

Principal Professional Development

Results of a National Survey



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Research Center

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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.

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Executive Summary

The sudden shift to remote learning at the outset of the coronavirus pandemic carved out new responsibilities for students and educators alike. Almost overnight, educators reconfigured lesson plans and students adjusted to new expectations and study habits. As time passed and some schools returned to in-person learning, students and teachers navigated social distancing, quarantine policies, and periodic closures on top of their normal instruction.

Just as the COVID-19 crisis upended the traditional classroom environment, it shuffled priorities and compounded existing challenges for school leaders. Principals rushed to implement 1:1 computing, establish COVID-19 safety protocols, and respond to the changing demands of remote and hybrid instruction. Their job description changed and their needs for professional knowledge and training shifted along with it.

This report examines data from an EdWeek Research Center survey of 1,241 educators conducted between August 25 and September 8, 2021. The survey asked participants a range of questions on how professional development is provided in their districts. The results shed light on the kinds of professional development (PD) that principals need most as they reflect on the challenges of the past school year and plan for the future.

Most principals reported that their district provides professional development continuously or as needed, rather than following an annual or biennial schedule. Fifty percent of principals said their district provides professional development continuously to principals and assistant principals. Thirty-one percent said their district provides PD as needed. Thirty-eight percent reported that their district always consults principals and assistant principals on the types of professional development they need, while 39 percent said that was only sometimes true.

Looking forward, educators emphasized the important of social-emotional learning and curriculum and instruction-related topics in professional development for principals. Principals' PD priorities varied according to their district's size and location. Their responses offer insight into the kinds of professional development that will best serve them in an evolving educational landscape.

Key takeaways include:

- Seventy-three percent of rural principals preferred in-person professional development trainings to online trainings, but most urban principals—57 percent—preferred online sessions.
- Of the principals who preferred online professional development, just under half preferred an on-demand, on-your-own-schedule format.
- Sixty-two percent of principals and district leaders said that principals in their district need professional development in social-emotional learning and student well-being. Fifty-five percent said that principals need PD in instruction and curriculum, and 52 percent identified legal issues as a professional development priority.
- Fifty-three percent of principals in large school districts (10,000 students or more) said they needed professional development in technology, as opposed to 28 percent of principals in small (less than 2,500 students) districts.

Of course, professional development won't be meaningful unless principals have the opportunity to translate new knowledge into action. Fortunately, 93 percent of principals reported that their districts are somewhat or very willing for them to use and apply professional development in action—good news for schools navigating a tumultuous reopening this fall and the lingering effects of the pandemic going forward.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new challenges for school leaders and transformed old ones. Since March of 2020, principals have taken on a range of public health roles, setting and enforcing policies on masking, quarantining, and hybrid learning. They've faced new barriers to addressing longstanding concerns around student engagement and the digital divide.

Effective professional development will need to adapt in both format and content to address principals' shifting priorities and enhanced responsibilities. A "new normal" can't rely on old professional development.

In August and September of 2021, the EdWeek Research Center administered a nationally representative survey of 1,241 educators, including 259 principals, to better understand their professional development needs and preferences. Respondents described where they learn about professional development opportunities, how often they receive PD, and what they're looking for in future trainings.

Most principals report that they are always or sometimes consulted by their district on the types of professional development they need. Yet, their perspectives vary on several key aspects of PD. Principals are divided on whether they want online professional development to stick around post-pandemic, and hold disparate views on the importance of PD in technology and classroom management.

The survey results offer evidence that principals and district leaders have adjusted their PD focus to address pandemic-related challenges. When asked to identify the areas of school leadership in which principals in their district need professional development, the three topics they cited most were social-emotional learning and student well-being, instruction and curriculum, and legal issues. All three of these topics share broadened, ongoing implications in the context of the pandemic.

SURVEY DETAILS

Survey Administered: August 25 to September 8, 2021.

Sample: Nationally representative

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

Respondents: 1,241 educators and administrators including:

- 193 district leaders
- 259 school leaders
- 789 teachers

Format and Structure: How Do Principals Receive PD?

