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The K–12 Pandemic Budget and Staffing Crises Have Not Panned Out—Yet

Selected Findings from the Third American School District Panel Survey

Key Findings

- Nationally, district leaders reported that 6 percent of their teachers and 6 percent of their principals retired or resigned at the end of the 2020–2021 school year—rates they said were on par with their pre-pandemic attrition rates.
- About one in ten superintendents said they planned to leave their jobs by spring 2022, and media reports indicate their turnover is higher than normal.
- Nearly four in ten districts anticipate a fiscal cliff in the next three or four years as federal aid expires.
- Eight in ten districts that anticipate a fiscal cliff have modified their spending plans for the upcoming 2021–2022 school year and the year that follows to mitigate the effects of such an event.
- District leaders are seeking to hire more staff across job categories, especially substitute teachers and mental health staff.

During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, teachers experienced higher levels of job-related stress and symptoms of depression than other working adults (Steiner and Woo, 2021). Perhaps related to their high stress levels, as many as one-quarter of teachers and one-fifth of principals indicated they planned to leave their jobs by the end of the 2020–2021 school year—proportions much higher than pre–COVID-19 attrition rates (Goldring et al., 2014; Goldring, Taie, and O'Rear, 2018; Kaufman et al., 2020). These signals raised educators', policymakers', and researchers' fears of an exodus among K–12 educators, either at end of the 2020–2021 school year or soon after.

In addition, researchers and policymakers have raised concerns about school districts' fiscal health because of reduced state and local revenues for K–12 education and the unknown costs of COVID-19 adaptations to schooling (e.g., Roza and Silberstein, 2020), although these concerns have abated somewhat because of federal stimulus funds (U.S. Department of Education, undated).

RAND CORPORATION
AMERICAN SCHOOL DISTRICT PANEL

Now that the 2020–2021 school year has concluded, are the much-feared budget and staffing crises for school districts actually panning out?

To find out, we surveyed 292 district leaders between June 1, 2021 and July 2, 2021. We then weighted their responses to make them nationally representative. These leaders are members 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.

We use the terms *districts* and *district leaders* in this report to refer to both the 277 traditional public school district leaders who took the survey as well as leaders from 15 charter management organizations (CMOs).

This is the first of three short reports about district leaders' views at the end of the 2020–2021 school year. In our forthcoming report, we examine the academic and nonacademic services that districts plan to offer in fall 2021 to help students recover from the pandemic. Our final report will focus on the future of remote instruction.

Because districts' experiences vary, we examined differences in district leaders' responses in the following four categories that yield nine subgroups:

1. district type (traditional public school district versus CMO)[1]
2. locale (urban, suburban, and rural)
3. student racial and ethnic composition (districts in which more than half of the student population are students of color are categorized as *majority students of color* with the remaining districts categorized as *majority white*)
4. district poverty level (districts in which half or more of the student population qualifies for a free or reduced-price meal are categorized as *high poverty* whereas the remainder are categorized as *low poverty*).[2]

In this report, we only describe those differences among district subgroups that are statistically significant, unless otherwise noted. Because only 15 CMO leaders completed our survey, we do not present any differences between CMOs and traditional public school districts in this report. However, we do present results for both categories as well as the seven other subgroups in our Interactive Survey Results Tool at www.americanschooldistrictpanel.org/survey-results. Accompanying technical documentation (Grant et al., 2021) provides information about the survey methodology and weighting procedures.

