

Student and Teacher Views Of Social-Emotional Learning

Results of a National Survey



EdWeek[™]
Research Center

This study produced
with support from



Allstate
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 Top School Jobs 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.

About The Allstate Foundation

The [Allstate Foundation](#) supports Education Week's coverage of social and emotional learning. The Foundation champions SEL and service-learning programs to ensure youth reach their full potential and have the power to build the just, equitable and healthy world we all deserve.



REPORT: Holly Kurtz, Director, EdWeek Research Center - Sterling Lloyd, Assistant Director - Alex Harwin, Research Analyst - Victor Chen, Research Intern - Natalie Gubbay, Research Intern

EdWeek
Research Center

6935 Arlington Road
Bethesda, MD 20814
www.edweek.org/rc | rcinfo@epe.org

Copyright © 2021 by Editorial Projects in Education Inc.

Executive Summary

The widespread disruptions stemming from the coronavirus pandemic have jolted American school systems since March 2020. Students and educators have grappled with the profound academic challenges of remote learning and with the social isolation it produced. As the 2020-21 school year closed, however, there was some reason for optimism. The spread of COVID-19 had slowed, vaccinations were widely available for adults, and students and educators anticipated a return to the more familiar habits of in-person learning.

Since then, the community spread of the Delta variant has tempered that optimism, and students and educators are again called on to adapt to an uncertain environment with continuing concerns about exposure to the virus at school, mask requirements, and other safety protocols for in-person instruction. This report examines data from two EdWeek Research Center surveys fielded in August/September at the outset of the 2021-22 school year. One survey asked middle and high school students a range of questions related to social and emotional learning (SEL) and the other examined educators' views on the same topics.

The results provide a snapshot of students' mental well-being and confidence in their SEL skills. They highlight room for growth in several competencies as students return to classrooms this school year.

Of the 1,022 students surveyed, 44 percent reported that their level of social anxiety had increased since the pandemic. Forty-three percent reported a higher level of loneliness, and 37 percent said they felt less comfortable with physical contact like hugs from others their age.

Their reports of heightened anxiety and stress come even with 78 percent of respondents learning in-person full-time and 92 percent in-person at least some of the time.

Strategies for social and emotional learning offer options for helping students to navigate heightened feelings of anxiety and isolation. Though students reported high confidence in some SEL skills, they expressed less comfort with several essential interpersonal skills than teachers perceived. And while teachers pointed to various ways their schools enhance students' personal development and growth in SEL, results suggest students didn't always feel that support.

It's not surprising that student and teacher viewpoints don't always align, especially after a year of interrupted learning. They have different vantage points for understanding the success of SEL strategies. They approached the survey differently: students responded to questions based on their personal experiences, while teachers assessed all their students' abilities.

Nonetheless, a better understanding of students' personal experience with social and emotional learning may help schools and teachers respond to the emotional stress and continued upheaval brought on by the pandemic. The survey also highlights specific skill areas where students say they need more help from their school staff to improve.

The survey's key insights include:

- Students reported confidence in their ability to ask teachers for help when needed and teachers agreed with that assessment. Ninety-four percent of teachers partly or entirely agreed that students at their school feel comfortable asking for help, and 88 percent of students said the same.
- Ninety percent of the educators surveyed said that adults at their school are helping students to figure out their identity. By contrast, just 70 percent of students agreed.
- Less than half of students who participated in the survey reported that their school provided them with enough help to do a better job with making responsible decisions, handling challenging situations well, and learning to recognize and manage emotions. Less than a third said their schools provided sufficient help to handle conflict and take on others' perspectives.

Introduction

At the start of the 2021-22 school year, most students returned to in-person schooling after months of remote learning. Yet they returned to in-person learning amid ongoing economic stress, with COVID-19 cases reaching levels not seen since January 2021 and following over a year's worth of unprecedented disruption in their educational experience and home lives. Concerns about students' mental health and well-being, compounded by evidence of COVID-related "learning loss" in core academic subjects, have led many to a renewed focus on social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines [social and emotional learning](#) as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions." It also identifies five broad areas of social and emotional competence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Between August 30 and September 7, 2021, the EdWeek Research Center surveyed a representative sample of 1,022 students in grades 6-12, asking a range of questions related to their mental health and social-emotional learning since the pandemic. Students rated their comfort with skills in several of CASEL's five competence areas. They also described the level of support available at school to help them improve their confidence in their SEL skills, develop their identity, and take on leadership and decision-making roles.

