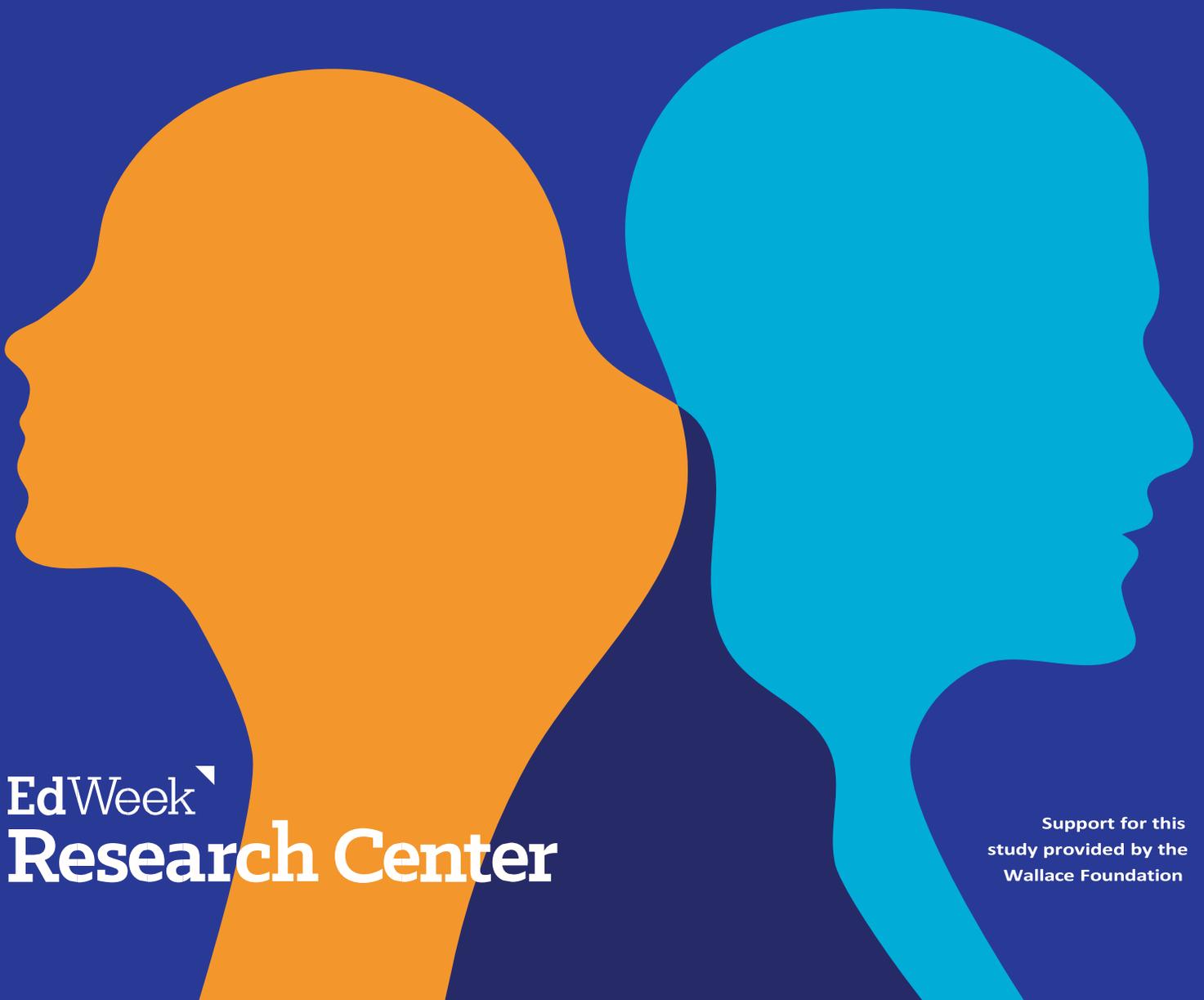


# Crisis of Confidence

Results of National Surveys on  
Educator Morale During a Pandemic



EdWeek  
Research Center

Support for this  
study provided by the  
Wallace Foundation

## About Editorial Projects In Education

Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization based in Bethesda, Md. Its primary mission is to help raise the level of awareness and understanding among professionals and the public of important issues in American education. EPE covers local, state, national, and international news and issues from preschool through the 12th grade. Editorial Projects in Education publishes Education Week, America’s newspaper of record for precollegiate education, the online Teacher, EdWeek Market Brief, and the TopSchoolJobs employment resource. It also produces periodic special reports on issues ranging from technology to textbooks, as well as books of special interest to educators.

