



SURVEY BRIEF

# 2023 Voice of the Superintendent

Key Survey Findings and Crucial Conversations for the Year Ahead



# District Leadership Forum

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# Introduction

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**Superintendents of schools arguably have more influence over the shape of public education in the United States than any other group.** Their ideas shape initiatives, perspectives inform policies, and they have the final decision over investments that will shape outcomes for individuals and communities.

**In short—their thoughts matter.**

**EAB’s annual Voice of the Superintendent Survey aims to gather and elevate the experiences, needs, and perspectives of district leaders across the nation.** We hope that superintendents will use these findings to compare their own perspectives with those of their peers and as a platform for informed discussion with their leadership team about current challenges. We also hope that those striving to support schools and districts will use this as a tool for determining which questions to ask and how they can help.

**This year, a few clear themes emerged.**

**First, the majority of superintendents are in a better place than they were a year ago.** Most respondents agreed that they feel more successful in their role today than they did a year ago and are optimistic about the year ahead. However, those who are neither new (<3 years of experience) nor veteran (10+ years of experience) are much more likely to have one eye on the exit, and one in four district executives still plan to retire within the next two to three years.

**Those who stay will have a lot of challenges to address.** In aggregate, superintendents report practically every issue (from academic readiness to communicating with parents) to be in a worse state now than prior to the pandemic (2019). But for many, nonacademic challenges of disruptive behavior and mental health concerns have been the most significant sources of change.

**No matter the challenge, district leaders consistently cite one greatest barrier to success: staffing.** Low morale and burnout continue to plague our schools, preventing teachers from doing their best work today, causing them to question the sustainability of the profession, and causing those who might otherwise have pursued a career in the classroom to choose another path.

**At EAB, we see these results as a call to action** in our mission to help district leaders identify and implement proven solutions to current, critical challenges. But they are also just a starting point for the conversations that need to be had. If you are a superintendent and your experience differs from our findings or you want to talk more about the challenges identified in this brief, please don’t hesitate to reach out. We want to bring your thoughts to the conversation.

Best wishes for a successful 2023,  
Ben Court  
Senior Director, EAB Research

# About This Survey

## Methodology

The 2023 Voice of the Superintendent Survey was distributed online from November 2, 2022, to December 1, 2022.

One hundred and ninety-eight superintendents from across 37 states completed the survey,<sup>1</sup> which was designed to provide current superintendents with data about the experiences, needs, and perspectives of their peers.

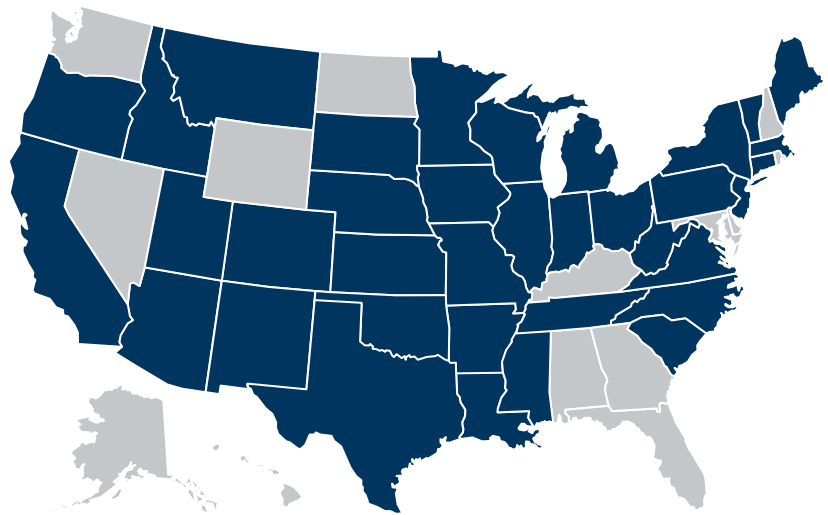
Only school superintendents participated in the survey.

The survey instrument assessed respondents':

- Perceptions of current success and optimism about the future
- Levels of concern about student academic and non-academic issues
- Levels of concern about ability to hire qualified candidates, retention of key employee groups, and staff morale
- Perceptions of community confidence through parent behaviors and concern about the influence of external groups
- Perspectives on key questions about the future of student success, school staffing, and community engagement
- Recommendations for new superintendents

## Profile of Respondents

■ Locations of Survey Respondents<sup>1</sup>  
(n=198)



### Gender Identity

She/her	He/him	Self-identify	Prefer not to answer
29%	60%	2%	9%

### Years of Experience as a Superintendent

<3 years	3–5 years	6–10 years	10+ years
29%	21%	25%	25%

### District Size

<1,000	1,000–4,999	5,000–19,999	20,000+
21%	45%	30%	4%

### Community Type

Urban	Suburban	Rural
9%	47%	44%

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

0–24%	25–49%	50–74%	75–100%
22%	33%	30%	15%

1) States are reflective of survey respondents who provided their district name.

2) Free/Reduced Priced Lunch hereafter referred to as FRPL.





# Key Themes for 2023

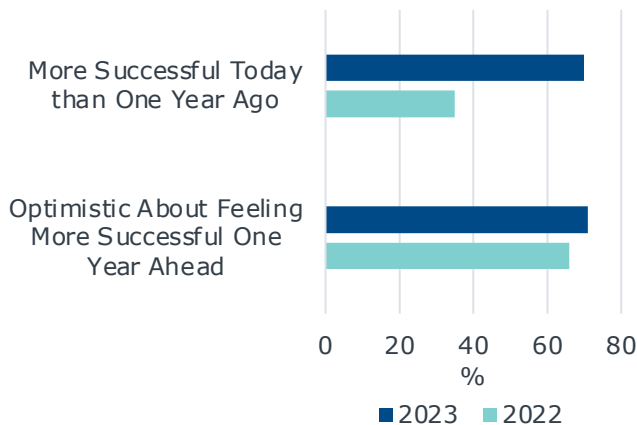
Survey Sections:

- State of the Superintendency
- Student Success
- Staffing and Morale
- Community Confidence

## The Superintendency is Moving in the Right Direction

### Most Superintendents Feel More Successful Today than Last Year (and Remain Optimistic About the Year Ahead)

Percentage of superintendents who report feeling:



We start with good news! After three indescribably challenging years, the collective experience of superintendents appears to be moving in a positive direction.

- 70% of superintendents report feeling more successful in their role today than one year ago (compared with 35% in January 2022).
- 71% percent of superintendents believe they will feel even more successful in their role a year from today.

### Almost All Agree That the Majority of Key Stakeholders Trust Their Decisions

Percentage of superintendents who who say that most members of each group trust their recommendations and decisions:

Employees

**91%**

Parent(s)/Caregiver(s)

**90%**

School Board Members

**93%**

Community Partners

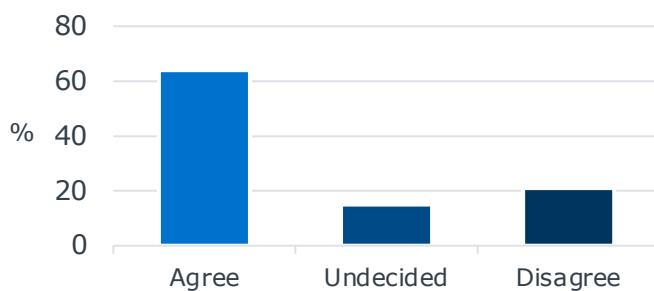
**90%**

This optimism may be attributed, in part, to feeling trusted by most individuals in each key stakeholder group.

