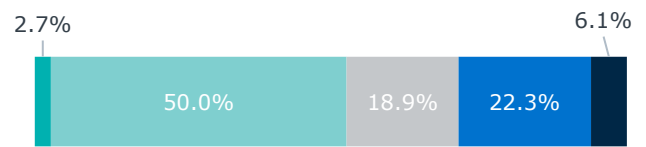
Question: How have the following issues changed over the past 12 months in your district?



Number of students below grade level in Math



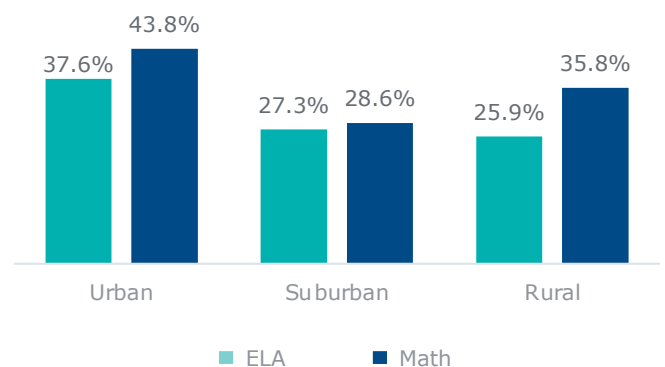
Number of students below grade level in ELA



■ Decreased a lot    ■ No change    ■ Increased a little  
■ Decreased a little    ■ Increased a lot

## But 1 out of every 3 report an increase in students below grade level in ELA or Math, with those leading urban districts most likely to report students falling further behind

This chart shows the percentage of respondents reporting an increase in the number of students below grade level in ELA and/or Math, disaggregated by locale (Urban, Suburban, Rural)



**What do leaders need to know to implement the Science of Reading?**

Access essential knowledge and systems for lasting change at [eab.com/reading-instruction](https://eab.com/reading-instruction)

# No Relief From Disruptive Behavior and Absenteeism

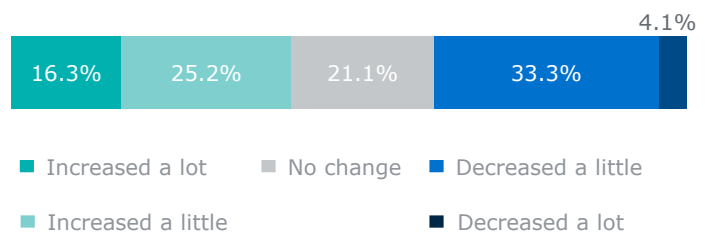
**Despite what seems to be consistent increases year after year, superintendents again report in increase in nonacademic challenges.** Chronic absenteeism, perhaps the hottest topic of 2023, has either not improved or increased in 63% of districts over the past 12 months. Similarly, 57% report further increases in disruptive behavior, and another 20% report no improvement. Both of these issues are often described as being more prevalent in schools serving economically disadvantaged students, but our survey responses indicate that increases are being seen in districts across the board, regardless of the percentage of students qualifying for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch. Both of these challenges rank in the top 5 most urgent issues for superintendents this year (see page 16).

## After chronic absence doubled from 2019 to 2022, most see no improvement and 4 out of every 10 superintendents say absences are still on the rise

Question: How have each of the following issues changed over the past 12 months in your district? (Fall 2023 vs Fall 2022)



Rates of chronic absenteeism

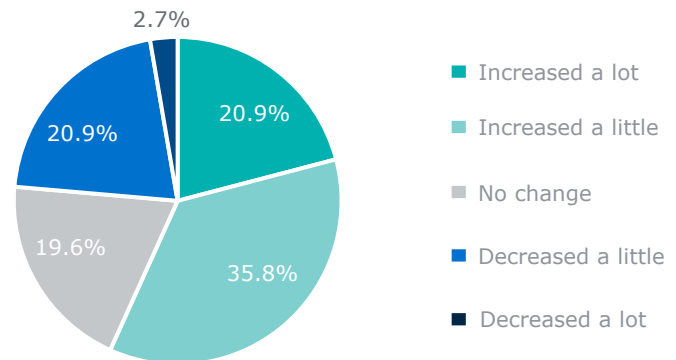


## Nearly 6 in 10 also report increases in disruptive student behavior over the past 12 months

Question: How have each of the following issues changed over the past 12 months in your district? (Fall 2023 vs Fall 2022)