Frequency of PD

Survey results show that districts tend to provide professional development to principals on an ongoing or as-needed basis, rather than a fixed annual schedule.

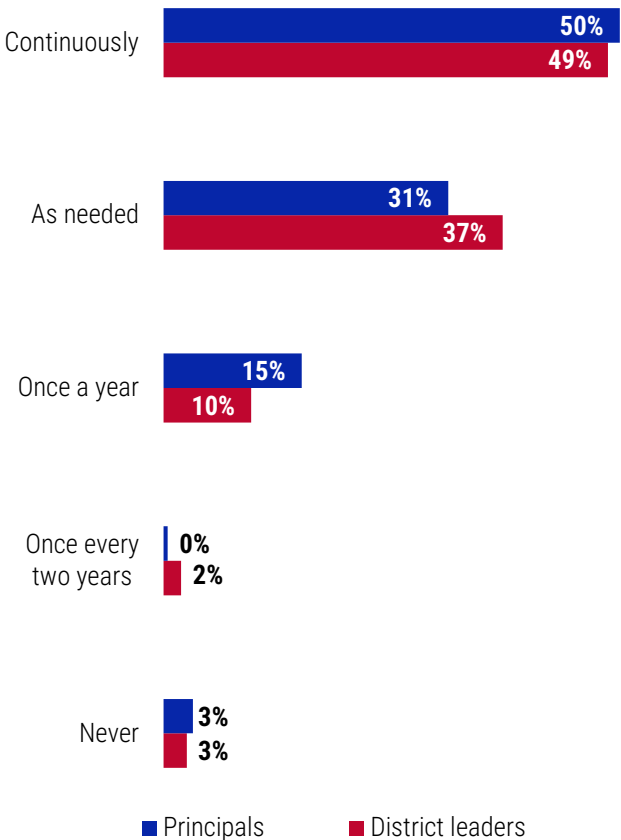
Forty-nine percent of district leaders reported that professional development is provided continuously to principals and assistant principals in their district. Thirty-seven percent said that their district provides professional development as needed.

Principals' responses closely mirrored those of district leaders. Fifteen percent of principals said their district provides professional development once a year, as opposed to 10 percent of district leaders. Thirty-one percent reported that PD is offered as needed.

Larger discrepancies between principals and district leaders might indicate a need to improve communication around professional development opportunities between school and district personnel. But school and district leaders are largely in sync regarding the frequency of PD opportunities.

Just 3 percent of principals and 3 percent of district leaders said that their district never provides professional development to principals or assistant principals.

About how often does your school district provide formal professional development to principals and assistant principals?