- At least 90% of superintendents either agree or strongly agree that most of their board members, employees, school parents, and community partners trust their recommendations and decisions.

### And Most Report Feeling Energized by Their Daily Work

Responses to the statement, "I feel energized by my daily work."  
(% of all respondents)



For this year's survey, several superintendents requested the inclusion of an interesting question: "Do superintendents feel energized by their daily work?"

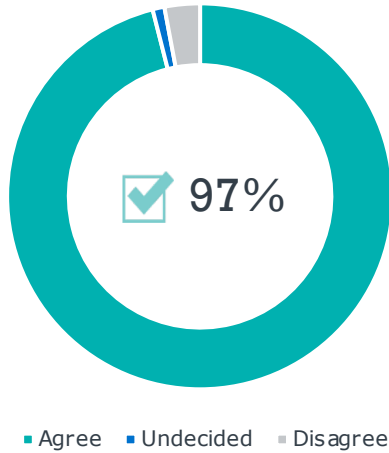
- Overall, 64% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed.
- However, just 9% of superintendents strongly agree with this statement.



# Priorities Are Clear, but Some Say Funding Still Insufficient

## Superintendents Are Clear-Headed on What Matters Most in Their Districts in 2023

Responses to the statement, "I can name the three most important objectives for my district this year."

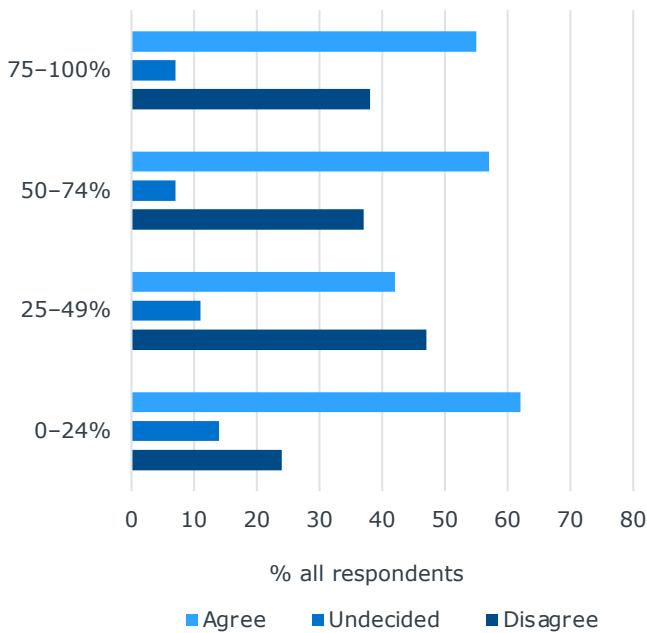


Despite the myriad challenges present in K-12 schools today, almost all district leaders say they know which issues need the most urgent attention in their schools.

- 97% of superintendents say that they can name the three most important objectives for their districts this year.
- Not more than 5% of superintendents in any demographic category disagreed with this statement, showing remarkable uniformity across the subgroups we analyzed.

## But Divided on Whether They Have Sufficient Funding to Achieve Their Strategic Goals

Responses to the statement, "Our district has sufficient funding to achieve those three objectives."



While respondents consistently understand what matters most for their districts, we see no such consensus on whether districts have the funds needed to achieve those objectives.

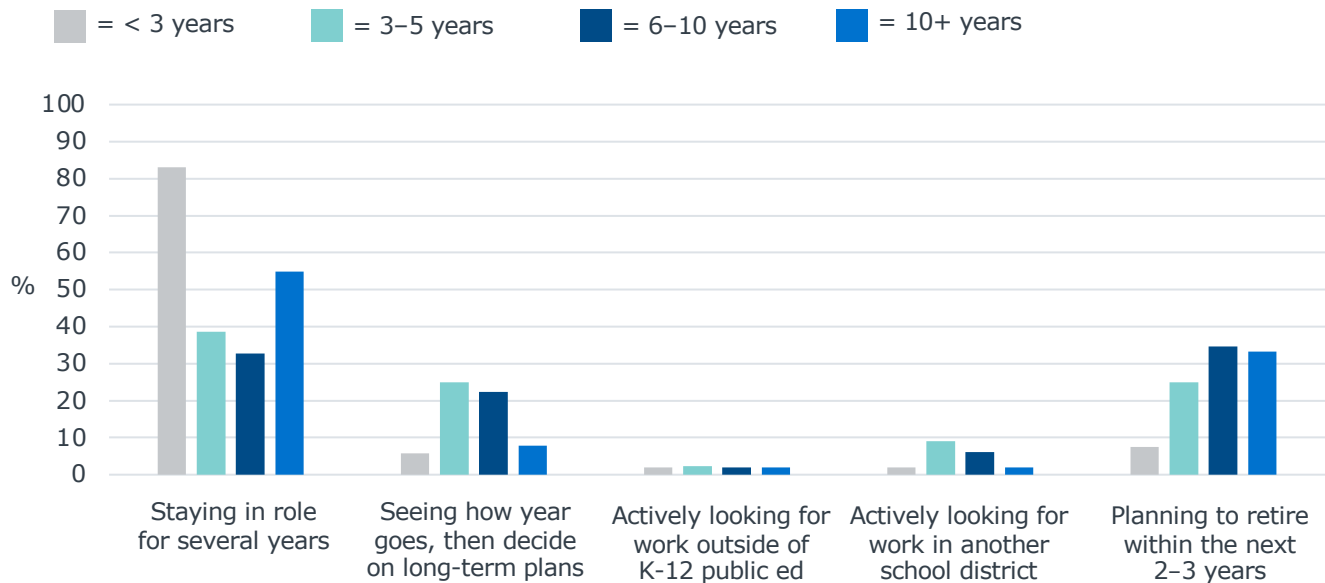
- Just 53% of superintendents believe they have the funding necessary to achieve the three most important objectives for their district this year.
- Those who disagree are more likely to serve urban districts than suburban or rural school systems.
- Perhaps predictably, likelihood to disagree was also greatest in districts where more than 75% of students qualify for FRPL.<sup>1</sup>
- Interestingly, those with between 25 and 49% FRPL<sup>1</sup> were the group most likely to disagree. This may reflect that these districts often provide a significant number of resource-intensive services without the benefit of either high local tax dollars or substantial federal funding.

1) Free/Reduced Priced Lunch.