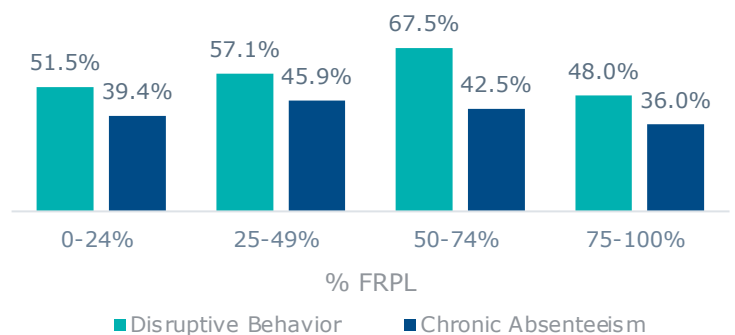


Rates of disruptive behavior



## Notably, responses show that these increases are prevalent across districts, regardless of the share of students from low-income households

This chart shows the percentage of respondents who reported increases in chronic absenteeism and/or disruptive behavior, disaggregated by the share of students qualifying for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

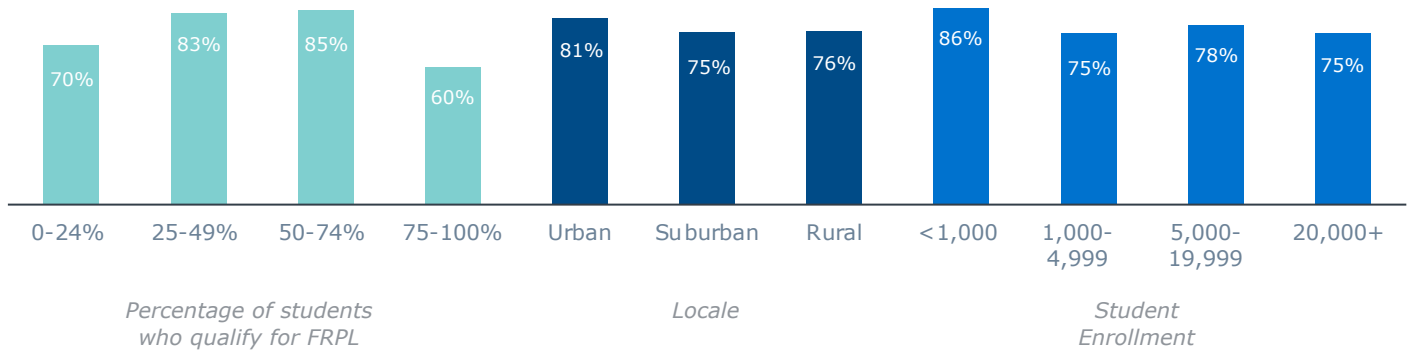


# Mental Health Challenges Somehow Still on the Rise

**Across K-12 and Higher Education, we've been writing about the rise in student mental health concerns for more than a decade.** Unfortunately, our nationwide battle with mental health crises shows no sign of slowing down, with 76% percent of superintendents reporting an increase in the number of their students needing mental health care over the past 12 months. A third of respondents say that number has increased significantly. This year, one source is perceived to carry much of the blame: Seventy-seven percent of superintendents say they either "agree" or "strongly agree" that social media is the primary driver of mental health challenges in their districts today.

## The majority of superintendents continue to report an increase in the number of students needing mental health care, regardless of household income levels, locale, or size of enrollment

This chart shows the percentage of superintendents who report an increase in number of students needing mental health care over the past 12 months, disaggregated by share of students who qualify for FRPL, locale, and number of enrolled students.

