



Staffing, Budget, Politics, and Academic Recovery in Districts

Selected Findings from the Fall 2023 American School District Panel Survey

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RR-A956-19

March 2024

Sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

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Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

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Summary of Key Findings

- Districts estimated that 9 percent of their teachers retired or resigned in the 2022–2023 school year. The district-reported turnover rate was on par with that of the previous school year but remained above the turnover rate reported before the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic.
- Staffing shortages have abated from pandemic-era highs, but teacher shortages remain prevalent for substitutes and special education teachers.
- About one-quarter of districts foresee a drop in revenues of at least 5 percent for the 2024–2025 school year.
- Although it is declining, political polarization about race- and gender-related topics continues to interfere with schooling in about four in ten districts.
- Five percent of districts have disciplined educators for violating policies that restrict discussions about race, gender, or sexuality in the classroom since the start of the 2020–2021 school year.
- Districts believed tutoring, summer programming, and use of academic interventionists were the best interventions for helping students recover academically from the pandemic.

Overview of the Fall 2023 American School District Panel Survey

We have used the American School District Panel (ASDP) to monitor timely topics in K–12 public education since its launch in the midst of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Over time, our questions have coalesced around four key challenges that U.S. school districts face today: school staffing, budgeting, the politicization of schooling, and academic recovery efforts (see Diliberti and Schwartz, 2021; Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022b; Diliberti and Schwartz, 2023; Jochim et al., 2023; Schwartz and Diliberti, 2021; and Schwartz and Diliberti, 2022).¹

In this Data Note, we provide a brief update on these four challenges using data from the fall 2023 ASDP survey. This survey, which was administered to districts between October 12, 2023, and December 14, 2023, included seven questions on these topics. All surveyed districts are members of the ASDP, which is a research partnership between RAND and the Center on Reinventing Public Education. The panel also collaborates with several other education organizations, including the Council of the Great City Schools and Kitamba. This is the first of three publications with results from the fall 2023 ASDP survey. The second will focus on educators’ use of artificial intelligence in schools, and the third will focus on summer programming.

Over the past four years, we have randomly selected public school districts to invite into the ASDP. Of the 1,167 public school districts that were members of the ASDP as of fall 2023, 231 districts completed our survey (a 19.8-percent survey completion rate). We weighted these districts’ responses to our survey to make them representative of school districts across the country.

Throughout this Data Note, we describe only those differences among district subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5-percent level, unless otherwise noted. Where possible, we compare districts’ responses in fall 2023 with those from prior survey waves. Additional details about our methods and the survey are in the “How This Analysis Was Conducted and Limitations” section of this Data Note. We hope the results presented in this Data Note will provide valuable insights about the state of K–12 public education that will be useful to district leaders, state and federal policymakers, and other education researchers who study these topics.

¹ For example, our previous work documented a national rise in teacher turnover rates, revealed districts’ concerns about an impending “fiscal cliff,” discussed districts’ struggles to address political tensions over schooling, and identified the expanded academic and nonacademic services that districts are using to help students recover academically from pandemic-related disruptions to schooling (e.g., Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022b; Diliberti and Schwartz, 2023; Jochim et al., 2023; Schwartz and Diliberti, 2021).

Districts Estimate That Educator Turnover Has Stabilized, but at a Higher Level Than Before the Pandemic

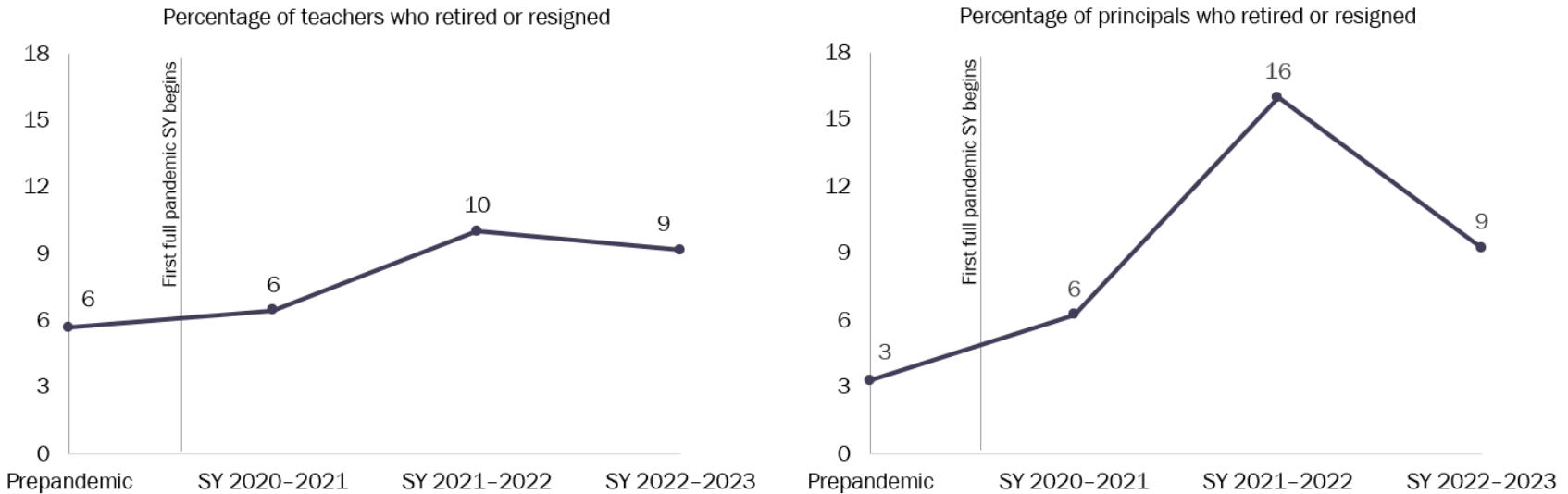
Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, many studies have documented educators’ declining satisfaction with the profession—a trend that predates the pandemic but has perhaps accelerated in recent years (e.g., Kraft and Lyon, 2022; Steiner, Schwartz, and Diliberti, 2022). Educators’ declining job satisfaction and low levels of morale continue to raise concerns about the possibility of heightened rates of educator turnover.

For the past three school years (i.e., from 2020–2021 to 2022–2023), we have asked nationally representative samples of districts to estimate what percentage of their teachers and school principals retired or resigned that school year. We used their answers to construct national estimates of *educator turnover*, which we define as the estimated average percentage of educators who retired or resigned.²

According to districts’ reports, 9 percent of teachers, on average, retired or resigned at some point during or at the end of the 2022–2023 school year. As shown in the left panel of Figure 1, this is roughly the same percentage that districts estimated retired or resigned in the previous school year (2021–2022) and is several percentage points higher than districts’ estimated prepandemic turnover rate. This pattern of continued heightened turnover nationally in 2022–2023 relative to prepandemic levels generally mirrors findings from other recent state-specific studies conducted in Arkansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Wisconsin; these studies also found that teacher turnover in 2022–2023 remained roughly on par with or even exceeded that in 2021–2022 (Bastian and Fuller, 2024; Camp, Zamarro, and McGee, 2024; Clark, 2023; Fuller, 2023; Hamidu, 2023; Knight et al., 2023).

