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Identifying Supports for Struggling Students

Findings from the 2021 Learn Together Surveys

Key Findings

- Teachers rely most often on information that they gather from personal interactions with students and from students' performance on teacher-created classroom tasks to support students' academic needs.
- More than 50 percent of teachers first look to school and district colleagues for information about interventions and supports for students.
- Teachers are least likely to report knowing where to find information to support students experiencing poverty, English language learners, and anti-racist instruction.

Teachers commonly rely on many sources of information to diagnose student needs and to identify the most-appropriate resources to support those needs (Sun, Przybylski, and Johnson, 2016). In previous RAND Corporation reports that have drawn from the American Educator Panels (AEP), we found that English language arts and mathematics teachers often supplemented their regular instructional materials with academic intervention programs designed to support struggling learners (Kaufman et al., 2020; Stelitano et al., 2020). In this Data Note, we use nationally representative survey response data from 6th- to 12th-grade teachers in the American Teacher Panel who completed the 2021 Learn Together Surveys (LTS) to examine how secondary teachers leverage different types of information to guide them to the supports and interventions that they use in the classroom. Specifically, we look at three questions:

1. What types of information do teachers consider when looking to support struggling students?
2. What sources do teachers use to find interventions?
3. Are teachers more confident in their ability to find information to support certain student needs more than others?

In this Data Note, we discuss three key findings from 2021 LTS response data and conclude with implications and policy recommendations based on our analysis.

Teachers Rely Most Often on Information That They Gather from Personal Interactions with Students and from Students’ Performance on Teacher-Created Classroom Tasks to Support Students’ Academic Needs

In the 2021 LTS, teachers were provided with a list of 13 data sources and asked to select and rank their top-three sources of information to “improve their [students’] academic performance” for those students whom they had previously identified as struggling academically. Table 1 shows the percentage of

teachers who selected each source (1) in their “top 3” and (2) as their top-ranked source.

The most commonly selected sources, with more than 40 percent of teachers ranking them among their top three, included teachers’ personal interactions with students (“conversations with students,” “observations of students”) and students’ performance on teacher-created “classrooms tasks, assignments, or projects.” Conversely, 10 percent or less of teachers indicated using data from tests and quizzes included in their curriculum materials, data that is built into curriculum software, or data from required grade-level tests. Given that results from grade-level tests are generally not available until the summer following the end of the academic year, information from these tests might help teachers *identify* students with histories of low achievement, but this information might not be timely enough to actively guide *support* for such students in the current academic year (Sun, Przybylski, and Johnson, 2016).¹

TABLE 1

Teachers’ Top Sources of Information for Helping Struggling Students

Source of Information	Percentage of Teachers	
	Selected in Their Top Three Sources	Ranked as Their Top Source
Conversations with students	47	18
Your observations of students	47	17
Classroom tasks, assignments, or projects you created	40	14
Students’ Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)	25	10
Conversations with other teachers	24	7
Conversations with parents, guardians, or other family members	23	6
Tests or quizzes you created	22	8
Classroom tasks, assignments, or projects that are provided in your curriculum materials	21	6
Conversations with other school staff (e.g., counselors, School Resource Officer)	19	5
Tests or quizzes that are provided in your curriculum materials	10	3
Data that is built into curriculum software	8	2
Required grade-level tests	8	2
Conversations with administrators	6	2

NOTE: This table reflects teacher responses to the following survey question: “When you use data to help your struggling students improve their academic performance, what three sources have you used most often this school year (2020–21)?” Teachers were asked to select and rank up to three sources. This table presents the percentages of teachers who selected each source as (1) among their top three sources and (2) as their top source. (n = 3,550)

Also, disruptions to required standardized testing because of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years likely further inhibited teachers’ access and use of required standardized tests to guide their choice of student supports.

As the use of digital learning management systems and instructional materials increased during the remote-learning period brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers might have used more data from their curriculum materials and software (e.g., academic and student engagement assessments, classroom tasks) (Bushweller, 2020; Gartner, 2011). Although the 2021 LTS did not specifically ask teachers about the availability of curriculum material–embedded data, we did not find that usage of these data sources was significantly higher among teachers who taught in remote or hybrid settings, who would be most likely to use digital materials that include these data.