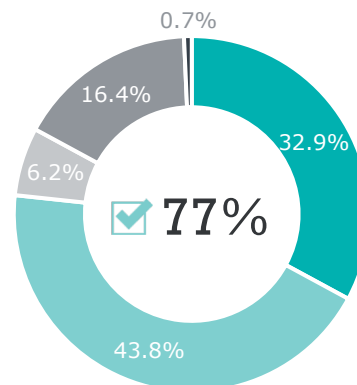


## What's to blame? Seventy-seven percent of respondents point to social media as the greatest contributor to student mental health challenges in their district

Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statement?:



*Social media is the biggest driver of student mental health challenges in my district.*



- Strongly agree
- Strongly disagree
- No opinion
- Disagree
- Agree

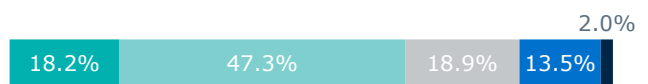
# Staffing Shortages Remain Problem #1

In our 2023 survey, respondents reported that staffing challenges were the biggest barrier to making progress on every challenge, from accelerating learning to supporting students’ mental health. This year’s responses indicate that staffing challenges continue to be the most urgent issue for district leaders today (see page 16), and few anticipate near-term resolution. Nearly 80% of superintendents say that hiring more teachers from non-traditional backgrounds will be necessary to meet district needs over the next five years.

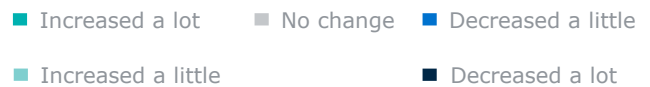
## More than half of districts report further increase in staff vacancies this year

Question: How have each of the following issues changed over the past 12 months in your district? (Fall 2023 vs Fall 2022):

Number of vacancies, non-instructional staff

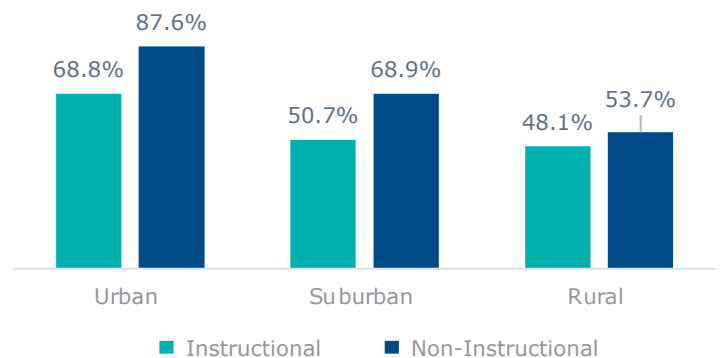


Number of vacancies, instructional staff



## Leaders of urban districts are most likely to report shortfalls both inside and outside the classroom

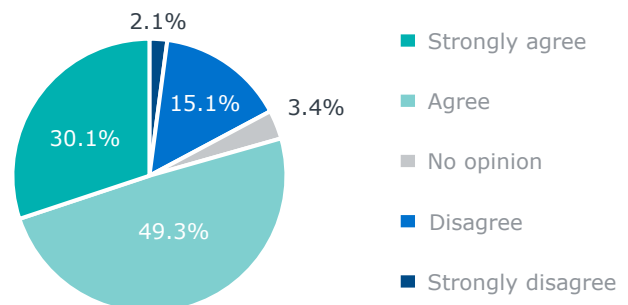
This chart shows the percentage of respondents that reported an increase in vacancies among instructional and/or non-instructional positions, disaggregated by locale (Urban, Suburban, Rural)



## Most say districts will need to increase hiring from non-traditional backgrounds to meet school needs

Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statement?:

Hiring and training more teachers from non-traditional backgrounds will be necessary to meet staffing needs over the next five years.

