RAND AMERICAN EDUCATOR PANELS

Research Report

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Difficulty Supporting Student Mental Health Strains Teacher Well-Being

Findings from the 2026 State of the American Teacher Survey

Young people face significant mental health challenges. A national survey of high school students from 2023 showed that 40 percent of high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, up from 30 percent in the decade prior (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). As of 2021, 20 percent of children had been diagnosed with

KEY FINDINGS

- Nearly all teachers reported providing one or more supports for student mental health and well-being, such as checking in on students, helping them build empathy or peer relationships, and collaborating with a school counselor or social worker.
- Nearly all teachers reported challenges to student well-being at their schools. Teachers most commonly named student apathy, student lack of preparedness to learn, lack of parental involvement, and student absenteeism as serious problems.
- High school teachers reported more challenges affecting student well-being but provided fewer supports than their elementary counterparts.
- Teachers spent, on average, about eight hours per week supporting student well-being. Teachers who reported providing more student supports were more likely to report that teaching was emotionally draining.
- Half of teachers said that it has gotten harder to provide mental health and well-being supports to students and/or families since fall 2024. Teachers named such factors as resource constraints, economic hardship, and a divisive political climate. Teachers who perceived increased difficulty in providing supports were more likely to report worse well-being.

This research was sponsored by the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers.

Abbreviations

AEP	American Educator Panels
ALP	American Life Panel
ATP	American Teacher Panel
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
K–12	kindergarten through 12th grade
NTPS	National Teacher and Principal Survey
SoT	State of the American Teacher

a mental, emotional, or behavioral health condition, and such diagnoses become only more common as children age (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025; Leeb et al., 2024).

Challenges to student mental health and well-being are complex and evolving. Recent studies confirm that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic had significant detrimental impacts on student mental health and well-being (Hamilton et al., 2021; Naff et al., 2022). Since the pandemic, new stressors have emerged or grown more salient. Despite numerous studies showing strong associations between screen use and poor mental health outcomes (Zablotsky et al., 2025), nearly all teens have access to a smartphone, and about half say that they are online "almost constantly"—roughly double the pre-pandemic share (Anderson, Faverio, and Gottfried, 2023).

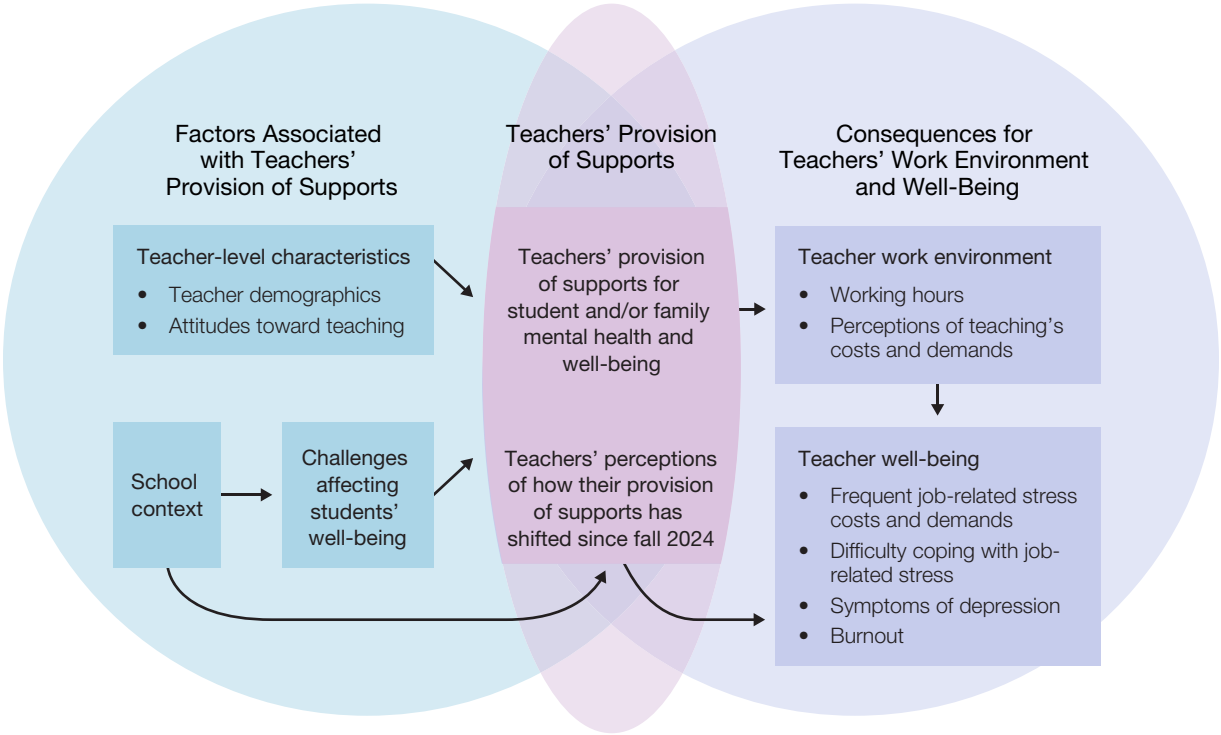
About two-thirds of teens say that the world is more stressful now than when their parents were their age (National Alliance on Mental Illness, undated). Stressors affecting young people include a wide variety of socioeconomic issues, such as economic insecurity, heightened cost of living, climate change, discrimination, and an uncertain political climate (Blue Shield of California and Children Now, 2025; McGorry et al., 2024). These challenging conditions manifest in schools as heightened chronic absenteeism, behavioral challenges, dropping out, and disengagement from learning, all of which interact in complex and bidirectional ways (Castillo et al., 2025; Klassen, Stewart, and Lapshina, 2021; Polikoff, Clay, and Silver, 2023).

Schools can and do play a vital role in supporting student mental health (Gross and Hamilton, 2023; Hoover and Bostic, 2021; National Alliance on Mental Illness, undated). Beyond promoting social and emotional development and maintaining safe, supportive school climates, schools serve as a common entry point for children to receive mental health services (Farmer et al., 2003; Learning Policy Institute, 2025; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). School personnel, such as counselors and psychologists, also play an important role in bolstering student mental health and well-being.

However, many schools do not have adequate access to specialized mental health professionals (DePaoli and McCombs, 2023). Across the United States, only about one in five schools meet the recommended pupil-to-counselor ratio of below 250 to 1 (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). In the 2021–2022 school year, about 40 percent of public schools reported that inadequate access to mental health professionals, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, social workers, and professional counselors, limited their efforts to provide student mental health services (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Inadequate funding was another top factor, also cited by about 40 percent of public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). It is therefore unsurprising that classroom teachers increasingly find themselves playing the role of frontline responders. In the years since the pandemic, managing student behavior has consistently topped the list of teachers' job-related stressors (Doan et al., 2023; Doan, Steiner, and Pandey, 2024; Steiner et al., 2025; Steiner, Levine, and Doan, 2026), signaling a need to better understand how teachers are responding to students' mental health challenges and the consequences for teachers' work environment and well-being.[1]

In this report, we explore teachers' experiences with providing supports for student and/or family mental health and well-being (see "Teachers' Provision of Supports" in Figure 1). Throughout the report, we refer to teachers' strategies as *student well-being supports* or *student supports*. We then examine the associations between various school- and teacher-level characteristics and teachers' actions ("Factors Associated with Teachers' Provision of Supports" in Figure 1). Finally, we explore the relationships between the provision of student supports and teachers' work environment and well-being ("Conse-

FIGURE 1
Report Roadmap



quences for Teachers' Work Environment and Well-Being" in Figure 1).

We anticipate that the findings in this report will be useful to school system leaders and mental and behavioral health program providers crafting supports to enhance teachers' capacity to support student well-being.

Data Sources and Analytic Approach

We draw on data from the 2026 State of the American Teacher (SoT) survey, a nationally representative survey of 829 kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) public school teachers. The SoT draws on the American Educator Panels, which are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country. We asked teachers about the types of well-being supports they provided to students and/or their families. We also asked about changes in the time spent and difficulty of providing those supports since the prior school year.

To understand how school context shaped teachers' actions, we matched teachers' responses to school-level data from the Common Core of Data (Institute of Education Sciences, undated). We focused on how teachers' responses differed by their schools' grade levels, given consistent patterns across this variable and prior research underscoring age as an influence on student well-being and mental health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025).

We also asked teachers about the presence of various school-level challenges the literature indicates as commonly affecting student mental health and well-being, such as student apathy, tardiness, and chronic absenteeism (Castillo et al., 2025; DePaoli and McCombs, 2023; Klassen, Stewart, and Lapshina, 2021; Polikoff, Clay, and Silver, 2023). We refer to these collectively as *challenges*.

In line with prior research connecting teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices (Buehl and Beck, 2015; Guo et al., 2012), we hypothesized that teachers with different attitudes toward their profession might perceive the roles and responsibilities of teachers differently, thereby influencing their sup-

Most teachers said that they had increased the amount of time they spent providing supports related to mental health and well-being to students and families since fall 2024.

port of student well-being. Drawing on prior studies (Bergey and Ranellucci, 2021; Watt and Richardson, 2007), we asked teachers a set of survey items to understand their beliefs regarding the value of teaching, focusing on the intrinsic, social utility, and personal utility value of teaching. *Intrinsic value* refers to teachers' enjoyment of their jobs; *social utility value* relates to their perceptions of teaching's ability to enhance social equity and make a social contribution; and *personal utility value* refers to teachers' valuation of the extrinsic benefits of teaching, such as job security, a reliable income, and a convenient work schedule (Bergey and Ranellucci, 2021; Watt and Richardson, 2007).