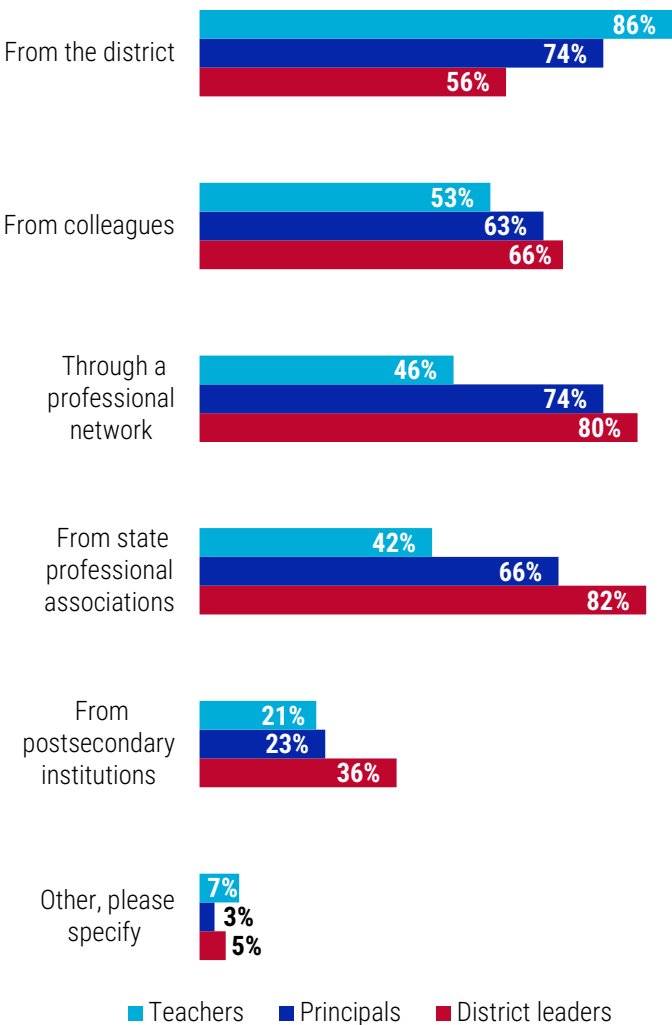


Identifying Professional Development Opportunities

Principals most often reported that they learn about professional development opportunities from their district (74%) and through professional networks (74%). Sixty-six percent of principals said they learn about professional development from state professional associations, and 63 percent reported that they get this information from colleagues. Fewer, 23 percent, said they learn about professional development opportunities from postsecondary institutions.

In general, district leaders were most likely to learn about professional development opportunities through professional networks or associations. They reported getting information on professional development from postsecondary institutions more often than principals and teachers did. Most teachers (86%) said they learn about professional development opportunities from their district.

How do you learn about professional development opportunities? Select all that apply.

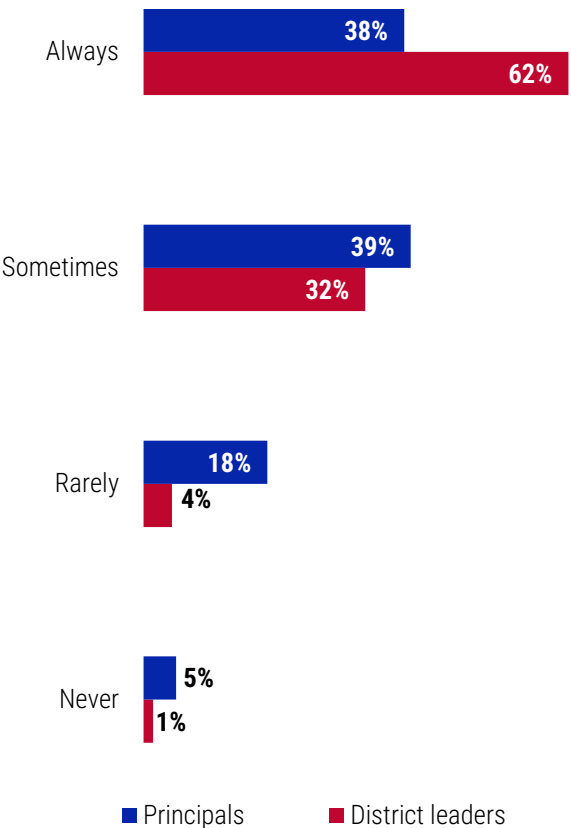


Incorporating Principals' Input

District leaders and principals both reported that principals have opportunities to communicate their needs around professional development to district-level administrators. But district leaders had a rosier view of such communications than principals did. Sixty-two percent of district leaders said that their district always consults principals and assistant principals on the type of professional development they need. Thirty-eight percent of principals agreed, while 39 percent said that was only sometimes the case. Thirty-eight percent of principals agreed, while 39 percent said that was only sometimes the case.

Twenty-three percent of principals said that they were rarely or never consulted by the district on their professional development needs, as opposed to 5 percent of district leaders.