There Was Not an Exodus of Teachers or Principals in Spring 2021

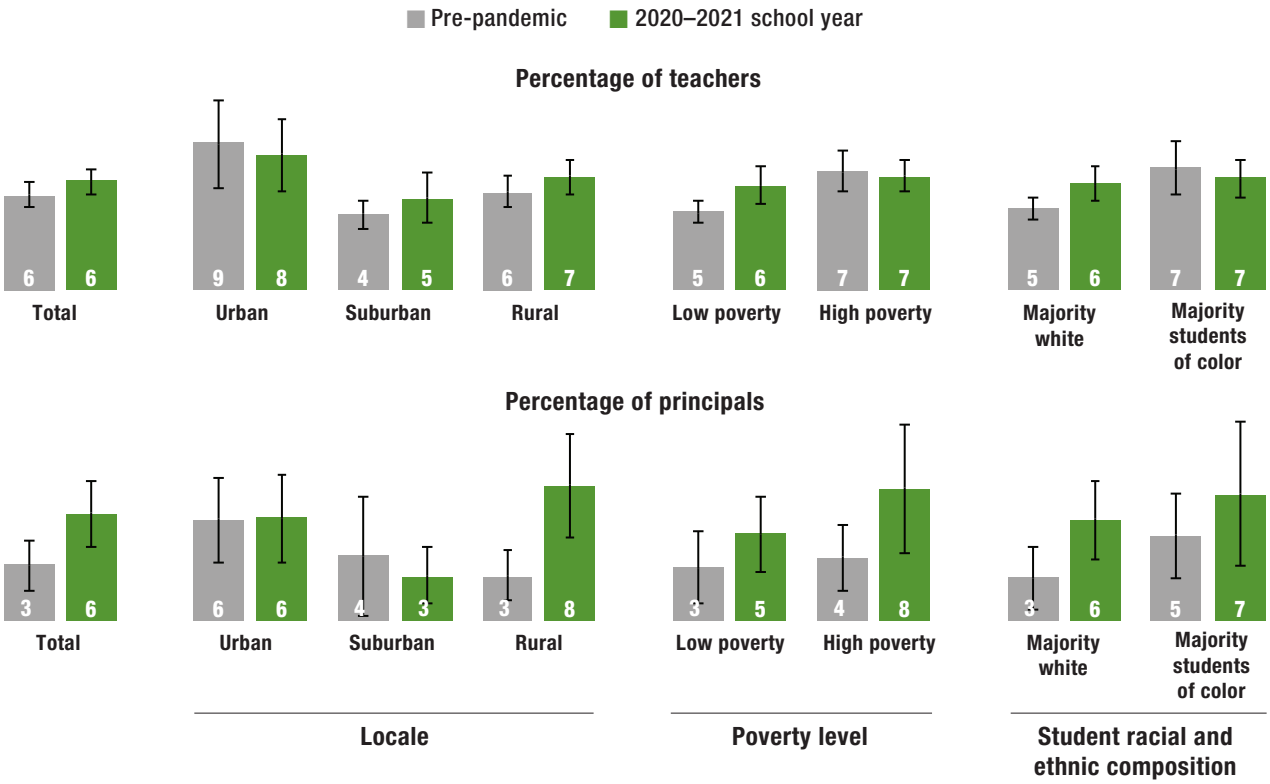
We asked district leaders to estimate the typical percentage of teachers and principals who resigned or retired annually pre-pandemic and to estimate these percentages as of the end of the 2020–2021 school year.

Nationally, district leaders reported that 6 percent of their teachers and 6 percent of their principals retired or resigned at the end of the 2020–2021 school year—rates these district leaders say are generally on par with their typical pre–COVID-19 turnover rates, as shown in Figure 1. There is no current national data source on teacher and principal turnover to validate these data against (which is why we asked this question on our district leader survey), but some local reports corroborate our finding that, in 2020–2021, educators have not left the profession at substantially heightened rates (e.g., Barnum, 2021).

In spring 2021, there were reportedly no differences in teacher turnover rates across district subgroups. Furthermore, for all district subgroups, their teacher turnover rates in spring 2021 were generally on par with pre-pandemic levels. However, there were some differences in principal turnover rates, both across district subgroups and over time. In spring 2021, suburban district leaders reported the lowest principal turnover rate among district subgroups—a rate that suburban leaders said was on par with their pre-pandemic level. Meanwhile, rural district leaders reported higher principal turnover in 2020–2021 (8 percent) than in years prior to the pandemic (3 percent). We caution readers from overinterpreting the increase in principal attrition rates in rural

FIGURE 1

District Leaders' Reported Percentages of Teachers and Principals Who Retired or Resigned Pre-Pandemic and at the End of the 2020–2021 School Year



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from four survey questions: "What was the typical percentage of your teachers who retired or resigned annually pre-pandemic?" "What percentage of your teachers retired or resigned at the end of the 2020–2021 school year?" "What was the typical percentage of your school principals who retired or resigned annually pre-pandemic?" and "What percentage of your school principals retired or resigned at the end of the 2020–2021 school year?" (n = 279). For all questions, respondents were asked to enter a number into an open-ended text box. Columns with the same displayed values may be of different heights because of rounding. The vertical black bars represent the 95-percent confidence interval for each estimate.

districts. On average, the rural districts in our sample had four total schools, and the departure of one additional principal can increase their attrition rates by a large amount.[3] However, even a small increase in the number of principal departures can still present substantial challenges in rural districts that historically have had school staffing shortages.

While teachers did not exit at substantially heightened rates, which we define as more than 2 percentage points above pre-pandemic levels, two in ten districts reported heightened teacher turnover in the 2020–2021 school year. Of those districts with heightened teacher turnover, 72 percent were rural districts, 77 percent were majority-white districts, and 61 percent were low-poverty districts. The two in ten districts with heightened principal turnover were also mostly rural and majority white.