To contextualize teachers' survey responses, we share findings from teachers' responses to one open-ended survey question: "How, if at all, has supporting students' and/or their families' mental health and well-being changed from fall 2024 to now?" We received interpretable open-ended responses from 686 teachers.

At times, we compare teachers' responses with those of similar working adults surveyed through the 2026 American Life Panel (ALP) companion survey, a nationally representative survey of 498 similar working adults in which we asked parallel questions about attitudes toward their occupations (Doan et al., 2026).[2]

Unless otherwise noted, we discuss only those differences among teacher subgroups that are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ using pairwise t-tests. In select cases, we tested the robustness of significant differences across teacher subgroups by controlling for other characteristics (e.g., teacher- or school-level characteristics) that could help explain the patterns we observed. These tests are not evidence of any causal effect and are intended only to highlight differences in reported experiences across subgroups of teachers.

More details about our data and analysis can be found in the "How This Analysis Was Conducted" box at the end of this report. We provide the SoT and ALP survey responses in our technical report (Doan et al., 2026).

Teachers' Provision of Supports for Student Mental Health and Well-Being

Most Teachers Provided Multiple Student Well-Being Supports

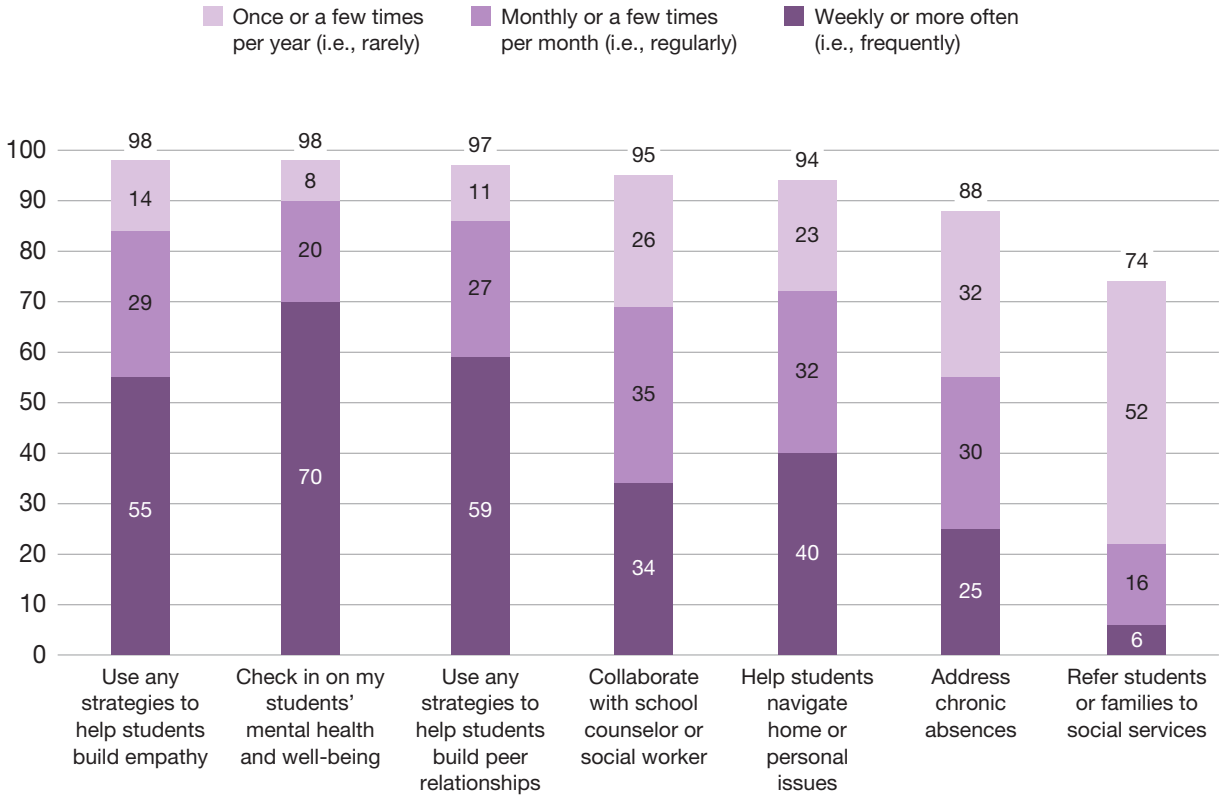
Nearly all of the surveyed teachers reported providing supports for student well-being, and most provided some supports—such as checking in on students or helping them build empathy or peer relationships—weekly or more often (Figure 2). Referring students or families to social services was the least commonly reported support, although about three-quarters of teachers said that they did so at least once during the 2025–2026 school year.[3]

Most teachers frequently (i.e., weekly or more often) provided multiple supports for student well-being.[4] Seventy-one percent said that they frequently provided at least two of the supports we asked about. About one-quarter said that they frequently provided five or more supports.

Notably, most teachers (59 percent) said that they had increased the amount of time they spent providing supports related to mental health and well-being to students and families since fall 2024. Together, these results highlight the pervasive role that teachers play in supporting student and family well-being and the heightened responsibilities placed on teachers,

FIGURE 2

Percentage of Teachers Reporting That They Provided Supports for Student Mental Health and Well-Being During the 2025–2026 School Year



NOTE: This figure displays response data from the question, "This school year (2025–2026), how often do you do the following things related to supporting students' mental health and well-being?" The total value at the top of each bar might not equal the sum of the percentages below it because of rounding. Teachers, *n* = 788.

particularly in light of students' potentially greater levels of need.

Factors Associated with Teachers' Provision of Supports for Student Mental Health and Well-Being

Next, we explore factors associated with teachers' provision of student supports. We explore school context; teacher characteristics, such as demographic and attitudinal characteristics; and factors internal and external to the school system.

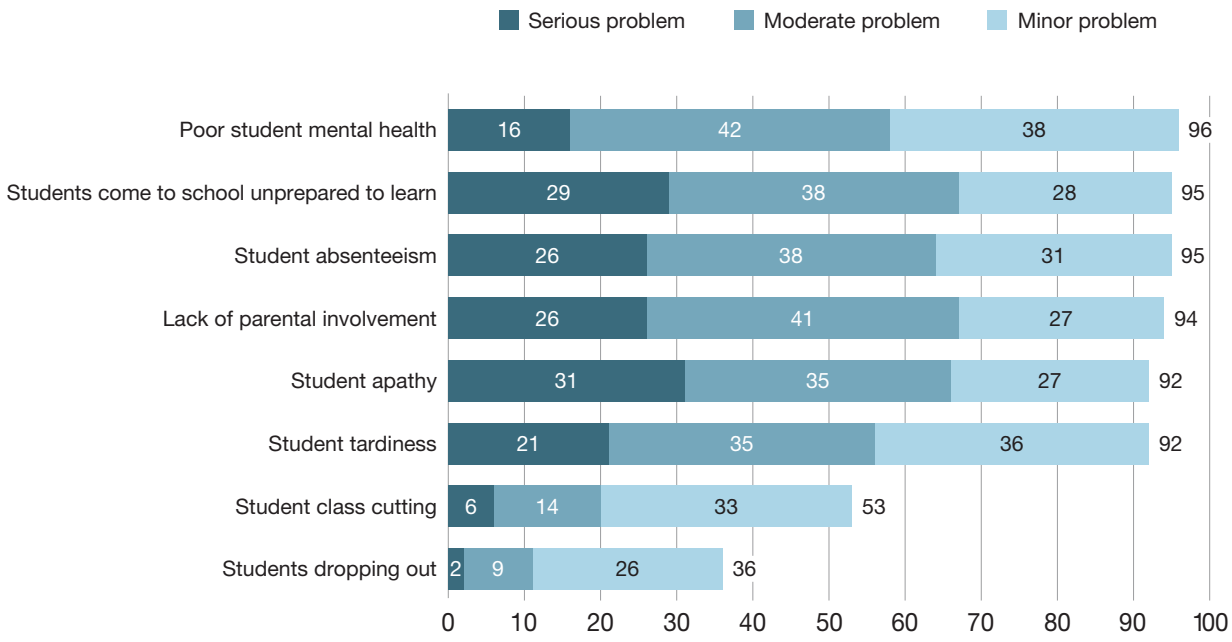
Nearly All Teachers Reported Challenges Affecting Student Well-Being at Their Schools

Teachers' provision of supports likely reflects their perceptions of challenges that affect student well-being. More than 90 percent of teachers reported at least one such challenge at their schools, and teachers most commonly named student apathy, student lack of preparedness to learn, lack of parental involvement, and student absenteeism as serious problems (Figure 3).

These results align with research documenting the post-pandemic rise of such issues as student absenteeism and student disengagement in schooling (Hrynowski, 2024; Polikoff, Clay, and Silver, 2023). A comparison of responses from the pre-pandemic National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS)

FIGURE 3

Percentage of Teachers Indicating the Extent to Which Each Challenge Was a Problem at Their Schools During the 2025–2026 School Year



NOTE: This figure displays response data from the question, "To what extent is each of the following a problem in your school THIS school year (2025–2026)?" The total value at the end of each bar might not equal the sum of the percentages shown to the left because of rounding. Teachers, *n* = 793–794.

