

Student Achievement In Math

5 Trends in K-12 Education

EdWeek
Research Center®

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Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization based in Bethesda, Md. Its primary mission is to help raise the level of awareness and understanding among professionals and the public of important issues in American education. EPE covers local, state, national, and international news, and issues from preschool through the 12th grade. Editorial Projects in Education publishes Education Week, America's newspaper of record for precollegiate education, EdWeek Market Brief, and the Top School Jobs employment resource. It also produces periodic special reports on issues ranging from technology to textbooks, as well as books of special interest to educators.

The EdWeek Research Center conducts surveys, collects data, and performs analyses that appear in Education Week and EdWeek Market Brief. The center also conducts independent research studies for external clients including for-profit and nonprofit organizations.

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Key Contributors | REPORT

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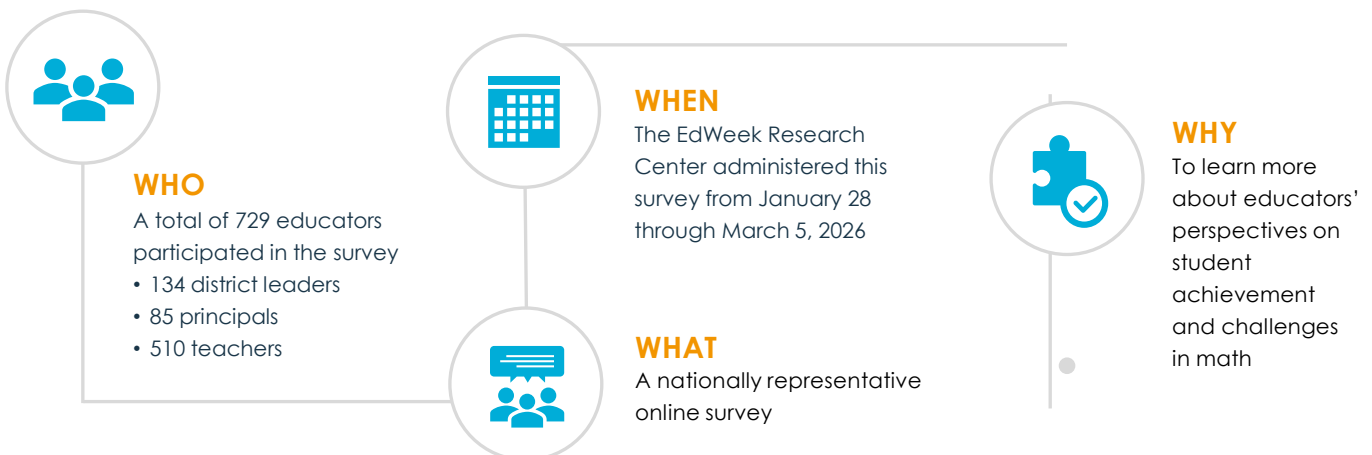
Introduction



Across the country, schools are under growing pressure to strengthen student performance in math. Educators are being asked not only to raise achievement, but also to help students build the foundational skills they need to succeed as math content becomes more complex from one grade span to the next. Understanding where educators see the greatest challenges, as well as what they believe is driving them, can help clarify where support may be most urgently needed.

This report highlights five key takeaways regarding student achievement in math from a recent EdWeek Research Center survey of educators. Findings from the survey of 134 district leaders, 85 principals, and 510 teachers—which was administered from January 28 through March 5, 2026—point to increasing challenges in the upper grades, more severe difficulties in higher-poverty districts, strong pressure for educators to improve achievement, and widespread concern about unfinished foundational skills.