Among districts with heightened teacher turnover, their rates were 6 percentage points higher, on average, than they were pre–COVID-19. Among districts with heightened principal attrition, attrition was 23 percentage points higher on average than it was pre-pandemic. Both changes are substantial increases in turnover rates. The increase in principal turnover likely is driven by small changes in the number of principals leaving the profession in

districts, such as rural ones, that operate only a handful of schools.

There were also some districts in which turnover was *lower* in spring 2021 than it was pre-pandemic. Fifteen percent of districts reported decreased teacher turnover in the 2020–2021 school year compared with pre–COVID-19 levels, and 9 percent of districts reported decreased principal turnover. Although there were few subgroup differences among those districts with decreased turnover rates, a higher percentage of high-poverty districts than of low-poverty districts reported lower-than-normal teacher turnover (22 versus 10 percent, respectively). We speculate this may reflect a weaker job market in particularly high-poverty areas where pandemic-related job loss has been high (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021).

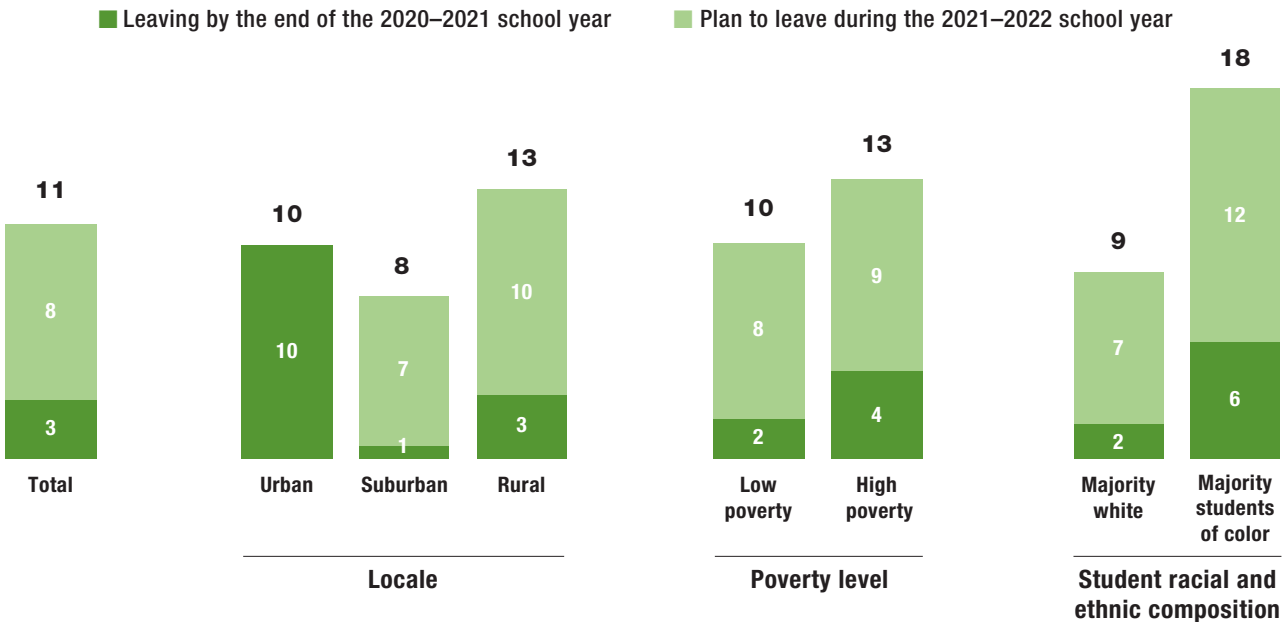
One in Ten Superintendents Said They Planned to Leave Their Current Job by Spring 2022

We asked superintendents when they planned to leave their current job. Three percent of the superintendents who took our survey said they were leaving or retiring their position by the end of the 2020–2021 school year, while another 8 percent said they planned to leave at some point during the 2021–2022 school year (see Figure 2).[4]

Meanwhile, about 46 percent of superintendents planned to leave in the next two to five years, while the remainder (43 percent) planned to continue serving as superintendents in their current school districts for more than five years. (For reference,

FIGURE 2

Percentages of Superintendents Who Planned to Leave Their Positions by Spring 2021 or Spring 2022



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the survey question: "For how many years do you plan to continue to be a superintendent at this [district/CMO]?" We excluded 49 responses from respondents who completed the survey on behalf of their districts but who had indicated they were not the superintendent (n = 235). There were no statistically significant differences in the percentage of superintendents who planned to leave by spring 2022 across district subgroups.

superintendent contracts are typically three years in length and may be renewed [Björk, Kowalski, and Browne-Ferrigno, 2014].)

