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# State of the Superintendent—High Job Satisfaction and a Projected Normal Turnover Rate

## Selected Findings from the Fifth American School District Panel Survey

**N**umerous accounts suggest that public school superintendents are burned out and frustrated by the accumulated stress of steering schools through the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and political polarization, and that they are increasingly at risk of mass attrition (Fung, 2021; Heim and Strauss, 2021; ILO Group, 2022; Morton and Valley, 2022; National Superintendents Roundtable, 2021; Sawchuk, 2022a; Taylor and Nierenberg, 2021). However, despite high stress levels and similarly dire predictions for teachers and principals, there has been a noticeable lack of heightened turnover among teachers and principals thus far throughout the pandemic (Aldeman, 2022; Barnum, 2022; Bleiberg and Kraft, 2022; Diliberti and Schwartz, 2021; Goldhaber and Theobald, 2022; Makkonen and Jaquet, 2021).

These contradictory signals beg the questions: Are superintendents satisfied with their jobs right now, and will they leave at higher-than-normal rates? Our analyses suggest that, as of spring 2022, superintendents have positive feelings about their

### Key Findings

- Although 95 percent of superintendents agreed that the superintendent's job has gotten harder over the past decade, 85 percent were satisfied with their job as of spring 2022.
- Thirteen percent of superintendents plan to leave their position by the end of the 2021–2022 school year, a rate on par with prepandemic superintendent turnover estimates.
- Job-related stress topped superintendents' reasons for considering leaving their position, followed by community politics.
- Higher proportions of superintendents in majority-white suburban and rural districts than in urban districts thought about leaving their job for a variety of reasons.

jobs despite the many challenges schools have faced both before and throughout the pandemic, and they do not plan to depart the profession at heightened rates.

To examine superintendents' job satisfaction and short-term career plans, we fielded a survey to a randomly sampled set of 291 district and charter network leaders and then weighted their responses to make them nationally representative of districts across the country. In this report, we focus on a subset of survey items administered to 222 superintendents.<sup>1</sup> We administered the survey between February 28, 2022, and April 10, 2022, and we refer to this survey as the *spring 2022 survey* throughout this report. We use the term *superintendent* to refer to both the 211 traditional public school superintendents and the leaders from 11 charter management organizations (CMOs) who took the survey.

In this report, we describe only those differences among district subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5 percent level. Additional details about our methods are included at the end of this report. We do not report separate results for CMOs due to their small number of completed surveys.

This is the first of two reports with results from the spring 2022 survey of the American School District Panel (ASDP). The ASDP is a partnership among the RAND Corporation, the Center on Reinventing Public Education, Chiefs for Change, the Council of the Great City Schools, and Kitamba. In our next report, we examine the pressing challenges districts faced during the third pandemic school year: staffing shortages, political polarization, and addressing unfinished learning (Diliberti and Schwartz, forthcoming).

## Abbreviations

AASA	School Superintendents Association
AEP	American Educator Panels
ASDP	American School District Panel
CCD	Common Core of Data
CMO	charter management organization
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics

## Although Superintendents Universally Said Their Job Has Gotten Harder, 85 Percent Were Satisfied with Their Job

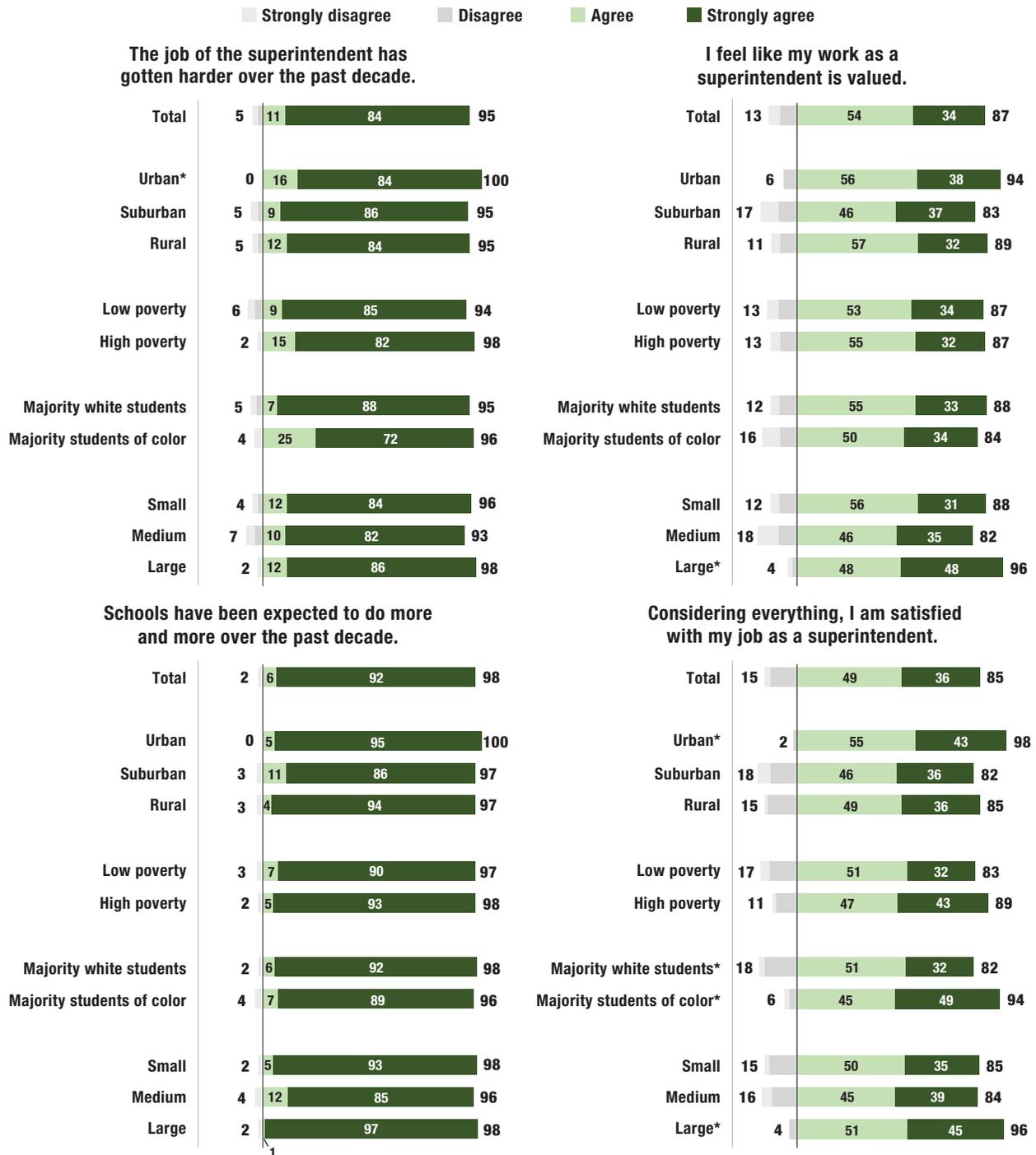
When asked in spring 2022, nearly all superintendents agreed or strongly agreed both that the job of the superintendent has gotten harder and that schools have been expected to do more and more over the past decade (see Figure 1). In fact, 84 percent and 92 percent of superintendents, respectively, strongly agreed with these two statements—the strongest level of agreement we have seen for any single survey item in the five surveys we have administered to district leaders via the ASDP.

Although an overwhelming share of superintendents think their job has gotten harder, a large majority (85 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that, considering everything, they are satisfied with their job, and 87 percent feel their work is valued. Job satisfaction is somewhat stronger among superintendents of urban districts, superintendents of large districts, and those leading districts that predominantly serve students of color.

These satisfaction rates are strong, even by prepandemic standards. The rates are considerably higher than the 45 percent to 60 percent of U.S. workers who reported satisfaction with their job in periodic surveys between 2000 and 2019 (Levanon et al., 2019). They are also on par with or higher than prepandemic job satisfaction rates among superintendents. For example, they are on par with a 2002 survey of superintendents in Illinois, Indiana, and Texas, in which 87 percent reported being satisfied with their job (Sharp, Malone, and Walter, 2002), and a 2020 School Superintendents Association (AASA) survey in which 92 percent reported being satisfied (AASA, 2021). Job satisfaction rates in our spring 2022 survey were considerably higher than the 75 percent reported in a 2009 New York survey, 60 percent reported in a 2015 New York survey, and 75 percent reported in a 2006 Idaho survey (Bell, 2015).<sup>2</sup>

FIGURE 1

# Percentage of Superintendents Reporting Increasing Job Difficulty and Job Satisfaction as of Spring 2022



NOTES: Only respondents who indicated that they were the superintendent saw these questions. This figure depicts response data from the survey question: "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" (n = 219). The survey question also included a "don't know" option that was selected by less than 3 percent of respondents and has been omitted from this figure. Bars might not sum to totals because of rounding. An asterisk (\*) indicates that the subgroup percentage of superintendents indicating "agree" or "strongly agree" is statistically significantly different (p < 0.05) from the balance of superintendents who were not in that district subgroup and who said the same.

We hypothesize that superintendents’ high levels of job satisfaction—both now and before the pandemic began—might derive from a strong sense of mission. The pandemic underlined the critical role educators play, which could help explain superintendents’ high rates of job satisfaction despite high rates of job-related stress, which we discuss in more detail below. Previous research supports our hypothesis: “making a difference” was the top motivator for taking the position, according to a 2002 three-state survey of superintendents (Sharp, Malone, and Walter, 2002).

