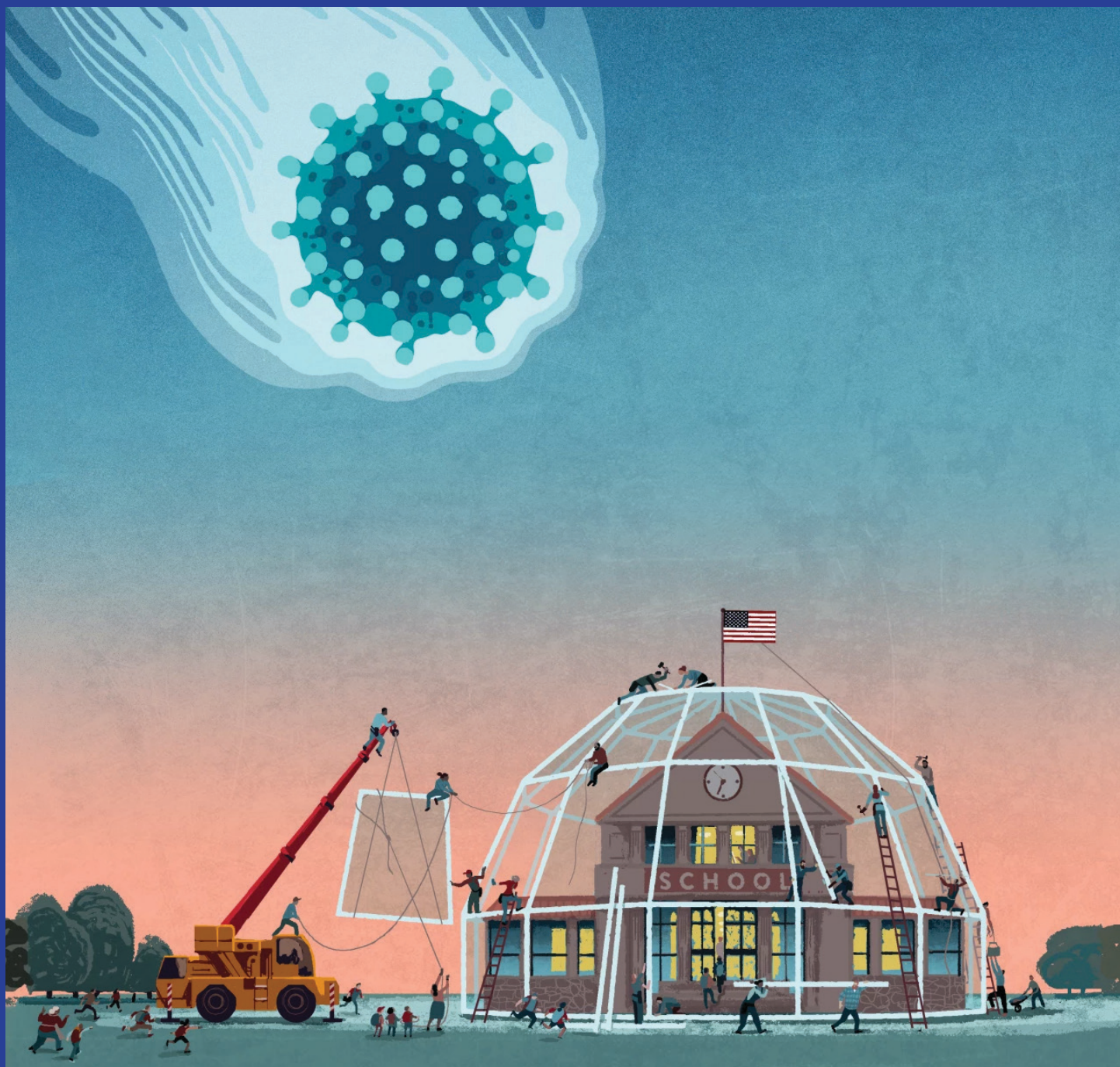


Big Ideas 2021:

10 Broad Trends In K-12 Education in 10 Charts





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Executive Summary

Drawing upon the results of a nationally representative survey of nearly 900 teachers, principals, and district leaders that was incorporated into Education Week's fourth annual report on big ideas in K-12 education, this whitepaper sums up 10 broad trends in 10 accompanying charts. These ideas include the transformation of educational technology, educators' knowledge of students' lives outside of school, and educator stress. Given the time period

covered by the survey, all of these broad trends were deeply impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, a theme that resonates throughout this report.

Introduction

Each year, for the past four years, Education Week has produced [a special report on big ideas in K-12 education](#). The reports focus on important and timely issues that schools have grappled with in the past 12 months. Not surprisingly, the coronavirus pandemic was a major emphasis in the 2021 edition, [Big Ideas for Education's Urgent](#)