The EdWeek Research Center conducts surveys, collects data, and performs analyses that appear in Education Week and special reports such as Quality Counts, and Technology Counts. The center also conducts independent research studies and maintains the Education Counts online data resource.

## About the Wallace Foundation

The Wallace Foundation supports Education Week’s coverage of issues including education leadership, summer learning, social and emotional learning, arts learning, and afterschool. The Wallace Foundation seeks to create both direct benefits for its grantee partners in the form of improved capacity and services and indirect benefits for the fields in which it works by developing and sharing credible, useful knowledge. [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org)

REPORT: Holly Kurtz, Director, EdWeek Research Center - Sterling Lloyd, Assistant Director – Alex Harwin, Research Analyst – Victor Chen, Research Intern – Yukiko Furuya, Research Intern

## EdWeek<sup>®</sup> Research Center

6935 Arlington Road  
Bethesda, MD 20814  
[www.edweek.org/rc](http://www.edweek.org/rc) | [rcinfo@epe.org](mailto:rcinfo@epe.org)

Copyright © 2020 by Editorial Projects in Education Inc.

## Executive Summary

A series of six nationally-representative K-12 educator surveys conducted by the EdWeek Research Center between March and June of 2020 assessed perceptions of morale rates over time for students, teachers, hourly employees, and administrators. On every survey, a majority of teachers and district leaders reported that student, teacher, and hourly employee morale was lower than it had been prior to the pandemic. By late May, a majority of educators also perceived that administrator morale had declined. On every survey except for the first, educators were more likely to say student morale had declined than to perceive that employee morale had waned. These declines were accompanied by decreased levels of student engagement in instruction. As they faced the dramatic and abrupt shift from in-person to remote learning, teachers also experienced demoralization. Although most reported that principals had taken steps to address their morale, there were large gaps between teacher and principal perceptions of the extent of these efforts. In the meantime, administrators themselves were increasingly likely to report lower morale as the 2019-20 school year wound down and they found themselves grappling with tough decisions made on the basis of limited information in an economic situation in which resources may be scarce. Without adequate intervention, the student and educator morale crisis occasioned by the pandemic may linger long after the threat of the virus itself has faded.

## Introduction

For much of America, the spring of 2020 culminated with a difficult end to a challenging school year. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, schools closed abruptly in mid-March, leaving educators scrambling to provide remote learning as students missed out on milestones from graduations to annual exams. In the meantime, thousands of people died from the disease, including educators, students, and family members. It was not an easy time to be a human being. Or an educator.

In a series of six nationally-representative surveys administered throughout the highly unusual spring 2020 semester, the EdWeek Research Center tracked teachers' and district leaders' perceptions of what the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines as “the mental and emotional condition of an individual or group with regard to the function or tasks at hand.” In other words, we tracked morale. This sense of contentment or discontent has proven critical to life inside and outside the workplace, with the [American Psychological Association reporting that](#) morale impacts everything from productivity at work to relationships at home to physical wellbeing and health. As a result, a key goal of most leaders, both inside and outside of education, is to do what it takes to maintain and improve the morale of their employees. However, as our survey results show, this has not been easy to accomplish. Although that time is now over, the results remain important because morale is not something that necessarily recovers overnight. In addition, it's likely that the school closures of spring 2020 may recur along with the coronavirus as cool weather descends upon us in the fall.

## **| SURVEY DETAILS**

Surveys Administered: March-June 2020

Sample: Nationally-representative

Method: Online [Email invitations sent to an online survey]

Respondents: K-12 educators

## The surveys

Between March 25th and June 18th, 2020, the EdWeek Research Center conducted six nationally-representative, online surveys that asked K-12 educators about the morale levels of students, teachers, hourly employees, and administrators. The sample sizes ranged from 908 to 1,907. Four of the surveys included teachers and district leaders such as superintendents, chief finance officers, and director and specialist-level administrators. Two of the surveys included principals, teachers, and district leaders. The samples included both public and private school educators.

