K-12 Lens 2026

Decoding the Trends Shaping District Decisions

K12 Lens

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Summary

Every day, district leaders make decisions about staffing, student support, and resources. For the **third year**, Frontline's **K-12 Lens** looks at how changing conditions are influencing those choices.

This year's data reflects a system that has moved beyond emergency response, but is still operating under real constraints. Teacher shortages are less widespread than they were two years ago. At the same time, workload and retention pressures remain, especially in specific roles. Chronic absenteeism remains high and hard to move. Funding conditions vary by source, with federal dollars proving the least predictable. Technology and early uses of AI are now embedded in routine operations, bringing both opportunity and new considerations.

Rather than pointing to a single story, the findings show differences across roles, district types, and approaches. In many cases, those differences come down to how work is organized, how data is used, and how systems support everyday decision-making.

Key Trends

Teacher shortages are less widespread (61% down from 81% in 2024)

but pressure is still growing in a small set of roles where workload and complexity continue to rise.

Chronic absenteeism remains near 18%

but districts that organize mental and behavioral health supports proactively report consistently lower rates **(14-15%)**.

Funding is less predictable.

Forty-three percent report significant decreases tied to legislation. **Sixty-four percent** describe forecasts as fairly accurate; accuracy is strongest where districts plan with benchmarking, location context, and modeling tools.

Introduction

1,058

district leader
responses

K-12 districts track student outcomes across many dimensions. Academic performance, attendance, behavior, enrollment, and demographics are measured often and in detail. What receives less attention is the operational work that supports those outcomes: staffing classrooms, delivering services, managing budgets and keeping systems running day to day.

This report focuses on that side of the work.

Drawing on responses from **1,058 district leaders**, this is the **third year** of Frontline's annual *K-12 Lens* survey. With multiple years of data, it is now possible to look beyond one-year snapshots and see how conditions are changing over time.

Many of the challenges facing districts are familiar. Staffing remains a concern. Attendance continues to matter. Budgets require close attention. What has changed is how these issues are showing up. Staffing pressure is less universal and more role-specific. Student support needs remain high. Confidence in financial planning has improved, even as unpredictability and unexpected costs complicate precision. Technology and AI are no longer emerging topics; they are part of daily operations.

The sections that follow examine staffing, student engagement and support, and district finance and technology. The goal is not to offer solutions, but to clarify what is shifting, what is holding steady, and what that helps explain.

Findings at a Glance

What's Changing and
What's Holding Steady

Staffing

- **61%** of districts report **teacher shortages, down from 81%** two years ago.

- Average teacher retention is **74%**, with improvement in large and urban districts and new pressure in rural, small, and medium districts.

Student Support

- **18%** of students are chronically absent, largely unchanged year over year.

- Districts with targeted mental and behavioral health supports report lower absenteeism (**14%**) than districts without those supports (**34%**).

Financial Planning

- **43%** of districts report significant funding decreases tied to legislation; **13%** report increases.

- **64%** describe their forecasts as fairly accurate (**79%** as very or fairly accurate combined)

Technology

- Cybersecurity is the **top** concern for the **third year** in a row, followed by funding.

- Interest in AI is **high**, but adoption remains **limited**; districts already using AI report **higher operational confidence**.

01

The State of K-12 Staffing

61%

districts reporting teacher shortages in 2026

Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining Educators

Staffing conditions have eased since the height of recent shortages, but pressure has not disappeared. Instead, it has become more concentrated in certain roles and settings.

Staff Shortages: Less Widespread, Still Present

The share of districts reporting teacher shortages declined from **81%** in 2024 to **61%** in 2026. Differences by district size and location have narrowed.

Percentage of Districts Seeing a Teacher Shortage

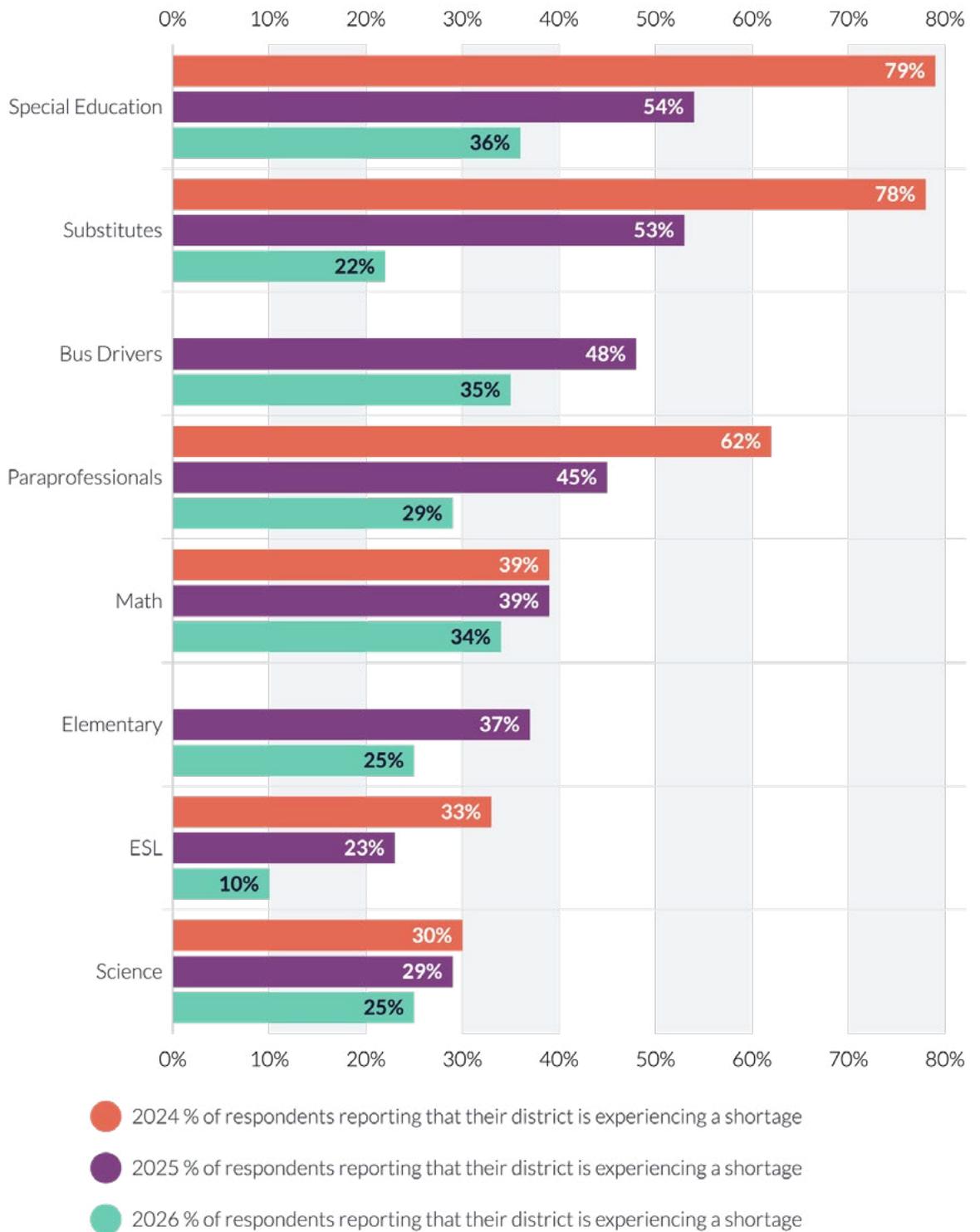|	Overall	Urban	Suburban	Rural
2024	81%	91%	81%	75%
2025	66%	68%	69%	62%
2026	61%	57%	68%	63%
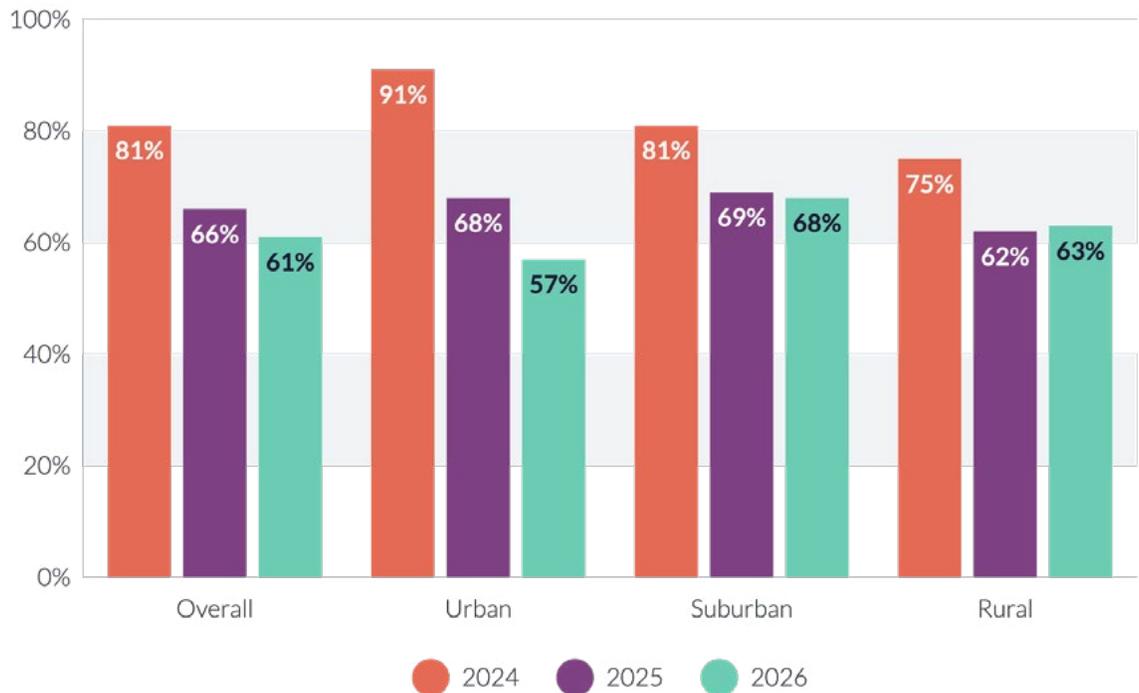
Percentage of Large Urban and Small Suburban Districts Seeing a Teacher Shortage
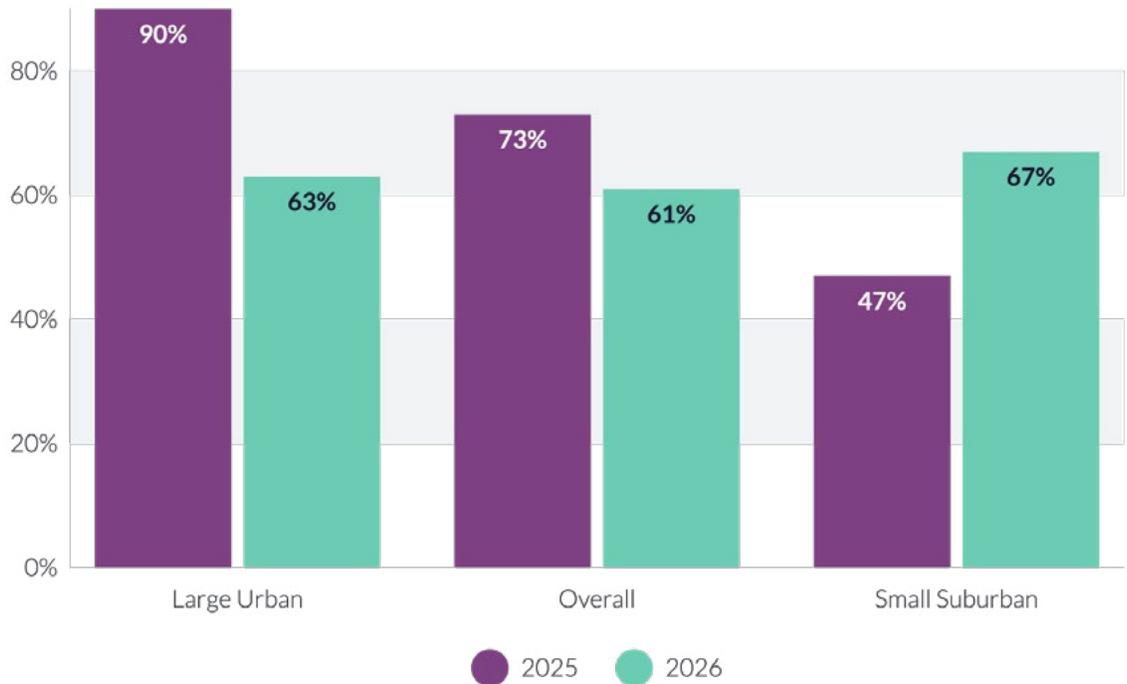
Where Shortages Have Eased, and Where They Remain

Shortages declined once again across many instructional and operational roles, including substitutes, paraprofessionals, and transportation staff.