## A Make-or-Break Year for Mid-Tenure District Leaders

### Risk of Turnover Remains High, Especially for Those with 3–10 Years in Current Role

Responses to the question, “Which of the following best describes your long-term plans?” by length of time in current role

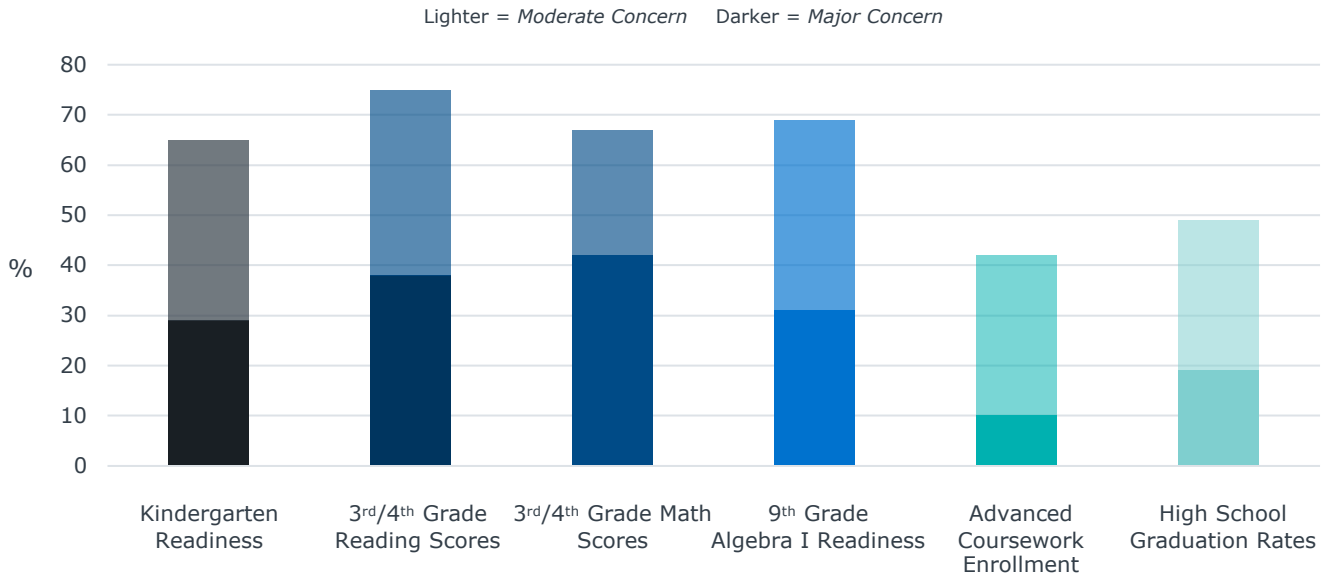


One of last year’s biggest stories was the number of superintendents considering leaving district leadership. Over the following months, we saw many follow through on those intentions, so we now have a lot of new district executives in seat. This year, we see a combination of good news and continued cause for concern.

- The good news is that a majority (83%) of those with fewer than three years their current role plan to stay in seat for several years.
- Those who have spent 10 or more years leading their current district are the second most likely group to be planning to stay (55%).
- Unfortunately, risk of turnover is significantly higher among “middle tenure” superintendents. We are defining that group as those with 3–5 or 6–10 years of experience leading their current districts.
- “Middle tenure” superintendents are significantly more likely than those at either end of the experience curve to be “seeing how this year goes” before deciding on long-term plans.
- In addition, 60% of those with 3–5 or 6–10 years of in seat are planning to retire within 2 to 3 years.
- Overall, that leaves 46% of superintendents at risk of voluntarily leaving their districts within the next two to three years. This is a 6 percentage-point reduction from last year.

# Foundational Skills Top the List of Academic Concerns

Percentage of Superintendents Expressing Moderate or Major Concern About Issues Related to Student Academic Achievement



“Missed learning” has been well documented over the past two years. So, as we expected, the majority of superintendents cited moderate or major concern about current early literacy and math scores in their schools. However, major concern about key academic indicators at the secondary level was consistently lower, raising questions about whether more focus needs to be placed on the consequences of missed learning from ninth through twelfth grades.

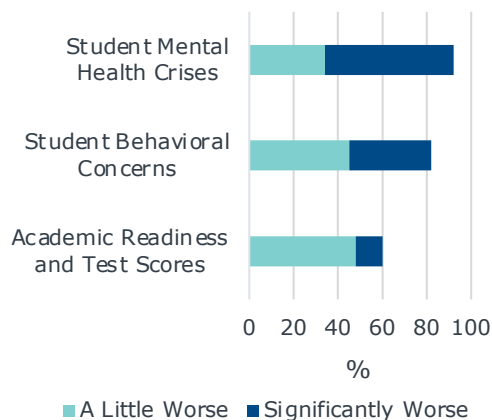
- 75% of superintendents cite third- and fourth-grade reading scores as a moderate or major concern in their schools, with 40% selecting “major concern” for this issue.
- Responses regarding third- and fourth-grade math assessment scores are nearly identical to those about early literacy, with 76% of total respondents citing this issue as a moderate or major concern.
- Likelihood of third- or fourth-grade reading and math scores being a major concern was nearly 6x greater for districts with at least 75% FRPL<sup>1</sup> than in districts with fewer than 25% FRPL<sup>1</sup> (Reading = 69% versus 12%, Math = 76% versus 17%).
- Rates of concern about the percentage of students ready for Algebra I initially look similar to overall concern about early literacy and math, with 70% of all respondents citing this as a moderate or major concern.
- But superintendents are far less likely to see Algebra I readiness as a major concern, with just 32% of respondents selecting that option (rising to 48% for those with 75%+ FRPL.<sup>1</sup>)
- Superintendents expressed the least concern about the percentage of students taking advanced coursework. Fifty-nine percent of respondents said this was, at most, a mild concern, but one in five said this issue was no concern at all.
- Overall, roughly half of superintendents (49%) report moderate or major concern about the percentage of students on track for graduation. But again, 38% of superintendents with 75%+ students receiving FRPL<sup>1</sup> regard this as a major concern, compared with just 2% of those with 24% FRPL<sup>1</sup> or less.

1) Free/Reduced Priced Lunch.

# Greatest Changes Seen in Behavior and Mental Health

## Nonacademic Challenges Are More Likely to Be Perceived as Significantly Worse Today than Prior to the Pandemic

Percentage of superintendents who say the following categories are worse now than in 2019

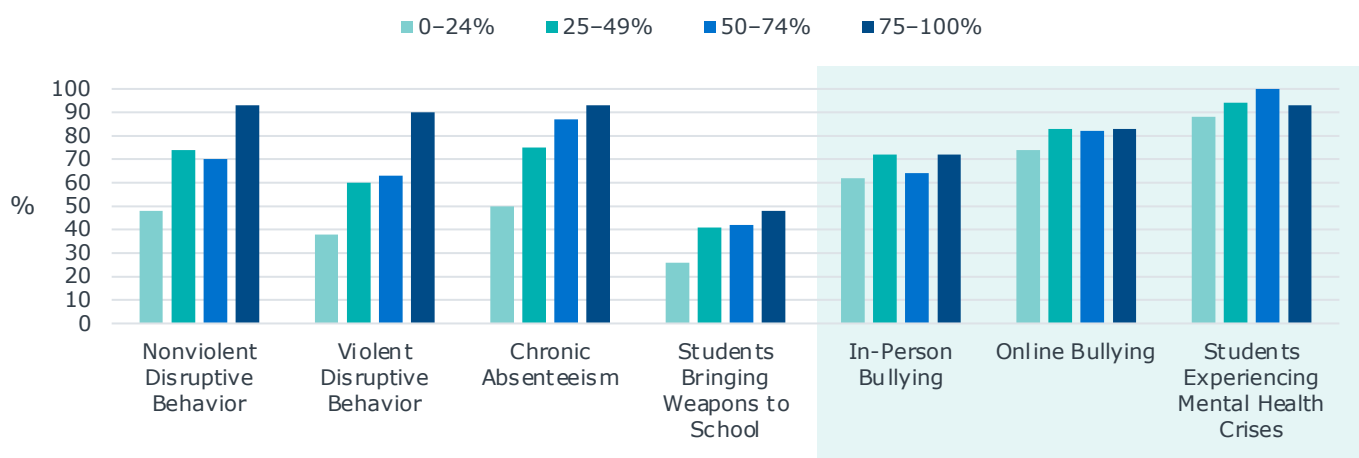


Overall, superintendents rated every challenge as “worse now” than in 2019 (pre-pandemic). But while a little more than half (58%) say that academic readiness and test scores are worse now than in 2019, just 12% report academic issues to be “significantly worse.” Responses on nonacademic issues tell a different story.

