



Sharing Solutions

K-12 Administrators Weigh
in on Strategic Resourcing

This study produced with support from:

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Executive Summary



Strategic resourcing practices can help school districts make financial operations and purchasing processes a lever to support academic achievement.

In 2024, with support from the Gates Foundation, Education Week, EdWeek Market Brief, and the EdWeek Research Center launched a new project to examine strategic resourcing by surveying K-12 administrators with firsthand experience in the field. Results from an [inaugural survey](#) conducted that year indicated that short-term thinking, siloed decisionmaking, and staffing turnover are key barriers.

To build on that research, this whitepaper highlights six solutions based on findings from a June 2025 follow-up survey and interviews with K-12 leaders who provided real-world examples in their own words.

- **Adopt outcomes-based contracts.** This approach makes at least part of payments to companies

contingent upon specific outcomes. Nearly 9 in 10 K-12 administrators agreed that such contracts are likely to increase student achievement, expectations for vendors to accomplish results, and innovation.

- **Discuss priorities early in the budget process.** Almost half of survey respondents (46%) said an initial effort to talk about key goals would help districts ensure that they make decisions about spending on academic resources in a way that reflects their long-term strategy.
- **Develop a strategic plan to address siloed decisionmaking.** When asked to identify strategies their school or district has successfully used to break down silos between key departments during the procurement process, survey respondents most commonly (38%) said that they developed a strategic plan that assigns roles from different departments to specific goals or tasks.

Executive Summary

- **Promote from within and view staffing changes as a source of new ideas.** An inability to sustain alignment between finance and academic goals over time due to staffing changes was one of the most common challenges (35%) that survey respondents said significantly hindered their district's ability to make resourcing decisions more strategic. In interviews, K-12 administrators suggested promoting from within as a solution to reduce the level of disruption from staffing turnover.
- **Evaluate the sustainability of funding sources to prepare contingency plans.** The majority of K-12 administrators reported that uncertainty about future federal funding (71%) and the state of the economy (58%) have significantly disrupted their ability to make strategic decisions about academic resources. Roughly 4 in 10 survey respondents said that assessing sustainability would help.
- **Provide technical assistance and training to inform budget processes, purchasing decisions, and product implementation.** Only 4 in 10 K-12 administrators said they know "a lot" about the purchasing process in their districts pointing to a need for more professional development to help leaders put solutions to purchasing challenges into effect.

A third study next year will add to the knowledge base on solutions in this evolving research area. Taken together, the studies conducted for this project can provide actionable insights to help policymakers better ensure that district purchases pay off.

58%

of K-12 administrators have reported that the state of the economy has significantly disrupted their ability to make strategic decisions about academic resources.

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Introduction

Amid significant uncertainty about the national economy and future federal funding, education systems are competing against other sectors for a share of a limited financial pie.

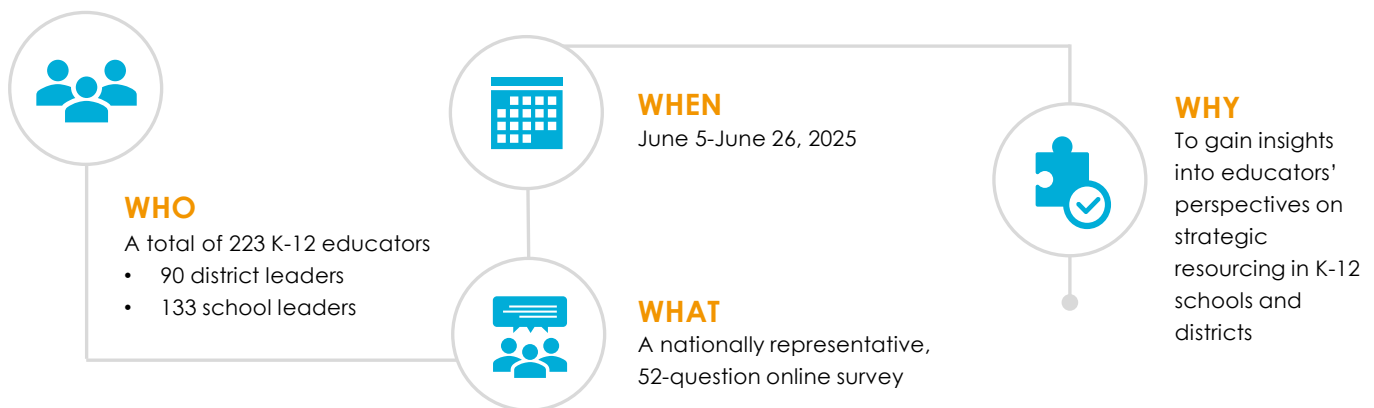
Regardless of the dollar amounts and funding formulas that will ultimately be determined in the political arena, K-12 administrators will need tools and strategies to make the most of the money that they receive.

Setting a goal to boost return on investment in school districts might be considered the easy part.

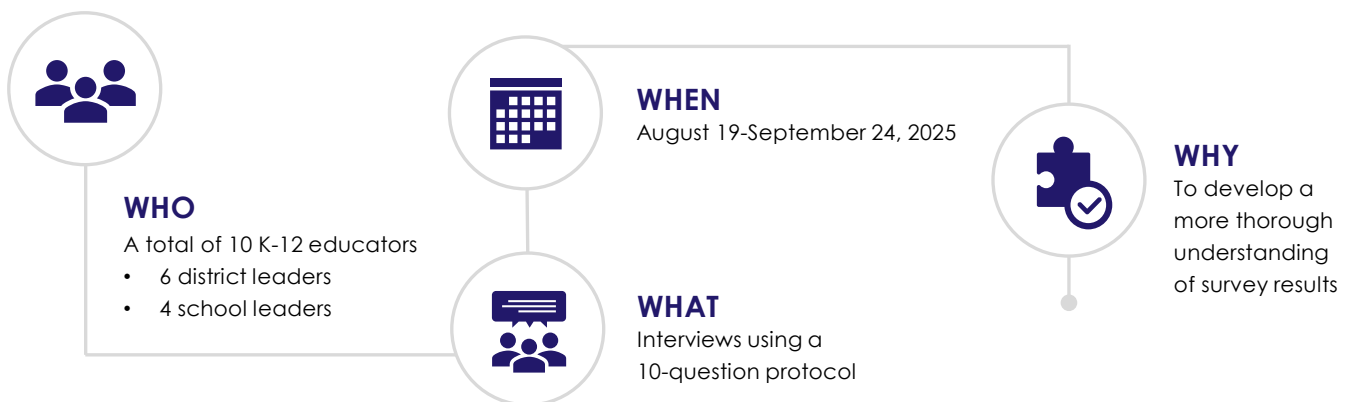
Executing on strategic resourcing decisions and implementing the steps needed to put them into effect—that’s the hard part. More data about solutions can help to better connect financial operations and purchasing processes with instructional goals.

