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Changes in College and Career Readiness Supports During the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Key Findings

- Access to supports for postsecondary transitions was unevenly distributed across student groups. High-achieving students reportedly had the most access to such supports, while underachieving students and those who did not ask for these supports had the least access to them.
- High school teachers reported providing fewer students with college and career readiness supports one year into the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.
- High school principals and teachers desired more staff to help with postsecondary transitions.

High schools play a crucial role in helping students plan for and transition to postsecondary education and career pathways. Resources, such as school counselors and advising technologies, can affect students' choices (Hurwitz and Smith, 2018; Lavecchia, Liu, and Oreopoulos, 2016; Mulhern, 2021; Page and Scott-Clayton, 2016), but there have long been concerns about the adequacy of supports for postsecondary transitions. Prior to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, access to such resources and information about postsecondary options varied considerably across high schools and students, and high school students experiencing poverty and students from racial/ethnic minorities and low-income backgrounds generally had less access to these supports (National Association for College Admission Counseling and American School Counselor Association, 2015; Lee and Ransom, 2011; Hoxby and Avery, 2012; McDonough, 1997; Radford, 2013; Perna, 2008). Differences in access to supports in high school contribute to significant variation in student access to postsecondary opportunities; high school students experiencing poverty and students in minoritized

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groups generally experience the largest barriers to access (de Brey et al., 2021; Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka, 2011).

Emerging evidence suggests that high school students' postsecondary aspirations and their engagement with school counselors have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Naviance, 2020; YouthTruth Student Survey, 2021; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). According to a recent national survey of high school students, the percentage of such students who plan to attend two-year or four-year colleges has declined slightly, from 74 percent prior to the pandemic to 68 percent in spring 2021 (YouthTruth Student Survey, 2021). This is consistent with declining rates of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion during the pandemic (Gurantz and Wielga, 2021) and declining enrollment in public two-year and four-year colleges (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021).[1]

Although many factors may be driving changes in high school students' postsecondary aspirations and enrollment (such as shifts to online education, family considerations, or financial constraints), limited resources to support postsecondary transitions in high schools and changes to how these supports were delivered during the pandemic may have contributed to these changes in aspirations and enrollment. Surveys of high school counselors emphasize the challenges of advising students in a virtual environment, and counselors and teachers are facing many more responsibilities during the pandemic (American School Counselor Association, 2021; Kaufman and Diliberti, 2021a).

This Data Note explores high school teachers' and principals' perspectives on the supports provided to students for postsecondary transitions using nationally representative data from the 2020 and 2021 Learn Together Surveys (LTS).[2] The LTS have been administered yearly in March and April since 2019. A majority of the 2020 LTS responses were returned in early March, just before schools shut down, or shortly after the shutdown (EducationWeek, 2020). Given the timing, we interpret the 2020 LTS responses to be reflective of prepandemic trends. The 2021 LTS was administered one year later, when large numbers of high school students were still learning remotely (Kaufman and Diliberti, 2021b).

In this Data Note, we address three research questions:

1. Which students received supports for postsecondary transitions?
2. How have supports for postsecondary transitions changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What were the perceived barriers to supports for postsecondary transitions, and what types of resources did principals and teachers report might help address those barriers?

In addition to describing changes in teacher and school leader responses over time, we explored survey responses by student and school characteristics (e.g., students' race and ethnicity and the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch [FRPL]) to see how supports for postsecondary transitions varied across educational contexts. Principals and teachers have complementary perspectives of the supports provided within a school. Principals are well situated to observe schoolwide trends, while teachers have a good sense of classroom-level supports and practices. We therefore present survey responses from principals and teachers in an effort to paint a comprehensive picture of supports for postsecondary transitions. We conclude with implications and policy recommendations.

Access to Supports for Postsecondary Transitions Was Unevenly Distributed Across Student Groups and Schools