² Many national and state-specific studies conducted before and after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic have documented churn in the educator labor market. Although terminology and definitions are inconsistent across studies, researchers generally categorize educators into three buckets: (1) *stayers* (i.e., educators who remain in the same position or in the same school), (2) *movers* (i.e., educators who remain in the profession but who move to new schools or new positions, whether internal or external to their current school district), and (3) *leavers* (i.e., those who depart the profession entirely for various reasons). Because they can track individuals over time, state administrative records can categorize educators into these three bins precisely. The term *turnover* is sometimes used to refer to only leavers, and at other times to refer to leavers plus movers. In this Data Note, we use the term *turnover* to mean educators who retired or resigned. Unlike state administrative records, we presume that districts’ reports cannot distinguish between an educator who leaves the profession entirely and someone who moves to a new but similar position external to the school district. We also presume that districts’ self-reports exclude internal movers because, from districts’ perspectives, these people have not retired or resigned. Given this context, we interpret districts’ reports of retirements and resignations as including leavers and external movers but excluding internal movers. Thus, when we compare our results with those from other studies, we generally expect our numbers to fall somewhere between other studies’ estimates of leavers and leavers plus movers. (Federal data show that about half of movers are internal and half are external [Taie, Lewis, and Merlin, 2023b]).

Figure 1. Districts’ Average Estimates of the Percentage of Educators Who Retired or Resigned, by School Year



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: “What percentage of your [teachers or school principals] retired or resigned at any point during the 2022–2023 school year? Include those who left during the school year or at the end of it,” which was administered in fall 2023 ($n = 229$); “What percentage of your [teachers or school principals] retired or resigned at any point during the 2021–2022 school year? Include those who left during the school year or at the end of it,” which was administered in fall 2022 ($n = 295$); “What was the typical percentage of your [teachers or school principals] who retired or resigned annually prepandemic?” which was administered in summer 2021 ($n = 279$); and “What percentage of your [teachers or school principals] retired or resigned at the end of the 2020–2021 school year?” which was administered in summer 2021 ($n = 278$). For all questions, respondents were asked to enter a percentage into a text box. Figures present the average turnover rate reported by districts. SY = school year.

Meanwhile, districts estimated that, on average, 9 percent of their principals retired or resigned at some point during or following the 2022–2023 school year. The estimated turnover rate came down from that of the previous school year, but it is still higher than the prepandemic turnover rates for school principals, at least according to district reports. There have been fewer studies of principal turnover in recent years, limiting our ability to understand how our estimates compare with other published turnover rates. Like other national and state-specific studies, we observed evidence of heightened principal turnover in 2021–2022 relative to prepandemic levels, after steady—or even declining—principal turnover rates early in the pandemic (Bastian and Fuller, 2023; Knight et al., 2023; Makkonen and Jaquet, 2021; Steiner et al., 2022; Superville, 2022; Taie, Lewis, and Merlin, 2023a). However, as of the writing of this Data Note, we are unaware of any other national studies that have documented principal turnover as of 2022–2023.

We caution readers that these turnover estimates have several limitations. First, our numbers are estimates provided by districts rather than taken directly from employment records.³ It is possible that districts' self-reports could over- or underestimate the actual turnover rate. Second, we asked districts in summer 2021 to estimate their typical prepandemic turnover rates, which were rates from more than a year before. Thus, there might be some recall bias in districts' reports—either because respondents could not accurately remember their prepandemic turnover rates or because respondents might have been overly optimistic in recalling the past. Third, our data about turnover for 2020–2021 were collected in summer 2021, and our data for 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 were collected in fall 2022 and 2023, respectively. Therefore, districts' estimates of educator turnover in 2020–2021 represent a shorter time frame, which perhaps contributes to the lower turnover rates observed in this school year than observed in subsequent school years.

Despite these limitations, we present these survey data for two reasons. First, they are some of the only national data that bridge the prepandemic and pandemic eras. Second, these national data cover the most recent school year (2022–2023); other national data sources are several school years behind.⁴

As shown in Figure 2, the rate of estimated teacher turnover held steady over the past two school years within different types of districts. That is, teacher turnover in urban districts was both elevated and steady during the 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 school years.

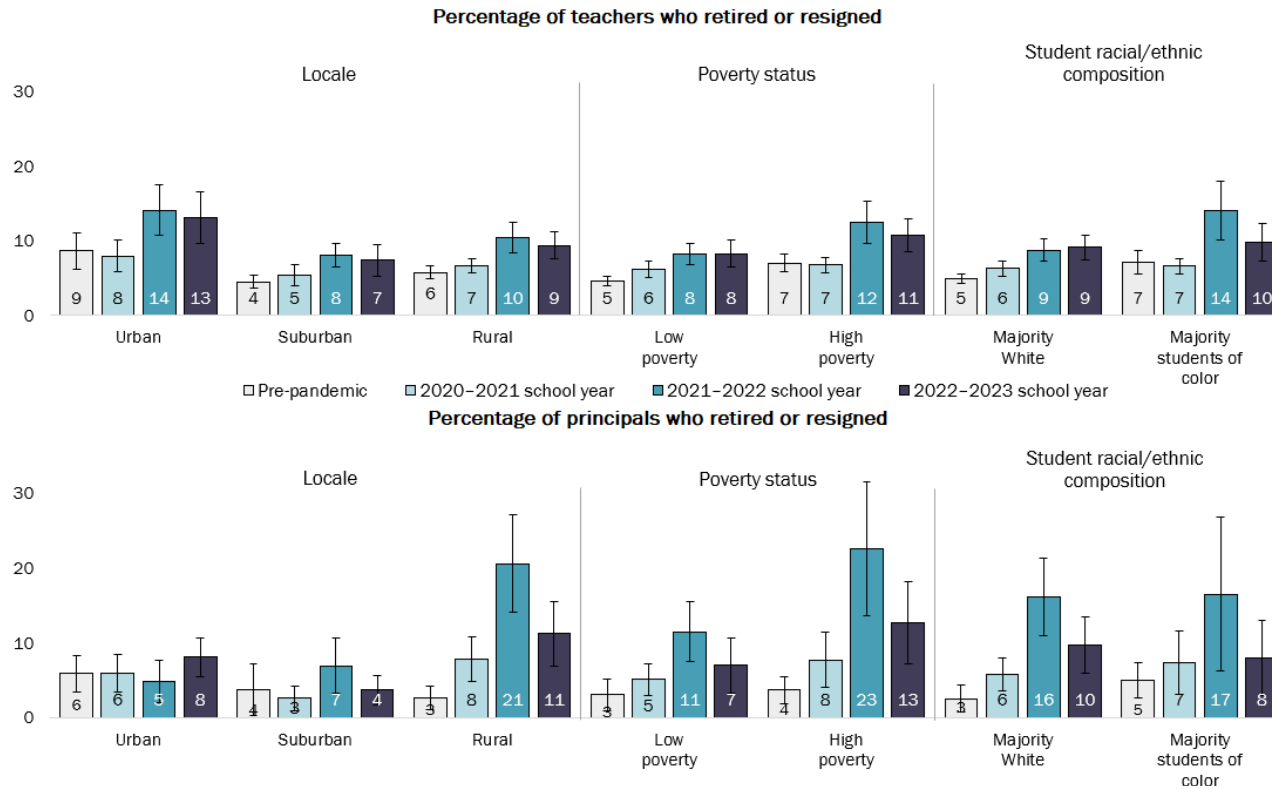
³ Our estimates of educator turnover are an average of districts' self-reports (e.g., one district reported an 8-percent turnover rate and another reported a 10-percent turnover rate for an average of 9-percent turnover). This method does not account for the fact that educators are not evenly distributed across districts and, thus, are susceptible to an upward or downward bias if, say, large districts that employ many educators report substantially higher or lower educator turnover rates than smaller districts that employ fewer educators.

