K12 Lens

K-12 Lens: A Survey Report from Frontline Education

Strategies for Strengthening School District Operations

The Frontline Research and Learning Institute houses comprehensive national datasets that track metrics crucial to K-12 leaders' decision-making. Through its white paper series, it shares key data trends and findings, aiming to support K-12 leaders so they can focus on what they care about most – shaping the hearts and minds of students. To enhance the Institute's existing dataset, the Institute issued a survey exploring district operations with the goal of tracking these metrics over time.

Executive Summary

The Frontline Research and Learning Institute is committed to equipping school leaders with actionable data and practical resources. In this inaugural K-12 Lens: A Survey Report from Frontline Education, we present key insights derived from the responses of nearly 700 K-12 administrators. This survey included questions that explore challenges related to past, current, and prospective district operations. Three key areas of focus for enhancing district operations emerged from the data:

1. Growing human capital

2. Supporting students holistically

3. Protecting essential district resources

The goal of this report is to share data that encourages reflection. By leveraging these insights, district leaders can chart a course towards improved outcomes for both students and staff, aligning their efforts with overarching trends in K-12 education.

Introduction

Riding a new wave of expectations and calls for transparency, the world of K-12 education is changing fast. In recent years, schools have faced fresh challenges, pushing them to get creative and find ways to adapt. Districts are being asked to do more than before. Among the growing list of tasks include incorporating new technology, supporting students' mental health, providing healthcare on-site, adapting teaching methods to help students catch up, and adjusting policies to address student populations with greater needs.

Some districts face challenges in securing the resources needed to complete these tasks, including ongoing staff shortages, growing class sizes, and curriculum changes. Disconnected systems for student and staff management combined with large amounts of data and tedious manual processes make things even more complicated.

We know that districts can refine operations to improve outcomes for staff and students and that they are dedicated to doing so. However, a crucial first step is to identify the greatest opportunities for improvement. Where should districts focus their time, energy, and resources?

To learn more about the operations that offer the greatest opportunity for district improvement, we surveyed nearly 700 K-12 district staff members during the 2023-24 school year. Participants included district and school-level administrators, curriculum directors, school-based health care providers, district business leaders, informational technology administrators, human resources practitioners, and directors of student services. Participants work at every grade level of K-12 education and in suburban, urban, and rural locales nationwide.

Where should districts focus their time, energy, and resources?

After carefully analyzing their responses, we identified the following as three essential themes that districts can target to improve operations and maximize outcomes for staff and students:

Critical Themes for District Operation Improvement

1. Growing human capital

2. Supporting students holistically

3. Protecting essential district resources

The rest of this report delves into these three critical opportunities, using findings from our data to illustrate them. Recognizing district staff as the foundation of K-12 education, the report begins with a deep dive into human capital. It spotlights district operations that can be addressed to improve the employee experience, including recruiting, engagement, and retention. It then explores the ways in which schools can boost student well-being by focusing on students' physical, social-emotional, and academic success. Its final section discusses the ways in which districts are currently managing essential resources, like funding and physical assets, which make teaching and learning possible.

Findings at a Glance

Growing Human Capital	Supporting Students Holistically	Protecting Essential District Resources
67% Note increased staffing difficulty for participating districts in the past year.	**Track EWI for grades 1-5** (early warning indicators of risk) like attendance, behavior, and coursework.	**1/4 Lack confidence in budgeting** for future technology needs.
41% Report a staff retention rate between 81 and 90%.	**1/2 Know for sure which students** are receiving intervention based on EWI data.	**45% Saw decreased funding** due to legislative changes.
96%+ Believe professional development will lead to greater engagement and retention.	**1/3 Know the percentage of students in their districts** who are chronically absent.	**#1 Tech challenge** is boosting cybersecurity.

Growing Human Capital: Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining the Best Candidates

Though the teacher shortage has been a longstanding topic of conversation, the lack of comprehensive data has made it difficult to fully understand the staffing landscape nationwide. This has led to differing opinions among experts regarding the existence, causes, and impacts of the shortage. Some argue that the challenge stems from a national shortfall in new candidates entering the workforce pipeline, while others see it as a more localized issue. There are also debates about whether it's a growing crisis, or an uneven distribution of a sufficient supply of teachers across regions, grade levels, and subjects.

While some states diligently keep track of their teaching staff, many struggle to get a complete picture of annual needs and unfilled positions. Shortage estimates are often inadequate because they are either outdated, limited in scope, or not consistently aligned to a clearly defined construct of "shortage."

The Institute has remained dedicated to tackling these data gaps by helping districts track shortage metrics and using its own robust datasets to report on national K-12 staffing patterns. This report seeks to build upon and enhance the Institute's previous discoveries by exploring how administrators' view recruiting and staffing in their districts.

In recent years, addressing teacher shortages has become more urgent than ever before. Experts argue that the best strategy for remedying learning loss is to increase the amount of high-quality instruction students receive. However, districts experiencing teacher shortages will likely find it challenging to do so. Understanding the national teacher shortage, including the locations most affected by it and the positions that are most difficult to staff, will help districts tailor recruiting, hiring, and retention strategies. In this section we aim to unravel the teacher shortage mystery by answering the following questions:

Guiding Questions

1. **How do administrators perceive staffing in their districts?**

2. **What strategies are districts using to combat shortage effects and what opportunities exist?**

How do administrators perceive staffing in their districts?

When asked to name the biggest changes in their districts in the past three years, survey respondents were quick to list a variety of factors related to human capital. An analysis of hundreds of open-ended responses reveals that districts are experiencing decreased candidate supply, increased turnover, inadequate staffing, and new hires with greater professional learning needs. One respondent explained:

> *"Staffing has seen the most change in our district. There are too few teachers entering the profession. We are short staffed, so teachers are covering multiple classrooms at a time. Each and every day there is a coverage plan as we lack the staff needed to provide the level of instruction and staff-to-student ratio recommended. Teachers are constantly being asked to do more for low pay. They're getting burned out and leaving the profession."*
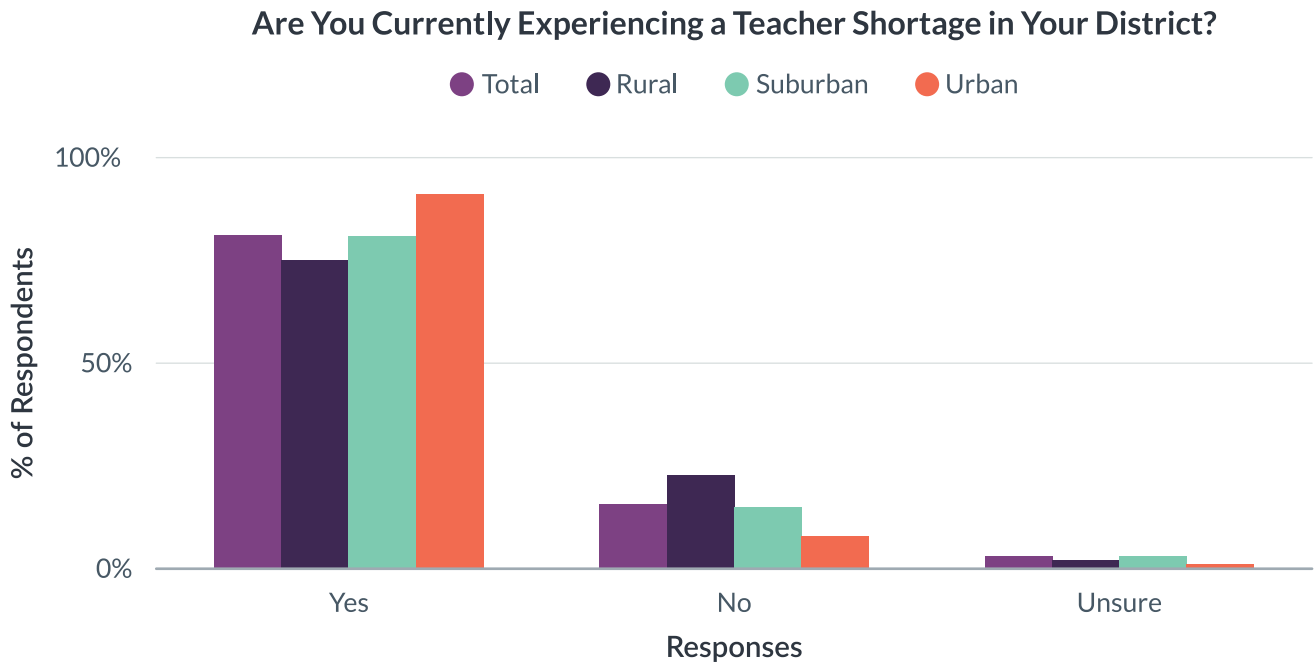
While the majority of respondents indicated that they are currently experiencing staff shortages in their districts, the data suggests that geographical location and subject area affect human capital factors like candidate supply. See findings 1-4, below.

1. Staff Shortages Are Pervasive

The largest share of respondents indicated that they are currently experiencing a staff shortage in their districts. However, the shortage is felt most in urban districts and least in rural districts. Figure 1 displays the percentages of those who indicated that their district is experiencing a shortage of teachers. The data is segmented by district location.

Figure 1 | Percentage of Respondents Whose Districts Are Experiencing Teacher Shortage

Are You Currently Experiencing a Teacher Shortage in Your District?

2. Most Districts Are In Need of Special Educators, Substitute Teachers, and Paraprofessionals

According to survey respondents, the shortage impact also differs by content area. While more than three-quarters of respondents indicated that they are in need of special educators and substitute teachers, less than one-quarter indicated that they lack speech therapists. See Figure 2 for percentages of respondents who indicated that they are experiencing a shortage in each content area.

