

Student Engagement During the Pandemic

Results of a National Survey



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Executive Summary

Student engagement is a longstanding concern among educators. The issue became even more urgent in March of 2020, when U.S. schools shut down to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, forcing millions of American students and teachers to engage in remote learning for the very first time. Although some students thrived in the new environment, educators worried that too many were being left behind as remote learning continued into the 2020-21 school year for some learners while others see-sawed back and forth between in-person and home instruction and still others experienced a next normal of “typical” school days punctuated by social distancing, quarantines, and masks.

In November of 2020, the EdWeek Research Center took stock of the pandemic’s impact on student engagement by administering two nationally representative, online surveys, one to PreK-12 teachers and another to students in grades six through twelve. Many of the questions overlapped. This report compares the results of the students who responded to that survey with the results of middle and high school teachers, since elementary students were not polled. The results suggest that, in many ways, when it comes to student engagement, students and teachers are simply not on the same page.

Teachers tend to severely overestimate the negative impacts of the pandemic on their students. For example, roughly eighty percent say student morale is lower now than it was before the pandemic. Yet just 38 percent of students say their own morale has declined. In turn, students underestimate the degree to which the pandemic has had a negative impact on the outlooks of the teachers and administrators at their schools. Teachers are also considerably more likely than students to say that the more lenient grading policies that have resulted from the pandemic have led to declines in student motivation.

When students do engage in behaviors with the potential to signal disengagement, teachers are quick to attribute nefarious motives. For instance, nearly three-quarters of students who use webcams during online learning say they have turned them off during class. Teachers are most likely to say it’s because the teens are not paying attention in class, or that they’re not anywhere near the computer. Yet students say the most common reasons their cameras go dark is that they’re embarrassed about the way they look or safeguarding their privacy.

Similarly, teachers are most likely to blame increases in student absences during the pandemic on distractions from TV and video games. Yet students who report an increased rate of absences are most likely to say it’s because they’re experiencing more anxiety.

Teachers and students also diverge when it comes to the degree that gamification enhances engagement. More than half the teachers who have increased their use of games during the pandemic say the strategy had made students more interested in learning. Yet just 27 percent of students say that’s the case.

Although they may not see eye to eye on many issues related to student engagement, teachers and students are in fairly close agreement when it comes to at least one thing: Sixty-nine percent of students and 60 percent of teachers say they are hopeful about the future.

Introduction

As the United States shifted into lockdown mode to curtail the spread of the coronavirus pandemic in March of 2020, student engagement became an even more pressing concern than it already was. The abrupt shift to remote learning left many students and teachers adrift as they struggled to transition to a model that was not only new to most but, out of necessity, abruptly implemented from one day to the next. As school started up again that fall, the threat of the virus prevented many students from returning to campus. Concerns about engagement remained as a large and ever-shifting population of students started the new school year from home. An EdWeek Research Center survey administered online to 1,143 teachers, principals, and district leaders found that declining student engagement was seen as the top educational challenge of 2020. Although some students thrived in this environment, others drifted away without the anchor of daily face time with faculty members and friends. Another Research Center online survey, this one taken by 790 teachers, principals, and district leaders during late September and early October of 2020, found that absence rates doubled between the falls of 2019 and 2020.

Methodology

In order to get a better sense of how the pandemic was impacting student engagement, the EdWeek Research Center administered a nationally representative online survey November 5th to November 24th, 2020 to more than 2,000 public, private, and home schooled students in grades six through 12. The margin of error is plus or minus two percent, with a 95 percent confidence level.

The EdWeek Research Center also administered a nationally representative online survey November 5th-24th, 2020 to 817 public and private school educators including 322 elementary school teachers, 145 middle school teachers, and 341 high school teachers. The margin of error is plus or minus 3 percent with a 95 percent confidence level.

Because the purpose of this report is to compare student and teacher responses and elementary students were not surveyed, the teacher results reported here do not include elementary school teachers. This report instead focuses exclusively on comparing perceptions of student engagement among middle and high school teachers and students in grades 6 through 12.

SURVEY DETAILS

Surveys Administered:

- Educator Survey: November 5-24, 2020
- Student Survey: November 5-24, 2020

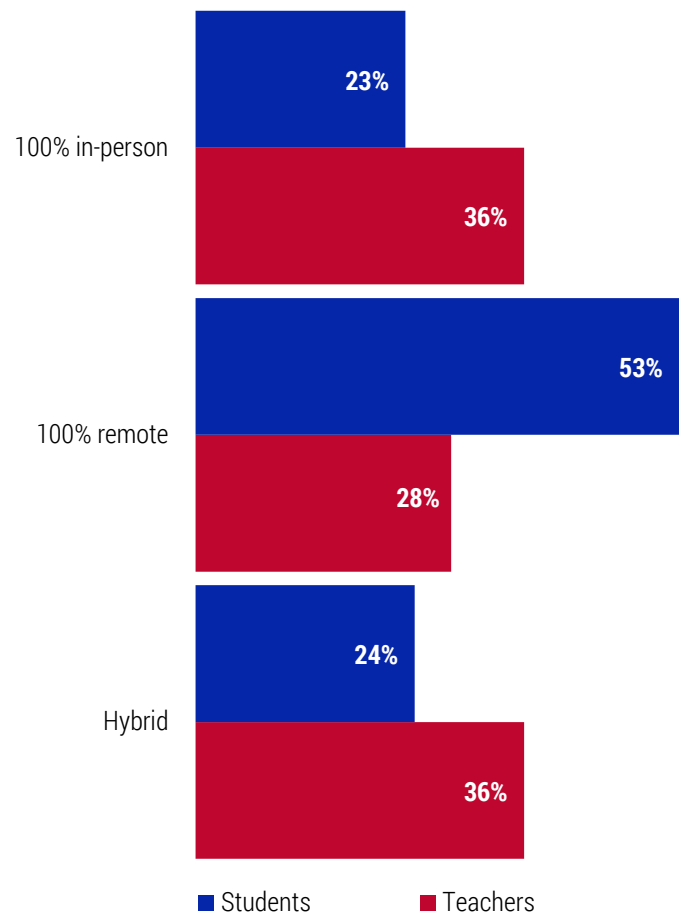
Respondents:

- Educator Survey: 817 public and private school educators including:
 - 322 elementary school teachers
 - 145 middle school teachers
 - 341 high school teachers
- Student Survey: 2,062 public, private, and home schooled students in grades six through 12.

Instructional Models

At the time the survey was administered, just over half of the students were learning from home 100 percent of the time as compared to 28 percent of teachers. It's important to note that during the fall of 2020, many teachers worked from schools 100 percent of the time even though some or all of their students were learning from home. A more detailed description of the survey respondents' demographics is provided at the end of this report.

In-person versus remote instruction for secondary teachers and students who responded to the survey



Morale in Schools

Student Morale

Survey results suggest that teachers are severely overestimating the degree to which the pandemic has depressed student morale. More than eighty percent of teachers say student morale is lower now than before the pandemic and 5 percent say it's higher.

By contrast, just 38 percent of students say their own morale is lower now while 30 percent say it's higher.

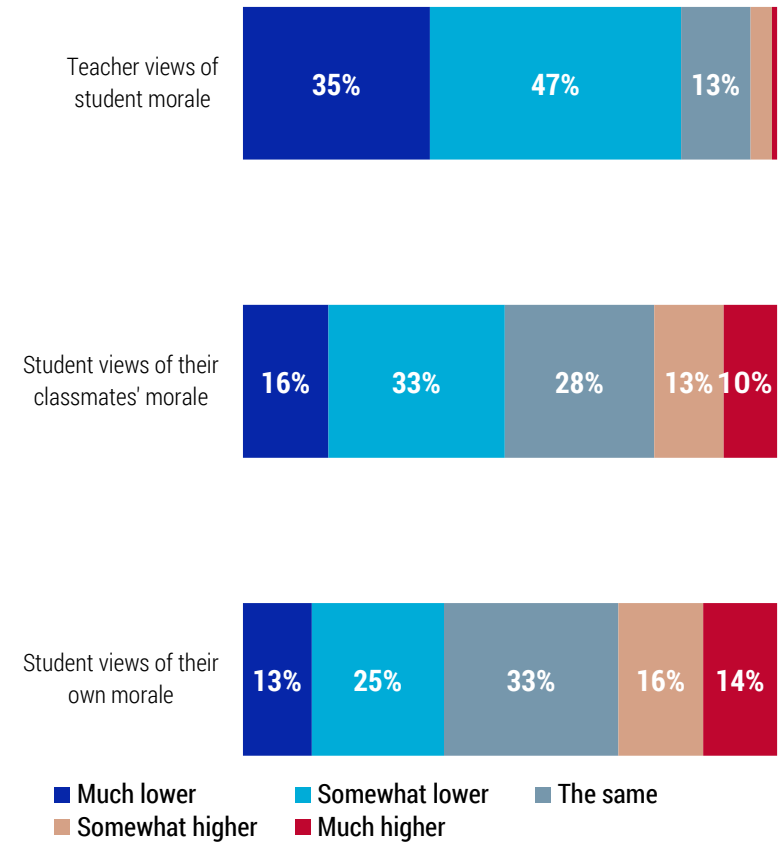
Students do have darker views of their classmates' morale than of their own morale. Nearly half say their classmates' morale is lower now. Twenty-three percent say it's higher.

Traditional public school students (42 percent) are roughly twice as likely as private school students (27 percent in religious schools, 23 percent in non-religious schools) to report that their morale has declined since before the pandemic. Charter school students are in between (34 percent). Morale is best among home schooled students: 15 percent report lower morale, 30 percent report higher morale and 56 percent report no change.