Where Staffing Pressure Has Eased

Category	2024	2025	2026
Special Education	79%	54%	36%
Substitutes	78%	53%	22%
Bus Drivers		48%	35%
Paraprofessionals	62%	45%	29%
Math	39%	39%	34%
Elementary		37%	25%
ESL	33%	23%	10%
Science	30%	29%	25%

● 2024 % of respondents reporting that their district is experiencing a shortage

● 2025 % of respondents reporting that their district is experiencing a shortage

● 2026 % of respondents reporting that their district is experiencing a shortage

Systems Appear to Matter

Among districts that use an absence or substitute management system, **18%** report a substitute shortage, compared with **27%** of districts using spreadsheets and **30%** using paper-based methods.

Special Education: Workload Remains the Constraint

Special education remains the most commonly cited staffing gap, affecting **36% of districts**. Survey responses consistently point to workload as the main constraint. Many districts report that IEP documentation and compliance demands contribute significantly to staff burnout.

More than 70% of districts not using AI for IEP development report spending five or more hours per IEP. Districts using AI for IEP goal writing report less time spent.

"Timely IEP completion isn't held back by lack of commitment, it's the workload. Between evaluations, re-evaluations, scheduling meetings, collaborating with teachers, and managing compliance requirements, staff are stretched thin. Even when districts are technically compliant, the time and coordination required to finalize an IEP adds significant strain, especially with limited evaluators, high caseloads, and constant documentation demands."

Only 14% of districts not currently using AI say they would not consider it, indicating that interest in reducing this burden is high. However, relatively few districts (**16%**) report changes that directly reduce documentation or compliance demands.

When administrators are pulled into classroom coverage, leadership shortages deepen.
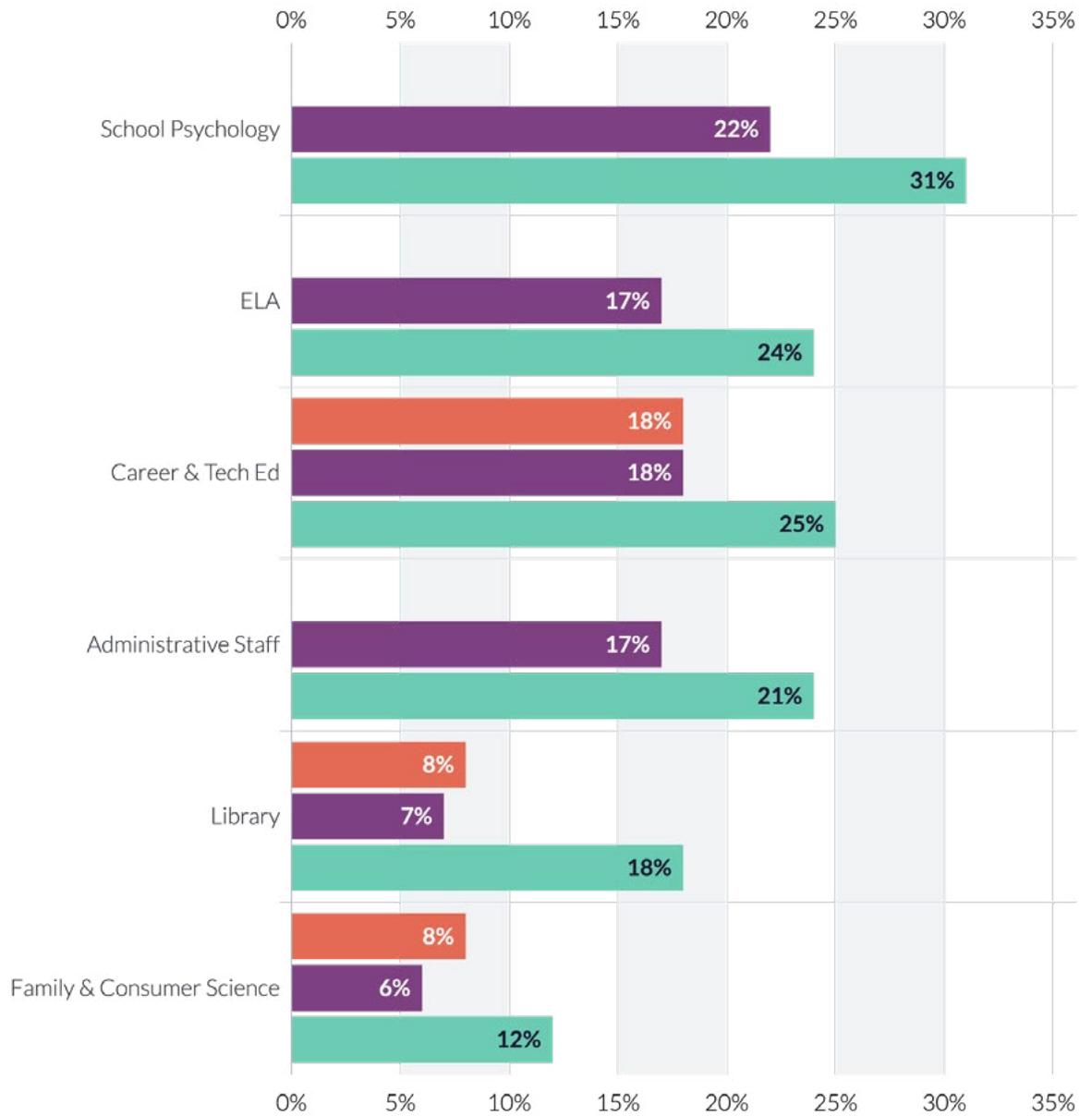
30% of districts that rely on administrators to cover for absences report an administrator shortage, **nearly double** the rate of districts that rely on teachers (**16%**).

Where Pressure Persists

Shortages are easing overall, but pressure is **still rising in a small set of roles**. This year, shortages increased in **English language arts**, as reading and writing expectations and related assessment demands continue to evolve alongside AI. **School psychology** remains under growing strain, with **31%** of districts reporting shortages amid sustained mental and behavioral health needs. **Career, technical, and applied learning** roles are also harder to staff, driven by rising student interest and competition for specialized talent outside K-12. **Leadership shortages** increased as well, particularly in districts where operational demands are pulling administrators into coverage and day-to-day triage. Together these roles share a common thread: they sit at the intersection of escalating expectations and limited capacity.
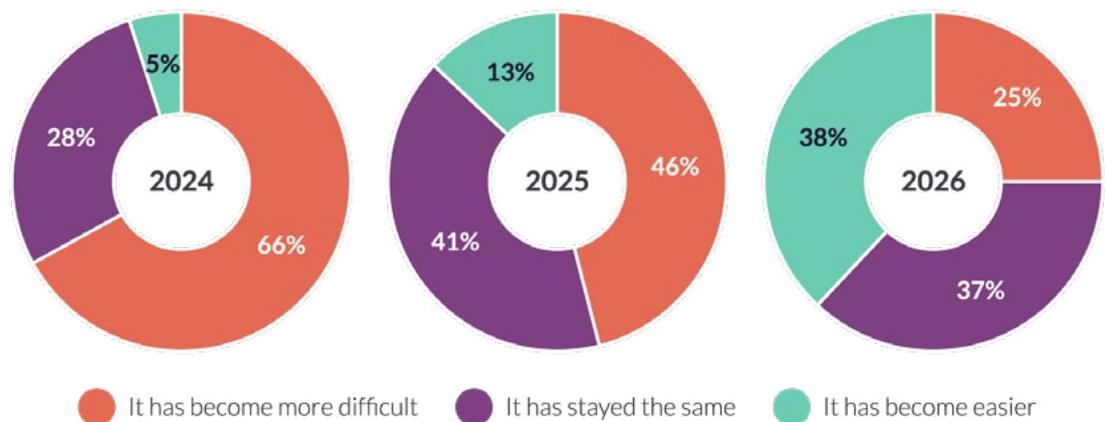
Where Staffing Pressure Has Increased

School Psychology — 22% (2025), 31% (2026)

ELA — 17% (2025), 24% (2026)

Career & Tech Ed — 18% (2024), 18% (2025), 25% (2026)

Administrative Staff — 17% (2025), 21% (2026)

Library — 8% (2024), 7% (2025), 18% (2026)

Family & Consumer Science — 8% (2024), 6% (2025), 12% (2026)

● 2024 % of respondents reporting that their district is experiencing a shortage

● 2025 % of respondents reporting that their district is experiencing a shortage

● 2026 % of respondents reporting that their district is experiencing a shortage

Hiring Conditions Are Improving For Some

Perceptions of recruiting and hiring have improved since 2024. Fewer districts say hiring has become more difficult, and more report improvement. Many districts report no change.

Ease of Recruiting and Hiring 2024–2026

2024: 5% · 28% · 66%
2025: 13% · 41% · 46%
2026: 25% · 37% · 38%

● It has become more difficult ● It has stayed the same ● It has become easier

Two patterns stand out:

1. Districts with structured or automated approaches to professional learning recommendations are **more likely** to report easier hiring.

2. Districts already using AI in staffing workflows, such as applicant screening, interviewing, credential tracking, and substitute management also report **stronger improvement**.

In a competitive hiring market, districts that use technology to support both teacher growth and smarter staffing processes appear to stand out to candidates and are more likely to report easier hiring.

Share of Districts That Said Recruiting and Hiring Became Easier In the Past Year, by Ability to Automate PD Recommendations
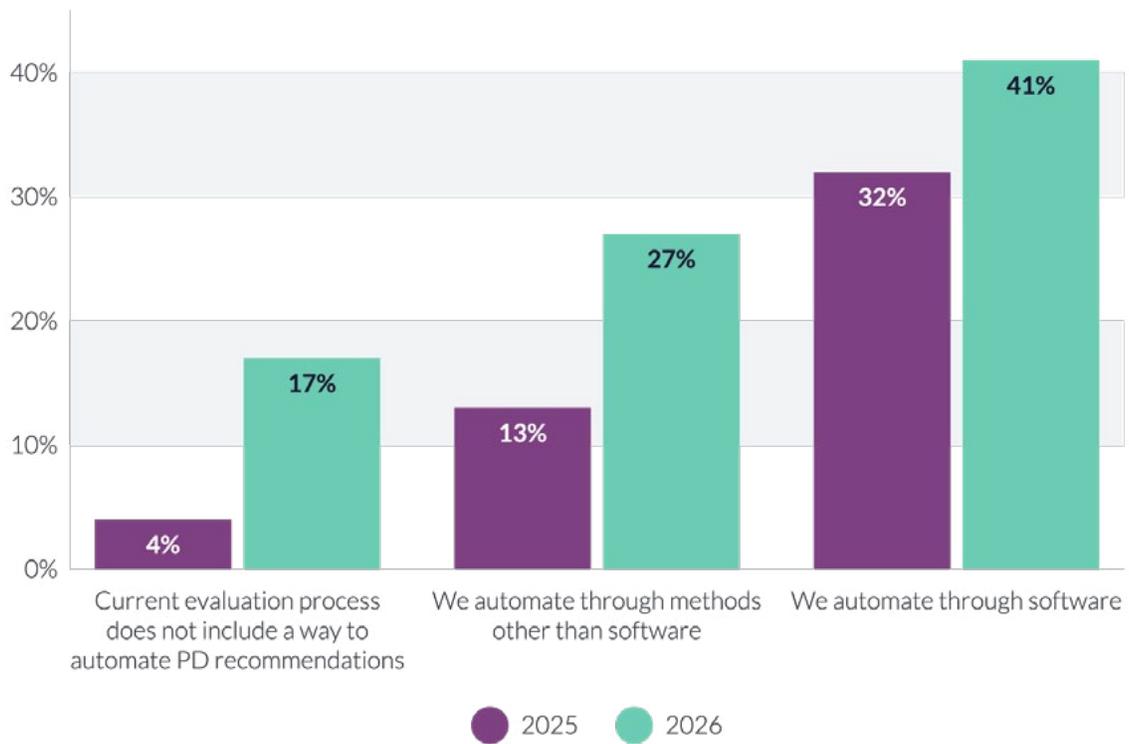

Across both 2025 and 2026, a larger share of districts that automate professional learning recommendations, particularly through software, report that recruiting and hiring has become easier. This is not a one-year spike; the difference by level of automation appears in both years and widens in 2026, indicating a consistent pattern.

Retention: Pressure Has Shifted

Retention improved modestly in large and urban districts, while declining in rural, small, and medium districts. The overall average fell from **78%** to **74%**, reflecting a change in where retention pressure is felt.