Our findings about superintendents’ job satisfaction levels in spring 2022 come with two caveats. First, it is possible that these survey items suffer from nonresponse bias, meaning that the superintendents who completed our spring 2022 survey questions have higher job satisfaction than those who chose not to complete the survey. Although our survey weights limit many sources of bias, we cannot know how these satisfaction items might be associated with the decision to participate in our survey, nor can we account for this in our analyses. However, we do not believe that our job satisfaction estimates are upwardly biased due to dissatisfied superintendents having already left their position earlier in the pandemic (and therefore not taking our survey), because our national analysis examining superintendent turnover last school year revealed a turnover rate (13 percent) that was on par with prepandemic levels (Schwartz and Diliberti, 2022).

Second, we suspect that many, if not most, superintendents responding to these questions have not held their current position for ten years, because the average tenure of a superintendent is much shorter than a decade (AASA, undated). Therefore, we interpret responses to our two prompts about the job of the superintendent and the expectation of schools over the past decade as a well-informed perception rather than an assessment of their own, specific position having changed or not over a ten-year time span.

### Thirteen Percent of Superintendents Plan to Leave by the End of the 2021–2022 School Year, Which Is Similar to the Prepandemic Turnover Rate

We asked superintendents when they plan to leave their position. In analyzing their responses, we do not find evidence of an impending mass exodus of superintendents (see Figure 2). Thirteen percent of superintendents said that they *plan* to leave by the end of the 2021–2022 school year, which exactly matches the rate of actual turnover we observed from last school year (2020–2021) to this one (2021–2022) among our national roster of more than 3,500 superintendents (Schwartz and Diliberti, 2022). (See Box 1 for additional information on interpreting reported intentions to leave versus actual turnover rates.)

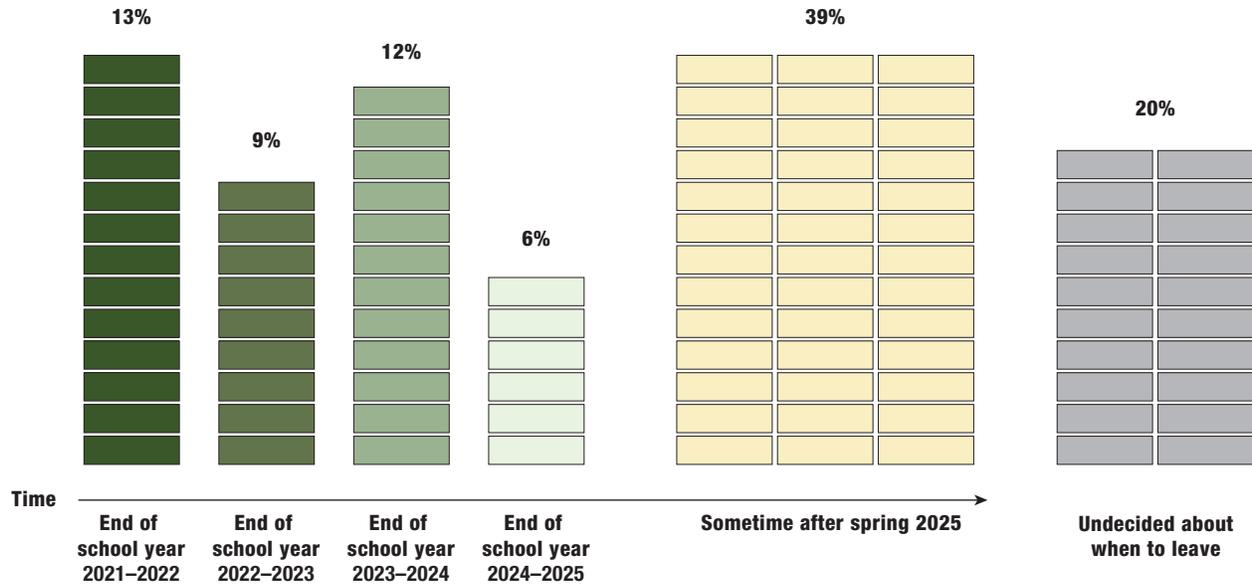
#### BOX 1

### The Difference Between Reported Intentions to Leave and Actual Turnover Rates

It is important to keep in mind that the estimates we present here are superintendents’ self-reported intentions to leave their jobs by the end of the 2021–2022 school year, and not actual turnover rates. A recent study by Nguyen et al., 2022, found that roughly two times as many teachers indicated on surveys that they intended to leave their jobs than actually did. Although the relationship between intentions to leave and actual turnover might be different for superintendents than for teachers, Nguyen et al. provides a helpful benchmark. Although we do not yet have the data to verify how well superintendents’ intentions predict actual turnover, we believe that our estimate of projected turnover of superintendents is likely close to what will be the actual turnover rate, because we documented a 13 percent actual turnover rate between the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years based on our roster of superintendents. We intend to perform analyses on how well superintendents’ reported intentions predict actual turnover for publication in future reports.