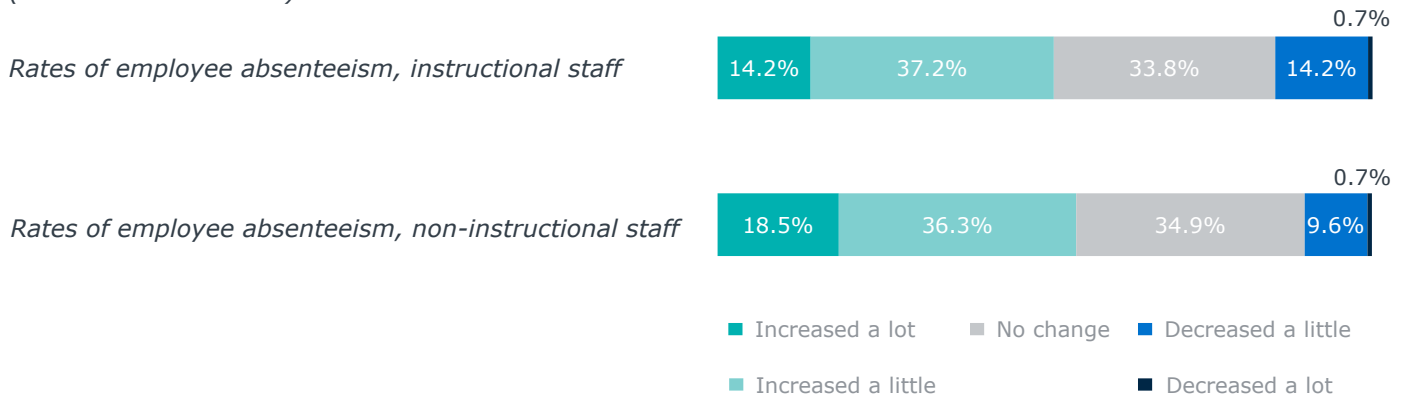


# Open Positions Compounded by Rise in Staff Absences

**This year’s responses highlight the reality that districts are not only grappling with rising vacancies, but also growing rates of employee absenteeism.** Because employee absences place additional strain on school systems and staff, further increasing risk of burnout and turnover, this may be the most critical staffing issue to address in 2024. The solution starts with identifying and addressing employee concerns about working conditions in schools. Those doubling down on addressing teachers’ concerns can also establish an advantage in attracting the next generation of talent to the classroom, setting themselves apart as a great place to work. To learn how innovative districts are implementing a proven system for staying ahead of employee concerns, explore EAB’s resources on raising morale (the link can be found at the bottom of this page).

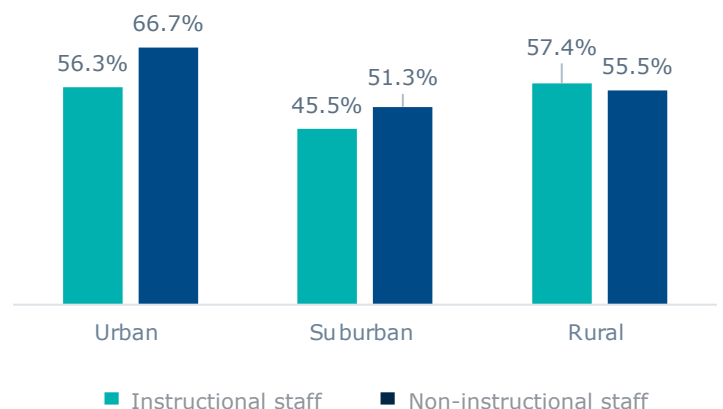
**Already challenged by vacancies, more than 50% of districts report an increase in employee absenteeism among both instructional and non-instructional staff**

*Question: How have each of the following issues changed over the past 12 months in your district? (Fall 2023 vs Fall 2022):*



**Overall, the rise in absences appears most prevalent among non-instructional staff, but rural districts are slightly more likely to report an increase in teachers missing time in the classroom**

This chart shows the percentage of respondents reporting an increase in absenteeism among instructional and/or non-instructional staff, disaggregated by locale (Urban, Suburban, Rural)