Average Retention Rate by District Size and Location
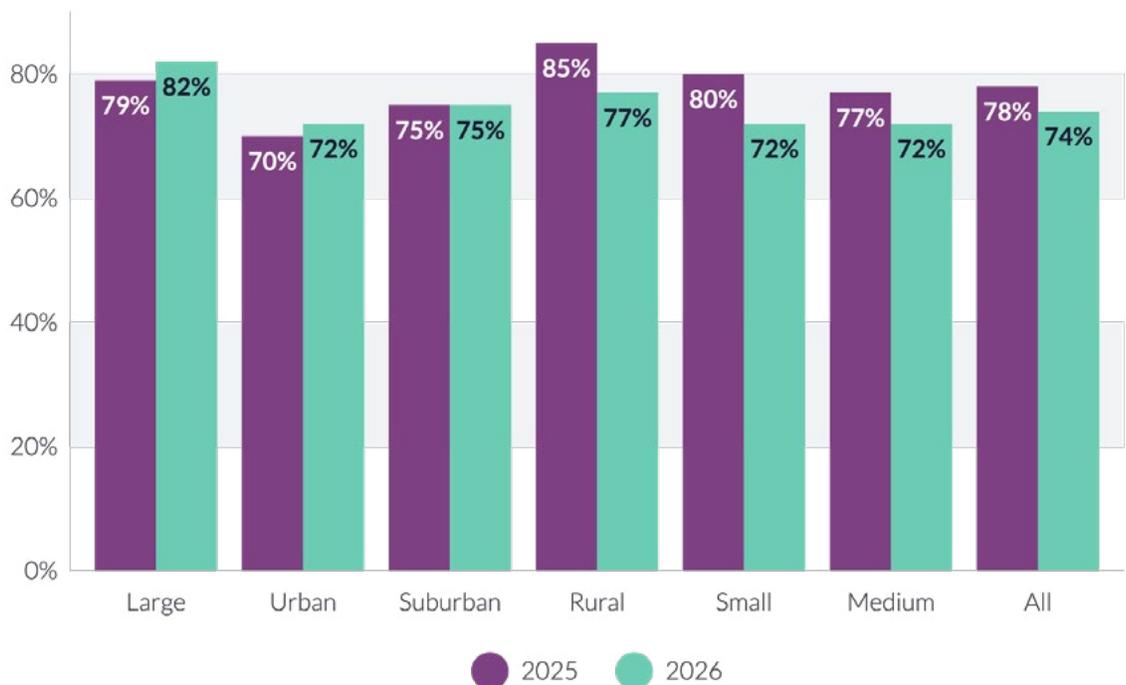
Most districts (**90%**) track staff retention, but how they do it varies, with **60%** using a human capital management system, **25%** using Excel or Google Sheets, and **5%** using paper-based or manual records.

The method matters. Districts using a human capital management system are more confident in the accuracy of their retention data than those using other methods. Seventy-six percent of human capital management system users say they are confident in the accuracy of their retention data, compared with 67% of districts relying on spreadsheets and just 50% of those using paper-based records.

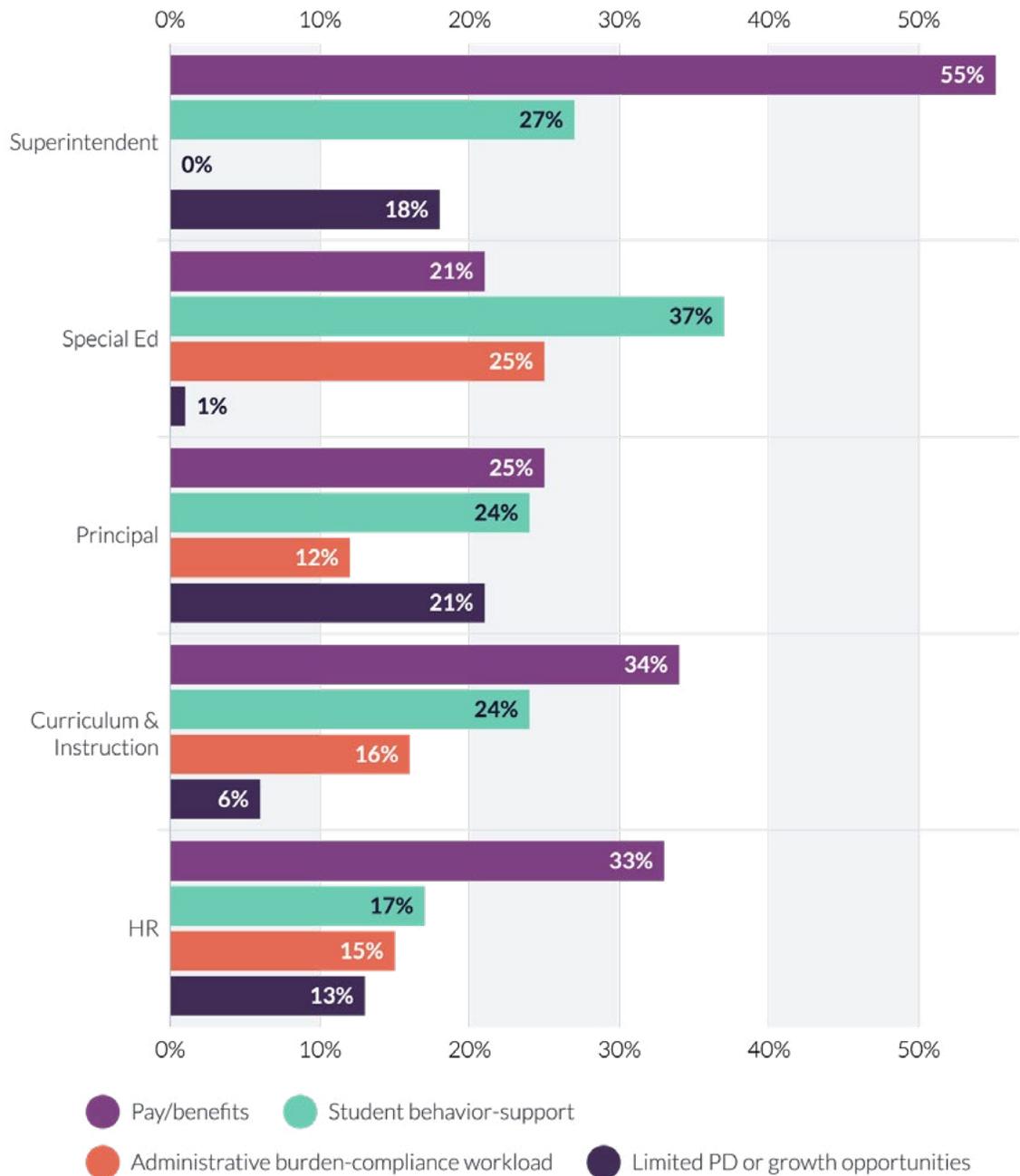## Data Systems Matter: Confidence in Staff Retention Rates by Tracking Methods
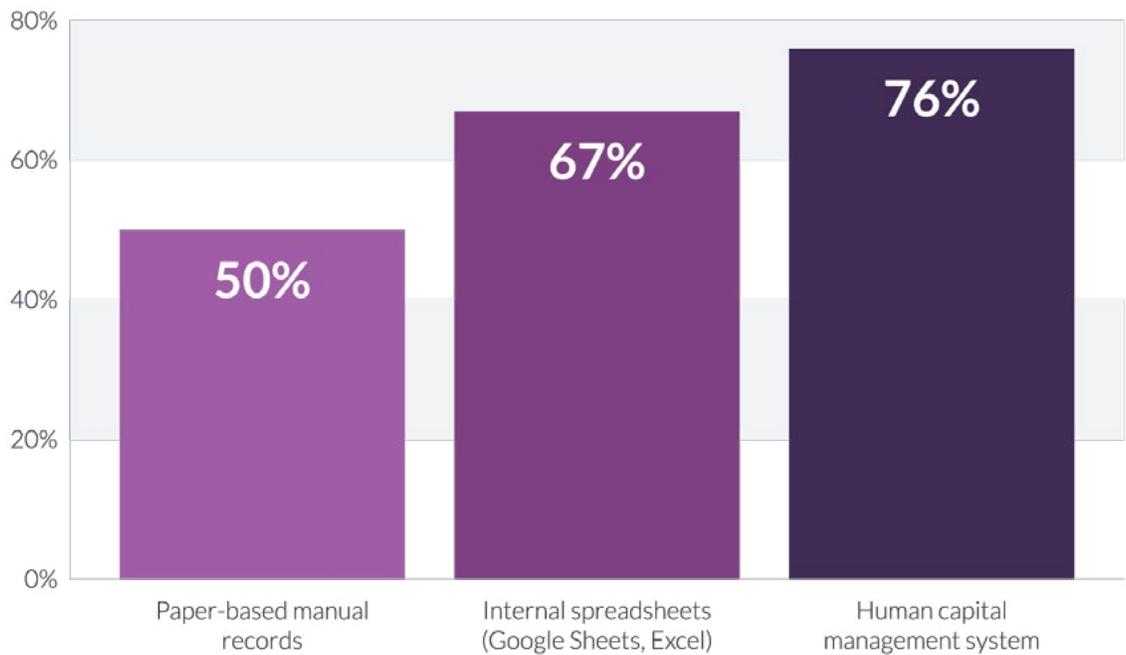
That confidence has real implications. When districts aren't sure their retention numbers are accurate, it becomes harder to know whether staff engagement efforts are working, or where to focus next. Clear reliable data helps districts direct time and resources toward strategies that are more likely to make a difference.

What Leaders Say Puts Retention at Risk

Retention risk looks different by role. While pay and benefits are a top concern across all leadership positions, student behavior and compliance demands weigh most heavily on special education leaders. See the full breakdown below:

Greatest Threat to Staff Retention By Role

Role	Pay/benefits	Student behavior-support	Administrative burden-compliance workload	Limited PD or growth opportunities
Superintendent	55%	27%	0%	18%
Special Ed	21%	37%	25%	1%
Principal	25%	24%	12%	21%
Curriculum & Instruction	34%	24%	16%	6%
HR	33%	17%	15%	13%

Legend:
- Pay/benefits
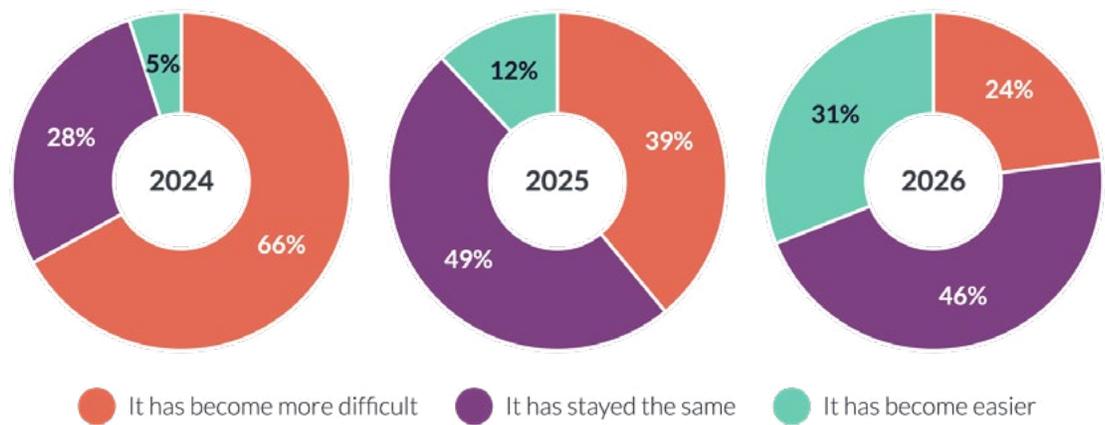- Student behavior-support
- Administrative burden-compliance workload
- Limited PD or growth opportunities

Retaining Staff Is Getting Easier, for Some Districts

Retention pressure has eased since 2024. The share of districts saying retention became more difficult fell from **66%** to **24%**, while about one-third now report improvement. Nearly half say nothing has changed.