⁴ The National Center for Education Statistics' National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) also provides national data on educator attrition and mobility that bridge the prepandemic and pandemic eras. As of the writing of this Data Note, the most recent NTPS data cover educator attrition and mobility that occurred between the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years, which are roughly analogous to our 2020–2021 estimates (Taie, Lewis, and Merlin, 2023a; Taie, Lewis, and Merlin, 2023b). For teachers, the last prepandemic data collection occurred between the 2011–2012 and 2012–2013 school years. At that time, 8 percent of teachers were categorized as movers and 8 percent were categorized as leavers (Goldring et al., 2014). The most recent NTPS data collection categorized 8 percent of teachers as movers and another 8 percent as leavers—the same rates that the NTPS documented before the pandemic (Taie, Lewis, and Merlin, 2023b). Although our prepandemic and 2020–2021 teacher turnover estimates are slightly lower than those observed in the NTPS, we nevertheless reach the same conclusion: Teacher turnover did not increase nationally in 2020–2021 over prepandemic levels. For principals, the last prepandemic data collection occurred between the 2015–2016 and 2016–2017 school years. At that time, 6 percent of school principals were categorized as movers and 10 percent were categorized as leavers (Goldring, Taie, and O'Rear, 2018). The most recent data collection categorized 6 percent of school principals as movers and another 11 percent as leavers—at most a marginal increase over prepandemic levels (Taie, Lewis, and Merlin, 2023a). Our prepandemic and 2020–2021 school principal turnover estimates are substantially lower than those observed in the NTPS, perhaps because of the method we are using to calculate our turnover rates. Nevertheless, we reached the same conclusion as the NTPS: Principal turnover increased marginally in 2020–2021 over prepandemic levels. In sum, our main conclusion that there was no mass attrition among educators nationally following the 2020–2021 school year—a finding that we discussed in detail in Diliberti and Schwartz (2021)—broadly aligns with newly released data from the NTPS.

We also observed a similar pattern among districts that serve mostly students of color and among high-poverty districts (those in which at least half of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch), although differences were not statistically significant. (Many urban districts are also high-poverty districts and serve mostly students of color, so the three categories are highly overlapping.)

By contrast, districts' estimates of principal turnover changed more substantially within categories of school districts. For example, estimated principal turnover among urban districts remained relatively constant over the past several school years. In contrast, district estimates of rural principals' rate of turnover declined markedly between 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 but still remained above prepandemic levels. We caution readers that rural districts have very few schools, and so the departure of even one principal in a small district—for example, a district that has only three schools and thus three principals—can substantially change the turnover rate from year to year.

Figure 2. Districts’ Average Estimates of the Percentage of Educators Who Retired or Resigned, by Subgroup and School Year



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: “What percentage of your [teachers or school principals] retired or resigned at any point during the 2022–2023 school year? Include those who left during the school year or at the end of it,” which was administered in fall 2023 ($n = 228$); “What percentage of your [teachers or school principals] retired or resigned at any point during the 2021–2022 school year? Include those who left during the school year or at the end of it,” which was administered in fall 2022 ($n = 295$); “What percentage of your [teachers or school principals] retired or resigned at the end of the 2020–2021 school year?” which was administered in summer 2021 ($n = 278$); and “What was the typical percentage of your [teachers or school principals] who retired or resigned annually prepandemic?” which was administered in summer 2021 ($n = 279$). For all questions, respondents were asked to enter a percentage into a text box. The vertical black bars represent the 95-percent confidence interval for each estimate. Figures present the average turnover rate reported by districts.

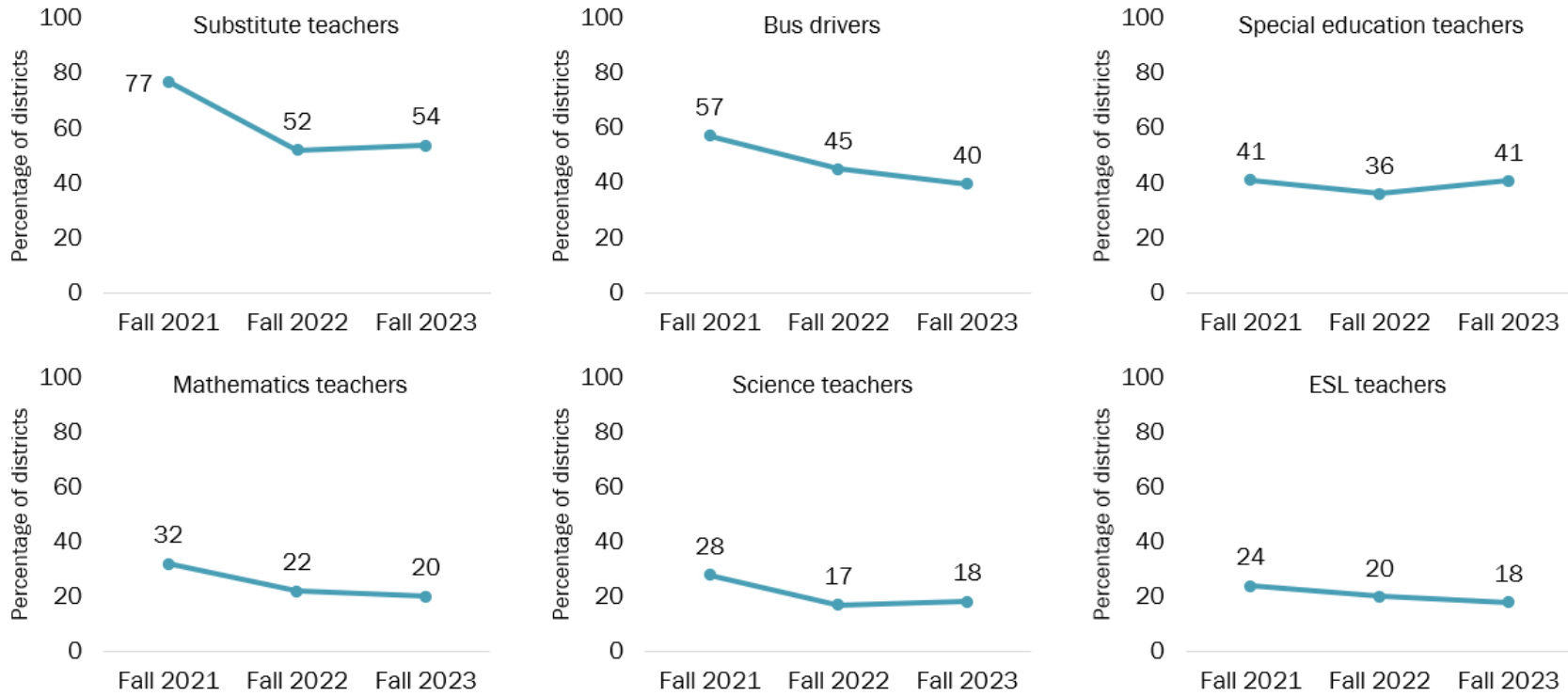
Shortages Have Abated from Pandemic Highs in Many Staff Categories but Are Still Considerable Among Substitutes and Special Education Teachers

Throughout the pandemic, school districts experienced acute shortages of many staff, particularly substitute teachers, bus drivers, and special education teachers (Goldhaber et al., 2022; Schwartz and Diliberti, 2022; Sparks, 2022). These shortages seem to have abated as districts increased their hiring, sometimes to above prepandemic levels, presumably using COVID-19 relief funds to do so (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022b; Diliberti and Schwartz, 2023; Institute of Education Sciences, undated; Wething, deCourcy, and Bivens, 2023). But an early survey of principals from this 2023–2024 school year shows that many schools were still struggling with staff shortages (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023; Sparks, 2023).

To learn whether shortages have continued to lessen, we asked districts in fall 2023 about staffing levels for the five teaching categories and one nonteaching category for which districts reported the highest shortages in fall 2022 (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2023). Figure 3 shows that the percentage of districts reporting considerable shortages of bus drivers and substitute teachers has declined from when we first asked districts about shortages in fall 2021. But half of districts still reported a considerable shortage of substitute teachers in fall 2023, and about four in ten said the same about bus drivers. Meanwhile, four in ten districts also reported considerable shortages of special education teachers in fall 2023, and this shortage might have grown since fall 2022. Finally, about one-fifth of school districts reported a considerable shortage of science, math, and English as a second language teachers as of fall 2023. These shortages appear to be roughly on par with district-reported shortages from fall 2022 but are below those from fall 2021.