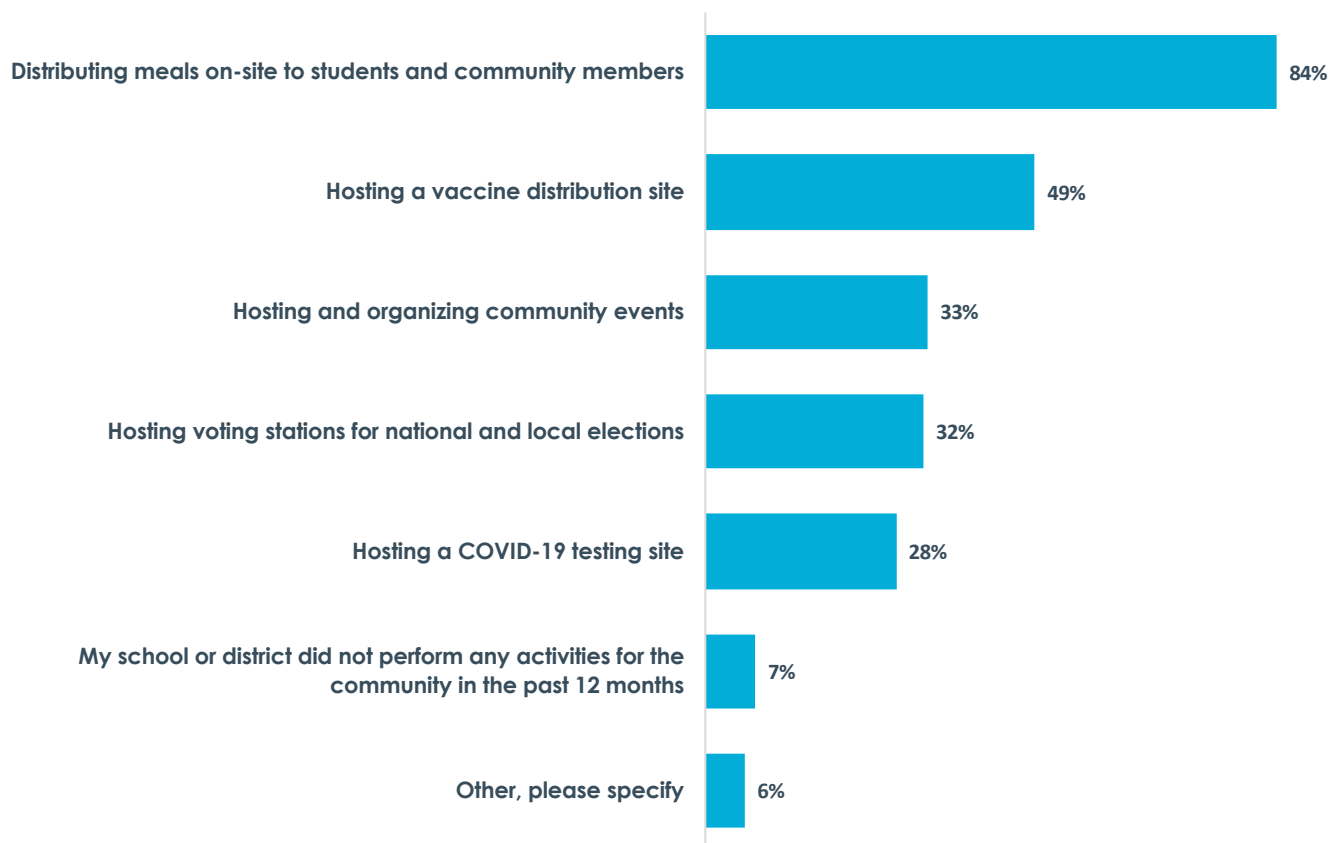
[Challenges](#). Initially published in September 2021, this report examined such pandemic-related topics as remote learning, educator stress, and student home environments. The report incorporated the results of a nationally representative, online survey that the EdWeek Research Center, the independent research arm of Education Week's nonprofit publisher, fielded July 8th-July 24th, 2021. Survey respondents were 886 K-12 educators (182 district leaders, 168 school leaders, and 536 teachers). The pages that follow summarize a selection of 10 broad ideas addressed in this survey, using a series of 10 accompanying charts. ■

10 Big Ideas in 10 Charts

1. Schools May Be Doing Too Much

Schools have long been more than locations where academic learning occurs. Eighty-four percent of principals and district leaders say their schools distribute meals not just to students but to the community. Thirty-seven percent say they provide health-related services. Nearly half refer families to emergency assistance with utilities and rent. With COVID, schools have been asked to take on even more activities than before, including those specifically related to the pandemic. Nearly half of school and district leaders say their campuses have hosted a vaccination site and more than a quarter have served as a COVID testing location. Sixty-three percent are now paying for or subsidizing student home internet access. Given pre-existing ongoing demands on schools, these additional activities raise questions about whether our nation's public schools have the resources they need to serve an ever-expanding portfolio of community-related needs. ■