Ease of Retention in 2024, 2025, and 2026

2024: 5%, 28%, 66%
2025: 12%, 49%, 39%
2026: 31%, 24%, 46%

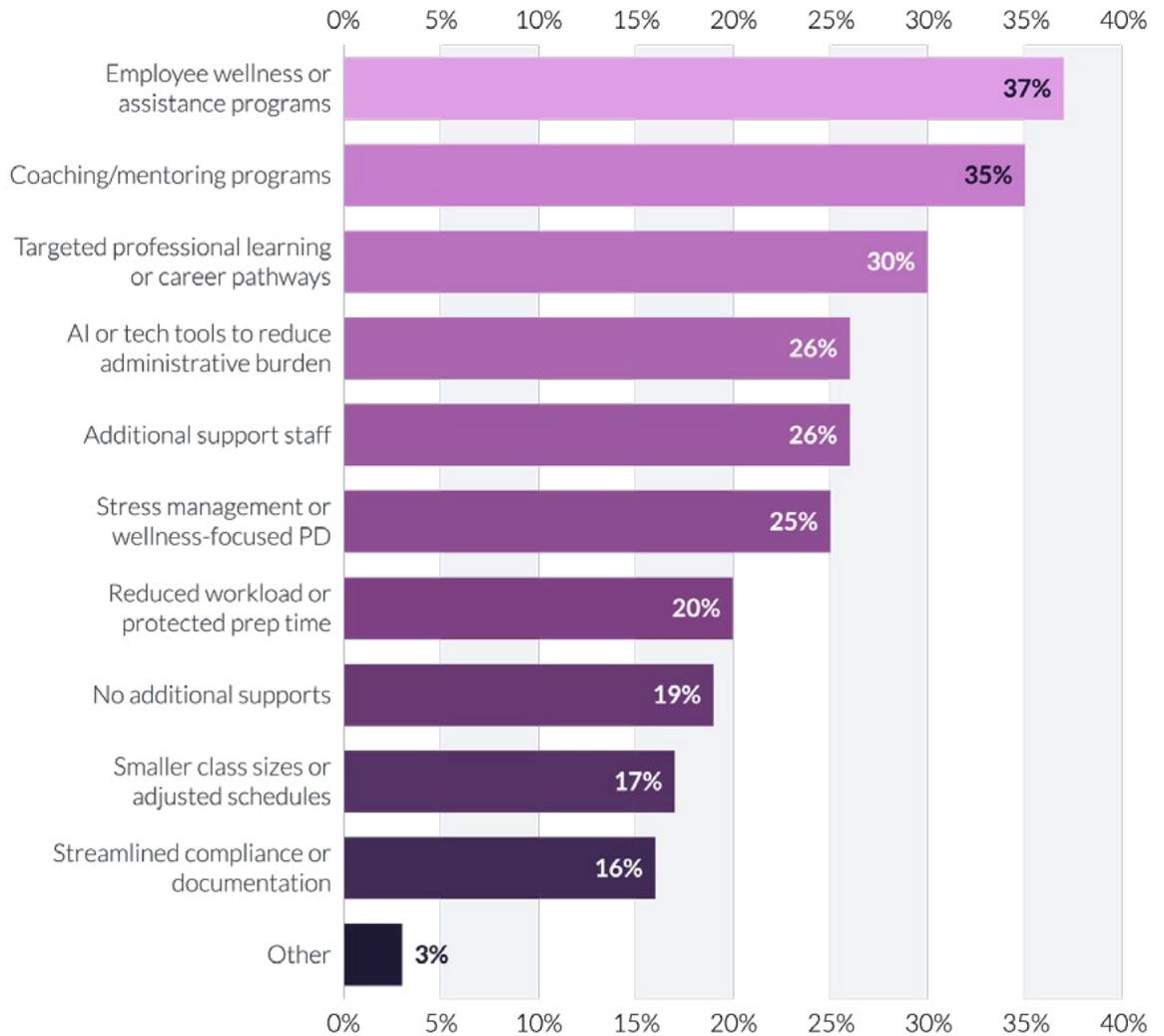● It has become more difficult   ● It has stayed the same   ● It has become easier

How Districts Are Responding to Retention Pressure

Districts are responding to retention pressure primarily by adding supports, not by reducing workload.

The most common responses this year include **wellness programs, coaching, and targeted professional learning**. Far fewer districts report changes that directly reduce workload or compliance demands. Notably, **nearly one in five districts** report no new supports at all, pointing to uneven ability or willingness to respond, even as retention remains a concern for many.

Percentage of Districts that Increased Supports to Address Staff Retention in the Past Year

Support	Percentage
Employee wellness or assistance programs	37%
Coaching/mentoring programs	35%
Targeted professional learning or career pathways	30%
AI or tech tools to reduce administrative burden	26%
Additional support staff	26%
Stress management or wellness-focused PD	25%
Reduced workload or protected prep time	20%
No additional supports	19%
Smaller class sizes or adjusted schedules	17%
Streamlined compliance or documentation	16%
Other	3%

When Districts Don't Respond, Retention Suffers

Among the 136 districts that provided staff with no additional supports, average retention was just **51%**. By contrast, districts that added support staff or expanded coaching and mentoring programs reported retention rates in the mid-to-high 70s.

The data does not show cause and effect, but the gap is substantial, highlighting the potential risk of inaction when retention pressure remains.

Key Takeaways

Staffing shortages are easing overall, but, rather than disappearing, pressure has shifted to leadership, English language arts, school psychology, and career and technical education.

Hiring conditions have improved in many districts, but progress varies by role, district type, and local labor conditions.

Workload and operational strain continue to shape staffing outcomes, particularly in special education and leadership roles, even where headcount has improved.

Districts with more structured approaches to educator growth are **more likely to report that recruiting and hiring has become easier**.

Retention pressure has shifted geographically, with improvement in some large and urban districts offset by new declines in rural, small, and medium districts.

Confidence in retention data varies widely by tracking method, influencing how effectively districts can assess risk and respond.

What This Means for District Leaders

Many of the pressures shaping staffing outcomes, particularly workload, burnout, and retention, are closely tied to student engagement, attendance, and access to support services.

01

Staffing shortages are no longer uniform across roles or districts. Reviewing which positions are stabilizing and which continue to tighten can help districts focus attention where pressure is most persistent.

02

Recruitment strategies may be more effective when tailored to the roles and locations experiencing the greatest strain, rather than applied uniformly.

03

District-level recruiting and hiring data can reveal whether gaps are concentrated in specific schools, roles, or grade bands rather than spread evenly across the district.

04

Operational practices, such as absence management and coverage planning, play a meaningful role in leadership workload and staffing sustainability.

05

Clear, structured approaches to professional growth appear to function as a signal to candidates and may influence hiring experience.

06

Reducing reliance on manual administrative processes, including through targeted use of technology, can free capacity for recruiting, engagement, and retention work.

07

Reliable, trusted retention data is foundational. Without confidence in the data, it becomes difficult to assess risk or evaluate whether strategies are working.

02

Student Engagement and Support

Student Engagement and Support

As staffing conditions begin to stabilize, student engagement and support continue to shape daily operations across districts. Enrollment, attendance patterns, student behavior, and access to supports influence workload, staffing coverage, and long-term sustainability.

In the staffing section, district leaders identified student behavior and support demands as a **major contributor to staff retention risk**. This section examines the student-side patterns behind that pressure: how chronic absenteeism is changing, how districts identify student risk, and how support services are being structured amid ongoing financial and staffing constraints.

18%

average chronic
absenteeism rate

Chronic Absenteeism: What Has Changed and What Hasn't

Chronic absenteeism remains largely stable year over year. The average district reports an **18%** chronic absenteeism rate, up slightly from **17%** last year. Rates remain highest in urban and large districts. Suburban districts show a modest decline, while small and rural districts report slight increases.

Rate of Chronically Absent Students by District Size and Location
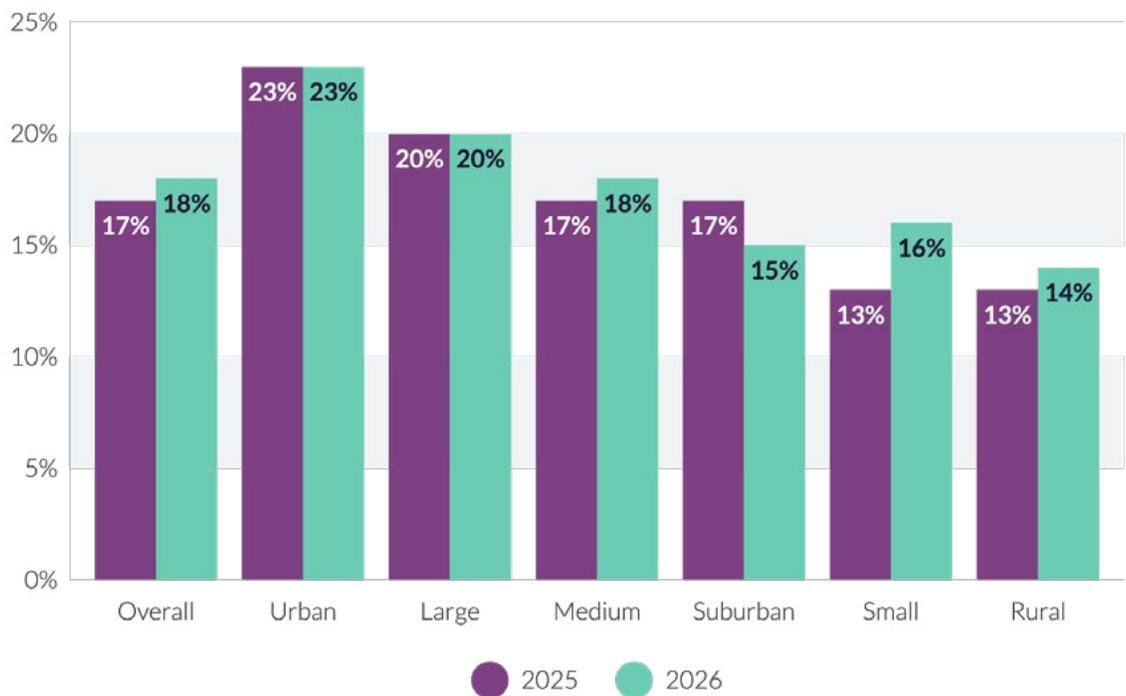
Despite sustained attention and new strategies in many districts, absenteeism has proven difficult to shift at scale. The data suggests that progress, where it exists, is incremental rather than systemic.

Student Supports and Attendance:
A Consistent Pattern

While overall absenteeism shows limited movement, a consistent relationship appears between how student supports are structured and attendance outcomes:

- Districts reporting **no mental or behavioral health supports** show slightly higher rates of chronic absenteeism (**19%**) compared with the overall average (**18%**).

- Districts that take a more **proactive approach**, such as offering targeted mental and behavioral health supports or regularly screening students, report lower absenteeism, typically in the **14-15% range**.

The differences are modest, but the pattern holds across district types. Even where absenteeism is elevated, **districts that organize support proactively appear better positioned to limit its extent**.

This suggests that attendance outcomes are influenced less by the presence of any single service and more by how supports are structured, coordinated, and delivered.

Early Warning Indicators: A Signal Across Systems

Districts that track early warning indicators across grades K-12 report **lower chronic absenteeism** than districts that do not, a pattern consistent across both **2025** and **2026**.

Chronic Absenteeism by Use of Early Warning Indicators

Average Chronic Absenteeism Rate - 2025 | Average Chronic Absenteeism Rate - 2026
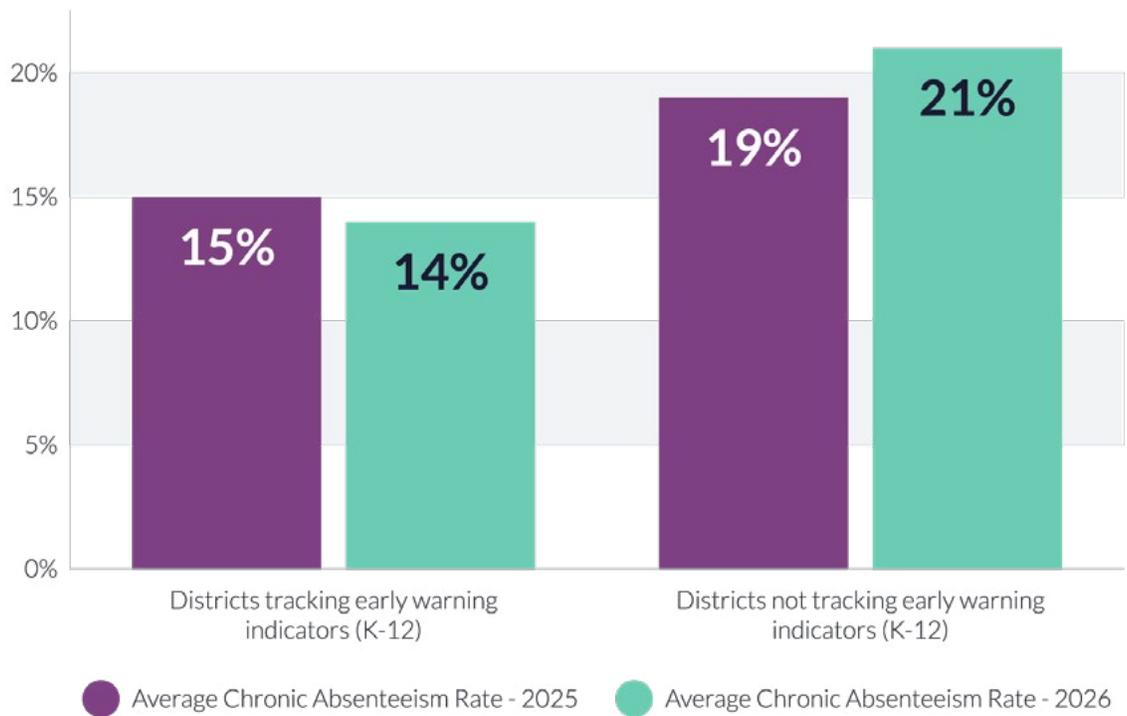
These districts also report **more favorable hiring conditions**. Districts not using early warning indicators are more likely to say recruiting and hiring has become more difficult, while districts that do track these indicators are more likely to report improvement.