Of course, staff shortages, especially for historically hard-to-staff positions, such as substitute teachers and special education teachers, long predate the pandemic (Liu, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, undated-c; Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, and Carver-Thomas, 2016). And high-poverty districts have historically had elevated shortages in many staff positions—a pattern we observe in our fall 2023 survey data as well, although differences are not always statistically significant (results not shown). However, a lack of national data on prepandemic staffing shortages means that we are unable to determine whether the staffing shortages we observed in fall 2023 have receded to prepandemic norms.

Figure 3. Percentage of Districts That Reported a Considerable Shortage in Various Teaching and Nonteaching Staff Categories over Time



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: “For which job categories, if any, does your district currently have staff shortages? By shortage, we mean your district has unfilled open positions in the given job category,” which was administered in fall 2023 ($n = 228$); “For which school levels and subject area(s), if any, does your district/CMO [charter management organization] currently have teacher shortages? By shortage, we mean your district/CMO has unfilled open positions in the given job category,” administered in fall 2022 ($n = 291$); “For which types of nonteaching staff, if any, does your district/CMO currently have shortages? Include contract workers and direct district employees in your answer. By shortage, we mean your district/CMO has unfilled open positions in the given job category,” administered in fall 2022 ($n = 276$); “For which subject area(s), if any, does your district/CMO currently have teacher shortages?” administered in fall 2021 ($n = 349$); and “For which types of nonteaching staff does your district/CMO currently have shortages, if any?” administered in fall 2021 ($n = 314$). This figure excludes respondents who selected “not applicable” because they do not employ teachers in that subject area or nonteaching staff in that job category. ESL = English as a second language.

One-Quarter of Districts Foresee a Funding Cut in 2024–2025

To help schools deal with immediate needs during the pandemic and to assist with academic recovery efforts, Congress allocated K–12 schools about \$190.5 billion in federal funds via three stimulus packages in 2020 and 2021 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2022).⁵ Districts must obligate all remaining federal stimulus funds by September 2024. The expiration of these stimulus funds—combined with enrollment declines, slowing state revenues, and heightened staffing and service levels to address recovery needs—has the potential to create a “perfect storm” (Dee, 2023; Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022b; Roza and Silberstein, 2023).

To update our understanding of districts’ expected budget shortfalls, we asked districts in fall 2023 whether their expected combined sources of revenue (including local taxes, state funds, federal funds, donations, and investment earnings) will be lower, higher, or about the same in 2024–2025 compared with the 2023–2024 school year. Given the combination of challenges we outlined above, we expected many, if not most, districts to report expectations for lower revenues in 2024–2025 than in 2023–2024. In fact, when we asked districts back in summer 2021 to predict when they expected a “fiscal cliff” to occur, districts most often predicted this that cliff would occur in 2024–2025 if it did come to pass (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2021).

To our surprise, only about one-quarter of districts (26 percent) said that they foresee that their revenues in 2024–2025 will be at least 5 percent lower than in 2023–2024 (see Figure 4). Meanwhile, almost half of districts (45 percent) estimated their funding in 2024–2025 to be about the same as in 2023–2024. Interestingly, a nontrivial share of districts (about 15 percent) indicated that they foresee revenues in 2024–2025 that will be higher than in 2023–2024. The remaining 13 percent of respondents were not sure how their funding levels would compare. It is possible that districts’ revenue challenges will emerge in 2025–2026 instead of in 2024–2025, because federal relief funding will be spent down by then and not just obligated.

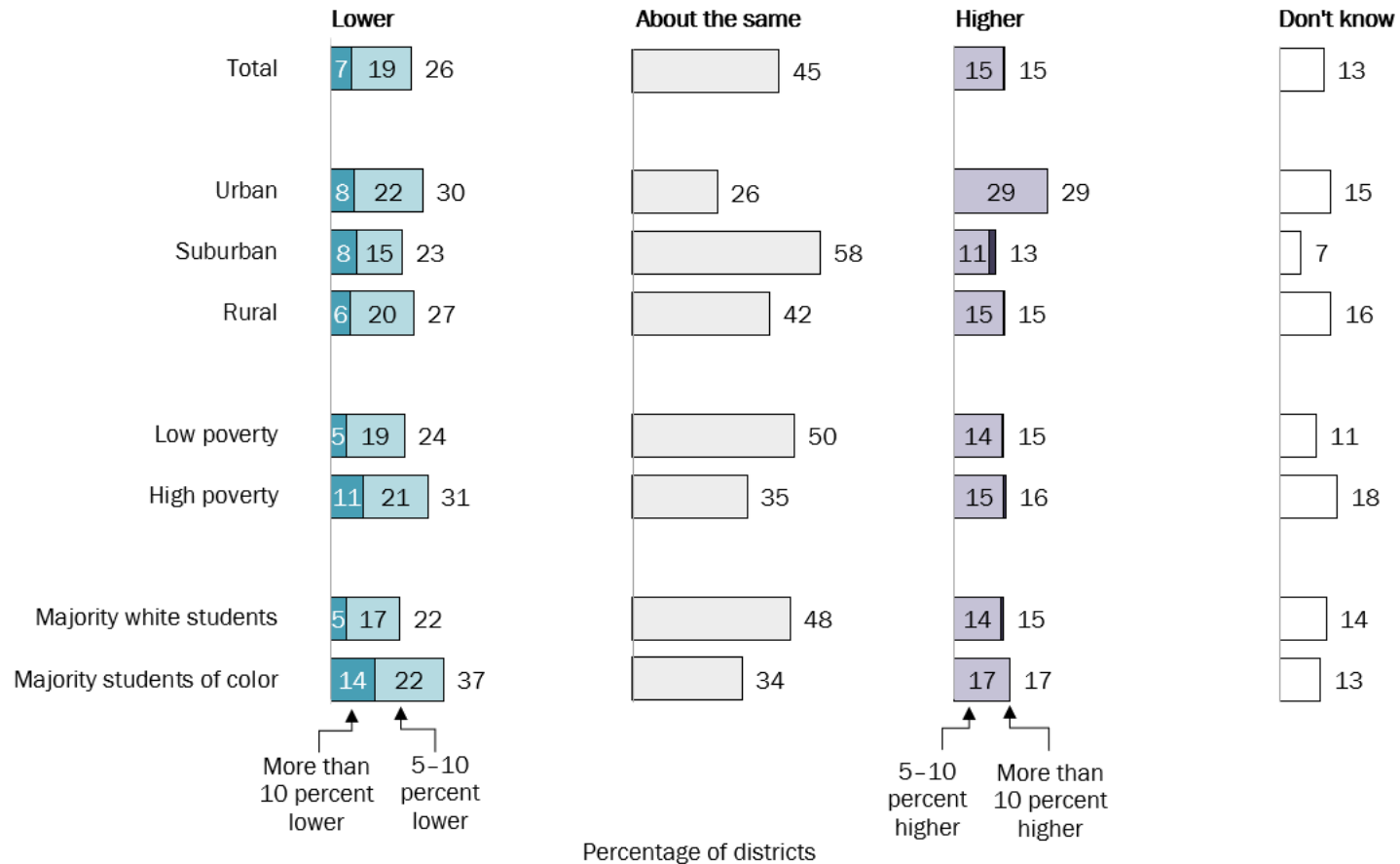
High-poverty districts and districts serving mostly students of color were somewhat more likely than their counterparts to foresee lower funding revenues next school year, although differences were not statistically significant. Suburban districts were particularly likely to estimate no change in revenues in 2024–2025.