FIGURE 2

## Percentage of Superintendents Reporting Plans to Leave Their Position in the Next Several School Years



NOTES: Only respondents who indicated that they were the superintendent saw this question. Respondents were asked, “When do you plan to leave your current position?” and were given three response options: “Sometime before spring 2025 (i.e., within the next three years),” “Sometime after spring 2025 (i.e., more than three years from now),” and “Undecided at this time.” Those who answered “Sometime before spring 2025 (i.e., within the next three years)” were asked, “In what month and year do you estimate you will leave your current position?” This figure depicts response data from these two survey questions. Responses were binned (i.e., sorted into categories according to when respondents said that they planned to leave their current position) for this figure ( $n = 221$ ). Categories do not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

This 13 percent turnover rate includes retirements, moves to another district, or shifts to a new career. It does not include unplanned leaves, such as termination or other unplanned personal reasons for leaving the position. We did not ask how long superintendents had been in their positions or their reasons for the planned timing of their departure, such as a retirement, a position in a different district, or a career change. However, neither our survey data nor the 2020 AASA decennial survey suggest there is a wave of impending retirements. In the decennial survey, 34 percent of superintendents indicated that they planned to retire in the next five years, compared to 50 percent in 2010 (AASA, 2021).

As far as we can tell given the paucity of systematic data on pre-pandemic superintendent turnover rates (Sawchuk, 2021), a 13 percent turnover rate

among superintendents at the end of this school year is on par with pre-pandemic rates. A 2006 study found that superintendent turnover rates are roughly 14 percent to 16 percent annually (AASA, undated). We hope to rectify the scarcity of reliable, national data on superintendents’ tenure using continued ASDP surveys.

In an analysis not shown here, we did not find significant differences in superintendents’ plans to depart at the end of this school year according to the type of district in which they work.

## Job-Related Stress Topped Superintendents' Reasons for Considering Leaving Their Position

We asked all superintendents whether any of 15 potential problems we listed (plus an “other” option) made them *consider* leaving their position, regardless of when they plan to leave their job. At the top of our list, we included “I don’t consider leaving my position, or no particular problem makes me consider leaving,” which 29 percent of superintendents selected, as shown at the bottom of Figure 3.

The remaining 71 percent of superintendents selected one or more reasons for considering leaving, which we present in Figure 3. To ease interpretation, we organized the 15 reasons we asked about on the survey into three categories: job characteristics, community relations and politics, and school system factors. We also created a composite indicator that we

“I do not believe that an army of first-year superintendents are going to pull us through this recovery. We need people with some experience and seasoning to help, because this path to recovery . . . is going to be a long one.”

—Superintendent interviewed for an ASDP case study<sup>3</sup>

label “politics” in Figure 3 to identify superintendents who selected any one or more of the five reasons we list under the category of “Community relations/politics.”

Among the 15 problems we listed, stress was the most common reason that superintendents said make them consider leaving. This is similar to other leadership positions, in which stress is the leading reason that many managers and directors have considered leaving during the pandemic (Qualtrics, 2021). Our composite indicator of all five community relations or political reasons was the second-most common reason; 47 percent of superintendents selected at least one political reason as making them consider leaving their position.