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2015; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020) and the 2026 SoT survey similarly suggests a potential increase in the prevalence of challenges affecting student well-being.[5] Ninety-two percent of teachers in the 2026 SoT survey said that student apathy was a problem at their schools, an increase of nearly 20 percentage points from when the same question was asked on the 2015–2016 and 2020–2021 NTPSs. Teachers in 2026 were also about 10 percentage points more likely to say that student class cutting, lack of parental involvement, and student absenteeism were problems (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-b).

In open-ended responses, about one-quarter of teachers expressed the view that challenges affecting student well-being had increased over time, noting escalations in the volume and intensity of need among students, often driven by heightened need among families. One teacher described a common dilemma—the combination of increased need and strained supports:

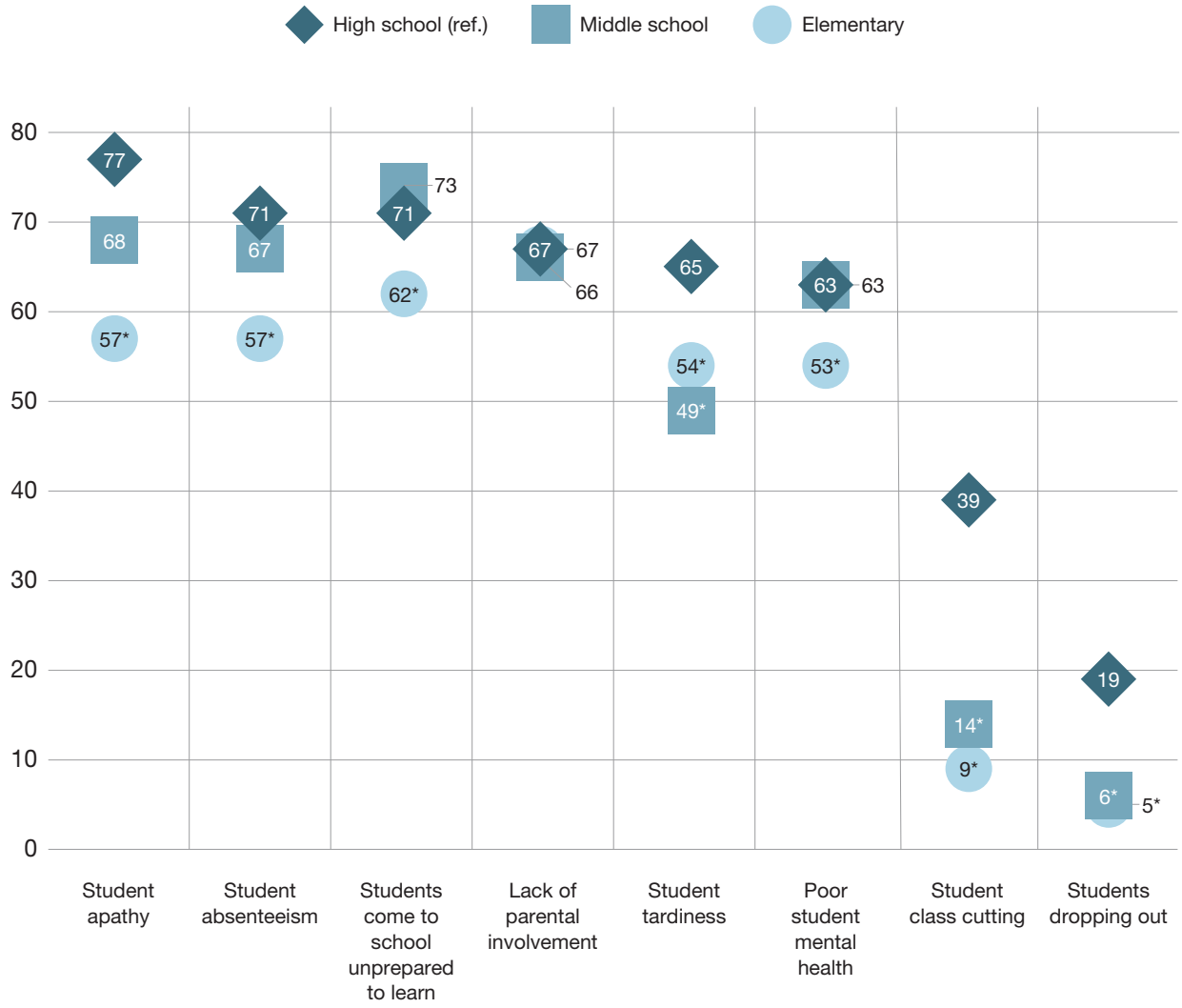
> There are more expectations for the school to address and support [student and family mental health and well-being], and there are also more students who need the support which make it more challenging. The need is higher for individual students and the number of students needing more support is also higher, spreading resources and time for teachers to support thinner than it already is.

Nearly All High School Teachers Reported Multiple Simultaneous Challenges Affecting Student Well-Being

Secondary teachers—especially those in high schools—were more likely than elementary teachers to name most of the challenges we asked about as moderate or serious problems at their schools (Figure 4). Some differences were especially large: 39 percent of high school teachers said that class cutting was a moderate or serious problem, compared

FIGURE 4

Percentage of Teachers Indicating Each Challenge as a Moderate or Serious Problem at Their Schools During the 2025–2026 School Year, by Grade Level



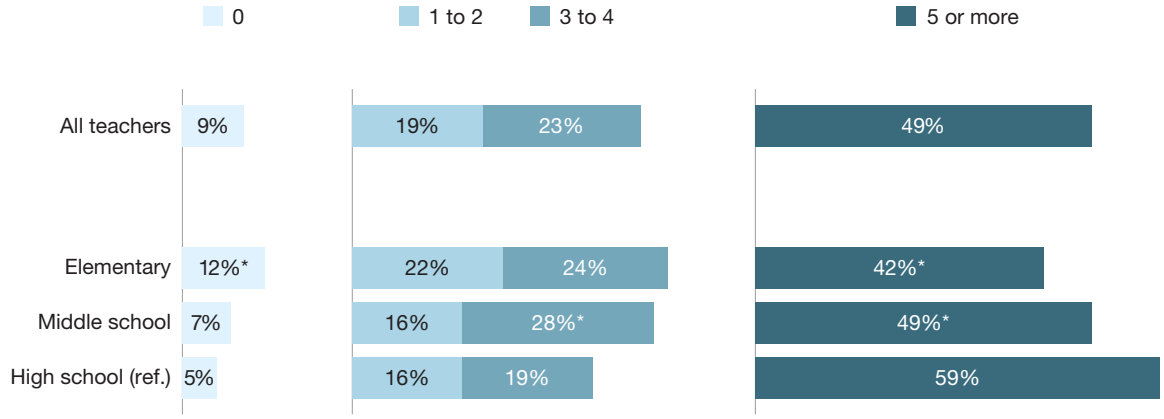
NOTE: ref. = reference group. This figure displays response data from the question, "To what extent is each of the following a problem in your school THIS school year (2025–2026)?" We present the percentage of teachers naming each challenge as a moderate or serious problem at their schools. An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group. High school teachers, $n = 248$; middle school teachers, $n = 162$; and elementary school teachers, $n = 362–363$.

with 9 percent of elementary teachers, a difference of 30 percentage points. For student apathy, this difference was 20 percentage points (77 percent, compared with 57 percent). The responses of middle school teachers often fell between those of high school and elementary teachers.[6] The main exception was lack of parental involvement, which teachers across grade levels reported at similar rates.

Forty-nine percent of teachers identified five or more of the eight challenges we asked about as moderate or serious problems (Figure 5). Only 9 percent of teachers nationally said that none of these challenges were moderate or serious problems at their schools. Again, high school teachers were far more likely to report experiencing multiple challenges simultaneously: 59 percent said that they experienced

FIGURE 5

Percentage of Teachers Indicating How Many Challenges Were Moderate or Serious Problems at Their Schools During the 2025–2026 School Year, by Grade Level



NOTE: ref. = reference group. This figure displays response data from the question, "To what extent is each of the following a problem in your school THIS school year (2025–2026)?" We present the percentage of teachers indicating the number of challenges that were moderate or serious problems at their schools. An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group. Bars might not sum to 100 percent because of rounding. All teachers, $n = 793$.

five or more of the challenges as moderate or serious problems at their schools.

In open-ended responses, teachers also noted the stacking of multiple challenges, due in part to their interconnected nature. For instance, teachers said that students experiencing anxiety or other mental health issues were more likely to miss school and that students' struggles with emotional self-regulation, social skills, and engagement manifested as behavioral challenges in the classroom.