ABOUT THE SURVEY



1. Math challenges intensify as students move into later grades.

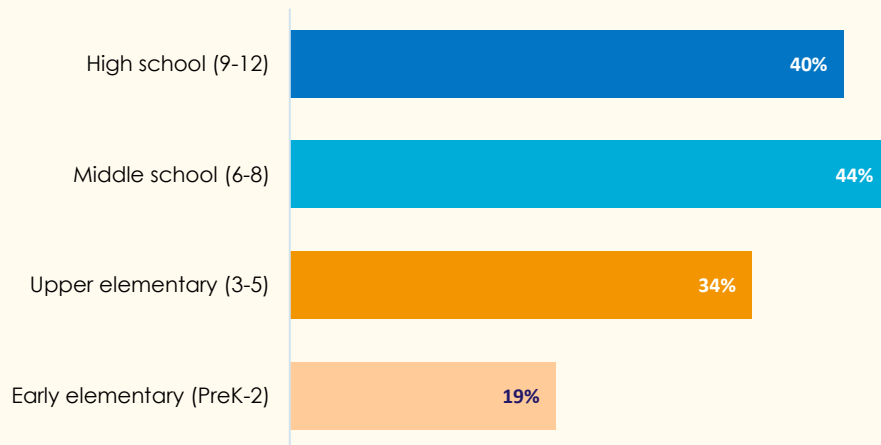
Educators are more likely to report serious barriers to math proficiency for their students in secondary schools than in earlier grade levels. In the survey, 19 percent of respondents said the majority of students face severe or very severe challenges in early elementary school (prekindergarten through 2nd grade).

That share rises to 34 percent in upper elementary grades, peaks at 44 percent in middle school, and remains at 40 percent in high school.

Figure 1

How would you describe the challenges the majority of your students experience as they work toward math proficiency at the following grade spans?

Percent selecting "severe" or "very severe"



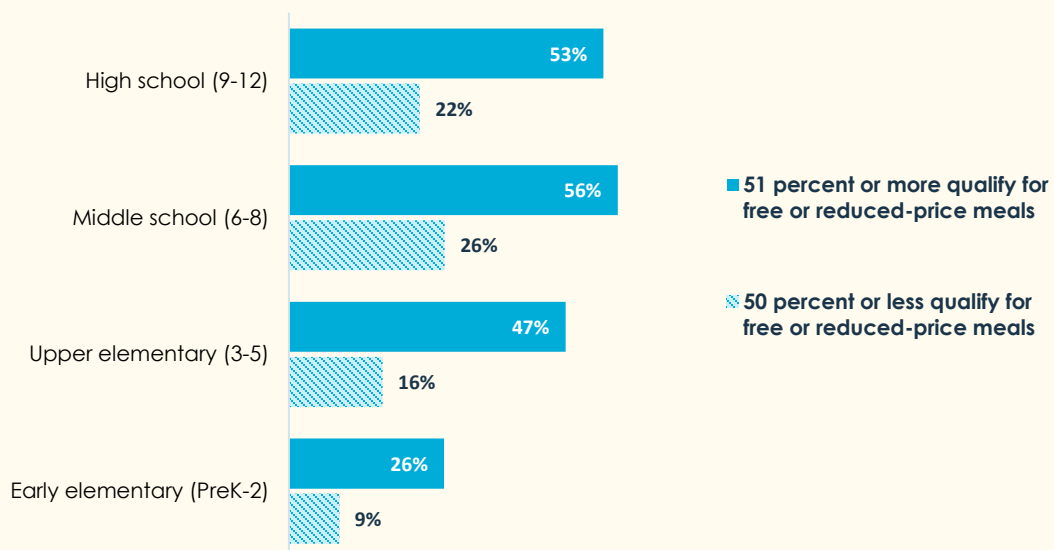
2. Poverty-related disparities widen in secondary schools.

Educators in higher-poverty school systems—where 51% or more students qualify for free or reduced-price meals—are more likely to say that their students experience severe or very severe challenges in math in all grade spans than their peers in more affluent districts. But those gaps widen the longer students are in school. Roughly one-quarter of educators (26%) in higher-poverty districts said their early elementary students had severe or very severe math challenges compared to just 9 percent of survey respondents working in wealthier communities, a gap of 17 percentage-points. By high school, where the majority of educators in higher-poverty systems (53%) saw such challenges compared to 22 percent in lower-poverty districts, that gap widens to 31 percentage-points.

Figure 2

How would you describe the challenges the majority of your students experience as they work toward math proficiency at the following grade spans?