### Survey Respondents

Survey date	Number of teacher respondents	Number of district leader respondents	Number of principal respondents	TOTAL respondents
3.24.20 to 3.25.20	557	354	None	911
4.7.20 to 4.8.20	1,096	624	None	1,720
4.22.20 to 4.23.20	785	322	None	1,107
5.6.20 to 5.7.20	599	309	None	908
5.20.20 to 5.28.20	1,014	446	447	1,907
6.17.20 to 6.18.20	559	302	289	1,150

### Survey Question

Each of the surveys asked educators the same question about the morale levels of students, teachers, hourly employees, and administrators.

### Compared to morale prior to the coronavirus, in our school district, morale levels for the following groups are:

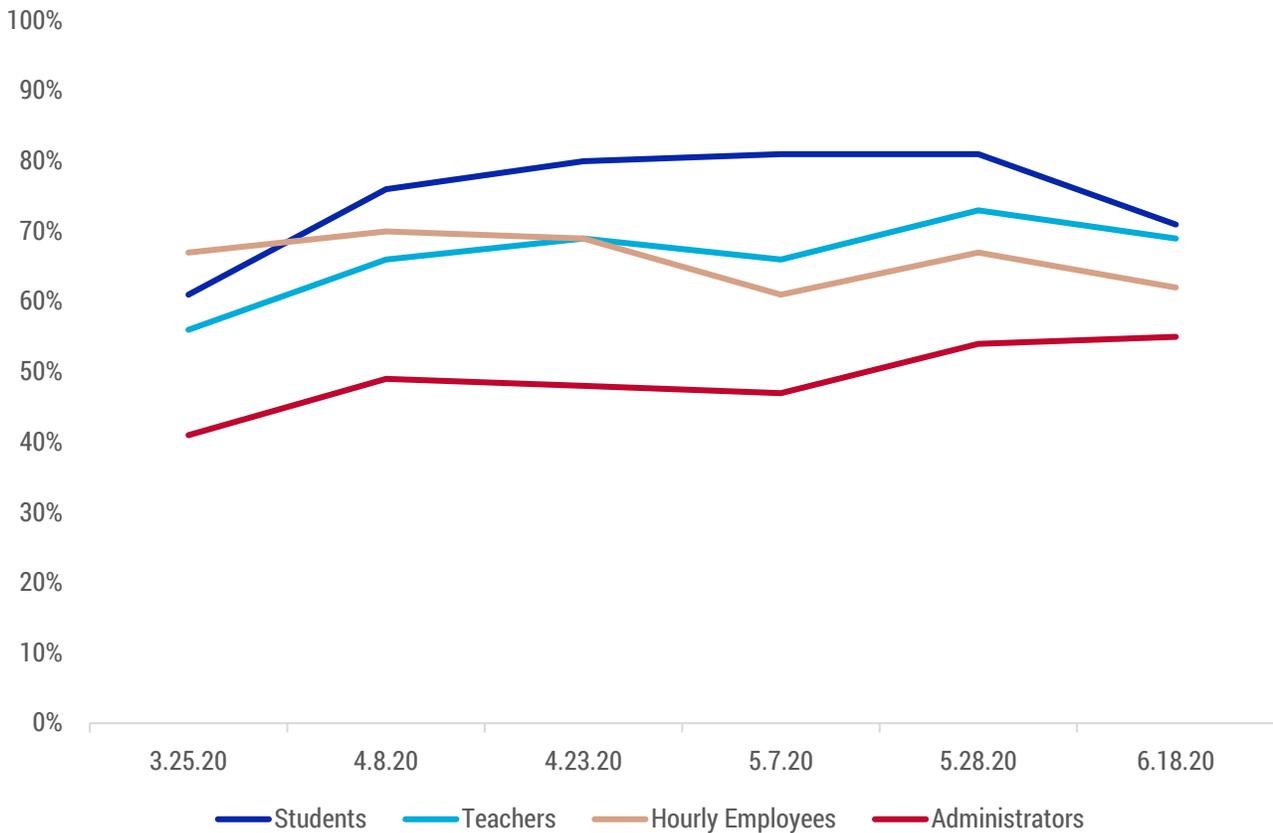
	Much lower	Somewhat lower	The same	Somewhat higher	Much higher	N/A/ Don't know
Students	<input type="radio"/>					
Teachers	<input type="radio"/>					
Hourly employees	<input type="radio"/>					
Administrators	<input type="radio"/>					