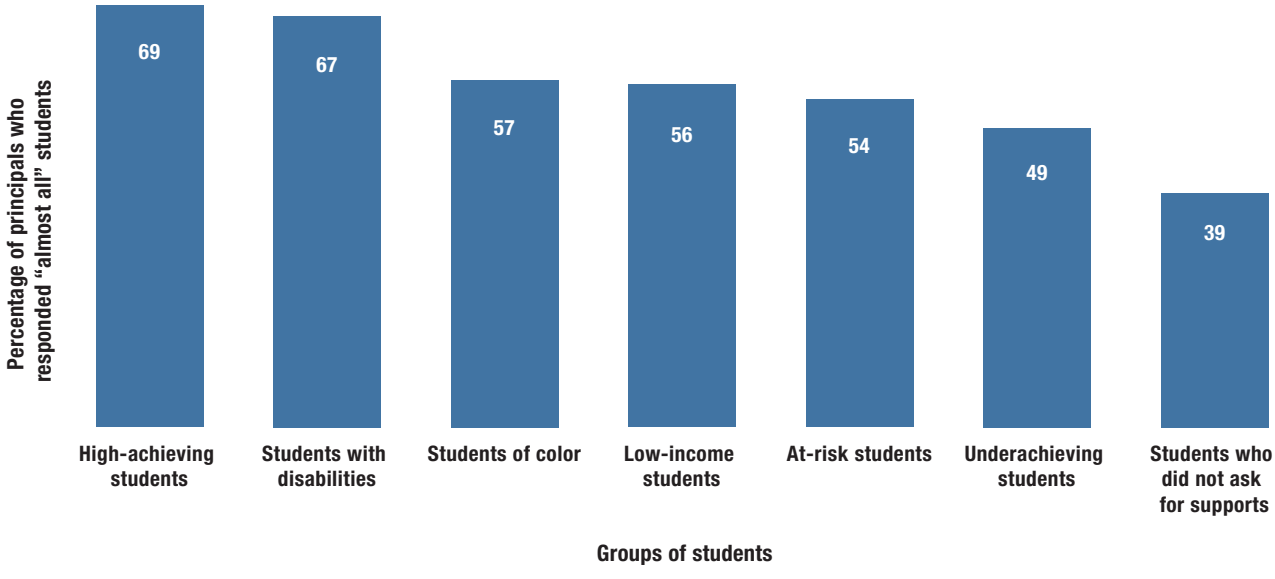
The 2021 LTS asked high school principals two questions about the supports that students received for postsecondary transitions. The first question asked whether all students typically received supports for postsecondary transitions. Overall, 84 percent of principals reported that almost all students in their schools received supports to prepare them for postsecondary education and careers. This is consistent with

the 81 percent of principals who reported that almost all students received such supports in 2020.[3]

The second survey question asked principals about how many students from different groups received sufficient supports to meet their needs for a successful postsecondary transition. Although most principals reported that almost all students received such supports, principals' responses about specific groups of students suggest that, in early 2021, some groups of students were not receiving sufficient supports for their postsecondary transitions. Only 39 percent of principals reported that almost all students who did not expressly ask for such supports received them, and about half of principals reported that almost all underachieving students received such supports (see Figure 1).[4] In contrast, more principals reported that almost all high-achieving students, students with disabilities, students of color, low-income students, and students identified as at risk received supports for postsecondary transitions.[5] Principals' reports of supports provided varied not only across student groups but also across school characteristics. Principals of high-poverty schools were more likely to report that almost all low-income students, underachieving students, and those who did not ask for supports received sufficient supports for postsecondary transitions than did principals of low-poverty schools.[6] However, principals in high-poverty schools were less likely to report that almost all students with disabilities received sufficient supports than did principals of low-poverty schools. Principals in rural schools were also more likely to report that almost all underachieving and low-income students received sufficient supports relative to principals in other locales.[7]

FIGURE 1

Percentage of Principals Who Reported That Almost All Students in Each Student Group Received Sufficient Supports for Postsecondary Transitions, 2021



NOTE: The results in this figure are based on the following 2021 LTS survey item to principals: "Please indicate approximately how many students in each of the following groups at your schools are receiving sufficient supports to meet their needs for a successful transition to postsecondary education and careers." For each group of students, respondents could indicate "almost all," "some," "very few," or "not sure" (n = 700). The bars represent the percentage of principals who indicated that "almost all" students in each group received sufficient supports for postsecondary transitions. All but three pairwise comparisons were statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. The exceptions are the differences between high-achieving students and students with disabilities, between low-income and at-risk students, and between low-income students and students of color.