- 81% of superintendents say behavioral concerns are significantly worse now than in 2019, with 35% selecting “significantly worse.”
- Those with 75%+ FRPL<sup>1</sup> are the least likely to say this issue is worse now than prior to the pandemic (65%).
- Mental health crises are even more likely to be “worse now” than in 2019 (92% of all respondents), with 57% saying this issue is “significantly worse” now in their schools.
- Of all the issues we asked superintendents about through this survey, “student mental health crises” was the most likely to be “significantly worse now” than in 2019.

## Levels of Concern Typically Correlate with Share of Low-Income Families but Not for Bullying or Mental Health.

Percentage of Superintendents Reporting Moderate or Major Concern About a Range of Nonacademic Challenges, by Share of Students Receiving Free or Reduced-Price Lunch



Two trends were impossible to ignore when analyzing this survey.

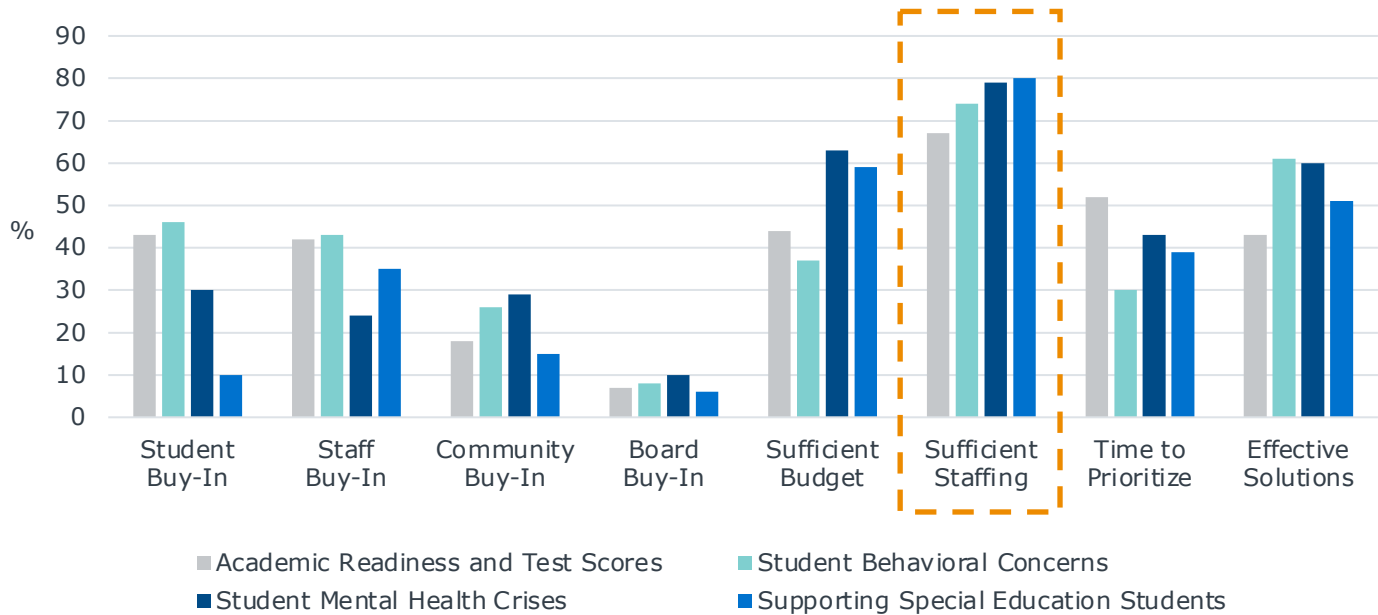
- Rates of concern about both behavioral and academic challenges increase in districts serving a high percentage of students receiving Free or Reduced-Price Lunch. This won’t surprise many readers, as these districts often serve disadvantaged students who have been disproportionately affected by the disruptions of the past two years and now need higher levels of support.
- However, there are two issues where levels of concern largely hold steady across all FRPL<sup>1</sup> quartiles: Bullying (both in person and online) and mental health crises.

1) Free/Reduced Priced Lunch.

# To Solve Today's Challenges, Districts Need...Talent

## Superintendents Say Staffing Challenges Are Their Biggest Barrier to Success

*"For each listed category of challenges, which resources are you lacking to help fully address the challenge? Select all that apply:"*



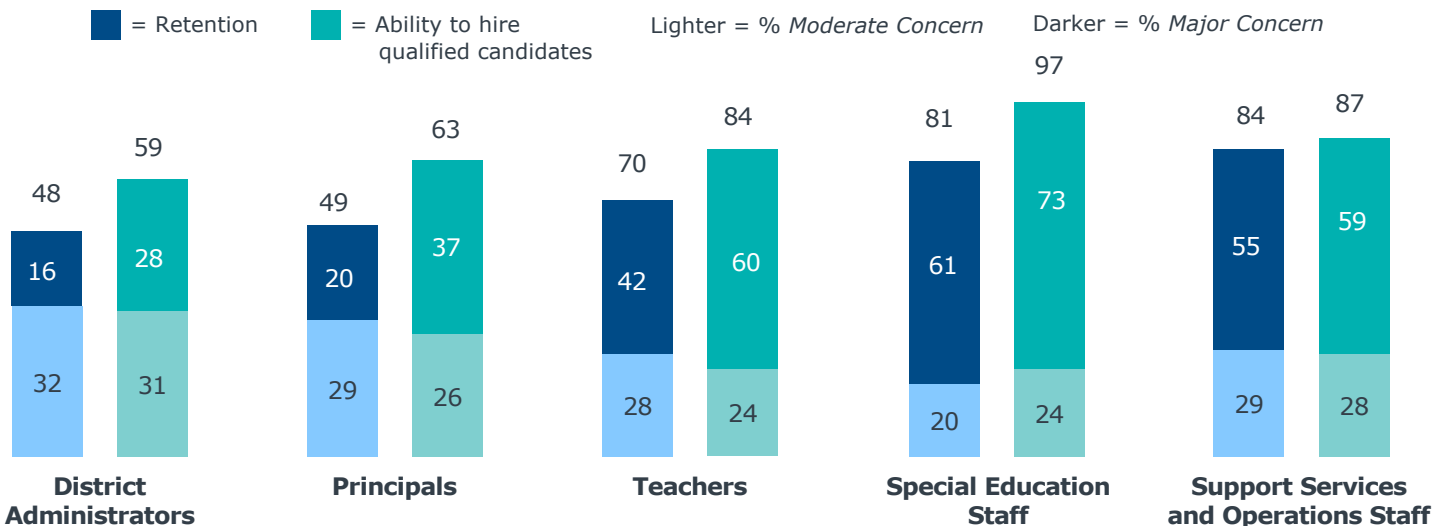
With such a wide range of critical and urgent challenges needing to be addressed, this survey also aimed to understand what superintendents believe will limit their ability to make progress. One answer rang out loud and clear: insufficient staffing.