Asian students are significantly less likely than their white peers to say their morale has improved (16 percent versus 36 percent). About a quarter of Black and Latinx students say their outlooks have improved.

Compared to students of color and public school students, white and private school students are more likely to be attending school in-person 100 percent of the time, which may help explain why their morale is better since they've experienced fewer educational disruptions.

Compared to before the coronavirus, how is morale for the students, teachers, and administrators at your school?
 ["Morale" is a person's level of confidence or enthusiasm.*]



Teacher Morale

If teachers are overestimating the negative impacts of the pandemic on student morale, students are underestimating the degree to which COVID has dampened the spirits of their instructors.

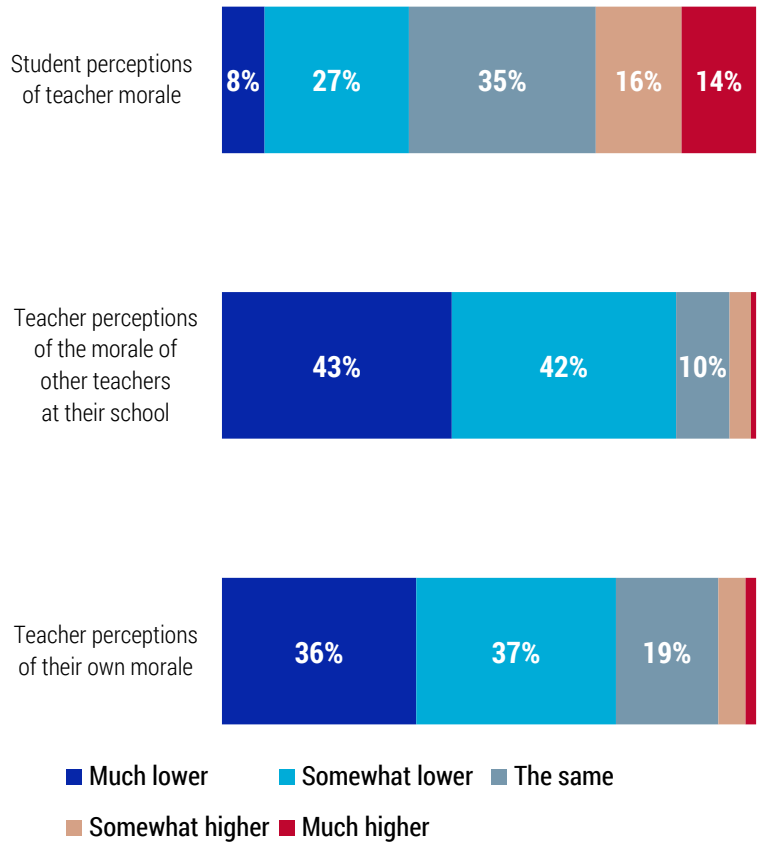
Thirty-five percent of students perceive teacher morale is lower now than prior to the pandemic. Nearly three-quarters of teachers say the same of their own morale. And even more teachers (85 percent) say the morale of their fellow instructors has declined since the pandemic began.

Just seven percent of teachers say their own morale is higher now as compared to 30 percent of students who say the same of the teachers at their school.

Overall, teachers are much more likely than their students to say their own morale has declined since the pandemic started (73 percent versus 38 percent).

Based on self reports, teacher morale has declined more sharply in rural areas, where 73 percent say it's lower, and in the suburbs (80 percent) than in urban locales (55 percent). Students were not asked whether they lived in rural, urban, or suburban areas.

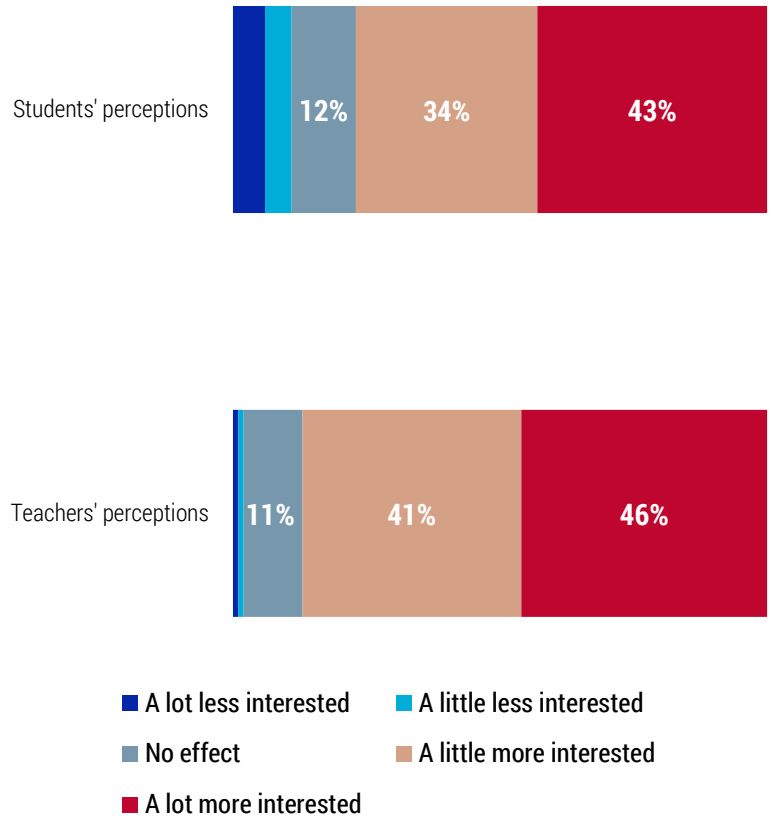
Perceptions of how teacher morale has changed since before the pandemic



The Importance of Teacher Morale

Students and teachers may misjudge the degree to which the pandemic has impacted one another's morale but there is one thing they strongly agree upon: When a teacher has good morale and is confident and enthusiastic about teaching, students are more interested in her class. Eighty-seven percent of teachers and 77 percent of students say positive teacher morale leads to higher levels of interest in class.

Teacher and student perceptions of how a teacher with strong morale impacts students' level of interest in her class



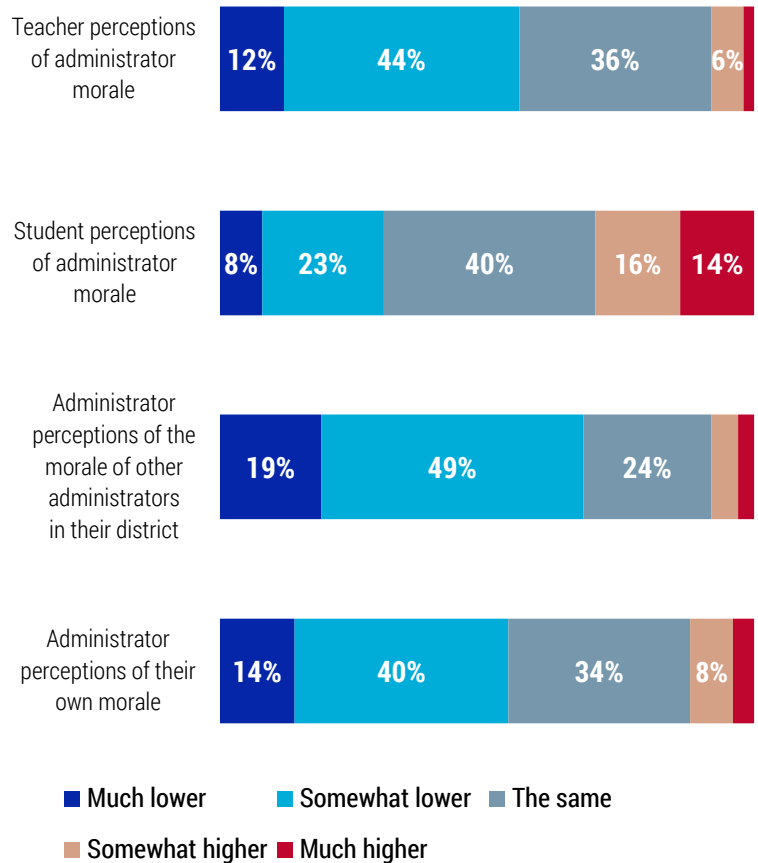
Administrator Morale

Just as students underestimate the detrimental effects of the pandemic on their teachers' morale, they also appear to be unaware of the degree to which COVID has darkened the outlooks of the administrators in their districts and schools.

Although administrators were not surveyed for the project described in this report, a nationally representative EdWeek Research Center survey fielded in December 2020 found that 54 percent of principals and district leaders report that their morale had declined since the pandemic's start. The teachers surveyed for this project generally agreed — with 56 percent reporting declines in administrator morale. By contrast, less than 1 in 3 students perceive that administrator morale has declined.

It is unclear why students underestimate the pandemic's impact on educator morale. It may be that their own more positive morale clouds their judgement. It's also possible that the adults they interact with are putting on a brave face for them.

Perceptions of how administrator morale has changed since before the pandemic



Motivation and Effort

Student and Teacher Motivation

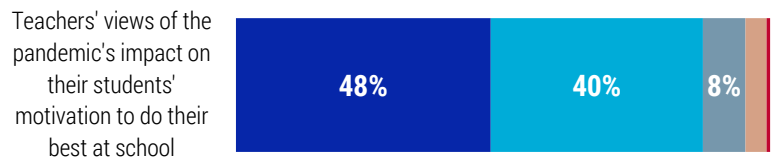
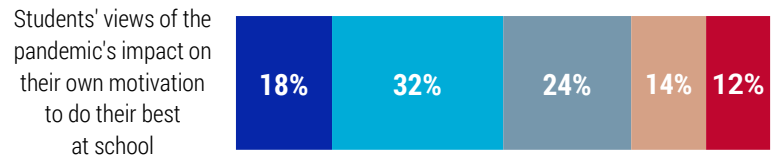
Just as teachers overestimate the pandemic’s negative impact on student morale, they also appear to misjudge the degree to which COVID has led to declines in the motivation of students to do their best at school.