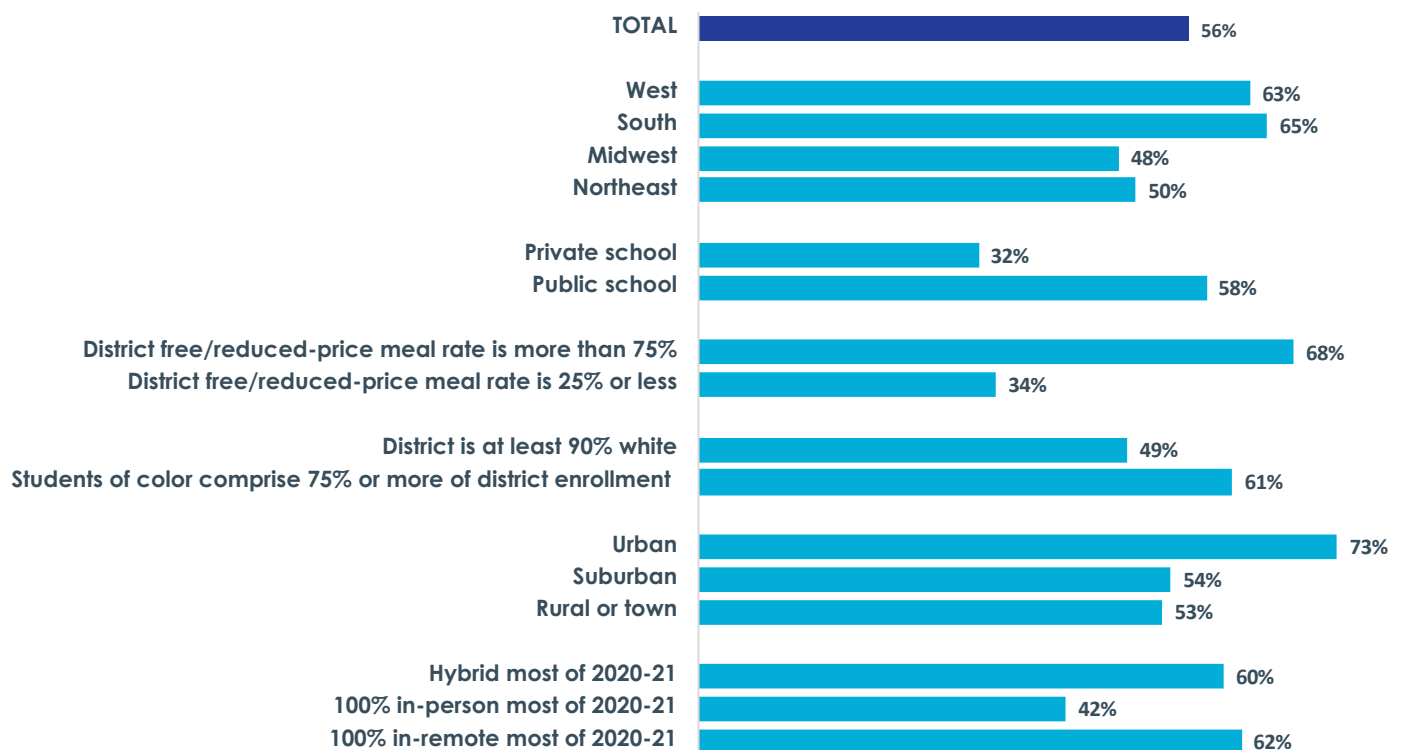
Chart 1. Which, if any, of the following activities did your school or district perform for the community over the past 12 months? Select all that apply.



2. Most Educators are Concerned That Student Homelessness Will Increase

As the federal government's pandemic-era eviction moratoriums expire amid rising home prices and rents, 56 percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders are somewhat or very concerned that the number of students experiencing homelessness will increase significantly during the current and next school years. Levels of concern are highest among educators serving the students who were most impacted by pandemic closure—i.e., those whose districts provided remote-only instruction for most of the 2020-21 school year. Concern is also higher among urban, Western, and Southern educators and in districts that serve higher percentages of students of color and lower-income families. During the pandemic, the majority of educators said their districts or schools had put more effort into providing food, clothing, school supplies, and other basic necessities for homeless students and into ensuring homeless students had the technology necessary to do schoolwork outside of school buildings. Asked what the most helpful thing their local and state governments, as well as the federal government, could do to support students currently experiencing homelessness, educators were most likely to say that their communities needed more affordable housing. ■

Chart 2. Percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders concerned that their district's homeless student population will increase significantly over the next two years



3. The 2020 Summer of Racial Reckoning Hasn't Transformed Schools

The nationwide demonstrations following the 2020 murder of George Floyd, a Black man, at the hands of Minneapolis police, led to lots of lofty promises and goals. But a year later, the majority of school and district leaders (60 percent) say their districts never even released a statement about its diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in the wake of the event. And 1 in 3 say the movement did not lead to any changes in their districts and schools. That said, two out of three administrators indicated that the movement did lead to some sort of action. Staff training on diversity, equity, and/or inclusion, the formation of diversity committees, and professional development on teaching about race and racism were the most frequently-reported responses. ■

Chart 3. What changes, if any, did the nationwide protests following the murder of George Floyd lead to in your district or school? Select all that apply.