Based on a 2025 EdWeek Research Center survey of school and district leaders, as well as a follow-up interview study, this whitepaper provides a roadmap for school systems as they navigate both the internal complexity of their purchasing processes and the uncertainty stemming from external disruptions, such as potential reductions in federal or state funding.

ABOUT THE SURVEY



ABOUT THE INTERVIEW STUDY



Outcomes-based contracts

When K-12 leaders were asked how they would describe the impact of finance, budgeting, and purchasing on academic results in their districts, just 44 percent said they are key levers that have successfully helped to invest resources in ways that best support overall student achievement. The lack of a resounding endorsement underscores the problem that strategic resourcing practices can address and the need to connect finance with instructional efforts in the classroom.

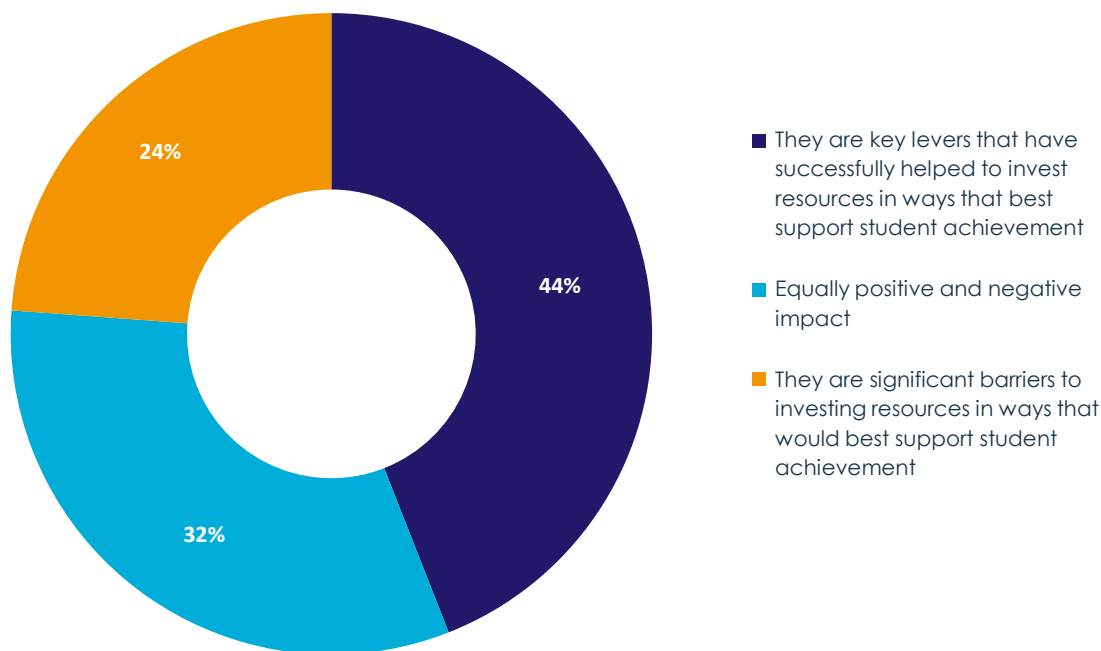
In interviews, academic leaders recognized the value of such connections but saw room for improvement. As one curriculum leader from Michigan put it, budgets are

important to academics because “without them, I can’t do the rest of it.” But, he added, alignment between purchasing and instruction is “one of the things I’m working on right now.”

In recent years, outcomes-based contracts—which make at least part of payments to companies contingent upon specific outcomes—have been discussed as a way to increase the impact of district purchases. In this year’s survey, nearly 9 in 10 K-12 administrators agreed that such contracts are likely to increase student achievement, expectations for vendors to accomplish results, and innovation.

Figure 1

How would you describe the impact of finance, budgeting, and purchasing processes on overall student achievement in your district?



*Results show responses from school and district leaders.

Just 1 in 10 survey respondents indicated that their districts have participated in an outcomes-based contract to make at least a portion of payment to a company dependent on student outcomes. Without widespread adoption, most K-12 administrators currently lack experience with the process—making information about implementation even more important in helping K-12 administrators think through whether to adopt this approach.

A curriculum leader from New York, who had participated in an outcomes-based contract, said:

“I think the [outcomes-based contract] was great because it did ... create mutual accountability for both the district and for our provider.”

Other interviewees whose schools or districts had not yet adopted outcomes-based contracts expressed a mix of optimism and skepticism when asked whether they thought that the approach would be helpful.