In a separate survey, 453 middle and high school teachers answered similar questions about the students at their school, allowing the research center to compare students' self-reported measures with educators' perceptions of their confidence in SEL skills and the opportunities available to them at school. The EdWeek Research Center fielded the educator survey from August 25 to September 8, 2021.

Results show that students and teachers see eye-to-eye on students' capacities in some SEL skill areas, like working in teams or asking teachers for help.

But their perceptions differ regarding students' ability to communicate how they're doing emotionally and get support on questions related to identity.

Students were less comfortable talking to other students and teachers about their feelings—and more likely to feel looked down on or "preached" at by adults at school—than teachers perceived. They reported less often than teachers that adults at school are helping students to figure out who they are, where they belong, and what they believe.

SURVEY DETAILS

Surveys Administered: August 30 to September 7, 2021 (Student Survey)
August 25 to September 8, 2021 (Educator Survey)

Sample: Nationally representative

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

Respondents: Students in grades 6-12 and middle and high school teachers

These differences in perception may not mean that teachers misunderstand students. Because teachers answered broader questions about all their students, their responses might reflect the many instances of successful communication and collaboration they see within the school community. By contrast, students may focus on the challenging nature of social and emotional growth. It’s also possible that student and teacher perspectives diverged during the period of remote (or mostly remote) instruction and will re-align as both spend more time in in-person classrooms.

Still, students’ responses signal an opportunity for educators to meet them where they are in SEL, particularly with interpersonal skills such as communicating emotions, understanding others’ perspectives, and handling conflict.

Demographics

From August 30, 2021, to September 7, 2021, the EdWeek Research Center conducted a nationally representative survey of 1,022 students in grades six through twelve, which asked them about their mental well-being since the pandemic and their experiences with social and emotional learning (SEL) in school. Forty-three percent of the participating students were in grades six through eight, and the other 57 percent were in grades nine through twelve.

Grade Level	Percentage
6th	12%
7th	15%
8th	16%
9th	15%
10th	15%
11th	13%
12th	14%

The EdWeek Research Center also fielded an independent survey of 453 middle and high school teachers from August 25 to September 8, 2021, which asked several of the same questions on school climate and SEL proficiency. While students responded based on their personal experience and comfort with SEL in school, educators described students’ facility with SEL, and the support dedicated to social-emotional learning in their schools more broadly.

The student survey participants were racially and ethnically diverse, with 40 percent identifying as white, 22 percent identifying as Latinx, and 21 percent identifying as Black or African-American.

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
Alaska Native	<1%
American Indian	<1%
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	<1%
Asian American	14%
Black	21%
Latinx	22%
White	40%
Other	3%

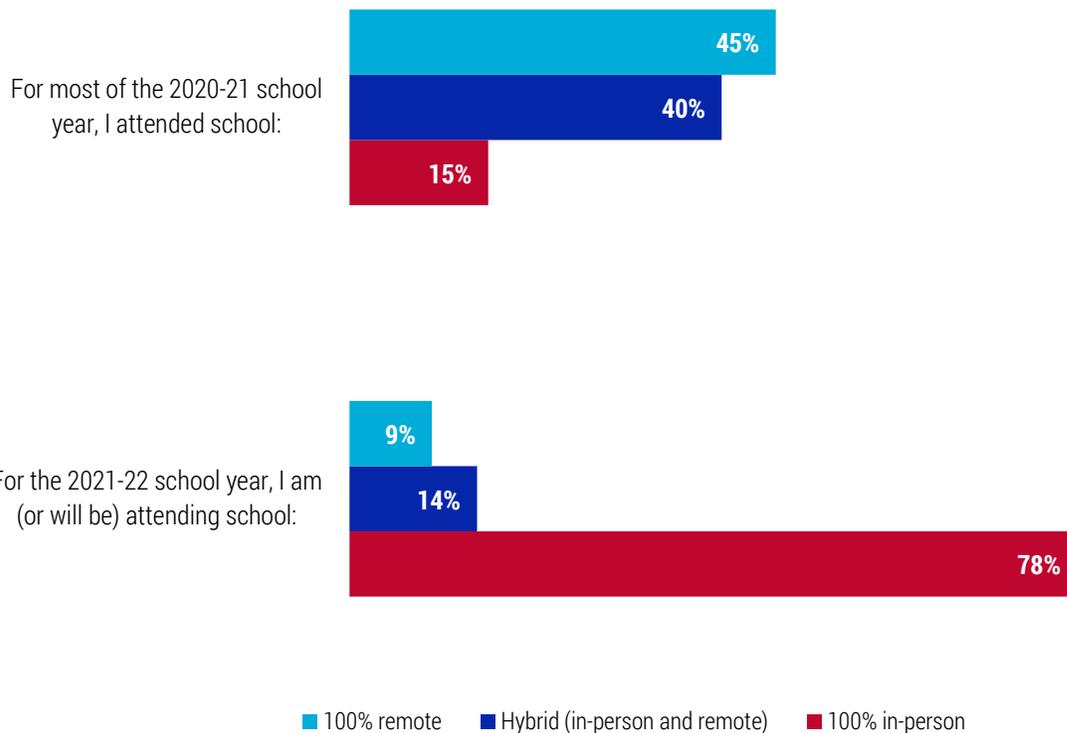
Just under half of the respondents to the survey (46%) identified as female, 54 percent identified as male, and less than 1 percent indicated their gender did not fall into those two categories. Fifty-four percent qualified for free or reduced-price lunch based on their family's income.