We do not know whether the superintendent turnover rates shown in Figure 2 are heightened or normal because we lack systematic national data on superintendent turnover (Sawchuk, 2021). However, a media report that used data from The School Superintendents Association indicates that superintendent turnover has increased during the pandemic (Heim and Strauss, 2021). Furthermore, our results likely underestimate superintendent turnover at the end of the 2020–2021 school year because some superintendents who had already left did not receive our survey invitation.[5]

Seven in Ten Districts Reported Their Funding for 2021–2022 Is Above Pre-Pandemic Levels

District leaders' reports corroborate the widely reported influx of COVID-19 federal aid to school districts across the United States. Thirty-one percent of district leaders anticipated a "large net positive" impact on their funding for 2021–2022, and another 40 percent anticipated a "small net positive" impact. Consistent with federal policy to distribute COVID-19 aid using the Title I formula (U.S. Department of Education, undated)—a formula that directs additional funding to districts serving large numbers of students from low-income families (Snyder et al., 2019)—leaders from 77 percent of high-poverty districts anticipated a net increase in funding for the 2021–2022 school year, including 39 percent who anticipated large net increases. More than 40 percent of urban district leaders and leaders of districts serving mostly students of color also indicated large net increases in funding for the 2021–2022 school year.

Meanwhile, leaders in about one in ten districts anticipated funding levels in the 2020–2021 school year to remain close to pre-pandemic levels, another one in ten anticipated less funding than in pre-pandemic years, and leaders in the few remaining districts were not sure. No district subgroup was more or less likely to anticipate reduced funds.

Four in Ten Districts Anticipate a Fiscal Cliff After COVID-19 Federal Aid Expires; Another Two in Ten Are Unsure

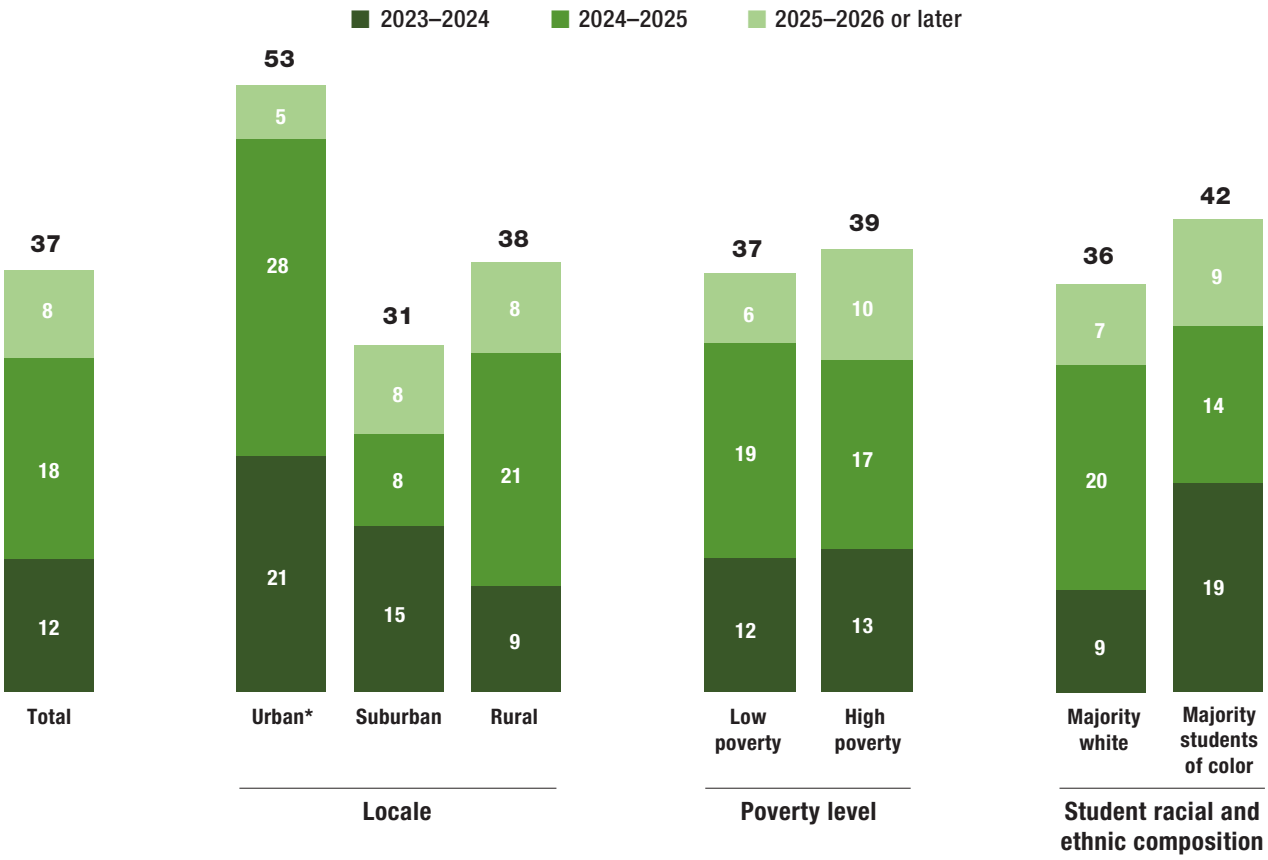
We asked district leaders if they believe their districts "will hit a fiscal cliff after COVID-19 federal aid expires." Because federal stimulus funds are both making up for shortfalls in state and local revenues, as well as providing new monies to pay for pandemic-related expenses and extra services for students, districts will face steep budgetary cuts (described here as a *fiscal cliff*) if state and local revenues for schools do not recover fully to pre-pandemic levels by the time the COVID-19 federal aid expires. Nationally, 37 percent of district leaders responded yes (see Figure 3).