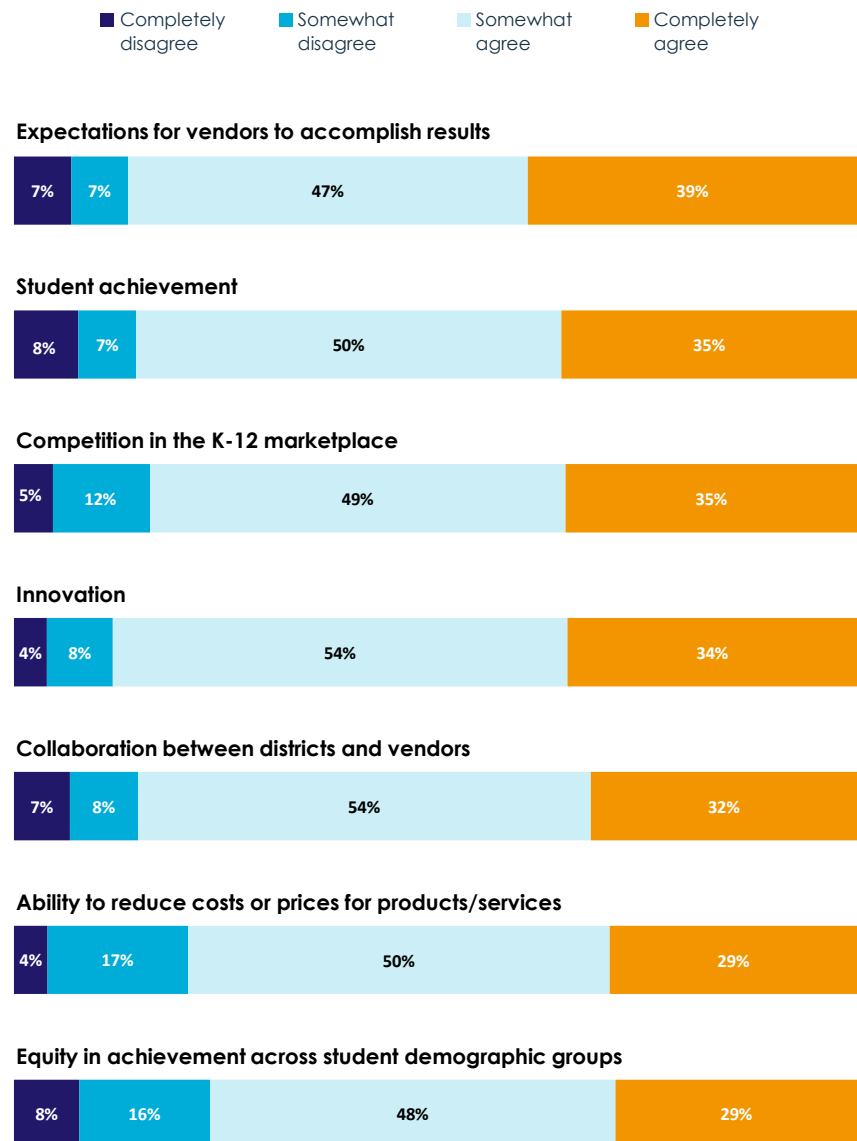
“Well, [the outcomes-based contract] would help in that we would most likely find something that works best for us, but it wouldn't help in that it'd probably be more expensive upfront,” a South Dakota school leader suggested.

A Connecticut school leader doubted that companies would want to use this type of contract.

“Is it a nonprofit?” she asked. “I don't know if their bottom line would actually participate in it.”

Figure 2

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following? Outcomes-based contracting that makes at least part of payments to vendors contingent upon student outcomes is likely to increase:



*Results show responses from school and district leaders.

Early budget discussions

When asked to identify potential approaches that would help their schools or districts make strategic decisions, K-12 leaders most often pointed to efforts to better ensure that decisionmakers are discussing priorities early in the budget process (46%) and to begin budget discussions earlier (45%).

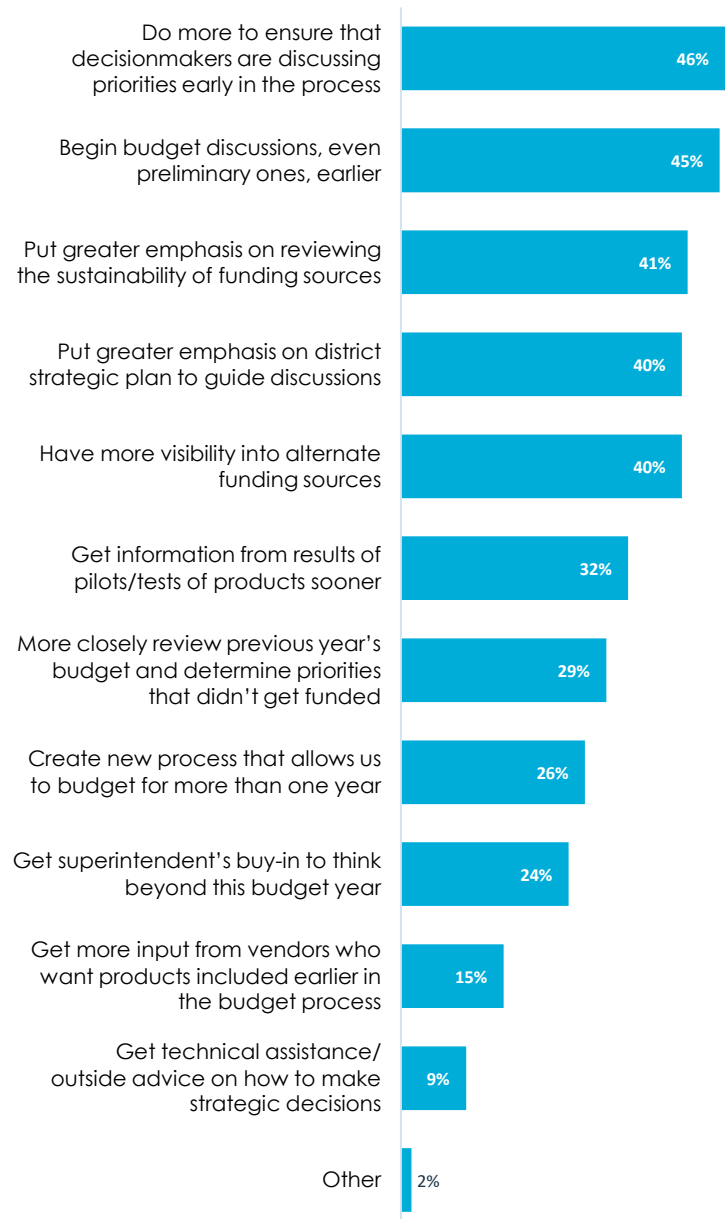
Survey respondents also pointed to communication as a critical ingredient in promoting alignment between financial operations and instructional goals. A strong majority of K-12 administrators (60%) said that finance, budgeting, and purchasing in their districts are aligned with instructional priorities. In follow-up interviews, leaders saw alignment when their districts had the right mix of staff members at the table and received input from a range of stakeholders when making key decisions. Six of the 10 interviewees mentioned staffing structure or communications as factors that make for alignment.