- Sufficient staffing was the resource superintendents said they were lacking to fully address academic challenges (67%), student behavioral concerns (74%), and student mental health crises (79%).
- Sufficient staffing was also the most consistently cited need for fully supporting students in special education programs today (80%).
- Budget is second to staffing in reported needs to address student mental health crises and adequately support special education students.
- Roughly half of superintendents (52%) say they lack the time to prioritize academic readiness and test scores in their districts. That number rises to 66% for those with 75%+ FRPL.<sup>1</sup>
- Superintendents are most likely to say they lack effective solutions for addressing student behavioral challenges and mental health crises in their schools.

1) Free/Reduced Priced Lunch.

# Hiring Is an Even Bigger Challenge than Retention

Percentage of Superintendents Who Report Moderate or Major Concern About Retention and Ability to Hire Qualified Candidates by Employee Type



There has been a lot of talk about teacher turnover in the past year, with many anticipating a mass exodus from America’s classrooms. The jury is still out on whether that exodus has happened or will occur, but this year’s survey results indicate that the shortage of candidates for open positions (especially qualified candidates) is perhaps an even larger concern.

- Moderate or major concern about ability to hire qualified candidates outpaces concern about retention across every category.
- Most superintendents cite moderate to major concern about their ability to hire principals (63%) and teachers (84%).
- But concern about ability to hire support services and operations staff (87%) or special education staff (97%) is greater still.
- Most respondents (67%) agree that the greatest competition for new employees still comes from other districts (rather than out-of-industry competition). As a result, we expect to see many districts pursue creative efforts to distinguish their district from others in the region and increase their competitive advantage in the year ahead.

## Spotlight on Staffing for Special Education

**97%**

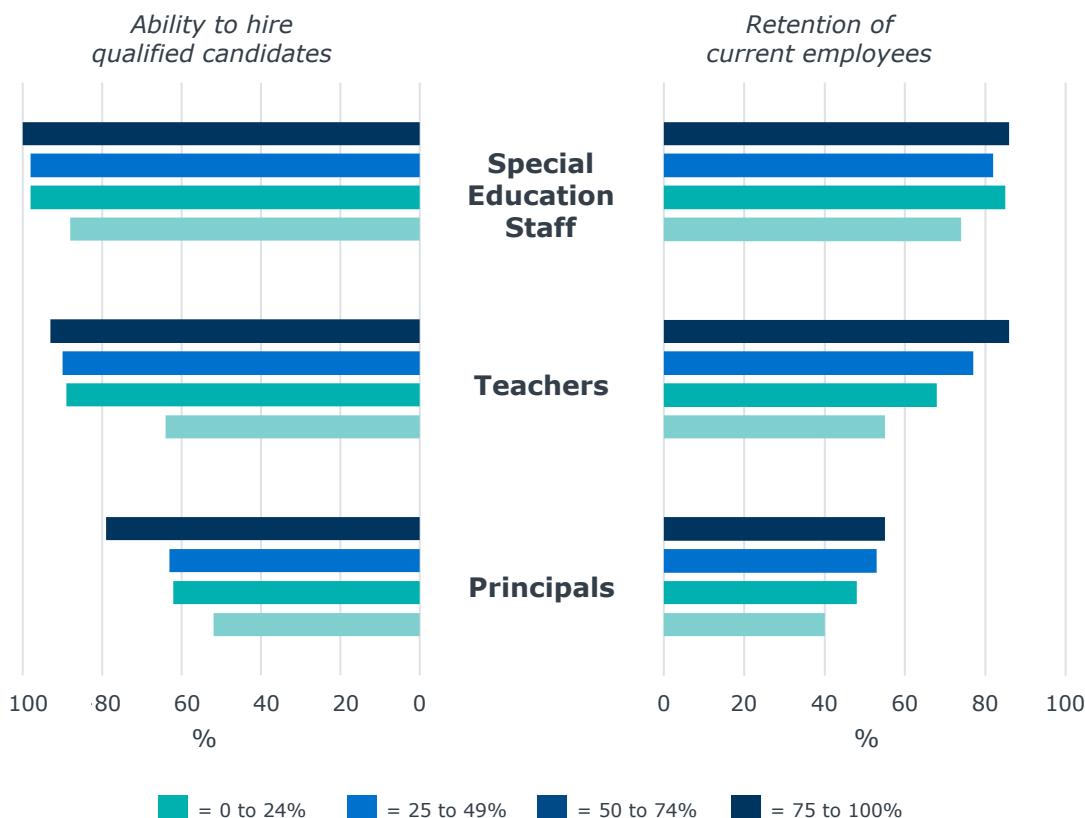
of superintendents report moderate or major concern about their district’s ability to hire qualified special education staff.

- Major concern about hiring for special education rises to 90% in districts with 75%+ FRPL.
- 90% of superintendents also say that low morale and burnout among special education staff was a moderate or major concern in their districts.

1) Free/Reduced Priced Lunch.

## Staffing Concerns Greatest Where Student Needs Are Highest

Percentage of Superintendents Who Report Moderate or Major Concern About Employee Retention and Ability to Hire Qualified Candidates, by Percentage of Students Receiving FRPL<sup>1</sup>



As shown on the previous page, concern about hiring and retention of school-based staff is high for the majority of superintendents. But levels of concern also rise in correlation with the share of students who qualify for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch. And as we shared on page 11, those districts also serve students who are most likely to need additional support today.

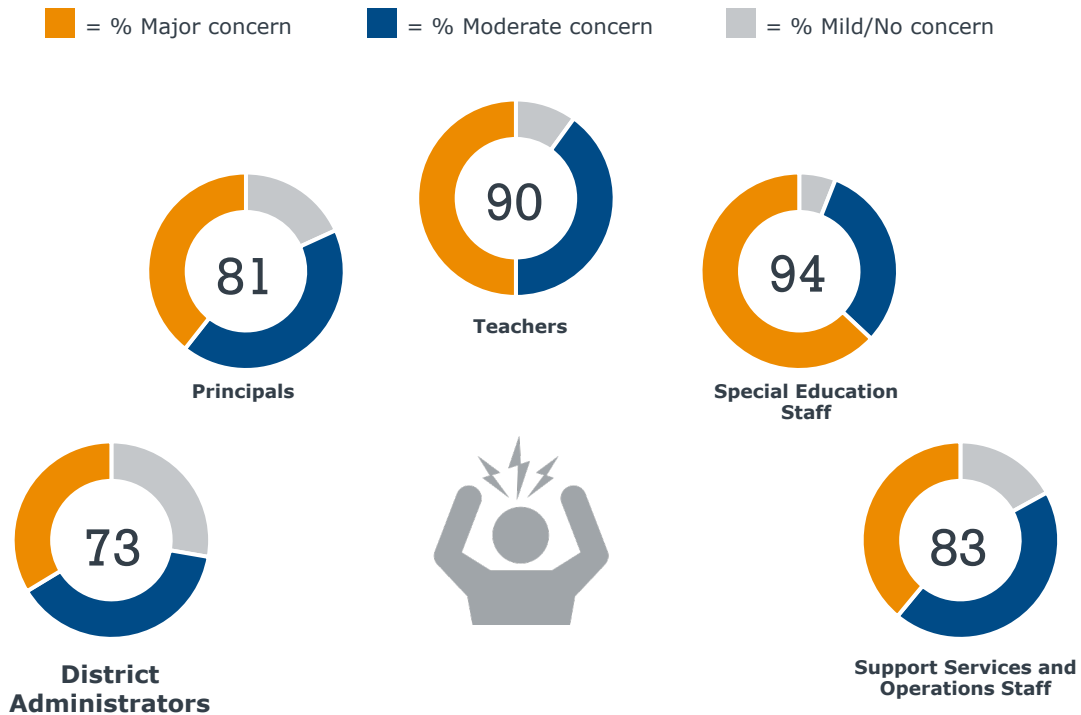
- Among districts with 75 to 100% FRPL,<sup>1</sup> 83% of superintendents report major concern about the ability to hire qualified teachers (compared with just 38% of those with 0 to 24% FRPL<sup>1</sup>).
- The likelihood of a superintendent citing principal retention as a “major concern” doubles among districts with 75 to 100% FRPL<sup>1</sup> in comparison with all other quartiles.
- The most glaring statistic here is that 100% of superintendents in districts with 75%+ FRPL<sup>1</sup> report teacher morale to be a moderate (28%) or major (72%) concern in their districts.
- 100% of respondents with 75%+ FRPL<sup>1</sup> also report moderate or major concern about their ability to hire qualified special education staff. Additionally, rates of major concern increase from 60% among districts with 0 to 24% FRPL<sup>1</sup> to 90% for those with 75 to 100% FRPL<sup>1</sup>.