These patterns align with what district leaders identify as a top retention risk: **student behavior and support demands**. Systems that surface attendance, behavior, and academic concerns earlier may support more timely intervention, helping to reduce downstream strain on staff and contribute to a more stable school environment.

Hiring Conditions by Use of Early Warning Indicators in 2026

Legend: Hiring became easier (green) — Hiring became more difficult (orange)
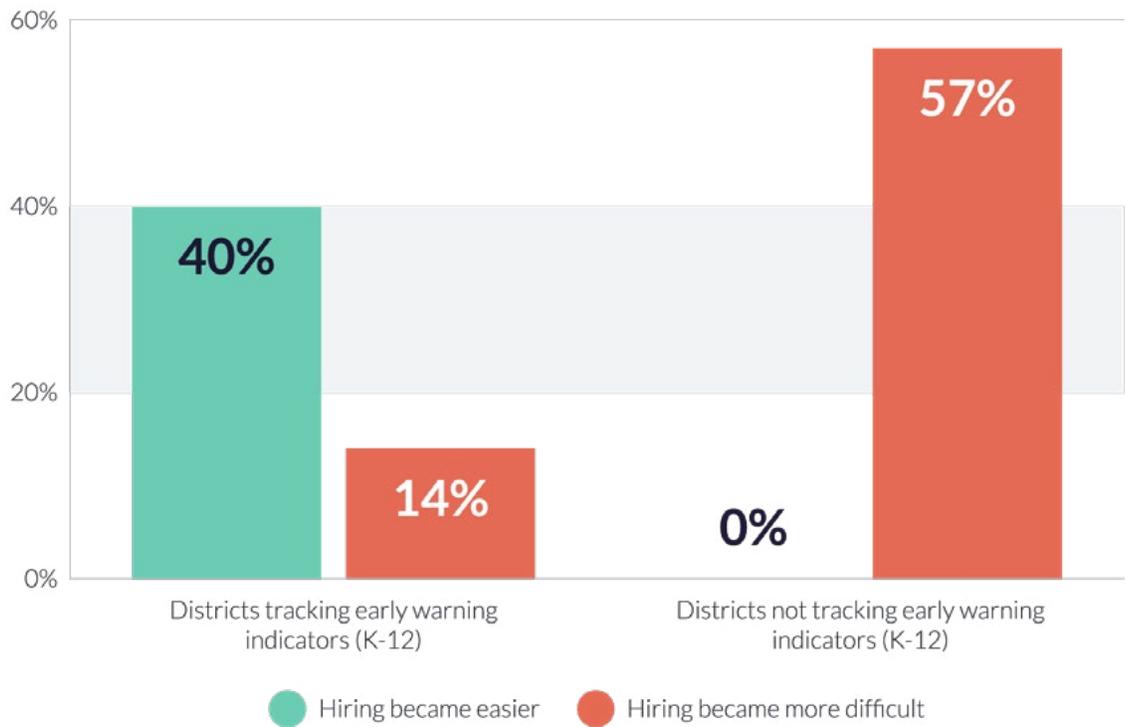
How Districts Use Student Data

Nearly all districts (**99%**) report tracking student data, but **how that data is used varies widely**.

These differences shape what districts are able to see and respond to when student needs emerge. Tracking attendance alone does not guarantee insight into whether supports are working or whether gaps are widening over time.
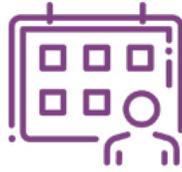
75%
track chronic absenteeism

63%
track course failure

51%
monitor intervention effectiveness

21%
monitor policy or program equity

47%
track progress toward strategic plan or school improvement goals

41%
track college & career readiness

Confidence in Attendance Data

Confidence in chronic absenteeism data varies by how these rates are tracked. Districts using a **dedicated student data analytics tool** report the highest confidence, followed by those relying on a **student information system**. Confidence is lowest among districts using **spreadsheets or manual records**.

Confidence in Chronic Absenteeism Data by Tracking Method
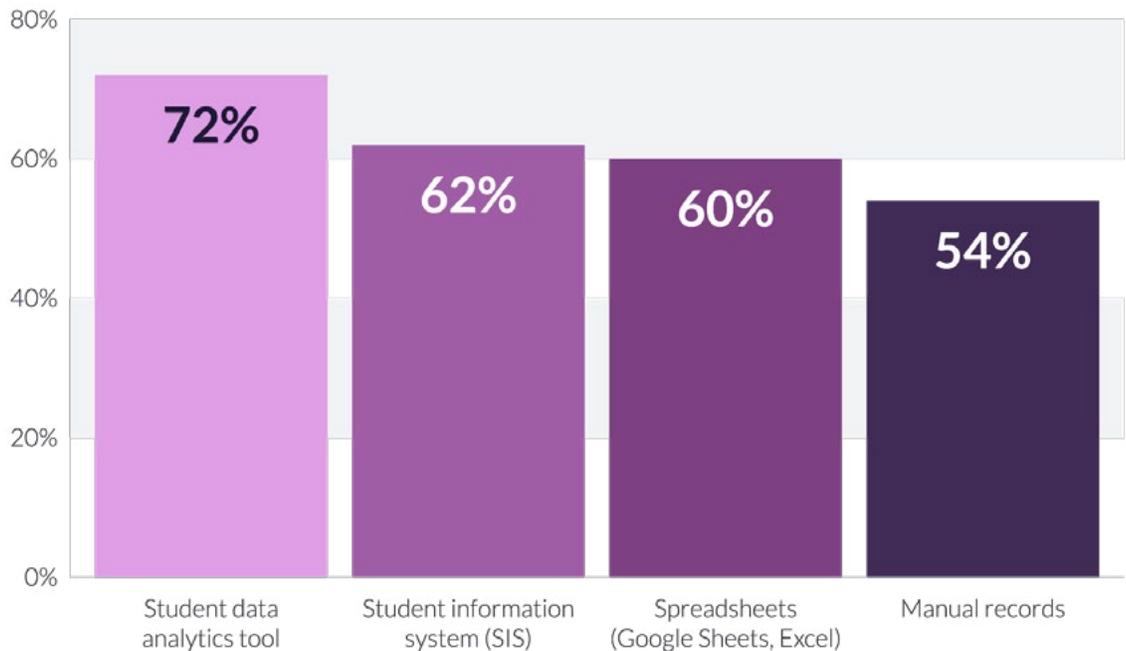
When leaders are not confident in their attendance data, it becomes harder to assess progress, evaluate strategies, or intervene early. **Reliable data is a gatekeeper for meaningful action**, especially when attendance challenges persist and resources are limited.

Adjusting Student Support Delivery

Ensuring access to student supports remains a priority, even as staffing and funding constraints persist. This year's data shows districts continuing to adjust how **Medicaid-eligible services** are delivered.

Across service areas, **in-house provision has declined or remained flat**, particularly for occupational therapy, physical therapy, and mental and behavioral health services. Core services such as **speech-language therapy and nursing** are still most often provided internally, though even these show gradual shifts.

Medicaid-Eligible Services Provided In-House

Speech-Language Therapy
- 2024: 90%
- 2025: 84%
- 2026: 78%

Nursing Servcices
- 2024: 79%
- 2025: 77%
- 2026: 82%

Transportation
- 2026: 71%

Occupational Therapy
- 2024: 72%
- 2025: 67%
- 2026: 57%

Mental/Behavioral Health Services
- 2024: 66%
- 2025: 66%
- 2026: 57%

Physical Therapy
- 2024: 63%
- 2025: 51%
- 2026: 47%

Legend: ● 2024 ● 2025 ● 2026
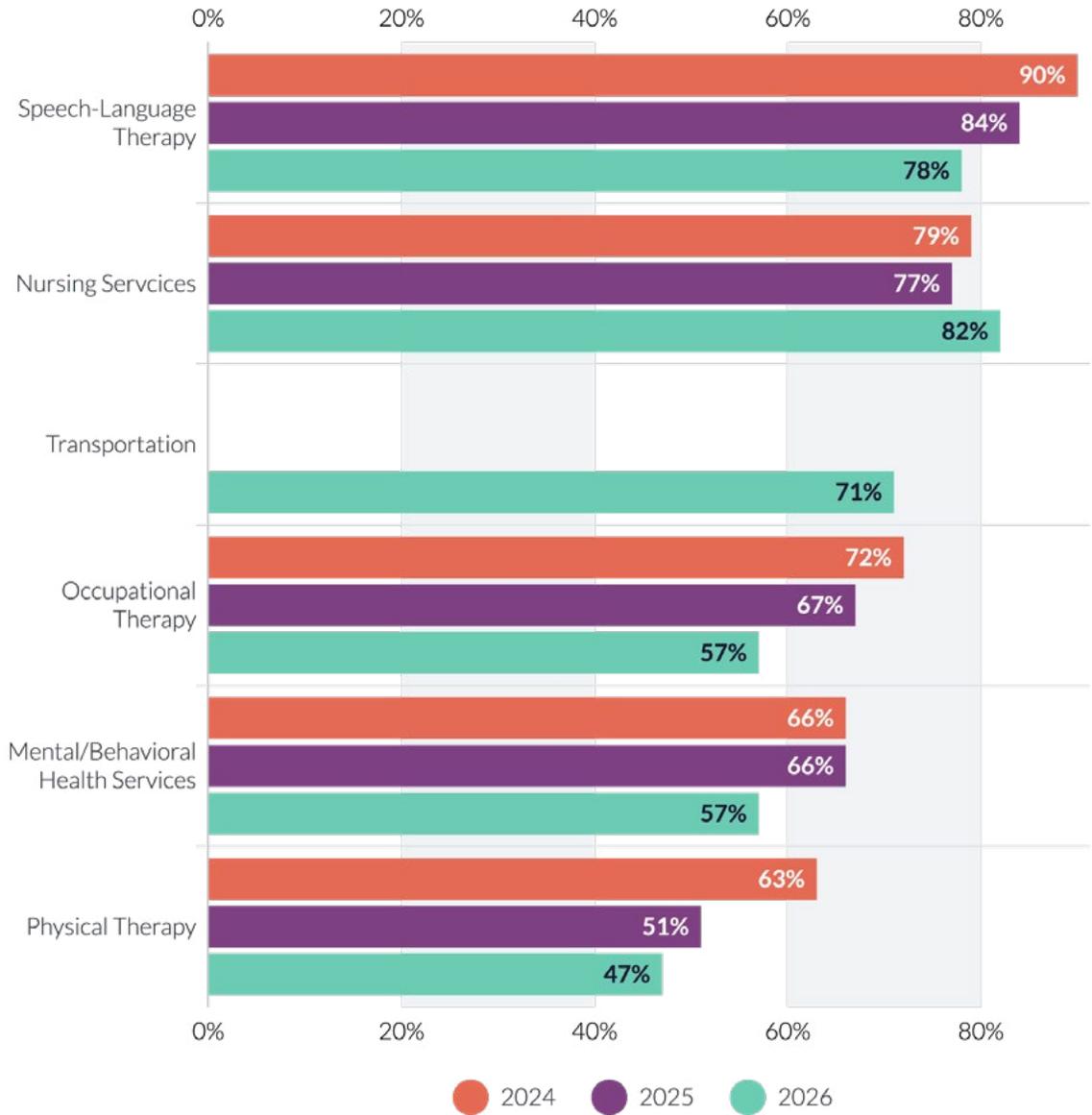
District reliance on **external partnerships** increased notably in 2025, especially for specialized and hard-to-fill services. In 2026, the use of external providers declined across all areas. While levels have not fully returned to 2024, the pullback is clear.

These changes coincide with the **expiration of temporary federal funding** and suggest districts are making tradeoffs about which services can be sustained over time.