More Than 50 Percent of Teachers First Look to School and District Colleagues for Information About Interventions and Supports for Students

Teachers look to various sources, including their colleagues, the internet, and school and district resources, to learn more about available interventions. Using data collected through the LTS, we examine the sources that teachers use when finding an intervention to support their students. Respondents were asked to either select the first place that they would go to find an intervention among a list of 13 sources or indicate that they “have all the interventions [they need] to support [their] students.” The percentages of teacher responses to this question are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

The First Places Where Teachers Look to Find Interventions to Support Students

Intervention Source	Percentage of Teachers
Ask a school leader or support staff at my school	24
Ask another teacher at my or another school	22
Internet information search (e.g., broad search on the topic using Google or a similar search engine)	14
Ask a leader or other support staff at my district	11
Online platforms for resource sharing (e.g., Pinterest, Teachers Pay Teachers, YouTube)	10
Develop a resource myself and/or ask other teachers/staff to develop a resource	7
Online social network inquiry or search (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, or similar for strategies from other teachers)	3
School or district website	3
Professional association online platform (e.g., AFT or NEA websites)	2
State Department of Education website	2
Other	1
None (I have all the interventions I need to support my students)	1
Ask someone in the district central office	1

NOTE: This table reflects teacher responses to the following survey question: “Where is the first place you would go to find an intervention (e.g., tools, programs, or strategies) to support your students?” Teachers were asked to select one response. This table presents the percentage of teachers selecting each source. AFT = American Federation of Teachers; NEA = National Education Association. (n = 3,548)

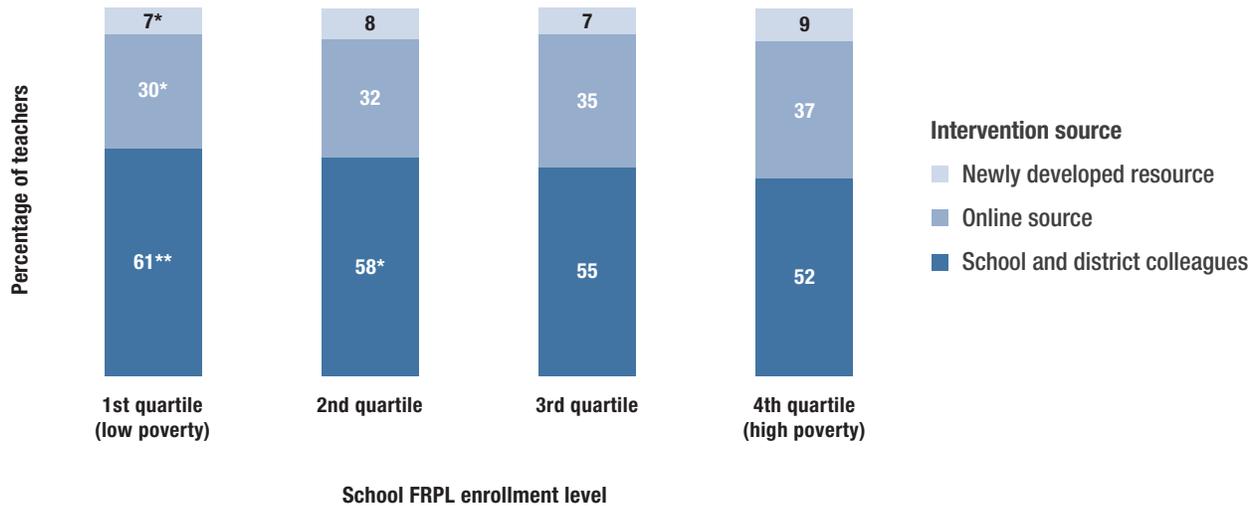
A majority of teachers (57 percent) responded that they would first reach out to school and district colleagues, including other teachers, support staff, and school leaders. This finding aligns with prior research on the importance of teachers’ use of formal and informal networks to seek advice on multiple dimensions of the teaching profession, including instructional support (Horn et al., 2020; Wilhelm et al., 2020). The second-largest percentage of teachers (34 percent) responded that they look at online sources (e.g., “State Department of Education website,” “school or district website,” “professional association online platform,” “internet information search,” “online social network inquiry or search,” and “online platforms for resource sharing”). Only 7 percent of teachers said that they first develop a new resource themselves or ask other teachers or staff to develop a needed resource. These results are consistent with other findings that teachers learn more about education trends and new ideas through word

of mouth and from colleagues than by online sources (e.g., teacher-focused websites, social media, research journals, news websites) (Education Week Research Center, 2017).