Most respondents, 81 percent, attended a traditional public school. Ten percent attended a private school, with 6 percent enrolled in religious institutions and 4 percent non-religious institutions. Five percent went to a charter school, and 3 percent were homeschooled.

As of the survey period, 78 percent of respondents learned entirely in-person, compared with 15 percent who went to school primarily in-person last year. Another 14 percent used some combination of remote and in-person learning (i.e., hybrid instruction).

Only 9 percent of students learned entirely online this September, compared with 45 percent last year.

Tell us about your experiences with remote, in-person, and hybrid (both remote and in-person) learning in your district or school.



Student Mental Health Since the Pandemic

EdWeek Research Center survey results indicate that the pandemic's impact on students' mental health and well-being remains substantial. Many of the pressures introduced by the pandemic continue to disrupt the classroom environment and students' home lives.

Forty-four percent of respondents reported that their level of social anxiety had increased since the pandemic, and 43 percent reported a higher level of loneliness. Thirty-seven percent said they felt less comfortable with physical contact like hugs from others their age.

And while some students reported no change, very few said their mental health had improved in these areas: just 9 percent had decreased levels of social anxiety, and 10 percent felt less loneliness.

Support from teachers and the school community is especially critical as students manage feelings of anxiety and isolation, and survey results suggest schools could do more to help students develop confidence in their SEL skills in a post-pandemic world.

Less than half of student respondents said their school provided them with the help they needed to do better with several critical SEL skills. These skills include the ability to make responsible decisions (46 percent), handle challenging situations well (46 percent), or establish positive relationships (36 percent).

Just 25 percent of students said their school provided them with enough help to handle conflict. Nearly one-third said their school did not offer enough support to tackle any vital skills included in the survey question.

Since the pandemic started, my school has provided me with the amount of help I need to do a better job at:



The remaining survey questions asked students about the support available from teachers and other adults at school and their confidence in several SEL competencies. Educators responded to the same questions about the students in their schools.