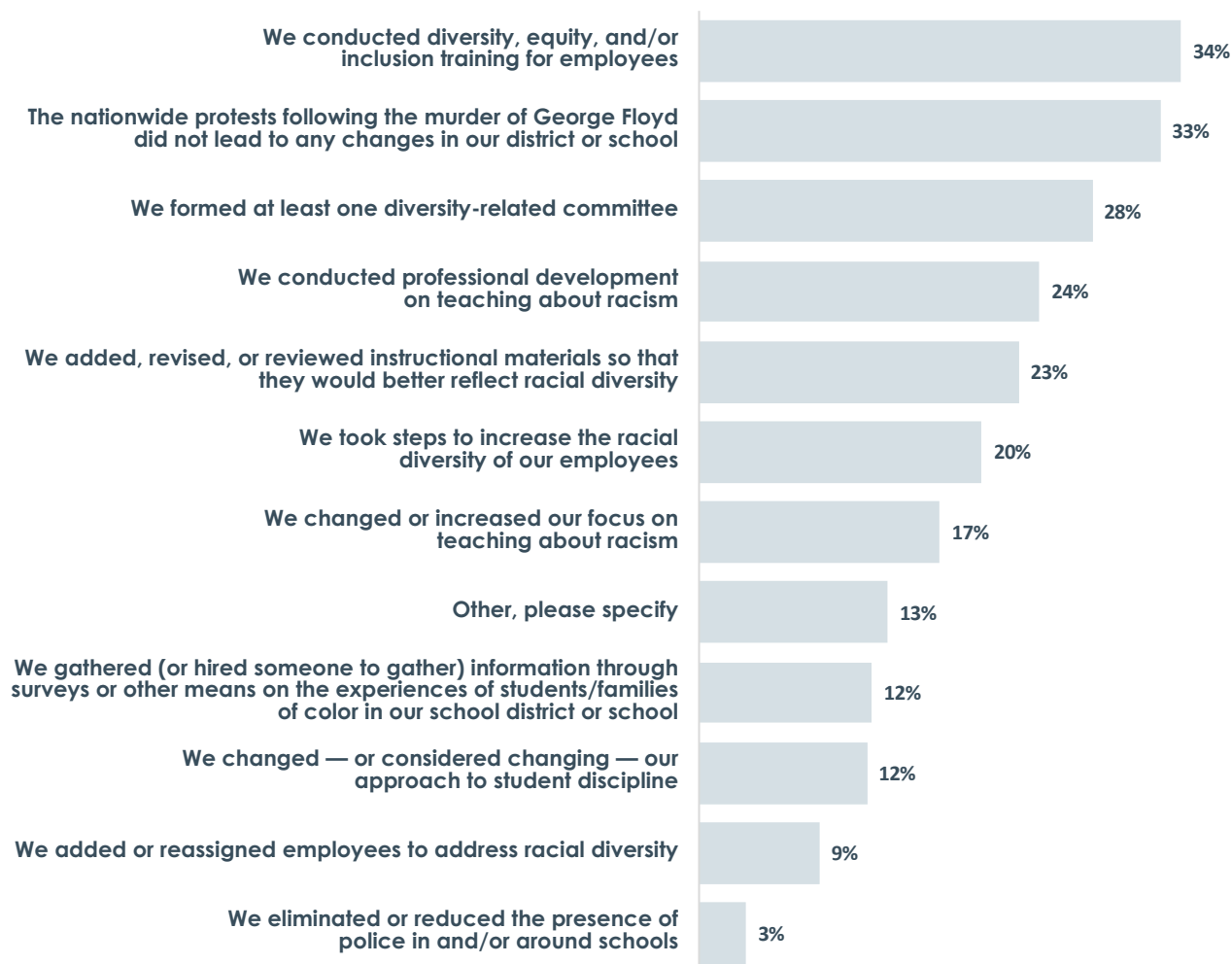
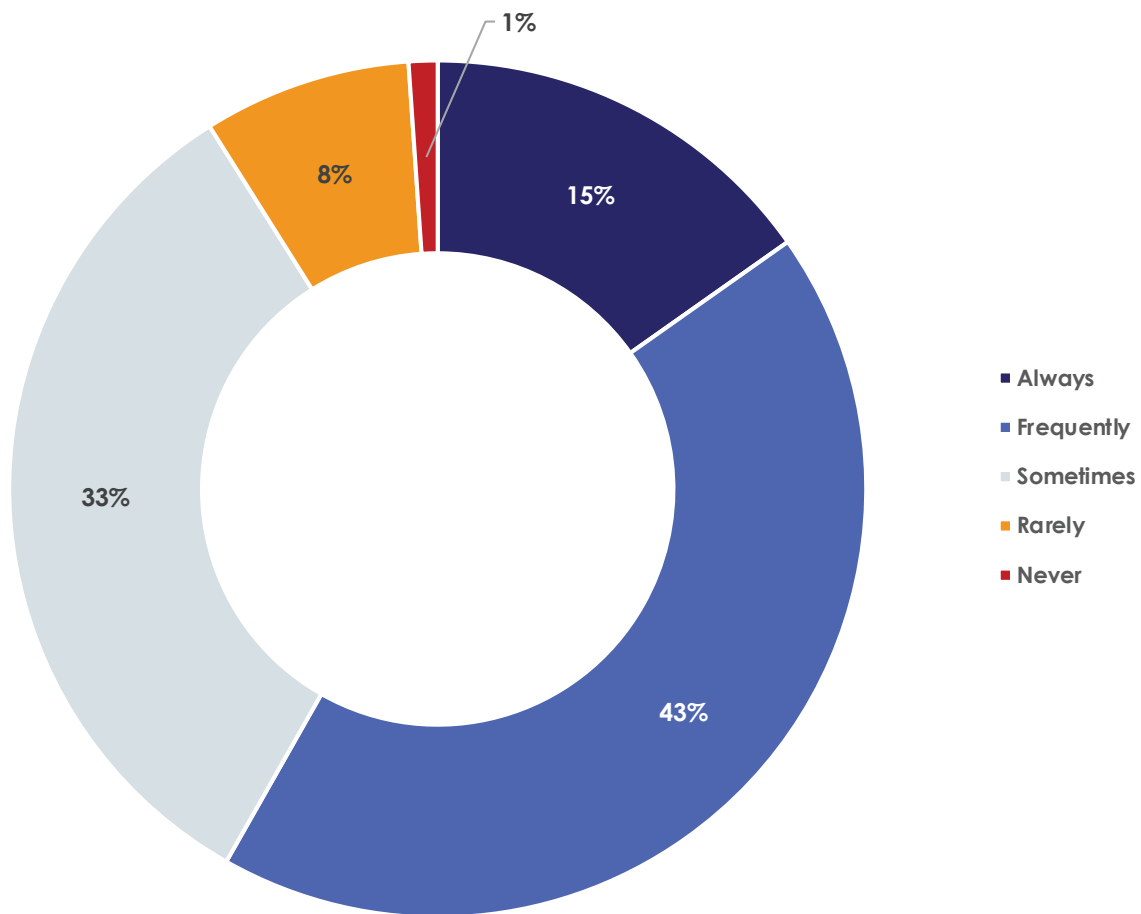


Chart 4. How often do teachers, principals, and district leaders experience job-related stress?