1) Free/Reduced Priced Lunch.

## Low Morale Continues to Plague Public Education

### Concerns About Morale and Burnout Remain High for All Employee Groups

Percentage of Superintendents Who Report Moderate or Major Concern About Low Morale/Burnout of Various Employee Groups in Their Districts



In many districts, retention and hiring challenges are being exacerbated by pervasive low morale and burnout. Despite pandemic restrictions being lifted and “normal” schooling having resumed in 2022/23, this year’s survey responses show that employee morale and burnout remain a significant concern for superintendents across the country.

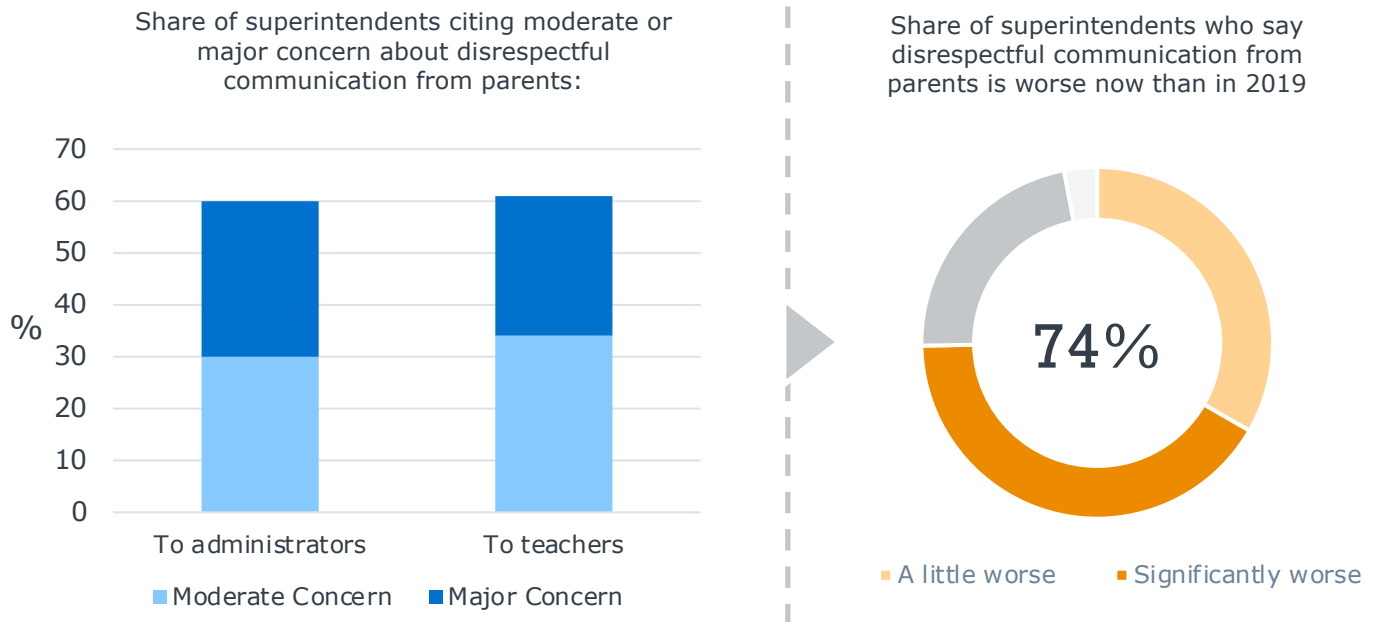
- More than 80% of respondents cited moderate or major concern about low morale and burnout across groups of school-level staff.
- Rates of moderate or major concern about this issue were highest for teachers (90%) and special education staff (94%).
- Moderate or major concern about low morale and burnout among principals was less prevalent than for teachers or special education staff, but not much.
- Superintendents are less likely to be concerned about low morale and burnout among district administrators than any type of school-based staff.
- The good news is that 83% of superintendents agree that it is possible for district leaders to improve teacher and staff morale; which implies that they see this as an addressable problem.

▶ Establish a systematic approach to raising employee morale at [eab.com/morale-collaborative](https://eab.com/morale-collaborative)



# Parents' Behavior is Harming the Employee Experience

## Disrespectful Communication from Parents Has Increased in Districts of All Types



To raise teacher morale, district leaders will need to address both internal and external factors. The most significant driver of low morale among educators today may not be low pay, overwork, or even classroom behavior. For many, the way educators are perceived and treated by parents and community members is having just as significant an effect.

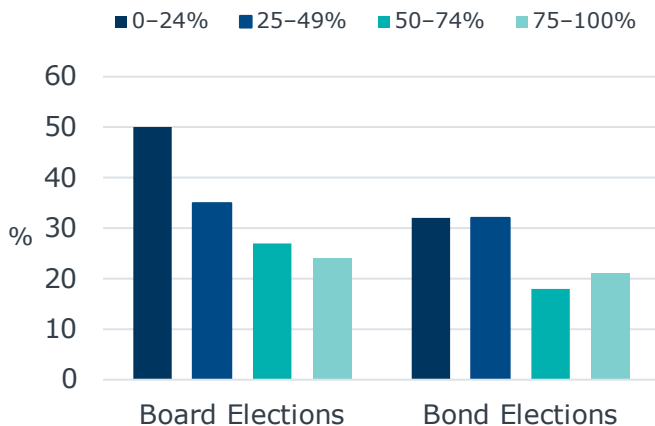
- More than half of superintendents report moderate or major concern about disrespectful communication from parents to teachers (61%) and administrators (62%) this year.
- Three out of four superintendents say this issue is worse now than before the pandemic.
- Fifty-three percent of all respondents also say that community tension and parental pressure are the greatest drivers of low staff morale in their schools.
- The reason for these disrespectful communications is not entirely clear from this survey. Forty-three percent of superintendents report at least moderate concern about parent/caregiver complaints regarding school curricula/instructional materials. Thirty-six percent report similar levels of concern about parent complaints regarding teacher quality and behaviors. But no more than 10% of respondents cited major concern about either of these categories.
- However, 63% of superintendents cite moderate to major concern about the influence of political groups on parent communications and behaviors, with half of those (33%) reporting this to be a major concern.