The analyses reported in this document do not include N/A/Don't know responses. When results are compared over time, principals are excluded since they did not participate in four of the six surveys.

## Overall Results: Morale

On each of the six surveys, the majority of teachers and district leaders said that, compared to prior to the coronavirus, morale was lower for students, teachers, and hourly employees.

## Percent of educators who say morale is lower than before the coronavirus for students, teachers, hourly employees, and administrators

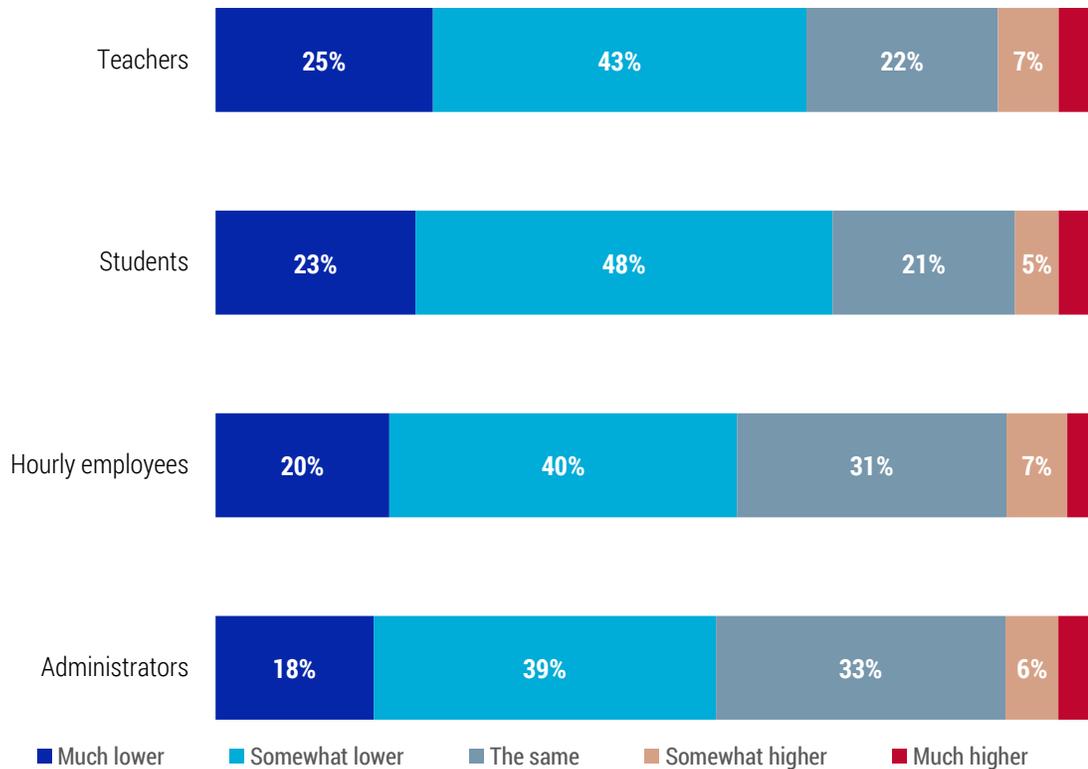


### In Most Recent Survey, Majority of Educators Continue to See Lower Morale

On the most recent survey (June 18th, 2020), 71 percent of all survey respondents said that morale was lower for students than before the pandemic. A similar share (68%) indicated it has declined for teachers. Slightly lower percentages, although still a majority, believe it has dropped for hourly employees (60%) and administrators (57%). They were most likely to say morale was unchanged for administrators. The percentage of teachers and administrators reporting that morale had improved since prior to the pandemic ranged from 9 percent for student morale to 11 percent for teacher morale.