4. Educators are not Okay

The pandemic has taken its toll on everyone, but teachers have faced a special set of obstacles as they pivoted from one day to the next from in-person to remote instruction and then, in many districts, back again. In the meantime, administrators found themselves in the middle of highly-politicized battles over mask-wearing and vaccines. It should come as no surprise, then, that 60 percent of teachers, 59 percent of principals, and 53 percent of district leaders say they always or frequently experience job-related stress. More than half of educators (53 percent) say the strain keeps them up at night, 39 percent say it makes them feel like they are less effective at their jobs, 38 percent say it impacts their physical health, and more than 1 in 5 say it makes them less patient with students and/or leads them to think often of quitting. ■

5. Schools May Need More Resources to Assist With COVID Mourning

Nearly 1 in 3 school and district leaders say they have lost a loved one since the pandemic started. Close to half of those administrators say the loss was due to COVID. The vast majority (77 percent) of administrators who did lose someone did not seek or desire any support from their districts or schools. However, many doubtless found themselves in the position of dealing with their own grief while also assisting students who had experienced similar losses. Although most principals and district leaders (79 percent) say existing mental health professionals are available to help students in mourning over the loss of loved ones, school counselors also juggle many additional responsibilities, from assisting with behavioral issues to helping students gain admission to college. And just 11 percent of administrators say student grief counseling is available as a specific service. Eighty-four percent indicate that the training and resources available to help them identify and address any grief their students may experience in school as a result of losing a loved one during the pandemic is less than fully adequate. ■

Chart 5. Percent of principals and district leaders who say their district or school offers some form of grief counseling for students

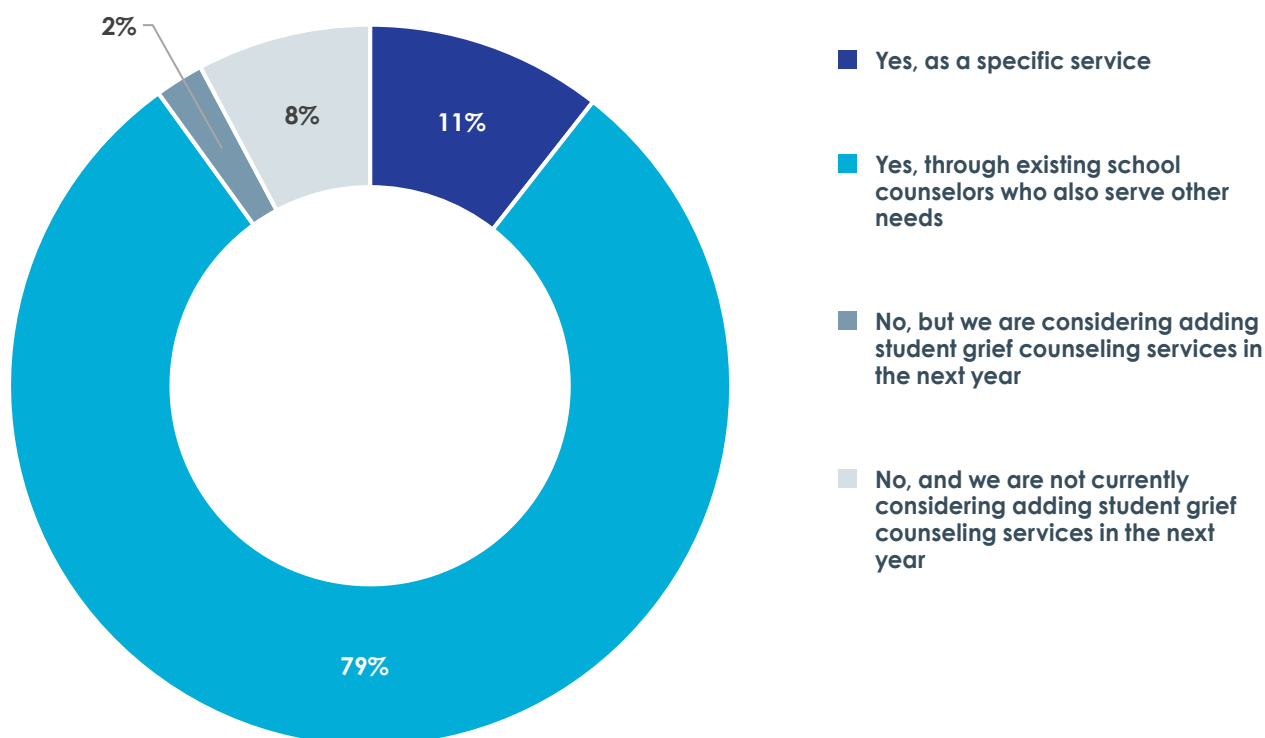
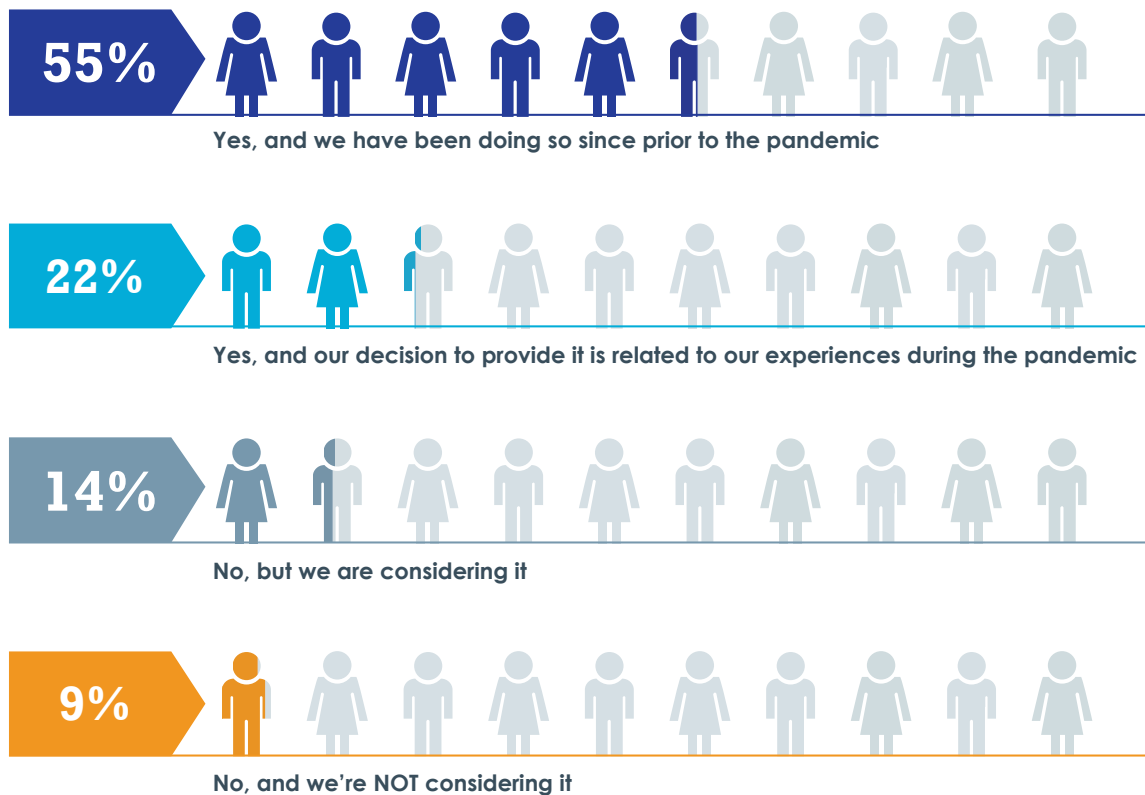