Eighty-eight percent of teachers say their students are less motivated nowadays as a result of the pandemic. By contrast, half of students report that their motivation has declined.

Interestingly, when teachers are asked to rate how the pandemic has impacted their own levels of motivation at work, the results are similar to students’ self-reports of COVID’S effects on their motivation at school.

Forty-three percent of teachers say their motivation has declined as a result of the pandemic — as compared to half of students. And 26 percent of teachers and students alike report that their motivation has increased.

How has the coronavirus pandemic affected levels of motivation?



- A lot less motivated
- A little less motivated
- No effect
- A little more motivated
- A lot more motivated

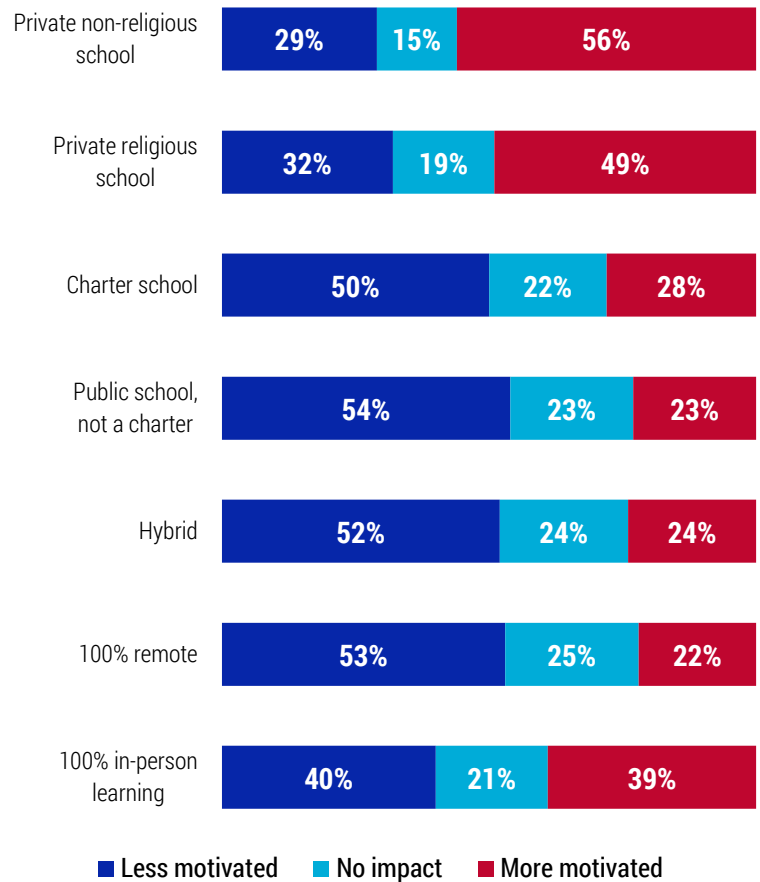
Motivation By Type of School

Private school students are roughly twice as likely as public school students to say their levels of motivation have increased as a result of the pandemic. In fact, the majority of students at non-religious private schools report they are more motivated now than before the pandemic to do their best at school.

White students are also more likely to say their motivation has increased (31 percent) when compared with their peers who are Asian (17 percent); Latinx (23 percent); and Black (26 percent).

The higher levels of motivation reported by white and private school students are likely related to the fact that both these groups are more likely to be attending school 100 percent in-person. As a result, they have experienced less educational disruption than public school students or students of color.

How the pandemic has impacted motivation levels for secondary students?



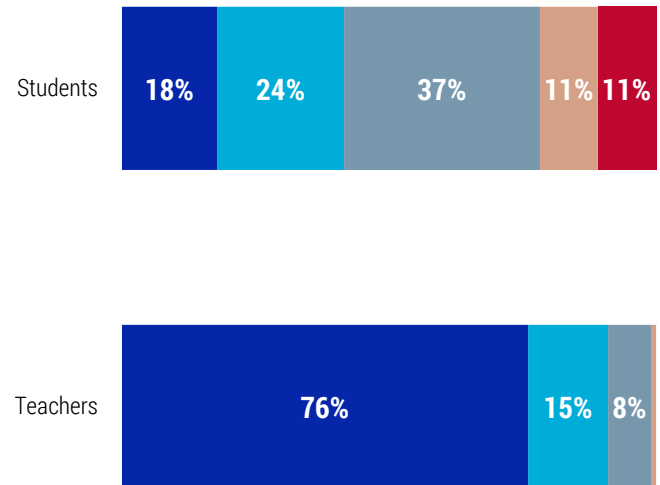
Impact of Pandemic Grading Policies on Student Motivation

On this secondary teachers and their students agree: Most teachers stopped or suspended grading at some point during the pandemic. Where they diverge is on the question of the association between grading and student motivation. And it's yet another example of ways in which the survey results suggest that teachers have a more negative view of their students than their students have of themselves.

Ninety-one percent of teachers say their students put in a lot or a little less effort when they stopped grading.

By contrast, 42 percent of students said the same of themselves. Twenty-two percent say they actually put forth more effort in the absence of grades, a perception that just 1 percent of teachers share.

How students reacted when teachers stopped grading or counting grades during the pandemic: Teacher versus student perspectives



- They put in a lot less effort
- They put in a little less effort
- They put in the same amount of effort as usual
- They put in a little more effort
- They put in a lot more effort

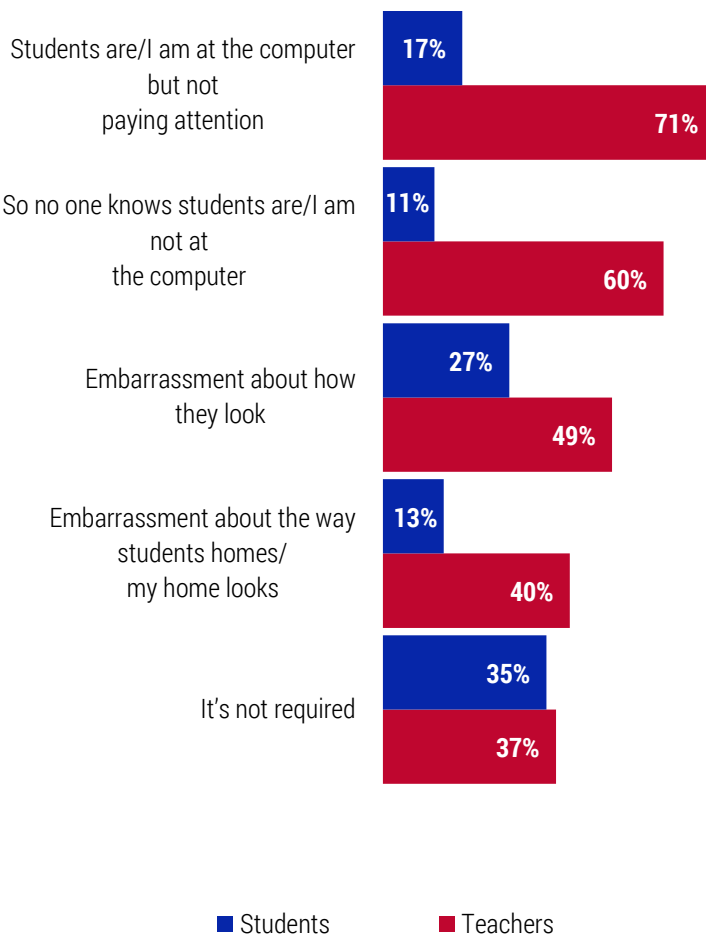
Students' Web Cameras and Levels of Engagement During Online Classes

Why Students Turn Cameras Off

Online cameras have become nearly ubiquitous during the coronavirus pandemic: They're used by 88 percent of middle and high school students who participate in full-time or part-time remote learning, the student survey found. Supporters of camera use say they foster student engagement but detractors say they can impinge on student privacy and, in some cases, compromise family safety. Although the debate continues, an EdWeek Research Center survey administered in September and October of 2020 found that more than three-quarters of teachers, principals, and district leaders require cameras to be kept on during class (if students have them and the technology is functioning). The requirement is not necessarily popular with students participating in remote learning—73 percent of whom say they turn off cameras at least some of the time during class, according to the student survey. Secondary teachers and students are not on the same page when it comes to the reasons why screens sometimes go dark. Students are most likely to say they turn their cameras off because they are embarrassed about the way they look or that they are safeguarding their privacy.

Yet, as is the case throughout this study, teachers attribute more nefarious motives to their students. They say the top reasons that cameras are off are that students are not paying attention to the class or that the teens are trying to hide the fact that they're not at the computer. The differences between teacher and student perceptions are stark. Seventy-one percent of teachers say students turn off cameras because they're not paying attention but just 17 percent of students say that's a motive. Sixty percent of teachers, but just 11 percent of students, say cameras are off to hide the fact that the student is not actually at the computer during class.

