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# District Leaders' Concerns About Mental Health and Political Polarization in Schools

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

**P**olicymakers had hoped that the 2021–2022 school year would be a chance to recover from coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic–related disruptions to schooling (U.S. Department of Education, undated). Instead, media reports of staff shortages, heated or even violent school board meetings, increased student misbehavior, low teacher and student attendance, and enrollment declines suggest increased—rather than decreased—problems during this third pandemic school year (St. George and Strauss, 2021; Kamenetz, 2021; Robertson, 2021; Belsha, 2021a; Hiruko, 2021; Jones, 2021; and Kamenetz, Turner, and Khurana, 2021). Even the unprecedentedly large allocation of federal funding intended to help districts recover from the pandemic has presented districts with its own challenges (Ujifusa, 2021).

To learn about the extent of these challenges, we surveyed 359 district and charter network leaders in the American School District Panel (ASDP) between October 25, 2021, and December 10, 2021.<sup>1</sup> The ASDP is a partnership among the

### Key Findings

- As of November 2021, district leaders' top three concerns out of the 11 we listed were the mental health of students, teachers, and principals, respectively. Leaders' concerns about student and staff mental health were more prevalent than concerns about student engagement, student discipline, student and teacher attendance, and declined enrollment.
- Roughly two to three times more leaders from urban districts, high-poverty districts, and districts serving mostly students of color expressed "major" concerns about declined enrollment and low student and teacher attendance compared with their counterparts.
- Three-quarters of district leaders said that political polarization about coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) safety or vaccines was interfering with their ability to educate students in 2021–2022. Four of every ten district leaders said the same about political polarization related to critical race theory.

## Abbreviations

AEP	American Educator Panels
ASDP	American School District Panel
CMO	charter management organization
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
ESSER	Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief
SEL	social and emotional learning

RAND Corporation, the Center on Reinventing Public Education, Chiefs for Change, Council of Great City Schools, and Kitamba. We use the terms *districts* and *district leaders* in this report to refer to both the 333 traditional public school district leaders who took the survey and leaders from 26 charter management organizations (CMOs). We weighted leaders’ responses to make them nationally representative of districts across the country. We describe only those differences among district

subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5-percent level.

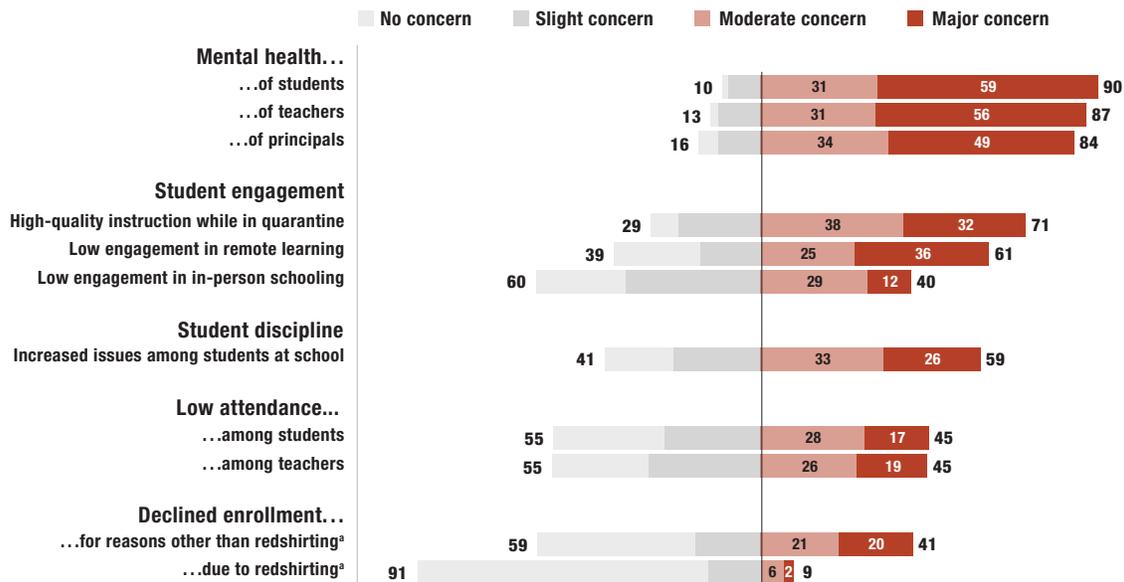
In this report, we summarize district leaders’ top concerns this school year (2021–2022) and the pressures of political polarization in public schools. In a companion report (Schwartz and Diliberti, forthcoming), we examine staff shortages this school year in detail, along with superintendents’ plans to stay in their positions. Additional details about our methods are included at the end of this report.