Percent selecting "severe" or "very severe"

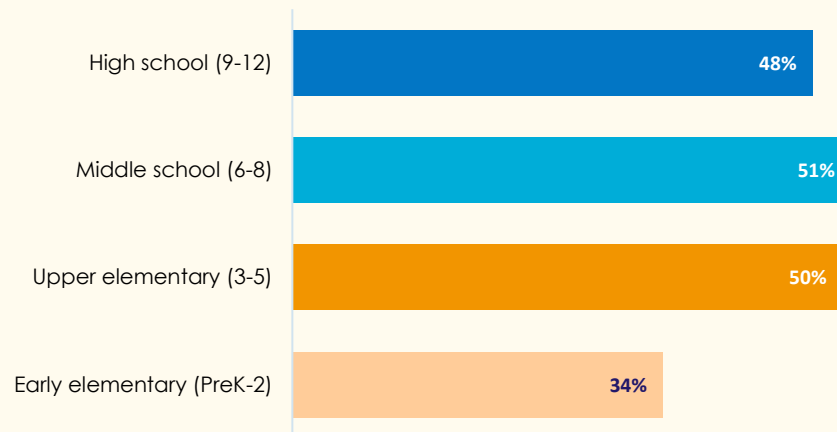


3. Pressure to raise math achievement is strongest in the upper grades.

Educators report considerable pressure to improve math results, especially beyond the early grades. Thirty-four percent say they feel a lot of pressure to raise achievement in early elementary, compared with 50 percent in upper elementary, 51 percent in middle school, and 48 percent in high school.

Figure 3

How much pressure—if any—do you face to increase student math achievement at the following grade levels? Percent selecting "a lot"



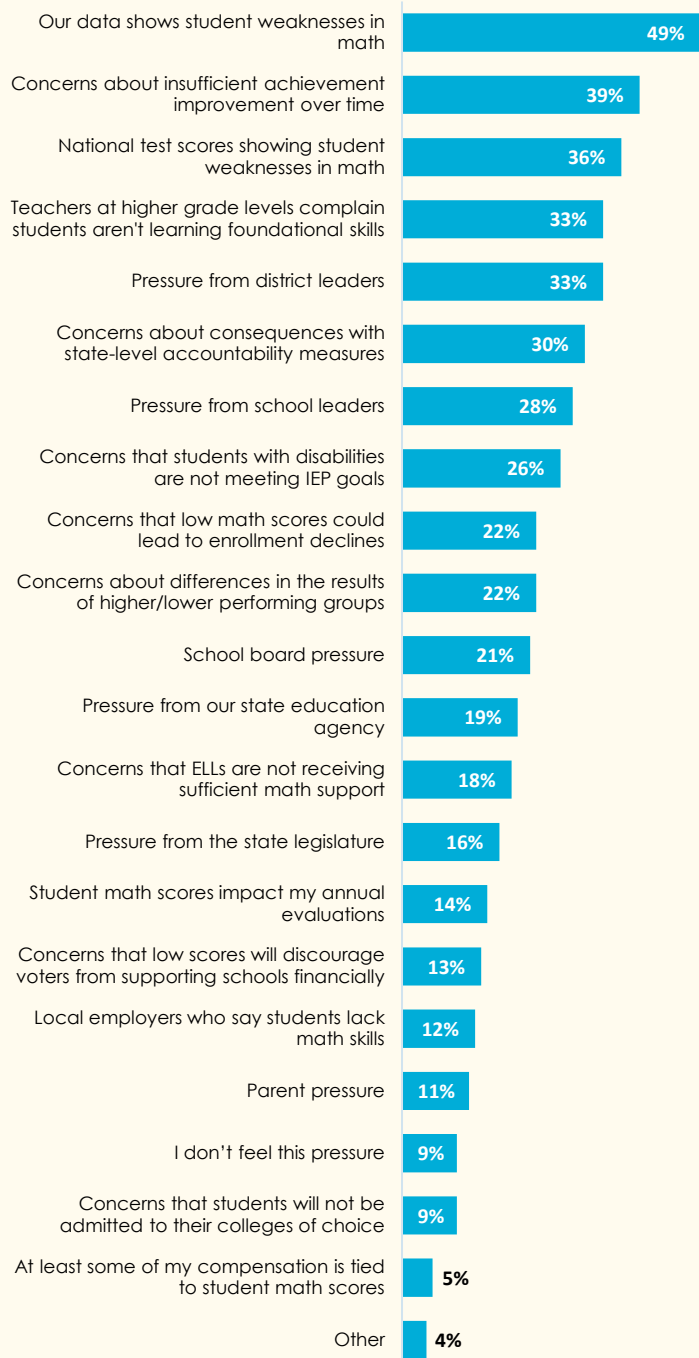
4. Pressure to improve middle and high school math is driven by what local data show.