Reasons why students turn off cameras during online classes: Student reports versus teacher perceptions

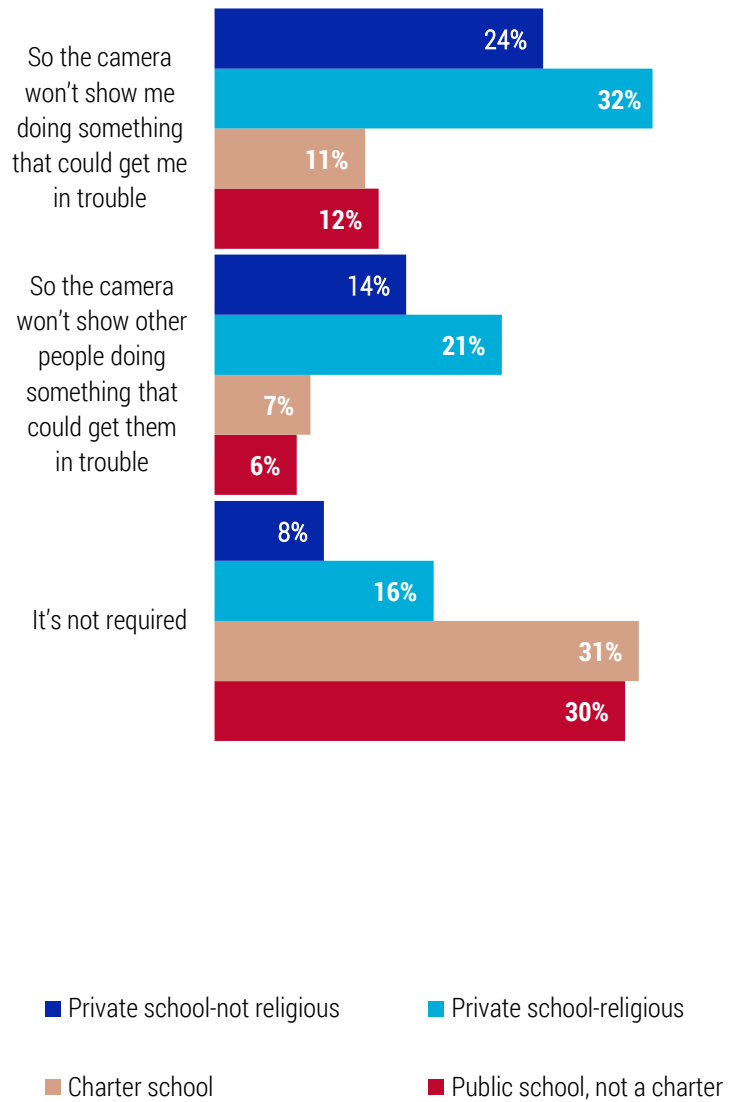


Reasons for Turning Cameras Off By Type of School

Public school students are significantly more likely than private school students to say they turn off cameras because they're not required to keep them on. And private school students are more likely than public school students to say they turn cameras off so no one can see them (or others in their home) doing something that could get them in trouble.

Students who qualify or have qualified for free or reduced-price meals at school are about twice as likely as those who have not qualified to say they keep cameras off because they're embarrassed about the way their homes look. However, this reason is relatively uncommon for both groups (12 percent versus six percent.)

If you turn off your camera sometimes during live, online classes, why? Select all that apply.



Why Students Keep Cameras On

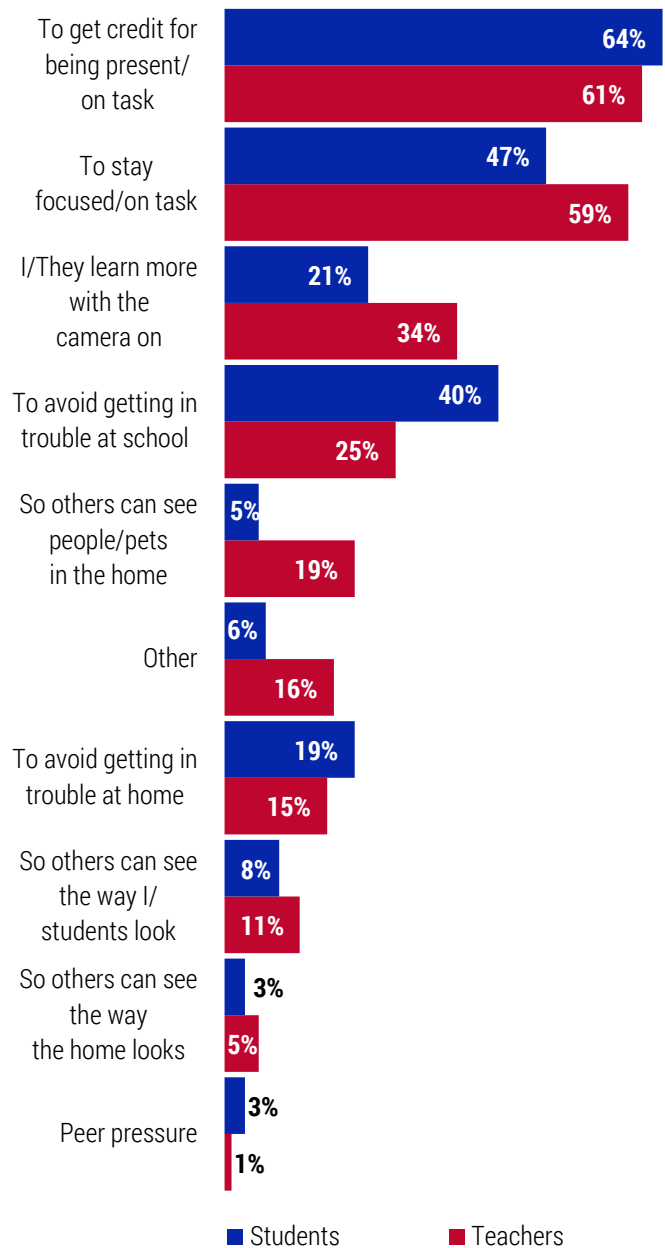
Secondary students and teachers may disagree about the reasons why students turn cameras off during online classes. But they have similar views of the reasons why students keep their cameras on.

Twenty-seven percent of students say they never turn their cameras off during online classes.

Both teachers and students say that the number one reason why students keep cameras on at least some of the time is to get credit for being present and on task. Both also agree that the second most common reason is that students hope keeping cameras on will help them stay focused.

Students are more likely than teachers to say that students keep cameras on so as to avoid getting in trouble in school. And teachers tend to overestimate the degree to which students keep cameras on in order to show off the people or pets in their homes or to allow classmates to see the way they look.

Reasons why students keep cameras on during online classes: What students say versus what teachers assume



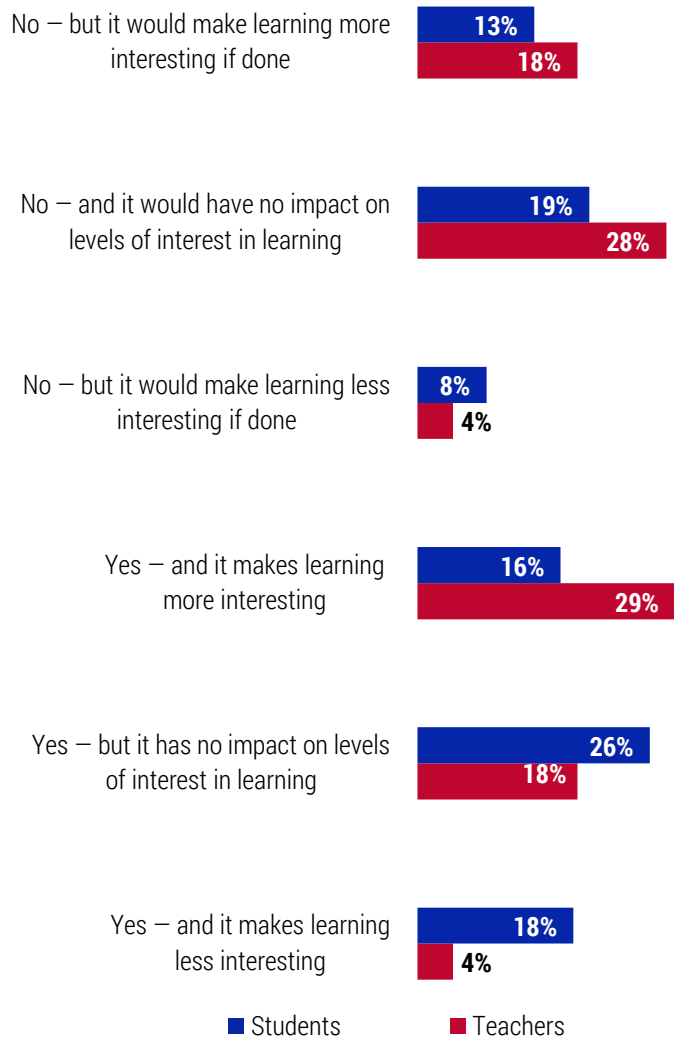
Does Gamification Increase Student Engagement?

Student engagement — especially during remote learning — has been an ongoing concern for teachers during the pandemic. Gamification is often viewed as a way to increase student engagement. Half of teachers say they have been incorporating online or digital games into their classes more often since the pandemic started.

However, the strategy has not necessarily kept everyone engaged.

More than half of teachers who have increased their use of digital games during the pandemic say that the practice has made learning more interesting for their students (57 percent). Yet just 27 percent of students who report that their teachers are incorporating games more often say that learning actually is more interesting for them as a result. Slightly more (30 percent) say learning is actually less interesting as a result of their teachers' increased reliance on games. And 43 percent say it's had no impact on their interest levels. Among teachers who haven't increased their reliance on digital games, 36 percent predict that students would be more interested in learning if they incorporated more gaming into their classes, and 33 percent of their students agree that more games would make learning more interesting. However, 20 percent of students say more gamification would decrease their interest in learning, a perception that just eight percent of their teachers share.

Compared to before the pandemic, are online or digital games incorporated more now into your classes?