## The Mental Health of Students and Staff Topped District Leaders’ Concerns

In November 2021, we asked district leaders about 11 widely reported problems, including increases in student disciplinary issues, declines in student enrollment, difficulty providing high-quality instruction during quarantines, and mental health, to examine how prevalent these problems are for

FIGURE 1

### Percentage of District Leaders Reporting Levels of Concern About Widely Reported Problems, as of November 2021



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “How much of a concern are the following issues in your district/CMO this school year (2021–2022)?” (n = 358). “No concern” includes respondents who said that the issue is “not applicable” to their district. Bars might not sum to totals because of rounding.

<sup>a</sup>In the survey, *redshirting* was defined for respondents as “Families keeping a child who is age-eligible for kindergarten out of school for an extra year.”

districts nationally. (We asked about staff shortages separately and discuss these issues in a companion report [Schwartz and Diliberti, forthcoming].)

As shown in Figure 1, mental health concerns for both students and staff were at the top of district leaders’ lists of concerns. Ninety percent of district leaders expressed either “moderate” or “major” concern about students’ mental health this school year. And 87 and 84 percent of district leaders, respectively, reported the same levels of concern about teachers and principals. The mental health of students and staff were the only topics for which half or more of district leaders reported “major” concerns.

Although we did not ask district leaders why they are so concerned about students’ mental health this school year, recent research and media reports suggest that increased anxiety, suicide attempts, and emergency room visits among children; large declines in academic achievement; increases in students failing to show up for classes; and increased student disciplinary issues could be reasons for district leaders’ concerns (Dewan, 2021; Lewis and Kuhfeld, 2021; McNeel, 2021; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). As for district leaders’ prevalent concerns about staff mental health, reasons could include heightened rates of teacher and principal absences, work performance, degraded

school climate, and potential attrition (Gewertz, 2021; Steiner and Woo, 2021).

Majorities of district leaders also expressed a considerable amount of concern about many of the other issues we listed. For example, 71 percent of district leaders reported “moderate” or “major” concern about providing high-quality instruction to quarantined students. Although the district leaders in our survey reported that few students were in quarantine on a typical school day when they took the survey in November 2021 (see Box 1), other research and media reports have pointed out districts’ limited plans to provide high-quality instruction to quarantined students, which comport with district leaders’ high levels of concern (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2021; Schwartz, 2021).

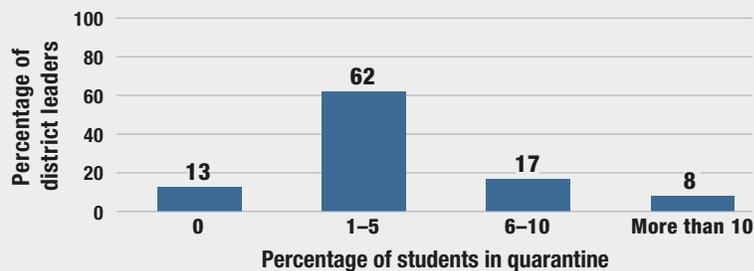
Meanwhile, 61 percent of district leaders expressed “moderate” or “major” concern about low student engagement in remote learning, and 59 percent said the same about increased student discipline issues. A minority—but still a sizeable portion—of district leaders (45 percent) expressed similar levels of concern about low attendance from students and teachers alike, which we discuss in more detail in the next section.