“When we do the budget, we look at our goals and we look at the personnel that we have and then we align our personnel according to the goals that we have,” the school leader from South Dakota noted.

An executive cabinet that collaborates effectively can assist in the alignment process. “We have a very cohesive executive cabinet that works closely together representing human resources, educational services and curricula as well as our fiscal and business services,” said a curriculum leader from California. “I think we just have a very collaborative, cohesive district that has open dialogue relative to finances and where those resources are being put. Human and otherwise.”

Figure 3

When your district/school makes decisions about spending on academic resources in the budget for the next year, which of the following approaches would help you and your colleagues make strategic, long-term decisions, as opposed to short-term ones? Select all that apply.



*Results show responses from school and district leaders.

Conversations about student achievement data can also be valuable when purchasing decisions are being made. The assistant principal from Connecticut explained:

“We just wanted to make sure that everyone was looking at the student data, meaning their reading levels, the scores that they received ... and that everyone was interpreting the information correctly so that we can make the best decisions. And so we weren't just purchasing resources and then they end up staying in a box ... I do believe that the curriculum resources that we are purchasing are appropriate and that we are spending that money appropriately.”

She also noted the critical importance of including school leaders in conversations with the central office about purchasing.

“They did a really great job of bringing us from the schools to come in and have the conversation and to look at the data to help to determine what are the right tools,” she commented. The absence of such conversations to promote alignment, she concluded, can cause a district to abandon the products it

purchased and to wind up with “intervention tools in the graveyard.”

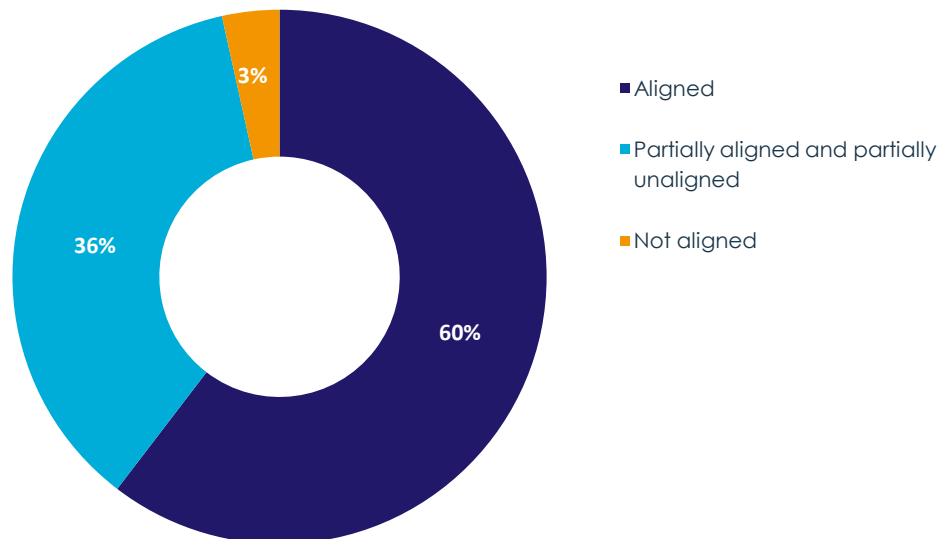
The New York curriculum leader also valued collaboration. “Having a very stakeholder-based approach, I think has been very helpful to make sure that there is broad buy-in from every group that will be impacted before you make the decision on what to purchase because that allows implementation to be that much stronger,” he stated.

A district leader from Texas found that “making sure that you have good relationships with purchasing curriculum and technology and that you all have a good communication system among all of you” is vital to success. “Meeting not to add another meeting to the list, but meeting to kind of talk about here's what I already know, what do we have and have some kind of coordinated effort in making those purchases from a list,” she observed.

Even when interviewees believed that their districts had aligned finance with academic goals, they often saw room for improvement to more fully integrate their decisionmaking processes. The New York curriculum

Figure 4

To what extent are finance, budgeting, and purchasing in your district aligned with instructional priorities?



*Results show responses from school and district leaders.

leader saw more information about products as an essential ingredient in improvement efforts. Given the wide range of products available in the marketplace, evaluations from independent experts could help districts to better ensure that their purchases are aligned to their instructional goals.

“I think it would be helpful if it was clear from an external validator measuring all of the different external programs that we purchase on those different criteria ... We're able to look at things like EdReports or other sources that give us a rating criteria on whether these are strong programs. But obviously having external validators of curriculum would be more helpful,” he noted.

A substantial share of survey respondents (40%) did not see finance and academics in their districts as fully aligned. In interviews, education leaders elaborated on reasons for that assessment. When asked about areas for potential improvement in her school system, a district leader from Missouri saw a role for communication with the community about how resources are used.

“I think it's just aligning and potentially communicating more effectively to our community, our larger community. We're lucky we have a very supportive community of our district, but aligning all of it and explaining to them how it's aligned ... maybe being more clear in our communication,” she suggested.

Interviewees also pointed to efforts to address other aspects of the alignment process beyond communications. An assistant principal from Texas saw partial alignment because her school system is still in the process of “focusing specifically on what they have found works best curricularly and spending less money on programs that have not shown a benefit.”



40%

of survey respondents did not see finance and academics in their districts as fully aligned.