Attendance Rates

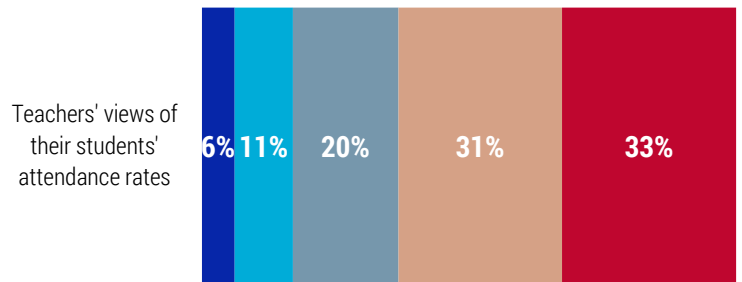
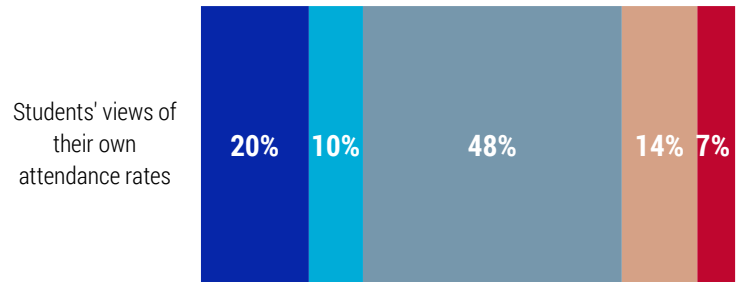
Student Attendance

Attendance rates are some of the most widespread and readily available measures of student engagement. Throughout the pandemic, educators have expressed concerns that engagement has declined because a larger share of students are skipping class. And preliminary administrative data also suggests that absences are on the rise.

Sixty-four percent of teachers surveyed for this study say absence rates have increased during the pandemic. There are large disparities between lower- and higher-poverty schools: 39 percent of teachers in schools where less than a quarter of the students qualify for free or reduced-price meals report that absence rates have increased during the pandemic. By contrast, the share of teachers who say absence rates have increased is 75 percent in schools where more than three-quarters of the students qualify for subsidized meals.

Although anecdotal reports, administrative data, and this teacher survey suggest that student absence rates have risen as a result of the pandemic, the students who participated in this study were actually more likely to report that their absence rates had declined (30 percent) than to say they had increased (21 percent). Close to half say the pandemic has had no impact on their rates of attendance. One reason may be that students who were absent more often during the pandemic were less likely to respond to the survey. Another may be that a relatively small number of students are increasingly chronically absent, leading to an overall increase in absence rates in schools. A final possibility is that absences are more difficult to define during remote learning. Students may be counting absences differently than schools. For instance, a student who skips a live, online class may not consider that an absence if she spends the day pursuing schoolwork on her own but her school may still mark her absent.

Student attendance rates as reported by students and teachers



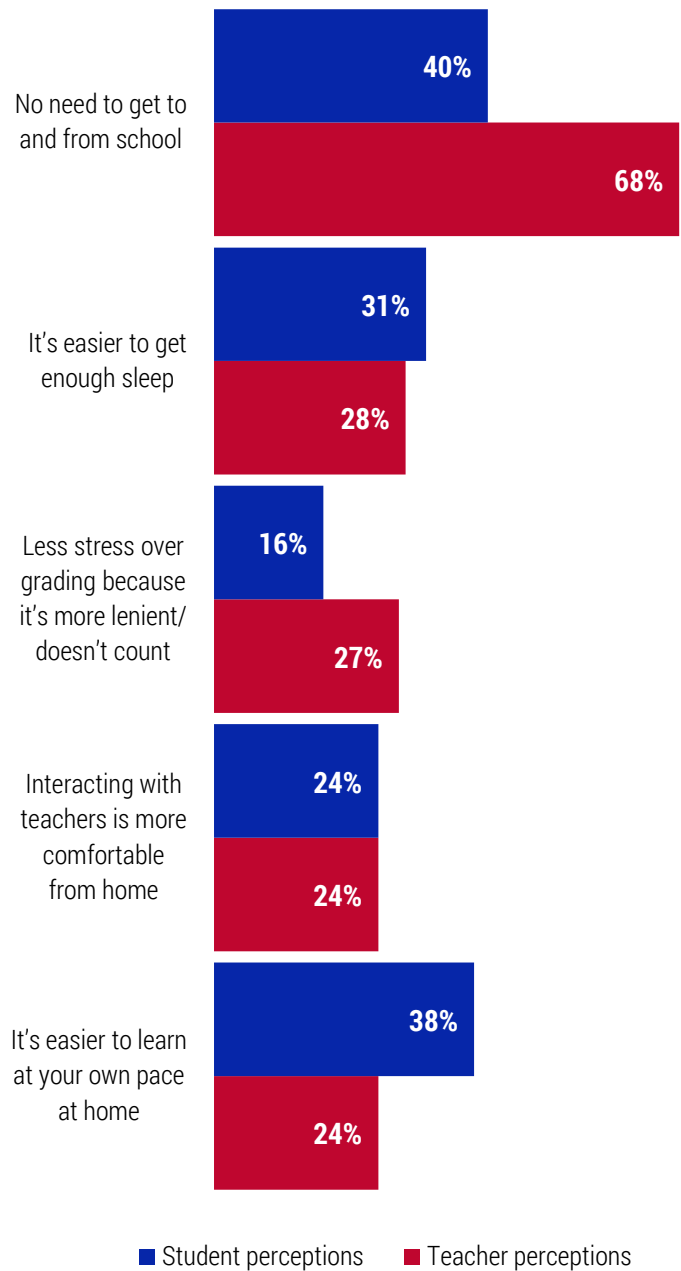
- Absent a lot less often
- Absent a little less often
- No change
- Absent a little more often
- Absent a lot more often

Reasons for Declines in Student Absences

Students attending school 100 percent in-person are most likely to say they're absent more often (28 percent) while those who are 100 percent remote are least likely (19 percent) and hybrid learners are in between (22 percent). This makes sense given that the top reason why students report that they are absent less often is that there's no need to get to and from school (because they're learning from home). Other common reasons for declines in absence rates reported by students include the perception that it's been easier to learn at your own pace and get enough sleep during the pandemic.

Teachers who report declining absence rates are, like students who are absent less often, most likely to say it's because there's no need to get to and from school and that it's easier to get enough sleep. However, teachers are more likely than students to attribute absence rate declines to grading policies that have grown more lenient during the pandemic. They're less likely than students to say that absences are down because it's easier for students to learn at their own pace at home.

Why are students absent less often during the pandemic? What teachers think versus what students say

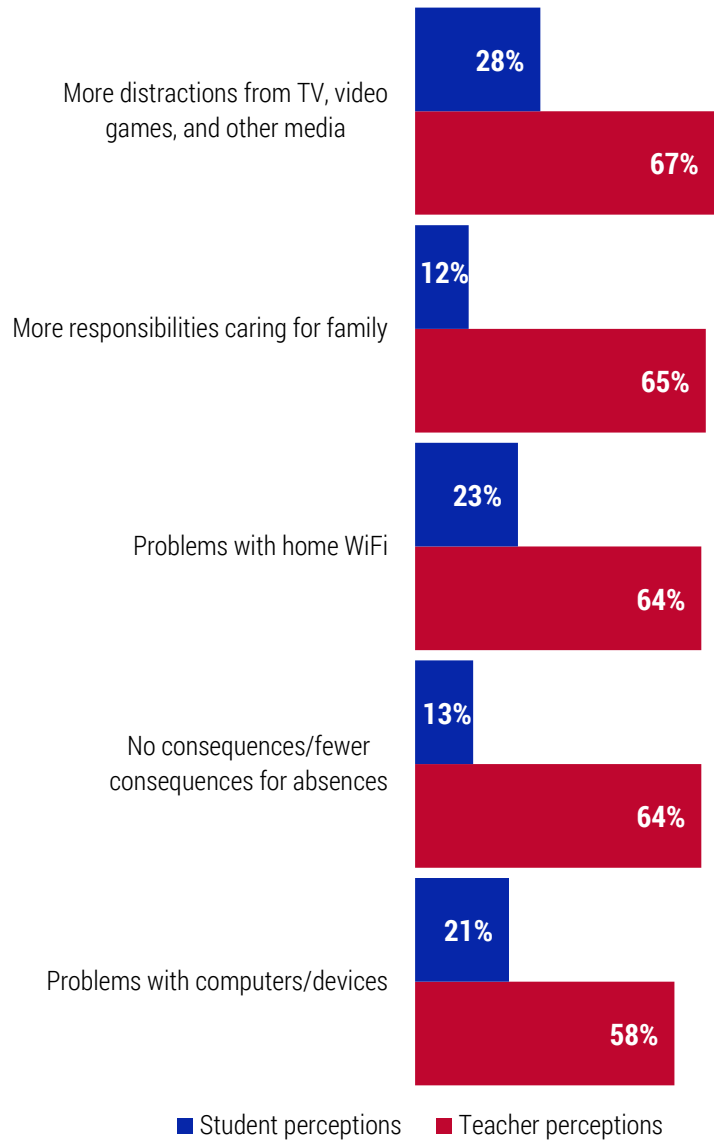


Reasons for Increases in Student Absences

Students who report increases in absence rates are most likely to say it's because they are experiencing more anxiety, they're having trouble understanding what they're learning, and that school has gotten more boring.

Teachers who report an increase in absence rates attribute more nefarious motives to their students. They are most likely to believe it's due to distractions from TV, video games, and other media. They are also likely to blame rising absence rates on increasing responsibilities related to caring for family, problems with home WiFi, and insufficient consequences for missing school.