High School Teachers Reported More Challenges but Provided Fewer Student Well-Being Supports

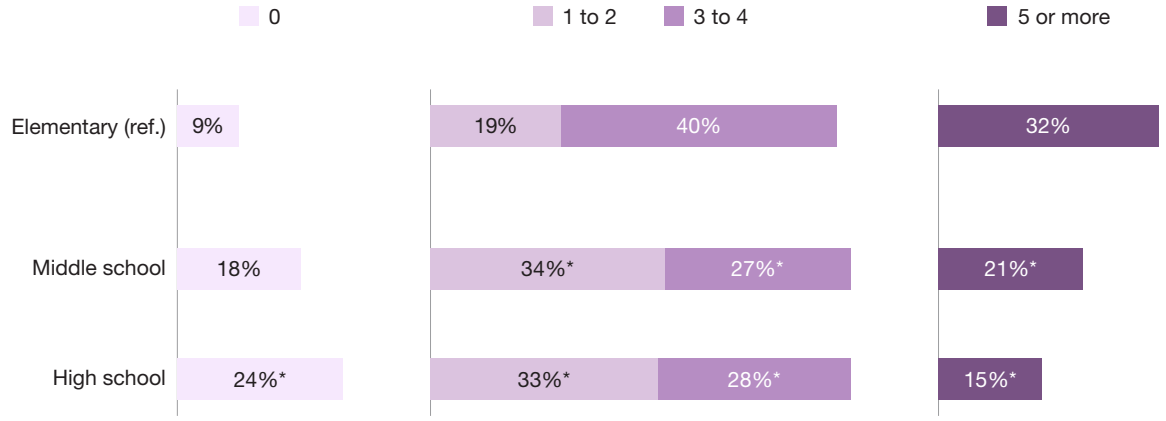
Despite reporting more challenges affecting student well-being, high school teachers were less likely than elementary teachers to say that they provided student supports (Figure 6). Twenty-four percent of high school teachers said that they did not frequently provide any of the supports we asked about, compared with only 9 percent of elementary teachers. Additionally, 15 percent of high school teachers reported frequently providing five or more supports, roughly half the share of elementary teachers (32 percent) who reported the same. Middle school teachers' responses looked similar to those of high school teachers, although high school teachers were still significantly more likely than middle school teachers to say that they did not frequently provide any supports.

Across all supports—except addressing chronic absenteeism—elementary teachers were more likely than high school teachers to report providing them frequently. The largest difference was for using strategies to help students build empathy: 73 percent of elementary teachers said that they did this frequently, compared with 35 percent of high school teachers, a 39–percentage point difference.[7] Other differences were also large. For instance, 48 percent of elementary teachers said that they frequently helped students navigate home or personal issues, compared with 29 percent of high school teachers, a 19–percentage point difference. Elementary teachers were also more likely than high school teachers to say that the amount of time they spent supporting student and family well-being had increased since the prior school year (63 percent versus 54 percent). Middle school teachers' responses often fell between those of elementary and high school teachers.

These patterns may reflect differences in how elementary and secondary teachers view their jobs and responsibilities because elementary teachers have historically placed greater emphasis on supporting

FIGURE 6

Percentage of Teachers Reporting the Number of Student Well-Being Supports They Frequently Provided During the 2025–2026 School Year, by Grade Level



NOTE: ref. = reference group. This figure displays response data from the question, "This school year (2025–2026), how often do you do the following things related to supporting students' mental health and well-being?" We present the percentage of teachers reporting the number of supports they said they provided frequently, by grade level. An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group. Elementary school teachers, $n = 361$; middle school teachers, $n = 159$; and high school teachers, $n = 247$.

students' social and emotional development (RAND Corporation, 2020). They may also reflect broader structural differences across grade levels; elementary teachers generally focus their attention on a smaller set of students than secondary teachers do.

Teachers Who Reported More Intrinsic and Social Utility Value from Teaching Did More to Support Student Well-Being

Next, we examined how teachers' personal characteristics and attitudes about their profession related to their provision of student supports. Teachers who derived more intrinsic and social utility value from teaching (see the box on the next page) were more likely to frequently provide certain student well-being supports,[8] such as checking in on students' mental health and well-being, using strategies to help students build empathy, and helping students navigate home and personal issues. This was true even after we accounted for other potentially explanatory characteristics (Figure 7).[9] Teachers who reported more intrinsic value from teaching were also more likely than teachers who reported less intrinsic value to say that they used strategies to help students build peer relationships.

In contrast, teachers who highly valued teaching's personal utility (i.e., a steady career path, a reliable income, work-life balance) reported less-frequent provision of student supports. Among those teachers who most valued teaching's personal utility, 19 percent said that they frequently provided five or more supports. Among teachers who most valued teaching's social utility and intrinsic value, 29 percent and 26 percent, respectively, provided five or more supports.

Notably, we observed relatively few differences in teachers' provision of supports by demographic characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, age, or gender,[10] suggesting that teachers' attitudes toward teaching may matter more than their personal demographic characteristics.

Half of Teachers Said That It Has Gotten Harder to Provide Student Well-Being Supports Since Fall 2024

Half of teachers said that it has gotten harder to provide well-being and mental health supports since fall 2024. Forty-five percent of teachers reported

Teachers See Their Jobs as Uniquely Providing Social Utility

To understand the extent to which teachers viewed teaching as providing intrinsic and social value, we asked teachers the extent to which they agreed with the following statements:

- Intrinsic value
  - *Teaching is interesting.*
- Social utility value
  - *Teachers make a worthwhile social contribution.*
  - *Teaching allows me to help disadvantaged students.*
  - *I like working with children and adolescents.*

Roughly 90 percent or more of teachers agreed with each of the four statements. Equal shares of teachers and similar working adults (88 percent) found their professions interesting. However, fewer similar working adults agreed that their occupations made worthwhile social contributions (71 percent) or allowed them to help disadvantaged people (54 percent).

no change, and only 5 percent of teachers reported decreased difficulty. Teachers who reported more challenges at their schools were more likely to report increased difficulty in providing student well-being supports. We observed the same pattern among teachers who frequently provided more student well-being supports.

In their open-ended responses, teachers raised a number of in-school and out-of-school factors that exacerbated challenges to student and family well-being, as well as their own ability to respond. About one-tenth of responding teachers named resource-related constraints at their schools, such as social worker and guidance counselor shortages and large caseloads for existing staff. One teacher explained,

> Students' mental health has declined a lot. With little to no support at home, it has become a huge issue in our district. We've also had large budget cuts, which included mental health clinicians and supports, all of whom aided in the teen mental health crisis.

Even where resources existed, a few teachers reported encountering administrative barriers to accessing them, such as heightened documentation requirements, lengthier processes, and legal constraints around privacy or parental notification.

About one-tenth of responding teachers also named factors related to the broader sociopolitical or economic climate. Some said that immigration enforcement activity and family separations drove fear and anxiety in their school communities. Teachers also described how poverty and increased cost of living imposed hardships on students and families, leading to food and housing insecurity that was at times made worse by funding cuts and reductions to social safety nets, such as food stamp programs. These stressors, teachers said, cascaded from caregivers to students. As one teacher in a high-poverty school put it, "Families and students are more worried about surviving than education."

Other teachers pointed to a divisive political climate that made it difficult for them to know how to support student and family well-being and that intensified unease about the future. As one teacher put it,

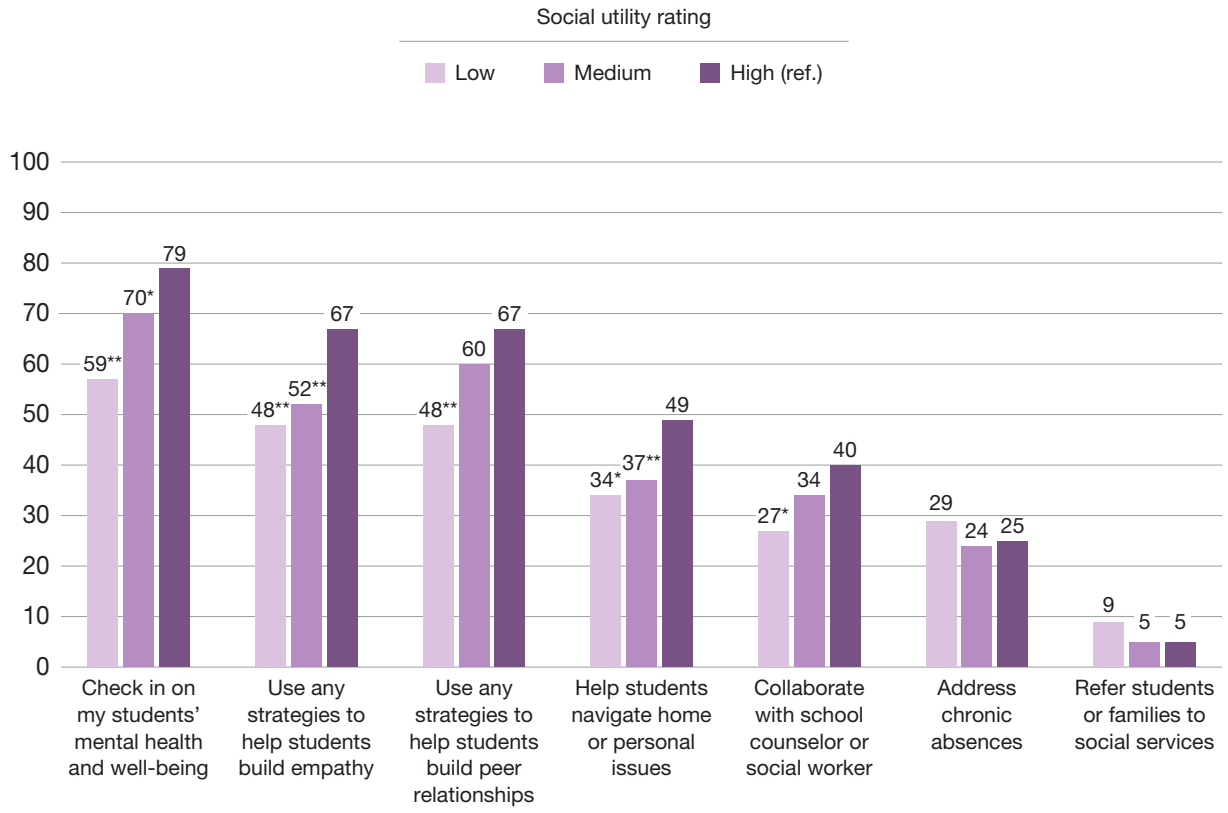
> Right now, our country is in a politically charged environment. Everyone feels it, from parents to students to teachers. The mental health of everyone we deal with has become a bit more fragile, it seems.