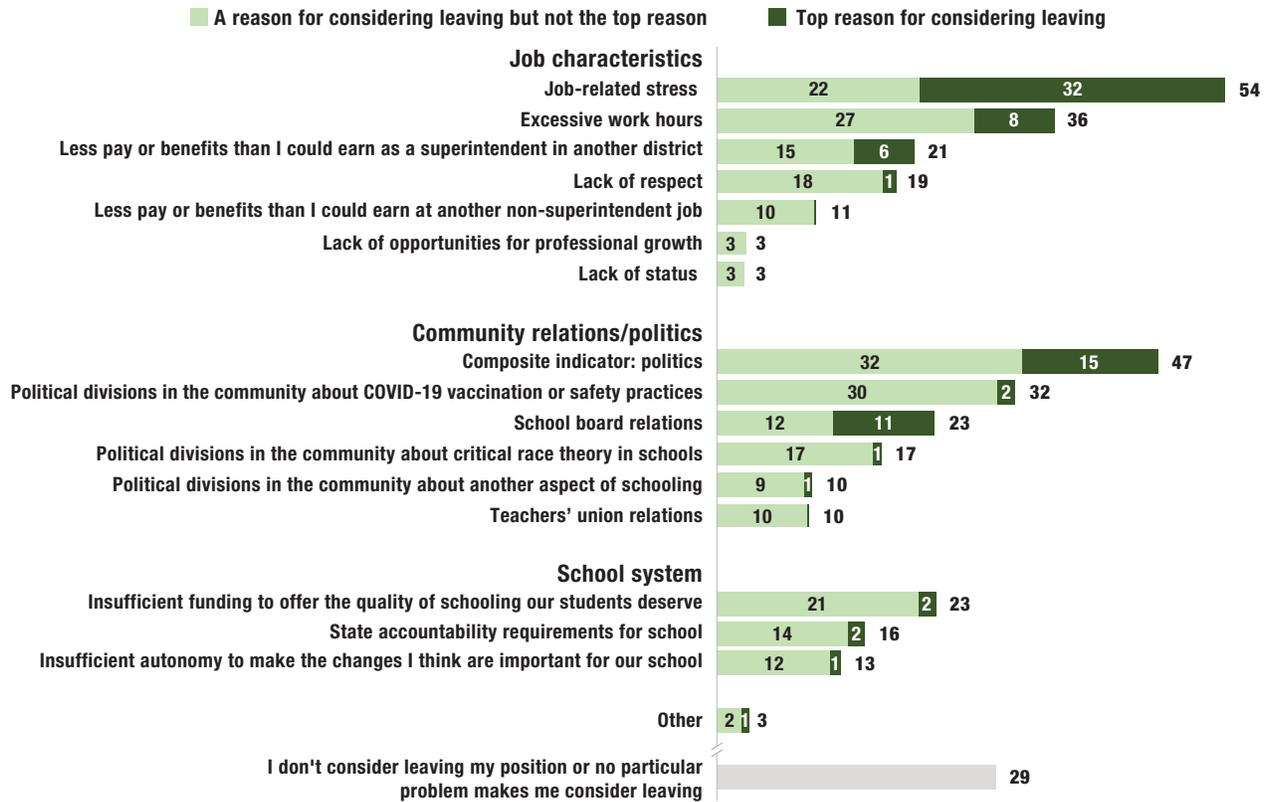
Superintendents were able to select multiple problems as a reason to consider leaving, and, on average, superintendents selected three problems. We asked superintendents who selected multiple problems to indicate which was their top reason to consider leaving. Job-related stress was by far the most common top reason for leaving: 32 percent of superintendents selected it as their top reason. The second most popular top reason to consider leaving was school board relations (11 percent), followed by excessive work hours (8 percent).

To understand some of the sources of job-related stress, we examined the correlation between it and the four other most common reasons superintendents selected as making them consider leaving their position. Excessive work hours was the most-highly correlated with stress ( $r = 0.52$ ), followed by community politics ( $r = 0.31$ ), insufficient funding for schools ( $r = 0.31$ ) and less pay or benefits than could be earned in another district ( $r = 0.08$ ).

We also conducted exploratory regression analyses to assess whether any of these reasons make a superintendent especially likely to plan to leave their position in short term. However, we found only one significant finding, and we deem the results insufficiently powered to merit reporting due to our small sample size.

FIGURE 3

## Percentage of Superintendents Who Said the Following Problems Make Them Consider Leaving Their Position as of Spring 2022



NOTES: Respondents were asked, “Which of the following problems, if any, make you consider leaving your current position?” and were instructed to “select all that apply.” The survey question also included a mutually exclusive response option—“N/A; I don’t consider leaving my position or no particular problem makes me consider leaving.” Those who selected one or more reasons for considering leaving their current position were also asked, “Which of the following problems that you selected is the most important reason that makes you consider leaving your position?” This figure depicts combined response data from these two survey questions ( $n = 222$ ). Only respondents who indicated that they were the superintendent saw these questions. The composite “politics” bar includes superintendents who selected at least one of the five reasons we list under the category of “Community relations/politics.” Bars might not sum to totals because of rounding.

“Superintendents have been an easy target for a long time, but they really became a target during the pandemic.”

—Superintendent from an ASDP case study

### Higher Proportions of Superintendents of Rural Districts, Suburban Districts, and Majority-White Districts Thought About Leaving Their Job

Superintendents in urban districts and districts enrolling predominantly students of color were less likely than their counterparts in rural, suburban, and

predominantly white districts to say that the problems we identified in the survey were making them consider leaving their position. This is consistent with our earlier findings of higher job satisfaction rates among superintendents of urban districts and among superintendents of districts serving mostly students of color.

A pattern emerges from Figure 4, where job-related stress, excessive work hours, political divisions about COVID-19, concern about insufficient funding, low pay (relative to what superintendents could earn in other districts), and lack of respect were more-salient concerns for superintendents of smaller districts (i.e., those serving fewer than 10,000 students), majority-white districts, and nonurban districts. We note that these patterns might be driven by the same set of districts that share multiple characteristics (see Box 2).

In contrast, superintendents’ concerns about problems like school board relations and political polarization about critical race theory were more evenly distributed across the ten district subgroups that we examined. We note that the perception of lack of autonomy, low pay (relative to what superintendents could earn in a non-superintendent job), teacher union relations, lack of opportunities for professional growth, and lack of status were not significant drivers for considering leaving in any of the ten types of school districts that we examined.