Medicaid-Eligible Services Provided Through External Partnerships

Service	2024	2025	2026
Speech-Language Therapy	7%	23%	14%
Nursing Servcices	10%	17%	5%
Transportation			14%
Occupational Therapy	24%	33%	30%
Mental/Behavioral Health Services	25%	42%	27%
Physical Therapy	31%	43%	33%

● 2024   ● 2025   ● 2026
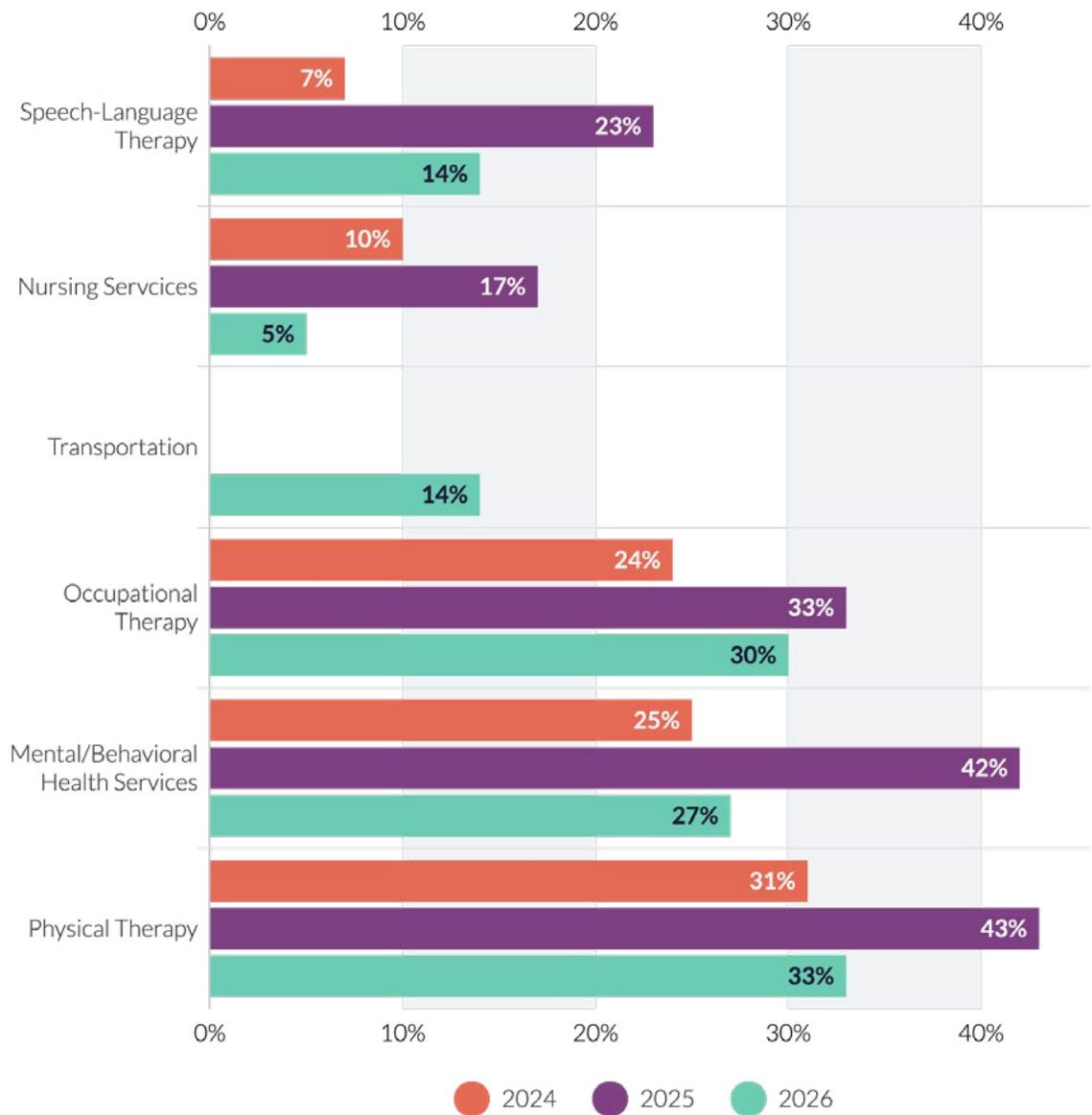
Early AI Use in Student Support

As staffing and student support constraints continue, some districts are beginning to explore AI as a way to extend capacity for early identification and targeted intervention.

Currently, a small share of districts report using AI for:

- **35%**: Personalizing student learning

- **26%**: Identifying at-risk students with predictive AI models

- **22%**: One-on-one tutoring

Interest extends beyond current use. More than **40% of districts** say they would like to use AI for these purposes, while only **10-20%** say they would not.

Notably, districts already using AI for these student supports also report higher chronic absenteeism and lower teacher retention. This does not suggest that AI is driving these outcomes. Instead, it likely reflects where districts are turning to new tools, often in response to greater student need and staffing strain.

Key Takeaways

Taken together, these findings suggest that student engagement outcomes are shaped less by individual programs and more by how districts structure supports, surface risk early, and use data with confidence. Where systems support early visibility and coordinated response, attendance outcomes appear more stable. Where those conditions are absent, pressure persists.

Chronic absenteeism shows little year-over-year change and remains elevated across districts.

Districts without **targeted mental and behavioral health supports** tend to report **higher absenteeism** than districts with more proactive structures.

Use of **early warning indicators** is associated with **lower absenteeism** and more favorable hiring conditions.

Nearly all districts track student data but tracking methods and depth of use vary widely.

Confidence in attendance data is highest where districts use dedicated analytics tools.

Districts continue to **adjust student support delivery** as temporary funding ends and staffing constraints persist.

AI use in student support remains limited and appears **more common among districts experiencing higher levels of strain**.

03

Reading the Financial Signals in K-12

District staffing and student support decisions are shaped by financial conditions that remain difficult to predict. Funding swings, policy changes, and uneven planning capacity continue to influence what districts can sustain, expand, or delay.

This section looks at how districts are experiencing funding shifts, how confident leaders are in their forecasts, and how planning tools and technology systems relate to financial stability.

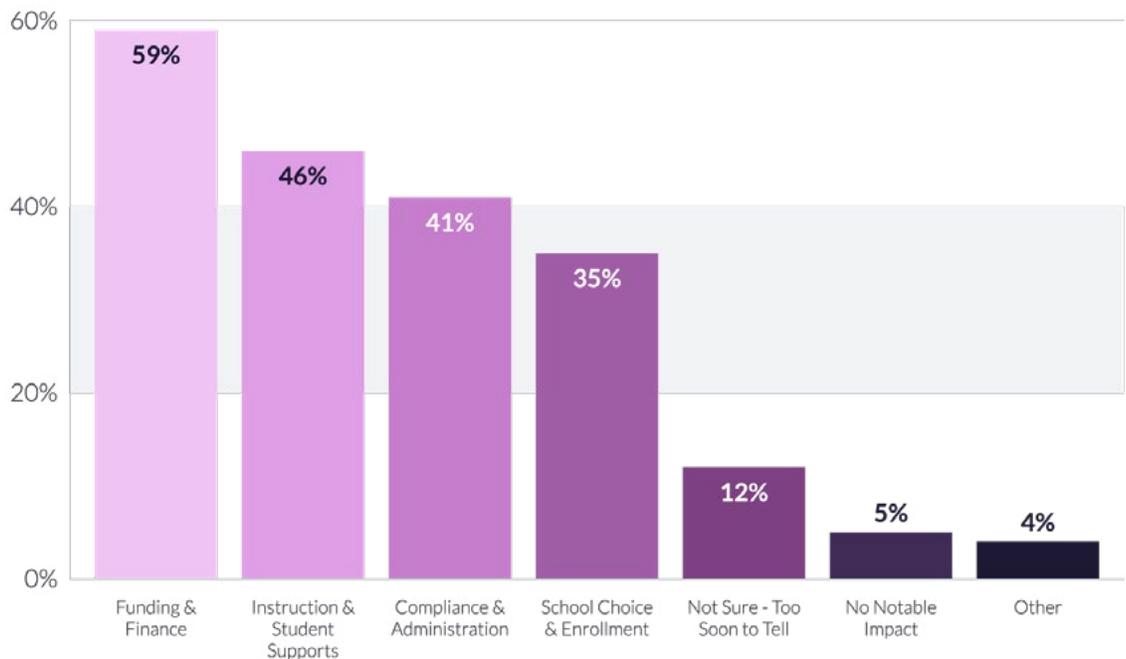## Funding Pressure Remains a Defining Constraint

When asked which recent federal or state K-12 policy changes have noticeably impacted their district in the past year, district leaders most frequently selected funding and finance, more than any other operational area. This includes impacts related to the timing of federal funds, state funding formula adjustments, and new or revised investments.
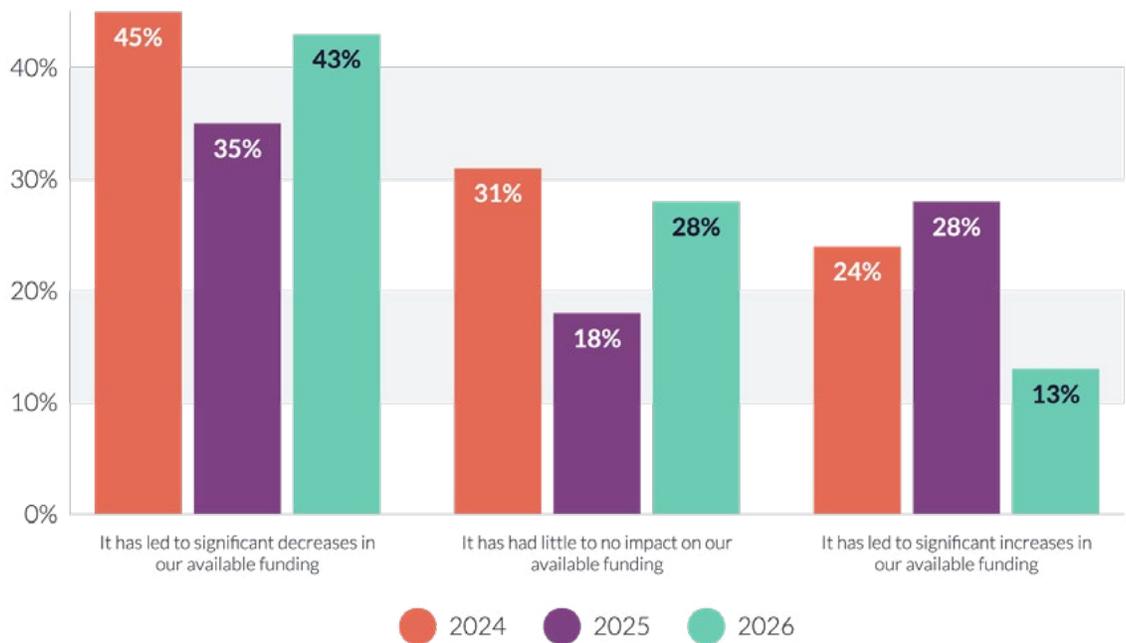
Other policy areas, such as **instruction and student supports, compliance and administration**, and **school choice and enrollment**, were selected by a smaller share of respondents. Overall, the results suggest that while districts are experiencing policy-related effects across multiple areas, financial planning and budgeting remain where those effects are most widely felt.

Which Recent Federal or State K-12 Policy Changes Have Noticeably Impacted Your District in the Past Year?

Bar chart showing: Funding & Finance 59%, Instruction & Student Supports 46%, Compliance & Administration 41%, School Choice & Enrollment 35%, Not Sure - Too Soon to Tell 12%, No Notable Impact 5%, Other 4%.
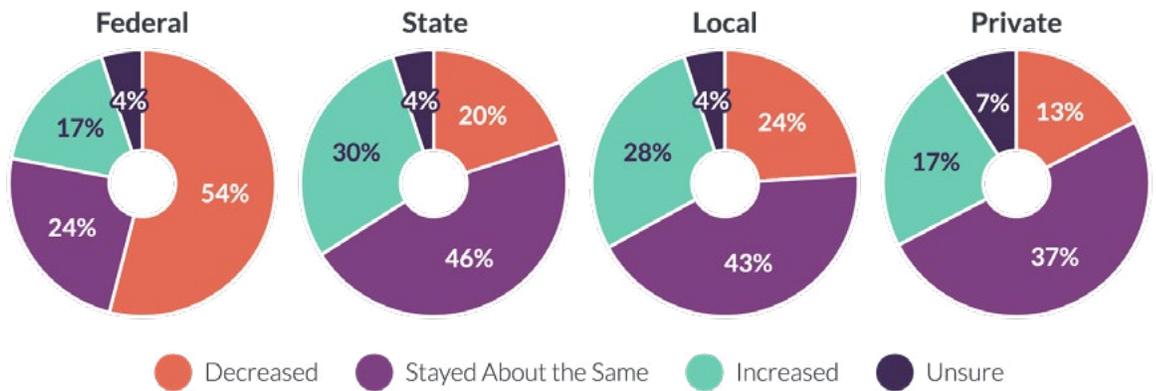
In 2026, **43%** of districts report significant funding decreases tied to legislation, while **13%** report increases.

Impact of Legislation on Available Funding

|	It has led to significant decreases in our available funding	It has had little to no impact on our available funding	It has led to significant increases in our available funding
2024	45%	31%	24%
2025	35%	18%	28%
2026	43%	28%	13%

● 2024 ● 2025 ● 2026

Funding conditions also vary by source. Federal funding remains the least predictable. State and local funding appear more stable for many districts, though stability does not necessarily mean flexibility.