District strategic plans

Executing on strategic resourcing in which finance is aligned with instructional priorities can be easier said than done. A variety of stumbling blocks and complications muddy the waters. Survey respondents most commonly pointed to difficulties resulting from a lack of information necessary to accurately forecast the amount or sources of funding (45%), an inability to sustain alignment over time due to leadership or staffing changes (35%), inconsistent instructional goals stemming from staffing turnover (33%), siloed decisionmaking where academic and finance leaders do not communicate effectively (32%), and shifts in instructional priorities due to political pressure (32%).

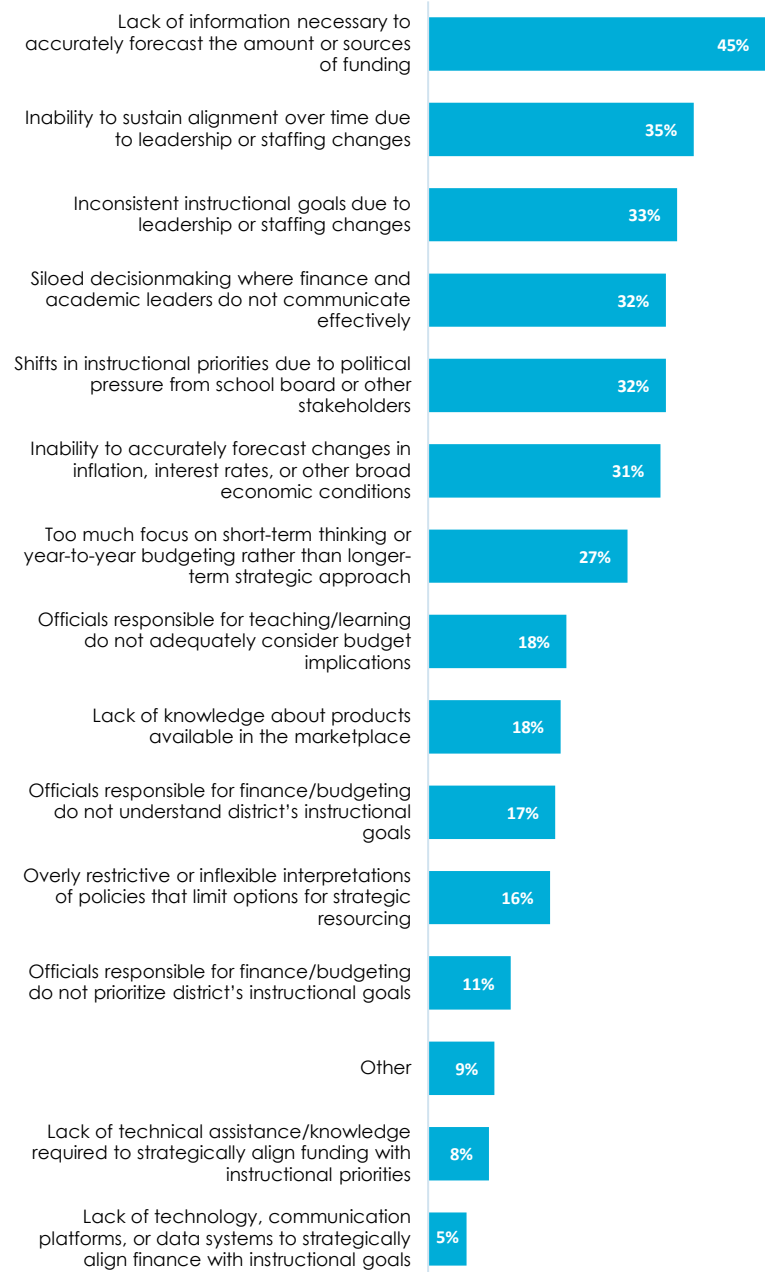
The Michigan curriculum director emphasized that siloed decisionmaking is a key challenge in his district.

“That’s our biggest problem with the purchasing right now,” he said. “That’s one of the pieces I’m trying to fill right now is putting the right people in the room at the right time.”

Survey results highlight the strategies that schools or districts have successfully used to break down silos between key departments during the procurement process: A strategic plan that assigns roles from different departments to specific goals/tasks (38%) emerged as the most common option.

Figure 5

Which, if any, of the following challenges significantly hinder your district's ability to have strategic resourcing in which finance, budgeting, and purchasing are aligned with instructional priorities? Select all that apply.



*Results show responses from school and district leaders.

Not all school systems will face siloed decisionmaking. The South Dakota school leader explained that silos don't affect his district because it's a small education agency.