Figure 2 | *Percent of Respondents Reporting That Their District Is Experiencing a Shortage by Content Area*
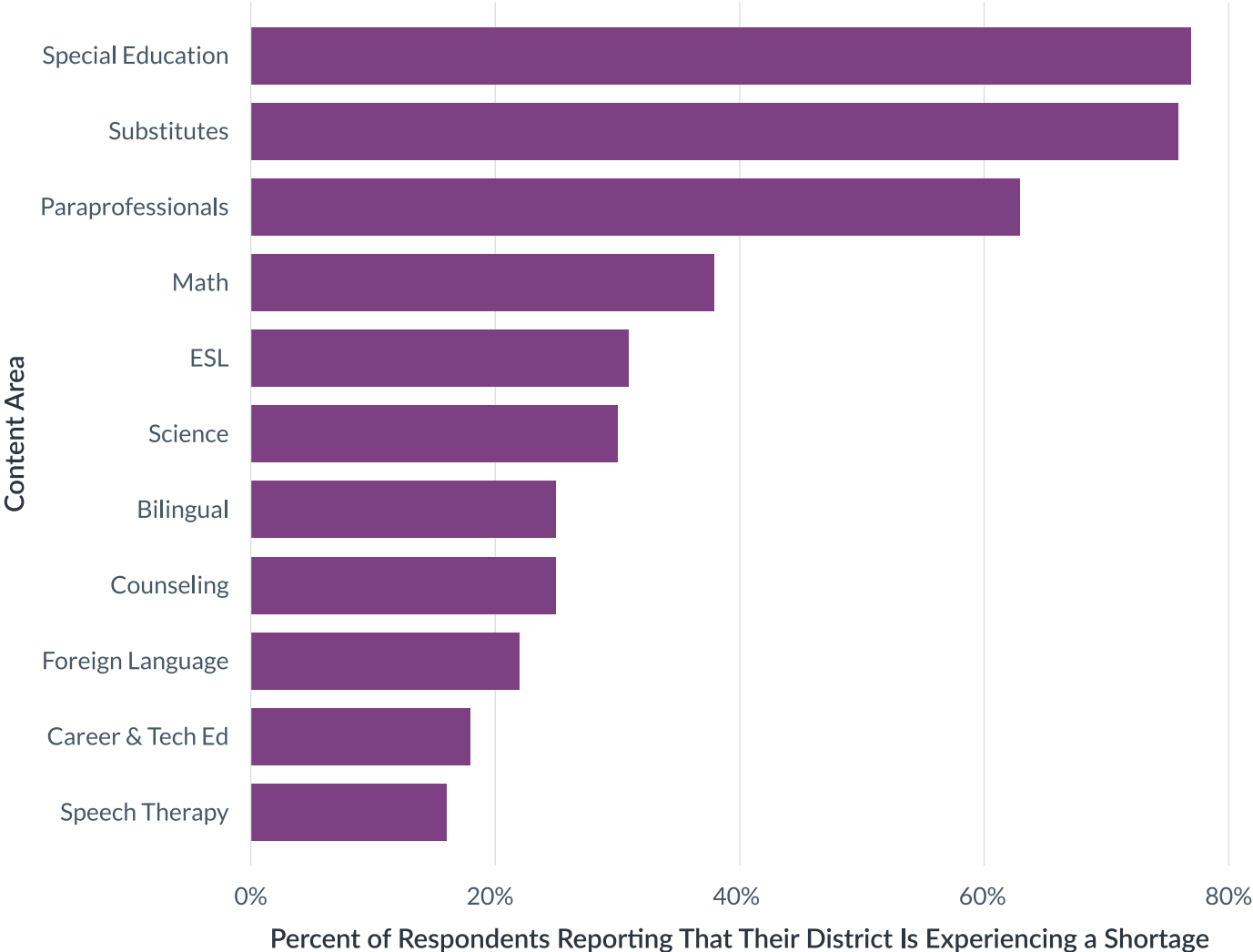
3. Hiring Has Become More Difficult

Two-thirds of all participants indicated that hiring has become more challenging for them in the past year, with urban districts, once again, experiencing the greatest challenge. Figure 3 displays the percentages of respondents who indicated that hiring has become more difficult, stayed the same, or become easier in their districts.

Figure 3 | *Changes in Perception of Hiring Ease*
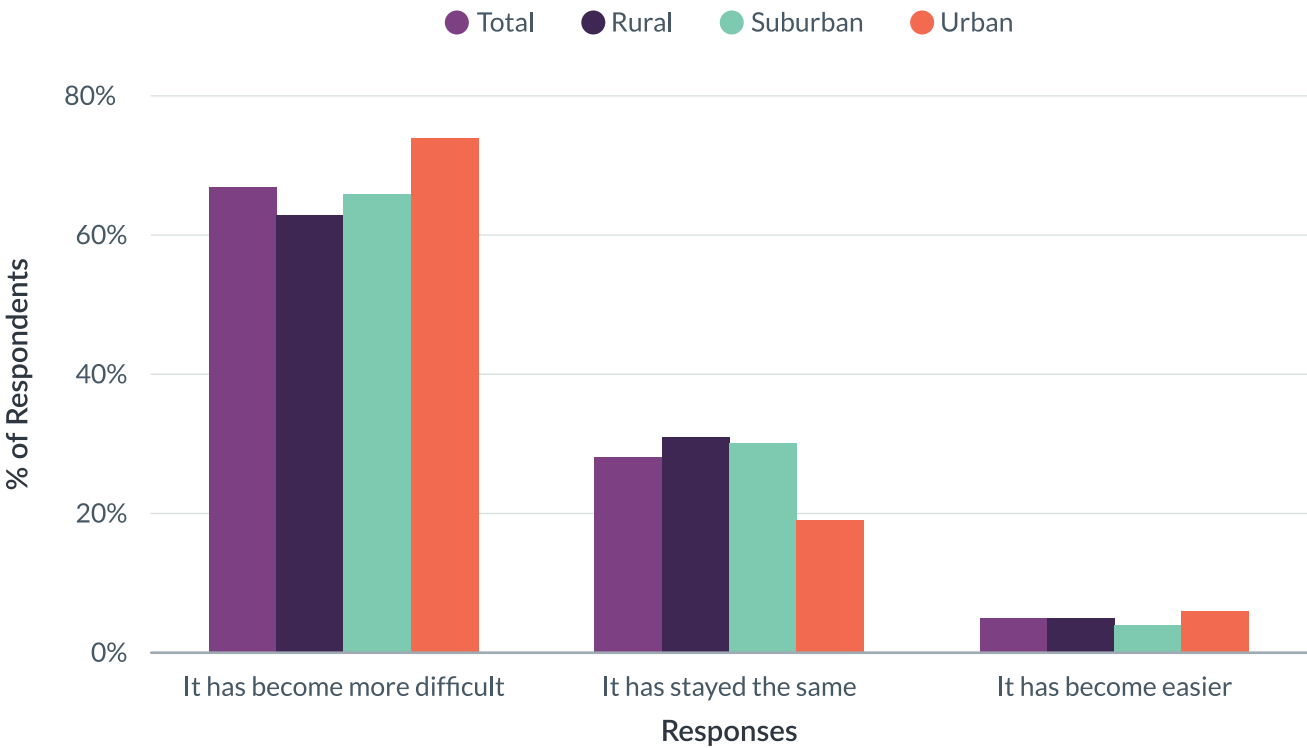
4. Hiring and Retention Remain High Needs

The largest share of survey respondents indicated that their district retained between 81-90% of teachers last year. When considering the difficulty of attracting new teachers, this rate indicates that districts are still losing a considerable number of educators. While reasons for leaving their jobs remains unknown, the reality is that these districts will have to strategize to boost recruiting, hiring, and retention. Table 1 displays three ranges of retention rates and the percentage of respondents who selected each.

Table 1 | *Rate of Teacher Retention and Estimated Teacher Turnover*

Retention Rate	Percentage of Respondents
91–100%	29%
81–90%	41%
</=80%	20%
Unsure	11%

What strategies are districts using to combat teacher shortage effects and what opportunities exist?

Amid widespread difficulties in recruiting, hiring, and retaining talent, it is no surprise that districts are actively pursuing strategies to bolster staff engagement. A significant number of respondents identified enhancing the employee experience as a top priority, aiming to increase job satisfaction and retention. Key actions towards this goal include providing teachers with impactful professional learning opportunities and streamlining human resources (HR) processes through automation. By freeing up HR practitioners to concentrate on strategic initiatives, districts can mitigate disengagement and turnover risks.

The data also reveals opportunities for districts to capitalize on professional learning needs, focusing professional learning offerings on relevant knowledge and skills that teachers can immediately apply to meet current classroom challenges. This approach not only fosters deeper engagement among existing staff but also prepares newcomers for the increasing demands of the job.
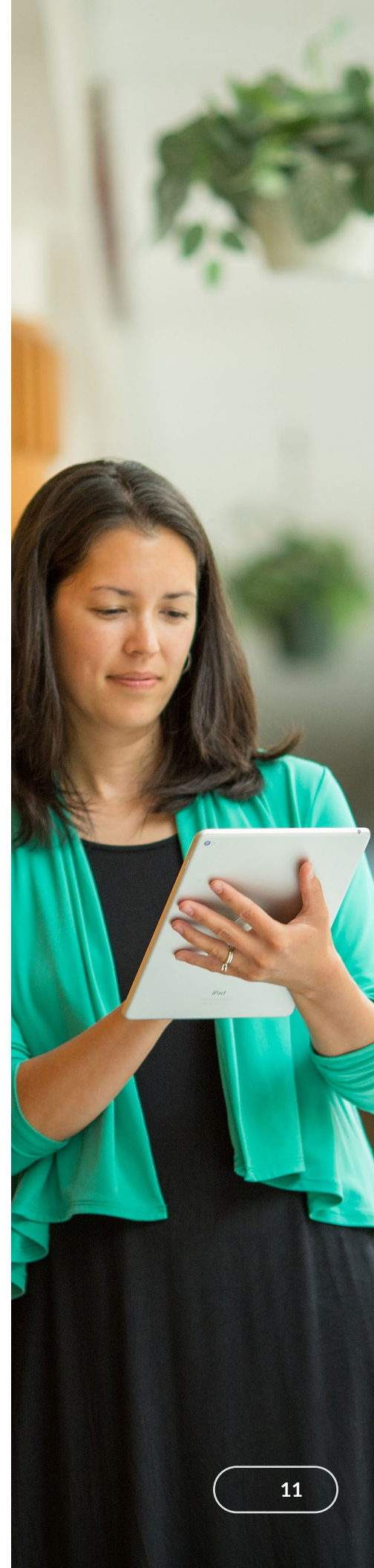
1. Professional Learning Priorities: Buy-In, Transfer, and Personalization

Almost all respondents indicated that they are prioritizing the following shifts in professional learning because they believe it will lead to greater engagement and retention:

- **99%** Increased transfer of new learning to classroom practice;

- **98%** More teacher buy-in to professional learning agendas;

- **97%** Greater connection between professional learning and teacher goals; and,

- **96%** Increased alignment between teacher evaluation results and professional learning activities.

However, less than half of participants indicated that their teacher evaluation systems currently include a way to facilitate personalization based on evaluation results and teacher goals (see Figure 4). This may indicate that aligning evaluation and professional learning systems to increase personalization and engagement is a key opportunity area for district improvement.