Finally, 41 percent of district leaders reported “moderate” or “major” concern about enrollment

BOX 1

### How Many Students Were in COVID-19 Quarantine, as of November 2021?

District leaders estimated that 6 percent of students, on average, were absent on a typical school day at the time they took the survey because of quarantines related to COVID-19. Three-quarters of district leaders reported that zero or else 1–5 percent of students were in quarantine on a typical day.



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “Approximately what percentage of your district/CMO’s students were absent due to COVID-19 exposure or diagnosis on a typical day last week? Include students who could not attend in-person school as planned because of an exposure to someone with COVID-19 and students who themselves tested positive for COVID-19” (n = 300). Respondents were instructed to enter a percentage between 0 and 100. Respondents who said that they did not know are excluded from this figure. Responses were binned (i.e., sorted into categories according to the percentage of students absent because of quarantine) for this figure.

declines for reasons other than redshirting (i.e., families keeping a child who is age-eligible for preschool or kindergarten out of school for an extra year). District leaders' concerns about enrollment declines comport with other research showing students leaving public schools for private and homeschooling sectors (Musaddiq et al., 2021).

In comparison, only 9 percent of district leaders had “moderate” or “major” concerns about enrollment declines in 2021–2022 specifically because of redshirting. This is a shift from last school year (2020–2021), when district leaders cited redshirting as the top reason for enrollment declines (Schwartz et al., 2021). District leaders' reports of redshirting last school year are supported by federal data, which show that preschool and kindergarten enrollment in the 2020–2021 school year declined 13 percent below

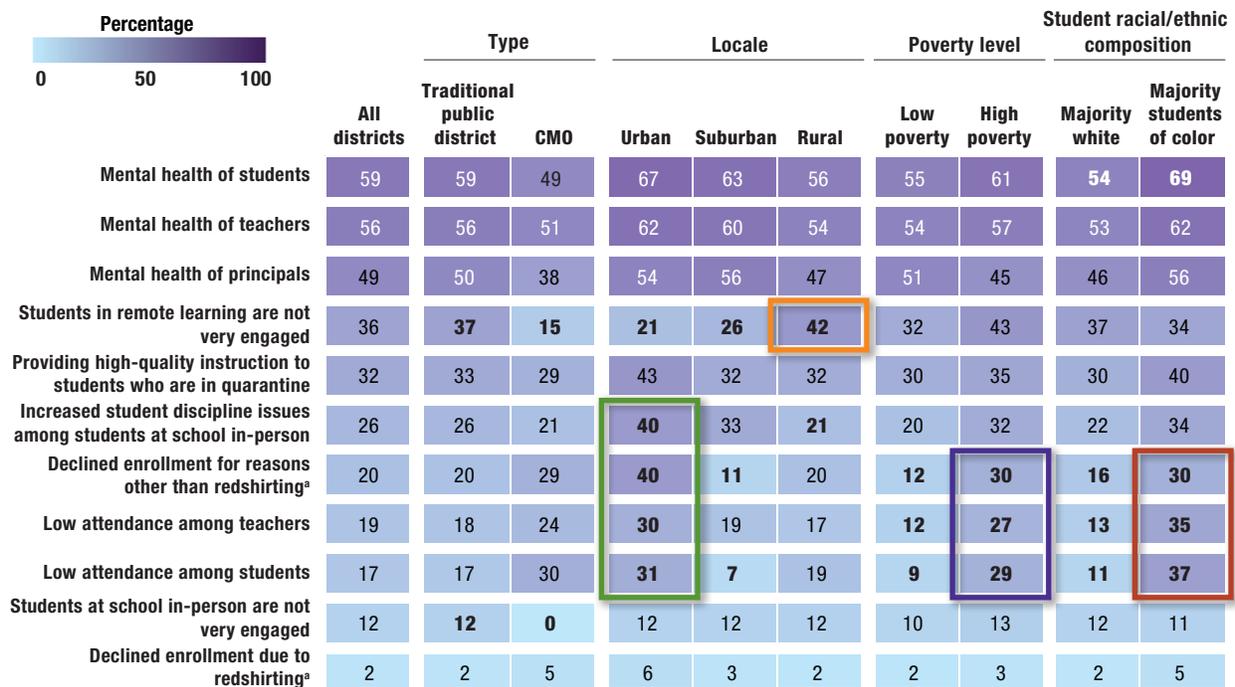
prepandemic levels (Mahnken, 2021). The decrease in district leaders' concerns about redshirting from last school year to this one is also supported by preliminary enrollment numbers in some school districts, which show that kindergarten enrollments have rebounded (Belsha, 2021b; Bodkin, 2021).