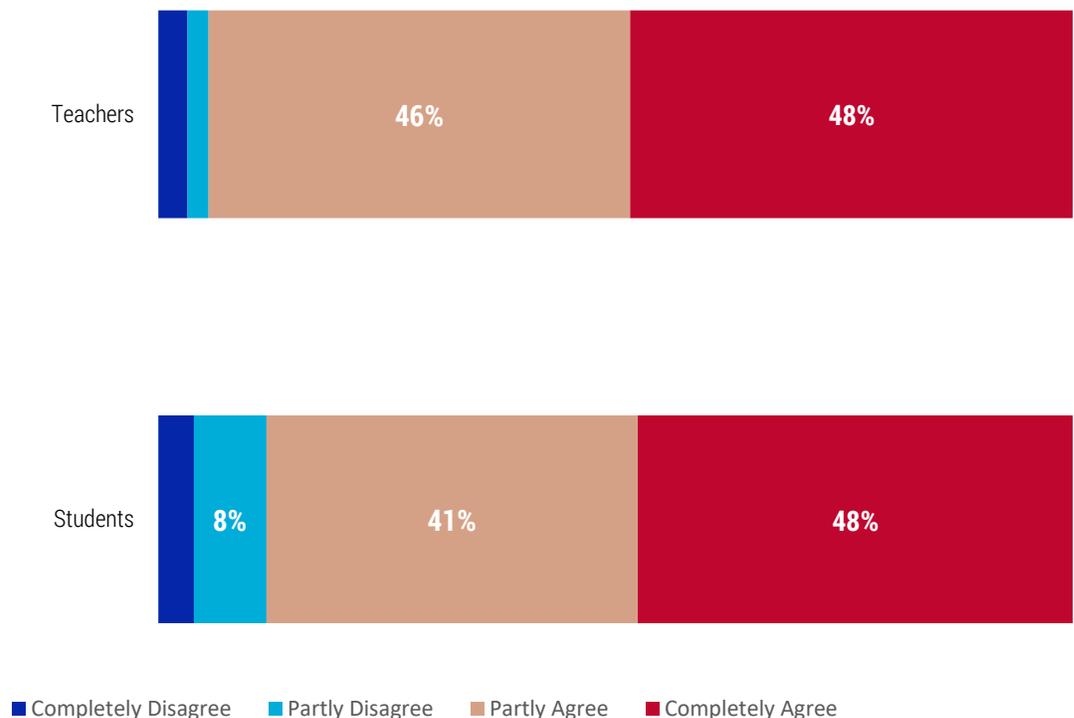
Teachers were spot-on in assessing students' confidence in their ability to work in teams and ask for help when needed. Yet, they tended to overestimate students' comfort talking to other students and teachers about how they're feeling. They also suggested that adults are doing a better job taking students seriously and supporting their identity development than students say is true at school.

Where are Students and Teachers Aligned?

Most students and teachers agreed that students felt comfortable asking teachers for help when needed—89 percent of students thought they could ask for help, and 94 percent of teachers said so. The full breakdown in responses revealed striking similarities. Forty-eight percent of students and 48 percent of teachers completely agreed that they [their students] feel like they can ask for help from a teacher, and 3 percent of teachers and 4 percent of students completely disagreed.

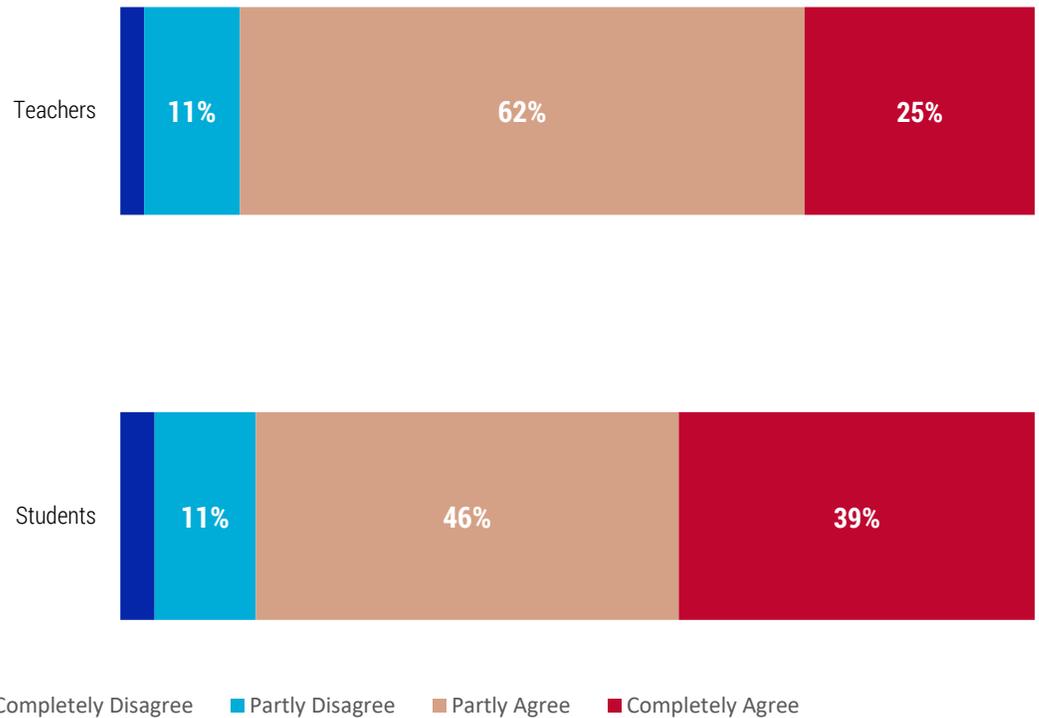
Student responses were slightly more negative than teachers', as 8 percent of students partly disagreed with the statement, compared with just 2 percent of teachers.