High School Teachers Reported Providing Fewer Students with College and Career Readiness Supports One Year into the COVID-19 Pandemic

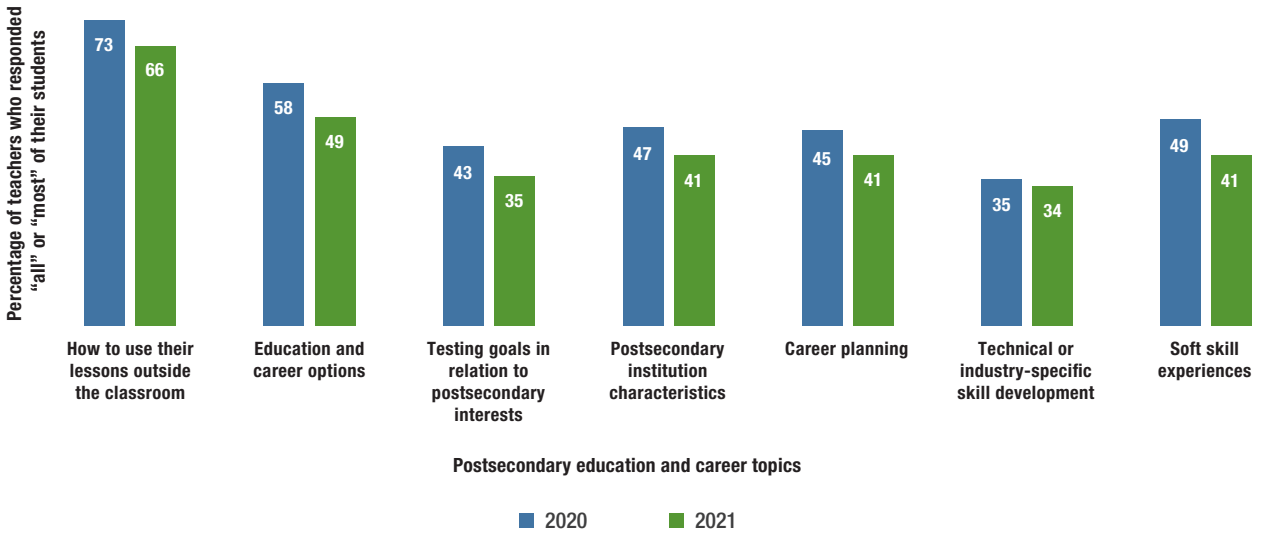
High school teachers may play a crucial role in providing college and career readiness supports to students. We compared teachers' responses to common questions in the 2020 and 2021 LTS to explore how the college and career readiness supports that teachers provided to students changed over the first year of the pandemic. Teachers reported how many students they talked with about various education and career topics during the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years. Teachers reported providing fewer students with college and career guidance on all of the topics shown in Figure 2 during the 2020–2021 school year than they did during the 2019–2020 school year. These differences were statistically significant for all topics except for "technical or industry-specific skill development."

We found few significant differences by school characteristics, but teachers in low-poverty high schools were less likely than teachers in high-poverty high schools to report talking with all or most of their students about each topic, except for "how to use their lessons outside the classroom" and "soft skill experiences."

This reported reduction in the number of students who received college and career readiness supports is not surprising given the many pandemic-related challenges that teachers faced. Other nationally representative teacher surveys indicate that during the first year of the pandemic teachers were struggling to provide instruction, engage students, and learn new technologies (Kaufman and Diliberti, 2021a). These and other time pressures and challenges may be part of the reason that teachers reported doing less college and career advising.

FIGURE 2

Postsecondary Education and Career Topics That Teachers Discussed with All or Most of Their Students in Spring 2020 and Spring 2021



NOTE: The results in this figure are based on teachers' responses to the following survey question: "During the current school year (2020–2021), how many students have you talked with about the following education and career topics?" For the 2020 LTS, the question instead refers to the 2019–2020 school year. For each topic, respondents could indicate "all of my students," "most of my students," "some of my students," "none of my students," or "[I did] not have access to information/resources to share" (2020: n = 2,273; 2021: n = 2,123). For each topic, the differences between 2020 and 2021 results were statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, except for in the technical or industry-specific skill development category.

High School Principals and Teachers Desired More Staff to Help with Postsecondary Transitions

In spring 2021, we asked principals to indicate the top three barriers that prevented every student in their schools from receiving sufficient supports for a successful postsecondary transition.[8] We asked about a variety of barriers that included staffing constraints, course availability, time to deliver supports, and student preparation.[9] Principals perceived that lack of student motivation and inadequate family engagement were the top two barriers.[10] Time needed for delivering supports and staffing constraints were also frequently reported barriers, and principals in schools with in-person or hybrid instruction were more likely to report these two barriers than principals in schools with remote instruction.[11]

In 2021, principals and teachers were also asked to rank the top three resources that they thought their school district or school needed most to ensure that students were better prepared for their future careers.[12] Principals reported that two of their three most desired resources were "additional staff to be responsible for postsecondary transitions and success" and "school counselors focused on helping students make choices about their future careers." Teachers also indicated that school counselors were one of their three most desired resources.[13] These patterns were generally consistent across different types of schools and respondents. Principals in schools with hybrid instruction were significantly more likely to rank counselors in their top three desired resources than principals in schools with in-person or remote instruction.[14] There were no other significant differences in principals' reported desires for school counselors or additional staff by school characteristics, including poverty level, locale, and racial/ethnic composition of the student population.