### Low Attendance Among Students and Staff and Declined Enrollment Were More-Prevalent Concerns for Historically Marginalized Districts

In Figure 2, we show the percentage of district leaders in each of nine district subgroups who expressed

FIGURE 2

## Percentage of District Leaders Who Said That Widely Reported Problems Were a “Major” Concern, as of November 2021



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “How much of a concern are the following issues in your district/CMO this school year (2021–2022)?” (n = 358). Numbers in bold indicate that the subgroup percentage of district leaders reporting that an issue is a “major” concern is statistically significantly different (p < 0.05) from the balance of district leaders not in that subgroup who said the same.

<sup>a</sup> In the survey, *redshirting* was defined for respondents as “Families keeping a child who is age-eligible for kindergarten out of school for an extra year.”

“major” concern about the same 11 problems shown in Figure 1. As shown in the first three rows of Figure 2, roughly equal percentages of district leaders from all nine district subgroups expressed major concern about the mental health of students, teachers, and principals, with the exception that a higher percentage of leaders from majority–students of color districts reported “major” concerns about the mental health of students than their counterparts from majority-white districts (69 versus 54 percent, respectively).

Aside from the widely shared concerns about staff and student mental health, a larger percentage of leaders from historically marginalized districts—urban districts, high-poverty districts, and districts serving mostly students of color—expressed a cluster of concerns related to attendance and enrollment. As shown in the green, purple, and red boxes in Figure 2, leaders from urban districts, high-poverty districts, and districts serving mostly students of color were roughly two or three times as likely as their counterparts to express “major” concerns about reduced student enrollment and low attendance among teachers and students. Urban district leaders’ concerns about enrollment align with some early reports showing that declines in enrollment have

been slightly larger among urban districts (Lafortune and Prunty, 2021). Note, however, that the consistency in these patterns might be driven to some extent by the subset of districts that are classified as urban, high-poverty, and serving mostly students of color (see Box 2).

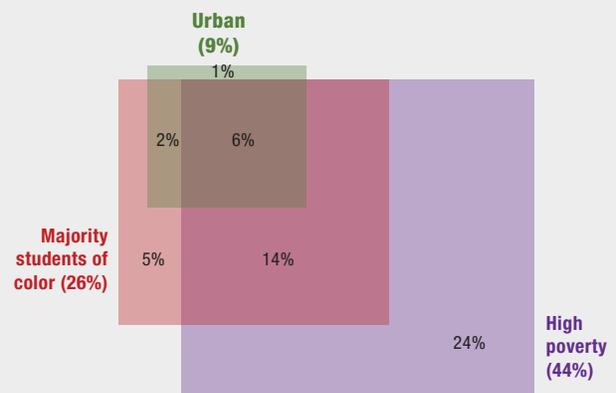
More generally, these findings largely comport with those from a teacher survey we conducted in spring 2021, in which teachers in higher-poverty schools and those serving mostly students of color—the same types of schools that were most likely to be offering remote instruction for large portions of the 2020–2021 school year—reported more absenteeism and less student engagement, which was reflected in assignment completion and passing grades (Kaufman and Diliberti, 2021). District leaders’ responses to our November 2021 survey suggest that some of these same problems have persisted into this school year, with the caveat that these patterns also might reflect prepandemic differences.