These findings suggest that when the 2020-21 school year starts, principals and district leaders will need effective approaches to address the demoralization their employees have experienced. In a May 2020 [article](#), Education Week identified some potential strategies for boosting teacher morale based on interviews with principals and district leaders. They include efforts to offer flexible schedules, encourage teachers to set work boundaries limiting their hours of availability, increase administrator transparency and accessibility, troubleshoot on challenges like technology, and provide teachers with emotional support.

According to teachers, principals, and district leaders surveyed June 18th, compared to morale prior to the coronavirus, in our school district, morale levels for the following groups are:



## Student Morale

On every survey except the first, student morale was lower than educator morale. (On that first survey, hourly employee morale was lowest.) The percentage of educators who said student morale was lower than it was before the school closures ranged from a low of 61 percent on March 25th to a high of 81 percent on the two May surveys.

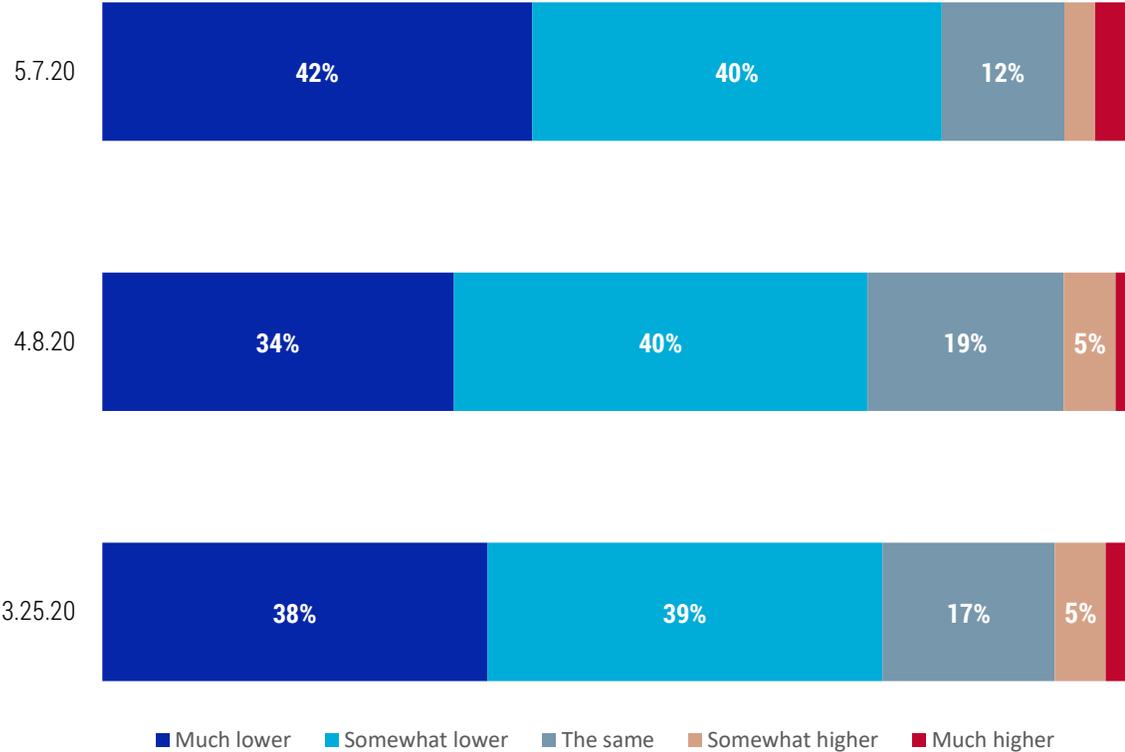
By the time of the June survey, school was out for summer for 90 percent of respondents and student morale had improved considerably although it remained poor. The percentage of educators reporting that student morale had declined since the pandemic started fell from 81 to 71 percent. Respondents in districts where school was out for summer reported better student morale, but the difference was not statistically significant. Secondary teachers reported poorer student morale than did elementary teachers. And teachers consistently reported significantly lower student morale levels than did administrators.