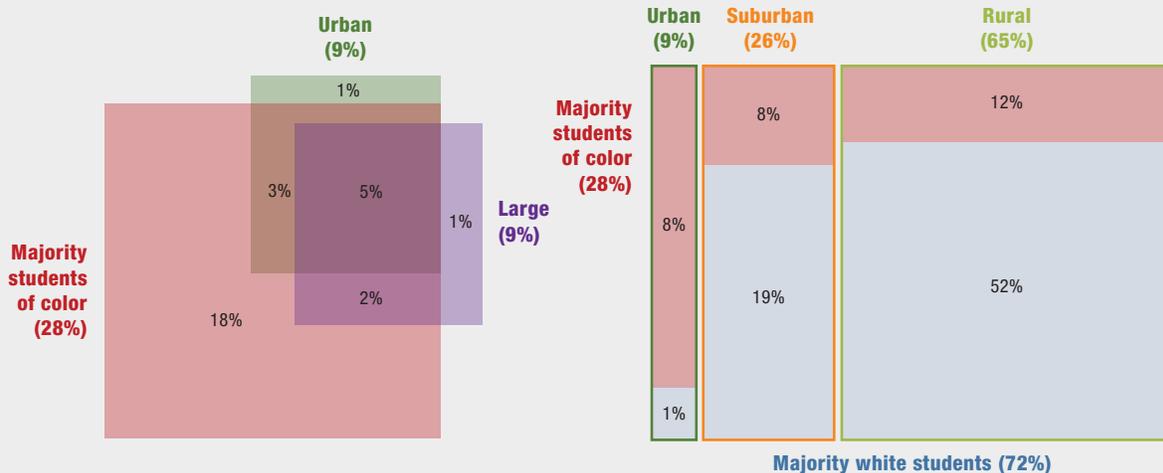
## Implications

These survey results provide several positive signals about leadership in public school districts as of spring 2022. More than eight out of every ten superintendents felt that their work was valued and were satisfied with their job. The proportion of superintendents

### BOX 2

## The Degree of Overlap Between District Subgroups

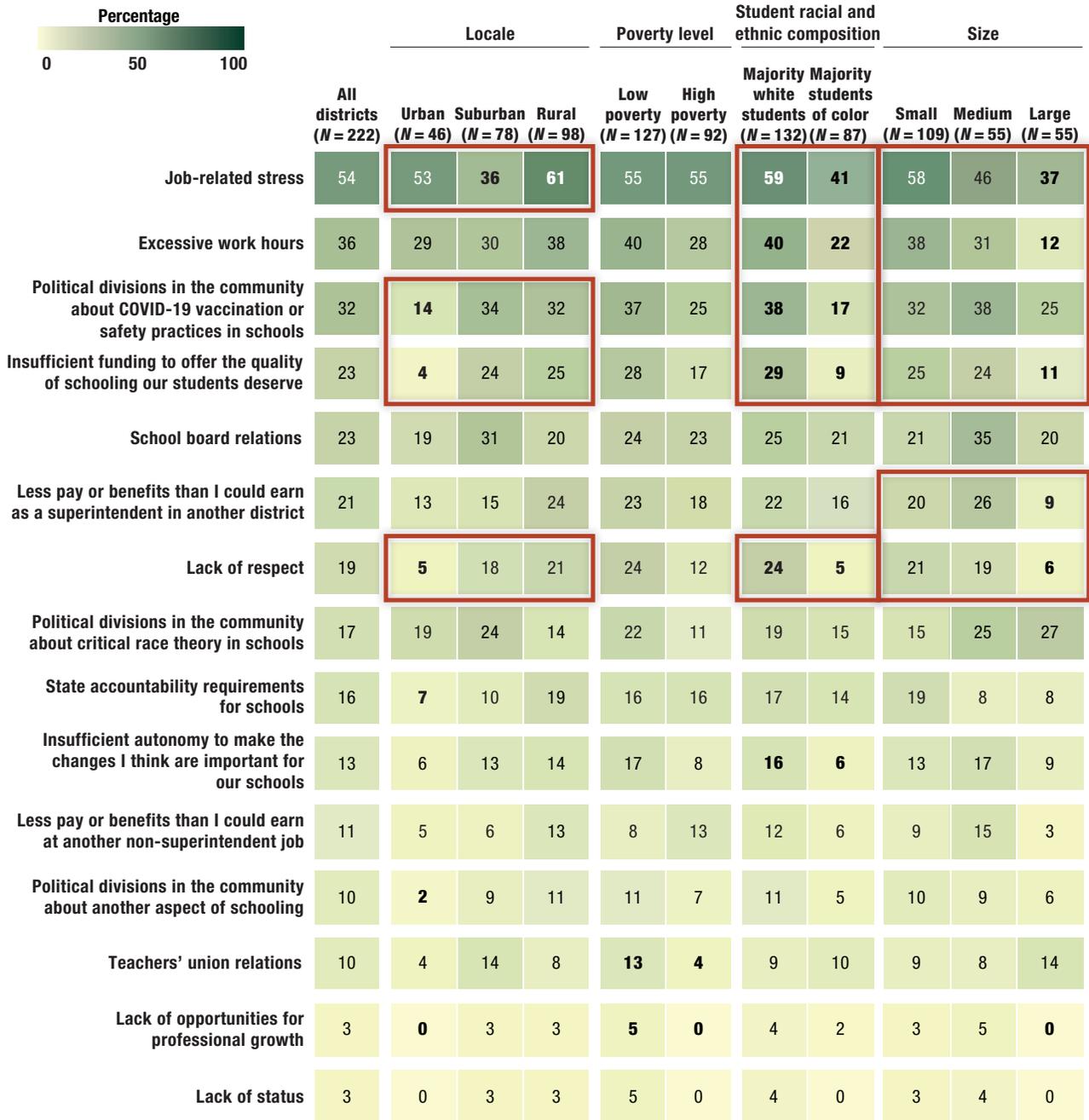
Each district in our sample belongs to four of the ten district subgroups that we examine in this report. As shown on the left, almost all urban districts serve mostly students of color, and many are also large (serving 10,000 students or more). Likewise, a large majority of suburban and rural districts serve mostly white students, as shown at the right. We expect to see similar survey results among demographically overlapping districts because the same district leaders are often represented in multiple district categories.