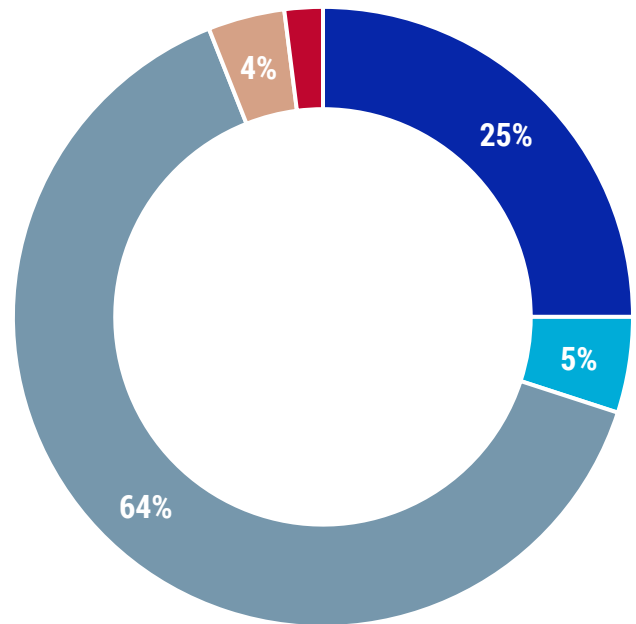
Why are students absent more often during the pandemic? What teachers think versus what students say



Teacher Absence Rates

Most teachers say that the pandemic has not impacted the rate at which they are absent from work. However, those who say they have been impacted are five times more likely to report that they are absent less often than to say they're absent more often.

How teachers say the pandemic has impacted their own rates of absence from work

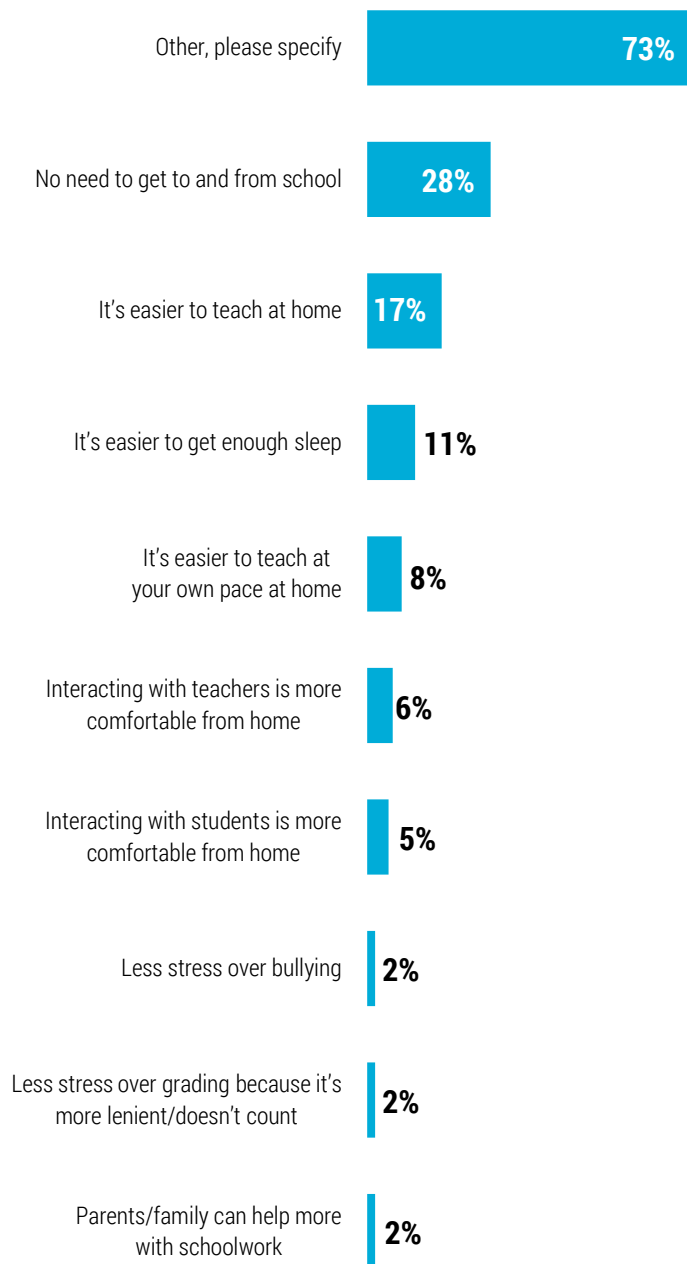


- Absent a lot less often
- Absent a little less often
- No change
- Absent a little more often
- Absent a lot more often

Reasons for Declines in Teacher Absences

More than 70 percent of teachers who miss less work during the pandemic wrote in responses to explain why rather than selecting one of the multiple-choice options. Many of these responses explained that it was so difficult to get substitutes during the pandemic that they felt they could not miss school. Others offered reasons related to the benefits of working from home — such as getting sick less often due to lack of exposure to sick people at school, having more flexibility to schedule and attend appointments without taking an entire day off, and being able to teach online classes from home even when feeling ill. Teachers also explained that school-related activities that had previously caused them to miss school (e.g., field trips, professional development) had been canceled or scaled back.

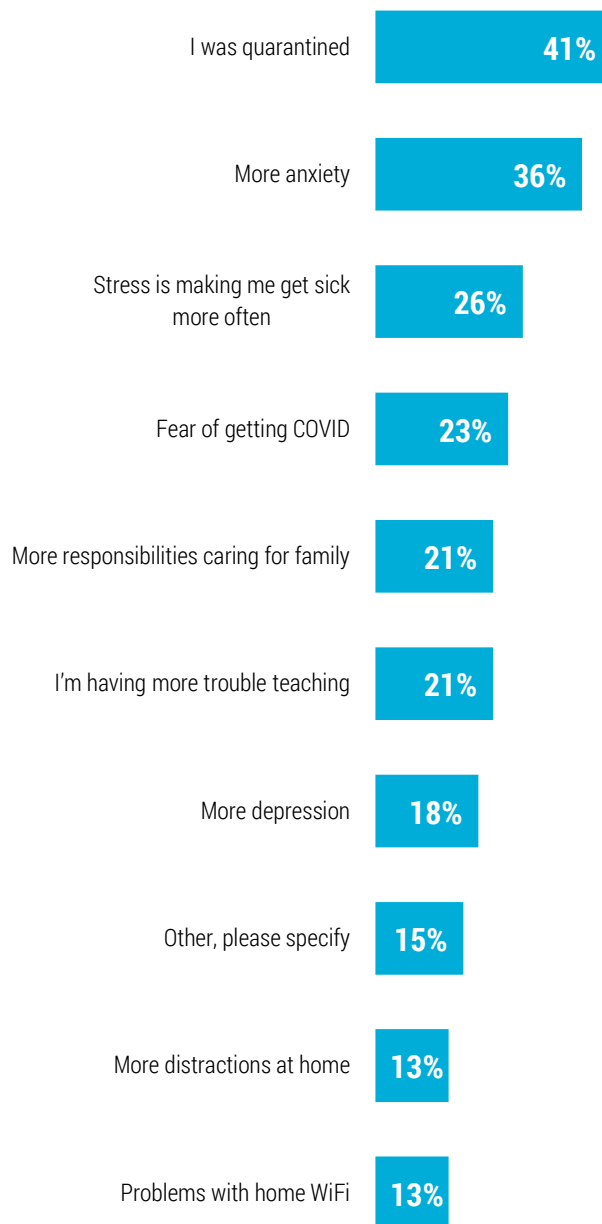
Teachers who miss work less often during the pandemic explain why



Reasons for Increases in Teacher Absences

The small handful of teachers who say they have missed more work during the pandemic are most likely to say it was because they have been quarantined. Anxiety and stress-related illness are also common causes of increases in teacher absence rates.

Teachers who miss more work during the pandemic explain why



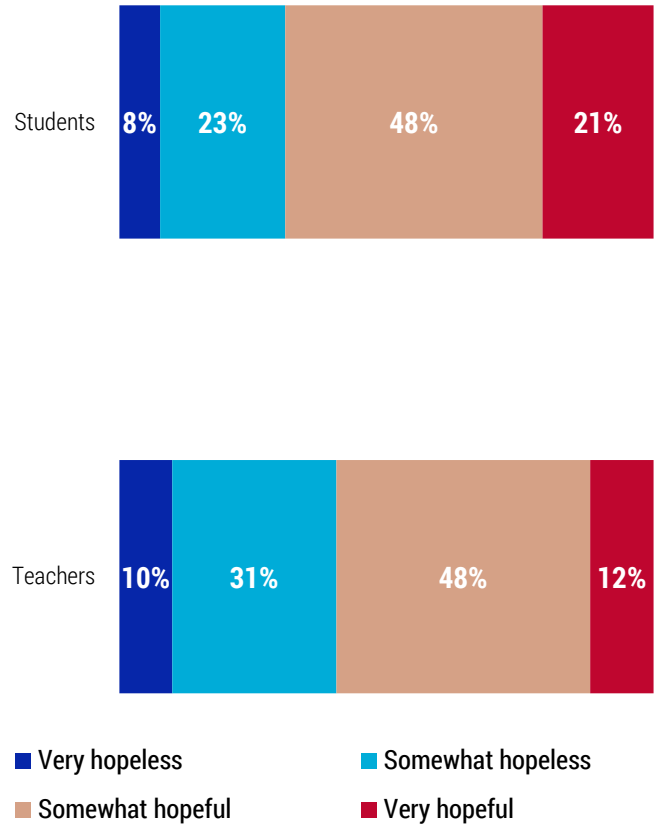
Looking Ahead

The pandemic has been a difficult period for many teachers and students. Yet most retain at least some degree of optimism. Sixty-nine percent of students and 60 percent of teachers say they are hopeful about the future. Students are nearly twice as likely as teachers to say they are very hopeful.

The share of students expressing hopefulness is lower among traditional public school students (67 percent) and their charter and home schooled peers (74 percent). It is higher among students who attend private schools that are religious (77 percent) and non-religious (82 percent).