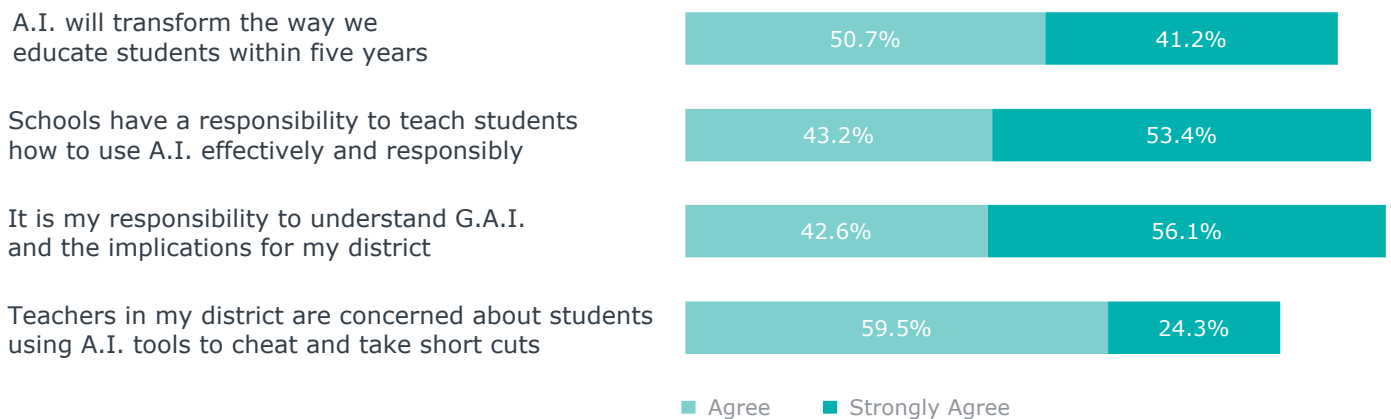


**The best way to combat employee absenteeism is to raise morale.**  
Learn more at [eab.com/morale-collaborative](https://eab.com/morale-collaborative)

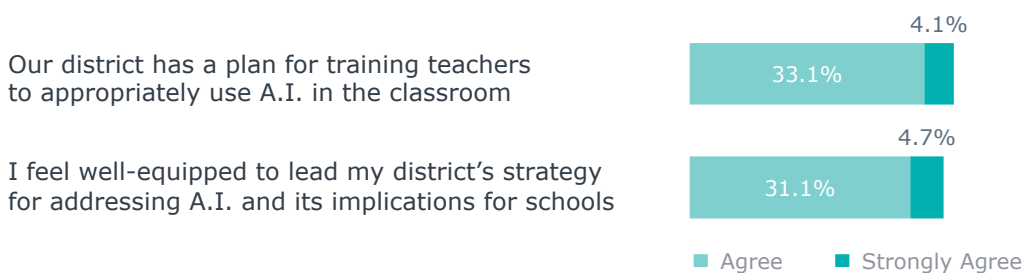
# Seeing the Importance, But Not Urgency, of A.I.

**Generative A.I. has the potential to help districts address many of the urgent challenges listed in this report.** For example, the 2022 Merrimack College Teacher Survey found that teachers spend a median of 15 hours per week on tasks that could be easily automated by A.I., opening the door for schools to make life in the classroom both more sustainable and more appealing. In addition, from cyberattacks to misinformation, A.I. increases the risk of disruptions to the school environment. As one superintendent shared during a recent interview, “Either I can choose to spend time addressing A.I., or A.I. will make that choice for me.” However, our survey results show that not all superintendents are on the same page. Almost all see the significance of A.I. for schools, but few recognize the urgency with which they need to act. Fewer than 1 out of every 20 superintendents in our survey indicated that defining uses and policies for A.I. is a “very urgent” issue for their district this year.