Figure 4 | Proportion of Respondents with Evaluation Systems Capable of Personalizing Professional Learning Based on Evaluation Results and Teacher Goals
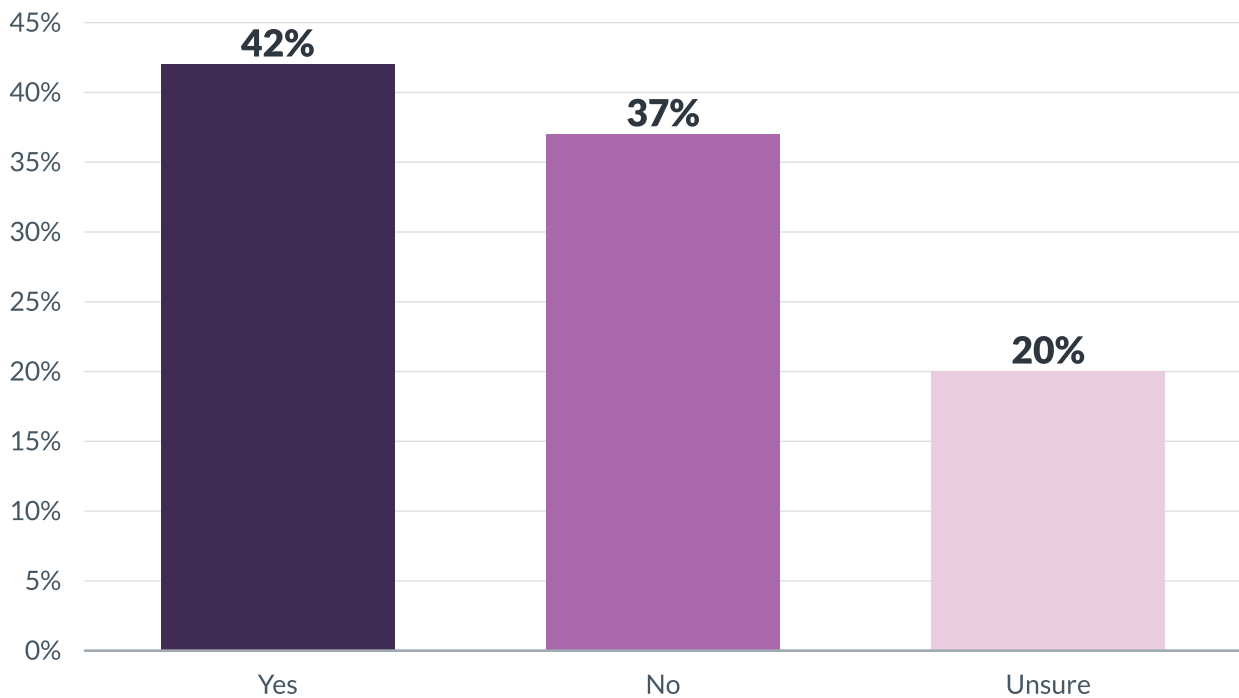
2. Coaching and Learning Communities Are the Most Engaging Forms of Professional Learning

The two professional learning offerings that respondents felt had the biggest impact on boosting teacher engagement and retention were mentorship through coaching and participating in professional learning communities. Figure 5 displays the share of respondents who feel that each type of professional learning provides teachers with growth that ultimately leads to retention.

Figure 5 | Professional Development That Boosts Engagement and Retention
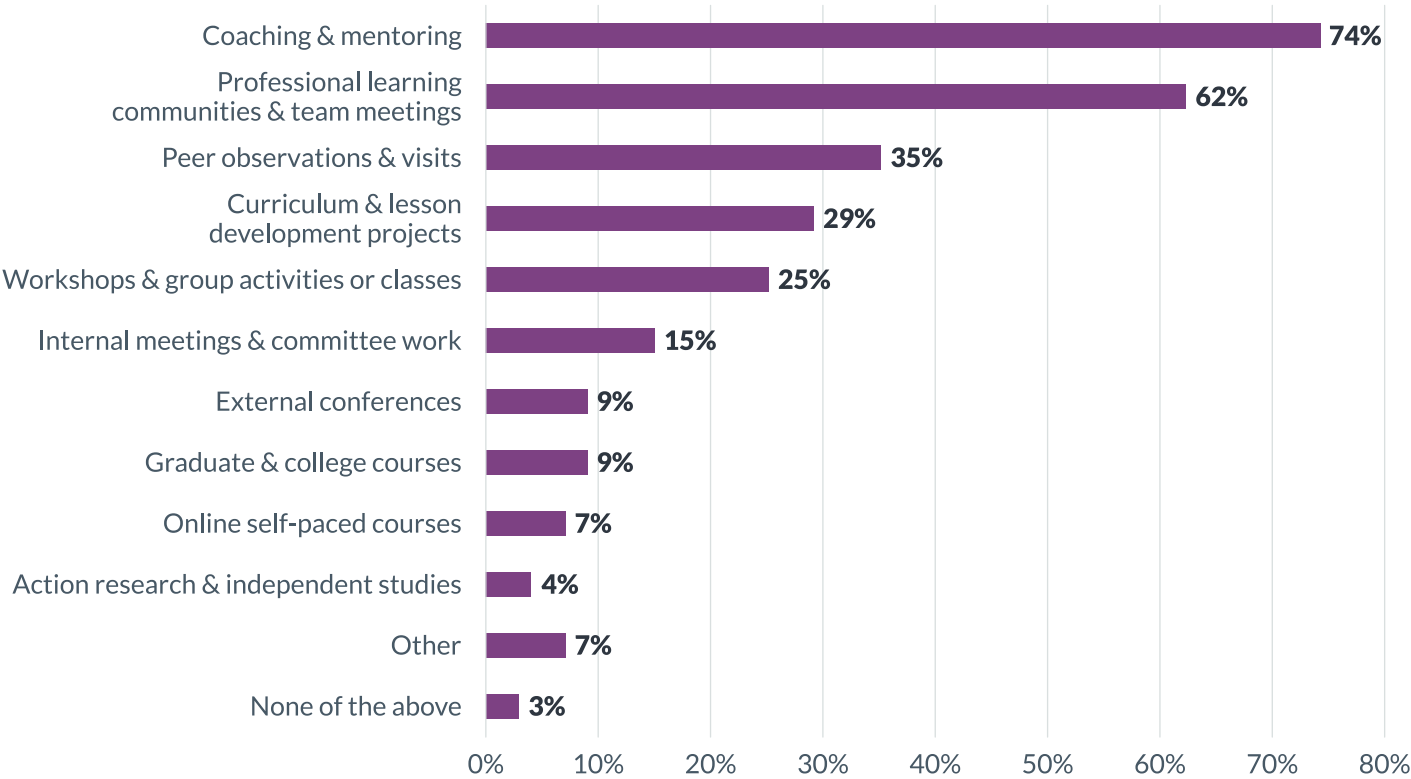
3. Instructional Shifts Provide Opportunities for Engagement and Retention Through Professional Learning

It is well-documented that high quality professional learning boosts teacher retention. Less clear are which forms of professional learning and the topics they address that lead to greater engagement and retention. While districts are offering ongoing professional learning, some respondents indicated that they aren't as engaging as they could be. One explained, "The districts are not offering professional development in the areas that are being the most affected."

Survey responses bring those areas to light. Participants shared hundreds of recent changes to their districts' operations. Many directly impact teaching and learning, making them ideal areas for professional learning. Stemming from recent increases in 1:1 technology programs, districts are witnessing significant upticks in digital assets, device usage, and application adoption. Increased access to new technology has allowed districts to depart from traditional teacher-centric approaches and embrace student-centered-learning models. Consequently, these changes have introduced new challenges in classroom management that are intensified by heightened student mental health needs. Table 2 showcases excerpts from our participants' responses, illustrating these instructional changes, which present optimal targets for relevant and engaging professional development opportunities.

Table 2 | Instructional Targets for Professional Learning

|	
Digital Tools	*"More technology. We are now one-to-one whereas 3-5 years ago, we had a tech lab that the students visited once a week plus one computer in each classroom for special use (or rotations). All of our classrooms now also have amazing interactive boards rather than projectors that we had just over 3 years ago."*
Student-Centered Approaches	*"We are shifting to true student-centered instruction within student-centered classrooms. We are striving for active engagement through the implementation of real-world connections that make every content area real to students."* *"Student choice in demonstrating competency. While we have a long way to go, we are working hard to ensure students may demonstrate their understanding in many ways rather than paper pencil tests."*
Classroom Management	*"We have seen a significant change in student behavior in the classroom. Classroom behavior impacts learning to a much greater extent. Students are unable to maintain focus and there are more frequent distractions to learning."*
Social-Emotional Learning	*"There is a great lack of social-emotional abilities. Teachers need more flexibility in their curriculum and schedule so that they can adequately address social-emotional learning within the classroom."*

From Data to Action

Addressing staffing challenges is crucial. Our data supports and refines the school staffing shortage narrative by sharing district leaders' perceptions of the hiring landscape. It underscores the urgency of identifying and implementing effective strategies to boost staff engagement and retention. The following emerge as key actions to address the staffing issue:

- Integrating teacher evaluation and professional learning software systems can enable districts to more efficiently personalize teacher learning. Personalized learning opportunities lead to higher levels of engagement and transfer to classroom practice.

- Coaching and professional learning communities are particularly impactful methods for boosting engagement and retention.

- Recent shifts, including increased reliance on digital tools, student-centered approaches, increased classroom management challenges, and social-emotional learning present clear targets for tailored professional development initiatives.