Meanwhile, the orange box in Figure 2 shows that 42 percent of rural district leaders had “major” concerns about students in remote learning not being very engaged, compared with 21 percent of urban and 26 percent of suburban leaders. We hypothesize that, because fewer rural schools offered remote learning

BOX 2

### The Degree of Overlap Between Urban Districts, High-Poverty Districts, and Districts Serving Mostly Students of Color

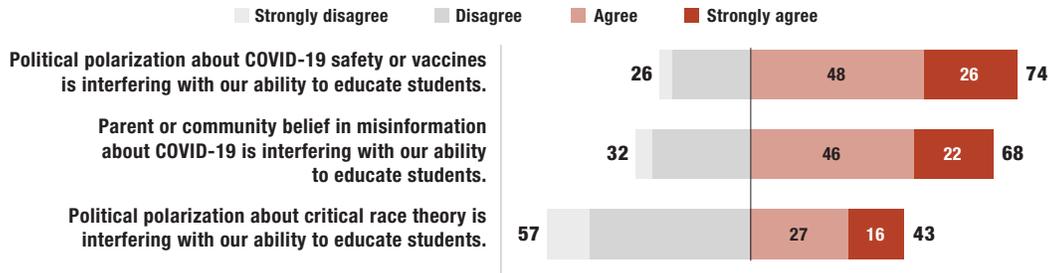
By definition, each district in our sample belongs to four of the nine district subgroups we examine in this report. Urban districts, high-poverty districts, and districts serving mostly students of color in particular have a high degree of overlap, as shown. For example, almost all urban districts in our sample serve mostly students of color, and many are also high-poverty districts. We therefore expect to see similar patterns for these types of districts because the same district leaders are often represented in two, if not all three, of these district categories.



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

FIGURE 3

## Percentage of District Leaders Who Agreed That the Following Are Problems for Their District This School Year (2021–2022)



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your district/CMO this school year (2021–2022)?” ( $n = 357$ ). Bars might not sum to totals because of rounding.

for long periods during the 2020–2021 school year (Institute of Education Sciences, undated-a; Schwartz et al., 2021), fewer rural students and teachers might have experience with remote learning, broadband service might be poorer, and access to technology might still be inadequate.

### Three-Quarters of District Leaders Said That Political Polarization About COVID-19 Safety or Vaccines Was Interfering with Their Ability to Educate Students; Four in Every Ten Said the Same About Critical Race Theory

We also asked district leaders about the extent to which they perceived that political polarization of COVID-19 safety procedures and critical race theory were interfering with their ability to educate students this school year.

Figure 3 shows that 74 percent of district leaders agreed or strongly agreed that “political polarization about COVID-19 safety or vaccines is interfering with our ability to educate students,” and 68 percent said the same about parent or community beliefs in misinformation about COVID-19.

In comparison, a smaller—but still substantial—43 percent of district leaders agreed or strongly agreed that “political polarization about critical race theory is interfering with our ability to educate students.”

After examining how leaders from different types of districts responded to these questions, we found the following three statistically significant differences (results not shown): First, 79 percent of leaders in majority-white districts agreed that political polarization about COVID-19 safety or vaccines was interfering with their ability to educate students, compared with 63 percent of leaders from majority-students of color districts. Second, fewer urban leaders (61 percent) than suburban and rural leaders (71 and 77 percent, respectively) agreed with the same statement. Third, 75 percent of leaders in low-poverty districts compared with 57 percent in high-poverty ones agreed that parent or community belief in misinformation about COVID-19 was interfering with the district’s ability to educate students.