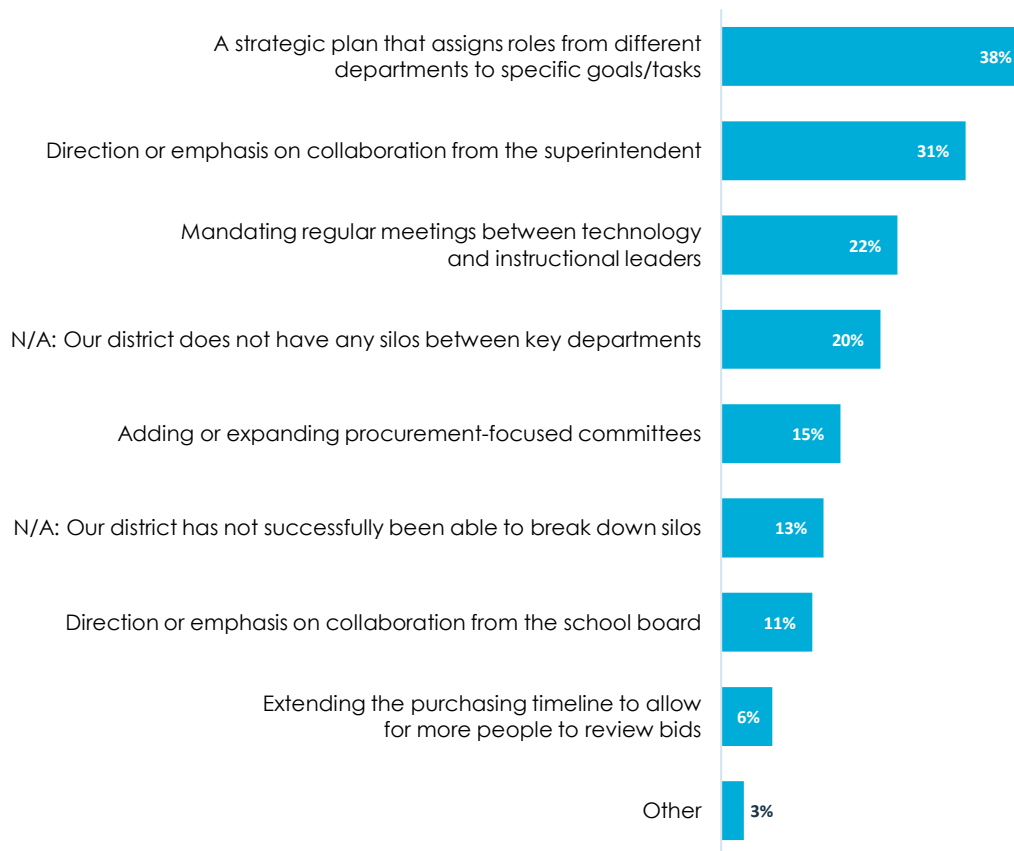
"We don't have that issue. We only have one section per grade, so in our district, all of our teachers are under one building. K-12 is in one building, so we don't have silos like that," he said.

But a strategic plan can do more than break down silos.

The curriculum leader from New York noted that a good strategic plan helps to clarify purchasing priorities. "We have a strategic plan that is built around our instructional priorities, our long-term academic goals. And so we have an instructional vision that requires alignment ... We make decisions about which curriculum, which assessment programs to purchase based on those principles and priorities," he commented.

Figure 6

What are some of the strategies, if any, your school or district has successfully used to break down silos between key departments during the procurement process? Select all that apply.



*Results show responses from school and district leaders.

Promotion from within

In interviews, school and district leaders provided insight into the ways that challenges due to staffing turnover play out on the ground.

The district leader from Texas explained how staff turnover has an impact on financial investments in teacher training.

“There’s a lot of turnover. And so last year we started it, we did all of this training, but now this year we’re having to go back and retrain again ... We find ourselves going back to the beginning because there’s so many new staff ... That impacts our finances because then we spent all of this money on training and now we’re having to spend it again to train the same thing instead of being able to move forward,” she said.

The New York instructional leader saw a role for curricular resources in limiting the impact of teacher turnover by providing a consistent baseline for instruction.

“Having external curriculum that we are purchasing that can provide that baseline and that threshold no matter how much retention we have in any given year

and is not dependent on the given content expertise of a teacher that we hire is really helpful,” he observed.

Some interviewees also explained how they were able to avoid obstacles that hampered other school systems with respect to staff turnover by promoting from within or viewing change as a chance to improve.

“Some of the turnover has been from promotions from within,” a district finance official from New Jersey commented. He provided examples of staff members who had been “mentored to sort of step into that role for at least a year ... and didn’t need much more training.”

The Texas assistant principal said that staffing changes can also present an opportunity to promote alignment between finance and instructional priorities when seen as a way to introduce new ideas.

“They have worked very hard when new positions come open to recruit people from districts that have more of that alignment and who have that experience already to come in and bring that experience to this district,” she noted.

“Some of the **turnover has been from promotions from within** ... [Staff members had been] mentored to sort of step into that role.”

—District leader from New Jersey

Evaluation of funding sustainability

In addition to barriers stemming from internal dynamics around staffing or communications, leaders may have to contend with external conditions that disrupt their school's or district's ability to make strategic decisions about academic resources. More than 7 in 10 (71%) cited uncertainty about future federal funding and the majority (58%) pointed to the state of the economy as significant disruptions to strategic resourcing.

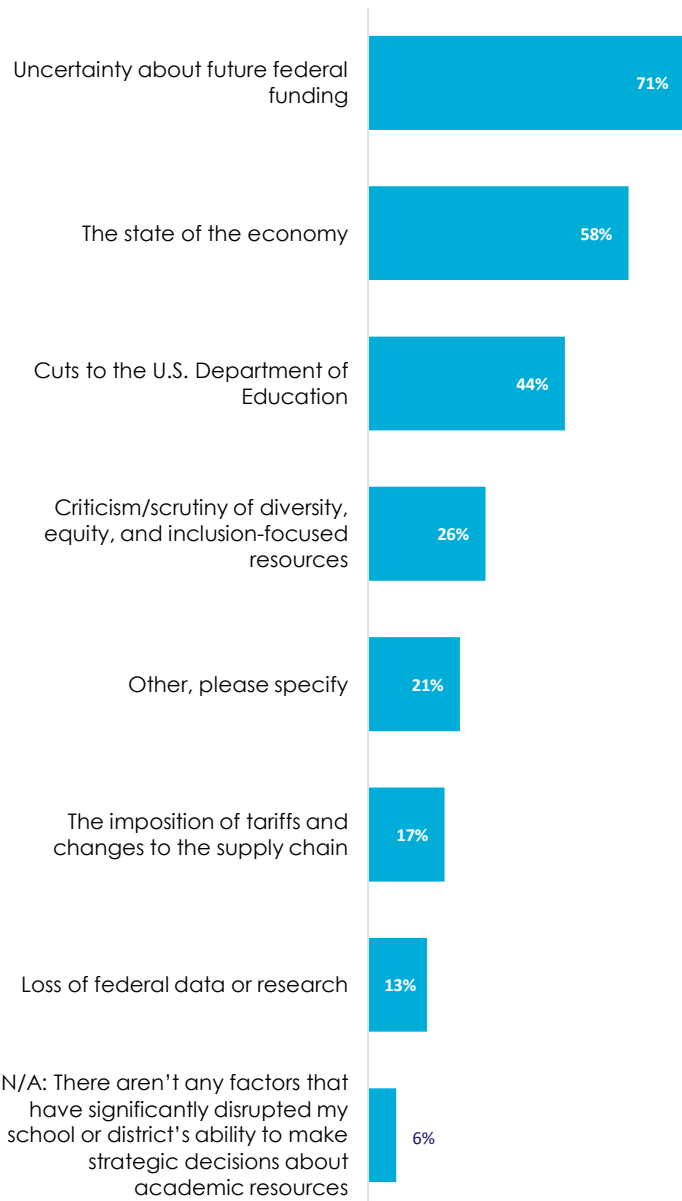
At the time the survey was conducted in June 2025, even a cursory review of news headlines revealed the swirling uncertainty around the impact of tariffs, inflation, and federal funding decisions. In May, for example, the Trump administration's [budget plan](#) indicated it intended to cut overall education funding significantly, would keep funding for Title I and IDEA flat, and entirely jettison Title II and Title III. Since that time, a reported slowdown in the labor market and a [federal government shutdown](#)—among other factors—have only added to the atmosphere of unpredictability.