As students' morale suffered, so too did their levels of engagement with their classwork and school. Over time, well over three-quarters of teachers consistently reported that student engagement had declined since the pandemic.

Although there was no significant, consistent relationship between poverty and student morale, engagement levels declined most for students from the highest poverty districts where three-quarters or more students come from low-income families. Teachers in these high poverty districts also consistently reported that higher percentages of students

were completely missing in action and not in contact with them at all. For example, on May 7th, teachers in district with poverty rates of 75 percent-plus said that 28 percent of their students were missing in action. By contrast, teachers in districts with poverty rates under 26 percent said 11 percent of their students were MIA. This disengagement was almost certainly impacted by the fact that low-income students had less access to devices and WiFi required to actively participate in remote learning. On May 7th, 72 percent of teachers in districts with poverty rates of 25 percent or less reported that their schools had one device for every student. By contrast, just 44 percent of their peers in districts with poverty rates of 75 percent plus reported 1:1 computing.

**Compared to their engagement levels PRIOR TO the coronavirus closures, students’ current level of engagement with their schoolwork is, according to their teachers:**



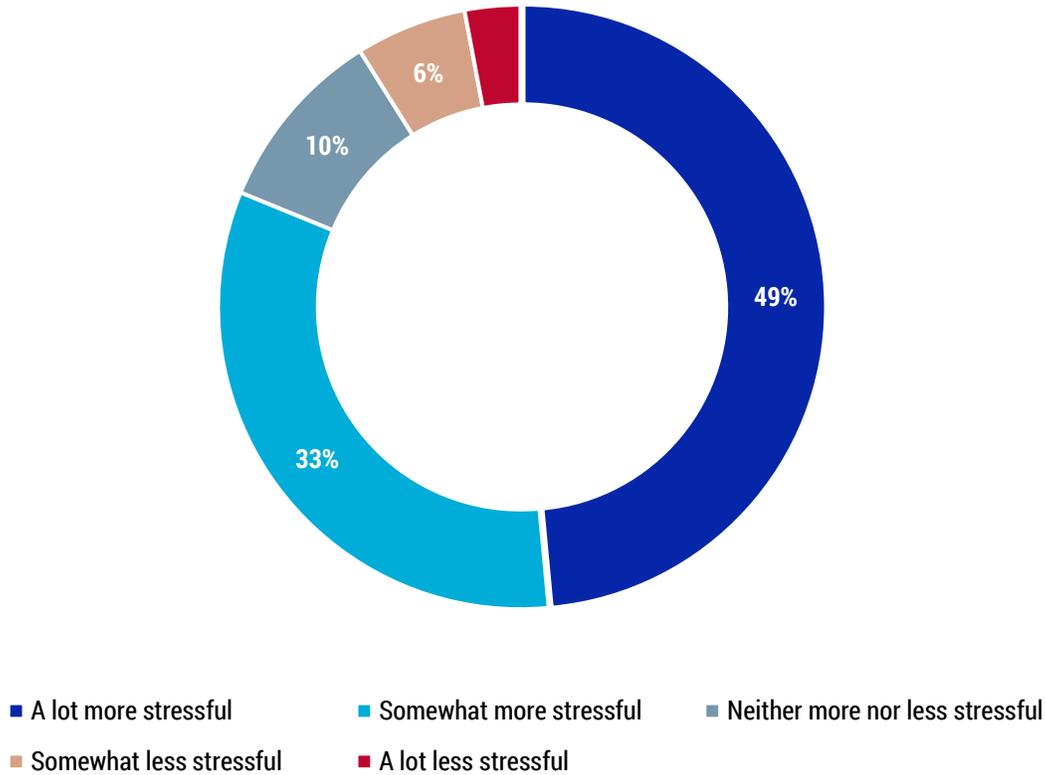
### Teacher Morale

The majority of educators consistently reported that teacher morale was consistently lower once schools closed for the pandemic. Also consistently, teachers were more likely than administrators to perceive that morale had declined since the pandemic started. For example, on June 18th, 73 percent of teachers said teacher morale had declined as compared to 64 percent of principals and 61 percent of district leaders.