Among those leaders who foresee a fiscal cliff, most expect to hit it in the next three or four school years. Nationally, 32 percent of district leaders anticipate a fiscal cliff will come in the 2023–2024 school year, 48 percent expect to hit it in the 2024–2025 school year, and the remaining 20 percent anticipate hitting a fiscal cliff in five or six years—i.e., in the 2025–2026 or 2026–2027 school year. (Note that districts can spend funds provided via the American Rescue Plan [ARP] through September 30, 2024.) No district leaders anticipate a fiscal cliff in or after the 2027–2028 school year.

However, there are some important differences by district subgroup. Urban district leaders were the most likely to foresee a fiscal cliff at all (53 percent), compared with 31 percent of suburban district leaders and 38 percent of rural district leaders. And, while the differences are not statistically significant, almost half of the leaders of suburban and majority–students of color districts who foresee a fiscal cliff coming anticipate it the earliest (i.e., in the 2023–2024 school year near the deadline for ARP spending). In contrast, more than half of urban and rural district leaders anticipated the fiscal cliff coming a year later, in the 2024–2025 school year. Perhaps surprisingly, leaders of high-poverty districts—which tend to receive more federal Title I funding and thus might be more susceptible to the expiration of COVID-19 federal aid—were no more likely

FIGURE 3

Percentage of Districts That Anticipate Hitting a Fiscal Cliff and the School Year in Which They Expect It to Occur



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the survey questions: "Do you anticipate your [district/CMO] will hit a fiscal cliff after COVID-19 federal aid expires?" and "In which school year do you first anticipate a fiscal cliff?" (n = 276). An asterisk (*) indicates that the percentage of district leaders in that subgroup who anticipate a fiscal cliff is statistically significantly different ($p < 0.05$) from the overall percentage of district leaders. Bars may not sum to total because of rounding.

than their low-poverty peers to anticipate hitting a fiscal cliff.

Among those district leaders who foresee a fiscal cliff, about eight in ten say they are making changes to their expenditure plans for 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 as a result. Forty-four percent of district leaders indicated they are making up-front investments to save on future costs (such as on purchases or facility improvements), 42 percent are trying to boost their rainy-day fund, and 41 percent are avoiding "certain staff hires" (presumably district employees as opposed to contract workers) to prevent later layoffs.

Over Half of the District Leaders Who Anticipate a Funding Increase Are Concerned About Their Ability to Spend the Money, Even Though They Said They Have Some Level of Discretion in How to Spend the Funds

Virtually all district leaders in our sample (96 percent) said they have at least some discretion in how to spend COVID-19 federal aid. About two-thirds

Districts Have Limited Information About Staff Vaccination Rates Against COVID-19

- In a May 2021 survey, parents indicated that staff vaccination rates are influencing their willingness to send their children to school in person in fall 2021 (Schwartz, Diliberti, and Grant, 2021). Parents who decide to remove their children from public schooling altogether decrease public school enrollment and thereby decrease school districts' funding. Schools providing information about staff vaccination rates could help assuage some of parents' concerns.
- But many districts we surveyed lack this information. We asked district leaders what information on staff vaccinations they will possess by fall 2021. Twenty-eight percent of district leaders said they were not collecting any information; 46 percent knew only about staff vaccinated at a district site; and 38 percent were encouraging, but not requiring, staff to disclose whether they had been vaccinated. Only 4 percent of districts were requiring staff to disclose their vaccination status.
- Rural districts were especially likely to have no information on staff vaccinations, while urban districts and districts serving mostly students of color were particularly likely to require staff to disclose their vaccination status.

of district leaders said they have "some" discretion, meaning that their spending choices are conditional on approval from their state department of education, and the remaining one-third said they have "complete" discretion on spending within the parameters set by the federal government.