How District Revenue Sources Changed in the Past Year

Federal
4%
17%
24%
54%

State
4% 20%
30%
46%

Local
4% 24%
28%
43%

Private
7% 13%
17%
37%

● Decreased ● Stayed About the Same ● Increased ● Unsure

Together, these conditions require districts to plan cautiously, often balancing modest stability in one area against uncertainty in another.
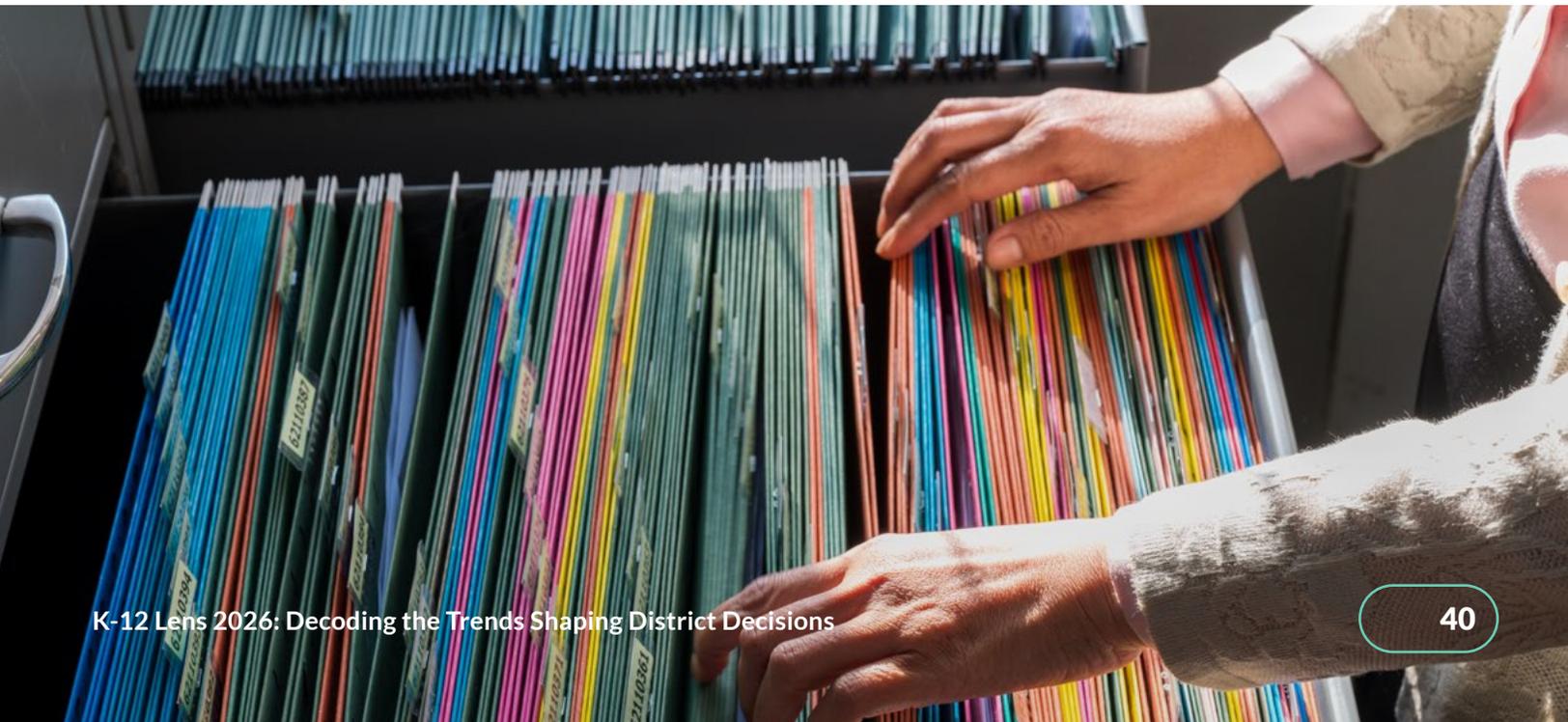
Forecasting Confidence Has Improved, Precision Remains Limited

As funding becomes harder to anticipate, forecasting accuracy has taken on greater importance. This year, **79%** of districts describe their budget forecasts as **very or fairly accurate** when compared with actual expenses.

Perceived Accuracy of Budget Projections
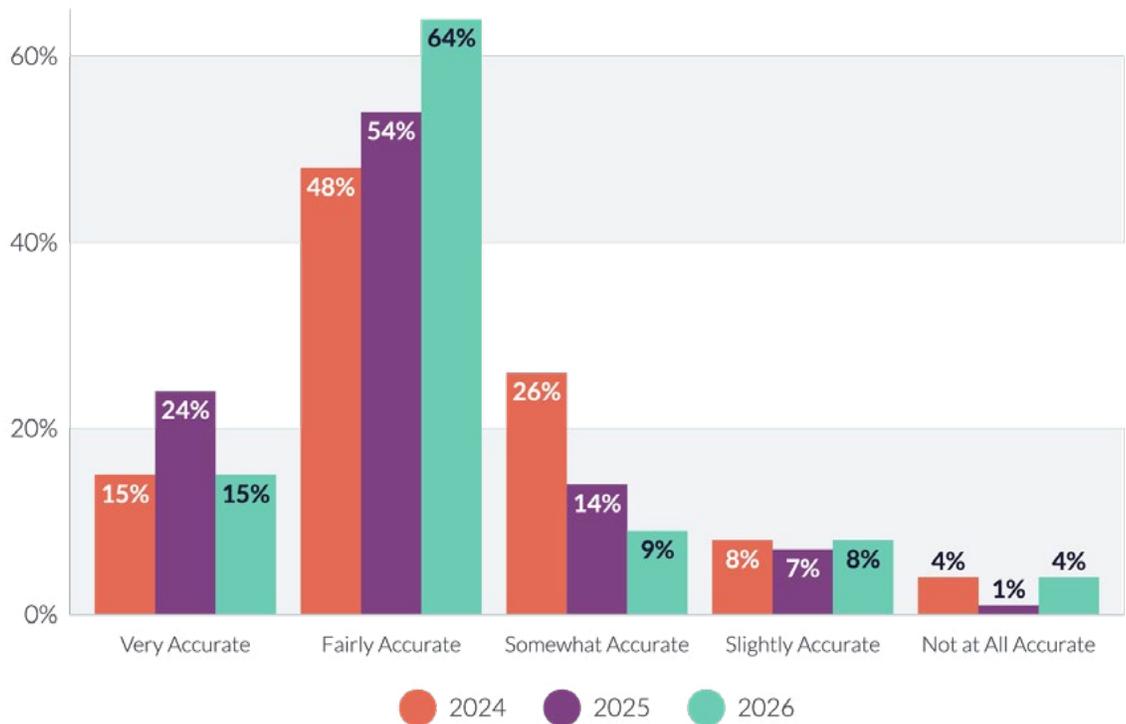
When forecasts fall short, district leaders most often point to factors outside their direct control, including changes in state or federal funding, inflation, staffing variability, and unanticipated capital needs.

Factors Most Impacting the Accuracy of Financial Forecasts

Changes in state or federal funding — 49%
Inflation/rising costs for services/materials — 40%
Staffing changes or compensation variability — 36%
Unanticipated capital of facility needs — 30%
Limited access to financial forecasting or modeling tools — 21%
Communication gaps across departments or sites — 17%
Incomplete or outdated financial data — 9%
Other — 9%
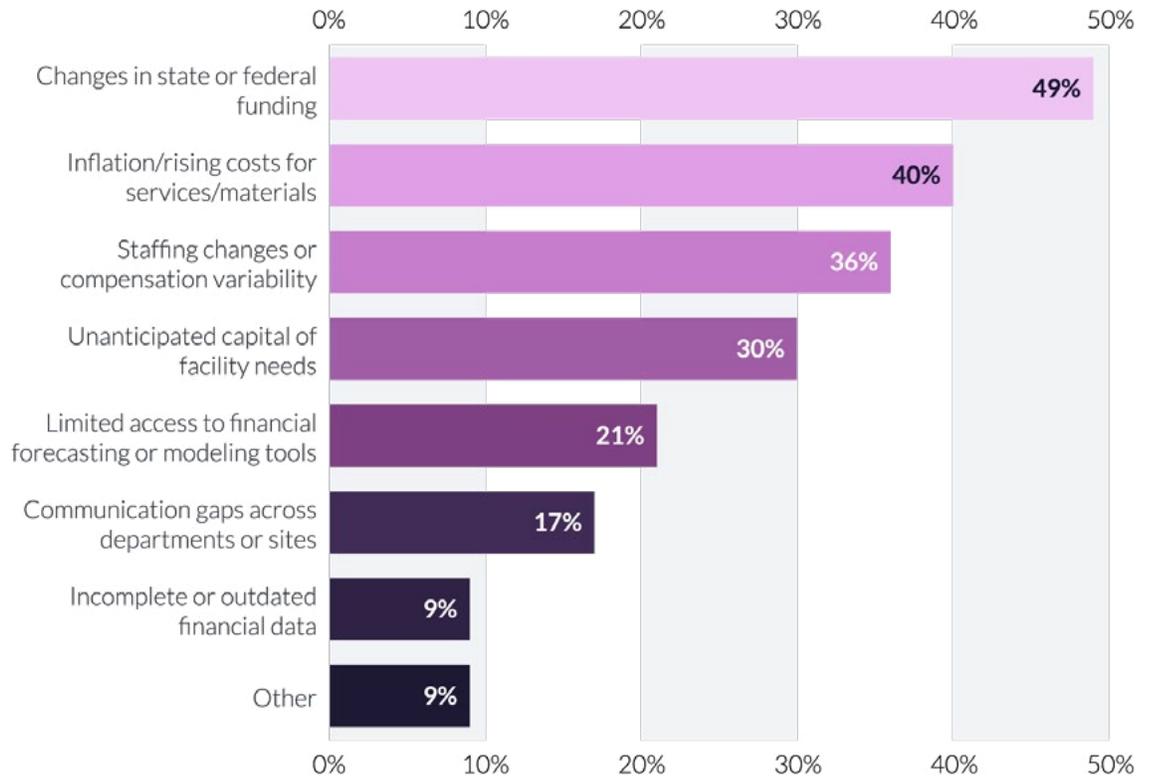
> *"Unanticipated special education costs are the biggest issue. Changes in special education enrollment and student needs from year to year make it difficult to forecast accurately."*

These responses suggest that forecasting challenges reflect the environment districts are operating in, rather than gaps in effort or expertise.

18%

of districts **using a budget modeling tool** say their forecasts are slightly inaccurate or worse.

40%

of districts **not using a budget modeling tool** say their forecasts are slightly inaccurate or worse.

Planning Capacity Shapes Forecast Accuracy

Even within these constraints, how districts plan, and what data they use, appears to matter.

Districts that regularly use **peer benchmarking data**, such as spending per student, staffing ratios, or attendance trends, report substantially higher forecast accuracy. Nearly **nine in ten** districts using peer comparison data describe their forecasts as accurate, compared with **fewer than one-third** of districts that do not.

A similar pattern appears among districts that use **location-based data**, such as enrollment by neighborhood, attendance zones, or school boundaries. More than **three-quarters** of these districts report accurate forecasts, suggesting that broader context supports more reliable planning.

Forecasting accuracy also varies by planning approach:

- Only **18%** of districts using a budget modeling tool say their forecasts are slightly inaccurate or worse, compared with **40%** of districts that do not use one.

- Districts that rely primarily on manual analysis are far less likely to report very accurate forecasts (**12%**) than those using analytics software (**30%**).

These patterns point to planning context and tool use as important differentiators in forecast reliability.

Interest in AI is High, but Adoption Remains Limited

Interest in AI for school business and finance tasks is widespread, even though adoption remains relatively low. Across budgeting, monitoring, and routine financial workflows, roughly **half** of districts say they would like to use AI, while only a small share report current use.

Interest in AI for District Business and Finance Tasks

Variance Detection
- Would Like to Use AI: 51%
- Already Using AI: 11%
- Would Not Like to Use AI: 9%
- Unsure: 30%

Budget Monitoring
- Would Like to Use AI: 51%
- Already Using AI: 11%
- Would Not Like to Use AI: 13%
- Unsure: 26%

Budget Forecasting
- Would Like to Use AI: 47%
- Already Using AI: 15%
- Would Not Like to Use AI: 11%
- Unsure: 28%

Financial Workflows (e.g. payroll, accounts payable)
- Would Like to Use AI: 40%
- Already Using AI: 15%
- Would Not Like to Use AI: 13%
- Unsure: 32%

Legend: ● Would Like to Use AI ● Already Using AI ● Would Not Like to Use AI ● Unsure

57%

of districts **using AI for budget forecasting** describe last year's forecast as very accurate.