Taken together, these differences suggest that more leaders in majority-white districts, nonurban districts, and low-poverty districts perceived political polarization about COVID-19 as a sufficiently large problem as to interfere with their schools’ ability to educate students. These patterns align with trends throughout the pandemic, such as lower parental perceptions of risk from COVID-19 in rural areas,

greater vaccine hesitancy among rural teachers and those in majority-white districts, and less support in rural areas and among white parents for COVID-19 safety practices in schools (Schwartz et al., 2021; Schwartz, Diliberti, and Grant, 2021).

### Districts Reported That Their Largest Barrier to Spending Emergency Federal COVID-19 Relief Funds Was a Shortage of Staff to Hire

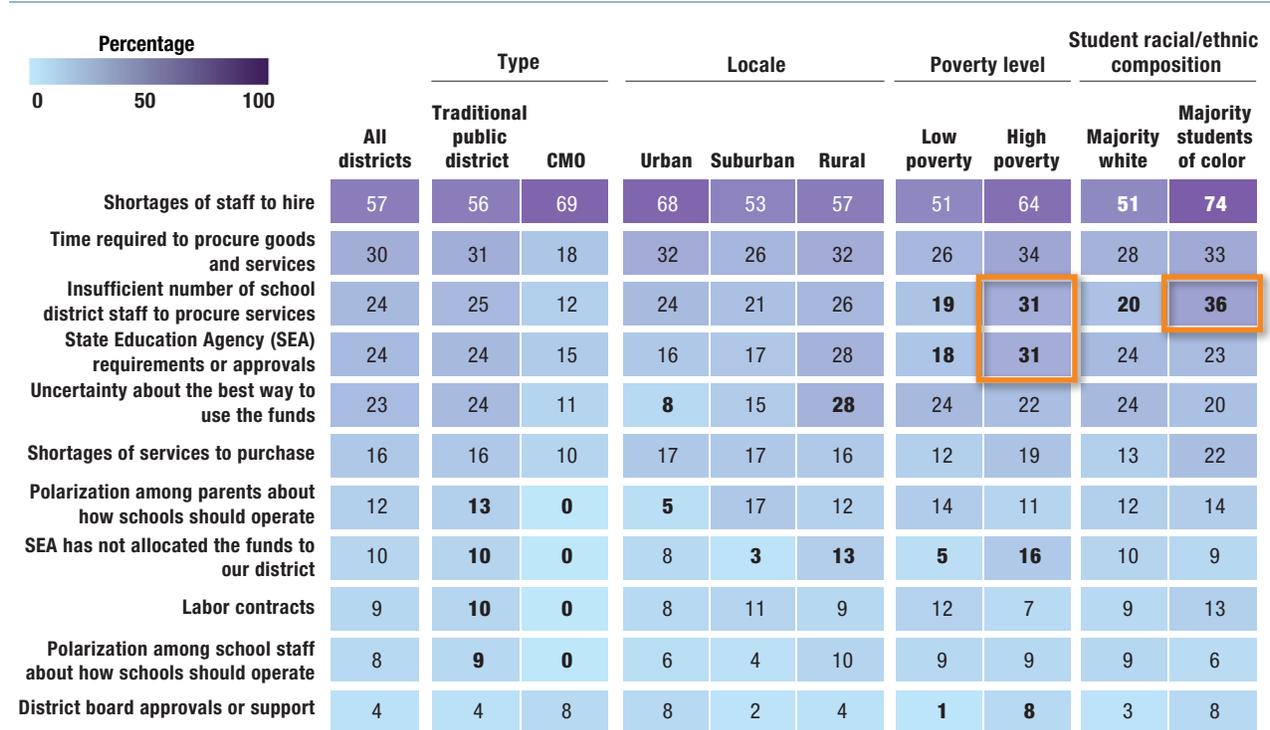
Districts have received an unprecedented amount of federal funds to spend over a four-year period to help recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and address some of the problems we discussed earlier. We asked district leaders what issues, if any,

stood in the way of spending the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund to help students. From a list of 12 possible barriers, 77 percent of district leaders said that they experienced one or more of the barriers to spending their ESSER funds (the 12th, “other,” option is not displayed). Leaders across all nine district types tended to select the same types of barriers, indicating some degree of conformity in their experience using ESSER funds to help students.