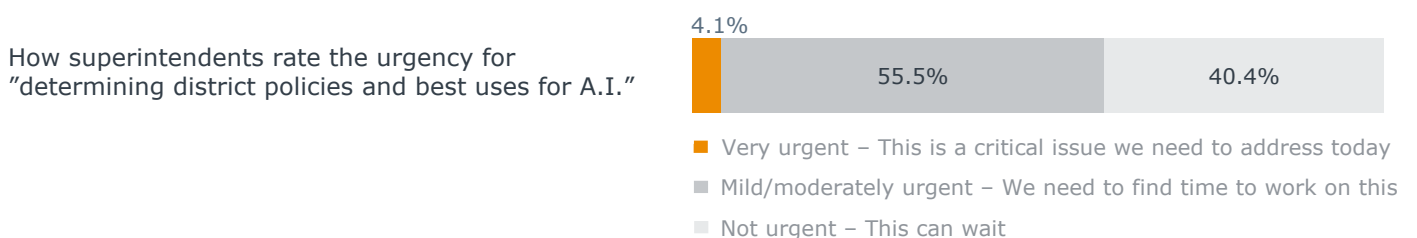
## Superintendents near-unanimously recognize the importance and likely impact of A.I.



## And few feel prepared to lead their school system into the A.I.-enabled age




## But fewer than 1 out of every 20 respondents see addressing A.I. as very urgent in 2024

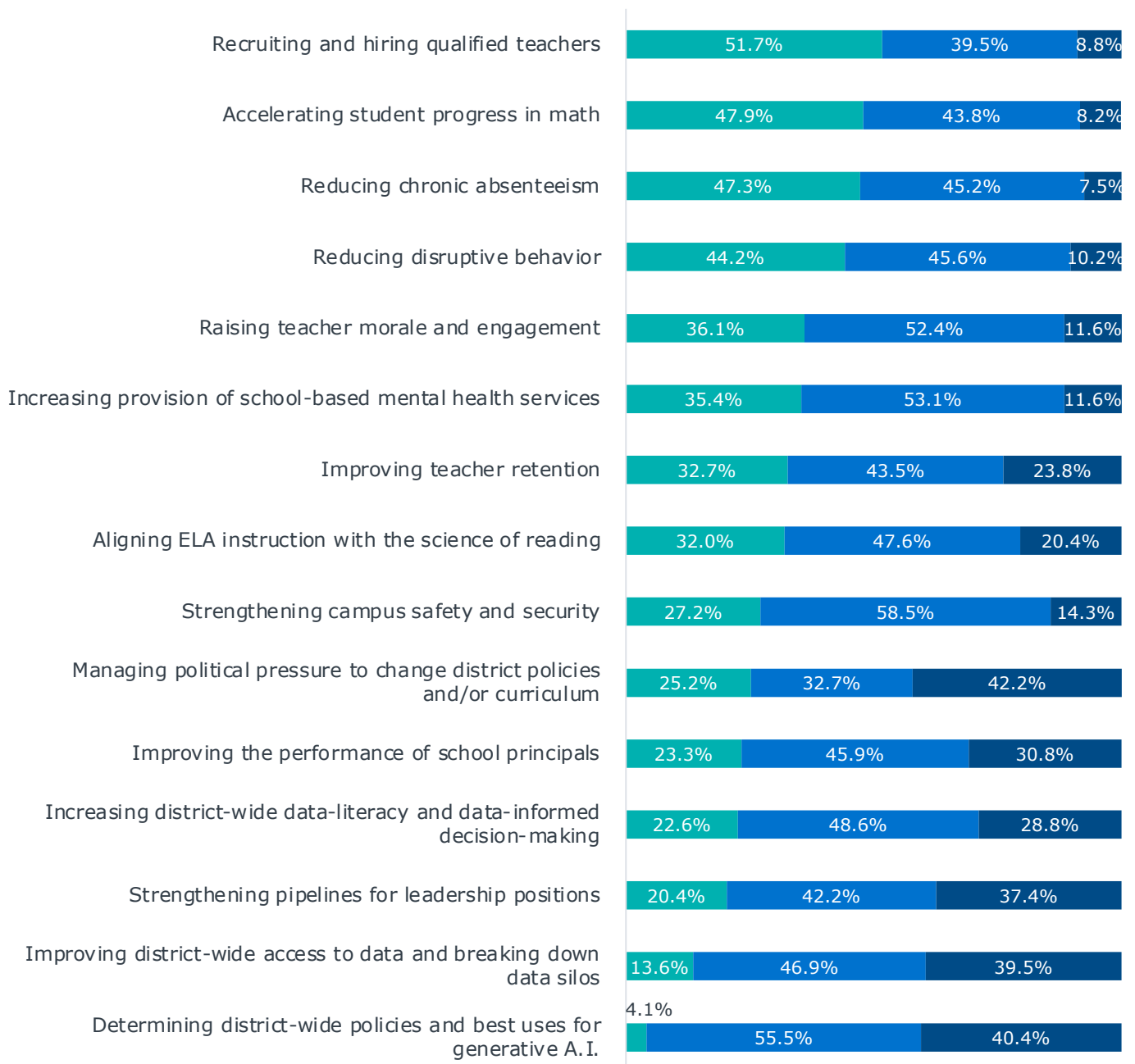


# The Urgency List

How Superintendents Rate the Urgency of Key Issues for their District in 2024



- Very urgent – this is a critical issue our district needs to address today
- Mild/moderately urgent – we need to find time to work on this
- Not urgent – this can wait





## Conclusion

**The list of complex, systemic challenges facing districts continues to grow.** The issues at the top of the urgency list are understandable: staffing shortages, students struggling with Math, absenteeism, and disruptive behavior are acute issues that educators deal with every day. However, our research consistently finds that the districts successfully making progress on these challenges first focused on the issues further down the list: deep investment in leadership development, systematic use of data to drive decisions, and continuous pursuit of ways to be more effective or efficient. In other words, they can solve the urgent because they've obsessed over the "important."

### **So how can time-strapped district leadership teams do both?**

EAB offers three central pillars of advice to superintendents in 2024:

- 1. Focus on building capacity: your greatest opportunity for impact.** Superintendents can't solve any of the urgent challenges that districts face alone, but they are uniquely positioned to build a leadership team and organization with the capacity to identify solutions and implement change. We invite superintendents to take the Self-Assessment for a High-Performance District on page 18 to reflect on where to invest in "leveling up" this year.