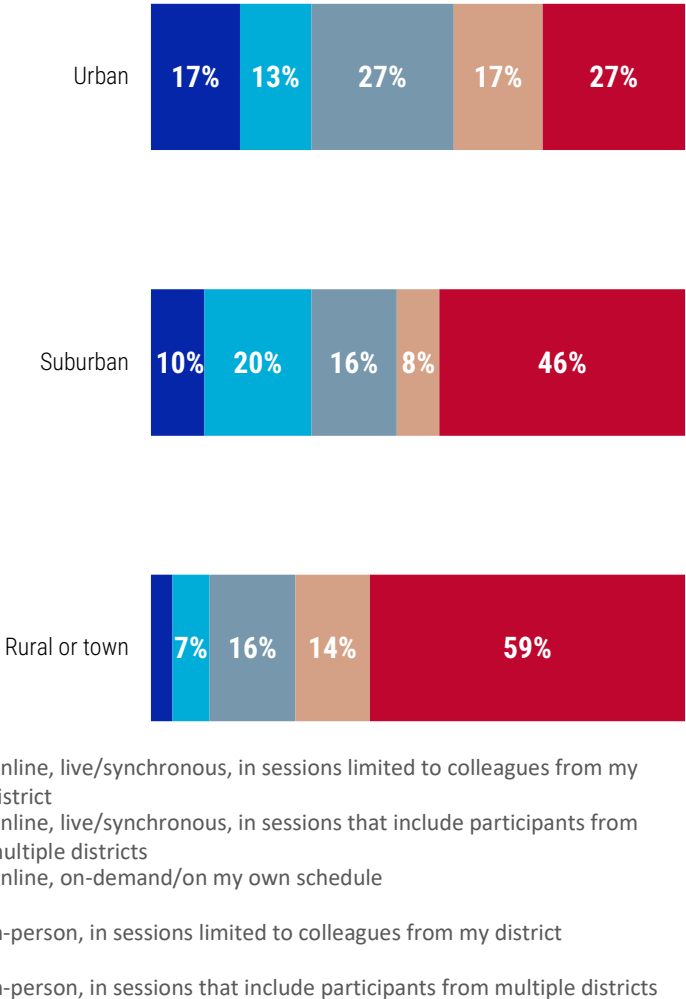
How often are principals and assistant principals in your district consulted on the type of professional development they need?



Instructional Modes

Principals' preferences for the format of professional development training varied by district location. Fifty-seven percent of urban principals preferred online professional development training to in-person training, compared to just 27 percent of rural principals. The majority of rural principals (59%) sought in-person sessions that include participants from multiple districts. Suburban principals fell between the two groups: 46 percent said they preferred some form of online training, but another 46 percent said they preferred in-person, multi-district sessions.

What format do you prefer when receiving your professional development training?



Note: Results show responses from principals.

PD Format

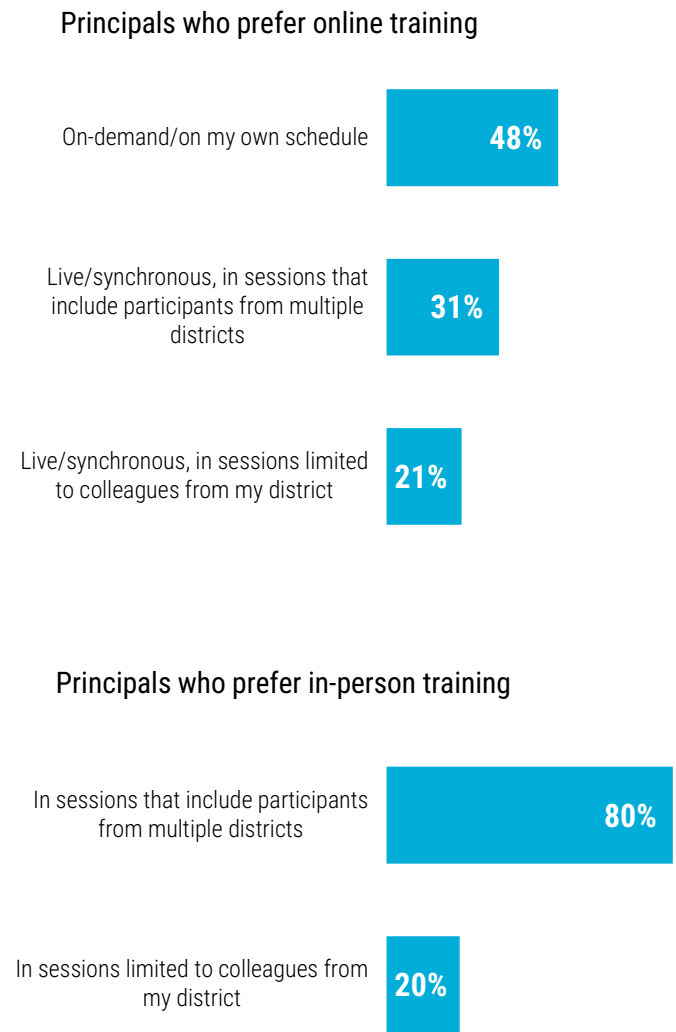
Among the principals who indicated that they preferred online professional development, just under half preferred an on-demand option that can be completed on their own schedule. Fifty-two percent said they'd opt for a live or synchronous format—31 percent preferred synchronous training with participants from multiple districts, and 21 percent said they'd rather participate in sessions limited to colleagues from their own district.