Relationships Between Teachers' Provision of Student Supports and Teachers' Work Environment and Well-Being

In this section, we explore the relationships between teachers' provision of student supports and teachers' work environment and well-being. Prior research suggests that providing student supports requires additional effort from teachers (Gunawardena et al.,

FIGURE 7

Percentage of Teachers Reporting That They Frequently Provided Each Student Well-Being Support During the 2025–2026 School Year, by Degree to Which Teachers Viewed Teaching as Providing Social Utility



NOTE: ref. = reference group. This figure displays response data from the question, "This school year (2025–2026), how often do you do the following things related to supporting students' mental health and well-being?" We present the percentage of teachers reporting that they provided each support frequently. An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group. Two asterisks (**) indicate that the difference remained statistically significant, even after we controlled for teachers' reports of intrinsic value and school-level characteristics (i.e., number of moderate or serious challenges present at teachers' schools, grade level, and school neighborhood poverty level). Teachers with low social utility ratings, $n = 167$; teachers with medium social utility ratings, $n = 397$; and teachers with high social utility ratings, $n = 224$. For more information on how we constructed the ratings, see the "How This Analysis Was Conducted" box at the end of this report.

2024; Nalipay et al., 2025) and can lead to stress and compassion fatigue as teachers struggle to balance their own mental health with students' needs, especially without adequate support (Ekornes, 2017; Luciw, 2024; Nalipay et al., 2025).

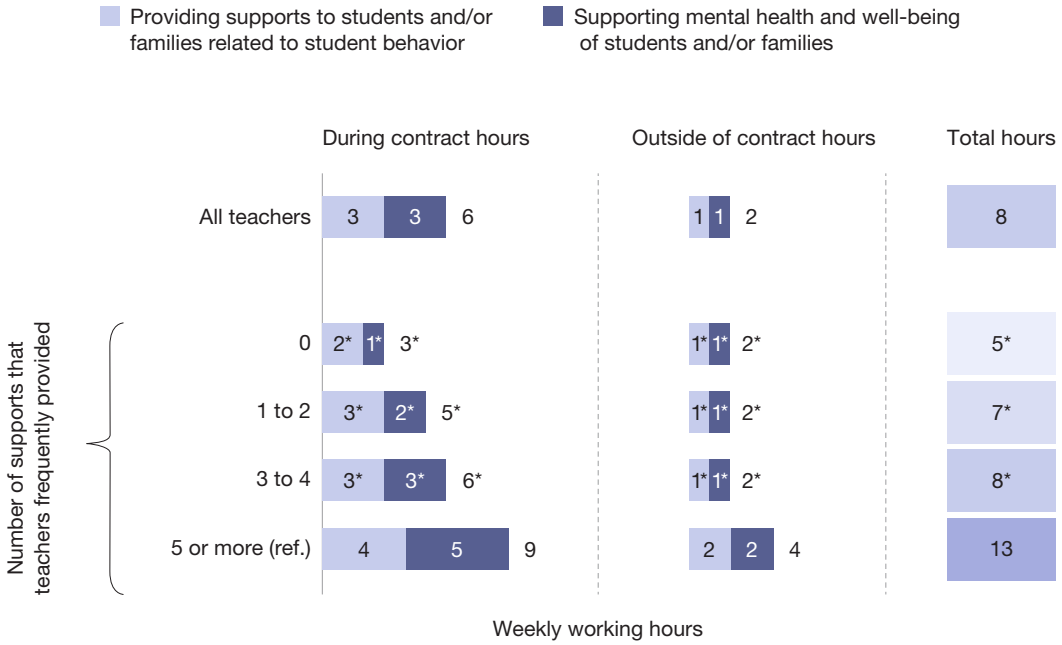
Therefore, we examine associations between teachers' provision of supports, teachers' workloads, and teachers' perceptions of the profession's costs. We then explore the relationship between teachers' provision of supports and their own well-being.

Teachers Spent, on Average, Eight Hours per Week Providing Student Supports

Teachers who frequently provided more student supports spent more hours on these activities—both during and outside of contract hours—than teachers who provided no or few supports (Figure 8). To understand how teachers apportioned their working hours, we asked them how many hours per week they spent on an array of activities, such as providing instruction, completing administrative or communication tasks, planning and preparing for instruc-

FIGURE 8

Number of Weekly Hours Teachers Estimated Providing Supports to Students and Their Families



NOTE: ref. = reference group. This figure displays response data from the question, "Please estimate how many hours you spend on each of the following activities in a typical week this school year (2025–2026) where it is your PRIMARY ACTIVITY. An activity is your primary activity if it is your main focus, even if you are also doing something else." We present the average number of hours that teachers reported spending on each activity during contract hours and outside of contract hours. An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group. Teachers who frequently provided zero supports, $n = 127$; teachers who frequently provided one to two supports, $n = 211$; teachers who frequently provided three to four supports, $n = 261$; and teachers who frequently provided five or more supports, $n = 188$.

tion, and providing supports to students and families relating to student behavior, mental health, and well-being.

Overall, teachers reported spending about eight hours per week providing these supports—most of which occurred during contract hours—accounting for 17 percent of their total hours worked. Teachers who did not frequently provide any student supports said that they spent five hours per week on these activities, or about 11 percent of their working hours. Teachers who frequently provided five or more of the supports we asked about said that they spent about 13 hours, or 28 percent of their working hours. Our analysis suggests that differences in teachers' hours worked reflected their provision of supports rather than the presence of student challenges at their schools, because teachers who reported more challenges did not report spending significantly more time supporting student well-being.

Additionally, teachers who frequently provided the most supports (i.e., five or more) reported working, on average, three more hours per week than teachers who frequently provided only a few supports (i.e., one or two). We are unable to account for how teachers allocated all of their working hours, but the additional time spent providing supports may have extended their total weekly working hours.

In open-ended responses, about 40 teachers explained that families often turned to schools for services, basic needs, and assistance. In turn, these teachers reported spending more time fulfilling the roles of such staff as counselors, school psychologists, and social workers; documenting and providing student accommodations; obtaining school supplies, clothing, and groceries; and redirecting students.

A few noted that this additional effort sometimes came at the cost of other tasks, including instruction:

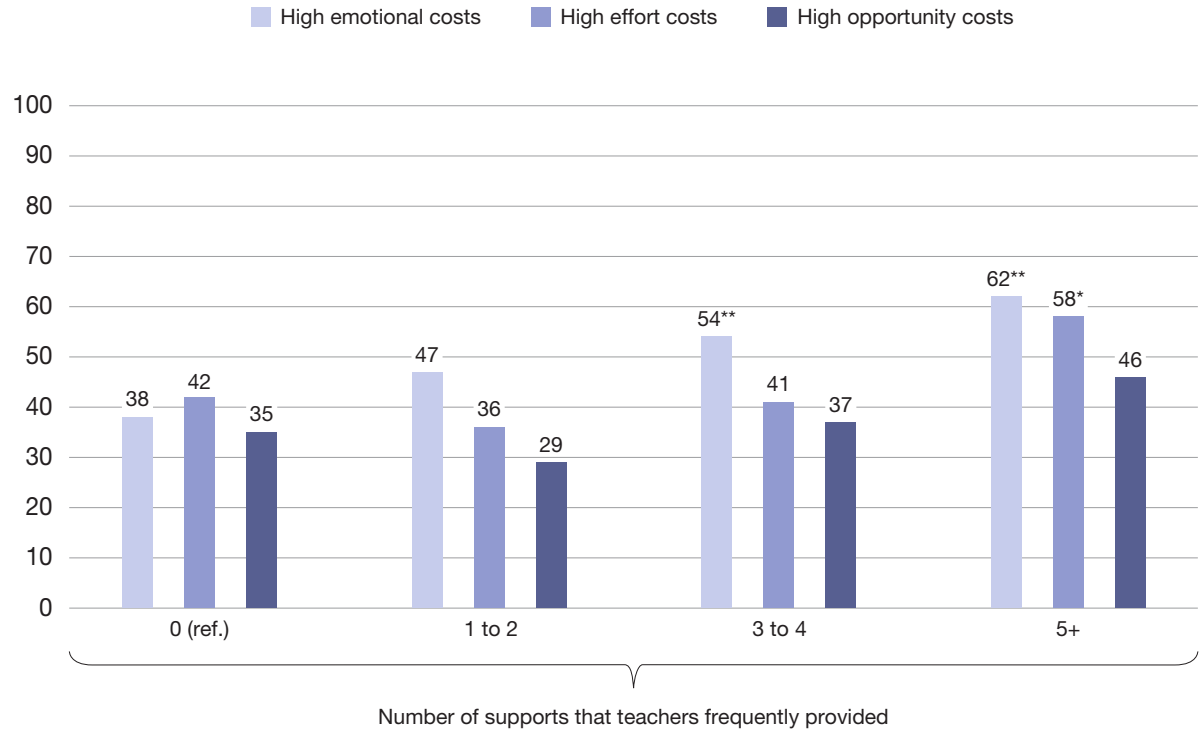
> I think as a school we are more aware of it [student and/or family mental health and well-being] and we are trying to address it more to check in on all students. But it comes at the [expense] of other tasks that teachers have to do in addition to their own mental health too.