The most common barrier by far, which 57 percent of district leaders selected, was a lack of staff to hire (see Figure 4). For every district subgroup, this barrier was about twice as common as the next-most prevalent barrier, which most districts indicated was the time required to procure goods and services. The least common barriers were

FIGURE 4

### Percentage of District Leaders Selecting Barriers to Using ESSER Funds to Help Students



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “What barriers is your district/CMO experiencing in using ESSER funds to help students, if any?” Respondents were instructed to “select all that apply” (n = 357). Numbers in bold indicate that the subgroup percentage of district leaders reporting that something is a barrier to spending ESSER funds is statistically significantly different (p < 0.05) from the balance of district leaders not in that subgroup who said the same.

labor contracts, polarization among staff about how schools should operate, and district board approvals.

As shown in the orange boxes in Figure 4, about one-third of leaders from high-poverty districts indicated that State Education Agency requirements or approvals and insufficient staff in district central offices were barriers to using the funds, which was considerably higher than their counterparts in low-poverty districts. Leaders from majority-students of color districts were also more likely than their counterparts from majority-white districts to note a lack of central office staff to procure services as a barrier to spending ESSER funds.

## Implications

Taken together, these results suggest that districts are confronting serious challenges in the 2021–2022 school year that might be getting in the way of student learning. Although some challenges, such as student and staff mental health, are nearly universal across districts, other challenges are more localized. Historically marginalized districts are confronting extra challenges this school year, such as getting students back in school and low teacher attendance, while a higher percentage of historically advantaged districts are encountering political polarization about COVID-19.

Above all, our survey results suggest that we need solutions for widespread mental health challenges in schools. Many districts are already taking steps to help meet students' increased mental health needs. As we found back in June 2021, seven in ten districts planned to provide mental health programming in 2021–2022, including two in ten districts that planned to newly provide these services (Schwartz and Diliberti, 2021). In a review of districts' pandemic-relief spending plans—which outline multiple investments—FutureEd found that one-third included various social and emotional learning (SEL) investments, such as curricula and training; one-third included hiring psychologists and mental health professionals; and one-third included

investments in behavioral and mental health initiatives or counseling and mentoring (Jordan and DiMarco, 2022). Furthermore, in a federal survey of schools in September 2021 (the results of which should be interpreted with caution given low response rates), 86 percent reported encouraging staff to address student well-being, 46 percent said that they created or expanded a program for students' social and emotional or mental well-being, 59 percent indicated offering professional development to train teachers to help, and 42 percent hired new staff related to SEL or mental health (Institute of Education Sciences, undated-b).

It is too early to say whether these student mental health efforts will be effective during the pandemic. However, prior research shows that SEL has positive effects on students' social and emotional skills and their behavior; it also has positive effects on teachers' emotional exhaustion and sense of personal accomplishment (Durlak et al., 2011; Oliveira et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2017). Likewise, meta-analyses show positive effects of certain types of school-based mental health programs on adolescents, with more-limited, but also positive, evidence for treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms in younger school-age children as well (Feiss et al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2021; Rolfesnes and Idsoe, 2011).

There is less research about the efficacy of ways in which to alleviate educators' work stress and sense of burnout. Education research has shown that work stress and burnout can affect not only an individual's mental ill health, work performance, and attrition—with its own attendant ripple effects—but also classroom climate and students' well-being (Oliveira et al., 2021). A meta-analysis of interventions to reduce teacher burnout showed the largest effects from mindfulness interventions and larger effects from programs that lasted longer than a month compared with programs that lasted from 1 to 3 weeks (Iancu et al., 2018). A second meta-analysis that focused on SEL interventions found positive effects on teacher burnout, which the authors hypothesize could be because many of the sources of teachers' stress relate

to the social and emotional demands of working with many students and of interpersonal conflicts (Oliveira et al., 2021).