Chart 6. Percent of district leaders who say their districts will provide social-emotional learning for staff in the next two years



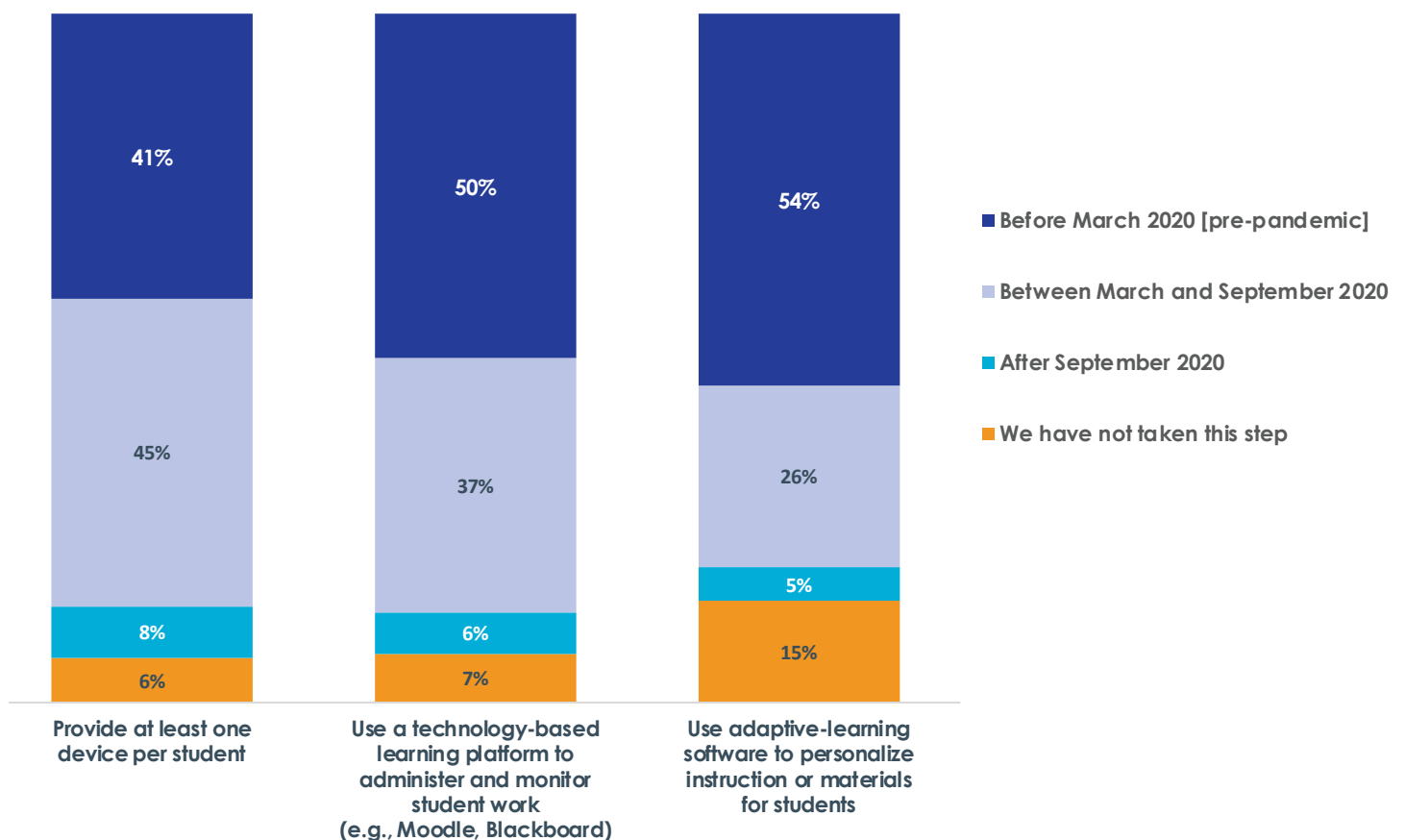
6. School Staff Are Embracing SEL

Social-emotional learning has become a buzzword in K-12 education in recent years, with educators increasingly working with students on skills like empathizing with others, recognizing and coping with emotions, and making responsible decisions. But what about staff? Is it really possible to assist students with healthy emotional development if their educators never learned those skills themselves? Likely to help address this very issue, 77 percent of district leaders say they are or will be providing social-emotional learning to employees in the next two years and an additional 14 percent report that they are considering doing so. Of the district leaders offering or planning to offer adult SEL in the next two years, 22 percent say they started doing so at least in part as a result of experiences during the pandemic. ■

7. The Pandemic Has Transformed School Technology

The numbers are dramatic: Prior to the pandemic, less than half of district leaders said they had implemented 1:1 computing (at least one device per student). Today, that share has more than doubled to 94 percent. Similarly, the percentage of district administrators saying they use a technology-based learning platform like Moodle or Blackboard to administer and monitor student work has skyrocketed from 50 to 93 percent. And the share using adaptive learning software has risen from 54 to 85 percent. Whether or not this is a positive development will clearly depend upon how these new capabilities are employed in the classroom over time. But regardless of what occurs, it is clear that the expansion of technology has been one of the biggest side effects of COVID. ■