More than three-quarters of survey respondents said they expected the amount of regular federal funding that their district receives (such as Title I and IDEA) to decrease in the next two years. Nearly two-thirds of survey respondents said their district would compensate for any loss of federal funding by cutting staff positions.

The California curriculum leader noted that uncertainty around future federal funding had an impact on district hiring decisions.

Figure 7

Which, if any, of the following have significantly disrupted your district's/school's ability to make strategic decisions about academic resources?



*Results show responses from school and district leaders.

“We are right now not filling the position because of the uncertainty of whether or not federal funds will be released next year,” she said. “It is absolutely affecting our decisionmaking.”

The Missouri district leader identified professional development as an area that’s affected by concerns around federal support.

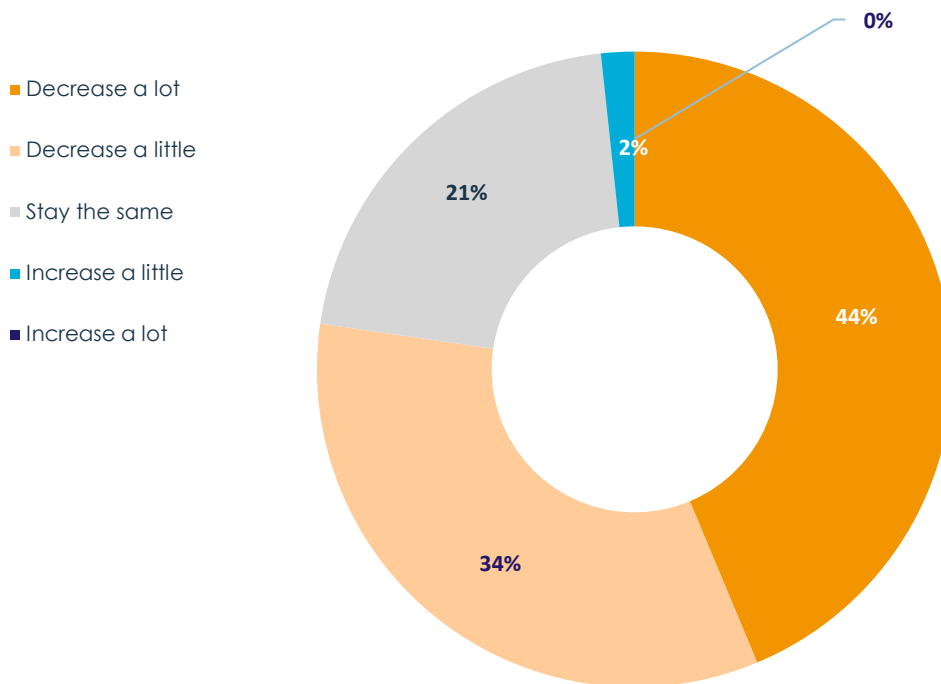
“It’s really impacting our ability to provide ongoing professional development,” she said. “They provide a significant amount, the federal government does, toward our professional development.”

Doubts about the availability of federal dollars also impact technology purchases.

“The federal funding it, I mean it appears to us as it’s going away. So it’s not something that we can depend on. And so we’re at the point where we used federal money to purchase so many of these technological things during COVID and we’re at the point where they need to be fixed or replaced and we don’t have the funds to come in and do that ... So definitely technology wise, it has been a huge burden,” the Texas assistant principal stated.

Figure 8

How do you expect the amount of regular federal funding your district receives (such as Title I and IDEA, but not COVID-relief funds or other one-time grants) to change in the next two years?



*Results show responses from school and district leaders.

For districts, an effort to evaluate the sustainability of federal, state, and local funding could help to navigate an unpredictable time. Roughly 4 in 10 survey respondents said that reviewing the sustainability of funding sources would help to better ensure that their school or district makes spending decisions that are based on a long-term strategy. Contingency plans can minimize the disruption as politics and policy changes cause districts to expect the unexpected.

In this tumultuous environment, companies seeking contracts may also have to monitor federal policy changes and prepare for school systems to change direction when district officials are uneasy about the topsy-turvy situation with funding sources.

“We were going to use some Title funds ... but then we kind of had to scrap that because we didn't know if the funds were going to be there. So it creates angst in a world where there's already a lot of disruption going on just in the field of education,” lamented the district leader from Texas.

*Results show responses from school and district leaders.

Figure 9

If your district receives less federal funding in future years than in the past, how will your district compensate for the loss of funding? Select all that apply.



Technical assistance and training

Professional development and information can help leaders to address myriad challenges in their purchasing decisions. Just 40 percent of school and district leaders said they know “a lot” about the purchasing process in their school system.

Interviewees outlined aspects of the process that they would like to learn more about if they could get additional information, technical assistance, or training.

The curriculum leader from Michigan said that learning more about the business side of the equation would make him more comfortable in the purchasing process.