In my school, I [students] feel like I [they] can ask for help from a teacher if I [they] need it.



Students and teachers also shared similar perceptions of students' confidence in their ability to work in teams. Eighty-five percent of students partly or completely agreed that they felt confident they could work in teams with other students and solve problems or disagreements if they arise. Eighty-seven percent of teachers said the same of students in their schools. Only 4 percent of students and 3 percent of teachers completely disagreed with the statement.

In my school, I [students] feel confident that I [they] can work in teams with other students and solve problems/disagreements if they arise.

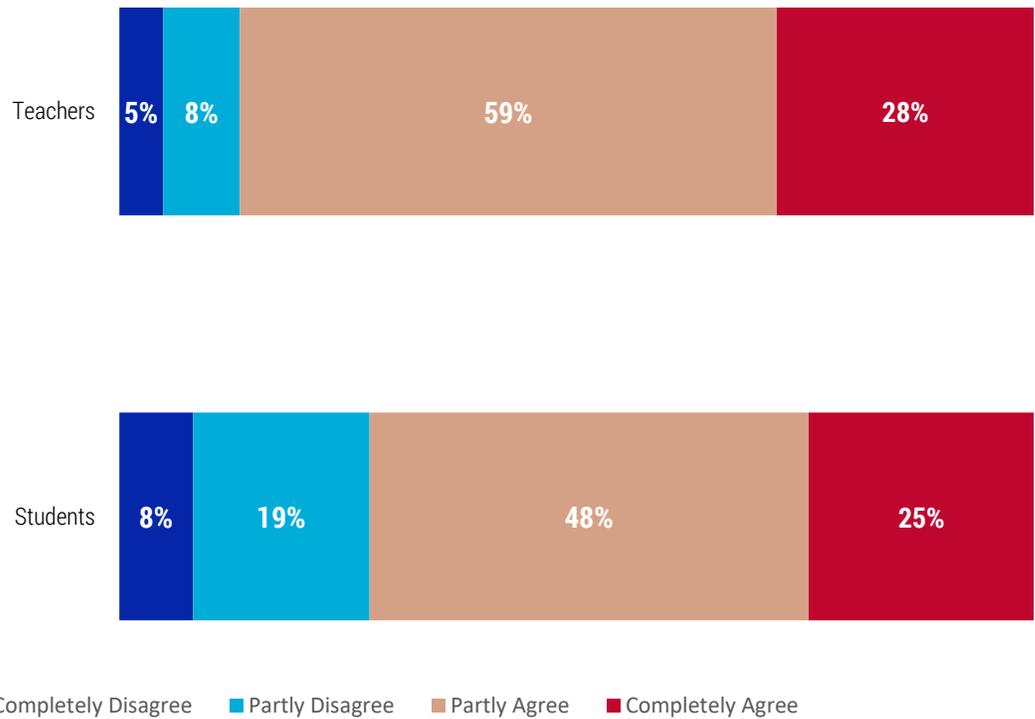


Where do Perspectives Differ?

Survey results show that students are less comfortable talking about their emotions with peers and teachers and believe they get less support in figuring out their identity than teachers perceive—but they are more confident in their ability to assess the consequences of their actions.

While 87 percent of teachers said that students felt comfortable talking with other students and teachers about their feelings, only 73 percent of students partly or entirely agreed. The proportion of students who said they did not feel comfortable having these conversations, 27 percent, was more than double what teachers assumed at 13 percent.

In my school, I [students] feel comfortable talking with other students and teachers about how I'm [they're] feeling.