- 2. Don't let your team tackle urgent issues alone.** Because most districts are working to address the same challenges, clear playbooks for success are emerging on multiple fronts. Where clear solutions don't yet exist, individual districts have often solved smaller pieces of each problem. In both cases, joining forces with other districts to share notes and solve problems together can accelerate progress for everyone. To support this approach, EAB is facilitating a series of "success pathways" and collaboratives (see page 19): programs that guide cohorts of districts through the implementation of best practices (for issues such as combatting absenteeism, raising reading scores, and reducing teacher turnover through raising morale), while enabling shared learning along the way.
- 3. Resist the temptation to "sleep on" A.I.** Because clear best practices for using A.I. in education don't yet exist, many superintendents are opting to wait for more guidance before introducing A.I. initiatives in their schools. But these tools already offer game-changing opportunities to free up your most needed assets: people and time. Districts can start by organizing an A.I. task force with two goals: 1. Define how A.I. can be used to make work more effective or more efficient across the district; 2. Explore how A.I. could aid progress toward the district's strategic goals. EAB's latest research, being released in April 2024 (see page 19), will provide concrete guidance on the steps that districts can take to get ahead with A.I. and harness the early potential of these revolutionary technologies in their schools.

### **Thank you to all who participated in the 2024 Voice of the Superintendent Survey.**

For the past two years, results from this survey have been used to drive crucial discussions among district leaders, policymakers, and support agencies about how to support the work of public school leaders nationwide. We are confident that your contributions to this year's survey will do the same.

To learn more about EAB's District Leadership Forum and the work we do to support hundreds of superintendents across the country, please visit [eab.com/k12](https://eab.com/k12)

**Instructions**

Assess yourself across each category to identify where your district is strongest, and where your biggest opportunities lie.