The declining morale is perhaps understandable given the many challenges that teachers faced as schools closed seemingly overnight, with few opportunities to prepare for the sudden and dramatic shift to remote learning. On April 23rd, 81 percent of teachers reported that teaching had grown more stressful as a result of the pandemic. The job of teaching itself had changed dramatically. Most teachers said they were spending less time testing, preparing students for exams, and introducing new material. They were spending more time reviewing and troubleshooting technology. In

fact, on April 23rd, they said they were spending an average of 27 percent of their work time helping families and students with issues related to technology.

**Compared to teaching prior to the coronavirus closures, teaching now is:**



Note: Results in chart show responses from teachers on April 23, 2020 survey.

How has this poor morale impacted teachers? Perhaps due to stress, teachers are more likely than administrators to say they have been overeating more since the pandemic started, according to the June 18th survey results. And the morale could lead to turnover. On May 28th, 12 percent of teachers said the pandemic might lead them to leave the classroom even though they were not planning to do so before the crisis. Some of this may be due to issues other than morale but it is likely that morale does play a role for at least some of the teachers who have decided to depart, especially as many schools are contemplating resuming online instruction when schools reopen in the fall. Compared to administrators, teachers are significantly more likely to say that they are more effective at their jobs when working at school — not home — a perception that could definitely depress their morale.

Most teachers (72 percent) say principals have addressed the issue of teacher morale since schools closed. But teachers and principals have different perceptions of the steps that have been taken. For example-96 percent of principals say they've addressed teacher morale during the pandemic. That's 24 percentage points more than teachers. Similarly, 88 percent of principals but just 37 percent of teachers say principals have encouraged groups of teachers. Forty-three percent of principals but just 20 percent of teachers say principals have held virtual parties. And 37 percent of principals and 13 percent of teachers say teachers have been offered special perks since the closures. Certainly, some of the disconnect may be due to the fact that teachers may be unaware of principal actions that do not involve them. For

example, if a principal noticed that morale was flagging among teachers at certain grade levels and held a meeting in which she tried to inspire that group, teachers at other grade levels might not be aware of her actions. However, the disconnect is sufficiently large to suggest that, at the very least, when it comes to morale boosting efforts, there might be a gap in teacher-principal communication.

## Hourly Employee Morale

Although salary structures vary by district, employees who are commonly paid by the hour include substitute teachers, bus drivers, paraprofessionals who assist teachers in classrooms, cafeteria workers, custodians, and administrative assistants. These employees are less likely than teachers or administrators to receive benefits such as paid sick leave and healthcare that they can rely on if they get sick with COVID-19. For example, on a survey conducted March 11th, 59 percent of district leaders said that substitute teachers were not eligible for paid sick leave. In addition, 22 percent said before/after school program staff lacked access to such leave, with 17 percent reporting that bus drivers did not receive that benefit. Certain types of hourly employees may also face a higher risk of job loss: On June 18th, 23 percent of district leaders said they planned to lay off paraprofessionals who assist teachers in schools due to budget cuts associated with the pandemic.

Hourly employee morale started out lower than teacher morale in late March and early April. On March 25th, 67 percent of teachers and district leaders perceived that morale had declined among hourly employees while 56 percent said the same of teachers. However, by June 18th, teacher morale was perceived to be lower. Sixty-nine percent said teacher morale had declined since the closures. Sixty-two percent said hourly employee morale had plunged.

It is important to note that, like students, hourly employees were not surveyed so the perspectives collected are those of their colleagues who are teachers or administrators.