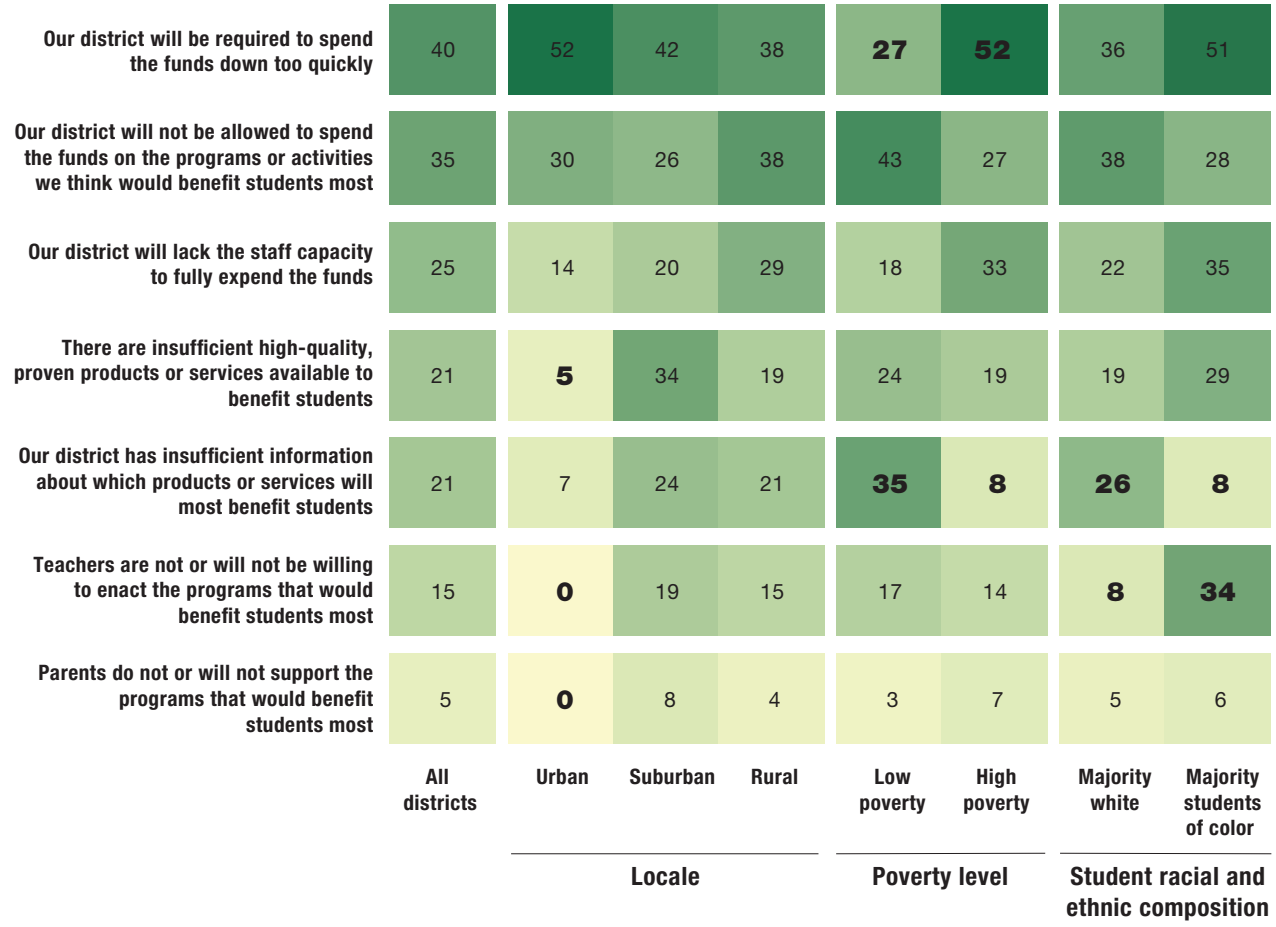
Nevertheless, among district leaders who anticipated increased funding levels for 2021–2022, over half (53 percent) were concerned about their "capacity or latitude" to spend COVID-19 federal aid in ways that would most benefit students. Thirty-one percent of these district leaders were slightly concerned, while 15 percent were moderately concerned and only 7 percent were very concerned. Leaders of high-poverty districts were most likely to report some level of concern about their capacity to spend these funds, but the majority of these leaders (58 percent) reported being only slightly concerned.

We presented district leaders who indicated concern about spending down funds with seven possible reasons for concern and an eighth "other" option, and we asked them to select all that applied. The most common reason why these leaders were concerned—which 40 percent of district leaders selected—was they would have to "spend the funds down too quickly" (see Figure 4). Other common reasons for concern included not being allowed to spend the funds on the programs or activities that district leaders' thought would benefit students the most (35 percent selected this option) and "lack[ing] the staff capacity" to spend the funds (25 percent selected this option).