Chart 7. When did district leaders adopt 1:1 computing, technology-based learning platforms, and/or adaptive learning software?

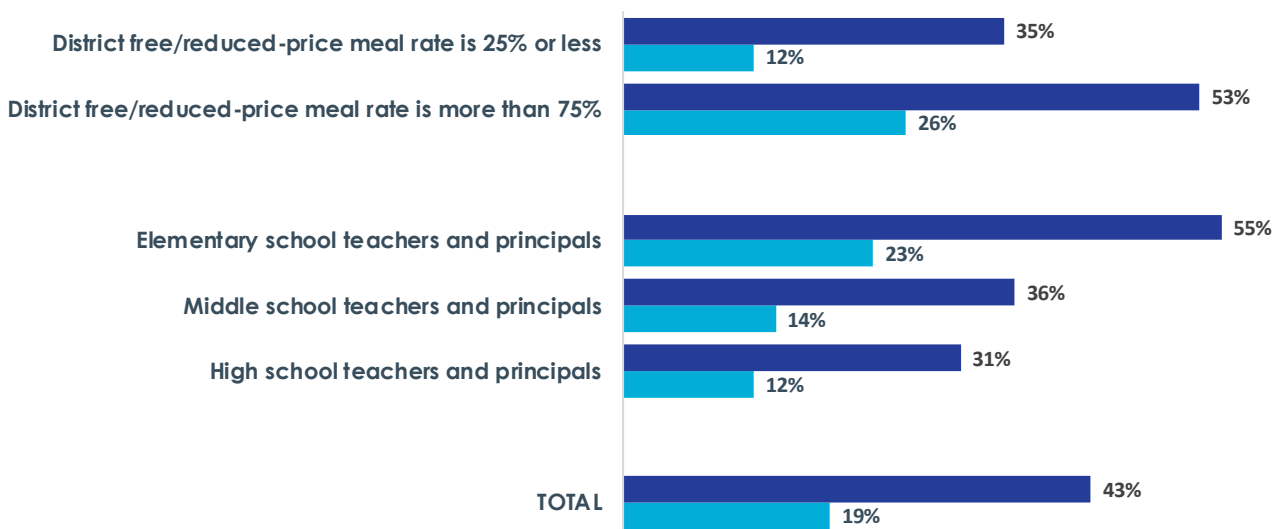


8. Educators Learned a Lot About Students' Home Lives During the Pandemic

As learning moved online and parents served as de facto school teachers, K-12 educators got a unique glimpse of their students' lives at home.

Seventy-seven percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders say that the amount of parent-educator communication increased during the pandemic. The share of teachers, principals, and district leaders who say they know a lot about their students' home lives has more than doubled, from 19 percent prior to the pandemic to 43 percent now. Elementary educators made especially big gains. The share of teachers and principals at that grade level who know a lot about their students' lives at home increased 32 percentage points to 55 percent as compared to a 22 percentage-point gain to 36 percent at the middle school level and a 19 percentage-point gain to 31 percent for high school educators. Teachers, principals, and district leaders in the highest poverty districts where more than 75 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals also made big strides. The share of educators who know a lot about students' lives at home increased 27 percentage points to 53 percent as compared to a 23 percentage-point increase to 35 percent in lower-poverty districts in which the free or reduced-price meal rate is 25 percent or less. ■