Using school free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) eligibility as a proxy for school poverty level, we find that teachers working in schools with higher poverty turn to school and district colleagues less often, opting instead to use online sources (see Figure 1). When comparing schools in the bottom 25 percent (1st quartile) and top 25 percent (4th quartile) of school FRPL enrollment, fewer teachers in the schools with the most FRPL-eligible students reported seeking information about interventions from school and district colleagues (52 percent compared with 61 percent). Female teachers were also less likely to indicate that they first go to their peers (54 percent compared with 62 percent among male teachers). Because these results are purely descriptive, there are several possible confounders that

FIGURE 1

The First Places Where Teachers Go to Find Interventions to Support Students, by Source Type and School FRPL Enrollment



NOTE: This figure reflects teacher responses to the following survey question: “Where is the first place you would go to find an intervention (e.g., tools, programs, or strategies) to support your students?” Teachers were asked to select one response. This figure presents the percentage of teachers selecting each type of intervention source, grouped into three categories: (1) school and district colleagues, (2) online source, and (3) newly developed resource. Teacher responses are grouped into quartiles based on their school’s FRPL enrollment (i.e., “1st quartile” refers to teachers whose schools are in the 1st to 25th percentile of school FRPL enrollment and “4th quartile” refers to teachers whose schools are in the 75th to 99th percentile of school FRPL enrollment. Asterisks denote statistical significance (* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$) of percentage differences relative to teachers whose schools are in the 4th quartile of school FRPL enrollment. ($n = 3,453$)

might explain the patterns that we have observed by school poverty level and teacher gender. For example, teachers in high-poverty schools might have fewer colleagues to consult because teachers in high-poverty schools tend to have less experience (California Department of Education, Professional Learning Support Division, 2016) and have a higher turnover rate than teachers in low-poverty schools have (Goldring, Taie, and Riddles, 2014). Responses of male and female teachers might differ because of systemic factors, such as subject matter or grade level taught.

Teachers Are Least Likely to Report Knowing Where to Find Information to Support Students Experiencing Poverty, English Language Learners, and Anti-Racist Instruction

Although prior findings have focused on how teachers identify supports for academically struggling students, the 2021 LTS also asked about teachers' confidence in finding information for supporting specific student subpopulations (e.g., students with disabilities, students experiencing poverty, students of color) and content beyond strict academic instruction (e.g., social and emotional learning, anti-racist pedagogy).

Figure 2 shows the percentage of teachers who agreed (dark and light blue bars) and disagreed (dark and light orange bars) that they know where to find information on different types of student supports. More than 90 percent of respondents agreed that they know where to find information on how to “implement high-quality, standards-aligned curriculum and instructional resources in [their] classroom practice”—a finding that aligns well with the ubiquity of standards and curriculum supports at the national, state, and local levels (EdReports.org, 2021). Comparatively, less than 80 percent of respondents overall indicated that they know where to find information for interventions that specifically support “students who are experiencing poverty,” “English language learners (ELLs),” or the incorporation of

“anti-racist teaching methods or materials.” Less than 30 percent of respondents indicated that they “strongly agreed” that they know where to find information on these topics.