Overall, these subgroup patterns generally comport with those from other recent studies. Our previous ASDP surveys revealed that respondents in urban districts were especially worried about the possibility of a fiscal cliff when COVID-19 federal aid expires in

⁵ These funds, referred to as the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, were distributed using the Title I, Part A formula of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which roughly allocates funding to districts proportional to the share of students in poverty. Schools have used these funds to pay for a variety of activities and personnel, including increased mental health supports, additional staffing, health and safety materials, technology, and such academic interventions as tutoring (Arundel, 2023; Silberstein and Roza, 2023).

September 2024, although concern among other district types eventually caught up (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2021; Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022b). High-poverty districts—which received a greater share of this federal aid—might be at a higher risk when the aid expires (Barnum, 2023; Roza and Silberstein, 2023). Furthermore, some evidence suggests that public school enrollment (which is one revenue source for districts) has declined to a greater degree in urban areas and in high-poverty areas, further putting these districts at risk of revenue shortfalls (Burtis and Goulas, 2023; Jacobson, 2024).

Figure 4. Percentage of Districts That Predicted Their Revenue in 2024–2025 to Be Higher, Lower, or About the Same as Their Revenue in 2023–2024, by Subgroup



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “Do you expect your district’s revenue in 2024–2025 to be higher, lower or about the same as your 2023–2024 revenue? (Revenue includes total receipts from all sources, including local taxes, state funds, federal funds, donations, and investment earnings.)” ($n = 229$). Respondents could select one of the following response options: “More than 10 percent lower than our 2023–2024 revenue,” “5–10 percent lower than our 2023–2024 revenue,” “Less than 5 percent lower or higher than our 2023–2024 revenue,” “5–10 percent higher than our 2023–2024 revenue,” “More than 10 percent higher than our 2023–2024 revenue,” or “Don’t know.” Bars might not sum to totals due to rounding. Some value labels have been omitted from the figure for readability.

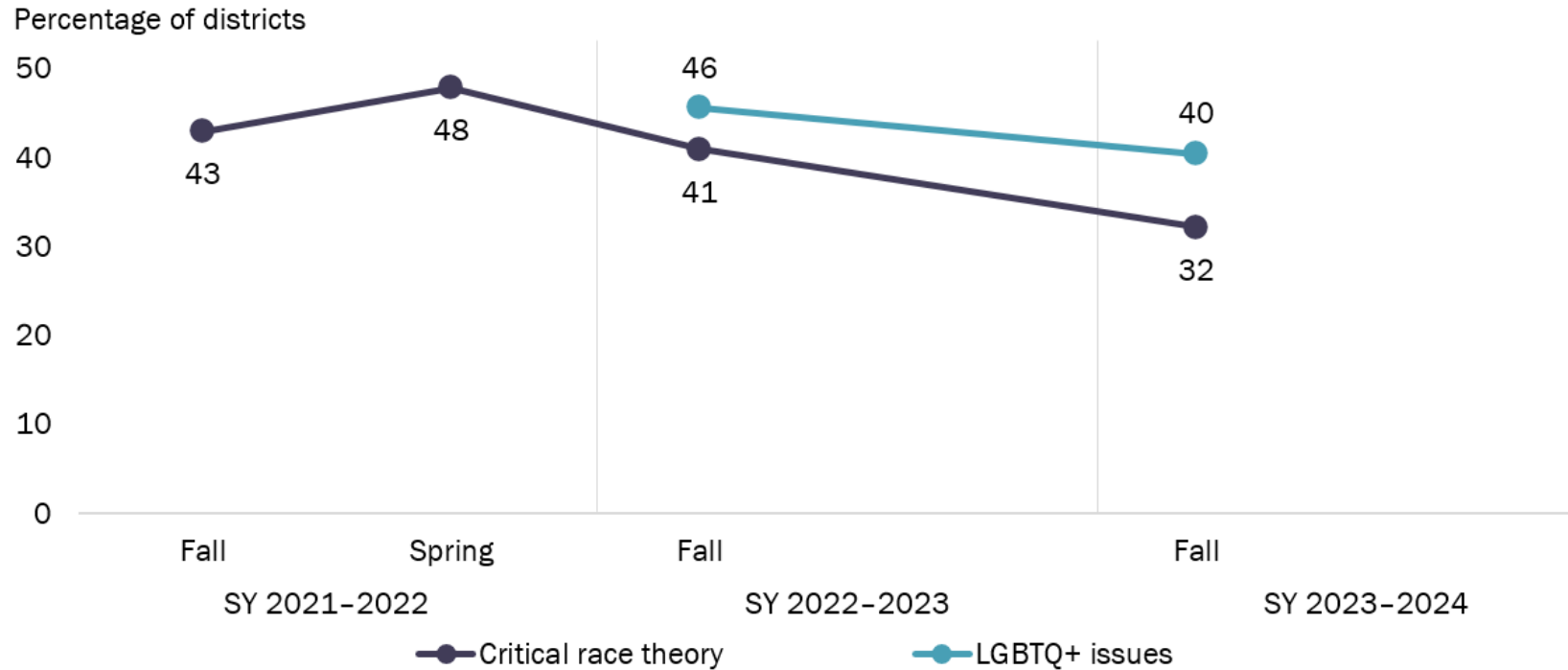
Political Polarization About Race and Gender Issues Continues to Interfere with Schooling in About Four in Ten School Districts, Although Polarization Is Declining

In April 2021, Idaho became the first state to restrict educator discussions about what legislators deemed tenets of “critical race theory” in classrooms (Idaho House Bill 377, 2021). Roughly a third of states and some districts followed suit, passing a variety of policies broadly focused on restricting classroom discussions about race, gender, and/or sexual orientation (CRT Forward, undated; PEN America, undated; Schwartz, 2023; Woo et al., 2024). These restrictions—combined with book bans, heightened numbers of requests from parents to opt their children out of instruction about controversial topics, and heightened Freedom of Information Act requests to districts—have had a chilling effect on schools’ instruction about controversial topics, such as race, gender, and sexuality (Jochim et al., 2023; Pollock et al., 2022; Woo et al., 2023; Woo, Diliberti, and Steiner, 2024; Woo et al., 2024).

Over the past three school years, we have asked districts repeatedly whether political polarization related to these topics is interfering with their ability to educate students. As Figure 5 shows, the share of districts reporting that political polarization about race and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, plus others (LGBTQ+) issues is interfering with schooling is declining, although it is still high. In fall 2023, 32 percent of districts agreed or strongly agreed that political polarization over critical race theory was interfering with schooling, which was down 9 percentage points from fall 2022 and down 16 percentage points from a peak in spring 2022. Meanwhile, 40 percent of districts agreed or strongly agreed that political polarization over LGBTQ+ issues was interfering with schooling in fall 2023, which was down several percentage points from the previous school year.

Although our trend line is shorter for polarization surrounding LGBTQ+ issues than for critical race theory, districts have consistently identified polarization about LGBTQ+ issues as a greater interference than polarization about critical race theory. This general pattern comports with that shown in other recent studies. For example, a national survey of U.S. adults found broader support for teaching race-related topics than for gender-related topics (Polikoff et al., 2022). Similarly, a recent nationally representative survey of teachers found that only a small minority of teachers (3 percent) supported restrictions on such content as race and gender in the classroom. Among these teachers, a greater number (most of whom are elementary teachers) described concerns about discussing gender-related topics than race-related topics (Woo et al., 2024).