Principals who preferred in-person training overwhelmingly preferred sessions that include participants from multiple districts. Just 20 percent of those who sought in-person training said they preferred sessions with participants from only their own district.

In a separate survey fielded in January of 2021, the EdWeek Research Center found that 27 percent of school and district leaders believe they will move their professional development permanently online within a year of the pandemic. Another 24 percent said they will never provide professional development training online once it is safe to do so in-person.

The August/September survey results featured in this report may shed light on such transitions. They indicate that principals may be seeking to connect with colleagues across districts during professional development sessions.

What format do you prefer when receiving your professional development training?



Content: What Kinds of Professional Development do Principals Need?

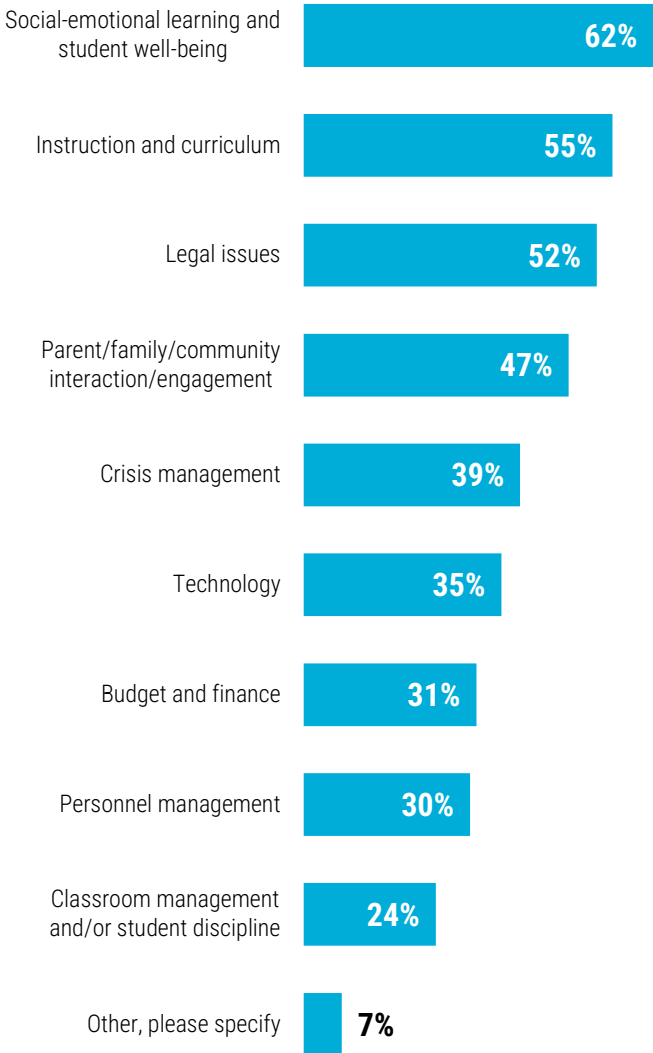
Honing School Leadership Skills

When asked to reflect on the areas of school leadership where principals need professional development, 62 percent of district and school leaders identified social-emotional learning and student well-being as top priorities. Fifty-five percent said that principals in their district need PD in instruction and curriculum while 52 percent pointed to a need for training on legal issues. In addition, 47 percent highlighted the need for PD to help with interaction and engagement with parents, families, and the broader community.