Implications and Recommendations

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the concurrent changes in students' postsecondary plans, supporting all high school students in their transition to life after high school remains important for postsecondary success. Like in prepandemic research, in our study, we found equity gaps in which groups of students reportedly received sufficient supports for postsecondary transitions. We also found that teachers reported providing support for postsecondary transitions to fewer students in the first year of the pandemic. In addition, principals perceived that a lack of student motivation and inadequate family engagement were the biggest barriers to all students receiving sufficient postsecondary supports.

Identifying ways to address these equity gaps to ensure that all high school students receive sufficient supports and to enable teachers to provide more postsecondary advising could be important for improving postsecondary transitions. Drawing on these findings, we suggest two key strategies for improving high school students' equitable access to and engagement with postsecondary education supports.

High school students who graduate during the pandemic may require additional supports to make successful postsecondary transitions. Our data suggest that high school teachers were not able to provide college and career readiness supports to students in their classes during the first year of the pandemic to the same degree as they did prior to the pandemic. Thus, many students may have missed out on these essential supports. When considered with other evidence of declining FAFSA completion rates and declining college enrollment (Gurantz and Wielga, 2021; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021), our findings suggest that students graduating during the pandemic may need additional supports for postsecondary planning. High schools could take several different approaches

to address this need, including offering postsecondary advising in 9th and 10th grades, partnering with community-based organizations to provide supplemental advising, or working directly with postsecondary educational programs and employers on direct outreach to students.

District leaders should consider expanding high school counseling staff and services. Principals and teachers selected school counselors as one of the resources that they most desired to have for help delivering college and career readiness supports. Expanding the availability of school counselors could help improve equity by expanding access to postsecondary advising. For example, a larger counseling staff could increase student and family engagement in the process and supplement the in-class supports provided by teachers, particularly when there are disruptions that create barriers to using class time for such supports. Adding counseling staff may also improve schools' capacity to support postsecondary transition planning for students who do not expressly ask for supports and for underachieving students.

These findings highlight important changes in how high school students received supports for postsecondary transitions during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the short term, it will be important to ensure that students who received different or fewer supports because of the pandemic are adequately supported as they approach graduation. In the longer term, it will be important to monitor how high schools' efforts to provide postsecondary and career readiness supports shift as the pandemic continues and the implications of those shifts for providing effective supports to all students.

Limitations

This Data Note uses nationally representative survey data from teachers and principals. There are a few important limitations to keep in mind when reviewing these results. First, all analyses, including those across groups of students, are descriptive and do not suggest causal relationships. Second, all survey items are self-reported measures of teachers and principals' perspectives. They may be subject to reporting bias, and they represent individuals' perspectives of student and school experiences rather than the perspectives of all educators in the school or of the students themselves. Third, there are some differences between the 2020 and 2021 LTS. Differences in survey items over time are noted throughout this Data Note and individual survey respondents differed across the years. We compare responses only from survey questions that were consistent across the two years of LTS administration. Fourth, teachers and principals are not matched within the same school. Thus, our comparisons of teacher and principal responses are broad and intended to be illustrative of general trends, rather than intended to be construed as within-school comparisons.

Finally, the survey weights included in the 2021 LTS and produced for prior years of the LTS are intended to facilitate cross-sectional (e.g., current-year) analysis of teacher and school leader responses to the surveys. Although cross-sectional comparisons of estimates across the 2020 and 2021 LTS are useful for observing descriptive trends, these weights are not designed to conduct formal longitudinal analyses that account for panel members who do and do not complete the LTS in multiple years. We believe that descriptive comparisons of item responses across the 2020 LTS and 2021 LTS are meaningful, useful, and relevant to report, and add this caveat to note that our significance tests are based on within-year weights, which do not account for the fact that the 2020 LTS and 2021 LTS are not independent samples because there are panel members who completed the survey in both years. Lacking longitudinal weights, we use the year-specific weights for each wave, stack the data, and then test the statistical significance of the differences over time. This is the approach suggested by the PATH study (Westat, 2021) for use when longitudinal weights are unavailable.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

This Data Note uses responses from 2,126 9th- to 12th-grade teachers and 702 high school principals to the 2021 LTS, and responses from 2,279 9th- to 12th-grade teachers and 640 high school principals to the 2020 LTS, focusing on survey items from the "Supporting Students' Transition to Postsecondary Education and Future Careers" portion of the survey; additional information about the survey methodology, weighting procedures, and descriptive tables for LTS questions can be found in *Learn Together Surveys: 2021 Technical Documentation and Survey Results* (Young et al., 2021).