Figure 5. Percentage of Districts That Agreed or Strongly Agreed That Political Polarization over Critical Race Theory or LGBTQ+ Issues Is Interfering with Their Ability to Educate Students over Time



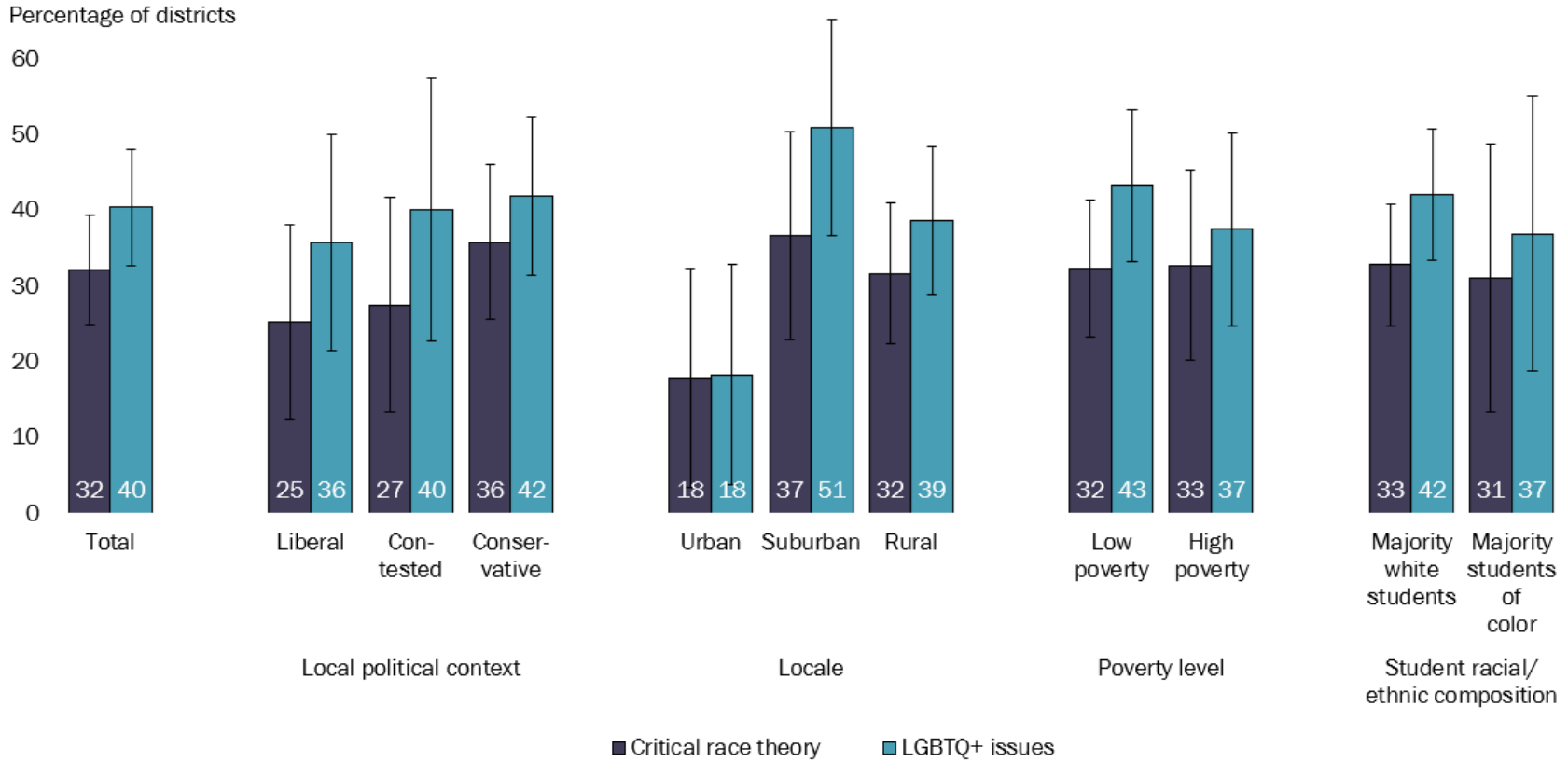
NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your district this school year [school year]?” Statements included “Political polarization about critical race theory is interfering with our ability to educate students,” administered in fall 2023 (*n* = 225), fall 2022 (*n* = 292), spring 2022 (*n* = 287), and fall 2021 (*n* = 357), and “Political polarization about LGBTQ+ issues is interfering with our ability to educate students,” administered in fall 2023 and fall 2022 only. The figure displays the percentage of respondents that selected “agree” or “strongly agree.” SY = school year.

Political Polarization About Race and LGBTQ+ Issues Continues to Be Concentrated in Suburban and Rural Districts

As shown in Figure 6, suburban and rural districts were more than twice as likely as their urban counterparts to indicate that political polarization over LGBTQ+ issues was interfering with their ability to educate students. We observed a similar pattern for polarization about critical race theory, although differences were not statistically significant. We also observed higher rates of polarization over LGBTQ+ issues among low-poverty districts, majority-White districts, and districts located in conservative areas, although, again, differences were not statistically significant. Nevertheless, these patterns generally mirror what we have observed in our previous surveys of districts (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022a; Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022b; Jochim et al., 2023) and surveys of educators (Woo et al., 2022).

With one exception, a greater share of districts in each subgroup agreed that polarization over LGBTQ+ issues was interfering with their ability to educate students. The exception was for urban districts; these districts reported the lowest rates of agreement about polarization interfering with schooling generally and were less likely to perceive polarization over LGBTQ+ issues as a greater interference than polarization over critical race theory.

Figure 6. Percentage of Districts That Agreed or Strongly Agreed That Political Polarization over Critical Race Theory or LGBTQ+ Issues Is Interfering with Their Ability to Educate Students in Fall 2023, by District Subgroup



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your district this school year (2023–2024)?” Statements included “Political polarization about critical race theory is interfering with our ability to educate students” and “Political polarization about LGBTQ+ issues is interfering with our ability to educate students” ($n = 225$). The figure displays the percentage of respondents who selected “agree” or “strongly agree.” The vertical black bars represent the 95-percent confidence interval for each estimate.

Five Percent of Districts Disciplined Educators for Violating Policies That Restrict Discussions About Race, Gender, or Sexuality

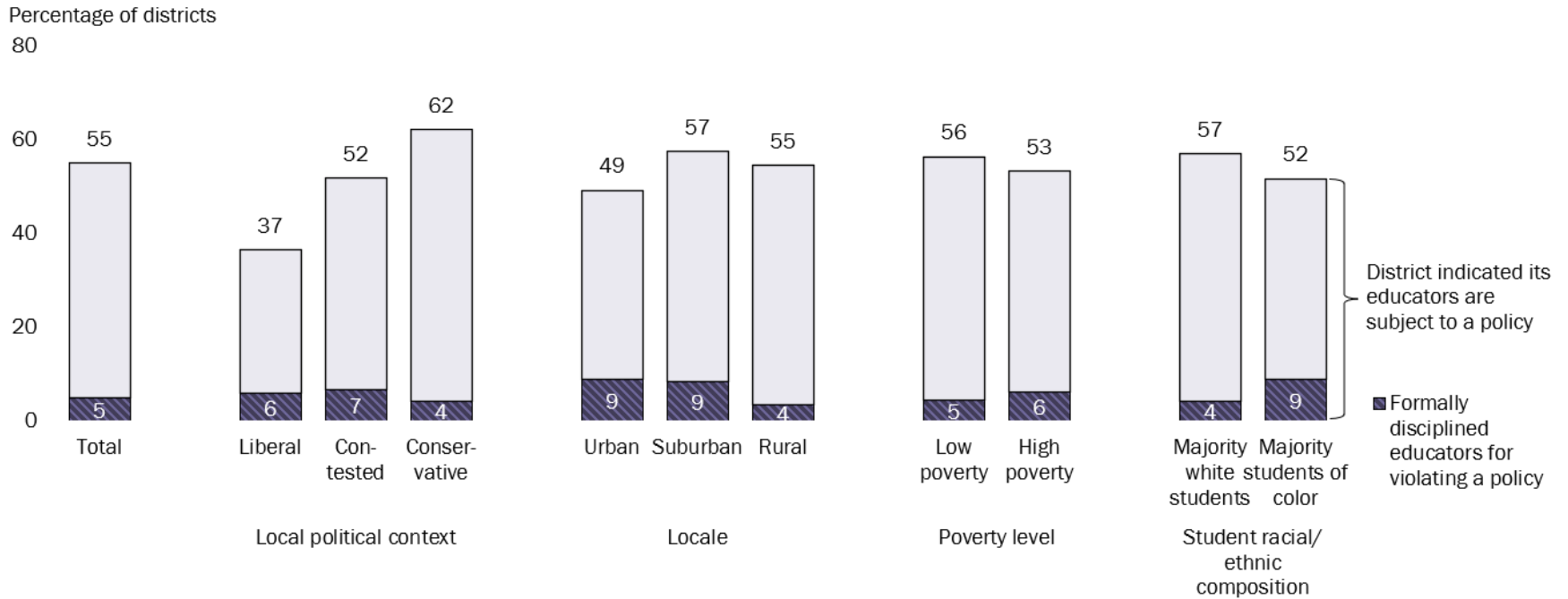
Media reports have highlighted isolated incidents of disciplinary actions taken by school districts or state departments of education against educators who have violated state or district policies restricting teachers' discussions of topics related to race, gender, or sexuality (e.g., Alonso and Rosales, 2023; Connolly, 2023; Sonnenberg, 2023). But it is not clear how common these disciplinary incidents actually are. To find out, we asked districts the following question: "Since the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, has your district formally disciplined (e.g., written up, fined, suspended with or without pay, removed from a leadership position, fired) any educators for violating a district or state policy that restricts teachers' discussions of certain topics related to race, gender, or sexuality in the classroom?" Figure 7 displays the results.