NOTE: Subgroup percentages might not sum to totals because of rounding.

FIGURE 4

## Percentage of Superintendents Who Said the Following Problems Make Them Consider Leaving Their Position as of Spring 2022, by District Subgroup



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the survey question: “Which of the following problems, if any, make you consider leaving your current position?” (n = 222). Respondents were instructed to “select all that apply.” The survey question also included a mutually exclusive option—“N/A; I don’t consider leaving my position or no particular problem makes me consider leaving”—that was selected by 29 percent of respondents and has been omitted from this figure. Bold font indicates that the subgroup percentage of superintendents saying a that problem makes them consider leaving their current position is statistically significantly different (p < 0.05) from the balance of superintendents not in that subgroup who said the same. We added red boxes to focus attention on notable patterns among subgroups with statistically significant differences.

(13 percent) who said that they plan to leave their position at the end of this school year (2021–2022) was on par with both turnover at the end of last school year and prepandemic levels (Schwartz and Diliberti, 2022; AASA, undated).

Despite heightened challenges with student enrollment, attendance, curriculum coverage during remote instruction, and staffing shortages during the pandemic (Kaufman and Diliberti, 2021; Schwartz and Diliberti, 2022), superintendents of urban districts and superintendents leading districts serving mostly students of color reported the highest rates of job satisfaction among the ten types of districts we examined, and they were least likely to select the problems we asked about as a reason to consider leaving their position.

COVID-19 federal relief funds likely play a role in helping to explain these patterns (Jordan and DiMarco, 2022), as districts with the greatest concentrations of poverty have received more COVID-19 federal aid. For example, urban districts, large districts, and districts that serve mostly students of color—all of which have a greater concentration of students in poverty—had the fewest superintendents who said that insufficient funding for schools made them consider leaving.

By contrast, superintendents of rural and suburban districts and districts that predominantly serve white students more often reported that job-related stress, long hours, political divisions about COVID-19, insufficient school funding, low pay, and lack of respect make them think about leaving their position. Of course, superintendents' stressors could change as the COVID-19 pandemic recedes and the accompanying federal stimulus funds expire.

The high rate of job satisfaction among current sitting superintendents is reassuring and make us less concerned about a possible mass exodus. But there are still concerns about the long-term health of the superintendency, about which we make the following two recommendations:

- The first concern is superintendents' near-universal and strong conviction that not only their job, but also the job of schools

more generally, has gotten harder over the past decade. This fact, plus the high amounts of job-related stress that superintendents experience, underlines the need for both school boards and superintendent preparation programs to invest in developing strong, well-integrated senior teams across which superintendents can distribute leadership. Placing too much responsibility on just the superintendent leaves the district exposed to risk of reform cycles as superintendents come and go (Fullan, 2000) and higher turnover of staff in the central office as superintendents are saddled with too much responsibility (Alsbury, 2008). More-distributed leadership could make the superintendent position more attractive insofar as it could reduce the high levels of job-related stress and long work hours. In addition, more manageable hours could make the position more tenable for women, who have historically balanced more family responsibilities than their male counterparts and remain underrepresented in the position generally (ILO Group, 2022; Sawchuk, 2022b).

- Our second recommendation is for state or regional professional superintendent associations, education associations, and superintendent certification programs to check on the pipeline, especially for the categories of districts that have been hardest to staff. Is the job still attractive enough for people to see it in their future? What are the local reasons that superintendents consider leaving? Are there enough qualified leaders in the traditional pipeline of principals and central office administrators to replace current superintendents as they retire or move to different positions (Azinger, 2003)?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Survey invitations were sent to district superintendents (or their previously specified designee) who could complete the survey themselves or designate another leader (or leaders) to complete the survey on behalf of their district. For each section of the survey, we recommended job titles of people who might be best suited to complete the questions in that section. Thus, we expect that it was common for multiple people in a district to work together to complete our survey on behalf of their district.