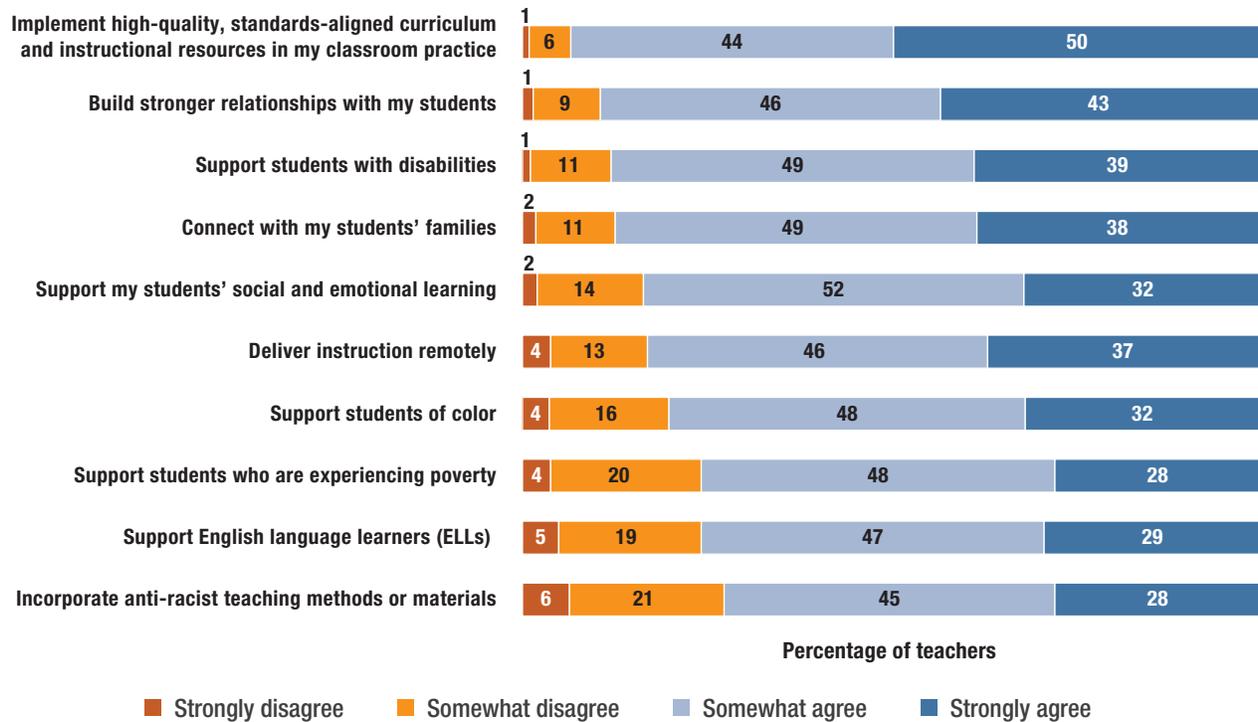
We find that teachers who reported teaching student populations with larger proportions of students of color, students experiencing poverty (as indicated by school FRPL enrollment), and English language learners were also more likely to indicate that they knew where to find information to support those specific communities. For example, 68 percent of teachers in schools in the first quartile of school FRPL enrollment indicated that they know how to find information to “support students who are experiencing poverty” compared with 81 percent of teachers in the fourth quartile of school FRPL enrollment. This suggests that teachers' ability to find information to support specific student subgroups could be linked to whether they teach students in those subgroups. However, we do not find evidence that teachers' ability to find information on “[incorporating] anti-racist teaching methods or materials” differed by observable teacher or student demographic characteristics. The lower rates of teacher confidence in identifying useful information on implementing anti-racist instruction or materials could reflect both the emerging availability of supports for, in addition to the controversy surrounding, the inclusion of anti-racist content in K–12 classroom instruction (Education Week Research Center, 2020; Milner, 2017; Milner et al., 2017).²

Implications and Recommendations

In this Data Note, we document patterns in the sources of information that teachers use to guide their choices of academic supports for struggling students, where they turn to find specific supports, and the types of students and student needs that they feel most confident in identifying supports for. Broadly, teachers trusted their own eyes and ears, and those of their colleagues. Respondents were most likely to report trusting their own observations of and interactions with students to determine how to support

FIGURE 2

Percentage of Teachers Who Know Where to Find Information on Different Types of Student Supports



NOTE: This figure reflects teacher responses to the following survey question: “If needed, I know where to find relevant, actionable information about the best ways (e.g., tools, programs, or strategies) to do the following [statements].” Teachers were asked to indicate whether they (1) strongly disagree, (2) somewhat disagree, (3) somewhat agree, or (4) strongly agree to each of the above statements. (n = 3,550)

academically struggling students, and they turned first to school and district colleagues to identify specific supports and interventions. Teachers’ perceptions and those of their colleagues play a critical and necessary role in how they make sense of implementing new supports, but this filtering of information through teachers’ personal networks could delay or even distort the adoption of supports for dimensions of instruction that teachers and their colleagues are less familiar with.

Our findings indicate that teachers are most comfortable with seeking out information on the rigor and standards alignment of instructional materials, an area where most teachers regularly report receiving school leader, peer, and professional development support (Kaufman et al., 2020). Teachers, as a

whole, are less comfortable with finding information on resources to support students of color, students experiencing poverty, and anti-racist instruction, in which the nascency of formal guidance can leave teachers and their colleagues struggling to adopt the information that they do find with fidelity and in an effective manner (Education Week Research Center, 2020; Phillip, 2011).

Using the findings presented in this Data Note, we recommend the following strategies that education policymakers could employ to encourage teachers to leverage a blend of their personal expertise, social networks, and external sources to identify student supports and interventions:

- *Develop guidance on using multiple sources of information to guide student supports.*

Teachers were more likely to report using their perceptions and interactions with students to determine how to support struggling students rather than data from required grade-level tests and curriculum materials. Students might be best served when teachers use a combination of these sources to guide their choice of supports. Prior research suggests that teachers benefit from refining the knowledge that they gain from initial conversations with students by incorporating assessment data (Lai et al., 2014; Van Geel et al., 2016). However, teachers are unlikely to incorporate assessment data into their decisionmaking if these data are not immediately available or available in a reliable manner, an issue exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Schildkamp, 2019). School leaders who are interested in increasing teachers' use of student assessment data when deciding how to support struggling students should consult with their teachers on the timeliness and accessibility of these data and provide guidance on how to use multiple, complementary sources of information to meet student needs.