Among those who feel pressure to increase middle and/or high school math achievement, the most commonly cited reason (selected by 49 percent of educators) is straightforward: their schools' own data show student weaknesses in math.

Other leading reasons include concerns about insufficient achievement improvement over time (39 percent), national test scores showing student weaknesses in math (36 percent), teachers at higher grade levels complaining that students are not learning foundational skills at lower grade levels (33 percent), and pressure from district leaders (33 percent).

Figure 4

If you feel pressure to increase middle and/or high school math achievement, what are the MAIN reasons? Select all that apply.



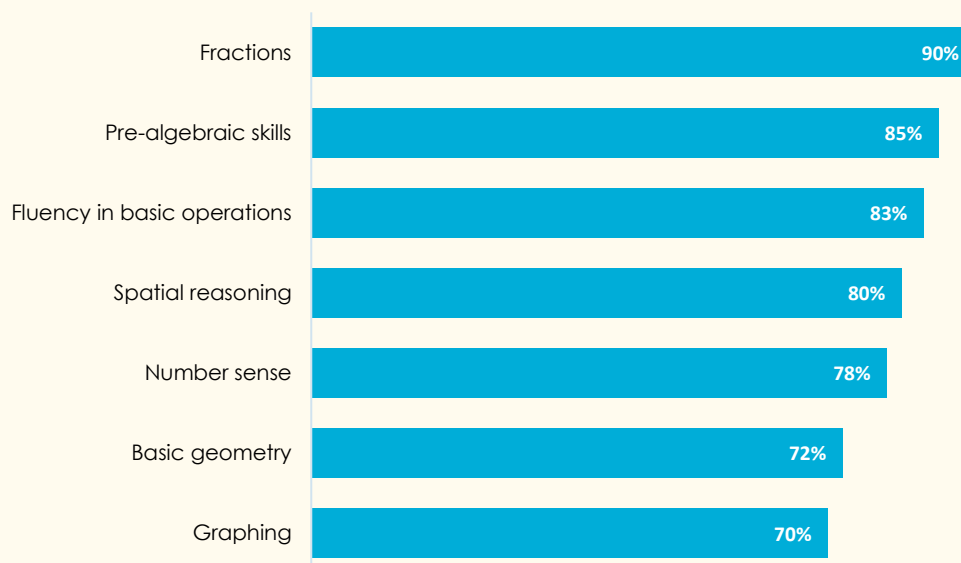
5. Educators say unfinished foundational skills are a major reason students struggle to make progress in math.

When asked about the foundational skills that students have not yet fully acquired, educators point to a broad range of unfinished learning. The most commonly cited area is fractions (90 percent), followed by pre-algebraic skills (85 percent), and fluency in basic operations (83 percent).

Large shares also identify spatial reasoning (80 percent), number sense (78 percent), basic geometry (72 percent), and graphing (70 percent). Taken together, these responses suggest that educators view students' math difficulties as stemming from a range of unfinished foundational skills rather than from any single area of weakness.

Figure 5

Are most of your students struggling to progress academically in math because they have yet to fully acquire these foundational skills?



Key Contributors



Holly Kurtz directs the EdWeek Research Center, which produces standalone studies as well as analyses for Education Week and special reports. Holly began working at Education Week in 2014 after earning a Ph.D. in 2013 from the University of Colorado at Boulder's School of Education and completing a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Colorado at Denver's School of Public Affairs. Prior to attending graduate school, she spent 11 years covering education and other topics for newspapers in Florida, Alabama, and Colorado.



Sterling Lloyd is the assistant director of the EdWeek Research Center. In this capacity, he manages data analyses and the development of surveys for data-driven journalism. Since joining the research center in 2005, he has authored articles on college- and work-readiness, school finance, student achievement, and other prominent topics in K-12 education.



Alex Harwin is a quantitative research analyst for the EdWeek Research Center. They work on a wide variety of projects, from marquee annual reports to data-driven reporting in collaboration with the Education Week newsroom. Alex received an education at Stanford and UT, earning degrees in Sociology and policy analysis