By addressing these challenges and leveraging opportunities for growth, districts can work towards ensuring a well-supported and effective teaching workforce, ultimately benefiting student learning outcomes.
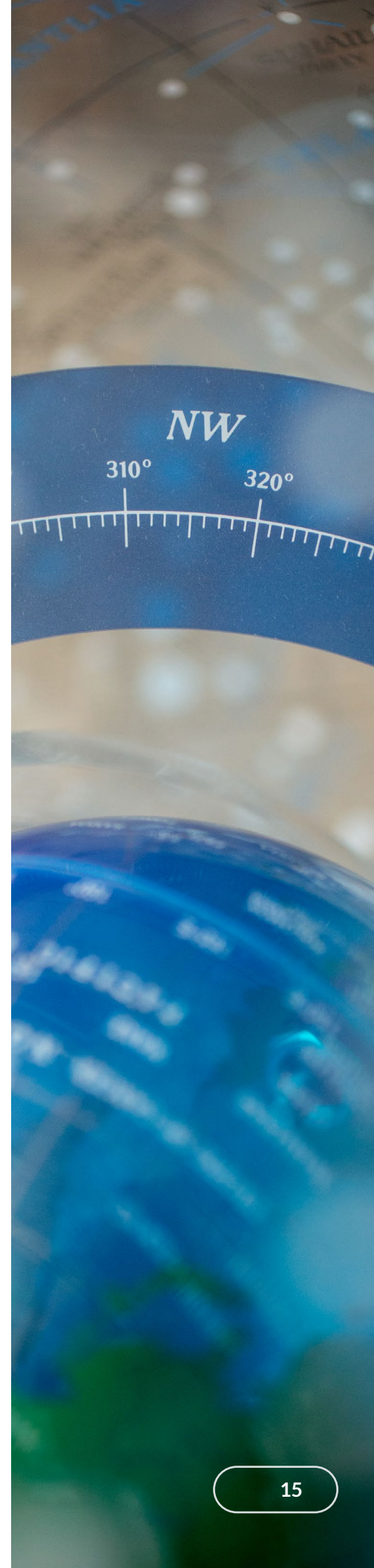
Supporting Students Holistically: Nurturing Their Physical, Mental, and Academic Health

The data suggests that student needs also present a significant opportunity for improving district operations. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the needs of K-12 students surged to unprecedented levels, with mental health and social-emotional coping at the heart of many challenges. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reveals that 87% of public schools witnessed a detrimental impact on students' social-emotional development during the 2021-22 school year. Similarly, 84% noted a decline in behavioral development, leading to increased incidents of classroom disruptions, disrespect toward educators, and unauthorized device usage.

These issues underscore the urgent need for support from educational leaders. Rising rates of chronic absenteeism and learning loss in key academic areas, like mathematics and reading, further contribute to and highlight the strain on students' mental well-being.

Addressing students' mental health and social-emotional needs is paramount, requiring comprehensive strategies to foster academic and emotional resilience. While schools have taken on the task of identifying and supporting students with the greatest needs, our findings indicate that many are still in the process of developing the necessary infrastructure to address them.

Guiding Questions

1. **What opportunities exist for improving operations to boost student outcomes?**

2. **What services are districts providing to support students' success?**

What opportunities exist for improving operations to boost student outcomes?

[FINDINGS]

1. Students' Mental Health Is the Central Need

Echoing NCES' findings, our participants emphasized the importance of focusing on students' mental and emotional well-being to enhance academic outcomes.

They also pointed out factors related to students' home or community environments that can affect their mental and emotional well-being. These include the quality of the relationships between their caregivers and their schools, financial security, and lifestyle factors that can interrupt learning, like student mobility.

Many respondents highlighted the connection between students' mental and social-emotional health and their attendance, behavior, and academic performance. They also mentioned the need for better identification of students who require intervention.

Finally, respondents discussed how issues related to human resources impact students' mental health. For example, some noted that inconsistent staffing negatively affects students' well-being, while others mentioned that an increase in behavioral challenges without added support leads to higher levels of stress and turnover among teachers. One administrator explained:
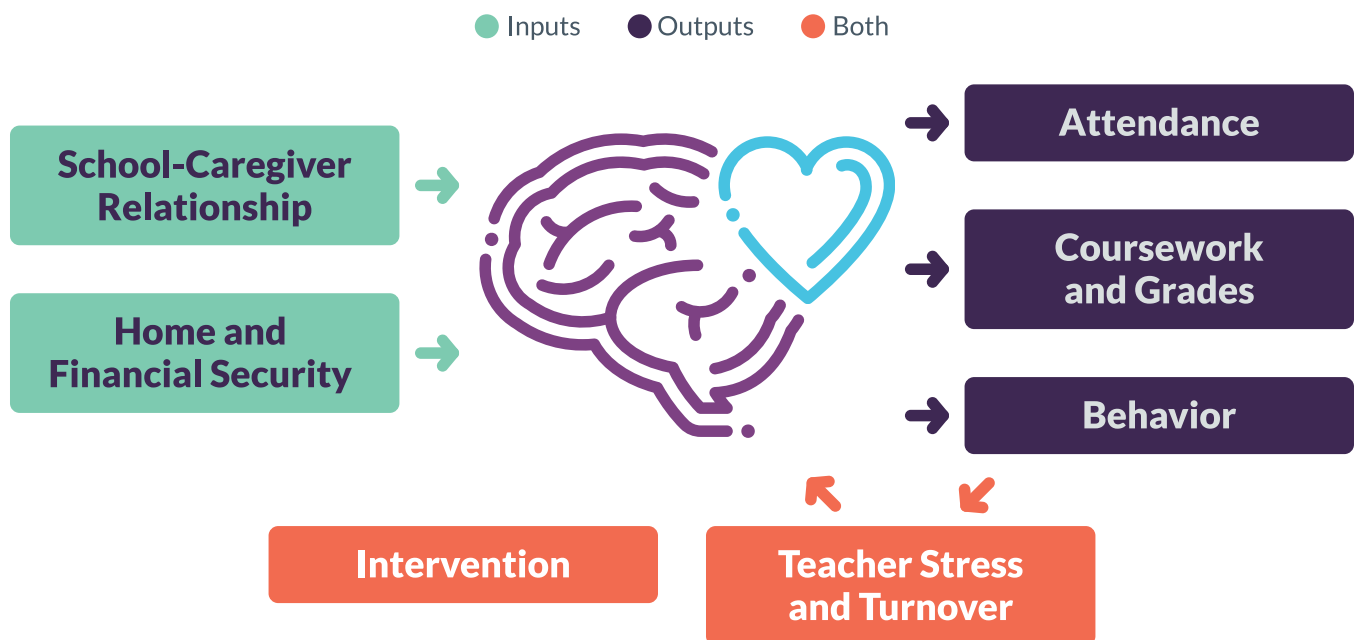
> "We have several factors influencing our students' success. They include a history of trauma, food insecurity, poverty, homelessness, and transience. The amount of students who need mental health support and interventions outnumbers the amount of spots that we have available. Our professionals who work with at-risk students and students who struggle with mental health are overloaded. There is not enough time to plan, collaborate, provide, and track interventions with fidelity. As a result, managing student behaviors takes priority and interferes with the ability to provide the highest quality instruction. We're seeing more staff stress and turnover resulting from some of these challenges."

Figure 6 depicts the complex relationships between the various mental health inputs and outputs that emerged from our dataset.

Figure 6 | *A Framework of Students' Social-Emotional Wellness*

A Framework of Students' Social-Emotional Wellness

● Inputs   ● Outputs   ● Both

School-Caregiver Relationship →

Home and Financial Security →

→ Attendance

→ Coursework and Grades

→ Behavior

Intervention

Teacher Stress and Turnover

What services are districts providing to support students' success?

Most districts have already transformed into full-service providers, aiming to meet their students' evolving needs. To support students' developmental health, districts are providing a variety of services. However, they are not always able to provide them in-house, likely due to infrastructure and staffing limitations.

Districts have also adapted quickly to address the growing mental health crisis by providing some support. Opportunities exist for districts to improve their mental health interventions by screening students regularly and using software to help document and track students' progress.

Finally, the data shows that while many districts are tracking early warning indicators of risk, like students' attendance, behavior, and grades, few are sure of the number of students who are receiving interventions based on these data points. Findings 1-5 describe these trends in greater detail.

1. Most Districts Are Providing Special Services but Staffing and Approaches Vary

A large majority of respondents indicated that their district provides services including occupational therapy, speech-language therapy, physical therapy, mental-behavioral health services, and nursing services. However, proportions of those who provide each service in-house varied to a greater extent. While 90% of respondents indicated that their districts provide speech-language therapy in-house, only 66% of respondents indicated that their districts provide mental-behavioral health services in house. See Figure 7, below.

Figure 7 | *Percentage of Districts That Provide Special Services Overall and In-house*
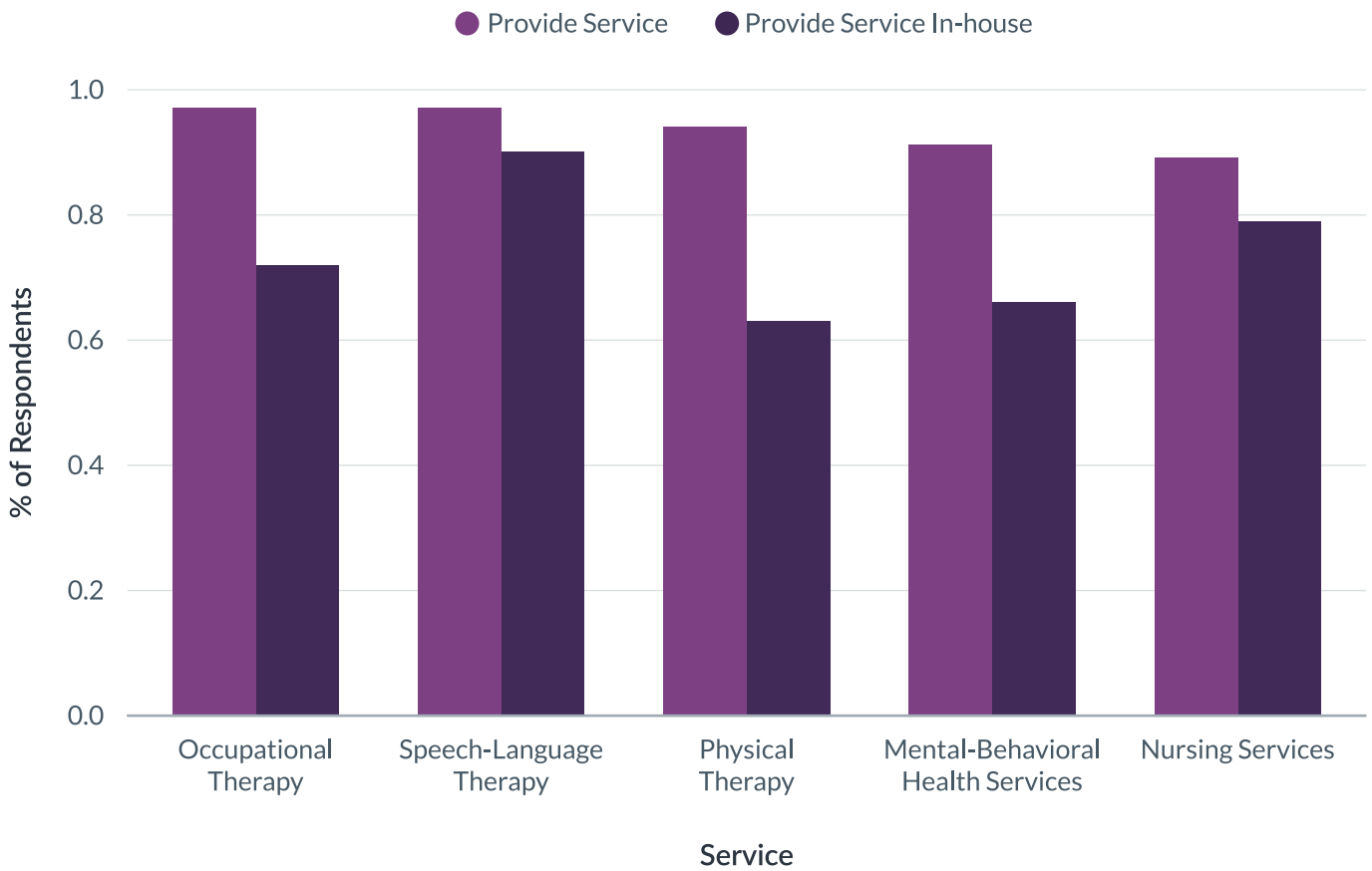
2. Student Access to School-Based Mental Health Services May Depend on District Location