Among teachers specializing in the core subjects of English/language arts, history/social studies, science, and math, English teachers are most likely to express hope about the future (79 percent) and science teachers are least likely (39 percent). One can only hope that the subject matter knowledge of life sciences teachers in particular is not filling them with prescient pessimism about our post-pandemic existence.

How are you feeling these days about the future?

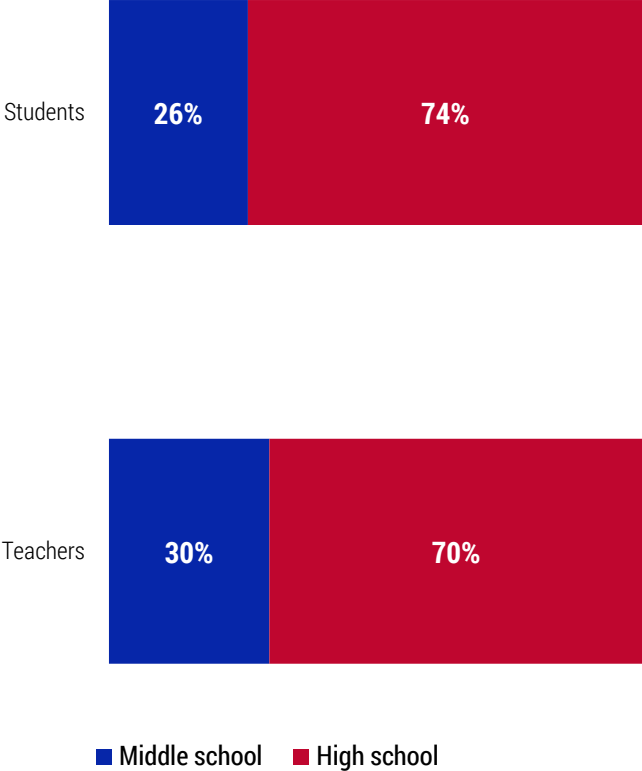


Demographics

Grade Level

Of the 2,062 students who took the survey, nearly three-quarters were in high school. Most of the 486 secondary school teachers work in high schools.

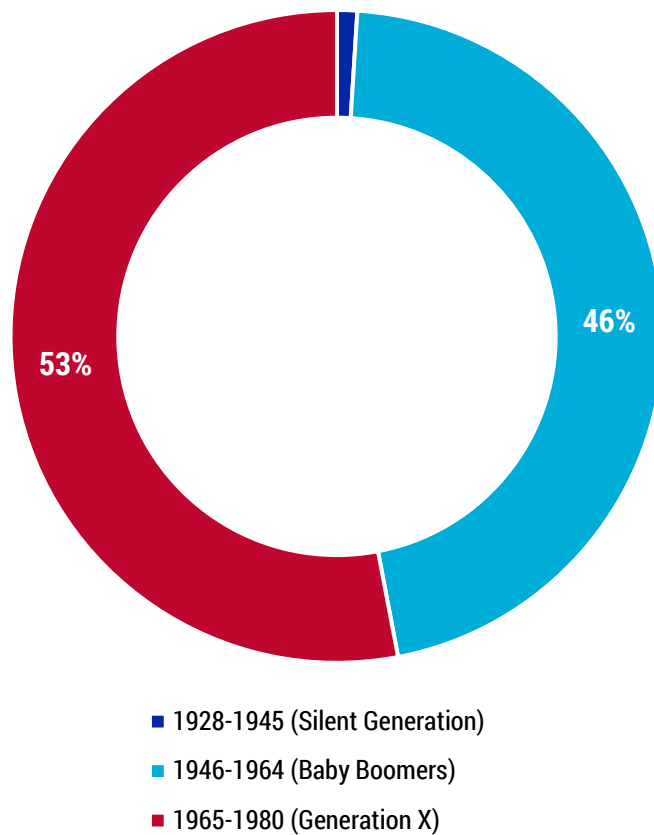
Survey respondents by grade level



Age

Slightly over half of the teacher respondents are Generation X-ers born between 1965 and 1980. Most of the remainder are Baby Boomers.

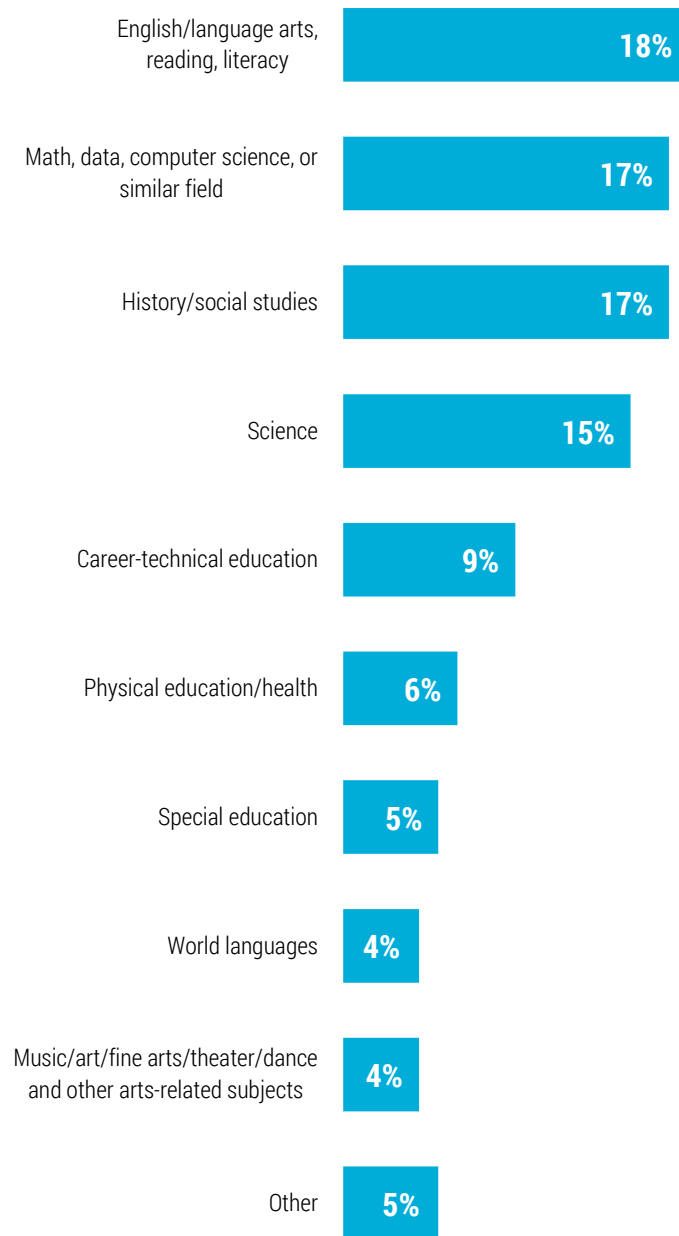
Birth years of secondary teachers who responded to the survey



Teaching Field

Teachers who responded to the survey were most likely to specialize in the core subjects of English, math, science, or social studies. Less than 1 percent of secondary school survey respondents specialized in English as a second language so they are not included in the chart.

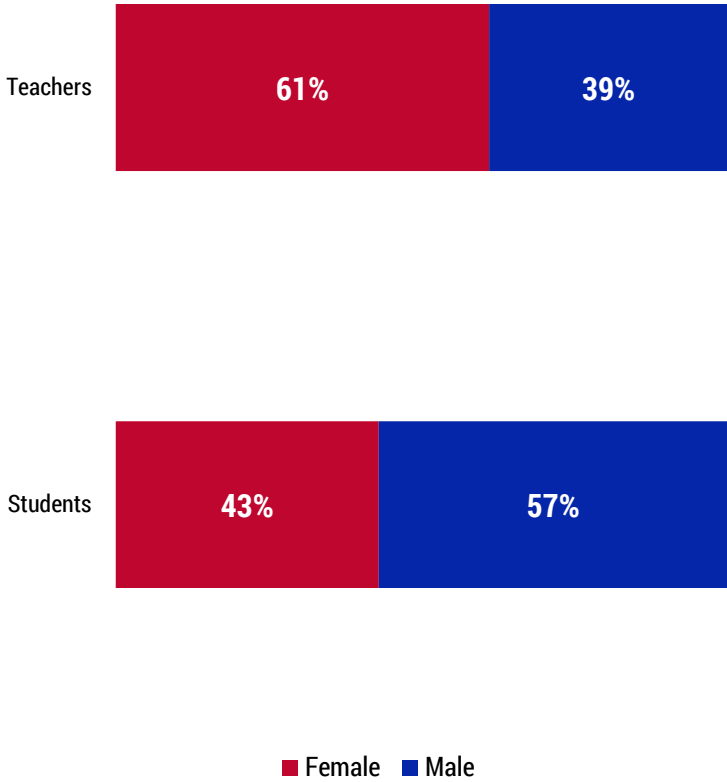
Fields of secondary teachers who responded to the survey



Gender

Just over half of the students who responded to the survey were male. Most teachers were female.