## Political Tensions and Enrollment Concerns Continue

### But Often in Different Districts

#### Superintendents Are Feeling the Influence of Political Groups (Especially in More Affluent Districts)

Percentage of Superintendents Expressing Major Concern About Political Influence on District Elections, by FRPL<sup>1</sup>%

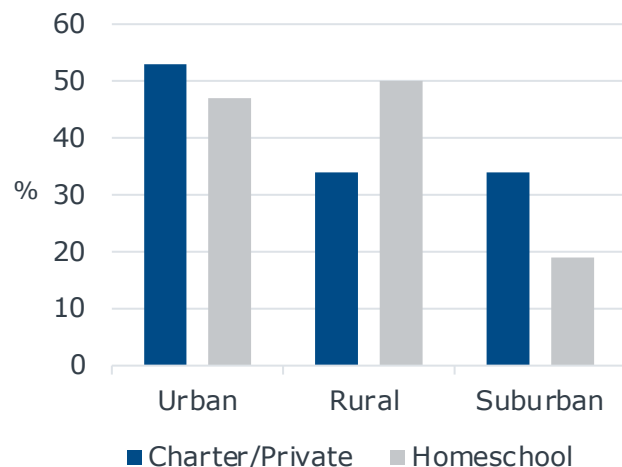


On most issues, levels of concern rise alongside an increase in a districts share of students receiving FRPL.<sup>1</sup> However, when it comes to political group influence on district decisions and governance, we saw the opposite.

- Fifty percent of superintendents with <25% FRPL<sup>1</sup> say that the influence of political groups on school board elections is a major concern in their districts. Just 24% of those with 75%+ FRPL<sup>1</sup> gave the same response.
- Similarly, 32% of superintendents with between zero and fifty percent FRPL<sup>1</sup> say that the influence of political groups on school referenda and bond elections is a major concern. Just 20% of those with 50%+ FRPL<sup>1</sup> report the same level of concern.

#### Concerns About Competition Are Largely Limited to Urban Districts (But Others See Growing Competition Ahead)

Percentage of Superintendents Expressing Moderate or Major Concern Over Competition from Private/Charter Schools and Homeschool, by District Type



Though most superintendents (86%) report regaining at least some of their pandemic enrollment losses, concerns of competition continue. However, type and level of concern around future enrollment declines vary across districts in urban, suburban, and rural settings.

- In urban districts, superintendents are as likely to report moderate or major concern about competition from private and charter schools (53%) as they are about parents choosing to homeschool their children (47%).
- In rural districts, parents choosing to homeschool their children is a far greater concern (50% cite moderate/major concern) than competition from private or charter schools (34% cite moderate/major concern).
- Suburban districts were least concerned about competition overall but more likely to be concerned about charter/private alternatives.
- Looking forward, roughly half of superintendents (53%) expect to see an increase in competition from private or charter schools over the next five years. The likelihood to agree with this statement rises considerably (to 79%) for those with 75% or more students receiving FRPL.<sup>1</sup>

1) Free/Reduced Priced Lunch.



# Looking Forward

Three Essential Discussions for the Year Ahead

# Preparing Students for a Turbulent Economy

## How Will District Leaders Make Informed Choices on New Programs and Postsecondary Guidance?



**To what extent to do you agree with the following statement?**

“Over the next five years, enrolling at a community college or university after graduating from high school will be the best option for most students.”

 = Agree     = Undecided     = Disagree

**It’s clear that the “college for all” mindset is crumbling.** When asked whether enrolling at either a community college or university will be the best option for most students upon graduating from high school over the next five years, superintendents are divided. Forty percent disagree, and 22% are unsure, but 38% still agree with the statement.

**This division reflects the fact that a “right answer” is hard to determine.** A tight labor market has forced employers to rethink whether a college degree is truly necessary for new openings and created pathways to well-paying work that previously seemed out of reach without a college education. But while some of these “degree resets” will last, others are likely cyclical, and degree requirements will quickly return when we see an employer-friendly job market.

**As a result, district leaders will need to stay up to date with detailed information about where the labor market is heading and the implications for different career paths.** This information will be invaluable not only in helping today’s students make informed postsecondary choices but also for making strategic decisions about which new courses and facilities need to be built to prepare tomorrow’s students for the world ahead.

### Questions for District Leaders to Discuss

- ▶ Where are we gathering information about the labor market and implications for postsecondary choices (and how frequently are we discussing that data)?
- ▶ Which changes in job requirements, skill requirements, and working styles appear likely to last, and how will our programs subsequently evolve to prepare students for their future?

▶ Find guidance and resources to improve post-secondary outcomes at [eab.com/k12-student-success](https://eab.com/k12-student-success)

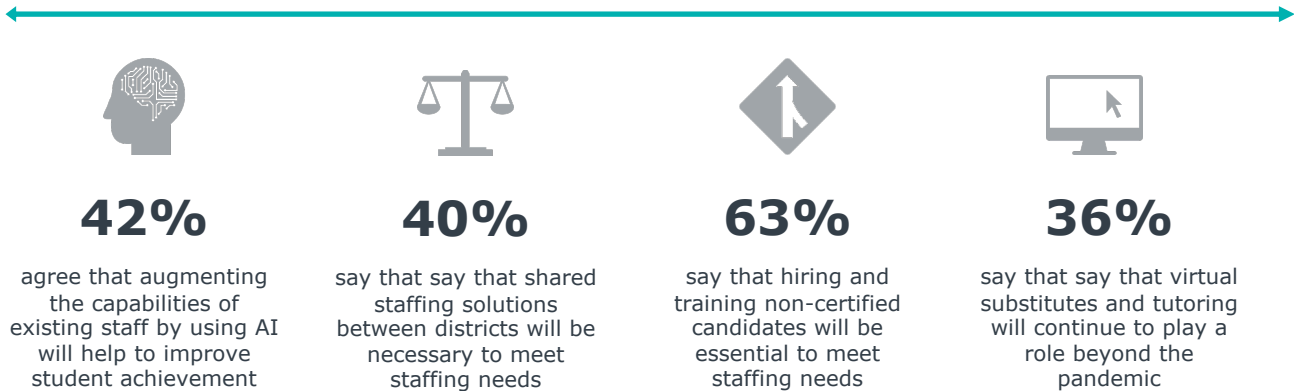
# Overcoming Persistent Staffing Shortages

## Which Creative Staffing Solutions Will Become Standard Practice?

### Superintendents' Perspectives on the Future of Alternative Staffing Models

Do more with less

Expand the talent pool



**The near-term outlook for staffing in schools is not good.** From 2008-2019, the number of students completing teacher preparation programs in the United States dropped by more than a third. Across 2021 and 2022, about 20% of traditional teacher education programs say the pandemic caused further enrollment drops of 11% or more.

**With shortages likely to continue** across classroom teachers, counselors, and other key roles, districts will likely need to explore new, innovative staffing models to meet the academic and social/emotional needs of today's students.

**But as you can see above, while several possible solutions each receive some support, there is little consensus** around what districts will double down on to solve staffing challenges in schools. Collaboration between districts and support organizations to find sustainable and effective staffing models will be essential as the industry searches for a path forward.