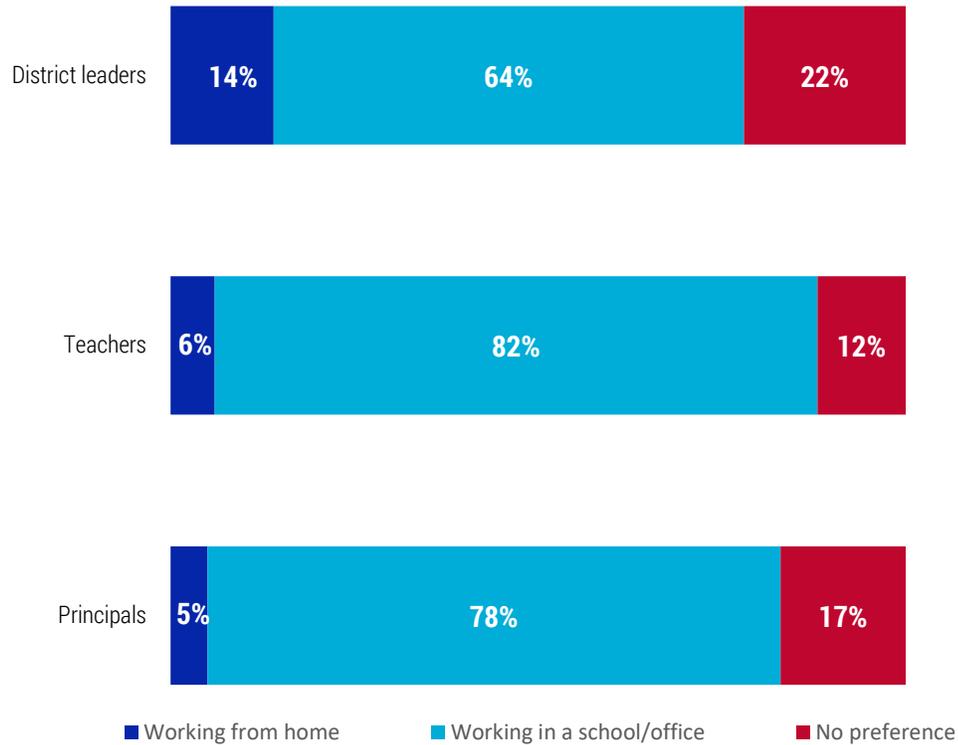
## Administrator Morale

Teachers and district leaders alike have consistently reported better morale rates for administrators than for students, teachers, or hourly employees. One reason may be that administrators are more likely than teachers to report that they have continued to go into the offices and schools where they work, limiting the disruption to their daily lives. District leaders in particular are also more likely to perceive that they are equally effective or more so working from home.

However, administrator morale has steadily declined over the course of the pandemic, survey results suggest. On March 25th, 41 percent of teachers and district leaders perceived that administrator morale had waned since schools had closed. By June 18th, that share had increased to 55 percent.

One reason may be that, as the 2019-20 school year has wound down, administrators have increasingly turned to grappling with the reality that the pandemic is not going anywhere in the fall. This means they are making tough decisions, often based on limited information, about issues such as social distancing in classrooms and on buses, checking temperatures, staggering school arrivals, and deciding how to best serve students and staff with conditions that make them especially vulnerable to suffering adverse effects from the virus. In the meantime, as of June 18th, 47 percent of school and district leaders predict that spending in their school districts will decline over the next year while just 17 percent say spending will stay the same and 36 percent expect an increase. The average predicted decline is 15 percent. This means many administrators will almost certainly face the reality of trying to do more with less funding.

**When it comes to my current job, I am more effective:**



Note: Results in chart show responses from teachers, principals, and district leaders on May 20-28, 2020 survey.

## Conclusion

Educators clearly perceive that the sudden and dramatic school closures necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic have had a detrimental impact on the morale of students, teachers, hourly employees and administrators. This finding is not surprising as students have been separated from their friends, teachers have been forced to abruptly shift to new and untried approaches to instruction, hourly employees face uncertainties related to their jobs, and administrators grapple with tough decisions about what to do next. In the meantime, like people all over the world, American teachers and students are coping with concerns about their own health and the health of their families, and the fallout of the economic slump caused by the pandemic.

It will be important for leaders to monitor student and employee sentiments over time, especially since the pandemic is not expected to end with the 2019-20 school year. If poor morale persists, it may give rise to multiple undesirable effects, from unhealthy levels of stress to employee turnover to student disengagement. While most educators report that principals have already taken steps to address the morale of teachers, the gap between teacher and principal perceptions of these efforts suggests, at the very least, the need to more fully communicate these measures. Students,

hourly employees, and administrators will also need morale boosters as schools reopen in the fall. Otherwise, the pandemic may leave behind a legacy of low morale long after the threat of the coronavirus itself has faded.