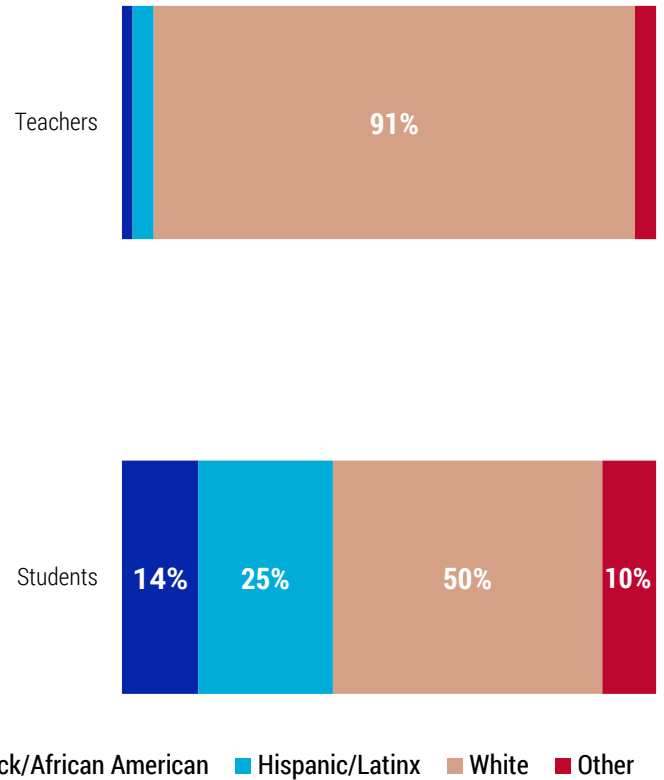
Survey respondents' gender



Ethnicity/Race

Most secondary teachers who responded to the survey were white, reflecting the reality that the teaching force in the United States is heavily white. Like the student population as a whole, the students who responded to the survey were more racially and ethnically diverse than the teachers.

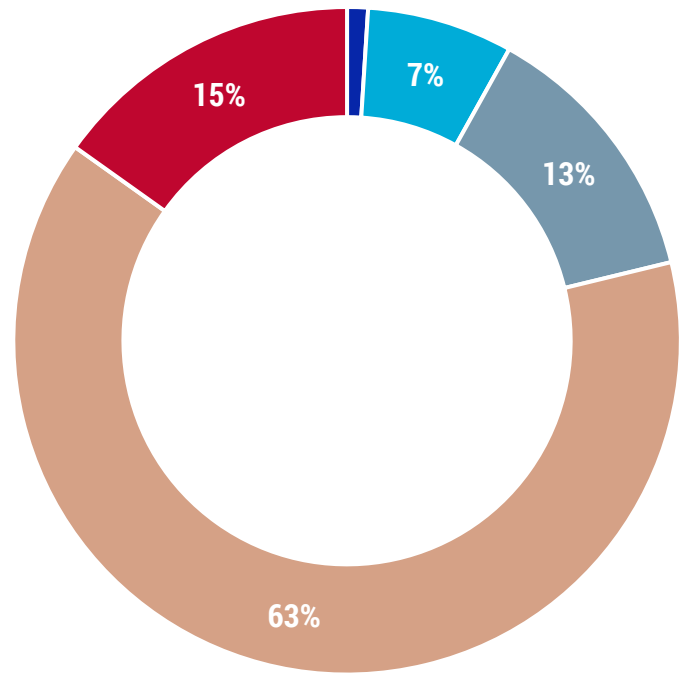
Survey respondents by ethnicity/race



Ethnic/Racial Composition of Schools in Which Respondents Teach

In addition to being asked about their own racial/ethnic identities, teachers were also asked about the racial/ethnic makeup of the students at their schools. Most teach at majority-white schools.

The majority of students in my school are:



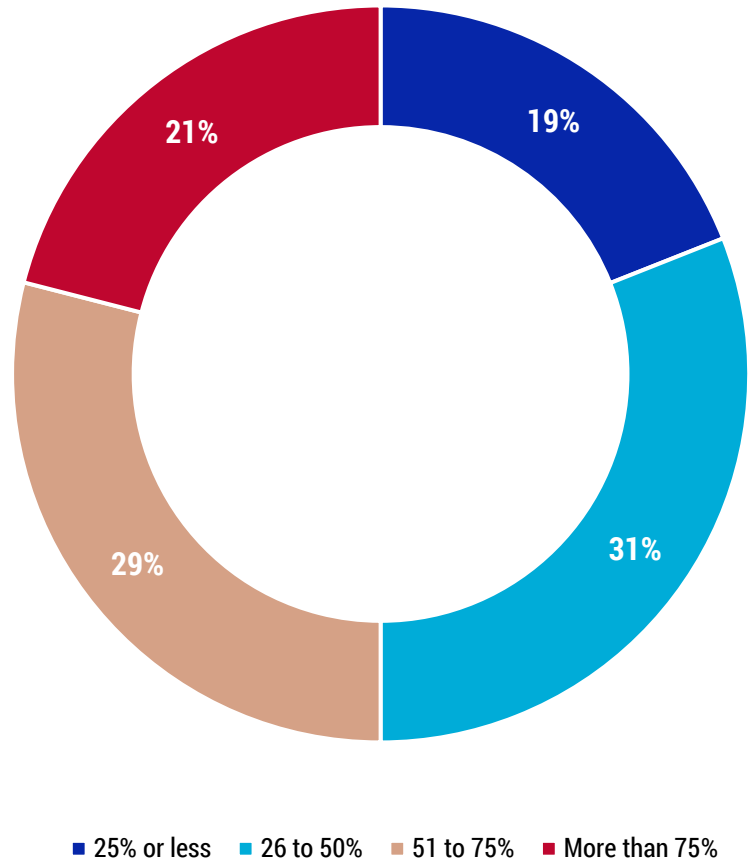
- Asian
- Black
- Hispanic
- White
- No one racial group comprises the majority of the student population

Socioeconomic Status

Federal free and reduced-price meal program qualification is a frequently-used if imperfect measure of socioeconomic status. In 2020-21, families within 130 percent of the poverty line qualified for free meals (no more than \$34,060 for a family of four) and those within 185 percent qualified for reduced-price meals at school (no more than \$48,470). Sixty-eight percent of students who responded to the survey said they had qualified for free or reduced-price meals at some point during their school careers (status is determined annually so students may fall in and out of qualifying).

Rather than being asked about their personal socioeconomic status, teachers were asked about the percentage of students at their schools qualifying for free or reduced-price meals.

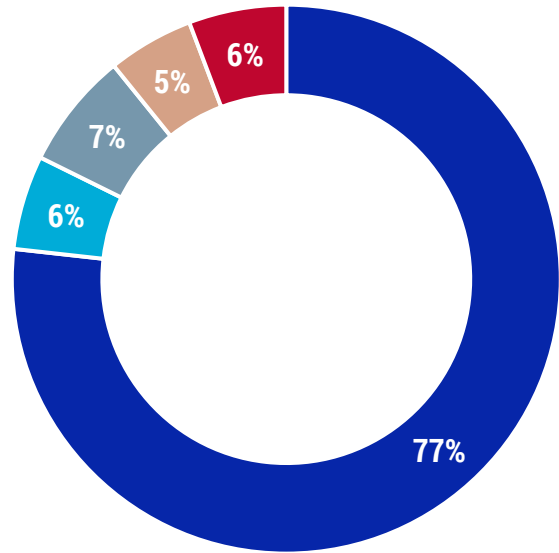
Percent of students at secondary teachers' schools who qualify for the federal free or reduced-price meal program based on family income



Sector

Eighty-three percent of students who responded to the survey attend public schools. Twelve percent attend private schools. And six percent are home schooled.

Type of schools students attend

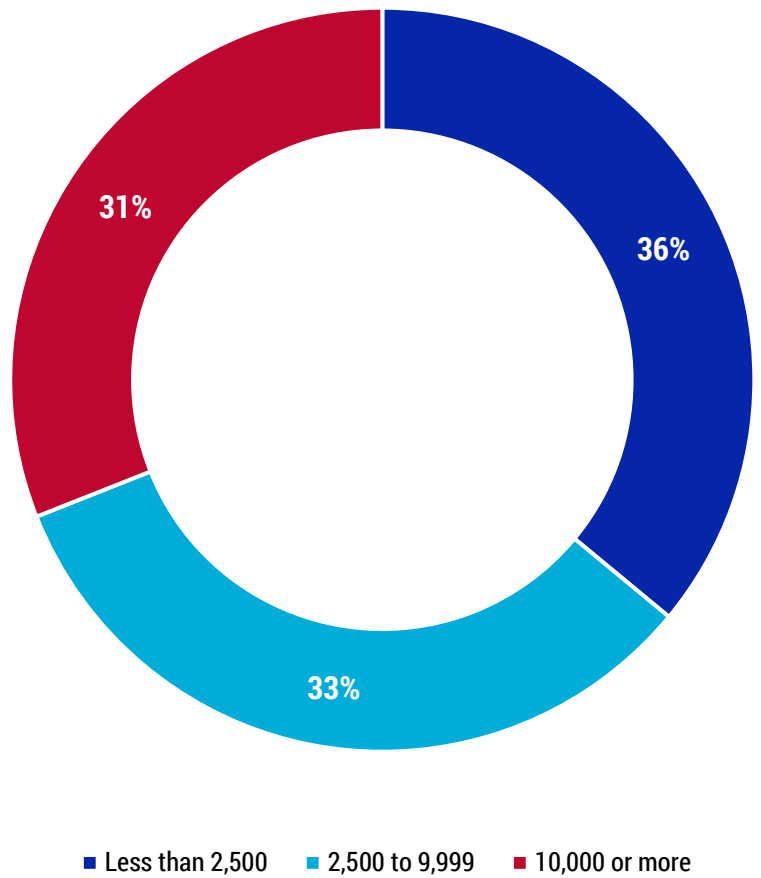


- Public school, not a charter school
- Charter school
- Private school-religious
- Private school-not religious
- Home school

District Size

Just over a third of secondary teachers who responded to the survey work in small districts with less than 2,500 students.

Enrollment in districts of secondary teachers who responded to the survey



Locale

Most of the secondary teachers who responded to the survey work in rural/town or suburban areas.

Locales of secondary teachers who responded to the survey