More than half of districts (55 percent) said that their educators were subject to a district or state policy that restricts teachers' discussions of certain topics related to race, gender, or sexuality in the classroom. This roughly mirrors the results from a recent teacher survey conducted by our colleagues that estimated that 51 percent of teachers nationally are subject to state and/or local restrictions (Woo, Diliberti, and Steiner, 2024).

Although districts' responses suggest that these policies have become relatively common, only 5 percent of all districts indicated that they had disciplined at least one educator for violating such a policy since the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year (see Figure 7). Furthermore, districts' reports indicate that disciplinary actions were rare in all types of districts.

However, as shown in Figure 7, not all districts were equally likely to have said that their educators are subject to a policy. Unsurprisingly, districts located in conservative areas were almost twice as likely as their counterparts in liberal areas to indicate that their educators were subject to such a state or district policy. But because districts of all types were about equally likely to report disciplinary actions, liberal districts have the highest ratio of disciplinary actions relative to policy restrictions. In other words, conditional on having a policy, liberal districts were about twice as likely to discipline educators for violating such a policy as their conservative counterparts.

Figure 7. Percentage of Districts Where Educators Are Subject to a District or State Policy That Restricts Teachers' Discussions of Certain Topics Related to Race, Gender, or Sexuality in the Classroom and Percentage of Districts That Have Disciplined Any Educators for Violating Such a Policy Since the Beginning of the 2020–2021 School Year



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “Since the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, has your district formally disciplined (e.g., written up, fined, suspended with or without pay, removed from a leadership position, fired) any educators for violating a district or state policy that restricts teachers’ discussions of certain topics related to race, gender, or sexuality in the classroom?” (*n* = 224). Respondents could select one of the following response options: “No; the educators in our district are not subject to any such policy,” “No; the educators in our district are subject to such a policy, but no educators have been disciplined for violating it,” “Yes,” or “Don’t know.” The figure displays the percentage of respondents who selected “Yes,” as well as the percentage who selected “No; the educators in our district are subject to such a policy, but no educators have been disciplined for violating it.”

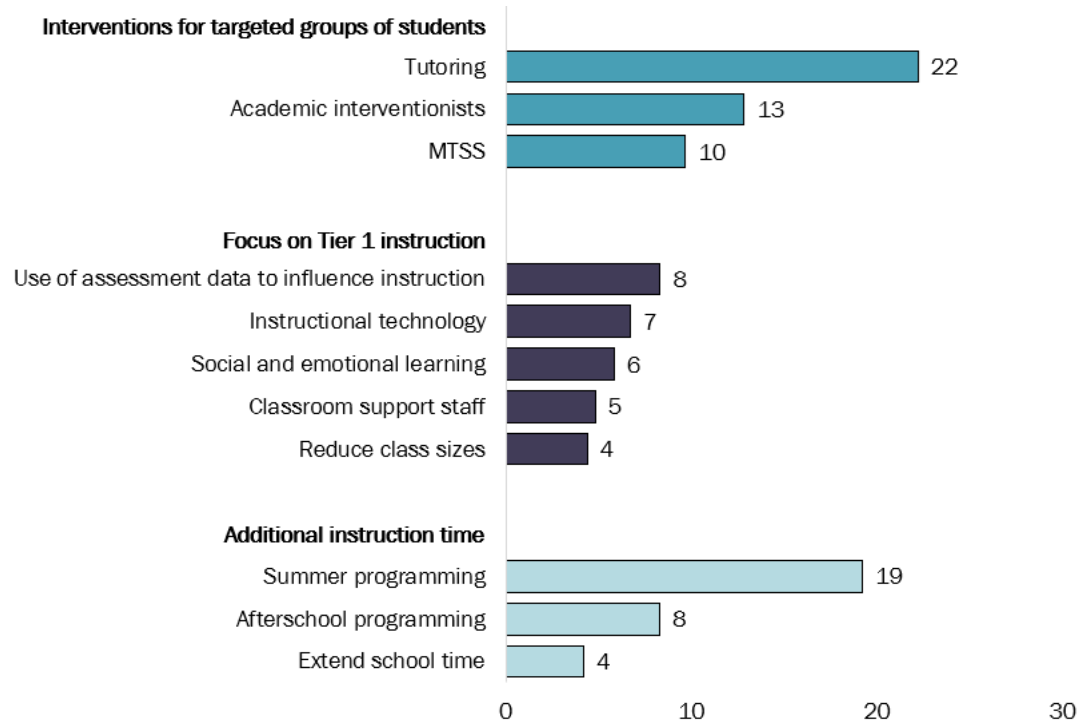
According to Districts, Tutoring, Summer Programming, and Academic Interventionists Are Best in Helping Students Recover from Learning Setbacks

There has been a sharp decline in student achievement after the COVID-19 pandemic first shuttered schools in March 2020, and the pandemic hit vulnerable students the hardest (e.g., Fahle et al., 2024; Kane and Reardon, 2023; Lewis and Kuhfeld, 2023; National Center for Education Statistics, undated-a). Naturally, districts are eager to invest in recovery activities that are the most effective. Although there is much research on some of the most popular recovery investments, such as tutoring, there are many unanswered questions about how effective interventions are and for which students when the intervention is carried out at scale (e.g., Callen et al., 2023; Carbonari et al., 2022; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; White, Groom-Thomas, and Loeb, 2023). We therefore asked districts which of their interventions they believed were best at helping their students recover from learning setbacks caused by COVID-19–related interruptions to schooling. Rather than list interventions from which to select, we included an open text response field and coded districts’ open-ended responses. Figure 8 shows the results.

Tutoring, summer programs, and academic interventionists were the three most–frequently-mentioned interventions. And interventions for targeted groups of students—as opposed to actions focusing on Tier 1 instruction for all students in the school—were by far the most popular category of investments for helping students recover academically (see Figure 8). Within targeted interventions, tutoring, the hiring of academic interventionists (most commonly for math and reading), and investments in a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)⁶ were the most common. Only 4 percent of districts mentioned ways to add instructional time, such as by lengthening the school day or the school year, although other commonly mentioned interventions, such as summer school and after-school programming, can essentially add instructional minutes.