While about two-thirds of all respondents indicated that their district provides students with in-house mental health services, that proportion changes drastically based on district location. A far greater percentage of suburban districts (78%) provide this support than rural districts (50%). See Figure 8, below.

Figure 8 | Proportion of Districts That Provide In-house Mental Health Support, by Location
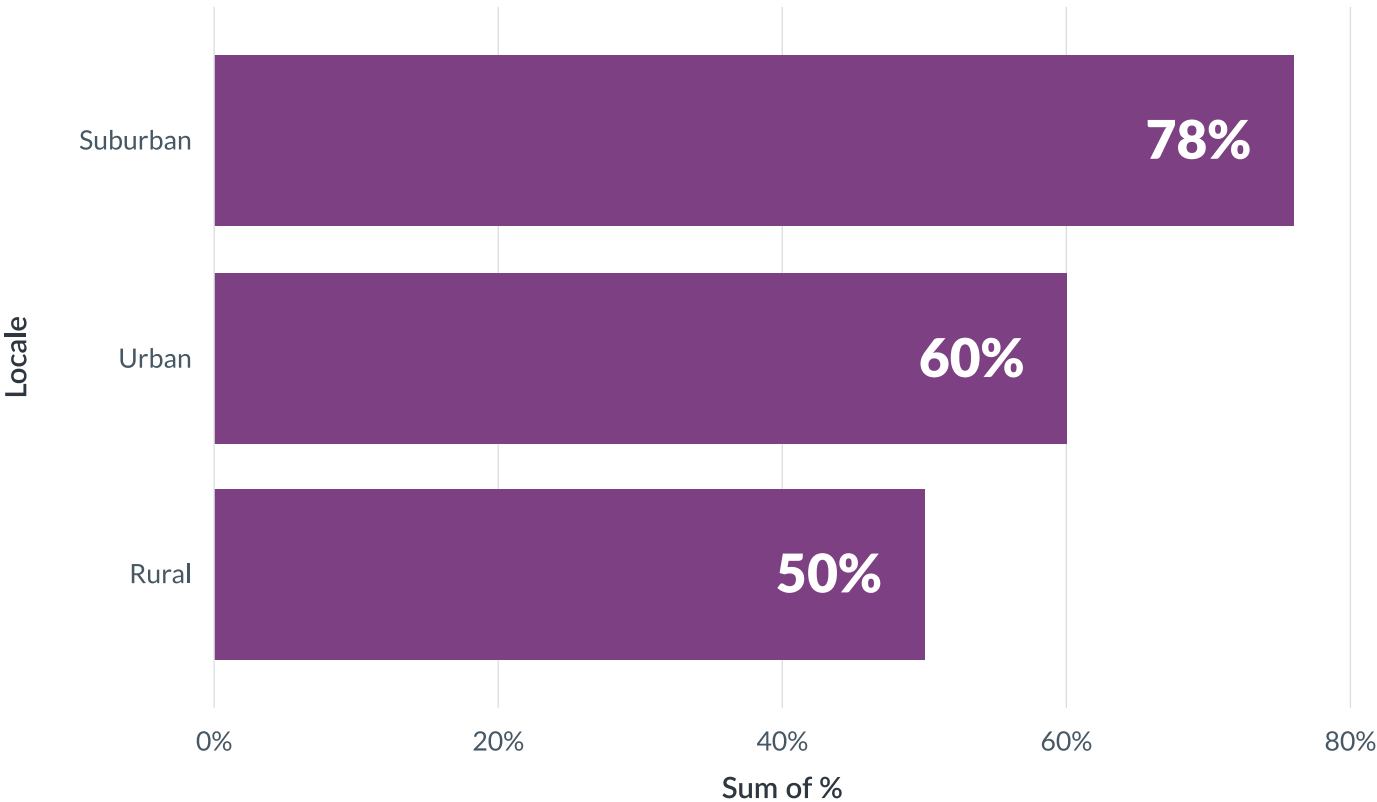
3. Districts Are Supporting Students' Mental Health but May Be Able to Increase Support Provided to Mental Health Providers

When asked which mental health services their districts are providing, almost three-quarters indicated that they had designated at least one employee to address students' mental health. While this is a great first step, supporting district mental health care providers is essential. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that as many as 1 in 5 children experience a mental disorder in a given year. For a district serving 2,500 students, that would amount to 500 students per year. Executing the identification, assessment, and intervention strategy, as well as manually documenting all sessions for 500 cases would likely be overwhelming and unsustainable for one or two employees.

However, far fewer respondents indicated that they have systems in place to support these individuals and their work. Only 22% said that they have a consistent mental health screening schedule and even less (18%) reported that they had a software tool to document students' mental health attributes. These two supports could save school-based mental health providers valuable time and energy so that they can focus on the important work of intervening. Figure 9 displays the share of respondents who indicated that their district provides each mental health service.

Figure 9 | Services Provided to Address Students' Mental Health Needs
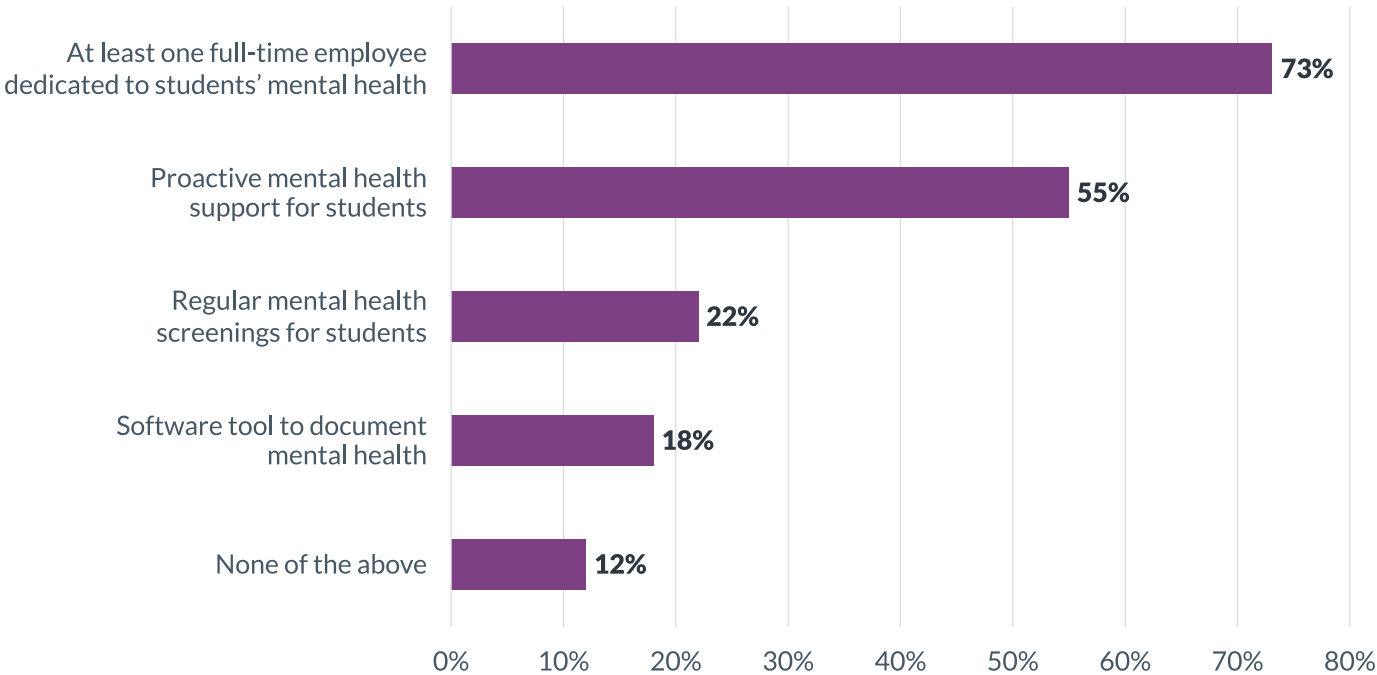
4. Many Districts Are Missing Key Opportunities to Identify At-risk Students

While most respondents indicated that their district tracks students' attendance, behavior, and academic data, few reported that their district uses that information to identify students in need of intervention. Just over half of respondents (52%) indicated that they are using data for this purpose at the elementary level, while only 40% reported using it at the middle school level, and 41% at the high school level. Almost one-third of respondents indicated that they are not using data on early warning indicators at any level. Figure 10 displays these results.