Teachers Who Reported Providing More Student Supports Were More Likely to Report That Teaching Was Emotionally Draining

We found strong associations between the number of student supports that teachers reported providing and their perceptions of the costs of teaching (Figure 9). We asked about three main types of costs: emotional costs, effort costs, and opportunity costs (Bergey and Ranellucci, 2021). These constructs rep-

FIGURE 9

Percentage of Teachers Reporting High Costs of Teaching, by the Number of Student Supports Provided



NOTE: ref. = reference group. This figure displays the percentage of teachers who reported high emotional costs, effort costs, and opportunity costs to teaching. For more information on how we defined *high* costs, see the "How This Analysis Was Conducted" box at the end of this report. An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group. Two asterisks (**) indicate that the difference remained statistically significant, even after we controlled for other potential explanatory factors (i.e., teachers' perceptions of other costs and school-level characteristics, such as the number of moderate and serious challenges present at teachers' schools, grade level, and school neighborhood poverty level). Teachers who frequently provided zero supports, $n = 127$; teachers who frequently provided one to two supports, $n = 211$; teachers who frequently provided three to four supports, $n = 261$; and teachers who frequently provided five or more supports, $n = 188$.

resent, respectively, the extent to which teachers say that their work is emotionally draining, requires a heavy workload, and prevents them from doing other things they would like to do.

Among teachers who said that they did not frequently provide any supports for student well-being, 38 percent reported high emotional costs from teaching. That percentage nearly doubled to 62 percent among teachers who frequently provided five or more supports.[11] We observed a similar pattern for effort and opportunity costs, although differences were not as large as for emotional costs and were often not statistically significant.[12] Together, these results suggest that teachers' provision of student supports may be uniquely emotionally draining. (See the box below for more details on the emotional costs of teaching.)

Teachers Who Said That It Has Become Harder to Provide Students with Supports Were More Likely to Report Poor Well-Being

After we accounted for school context and teachers' perceptions of the costs of teaching, we observed that teachers' *provision* of student well-being supports was not associated with their own well-being. Instead, teachers' well-being was significantly and consistently associated with their perceptions of *changes in the difficulty* of providing student well-being supports. Even after controlling for other potential explanatory factors, we found that teachers who reported increased difficulty were more likely to report experiencing frequent job-related stress, difficulty coping with job-related stress, depression, and burnout (Figure 11). Together, these results suggest that barriers to supporting students and families, such as inadequate resources or broader sociopolitical changes that intensify student and family challenges, may influence teacher well-being more than provision of the supports themselves.

Summary and Implications

As challenges to children's mental health and well-being intensify, teachers increasingly serve as front-line responders. The vast majority already report regularly engaging in activities that support student well-being, and those efforts have grown over time.

Teaching Is a Uniquely Emotionally Demanding Profession

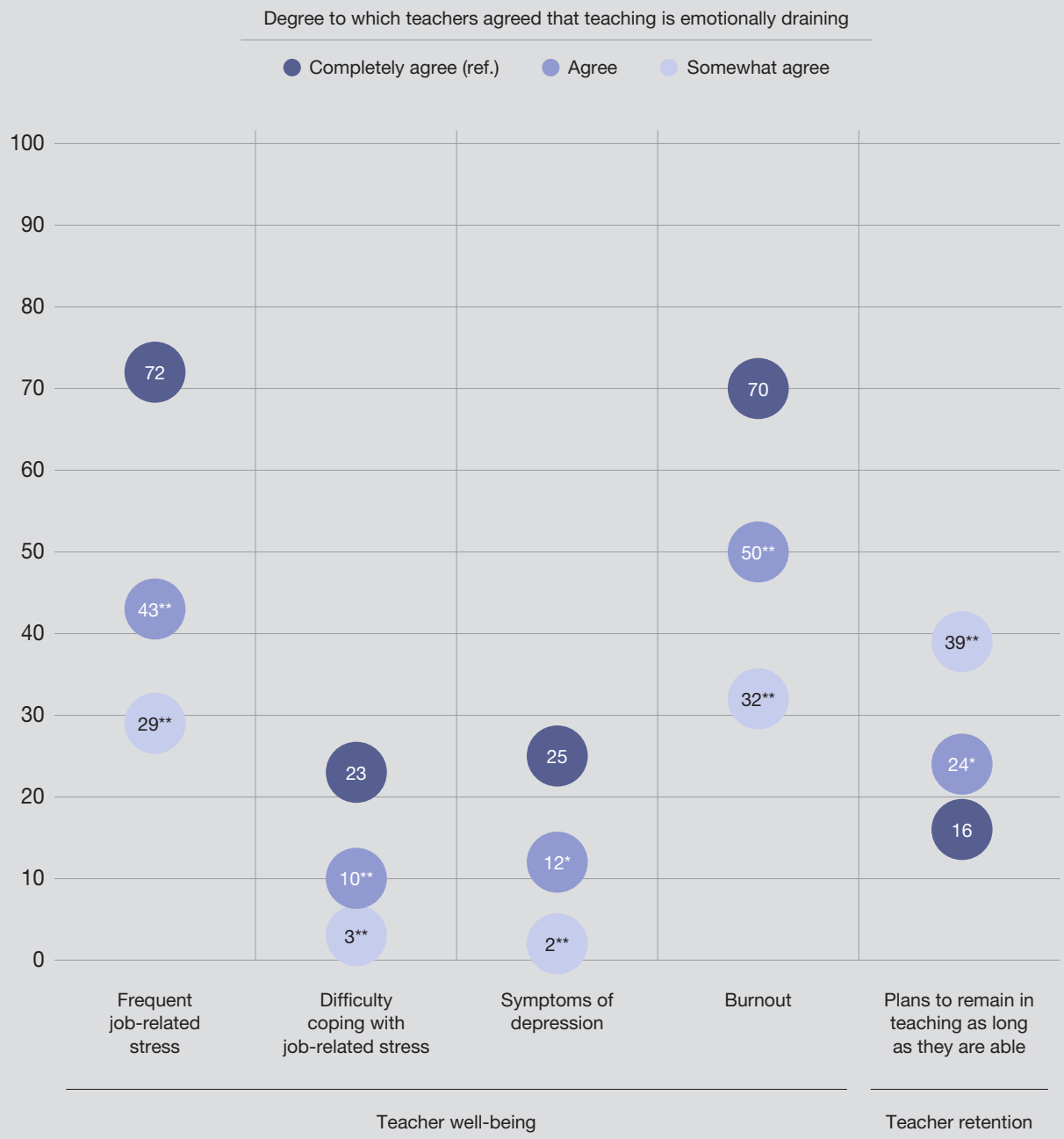
Ninety-six percent of teachers agreed that teaching is emotionally draining; in comparison, 51 percent of similar working adults reported the same about their own occupations. Moreover, 51 percent of teachers *completely* agreed that their occupations are emotionally draining, compared with just 11 percent of similar working adults. Elementary teachers face elevated emotional costs: 58 percent completely agreed that teaching is emotionally draining, compared with 49 and 45 percent of middle and high school teachers, respectively.

Teachers who completely agreed that teaching is emotionally draining were far more likely to report poor well-being (see Figure 10). Differences were large: Among teachers who only *somewhat* agreed that teaching is emotionally draining, 29 percent reported experiencing frequent job-related stress, compared with 72 percent of teachers who *completely* agreed that teaching is emotionally draining. We observed this same pattern across other well-being indicators, such as difficulty coping with job-related stress, symptoms of depression, and burnout.

Notably, teachers' perceptions of the emotional costs of teaching were associated with their longer-term plans to remain in the profession but not with their intentions to stay in their current jobs by the end of the school year. Teachers who only *somewhat* agreed that teaching was emotionally draining were more than twice as likely as teachers who *completely* agreed to say that they planned to remain in teaching as long as they were able (39 percent compared with 16 percent). However, some of these relationships were no longer statistically significant after we controlled for perceptions of effort and opportunity costs. This suggests that teachers likely perceive multiple types of costs simultaneously, all of which contribute to their intentions to remain in the profession.