“I came from the academic, the education side. So I'm fairly good at the program side. I'm just trying to speak the language of the business office right now and understand the accounting side,” he commented. “I want to follow all the rules. I just want to do things right ... I think I understand the programming side and helping kids.”

Other administrators suggested that districts could provide educators with more information about the rules regarding use of federal funding.

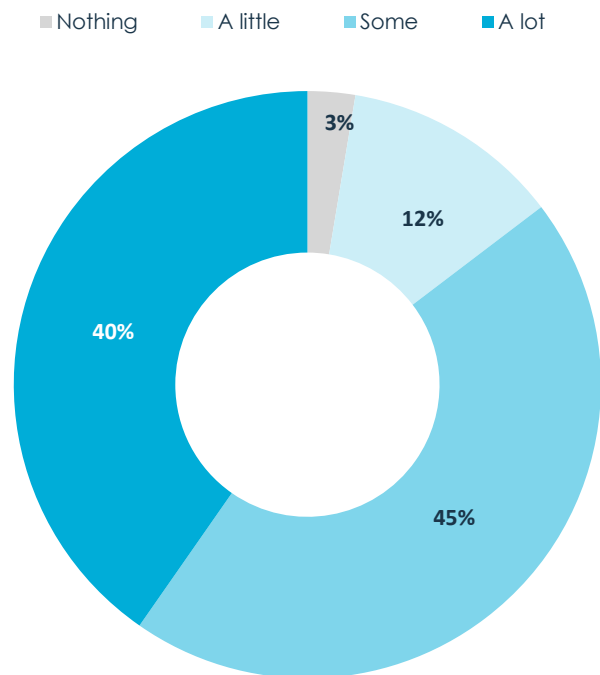
“I think it would be best if we sent information out about how federal money can be spent or if we get more information on how federal money is spent,” the school leader in South Dakota said.

Similarly, the Texas district leader suggested that it would be helpful to have information about “contracts with federal funds and the differences that each funding source requires when going through purchasing, like having a flow chart.”

In addition, interviews shed light on the types of information that K-12 administrators thought would be useful to them regarding products or vendors in the marketplace, including data on product effectiveness and resources to support AI implementation. Those insights suggest some opportunities for companies to solidify their connections to customers and to gain a competitive

Figure 10

How much do you know about the purchasing process in your district?



*Results show responses from school and district leaders.

advantage by providing the right information to districts in time for them to make purchasing choices.

The curriculum administrator from New York outlined the importance of reliable data on product impact.

“I’m frankly very skeptical of claims of impact from almost any program. So it’d be really helpful to have more quality, rigorous scientific data on impact before we make that decision,” he noted.

The New Jersey district finance official echoed that sentiment and indicated that his district would consider evidence of impact on standardized test scores or other metrics “as we’re deciding to do anything at all or between certain vendors, you know which ones could show they’ve had stronger academic ROI.”

For some interviewees, it was critical to see the product in action in the classroom.

“I would also say it would be more helpful for vendors to provide some examples of what instruction looks like in the classroom. It is rare in most programs to have actual high-quality video showing teachers actually teaching the curriculum itself ... and that would be helpful not only on the decisionmaking side, but also on the implementation side,” the New York curriculum official explained.

The Michigan curriculum leader had a similar view. “I need to see it working ... Flat out. I mean, if it’s a good

product ... send it to me for six weeks. Let me give it to a small group of kids and let me work with it with a teacher,” he said. “You could do it with 20 adults here sitting in the room. Great. Do it with kids. So that will pretty much make me buy it on the spot ... If you can do it with kids, then I’ll know it works.”

Other interviewees pointed to the role of resources to support implementation including customer service and training.

The California curriculum leader said she was looking for help with AI implementation “and not from quelling it, but rather how do we responsibly integrate it into our activities and integrate it into our classrooms.” She hoped that vendors could provide resources that explained “what the product offers and the functionality of it and then the professional development around it—not only the use of the platform, but how can we use it to the best capacity it was intended for.”

Timing was essential to some interviewees who wanted vendors to give them the facts right away.

The South Dakota school leader needed more information about customer service early in the process. “If we know more about the customer service before we purchase it, that would be great,” he said.

“I want to know right upfront what’s it going to cost me because I don’t want to waste my time on something that I can’t afford,” an Iowa school leader commented.

“I would also say it would be more helpful for vendors to **provide some examples of what instruction looks like** in the classroom.”

—New York curriculum official

Conclusion



As schools and districts grapple with the volatility of economic conditions and attempt to plan future financial investments, K-12 administrators can seek to maximize the impact of every dollar by better aligning their budget operations with their instructional priorities.

The survey results featured in this whitepaper, along with corresponding insights from follow-up interviews with school and district leaders, provide a playbook for policymakers by identifying key internal and external barriers to strategic resourcing while highlighting potential solutions to those stubborn challenges.

Challenges

- Barriers to making finance and purchasing key levers that successfully help to invest resources in ways that best support overall student achievement
- Siloed decisionmaking where academic and finance leaders do not communicate effectively
- An inability to sustain alignment over time due to leadership or staffing changes
- Inconsistent instructional goals stemming from staffing turnover
- Uncertainty about future federal funding and the overall economic outlook for the nation
- Lack of knowledge and information about purchasing processes

Solutions

- Implement outcomes-based contracts that link a vendor's pay to specific outcomes
- Ensure that department leaders discuss priorities early in the budget process
- Break down silos by using a strategic plan that assigns roles to key departments
- Promote from within and view staffing changes as a source of new ideas
- Evaluate the sustainability of funding sources and prepare contingency plans
- Provide technical assistance and training to inform budget processes, purchasing decisions, and product implementation

Based on the ideas and insights shared by the K-12 leaders participating in this study, educators, policymakers, and vendors can look ahead to envision a purchasing process in which districts integrate their financial operations with their academic policymaking to bolster student achievement by providing teachers with the tools they need to deliver high-quality instruction.

Key Contributors



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