Figure 10 | *Tracking Early Warning Indicators by Grade Level*
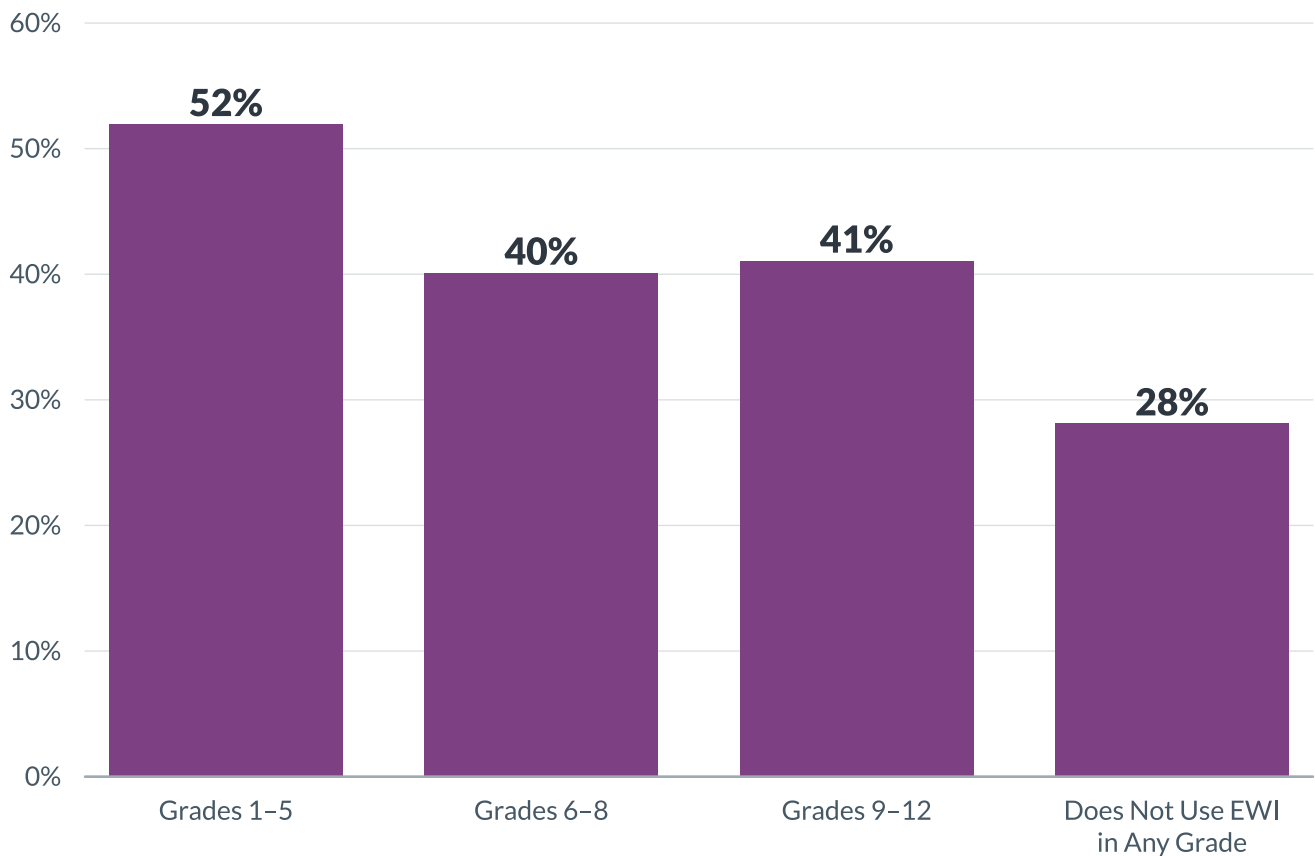
Chronic absenteeism is another key metric that can help districts identify at-risk students. When students are chronically absent from elementary school, they are unable to meet early learning milestones. Chronic absenteeism has been found to be a stronger predictive indicator of drop out before graduation as compared to test scores. In recent years, the rate of chronically absent students has doubled from about 15% during the 2018-19 school year to about 30% during the 2021-22 school year. This means that almost one-third of American students miss more than 10% of school days and are at increased risk of not completing high school. Knowing how many students in a district are chronically absent can help districts maximize intervention efforts. However, when asked to indicate the percentage of students who were chronically absent in their districts last year, most respondents indicated that they were unsure. See Figure 11.

Figure 11 | *Rate of Chronic Absenteeism*
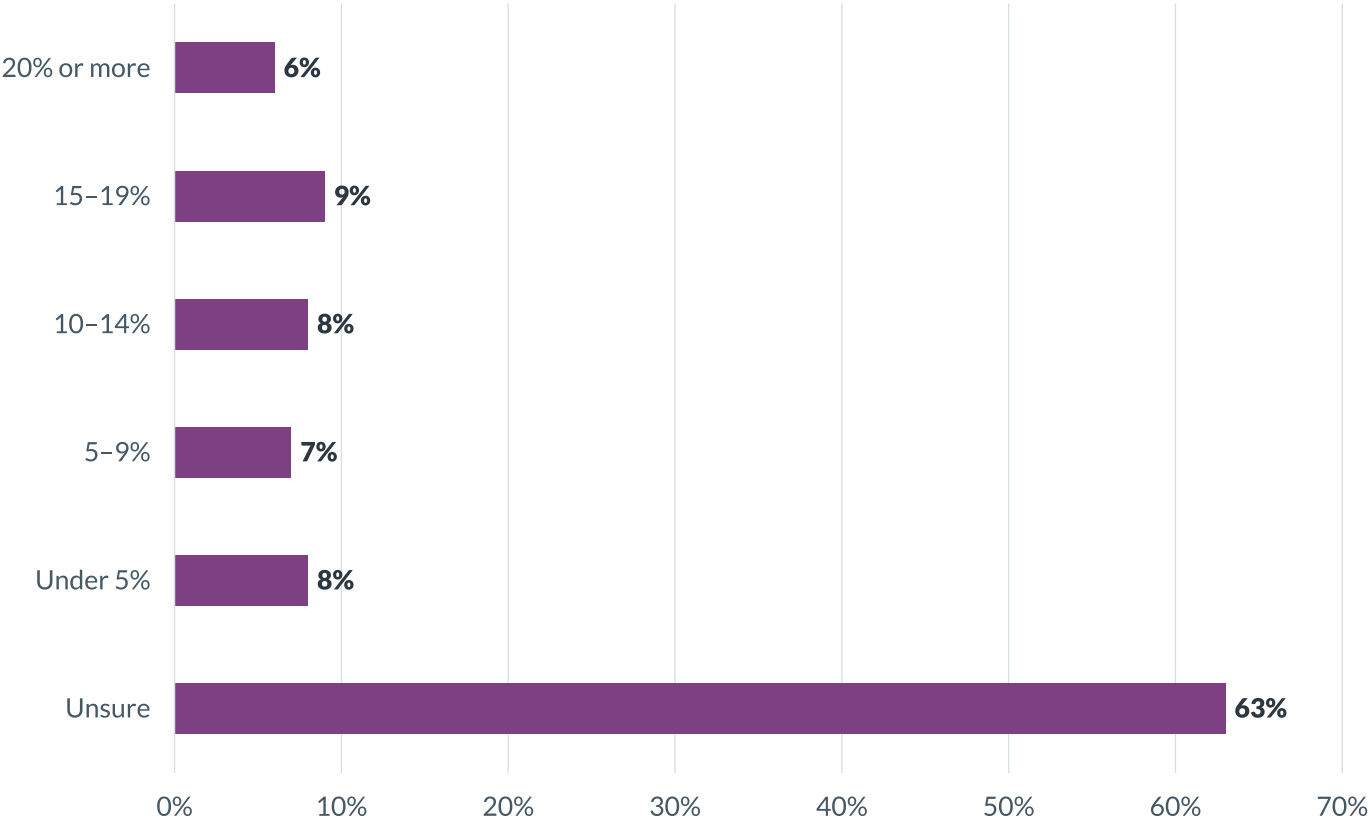
5. Only About Half of Districts That Track Early Warning Indicators Know How Many Students Receive Intervention

While districts may be collecting early warning indicator data, almost half of respondents were unsure as to the percentage of students who had been flagged by them as at-risk and received targeted interventions or support. Additionally, less than one-third of those who were sure indicated that the proportion was over 20%. See Figure 12 for the breakdown of responses.

Figure 12 | Proportion of Students Identified by Early Warning Indicators Who Received Targeted Support or Intervention
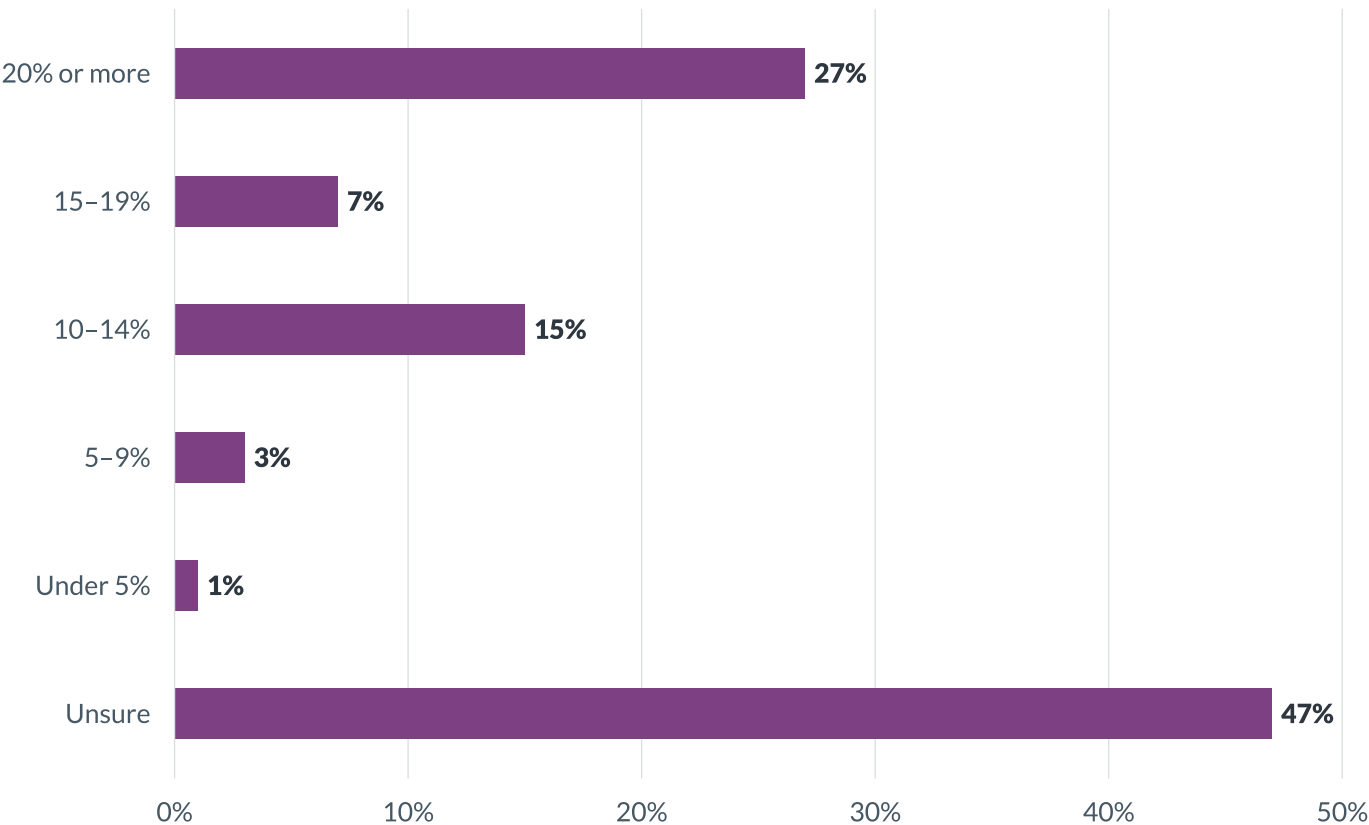
# From Data to Action

This section highlighted the need for comprehensive student support, particularly amid recent challenges. It underscored the profound impact on students' social-emotional and behavioral well-being, emphasizing the pivotal role of mental health support in academic success. Districts are providing various special services to their student populations. Below are strategies districts can consider:

- Understanding the factors that impact students' mental wellness and the outcomes of mental health challenges.