- *Leverage professional learning opportunities to better inform peer-provided intervention recommendations.* Professional learning opportunities are a top source of information for teachers to pick up new educational ideas (Education Week Research Center, 2017). Our data indicate that many teachers turn to their peers for information on interventions. Thus, students can benefit from educators who are more knowledgeable about evidence-based intervention practices, which would improve the quality of peer-provided recommendations. Previous AEP findings have suggested that summer sessions might also be a productive, low-pressure time for teachers' professional learning. According to nationally representative 2019 AEP survey data, nearly

all responding teachers pursued at least one summer professional learning activity and perceived those activities as high quality and relevant to the upcoming school year (Steiner et al., 2021).

- *Provide more descriptive information about student supports beyond standards alignment and academic effectiveness.* Repositories of instructional materials and interventions often rate student supports in terms of their alignment with academic standards or evidence of impact on student achievement. The availability of this type of information is reflected in teachers' high confidence in finding information on implementing high-quality, standards-aligned instructional resources. However, teachers' lower rates of confidence in finding actionable information on how resources support anti-racist instruction, social and emotional learning, and specific types of students demonstrate a need for local and state policymakers and leaders of national education policy organizations to develop and provide best practices that can guide teachers toward identifying high-quality materials to support diverse student populations and student needs.

Limitations

This Data Note uses nationally representative survey data to provide insights into the information sources that teachers look to when supporting struggling students. There are two primary limitations to keep in mind. First, all analyses across different subgroups are purely descriptive and do not suggest causal relationships. Second, all LTS items involve self-reported measures, which may be subject to reporting bias, particularly on survey items that are difficult for teachers to self-assess or have various socially acceptable answers.

Notes

¹ One source of information on student academic performance that potentially remains uncaptured in the survey items reported in Table 1 is data from national benchmark assessments, such as the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress. Seventy-six percent of teachers reported in the 2021 LTS that they had access to formative student assessment scores during the 2020–2021 academic year. Because benchmark assessments can be administered during the fall and winter, they could provide teachers with information on student academic performance that could be used to guide supports during the current academic year.

² The 2021 LTS was administered in March 2021, during which time multiple state legislatures considered “critical race theory” bans or restrictions in K–12 classrooms (Map: Where Critical Race Theory Is Under Attack, 2021). The concurrence of this legislation might have influenced teacher responses to the items presented in Figure 2; specifically, teachers’ ability to find information on how to “incorporate anti-racist teaching methods or materials.”

How This Analysis Was Conducted

This Data Note uses responses from 3,605 6th- to 12th-grade teachers who completed the 2021 LTS. We focus on survey items from the Supporting Struggling Students and Sources of Information and Support portions of the survey; additional information about the survey methodology, weighting procedures, and descriptive tables for LTS questions can be found in the LTS Technical Documentation and Survey Results (Young et al., 2021).

We compared teacher responses across various school-level characteristics, including school FRPL enrollment, percentage of non-white students, and school locale (city, suburban, town, rural), and various self-reported teacher-level characteristics, such as main subject taught, grade band taught, race/ethnicity, and their school’s mode of instruction during the 2020–2021 school year. School demographic characteristics were obtained from the 2019–2020 National Center for Education Statistics’ Common Core of Data, with the remaining characteristics identified through teachers’ survey responses. All comparisons made in this Data Note are unadjusted for statistical controls and tested for statistical significance using *t*-tests; all comparisons are significant at the $p < 0.05$ level unless otherwise specified. We tested the robustness of these patterns using regression models that controlled for the inclusion of school characteristics (e.g., locale, FRPL enrollment rate, percentage of non-white students) and teachers’ grade taught and years of total teaching experience. Because results obtained when adjusting for school and teacher covariates are substantively similar to unadjusted results, we have chosen to present only unadjusted descriptive results in this Data Note.

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About This Report

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country.

We are extremely grateful to the educators who have agreed to participate in the panels. Their time and willingness to share their experiences are invaluable for this effort and for helping us understand how to better support their hard work in schools. We also thank Ryan Balch and Jon Schweig for helpful feedback that greatly improved this report.

RAND Education and Labor

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About the Data Note Series

This Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of educator survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. If you would like to know more about the dataset, please visit *Learn Together Surveys: 2021 Technical Documentation and Survey Results* (RR-A827-2, www.rand.org/t/RR-A827-2) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own analysis or in reading other AEP-related publications, please email aep@rand.org or visit www.rand.org/aep.

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