FIGURE 10

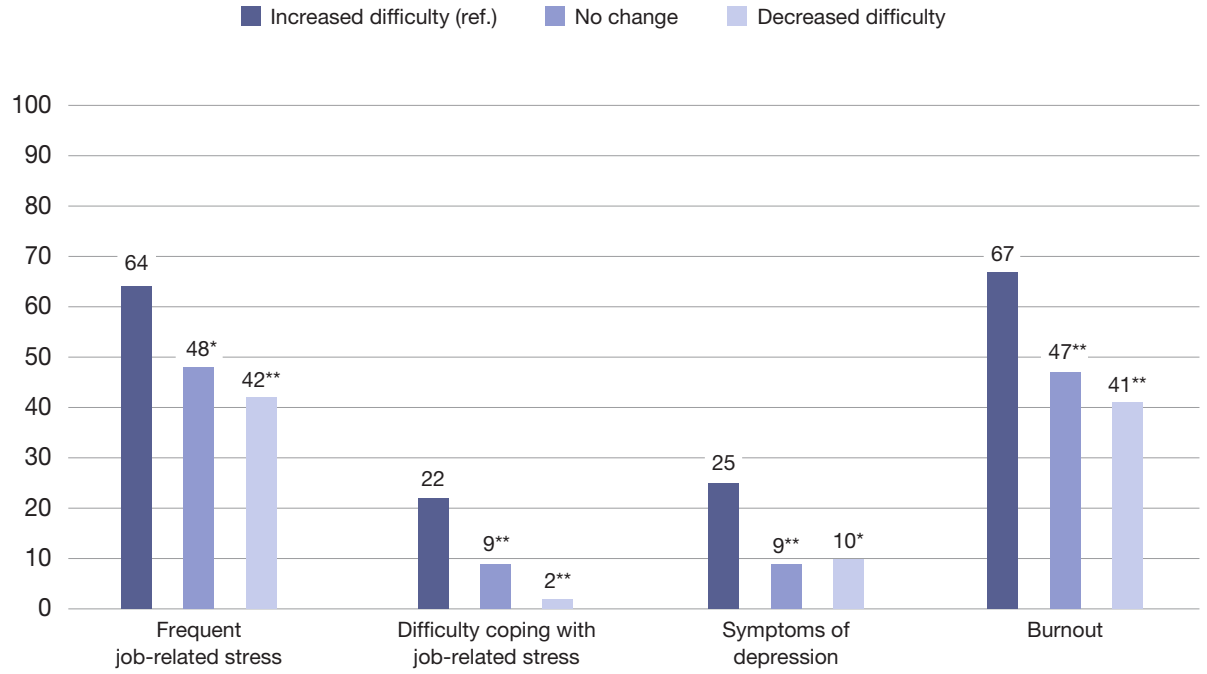
Percentage of Teachers Reporting Poor Well-Being and Plans to Remain in Teaching, by Emotional Cost



NOTE: ref. = reference group. This figure displays data drawn from several questions on teacher well-being. Refer to Doan et al. (2026) to see how we defined each well-being indicator. In addition, we draw on data from the question, "Which statement best describes how long you plan to remain in teaching?" An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group. Two asterisks (**) indicate that the difference remained statistically significant, even after we controlled for teachers' reports of teaching's effort and opportunity costs and school-level characteristics (i.e., number of moderate or serious challenges present at teachers' schools, grade level, and school neighborhood poverty level). Teachers who completely agreed that teaching is emotionally draining, $n = 435$; teachers who agreed that teaching is emotionally draining, $n = 236$; and teachers who somewhat agreed that teaching is emotionally draining, $n = 124$. We do not present the results of teachers who did not agree that teaching is emotionally draining because of the small sample size.

FIGURE 11

Percentage of Teachers Reporting Poor Well-Being, by Perceived Changes in Difficulty of Providing Student and Family Well-Being Supports Since Fall 2024



NOTE: ref. = reference group. This figure displays teacher well-being data drawn from several survey questions. Refer to Doan et al., 2026, to see how we defined each well-being indicator. An asterisk (*) indicates that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group. Two asterisks (**) indicate that the difference remained statistically significant, even after we controlled for other potential explanatory factors (i.e., grade level, school neighborhood poverty level, number of moderate or serious challenges at teachers' schools, and perceived emotional, opportunity, and effort costs of teaching). Teachers who reported increased difficulty, $n = 398$; teachers who reported no change, $n = 350$; and teachers who reported decreased difficulty, $n = 40$.

Teachers cannot be expected to wholly take on the role of trained mental health professionals. However, the prevalence of challenges that are often associated with poor student well-being—combined with the breadth and frequency of teachers' existing efforts—underscores the importance of ensuring that teachers can manage the difficulty of providing these supports effectively.

Teachers face substantial obstacles in this work. In-school constraints limit what they can do: Insufficient staffing of school counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals; budget cuts; and administrative hurdles all slow access to support. Meanwhile, providing well-being supports more intensively adds to teachers' already extensive workloads. Teachers who frequently provided many well-being supports reported spending more time on these activities, working more weekly hours, and experiencing higher emotional costs. Teachers also said that external forces compound classroom challenges. Economic hardship, reductions to social safety net programs, and a divisive political climate all generate community stress that students carry into school.

Perhaps as a result of these myriad challenges, half of teachers nationally reported that they have experienced increased difficulty in supporting student and family mental health and well-being. Even as teacher well-being has improved slightly since the COVID-19 pandemic (Steiner, Levine, and Doan, 2026), providing student and family supports has only gotten harder for a significant portion of the teacher workforce. Federal pandemic relief and recovery funds had bolstered districts' efforts to address students' social, emotional, and mental health needs (James and Shoemaker DeMio, 2024). However, with the expiration of those funds, schools are poised to experience even greater resource constraints in the imminent future (Clinton et al., 2026).

High school teachers face a distinct challenge. They were the most likely to report challenges affecting student well-being yet the least likely to regularly provide supports. These patterns may reflect structural realities (e.g., interacting with far more students each day), a lack of grade level–appropriate resources, and differences in views on whether mental health and well-being support falls within their role.

We also identified potential bright spots. Teachers who derived intrinsic value from their work and said they believed that teaching makes a social contribution were more likely to provide supports for student well-being. Our results also suggest that reducing barriers to providing well-being supports can protect teacher well-being. When teachers perceived that providing well-being supports had become harder to do—whether because of dwindling resources or intensifying external pressures—they also reported significantly more job-related stress, difficulty coping with that stress, and symptoms of depression and burnout. Removing obstacles and creating supportive conditions can therefore protect teachers while strengthening the support that students receive. With that in mind, we offer the following recommendations to build teachers' capacity and establish system-level conditions that make this work sustainable.

Teachers who derived intrinsic value from their work and said they believed that teaching makes a social contribution were more likely to provide supports for student well-being.

Recommendations

Mental and Behavioral Health Program Providers Should Build Adolescent-Specific Curricula for Secondary Teachers

The gap between high school teachers' experience of challenges affecting student well-being and their provision of supports signals an opportunity for program providers and education leaders to develop and direct more resources toward building high school teachers' capacity for supporting student well-being.

Helping students foster positive identity development, the capacity for emotional regulation, empathy for others, and responsible decisionmaking connects directly to the challenges that teachers reported. Yet a minority of secondary teachers reported that their schools have clear visions for such skill development or that they use programs or curricula designed to target those skills (RAND Corporation, 2020). Moreover, relatively few evidence-based programs designed to foster such skills target secondary grades, and those that do tend to be less effective than those developed for elementary students (Yeager, 2017).

To fill this gap, mental and behavioral health program providers should focus on crafting developmentally appropriate curricula for developing adolescents' inter- and intrapersonal skills and executive functioning. To build a broad base of support for these resources, program providers should highlight how these skills connect to critical workforce competencies, such as communication, collaboration, and leadership (Baird and Parayitam, 2019), which are in turn connected to eventual career advancement and adaptability (Hosseinioun et al., 2025).

Districts Should Support Students and Teachers by Addressing Out-of-School Barriers Through Community Schools or Similar Strategies

As individuals, teachers have limited capacity to address broad sociopolitical or economic challenges. This points to the importance of taking a systems-

Our findings suggest that addressing barriers to providing well-being supports may alleviate strains on teachers' own well-being.

level approach to addressing out-of-school challenges that impede students' readiness to learn.

The community schools strategy offers one such approach. A core pillar of the community schools model emphasizes integrated, wraparound student supports—such as physical and mental health services—to address barriers that impede students' readiness to learn (Maier et al., 2017). Research suggests that community schools can reduce chronic absenteeism and improve academic achievement, family engagement, and families' access to such services as food pantries and housing programs (Johnston et al., 2020; Olson, 2014; Swain et al., 2025).

Our findings suggest that addressing barriers to providing well-being supports may alleviate strains on teachers' own well-being. By reducing teachers' concerns about students' nonacademic needs, helping teachers share the work of supporting students with other school staff, and promoting collaborative decisionmaking, the community schools strategy can foster a more sustainable working environment for teachers (Ball and Anderson-Butcher, 2014; Daniel, Quartz, and Oakes, 2019; Truwit, 2025).

For districts that lack resources to fully implement the community schools strategy across schools, engaging with community-based organizations to address families' most pressing needs may be a viable alternative.

Limitations

This research has some limitations. First, as with all survey research, our results draw on teachers' self-reports. We have no way to verify the extent of the challenges they reported at their schools (e.g., rates of chronic absenteeism) or the frequency with which they provided well-being supports. Although we piloted our survey items with a set of teachers before administering the survey, teachers may also have provided well-being supports that we did not ask about.

Budget and survey space constraints also prevented us from collecting data on a comprehensive set of factors that might explain why and how teachers provided supports for student mental health and well-being—such as the nature of teachers' in-service professional learning or their students' access to school counselors, community-based mental health providers, and similar resources. Numerous factors unmeasured in our survey may have influenced teachers' responses or the differences across teacher subgroups that we observed.