- Aiding overburdened district mental health providers with important supports, such as a software tool to document students' mental health needs and a schedule for mental health screenings.

- Using student attendance, behavior, and grades data to identify at-risk students at every grade level.

- Tracking chronic absenteeism, an important metric that is highly predictive of school dropout.

- Documenting the at-risk students who are receiving targeted support and intervention.

By adopting strategies to assess and nurture students holistically, districts can advance the support necessary for students to thrive in school and beyond.
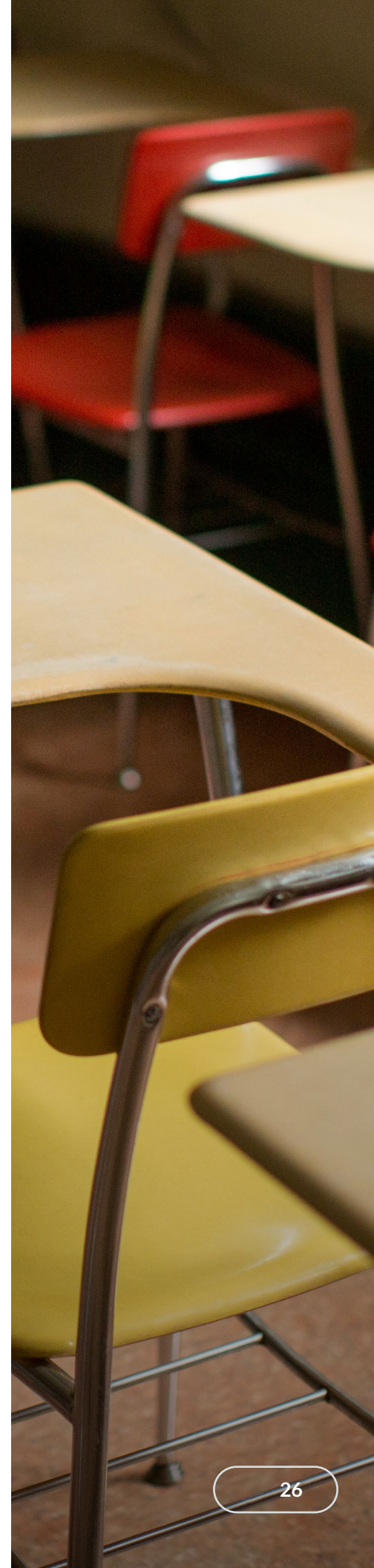
Protecting Essential District Resources

District resources represent another essential factor influencing operations. However, because monitoring and managing them often happen outside the classroom, they are not always considered first.

Recently, many districts saw an influx in funding resulting from federal programs to mitigate learning loss. Three waves of funding were provided to state and local education agencies beginning in the spring of 2020. Though funds could be used for a variety of initiatives, a large majority of districts used them to purchase new technology, initially to make remote learning possible. However, the drastic increase in technology assets created a ripple effect throughout teaching and learning, making these resources indispensable.

District business leaders and informational technologists are now charged with the responsibility of managing more technology assets than ever, mitigating the risks associated with student use of them, and acquiring and protecting the capital needed to ensure that teachers and students will continue to have access to them. Through a series of questions about budgeting, asset management, and district financial data analysis, we explore district resources as a third set of potential opportunities for operational improvement. The following questions guide our presentation of the findings:

Guiding Questions

1. **How has federal legislation impacted school funding?**

2. **How confident are district business leaders in meeting the increased technology needs of students and staff?**

3. **What challenges exist related to technology-based budgeting and what are the consequences of those challenges?**

How has federal legislation impacted school funding?

1. Districts Have Less Available Funding

When asked how school funding-related legislation has impacted their budgets in the past year, almost half of respondents, who had evaluated the implications, indicated that it has led to significant funding decreases. Although federal programs may have increased funding, influxes in unfunded federal and state mandates may be contributing to increased spending to ensure district compliance. For instance, 37 states and DC have passed laws related to the teaching of reading. To comply with these laws, many states are requiring districts to purchase new, evidence-based curricula. Additional costs related include purchasing new teaching and learning materials, paying for ongoing staff training, and in some cases creating and staffing new positions to support staff in-district. This is just one example of the many mandated line items that have been recently added to district budgets. Table 3 displays the proportions of respondents who indicated that legislation has led to decreases, increases, and little to no change in available funding.
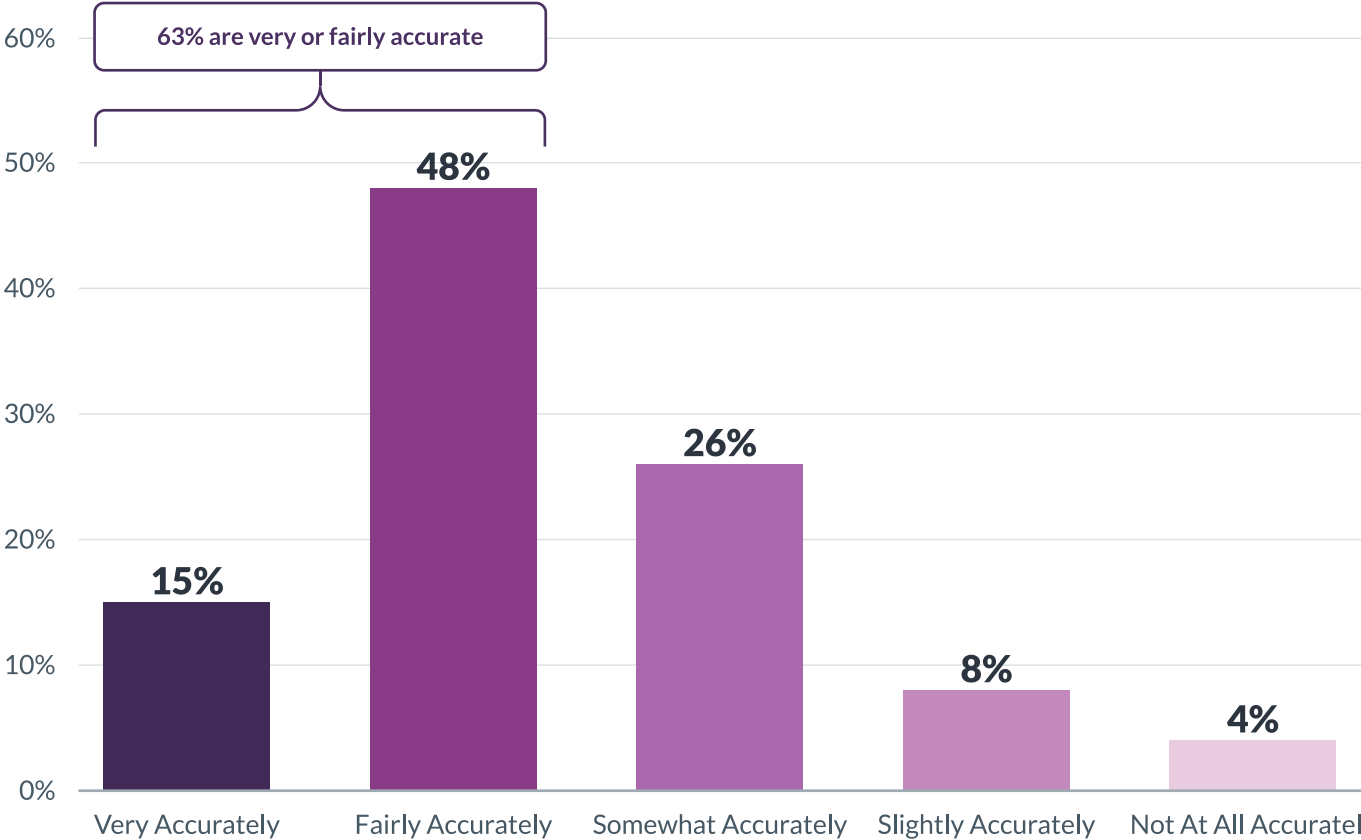
Table 3 | Impact of Legislation on Available Funding

It has led to significant decreases in our available funding	It has had minimal to no impact on our available funding	It has led to significant increase in our available funding
45%	31%	24%

2. Budget Predictions Are Mostly Accurate

Luckily, district business leaders have been able to anticipate these shifts and predict budget expenditures with accuracy. Eighty-eight percent indicated that their budgetary predictions for the last fiscal year were somewhat, fairly, or very accurate. See Figure 13.