Moving forward, districts should create contingency plans for next school year by mapping out scenarios that reflect staff shortages that may well continue into next school year (which we discuss in more detail in our companion report); investigating alternative staffing arrangements through new partnerships; anticipating the possibility of continued enrollment declines; and developing viable plans for remote and hybrid instruction if future variants or pandemics evolve to require it. Districts also should develop in-person school COVID-19 safety mitigation policies and communication plans that anticipate divided opinion among parents and staff.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> 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. Most surveys (83 percent) were completed by the district's superintendent, while 4 percent were completed by an assistant or associate superintendent, 8 percent were completed by the district's research director, and the remaining 5 percent were completed by personnel with other job titles.

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## How This Analysis Was Conducted and Limitations

RAND Corporation researchers fielded the fourth survey of the ASDP from October 25, 2021, through December 10, 2021. This report uses survey responses from 359 district leaders. Responses reflect district leaders' *perceptions*, which might or might not align with districts' actual experiences. Also, respondents might not consistently interpret such terms on the survey as “major,” “moderate,” “low attendance,” or “political polarization,” which might affect how they complete survey items.

Researchers randomly sampled traditional public school districts and CMOs to invite them to enroll in the ASDP. All enrolled districts were invited to complete this survey. Of the 987 districts and CMOs that have enrolled in the ASDP between fall 2020 and fall 2021, 359 participated in this survey.

Survey responses have been 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. Roughly 30 percent of the country's 50 million public school students are enrolled in urban districts (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-a), and the country's 120 largest school districts—many of which are urban—alone account for roughly 20 percent of all student enrollments (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-b). Among the population of 13,000 school districts in the United States, only 9 percent are urban, while 25 percent are suburban and 66 percent are rural (Grant et al., 2022). In our sample, urban districts have an average enrollment size of 33,400 students, while rural districts have an average enrollment of 1,700 students. Thus, although rural district leaders represent a majority of school *districts*, they do not represent a majority of public school *students*. Accompanying technical documentation (Grant et al., 2022) provides more information about survey methodology and weighting procedures.

Because districts' experiences vary, we examined differences in district leaders' responses by district characteristics. We obtained the data on district characteristics by linking survey data files to the 2019–2020 Common Core of Data issued by the National Center for Education Statistics. We analyzed the following four categories, which yield nine subgroups:

1. district type (traditional public school district versus CMO)<sup>a</sup>
2. locale (urban, suburban, and rural)<sup>b</sup>
3. 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 *majority students of color*, with the remaining districts categorized as *majority white*)
4. 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*).<sup>c</sup>

It is important to keep in mind that each district in the survey belongs to four of the nine subgroups—e.g., a single school district that is a traditional public school district, suburban, low-poverty, and enrolls a majority of students of color. Thus, patterns observed across locale, poverty status, and student racial/ethnic composition might be driven by the same set of districts that share multiple characteristics.

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 who were not in that subgroup who said the same (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.

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> Note that all 26 CMOs in our sample are members of the Charter School Growth Fund (an organization that funds charter school expansion) and, therefore, are likely not representative of all CMOs nationally.

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

<sup>c</sup> We also examined differences in district leaders' responses by district size. We observed similar patterns by district size and locale (urban, suburban, and rural). Therefore, we present only differences by locale to avoid repetition.

## 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).

Reports of staff shortages, heated school board meetings, increased student misbehavior, low student and teacher attendance, and enrollment declines suggest increased—rather than decreased—problems during this third pandemic school year. To learn about the extent of these challenges, RAND researchers surveyed 359 district and charter network leaders in the American School District Panel.

We are extremely grateful to the U.S. public school teachers and leaders 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 Christine Mulhern and Betheny Gross for helpful feedback that greatly improved this report. We also thank Blair Smith 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 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 Fourth American School District Panel Survey* (RR-A956-7, [www.rand.org/t/RR-A956-7](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A956-7)) 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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