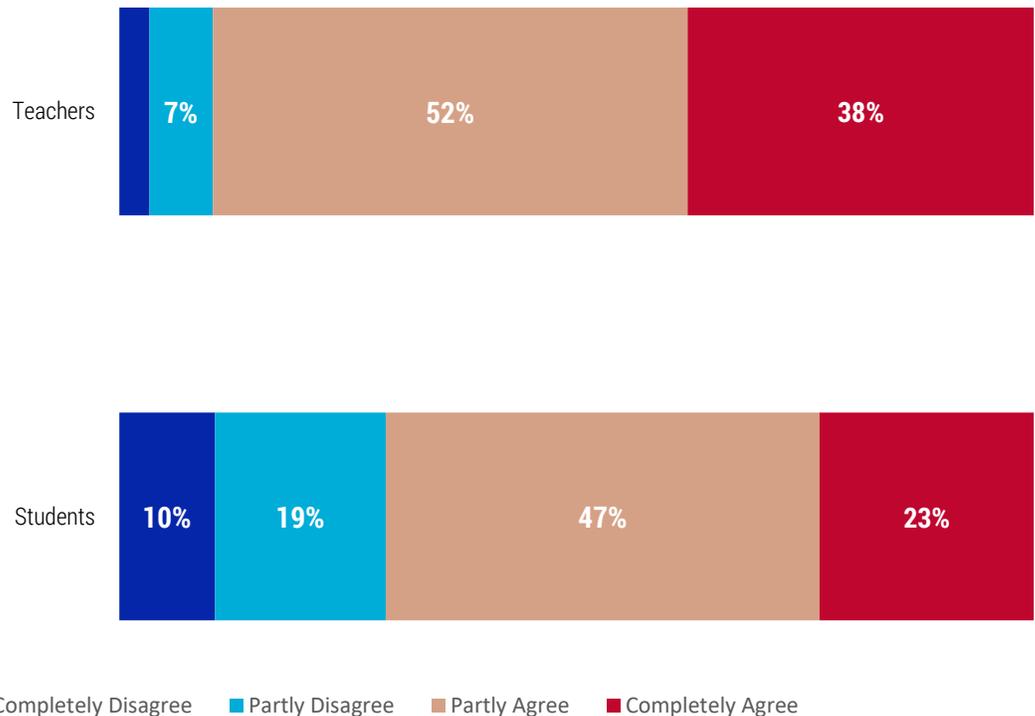
The gap between students and teachers was even wider when the survey asked whether adults at school are assisting students in figuring out their identity: 90 percent of teachers agreed compared to 70 percent of students.

Ten percent of students completely disagreed with the statement, along with only 3 percent of teachers.

Students also reported more often than teachers that adults at their schools can sound "preachy" or like they're looking down on students. Twenty-one percent of students found this partly or entirely accurate for their schools, a rate nearly three times as high as the percentage of teachers who agreed (8 percent).

This discrepancy suggests that students sometimes perceive teachers to be looking down on them even when teachers feel they're taking their students seriously. Students' responses might also reflect specific instances where they felt looked down on by teachers, while teachers perceive a more favorable school-wide climate.

Adults at my school are helping me [students] to figure out my [their] identity—who I am, what I want to be, where I belong, and what I believe.



Not surprisingly, a large majority (94 percent) of students said they know how to weigh the consequences of their actions in school, while fewer teachers (79 percent) said the same. Fifty-seven percent of students completely agreed with the statement, as did 14 percent—less than one-quarter the rate—of teachers. Most teachers (65 percent) partly agreed that students know how to weigh the consequences of their actions.