The past year has seen a number of legal actions with implications for school districts. Twenty-seven states have introduced critical race theory bans or taken other actions to limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism in class. Lawsuits over mask mandates in school have been widespread. It's perhaps no surprise, then, that principals and district leaders view legal training as an important aspect of school leadership moving forward.

Similarly, the need to communicate with parents and the public about the educational disruptions caused by the pandemic may have prompted interest in training on family and community engagement.

In what areas of school leadership do principals in your district need professional development? Select all that apply.



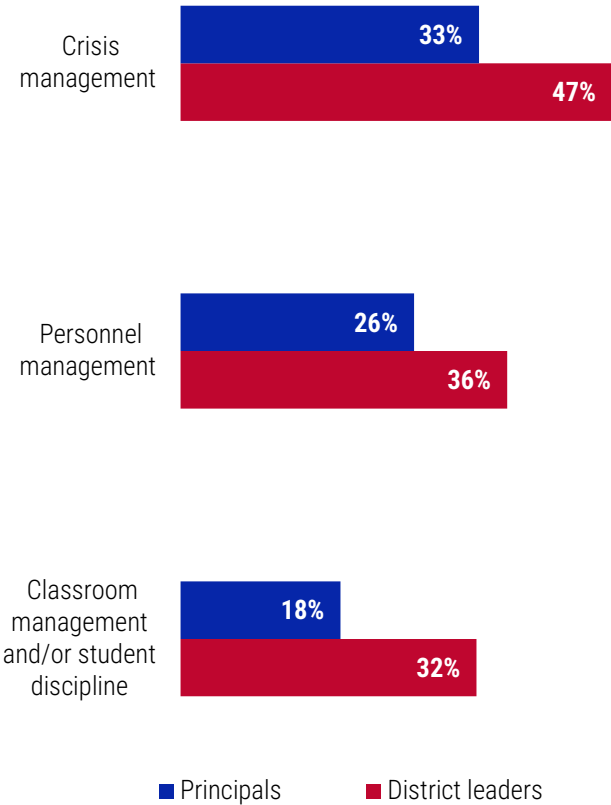
Note: Results show responses from principals and district leaders.

Principal and District Leader Perspectives

In general, district and school leaders shared a similar assessment of the professional development topics that principals need most. Social-emotional learning, instruction and curriculum, and legal issues were the three most cited areas of PD among both groups.

But district leaders indicated that principals need professional development in crisis, personnel, and classroom management far more often than principals did themselves. Nearly half of district leaders said that principals in their district need PD in crisis management, as opposed to just 33 percent of principals. Thirty-two percent of district leaders reported that principals need PD in classroom management and/or student discipline, a rate nearly double the percentage of principals who agreed (18%).

In what areas of school leadership do principals in your district need professional development? Select all that apply.



Variation by District Size and Location

Like principals' preferences for instructional mode, PD priorities varied between urban principals and their rural and suburban counterparts, as well as by district size and region. Principals in larger districts said they and their colleagues needed PD on topics related to technology significantly more often than those in smaller districts did. Fifty-three percent of principals in districts with 10,000 or more students said they and their peers needed PD in technology, compared to just 28 percent of those in districts with fewer than 2,500 students.

Urban principals showed a heightened focus on classroom management and student discipline. Thirty-six percent of urban principals cited a need for professional development in this area. Just 16 percent of rural principals and 9 percent of suburban principals said the same.

Finally, principals in the Western U.S. reported a need for professional development in crisis management more often than principals in the Northeast, South, and particularly the Midwest. Sixteen percent of Midwestern principals indicated a need for PD in crisis management, compared to 49 percent of principals in the West—a rate over three times as high. Principals in the Northeast and South fell in the middle: in both cases, about a third of principals pointed to a need for PD in crisis management.

Principals in my district need PD in...