**Scoring Key**

0 = No  
 1 = Sometimes  
 2 = Yes (systematically)

0	1	2
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<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Score / 6		
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Score / 6		
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Score / 6		

# The Eight Hallmarks of a High-Performance District

## Is Your Team Ready to Tackle Today's Complex Challenges?

### Shared Vision and Goals

- Our leadership team has a written, unified definition of success for the district
- We have a consistent process for prioritizing issues and initiatives
- Our school board is aligned with and supportive of our leadership team's priorities

### Role and Ownership Clarity

- Our leadership team's job descriptions are clearly written and well-defined
- We define the role that each individual will play in decisions and initiatives
- We have established clear parameters for when to say no to requests

### Hardwired Accountability

- We consistently assign success measures to tasks and initiatives
- We consistently assign fidelity measures to tasks and initiatives
- We provide transparent reporting on progress made toward strategic objectives

### Balance of Districtwide Standards and Autonomy

- We define non-negotiables for each initiative
- When setting non-negotiables, we communicate the rationale
- We clarify and communicate where and when individuals have autonomy

### Data-Informed Decisions and Actions

- We have clear policies for the use and management of data
- Our teams define which data will be used to inform each decision
- We identify and address data silos to ensure district-wide access to information

### Outsized Investment in Leadership Capacity

- We have clarified the skills needed to be successful in each leadership role
- We provide all leaders with training on the skills defined for their role
- We have established shared norms and practices to enable effective collaboration

### Continuous Focus on Employee Engagement

- We have a systematic process for identifying and addressing issues affecting staff morale
- We engage teachers in shaping implementation strategies for new initiatives
- When asking employees to take on new tasks, we find ways to reduce other work

### Culture of Innovation and Shared Learning

- We reach out to other districts to learn how they are tackling current challenges
- We have processes for identifying innovations being developed within the district
- We regularly share out examples of innovation occurring within the district

# Helping Districts Get Further, Faster in 2024

New District Leadership Forum Research and Pathways to Guide District Strategy



## New Research

### Building a High-Performance District

- ✓ Explore how the best districts make faster progress on their strategic priorities
- ✓ Explore case studies in organizational excellence from innovative school districts and define next steps for your team



## New Research

### Generative AI and the Future of Learning

- ✓ Demystify generative AI and understand challenges and opportunities
- ✓ Learn how to proactively guide teachers and students on how use this technology

## Leadership Summits

### 2024 Executive Roundtables for District Superintendents

These exclusive, two-day summits provide superintendents with protected time to discuss critical issues, the latest research, and immediate implications for district strategy.

2024 Executive Roundtable Dates:

- April 30-May 1, **Washington, DC**
- June 5-6, **Chicago, IL**
- June 25-26, **Dallas, TX**
- July 23-24, **Washington, DC**

## New 2024 Partner Success Pathways and Collaboratives

EAB's Success Pathways and Collaboratives guide district leaders and principals through the implementation of best practices on critical issues. Participants benefit from expert advising, "just-add-water" resources, and a community of peers to collaborate with through every step of the process.



### Hardwiring Effective Parent Communications to Improve Attendance

- Build a best-in-class campaign to prevent absenteeism
- Establish a sustainable process for responding to absences and bringing students back to school

Launching April 2024



### Establishing a System for Strategic School Leadership

- Establish a proven system of strategic improvement cycles to accelerate progress on district priorities
- Learn how to protect your principals' time for strategic work

Launching Summer 2024



### Achieving Alignment with the Science of Reading

- Discover the system successful districts have used to achieve full alignment of instruction with reading science
- Establish a process that every principal can follow to lead instructional improvement in their school

Launching Summer 2024

Ready to learn more?  
Schedule time with our team



[eab.com/k12](https://eab.com/k12)



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## ABOUT EAB

At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with thousands of institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across five major areas: enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at [eab.com](https://eab.com).