Although we present survey results to illuminate potential factors related to teachers' provision of student supports and the relationships between those supports and teachers' work environment and well-being, our findings are not evidence of any causal effect, as noted earlier. Additionally, we cannot be certain about the directions of those associations.

Finally, the findings related to our one open-ended question might not be representative of teachers nationally because they are based on only those teachers who provided interpretable responses. Because of the broad nature of the open-ended question and teachers' responses, as well as the nonrepresentativeness of our qualitative sample, the perspectives expressed by the teachers in our qualitative sample might be more or less prevalent in the general population of teachers than our data suggest.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

We assigned each SoT survey respondent a weight to ensure that estimates reflected the national population of teachers. Characteristics that factored into this process included descriptors at the individual level (e.g., gender, professional experience) and the school level (e.g., school size, grade level, locale). We also assigned each ALP respondent a weight to ensure that estimates reflected the national population of working adults. More information about SoT survey sampling and weighting is available in our technical report (Doan et al., 2026).

In this report, we examine teachers' provision of supports for student and family mental health and well-being. We asked teachers about the frequency with which they provided various types of supports, as well as whether the amount of time and difficulty involved in providing those supports had increased since the prior school year (fall 2024). We piloted these items with teachers before administering the survey to ensure that they captured the broad types of supports that teachers commonly provide.

Throughout this report, we examine various influences on teachers' provision of supports, one of which is teachers' attitudes regarding the value and costs of teaching (Bergey and Ranellucci, 2021; Watt and Richardson, 2007). We used the following survey items to represent each construct:

- Intrinsic value
  - *Teaching is interesting.*
- Social utility value
  - *Teachers make a worthwhile social contribution.*
  - *Teaching allows me to help disadvantaged students.*
  - *I like working with children and adolescents.*
- Personal utility value
  - *Teaching hours fit with the responsibilities of having a family.*
  - *Teaching offers a steady career path.*
  - *Teaching provides a reliable income.*
- Emotional costs
  - *Teaching is emotionally draining.*
- Opportunity costs
  - *I can't spend as much time doing the other things that I would like because of my teaching responsibilities.*
- Effort costs
  - *Teaching is too much work.*

For each survey item, we asked teachers the extent to which they disagreed or agreed with each statement on a seven-point response scale. To create a scale for each construct, we converted teachers' responses to z-scores where 0 equals the sample mean, thereby standardizing all scales and facilitating comparisons across them. Then, we categorized z-scores into three levels to facilitate interpretation and analysis. We determined cut points for the categories by examining the distribution of teachers' responses. Scores less than or equal to –0.5 were categorized as *low*, scores between –0.05 and 0.05 were categorized as *medium*, and scores greater than or equal to 0.5 were categorized as *high*. These cut points correspond to half of one standard deviation below and above the sample mean, such that the medium category represents teachers whose scores fell within one-half of a standard deviation of the sample average, while the low and high categories represent individuals with relatively lower and higher levels of the construct, respectively.

In addition to our quantitative survey data, we qualitatively analyzed one open-ended survey question to better understand how teachers' provision of supports, and the conditions surrounding them, had changed over the past school year. We asked teachers, "How, if at all, has supporting students' and/or their families' mental health and well-being changed from fall 2024 to now?" We presented all respondents with this question. Of our total sample of 829 respondents, 728 answered the open-ended question. We limited our analysis to responses

from 686 teachers that were clear enough for us to interpret and code, meaning that we excluded 42 responses that we considered uninterpretable (which were largely responses of "N/A" or "Unsure"). One qualitative coder identified emergent codes to create a coding scheme designed to capture high-level themes and finer-grained subthemes to meaningfully describe the variety of responses. When we discuss the open-ended data, we provide frequency counts (e.g., about 20 teachers, about 300 teachers, one-fifth of teachers) to provide a sense of how frequently some of the themes arose.

NOTE: We recycle language describing the qualitative methods used to analyze our open-ended survey data from prior reports using similar methods, such as Steiner, Woo, and Doan (2025).

Notes

[1] Much of the existing research on how teachers respond to student mental health challenges is qualitative, is drawn from small teacher samples, or reports on teacher experiences outside the United States (see Deaton et al., 2022; Gunawardena et al., 2024; Luthar and Mendes, 2020; and Nalipay et al., 2025).

[2] We define *similar working adults* as employed adults who are not K–12 teachers, are between the ages of 18 and 65, hold at least a bachelor's degree, and report working at least 35 hours per week (Allegretto, 2024).

[3] We did not provide teachers with a definition of *social services* in the survey. We anticipate that social services might include wraparound services, such as those related to providing students and families with basic needs supports or community-based mental health or behavioral supports.

[4] Throughout the report, we focus on teachers' frequent (i.e., weekly or more often) provision of student supports to understand how teachers' experiences differ depending on their regular—rather than occasional—support of student well-being.

[5] There are important methodological differences between the SoT survey and the NTPS that complicate a direct comparison of teachers' responses. One core difference is that the NTPS uses a sampling frame that consists of lists of teachers working at schools selected for the NTPS sample (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-a). In contrast, SoT survey respondents are sampled from RAND's broader American Teacher Panel (ATP), a standing panel of more than 25,000 K–12 public school teachers. The sampling frame for the ATP is acquired from MDR, the education division of Dun & Bradstreet (Doan et al., 2026). Additionally, NTPS respondents complete the survey over the course of several months, from December to August (Taie and Lewis, 2022), while SoT survey respondents complete the survey over the course of roughly a month every school year, from January to February (Doan et al., 2026).

[6] Middle school teachers were significantly less likely than high school teachers to report the presence of such challenges as student tardiness, student class cutting, and students dropping out as moderate or serious problems. They were also significantly more likely than elementary teachers to report the presence of such challenges as student absenteeism, student apathy, student lack of preparedness to learn, and poor student mental health.

[7] Minor discrepancies in differences are due to rounding.

[8] For more information on how we constructed ratings for teachers' attitudes, see the "How This Analysis Was Conducted" box at the end of this report.

[9] To better isolate the relationship between teachers' reports of social utility value and student supports, we controlled for teachers' reports of intrinsic value, as well as other school-level characteristics correlated with teachers' supports (i.e., the number of moderate or serious challenges present at teachers' schools, grade level, and school neighborhood poverty level). We conducted a parallel analysis when examining the relationship between teachers' reports of intrinsic value and teachers' provision of student supports.

[10] One minor difference was that *novice* teachers (i.e., those with five years of experience or less) were less likely than their more experienced counterparts to frequently provide zero supports (5 percent, compared with about 20 percent of more experienced teachers) and more likely to frequently provide a few supports (i.e., one or two). Novice teachers were also about 20 percentage points more likely than their more experienced counterparts to say that they frequently helped students build peer relationships.

[11] Notably, teachers reporting more school-level challenges also reported higher emotional costs. For instance, 30 percent of teachers reporting no moderate or serious challenges reported high emotional costs, compared with 58 percent of teachers reporting five or more moderate or serious challenges. This result was still significant after we controlled for teachers' provision of supports, suggesting that greater challenges are also independently associated with higher emotional costs.

[12] To explore the association between teachers' provision of supports and their perceptions of teaching's costs, we used a regression model that controlled for teacher-reported challenges, grade level, and school neighborhood poverty level. Because each of these factors is correlated with teachers' provision of supports, adding these controls helped better isolate the unique relationship between teachers' provision of supports and perceived costs. In addition, when examining, for instance, the relationship between teachers' provision of supports and emotional costs, we further controlled for teachers' reports of effort costs and opportunity costs, given the correlation between teachers' reports of teaching's costs.

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Acknowledgments

We are extremely grateful to the teachers and working adults who have agreed to participate in the panels. We thank the following RAND Survey Panel staff for their work on the surveys: Melissa Diliberti, Joshua Eagan, Gerald "Casey" Hunter, Vanessa Miller, Julie Newell, Tina Petrossian, Dorothy Seaman, and Lisa Wagner. We are grateful to Stacey Pelika and her colleagues at the National Education Association and to Marla Ucelli-Kashyap and her colleagues at the American Federation of Teachers for their partnership. We thank Benjamin Master, Susan Patrick, and Jaimie Shaff for helpful feedback that greatly improved this report. We thank Emily Ward for her editorial expertise and Monette Velasco for overseeing the publication process.

In addition to engaging expert human peer reviewers, the quality assurance team used assistive artificial intelligence tools to suggest writing improvements to the authors.

About This Report

Young people face significant mental health challenges, and teachers are increasingly on the front lines, checking in on students and connecting families to services. This report describes how teachers provide such supports, changes in the difficulty of providing supports, and the consequences for teachers' work environment and well-being. We draw on survey data from the American Teacher Panel (ATP), which is a nationally representative sample of more than 25,000 pre-kindergarten to grade 12 teachers across the United States. The ATP is one of three survey panels that make up the American Educator Panels (AEP), which are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country.

The AEP is part of the RAND Survey Panels. The RAND Survey Panels are dedicated to collecting and disseminating state-of-the-art, population-representative survey data to support research that addresses the most pressing public policy challenges. For more information on the RAND Survey Panels and the specific panels featured in this report, visit https://www.rand.org/surveypanels.

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Funding

This report is based on research funded by the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers. The findings and conclusions presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the funders.

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RR-A4404-6