High-poverty districts were especially likely to be concerned about having to spend the funds too quickly. Low-poverty districts, on the other hand, were more concerned about lacking sufficient information about services or products that would benefit students. Leaders of districts serving mostly students of color were particularly concerned that their teachers would not be willing to enact the programs that would benefit students the most. Urban district leaders were less concerned than suburban and rural district leaders about finding sufficient high-quality, proven products to benefit their students and convincing teachers to enact programs that would benefit students.

FIGURE 4

Percentage of District Leaders Who Selected Various Reasons for Their Concern About Their "Capacity or Latitude" to Spend COVID-19 Federal Aid



NOTES: Lighter yellow cells represent smaller percentages of district leaders, while progressively darker shades of green represent larger percentages of district leaders. This figure depicts response data from the survey question: "For what reasons are you concerned that your [district/CMO] will lack the capacity or the latitude to spend COVID-19 federal aid in ways that will most benefit students?" (n = 100). Only respondents who indicated concern about their district's "capacity or latitude" to spend the aid received this question. Bold font indicates that the subgroup percentage of district leaders reporting a reason for their concern is statistically significantly different ($p < 0.05$) from the overall percentage of district leaders who said the same.

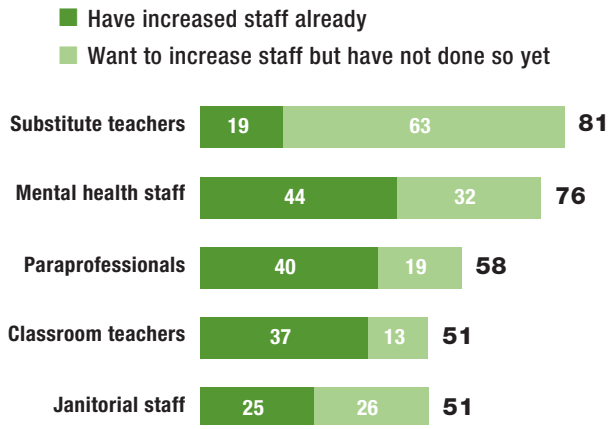
Districts Are Trying to Increase Staff, Especially Substitute Teachers and Staff to Support Students' Mental Health

A majority of districts reported increasing or trying to increase staff to above pre-pandemic levels for each of the five staff categories we asked about (see Figure 5). This is especially true for substitute teachers and for staff who address students' mental health. District leaders indicated that hiring in some job categories has been easier than in others. For example, while eight in ten district leaders wanted to increase the number of substitute teachers, six in ten are still working to do so—a finding that corroborates our recent work suggesting districts have been struggling to find substitute teachers throughout the pandemic (Schwartz et al., 2021).

In response to our survey question "For which services, if any, is your district/CMO contracting with an outside organization for 2021–2022?" 57 percent of the district leaders said their district

FIGURE 5

Percentage of District Leaders Who Have or Want to Hire More Staff, by Job Category



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the survey question: "In which categories, if any, is your [district/CMO] increasing (or trying to increase) the number of staff for 2021–2022 compared to their pre-pandemic level in 2019–2020?" (*n* = 279). Bars may not sum to total because of rounding.

is contracting with a third party for student mental health services. (Hiring contracted staff is one way that districts that are concerned about a forthcoming fiscal cliff can temporarily increase their staffing.)

While half of district leaders are either increasing or wishing to increase their number of classroom teachers, the vast majority (96 percent) indicated that they have not changed their hiring criteria. Furthermore, district leaders' reports indicated they generally have not expanded their recruitment efforts (e.g., to include out-of-state teachers) beyond typical sources.[6]

Implications

District leaders' responses at the end of the 2020–2021 school year confirm that the anticipated budgetary and staffing crises have not come to pass—or at least not yet. Nationally, district leaders reported that teacher and principal attrition rates in 2020–2021 were generally on par with pre-pandemic levels. Although some districts did report elevated turnover, these districts were offset by others that reported lower-than-normal turnover. However, there is still reason to be concerned about the high number of teachers who have experienced job-related stress and symptoms of depression and who have expressed a wish to leave their teaching job this past school year (Kaufman et al., 2020; Steiner and Woo, 2021). Teachers might be reluctant to leave a stable job because of the economic uncertainty that the pandemic created, but they could consider leaving as the economy continues to improve. And any level of teacher turnover could exacerbate pre-pandemic shortages (Kelleher, 2021). Taken together, these findings suggest systemic problems that could outlast the COVID-19 pandemic, even though turnover did not spike at the end of the 2020–2021 school year.