	Less than 2,500 students	2,500-9,999	10,000 or more
Technology	28%	33%	53%

	Rural or town	Suburban	Urban
Classroom management and/or student discipline	16%	9%	36%

	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
Crisis management	33%	16%	31%	49%

Note: Results show responses from principals.

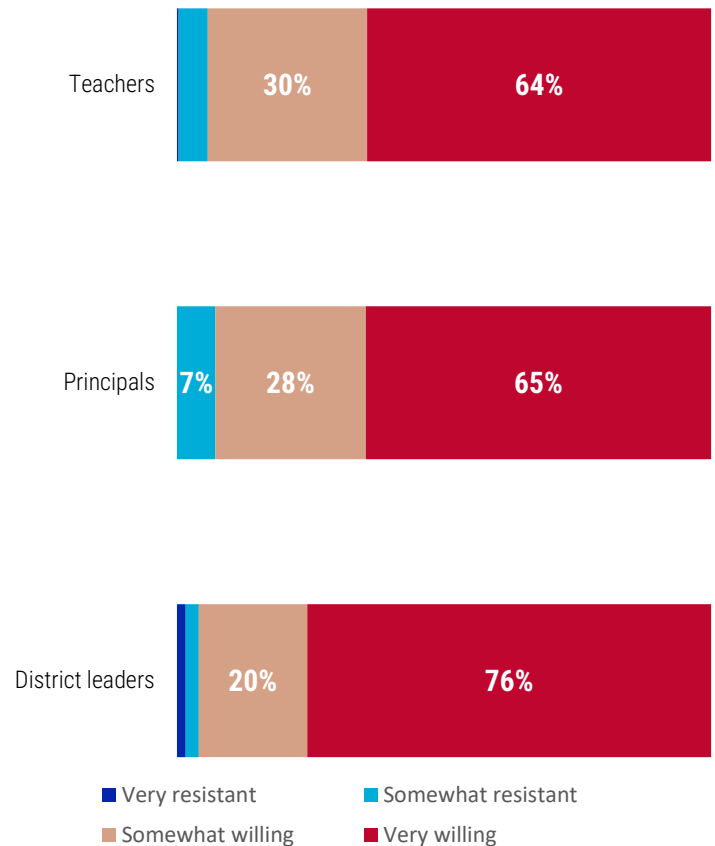
Professional Development in Action

Ninety-three percent of principals, along with 94 percent of teachers and 96 percent of district administrators, described their district as very or somewhat willing to allow them to use and apply professional development knowledge in action.

Of these three groups, district leaders were the most positive: 76 percent said their district is very willing to let them apply knowledge from professional development, compared to 65 percent of principals and 64 percent of teachers.

Overall, the survey signals robust opportunity for educators to implement changes as a result of what they learn in professional development. Less than one percent of teachers and no principals stated that their district is very resistant to them applying professional development knowledge in action.

How willing or resistant is your district when it comes to allowing you to use and apply professional development knowledge in action?



Conclusion

In August/September of 2021, the EdWeek Research Center surveyed educators to ask a series of questions about professional development for principals and assistant principals. The nationally representative survey assessed principals' experiences with district-provided PD and gauged their priorities for future trainings, just as schools reopened for another year of learning shaped by the continuing impact of the pandemic.

The modal principal in the survey learns about professional development opportunities primarily from her district and through professional networks. Her district provides professional development continuously, and sometimes consults her on the types of professional development she needs. She prefers in-person training with participants from multiple districts, unless she works in an urban district, in which case she may prefer online, on-demand professional development. She believes that principals in her district need PD in social-emotional learning and student well-being, and her district is very willing for her to use and apply professional development knowledge.

This profile suggests that principals are generally well situated to access and apply professional development training through the ongoing pandemic and a post-pandemic recovery.

Moving forward, survey results highlight social-emotional learning, curriculum and instruction, and legal issues as crucial PD topics for principals across the U.S. They also suggest that the best-targeted professional development will respond to district-specific needs, since principals' PD preferences and leadership focus correlate with their district's size, region, and urbanicity.