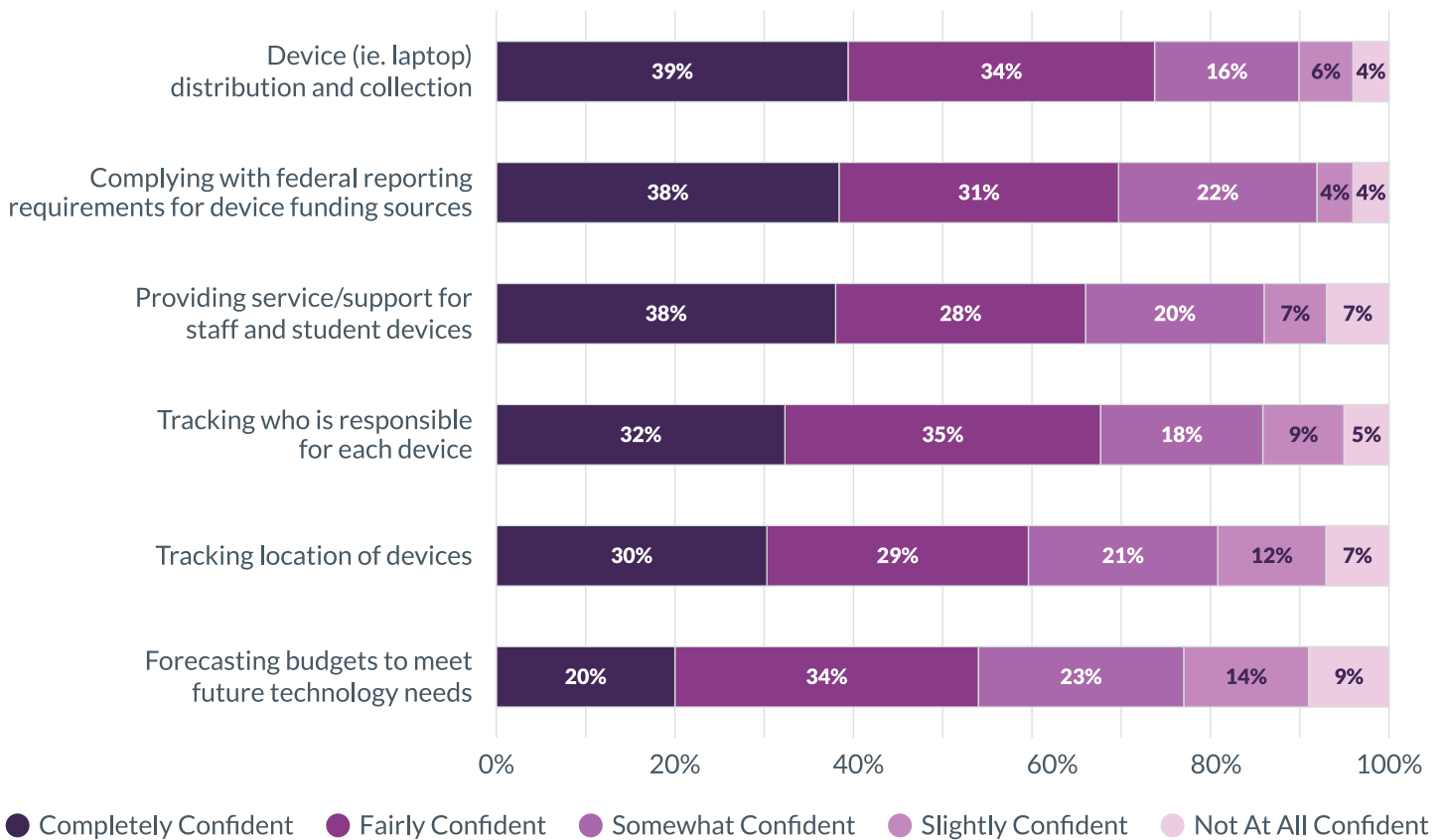*Figure 13* | *Percentage of Respondents Who Indicated That Their Budgetary Prediction Was Accurate*

63% are very or fairly accurate

- Very Accurately: 15%
- Fairly Accurately: 48%
- Somewhat Accurately: 26%
- Slightly Accurately: 8%
- Not At All Accurately: 4%

How confident are district business leaders in meeting increased IT needs?

[FINDINGS]

1. Districts Are Highly Confident in Day-to-day Tech Needs, Less Confident in Meeting Future Needs

Perhaps resulting from available funding instability, or from annual increases in unfunded mandates, only 20% of respondents indicated that they are completely confident in their ability to forecast budgets to meet future technology needs. Respondents were more confident in day-to-day management aspects like device distribution, federal reporting compliance, and providing service and support for devices. See Figure 14 for the proportions of respondents who are confident in their ability to manage each technology aspect.

Figure 14 | Confidence in Ability to Manage Technology Aspects

Legend:
● Completely Confident ● Fairly Confident ● Somewhat Confident ● Slightly Confident ● Not At All Confident

| Aspect	Completely Confident	Fairly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Slightly Confident	Not At All Confident
Device (ie. laptop) distribution and collection	39%	34%	16%	6%	4%
Complying with federal reporting requirements for device funding sources	38%	31%	22%	4%	4%
Providing service/support for staff and student devices	38%	28%	20%	7%	7%
Tracking who is responsible for each device	32%	35%	18%	9%	5%
Tracking location of devices	30%	29%	21%	12%	7%
Forecasting budgets to meet future technology needs	20%	34%	23%	14%	9%

2. Cybersecurity Is the Top IT Challenge/Concern and It's Costly

K-12 organizations saw a 275% growth in cyber-attacks in 2023. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the average school spends less than 8% of its IT budget on cybersecurity. However, attacks force districts to dig deep into their pockets as they shut down networks, recover sensitive data, and shore up susceptible systems. Shutting down district networks forces students, teachers, and staff offline where they must return to analog learning and data and task management.

Luckily, districts are aware of this potential weakness. When asked to indicate their top technology challenges and concerns, cybersecurity and technology maintenance ranked first or second for more than half of respondents. See Figure 15 for all rankings.

Figure 15 | Ranked Technology Challenges and Concerns
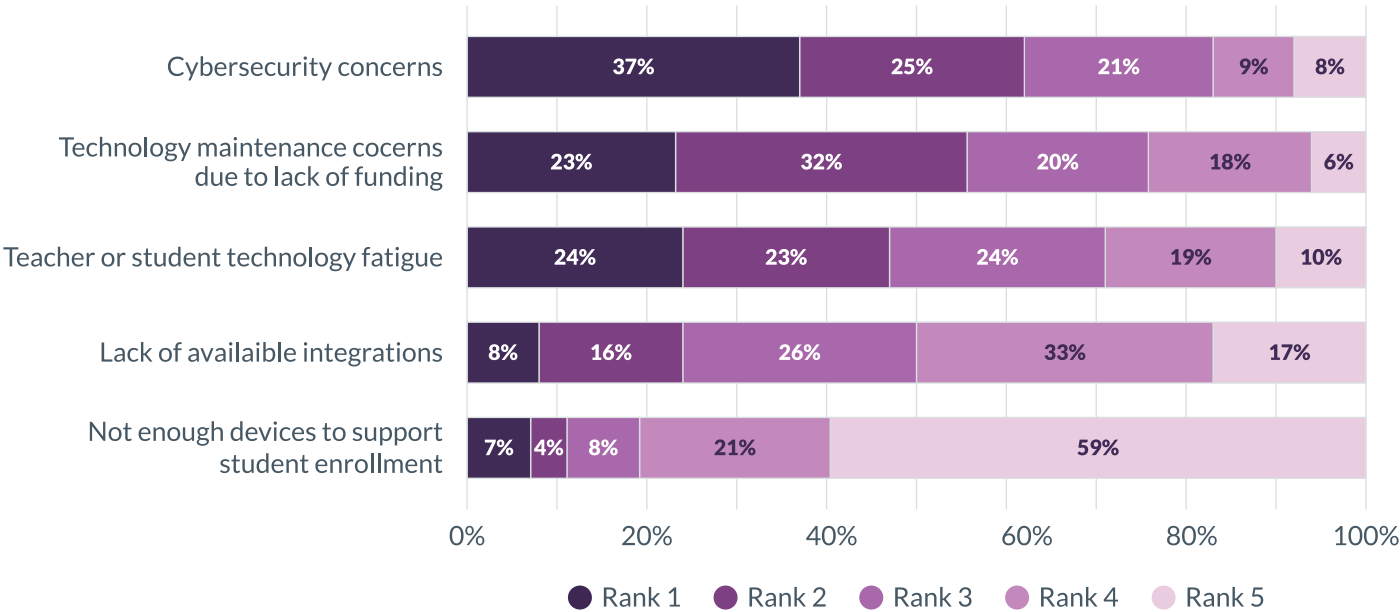
When asked to explain what challenges exist to managing cyber risk, one respondent said:

> *We are doing pretty well with the basics, like making sure we have enough devices in hand and making sure those devices are working properly. The next level will require investment in money, resources, expertise and also a huge change in expectation of the staff and leadership of how the technology department works. Because the next level is such a jump we have been focusing one step at a time which, at times, is slower than we want to be.*

From Data to Action

District resources play an important role in ensuring operational efficiency. Accurate budget predictions promote financial stability, enable resource allocation where they are most needed, and reduce the likelihood of financial risk. District resources, especially technology assets, have become integral to teaching and learning. Our data highlights various opportunities for improving financial operations at the district level. These include:

- Anticipating legislative impacts on district spending.

- Using a software system to assist with budget forecasting and strategy.

- Planning ahead for significant technology expenditures related to repairing and replacing new devices.

- Working with IT to develop a cybersecurity plan.

By addressing these opportunities, district business leaders can ensure that staff and students have the resources that they need to continue teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Optimizing District Operations

The findings from the Institute's K-12 Lens survey show that there are many opportunities for districts to enhance their operations and boost outcomes for students and staff. Software systems can play a vital role in helping districts overcome operational challenges. Specifically, these systems can assist districts in the following ways:

Growing Human Capital

- Automate technical human resources tasks like onboarding, payroll, and time tracking, allowing human resources practitioners to focus on strategic initiatives such as recruiting, engaging, and retaining high-quality teachers.

- Connect teacher evaluations with professional learning offerings to provide personalized learning opportunities and increase staff engagement.

- Integrate disparate systems to prevent duplicate work.

Supporting Students Holistically

- Store all student-level data in one place to streamline analysis, identification, and intervention.

- Create an early warning system that organizes student-level data, performs automatic risk analyses based on district-established thresholds, and reviews historic data to modify indicators for accurate identification of at-risk students.

- Use district-level data to plan and modify intervention strategies.

- Support district mental health providers by streamlining documentation processes, including screening, interventions, and progress monitoring.

- Automate administrative tasks so that special services providers can focus on providing students with high quality support.

- Keep all stakeholders informed by communicating up-to-date student level data.

Protecting Essential District Resources

- Manage essential digital assets, maximizing existing resources and minimizing costs associated with replacing lost or damaged assets.

- Assist with accurate forecasting of future purchasing needs, enabling better budgeting and resource allocation.

- Facilitate investment in cybersecurity measures.

The Frontline Research and Learning Institute remains committed to monitoring critical metrics and sharing insights to empower district leaders in enhancing their operations. By leveraging software systems to address the opportunities identified in this report, districts can elevate their human capital, student support services, and resource management, freeing up districts to focus on improving teaching and learning.

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