We compared educators' responses across various school-level characteristics, including FRPL eligibility of students, enrollment of nonwhite students, locale (city, suburban, town, and rural), and teachers' reported main subject taught, grade band taught, race/ethnicity, and 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.

Notes

[1] The percentage of high school students planning to attend a four-year college decreased from 52 percent prior to the pandemic to 48 percent in spring 2021, while the percentage of high school students planning to attend a two-year college decreased from 22 percent prior to the pandemic to 20 percent in spring 2021.

[2] We define *high school teachers and principals* as teachers and principals who work in schools that include any grade from 9th grade to 12th grade. Hereafter, when describing data from our survey and referring to "teachers" or "principals," we are referring to high school teachers and principals.

[3] This difference was not statistically significant at the 5-percent level.

[4] In the survey, *underachieving students* were defined as those with, for example, low GPAs or test scores. High-achieving students were defined as those with, for example, high GPAs or test scores.

[5] We were not able to analyze changes over time for this question because the 2020 and 2021 survey questions were not directly comparable.

[6] *High-poverty schools* are defined as those in which at least 75 percent of students were eligible to receive FRPL, based on data from the *2019–2020 National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data*. *Low-poverty schools* are defined as those in which less than 25 percent of students were eligible to receive FRPL.

[7] In addition, principals in schools with a majority of white students were significantly more likely to report that almost all high-achieving students received supports for postsecondary transitions than were principals in schools with a majority of nonwhite students. Principals in suburban schools were significantly the least likely to report that almost all low-income students received supports relative to principals in city, town, or rural schools. All other school-level differences by locales, poverty level, racial/ethnic composition of the student population, and mode of instruction were not statistically significant at the 5-percent level.

[8] Principals were asked a slightly different question in 2020, so responses over time are not comparable.

[9] The full list of barriers is as follows: adequate academic preparation coming into high school, affordability of available supports, staffing constraints, course availability, time needed for delivering supports, awareness of supports that work for specific student needs, prioritization/incentives from district leadership, availability of data on student pathways after high school, lack of student motivation, inadequate support from families, and lack of available career/technical courses.

[10] Most differences in perceived barriers by school locale or school poverty level were not statistically significant. The exceptions were that principals in city schools were less likely to report a lack of student motivation and inadequate family engagement as barriers and more likely to report time needed for delivering supports as a barrier than were principals in other locales. Principals in low-poverty schools were also more likely to report time needed for delivering supports as a barrier than principals in high-poverty schools, and principals in rural schools were less likely to report time needed for delivering supports as a barrier than principals in other locales.

[11] We categorized principals by instructional mode based on their responses to the following survey question: "Which of the following most closely reflects how instruction has been provided to your students since the beginning of the school year (2020–2021)?" We categorized those principals who responded that the majority, if not all, of their students received in-person instruction each day as "in-person"; principals who responded that the majority or all of their students received some in-person and some remote instruction each day were categorized as "hybrid"; and principals who responded that the large majority or all of their students received fully remote instruction were categorized as "remote." Twenty-six percent of principals in our sample led schools that provided in-person instruction, 52 percent of principals led schools that offered hybrid instruction, and 22 percent of principals led schools with remote instruction.

[12] The categories presented to teachers and principals covered internship programs, career and technical education classes, classroom resources, school counselors, and professional development (see Young et al., 2021, for more details). The categories differed somewhat for principals and teachers, and the 2021 LTS included more categories than the 2020 LTS, so we do not make comparisons over time, and comparisons between principals and teachers should be interpreted with caution.
[13] Teachers' top two most-desired resources were "high school career-technical courses" and "career academies, linked learning programs, or other programs that link high school curriculum with a specific career pathway"; principals did not rank these options very highly.
[14] The difference in principal responses on this item was not significantly different for principals in schools with in-person instruction versus schools with fully remote instruction. Teacher responses did not significantly differ across instructional modes.

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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.

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This Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of teacher and school leader survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. If you would like to know more about the dataset, please see *Learn Together Surveys: 2021 Technical Documentation and Survey Results* (RR-A827-2, www.rand.org/t/RRA827-2) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own analysis or reading other AEP-related publications, please email aep@rand.org or visit www.rand.org/aep.

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