⁶ MTSS starts with screening all students for academic, behavioral, absenteeism-related, and other social and emotional needs. Then educators intervene on the targeted need in a small group of students or escalate to one-on-one help.

Figure 8. Percentage of Districts That Identified Various Programs, Services, or Activities as the Ones They Believe Are Best at Helping Students Recover from Learning Setbacks from the COVID-19 Pandemic



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following open-ended survey question: “What is the program, service, or activity your school district has provided that you think has best helped, or is best helping, your students recover from learning setbacks from COVID-19?” ($n = 214$). We reviewed districts’ responses and coded them into the categories shown in this figure (e.g., tutoring, summer programming). We excluded from this figure programs, services, or activities identified by fewer than 3 percent of districts, as well as responses we categorized as “other.” In their responses, some districts identified more than one program, service, or activity; thus, categories are not mutually exclusive.

How This Analysis Was Conducted and Limitations

RAND researchers fielded the eighth survey of the ASDP from October 12, 2023, through December 14, 2023. Our methodology for analyzing survey data remains relatively consistent across survey waves; therefore, the description of our methods here is text that we updated from a previous publication (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2023).

Starting in fall 2020 and in several waves since, we randomly sampled public school districts to invite them to enroll in the ASDP. All enrolled districts were invited to complete this survey. Of the 1,167 public school districts that enrolled in the panel between fall 2020 and fall 2023, 231 districts completed surveys (19.8-percent survey completion rate). We designed the 12-minute survey to allow multiple respondents from the same district central office to complete portions of the survey—for example, a superintendent, human resources director, or research director might answer questions about district staffing levels; an academic director might complete questions about math instruction; and a summer learning coordinator might answer questions about summer programs. We do not know which person(s) in each district completed the survey on behalf of their district.

Survey responses were weighted to be representative of the national population of public school districts, not the national population of public school students. Students are not evenly distributed across school districts. More specifically, among the population of 12,500 school districts in the United States, only 7 percent are in urban areas, whereas 25 percent are in suburban areas and 69 percent are in rural areas (Grant et al., 2024). Yet roughly 30 percent of the country’s 50 million public school students are enrolled in urban districts (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-d). And the country’s 120 largest school districts (which represent less than 1 percent of all public school districts)—many of which are urban—alone account for roughly 20 percent of all student enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-e). Thus, although rural districts represent a majority of school districts, they do not represent a majority of public school students. For more information about the sampling and weighting procedures for the fall 2023 ASDP survey, see Grant et al., 2024.

Because districts’ experiences vary, we examined differences in districts’ responses by district context. We obtained data on district demographics by linking survey data files to the 2020–2021 Common Core of Data issued by the National Center for Education Statistics (2022). We obtained data on the political climate in the county where each district is located by linking survey data files to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Election Data + Science Lab (2022).

We analyzed the following four categories, which yielded ten subgroups:

1. locale (*urban, suburban, and rural*)⁷
2. student racial and ethnic composition (we categorize districts in which more than one-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*; the remaining districts are categorized as having *majority White students*)
3. poverty level (districts in which at least half of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch are categorized as *high poverty*, whereas the remainder are categorized as *low poverty*)
4. local political climate (we categorize districts based on the share of votes received by incumbent President Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election where districts in *liberal* areas are those in counties where President Trump received less than 45 percent of the vote share; districts in *contested* areas are those in counties where President Trump received between 45 and 55 percent of the vote share; and districts in *conservative* areas are those in counties where President Trump received more than 55 percent of the vote share).

It is important to keep in mind that each district that took our survey belongs to four of the ten subgroups—for example, a single school district is suburban, is categorized as low poverty, enrolls mostly White students, and is located in a conservative county. Thus, patterns observed across district contexts might be driven by the same set of districts that share multiple characteristics. Because of our small sample size, we are unable to disentangle these relationships.

In this Data Note, we describe only those differences among district subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5-percent level, unless otherwise noted. For all fall 2023 survey estimates, we conducted significance testing to assess whether subgroups were statistically different at the $p < 0.05$ level. Specifically, we tested whether the percentage of districts in one subgroup reporting a response was statistically different from the remaining districts that took the survey (e.g., urban districts versus other districts that are not urban). However, we did not conduct formal significance testing of differences across survey waves (e.g., comparing districts' responses on survey items in fall 2023 versus fall 2022) because of a lack of longitudinal survey weights that properly account for the partial overlap in respondents and changes in representativeness of survey respondents across years. Estimates for each survey were separately produced using cross-sectional survey weights designed specifically to provide nationally representative estimates at the time when the survey was administered. Therefore, we generally avoid making direct comparisons of data points from year to year and instead focus our attention on general trends. Additionally, comparisons across time points should be made with caution because some

⁷ Our locale definition aligns with the four-category locale definition used by the National Center for Education Statistics (undated-b), with the exception that we collapsed the districts located in towns into the rural category for sample size reasons.

differences that appear to be changes over time might actually be survey error. Furthermore, because of the exploratory nature of this study, we did not apply multiple hypothesis test corrections.

Finally, survey responses reflect district leaders' perceptions, which might not align with their actual experiences. Survey items were not pilot-tested before administration, limiting our ability to understand how respondents interpreted each item. Furthermore, respondents might not have consistently interpreted terms on the survey, such as "considerable shortage," which could affect how they completed survey items.

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About This Report

In fall 2023, we surveyed 231 American School District Panel (ASDP) member districts to track several timely topics in K–12 education today. We provide a brief update on four key challenges that U.S. school districts face today—school staffing, budgeting, the politicization of schooling, and academic recovery efforts—using data from the fall 2023 ASDP survey.

This 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, see *Technical Documentation for the Eighth American School District Panel Survey* (Grant et al., 2024) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting.

You can view the full set results from the survey and create user-friendly charts in Bento, a free data visualization tool. You can sign up for a Bento account at <https://www.bentobento.info/signup>. Researchers can also download survey data files to perform their own analyses at our website aepdata.org.

The ASDP is a research partnership between RAND and the Center on Reinventing Public Education. The panel also collaborates with several other education organizations—including the Council of the Great City Schools and Kitamba—to help ensure we produce actionable results. For more information, visit the ASDP website at www.americanschooldistrictpanel.org. The ASDP is one of the American Educator Panels (AEP). The AEP are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and districts across the country. The panels are a proud member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research’s Transparency Initiative. For more information, visit www.rand.org/aep.

RAND Education and Labor

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of RAND that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. This work was supported in whole by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation [INV-056780]. Under the grant conditions of the Foundation, a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Generic License has already been assigned to the Author Accepted Manuscript version that might arise from this submission. The findings and conclusions presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. For more information and research on these and other related topics, visit gatesfoundation.org.

More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this Data Note should be directed to hschwartz@rand.org, and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.

Acknowledgments

We are extremely grateful to the educators who agreed to participate in the panels. Their time and willingness to share their experiences were invaluable for this effort and for helping us understand how to better support their hard work in schools. We thank Brian Kim and Daniel Ibarrola for helping manage the survey; Casey Hunter for serving as the data manager for this survey; and Tim Colvin, Roberto Guevara, and Julie Newell for programming the survey. Thanks to Claude Messan Setodji for managing the sampling and weighting for these analyses. We greatly appreciate the administrative support provided by Tina Petrossian and Suzette Estey and ASDP management provided by Samantha DiNicola. We also thank Jill Cannon, Morgan Polikoff, and Elizabeth Steiner for helpful feedback that greatly improved this Data Note. We also thank Anna Bloom for her editorial expertise and Monette Velasco for overseeing the publication process for this Data Note.