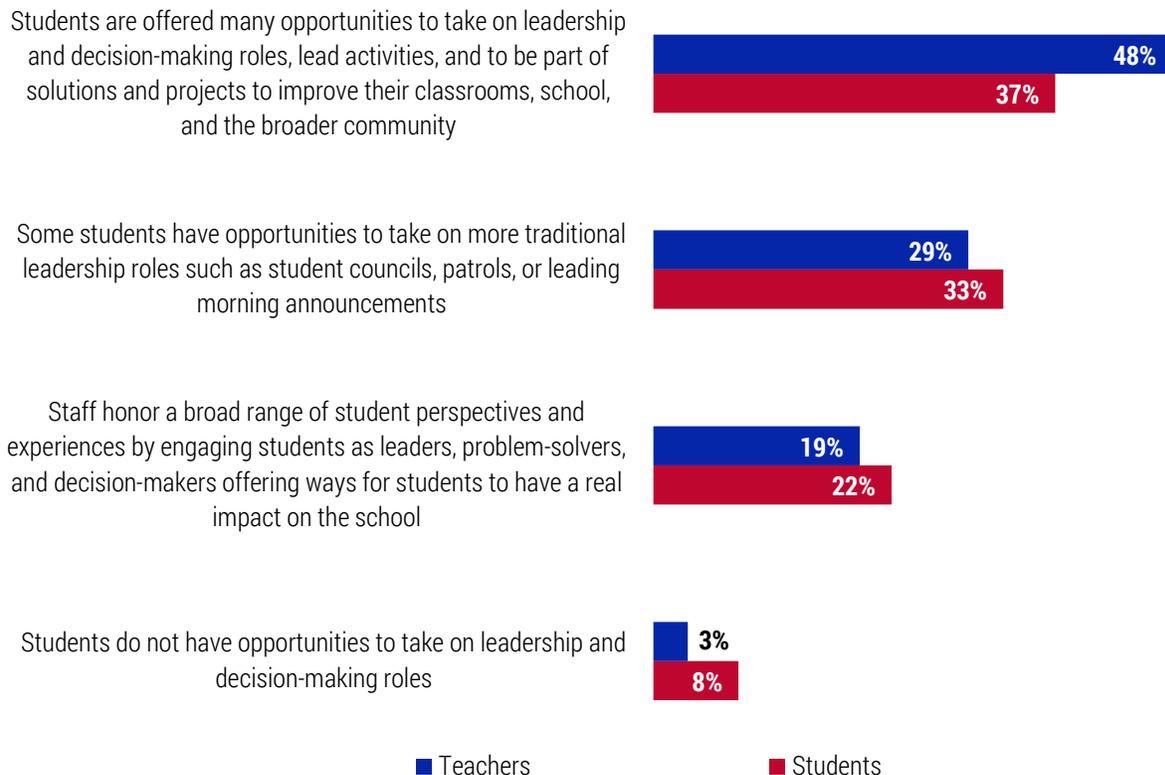
Leadership Opportunities at School

Most students indicated that their schools offer at least some meaningful opportunity for students to take on leadership roles and impact the school. Just 8 percent said students do not have opportunities to take on leadership and decision-making roles. Thirty-seven percent said students can take advantage of “many opportunities to take on leadership and decision-making roles, lead activities, and to be part of solutions and projects to improve their classrooms, school, and the broader community.”

A third of students reported that some students have opportunities to take on more traditional leadership roles such as student councils, patrols, or leading morning announcements. Somewhat fewer (22 percent) reported that “staff honor a broad range of student perspectives and experiences by engaging students as leaders, problem-solvers, and decision-makers, offering ways for students to have a real impact on the school.”

Responses from teachers were fairly aligned to students’ views. Just 3 percent of teachers said students at their schools do not have any such opportunities.

Which of the following best describes your school?



Conclusion

As the pandemic continues to evolve, educators and students must find new and meaningful ways to form strong interpersonal relationships, offer and seek out academic guidance, communicate effectively, and engage in the broader community. According to the survey results in this report, students and teachers agree that their schools have largely been successful in providing an environment that supports student well-being. The findings also outline areas in which students and teachers might work more closely to improve social-emotional learning.

While teachers gave robust evaluations of their students' confidence in their SEL capacities across the board, students' self-reported confidence varied considerably between SEL competencies. Students who participated in the survey reported less confidence in their ability to talk to other students and adults at school about their feelings and personal identity than teachers recognized.

Student experiences communicating their emotions and discussing questions of identity are likely less "visible" to teachers by default since such conversations tend to occur outside of core classroom assignments. Meanwhile, other skills—like teamwork—may be explicitly included in a course's curriculum or grading structure, leading to greater alignment between students and teachers. It is also encouraging that teachers respond optimistically when asked about students' opportunities to discuss their feelings and sense of identity. It suggests there is room for this type of social-emotional development within the school environment.

Moving into the 2021-22 school year, schools looking to foster student SEL may need to expand strategies for connecting students and teachers in meaningful and safe personal conversations. Still, students and educators both express general confidence that students can rely on strong and well-developed social and emotional capacities as they face ongoing uncertainty and pandemic-related disruption this year.