District leaders' budget worries are also concerning. Although federal stimulus funds have eased the direst predictions for districts' financial health, reports from district leaders suggest that this money may have put off only larger concerns about financial sustainability. (And, ironically, the money might have added a new problem of how to wisely spend an unprecedented level of funds over a four-year period.) About half of district leaders with heightened funding levels are concerned about their capacity or latitude to spend COVID-19 relief funds in a meaningful way. Four in ten expected a fiscal cliff in the next several years. Of those who expect a fiscal cliff, most have reported already changing their spending plans by investing in up-front costs and avoiding certain kinds of staff hires.

Despite their concerns about future cuts, many districts are hiring, and notably, many are hiring more mental health staff. Many district leaders say they are contracting with a third party for these mental health services, which could be one way to avoid layoffs among district staff when federal stimulus dollars expire. Districts' expanded use of new services is the topic of our next short report, which will examine more survey questions from the June 2021 district leader survey.

A majority of districts increasing their number of classroom teachers is also notable, because two-thirds of district leaders reported in our winter 2021 survey that they experienced an enrollment decline

in the 2020–2021 school year (Schwartz et al., 2021). However, *redshirting* (i.e., parents holding back a child from enrolling in preschool or kindergarten) was their most commonly selected reason for this enrollment loss. Therefore, districts may now be hiring teachers in anticipation of increased enrollment in the early grades in the 2021–2022 school year among families who held their children back from starting school in the past year. Or districts might be responding to the infusion of federal stimulus dollars that they must spend quickly, or possibly they are making additional hires to create a parallel track of teachers who teach remotely and who teach in-person. Despite district leaders indicating that they are looking to hire more classroom teachers—as we note in our forthcoming reports based on results from this same survey—only a minority of districts indicated that they plan to reduce class sizes in the 2021–2022 school year, and the practice of hybrid instruction is dropping steeply in favor of either fully in-person or else fully remote schooling. As we look ahead to the next few critical years of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be important to document in future research what these additional classroom teachers do.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

- RAND Corporation researchers fielded the third survey of the ASDP from June 1 through July 2, 2021.
- This report is based on survey responses from 292 district leaders that are weighted to be nationally representative. Surveys were completed by district superintendents, charter management CEOs, or their designees.
- Data on district demographics were obtained by linking survey data files to the 2019–2020 Common Core of Data issued by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Our locale definition aligns with the four-category locale definition used by NCES, with the exception that we collapsed the districts located in towns into the rural category for sample-size reasons. We classified districts as majority white if they had a student enrollment that was 50 percent or more white. All other districts were classified as *majority students of color*. Similarly, we classified districts as *high poverty* if 50 percent or more of their student population was eligible for free or reduced-price meals as part of the National School Lunch Program. All other districts were classified as *low poverty*.
- We conducted significance testing to assess whether subgroups were statistically different at the $p < 0.05$ level. Specifically, we tested whether the percentage of district leaders in one subgroup reporting a response was statistically different from the balance of district leaders who took the survey (e.g., leaders 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.

Endnotes

[1] Note all 15 CMOs in our sample are members of the Charter School Growth Fund (an organization that funds charter school expansion), and therefore, they are likely not representative of all CMOs nationally.

[2] We do not analyze differences by district size separately. However, district size and urbanicity are correlated. Among the districts in our sample, urban districts have an average enrollment size of 36,800 students, suburban districts have an average enrollment size of 15,600 students, and rural districts have an average enrollment size of 1,800 students.

[3] The urban districts in our sample each operate, on average, 72 schools, while suburban districts operate 23 schools and rural districts operate four schools.

[4] Districts could designate someone other than the superintendent to complete our survey. In 49 districts in our sample, someone other than the superintendent completed our survey. For this item, we have restricted the sample to only those respondents who indicated that they were the superintendent.

[5] We received bounce-back emails from 19 district leaders, indicating that they had left their current positions, when we invited them to complete this survey.

[6] Before the COVID-19 pandemic began, 91 percent of district leaders said they relied on local university teacher preparation programs to hire or recruit new teachers, 67 percent said they relied on teachers transferring within the state, and 64 percent said they used alternative certification programs. These remain the three most common methods for recruiting new teachers in the pandemic era. Leaders of high-poverty districts and districts with a majority of students of color were especially likely to recruit teachers for the 2021–2022 school year through alternate certification programs—a finding that is consistent with pre-pandemic practices.

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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. 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.

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RAND Education and Labor

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More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this report or about the AEP COVID-19 surveys should be directed to hschwartz@rand.org, and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.

About the Data Note Series

This Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of educator survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. If you would like to know more about the dataset, please visit *Technical Documentation for the Third American School District Panel Survey* (RR-A956-6, www.rand.org/t/RRA956-6) 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 or visit www.rand.org/aep.

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