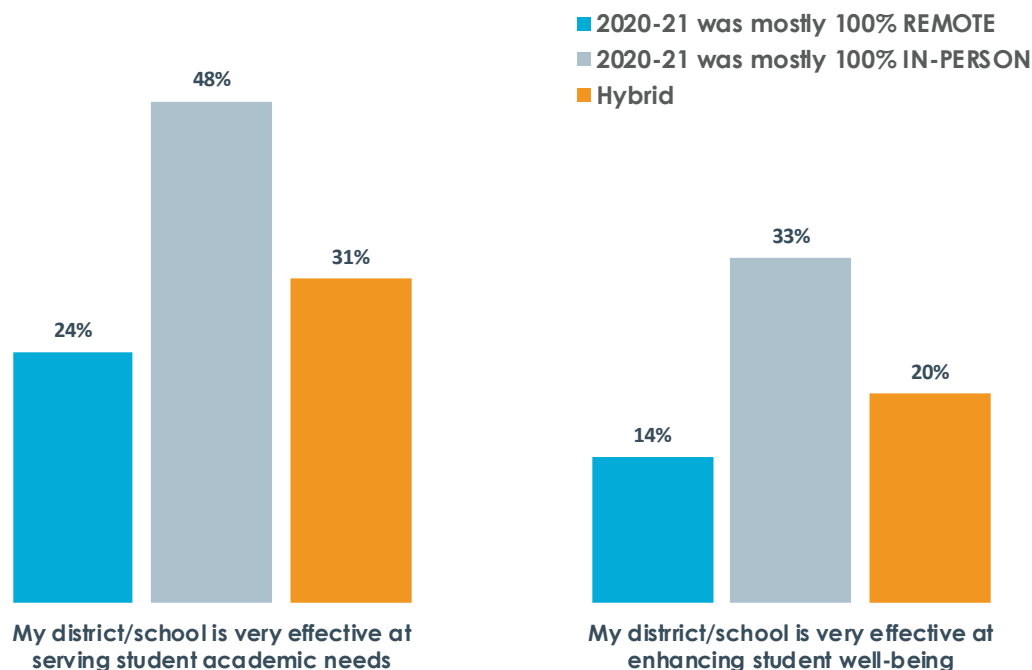
Chart 8. Share of educators who know a lot about their students' home lives, now versus pre-pandemic



■ How much do you know now about your students' home learning environments?

■ How much did you know about your students' home learning environments prior to the pandemic?

Chart 9. Percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders who say their districts or schools are very effective at meeting student academic needs, enhancing well-being



9. Especially in Districts That Embraced Remote Learning, Educators Say Schools Could More Effectively Meet Student Needs

Just 34 percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders say their district or school is very effective at meeting students' academic needs. The remainder perceive their schools are somewhat effective (52 percent) or very or somewhat ineffective (14 percent) at meeting this need.

An even smaller share of educators (23 percent) perceive that their district or school is very effective at enhancing student well-being. Sixty-one percent say their schools are somewhat effective at enhancing well-being and the remainder (16 percent) perceive they are ineffective.

The models of instruction adopted during the pandemic may have shaped these perceptions. Compared to their peers in districts where most of last year's learning was remote or hybrid, educators in districts where most of the instruction last school year was provided in-person were significantly more likely to say that their schools were very effective at serving students' academic needs and enhancing their well-being. ■

What, if anything, could your district or school have done better during the pandemic?		What, if anything, did your district or school do well during the pandemic?	
Improved communication and decisionmaking	27%	Adapted to different teaching models	30%
Adjusted expectations for teachers in light of the pandemic, especially with evaluations and workload	20%	Kept students safe by following health protocols	20%
Nothing	16%	Supported and communicated with students and parents	17%
Made different decisions on masking, safety protocols, and/or school closures/reopenings	11%	Provided necessary technology and devices	13%
Other	10%	Other	12%
Addressed challenges of different instructional models, especially hybrid learning	7%	Allowed in-person learning	9%
Supported student and/or staff mental health and SEL	6%	Provided meals to students	6%
Held students and parents more accountable for work/participation	6%	Provided internet access	3%
Don't know	3%	Nothing	2%
Provided devices and IT support to students and teachers	3%	Don't know	<1%
NA	2%	NA	<1%

10. What Educators Say Schools Got Right During the Pandemic (Adaptation) and Wrong (Communication)

In two open-ended questions, teachers, principals, and district leaders were asked what their districts or schools have done well during the pandemic and also what they could have done better.

Adapting to different teaching models was the thing educators were most likely to say their district had done well.

"We transitioned well from in-person to remote and back again smoothly," wrote a district superintendent in Washington. "We offered support to our most vulnerable/at-risk students including in-person learning during remote instruction time."

Educators also singled out their employers for praise for keeping students and staff safe by following health protocols.

"We had the students remain in their classrooms and the teachers moved between classes, not the students," wrote a Texas principal. "We felt like that was a safety factor that led to only one short closure due to COVID."

Educators were most likely to criticize their districts' communications and decisionmaking processes.

"The administrators figured out late in the game that more ongoing communication was needed, but we still lost so much cohesion as a staff," said

a Vermont special education teacher. “I believe this could have been prevented.”

The second most frequent criticism was that schools could have done a better job of adjusting expectations of teachers, especially when it came to evaluations and workload. “We kept right on like nothing had changed,” wrote a middle school English teacher in Arkansas. “Except it had, and teachers were drowning. All of our normal work plus all the additional online students and cleaning that had to be done constantly.”

After all, adapting to the pandemic was often a herculean task, as summed up by this Wisconsin high school principal:

“We sponsored a virtual mental wellness series; we conducted hundreds of home visits; we made thousands of phone calls; we leveraged positive student-teacher relationships and had zero fights during our in-person instruction; we continued our use of restorative practices; we took great care to care for one another; we focused on the positive.” ■

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