<sup>2</sup> In the two New York state studies, the survey question posed to superintendents was “Today, I would rate my overall job satisfaction as a superintendent as . . . ,” and superintendents responded on a five-point scale: very low, low, average, high, very high. We do not know what response scale was used in the study of Idaho superintendents. Our survey question asked respondents to rate their job satisfaction on a four-point scale: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. The difference in the number and phrasing of response categories might explain some of the difference in job satisfaction observed among superintendents in these different studies.

<sup>3</sup> All quotes from district leaders in this report were collected in semistructured interviews by our partner, Center on Reinventing Public Education, as a part of its ongoing ASDP qualitative case studies.

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## How This Analysis Was Conducted and Limitations

RAND researchers fielded the fifth survey of the ASDP from February 28, 2022, through April 10, 2022. Responses reflect superintendents' *perceptions*, which might or might not align with districts' actual experiences.

Researchers randomly sampled districts and CMOs to invite them to enroll in the ASDP between fall 2020 and spring 2022. All enrolled districts were invited to complete this survey. Of the 1,032 districts and CMOs that enrolled in the ASDP, 291 district leaders completed surveys on behalf of their district (a 28.2 percent completion rate). This report is based on survey responses from 222 superintendents who completed the final section of our survey.

Because superintendents' experiences can vary depending on the district they are in, we examined differences in their responses by district characteristics. We obtained the data on district characteristics by linking survey data files to the 2020–2021 Common Core of Data (CCD) issued by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). We also used some data from the 2019–2020 school year, given lower-than-normal levels of data quality on student poverty status in the 2020–2021 CCD. We analyzed the following four categories that yield ten subgroups:

1. locale (urban, suburban, and rural)<sup>a</sup>
2. student racial and ethnic composition (we categorize districts in which more than half of students are Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, or of two or more races as having *majority students of color*, and the remaining districts are categorized as having *majority white students*)
3. district poverty level (districts in which half or more of students qualify for a free or reduced-price meal are categorized as *high poverty*, whereas the remainder are categorized as *low poverty*)
4. district size (districts with fewer than 3,000 students are categorized as *small*; districts with 10,000 or more students are categorized as *large*; and the remaining districts are categorized as *medium*).

It is important to keep in mind that each district in the survey belongs to four of the ten subgroups—for instance, a single school district that is large, suburban, and low poverty and enrolls mostly white students. Thus, patterns observed across size, locale, poverty status, and student racial and ethnic composition might be driven by the same set of districts that share multiple characteristics.

We conducted significance testing to assess whether district subgroups were statistically different at the  $p < 0.05$  level. Specifically, we tested whether the percentage of superintendents in one subgroup reporting a response was statistically different from the balance of superintendents who took the survey (e.g., superintendents of urban districts versus other respondents who did not lead an urban district). Because of the exploratory nature of this study, we did not apply multiple hypothesis test corrections.

In this report, we describe only those differences among district subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5 percent level, unless otherwise noted. To see the full set of results by district subgroups, visit our Interactive Survey Results Tool at [www.americanschooldistrictpanel.org/survey-results](http://www.americanschooldistrictpanel.org/survey-results).

<sup>a</sup> Our locale definition aligns with the four-category locale definition used by NCES, with the exception that we collapsed the districts that are located in towns into the rural category for sample size reasons.

## About This Report

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country. The American School District Panel (ASDP) is a partnership among the RAND Corporation, the Center on Reinventing Public Education, Chiefs for Change, the Council of the Great City Schools, and Kitamba. For more information, please visit the ASDP website at [www.americanschooldistrictpanel.org](http://www.americanschooldistrictpanel.org).

To obtain a national picture of superintendents' job satisfaction and intentions to remain in their position, we surveyed 291 district and charter network leaders—including 222 superintendents—in the ASDP from February to April 2022.

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 Betheny Gross and Christine Mulhern for helpful feedback that substantially improved this report. We also thank Chris Anthony for her editorial expertise and Monette Velasco for overseeing the publication process for this report.

## RAND Education and Labor

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More information about RAND can be found at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org). Questions about this report or about the ASDP should be directed to [hschwartz@rand.org](mailto:hschwartz@rand.org), and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to [educationandlabor@rand.org](mailto:educationandlabor@rand.org).

## About the Data Note Series

This Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. If you would like to know more about the dataset, please see *Technical Documentation for the Fifth American School District Panel Survey* (RR-A956-11, [www.rand.org/t/RR-A956-11](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A956-11)) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own surveys or analysis or in reading other AEP-related publications, please email [aep@rand.org](mailto:aep@rand.org) or visit [www.rand.org/aep](http://www.rand.org/aep).

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