8%

of districts **not using AI for budget forecasting** describe last year's forecast as very accurate.

Among the smaller group of districts already using AI for specific financial planning functions, reported accuracy is higher. More than half (**57%**) of districts using AI for budget forecasting describe last year's forecast as very accurate, compared with fewer than **8%** of districts not using AI. Districts using AI for variance detection report a similar pattern.

These findings do not suggest that AI alone improves forecasting. Rather, they point to differences between districts that have adopted more advanced planning and monitoring systems and those that continue to rely on more manual or disconnected processes.

These patterns suggest that broader context and stronger planning tools support more reliable forecasting, even when funding conditions remain uncertain.
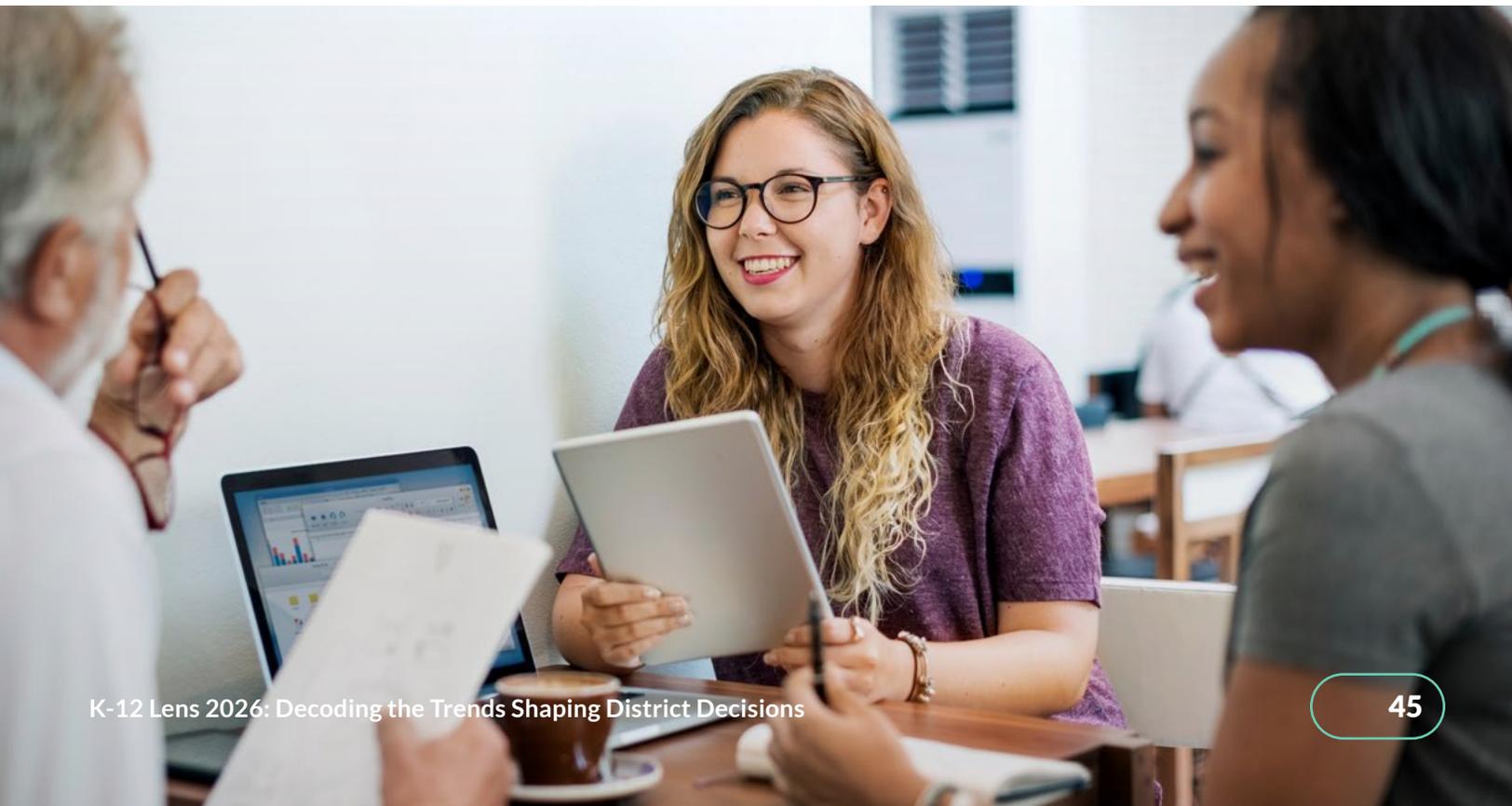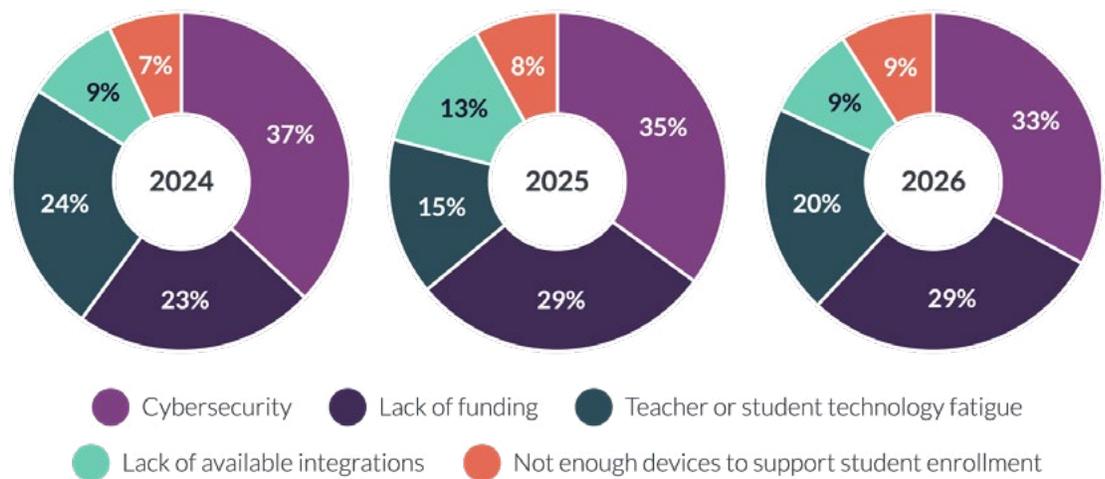
Technology Has Become Part of the Financial Equation

Technology decisions increasingly carry financial implications. Tasks such as tracking devices, managing inventory, and protecting student data directly affect spending decisions, staff workload, and financial risk. As a result, technology management is no longer confined to IT departments.

Cybersecurity remains the most frequently cited technology concern for the third consecutive year. Funding consistently ranks second. Together, these priorities highlight a clear pattern: protecting systems and maintaining infrastructure are not just technical responsibilities — they are financial ones. Preventing breaches, maintaining secure systems, and responding to incidents all carry real cost implications.

This alignment suggests that district leaders are viewing technology through both a security and fiscal lens, recognizing that operational resilience and financial stability are increasingly intertwined.

Percentage of District Leaders Identifying Each Technology Issue as Their Top Concern (2024-2026)

- Cybersecurity
- Lack of funding
- Teacher or student technology fatigue
- Lack of available integrations
- Not enough devices to support student enrollment

Where Technology Leaders Feel Completely Confident Managing Key Technology Responsibilities (2025-2026)

| Responsibility	2025	2026
Device (i.e. laptop) distribution and collection	38%	38%
Complying with federal reporting requirements for device funding	35%	29%
Providing service/support for staff and students	28%	36%
Tracking who is responsible for each device	26%	28%
Forecasting budgets to meet future technology needs	26%	17%
Tracking location of devices	24%	16%
Protecting student data in the age of AI		17%

Confidence varies by responsibility. Leaders report higher confidence in managing current operational needs than anticipating future demands, such as forecasting technology budgets or protecting student data as AI use expands.

Interest in AI Is High

Interest in AI is strongest for practical, operational use cases. **Nearly half** of districts say they would like to use AI to support inventory management, while about **one-third** remain unsure. Only a small share report current use.

Interest in AI for Inventory Management

Legend: Would Like to Use AI · Already Using AI · Would Not Like to Use AI · Unsure
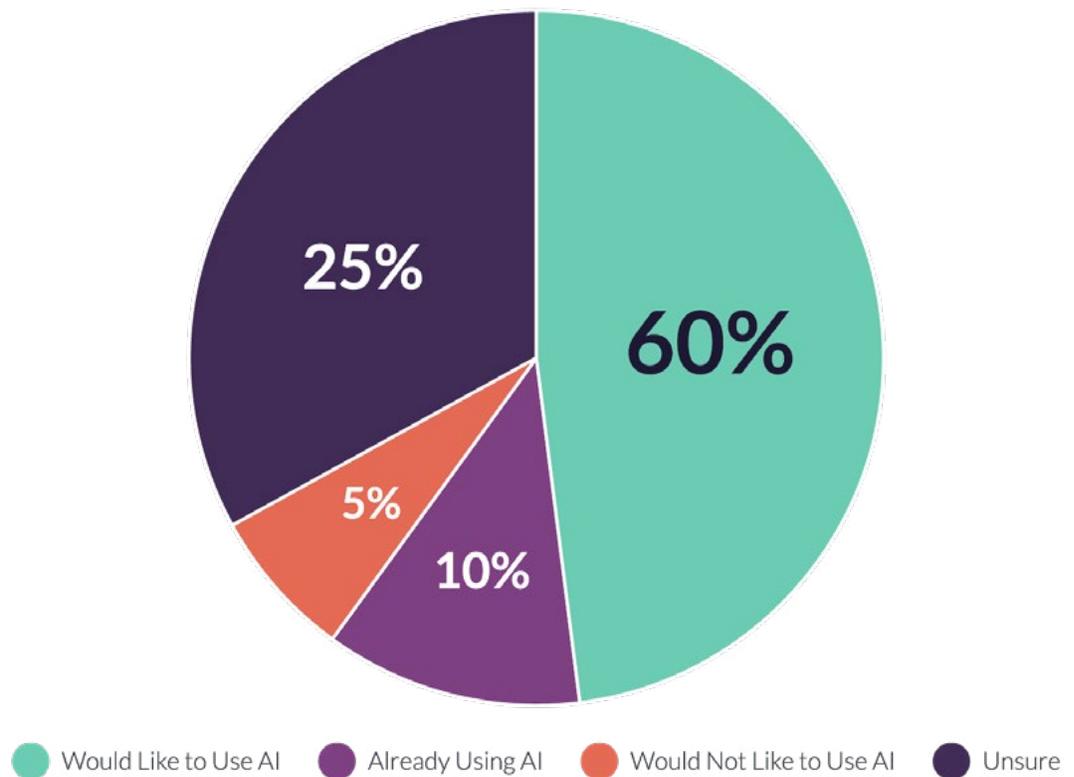
Early AI Use Is Linked to Higher Operational Confidence

Among the small group of districts already using AI for inventory management, leaders report much higher confidence across several core tasks.

Districts using AI are far more likely to say they feel confident tracking who is responsible for each device, managing device distribution and collection, and providing service and support for staff and student devices.

These findings do not suggest that AI alone improves operations. Instead, they indicate that districts already using AI tend to have more mature systems and clearer processes in place.

What the Data Suggests for Financial Planning

Financial pressure is less about one-time cuts and more about **sustained uncertainty across revenue sources**.

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Forecasting confidence has improved, but accuracy remains constrained by factors districts cannot fully control, like special education costs and policy-driven changes.

***

Planning accuracy varies most by use of context and tools, not by funding level alone.

***

Technology decisions increasingly carry financial consequences, with confidence strongest in current operations and weakest in future planning.

***

AI use is associated with **higher confidence** and **accuracy in specific tasks**, though adoption remains limited.

Conclusion

With three years of data, the story is no longer just what districts are facing, but how the conditions around core decisions are changing.

Some indicators are moving in a helpful direction. Teacher shortages are less widespread than they were two years ago, and more leaders describe their financial forecasts as accurate. But several pressures are holding in place. Chronic absenteeism remains high and difficult to reduce at scale. Workload, especially in special education, continues to shape staffing strain even when headcount improves. Funding remains uneven by source, with federal dollars proving the least predictable.

Across sections, the pattern is consistent. Outcomes vary less by intent and more by capacity. Districts that organize work clearly, use data with confidence, and rely on systems that reduce manual effort tend to report steadier conditions. Where those supports are weaker, pressure concentrates, often in specific roles, services, or planning moments.

This report does not point to a turning point. It documents movement and the distinction between what is shifting and what is holding steady. For district leaders, that distinction can sharpen priorities, clarify tradeoffs, and ground planning in today's operational reality.

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