### Questions for District Leaders to Discuss

- ▶ Where do we see opportunities for shared staffing between districts today?
- ▶ How would we talk to staff about increasing their capacity through the use of emerging technologies (such as artificial intelligence tools), both inside and outside of the classroom?
- ▶ Where do we most need new staffing models and solutions (for example, special education or school maintenance and operations)?

# Separating Local Reality from National Narratives

## How Will Superintendents Limit the Influence of Political Groups on Schools?



**Last year 80% of superintendents said that managing divisive conversations had become the most challenging aspect of their role.** Time spent managing flashpoints had increased by 300% over the previous five years and, for many, board meetings changed from sparsely attended policy reviews to contentious events with dozens (and sometimes hundreds) in attendance. More often than not, these chaotic events stemmed from the intensifying “culture wars” and the influence of politically motivated groups.



**This year, as stated in the previous section, the influence of political agendas on school operations continues to be a concern.** Sixty-three percent of respondents say that the influence of political groups on parent/caregiver behaviors is a moderate/major concern, while 67% expressed moderate/major concern about the influence of political groups on school board elections.



**But 2023 responses also show that superintendents believe it is possible for them to limit the influence of political groups on their school communities:** Just 18% “agreed” that there will be little a superintendent can do to limit the influence of outside political groups on their communities over the next five years. This provides a gateway to further discussion around what best practices on this topic should look like for district leadership.

### Questions for District Leaders to Discuss

- ▶ What strategies are district leaders using to proactively identify emerging flashpoint issues?
- ▶ How can district leaders use media and communications to sustain a positive local narrative for their district while national and state-level political campaigns intensify scrutiny of public education?

▶ Build the foundations for community support at [eab.com/public-vote](https://eab.com/public-vote)



# **Wise Words for New Superintendents**

Essential Advice to New District Leaders from Their Peers

## Six Themes Emerge in Guidance for Those New to the Role

Each year, we ask experienced superintendents to provide the best single piece of advice they can give to a new superintendent. This year, more than 130 took the opportunity to leave words of wisdom for those taking the reins for the first time. Six themes emerged from advice they shared:



### Keep students at the center

- *"Buckle up! ... How well you focus on the north star of student achievement will determine how long you stay in it. Politics and crisis come in waves. Ride it out and focus on teaching and learning."*
- *"While there are several aspects of public education that have changed since the pandemic, the core beliefs are the same. Maintain a focus on students and student achievement..."*
- *"Breathe. It's a marathon, not a sprint. Enjoy the differences you get to make. Get out and spend time with kids and teachers."*
- *"Small steps yield great gains...persist through adversity. Remain level and calm. Keep students and staff at the heart of your decision making."*



### Strive to overcommunicate

- *"Identify your district's strategic plan and whether it needs to be updated or not. Engage your stakeholders early in whichever processes you implement and ensure they "see themselves" in the work you're doing."*
- *"Be a strong communicator in promoting the District's vision and mission. Work to build positive consensus in decisions that provide each child the opportunity to be a successful person."*
- *"Be prepared to develop priorities, overcommunicate those priorities with ALL stakeholders, and stay focused on them."*
- *"Be a learner, communicate more than you think necessary, be open and honest, and be flexible."*



### Find your support system

- *"Establish relationships with superintendents in other districts. The seat is lonely, and colleagues provide the most insightful advice and can relate to what you are experiencing."*
- *"Develop a strong network of colleagues and a mentor. In today's political climate, you will need both. Surround yourself with a highly capable and trustworthy team. Your ability to cultivate leaders will make or break you."*
- *"Don't be afraid to ask for help."*



### Listen intently

- *"Listen to and honor the people, traditions, and values of the community and school system, but be innovative and creative in meeting your goals. We need new solutions to long-standing goals/issues."*
- *"Listen first. Talk last. While we often think we have the answers to the problems that are presented to us, it's critical that we listen carefully to our stakeholders before taking action."*
- *"Try to analyze the trends prior to them becoming a reality."*



### Focus on what you can control

- *"Focus on what you can control. Always remain positive and share the good about your district. Be proud."*
- *"Understand the experience of today will not be the experience of tomorrow and the years to come. Our challenges of today will pass and get better."*
- *"As much as possible, be in charge of your district's message to control the narrative about education. Be an advocate for schools."*
- *"The vocal negative voices are the minority; you can make a significant difference in your district's climate over time; and sustained improvement takes time, so be patient, but determined."*



### Stay healthy (with a sense of humor)

- *"Rent and buy as much life insurance as you can."*
- *"Get ready for the most unpredictable rollercoaster ride of your life."*
- *"Be like a duck and let stuff roll off but not let it soak in or else it will eat you up."*
- *"Stay off Facebook; it's where the unhappy thrive and multiply!"*





# Closing Thoughts

# What Do These Results Mean for District Leadership?

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**This year's survey results paint a complicated picture for district leadership.**

However, recent discussions with a handful of superintendents about these findings and their implications led to the following synopsis:

**Behind every problem lies another problem.**

To improve academic achievement in today's environment, district leaders must first address student mental health, behavioral challenges, and attendance. To address those challenges, they need sufficient qualified staff who are engaged and ready to support students. And to create the conditions for employees to thrive, schools need to build community-wide culture of trust and support that helps to minimize contentious communications.

**Where to start? Solving staffing challenges would have the greatest positive effect.**

As stated earlier in this brief, staffing concerns are consistently the greatest barrier to meeting student needs in 2023. EAB research indicates that establishing a consistent process for raising morale and engagement is where most districts should focus first. For as one superintendent recently shared, "The best advertisement for our district today is a happy teacher in every classroom."

**But superintendents must also stay focused on their primary responsibility: students.**

Raising employee morale and attracting qualified candidates may be the most pressing needs for district leaders today, but districts can't afford to place student-centered challenges on the backburner while improving the employee experience. As a result, we've heard several district executives express that 2023 needs to be a year of balancing high support with high expectations for all educators in their schools.

**Ultimately, successful practices must be designed to meet both student and employee needs.**

Education is not short of research-backed practices. Vast numbers of studies have been conducted to identify practices and policies that will improve student outcomes from kindergarten to graduation and beyond. But too many of those recommended practices and frameworks are impractical (sometimes impossible) for educators to realistically implement in schools today. Moving forward, evaluating new practices for both efficacy and feasibility is the only way districts can expect to see lasting results.

## Find a Path Forward with Peers from Across the Nation

This summer, EAB's District Leadership Forum will introduce new research on ways to address critical issues of disruptive behavior and chronic absenteeism in ways that are manageable for teachers without compromising student needs.

To learn more about participation in the District Leadership Forum, visit [eab.com/K-12](https://eab.com/K-12)



# Education's Trusted Partner to Help Schools and Students Thrive

## Proven Solutions for K-12's Current, Critical Challenges



### Student Success

#### Unlock Student Success

- Student Behavior
- Early Literacy
- Student Mental Health



### Employee Experience

#### Re-Imagine the Employee Experience

- Teacher and Staff Morale
- Principal Hiring and Development
- Employee Recruitment and Retention



### Community Confidence

#### Strengthen Community Confidence

- Parent and Community Buy-In
- Flashpoint Management
- District Communications



### About EAB and the District Leadership Forum

The District Leadership Forum helps district leaders identify and implement proven solutions to current, critical challenges.

Through our research, events, and advisory services we provide superintendents and their teams with expert guidance as well as hands-on support to make meaningful change in their districts.

**180+**

Districts in the District Leadership Forum

**37**

States represented

**600–180k**

Students per district we serve



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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).