2024 Education Focus Report

Addressing the Urgent, Shaping the Future of Student Learning

PowerSchool

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. education system is focused on dual goals: resolving urgent challenges and innovating the student learning experience.

Leaders are wrangling with stubborn attendance and behavior challenges. At the same time, they are eager to implode assessment design, democratize data insights, use artificial intelligence (AI) to personalize learning, and reduce time spent on burdensome paperwork and data analysis.

Educators are engaged in a balancing act between addressing the urgent and boldly shaping the future of schooling.

Some school systems are fully consumed with pointing the arrow of attendance upward, responding to cybersecurity attacks, and addressing staff vacancies.

Meanwhile, others have been able to shift their posture from heels to toes—pouring focus and effort into reshaping individual learning experiences to be rich in engagement, technology, and relevant workforce and life opportunities.

To create the **2024 Education Focus Report**, PowerSchool spoke with more than 75 district leaders, teachers, parents, and students. We also deployed a national survey of U.S. educators, gathering 1,620 individual responses from a wide range of school and district roles.

Right now we're doing a project where we choose our group for worldwide problems, and we research and write about them. So, I'm excited. **I like choices in my learning.**

KATALEYA
5th Grade Student

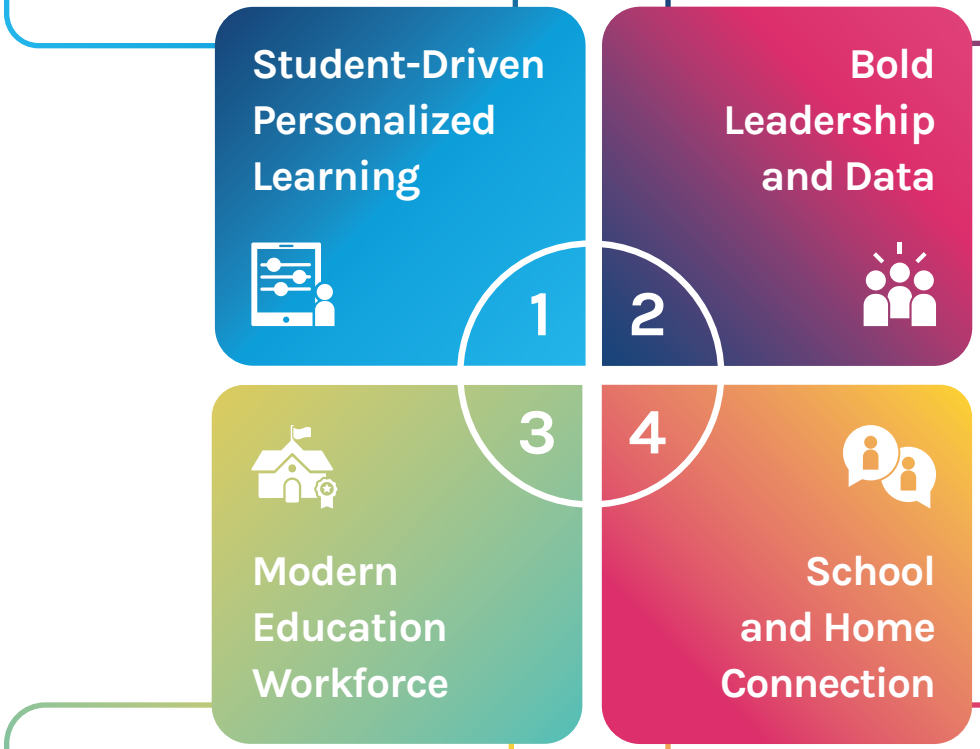
Findings at a Glance

Our research focused on the needs of students, leaders, teachers, and parents.

We found overlaps and intersections across the following four focus areas:

Changing traditional beliefs about what education looks like is the #1 hurdle to adopting more personalized learning systems.

60% of educators say to change the status quo education experience, leaders must be **collaborative** above all else.



1 in 3 educators (36%) say that the "one teacher, many students" model is not working for students.

87% of educators say a "single pane of glass" solution that consolidates information would help improve communication between school and home.

FOCUS AREA
ONE

Student-Driven Personalized Learning

Our national survey asked educators what top hurdles must be addressed for the adoption of more personalized learning systems like competency- or mastery-based education, and they said:

Changing traditional beliefs about what education looks like is the number one hurdle.

Educators identify three top innovations to change the education learning experience—many involving AI learning paths based on student choice, adaptive assessments with immediate feedback, and tailored learning content for students.

FOCUS AREA
TWO

Bold Leadership and Data

Bold leaders are collaborative at the core, while taking informed risks. It's about seeing the bigger picture and nudging, inspiring, and empowering teams to take steps toward that vision.

There is a bold-line connection between leading change and data. Data-informed, evidence-based leadership qualities were also cited as vital to achieving change. Top data priorities include "whole child analytics," "learning analytics," and "integration of data across systems."

FOCUS AREA
THREE

Modern Education Workforce

When you enter a classroom, the "one teacher, many students" model remains the industry standard. However, over one in four respondents indicate that alternative teaching models are in place.

Disruptive student behavior, planning interventions, and caregiver communication are all cited as major workload challenges for teachers.

FOCUS AREA
FOUR

School and Home Connection

Seven in 10 educators agree that student attendance has been a significant challenge in their school system since the COVID-19 pandemic. School leaders are using relationship- and incentive-based strategies to improve student attendance, but school and home communication is key.

When asked, parents widely agree that dramatic consolidation and simplification of school communication is needed. Too few schools ask and act on the mode and frequency caregivers say they want to communicate.

Our Research Method

We solicited insights from educators, parents, and students via roundtable conversations, interviews with thought leaders, and a national online survey.

Roundtables

Our research team convened 12 virtual roundtables. Conversations included more than 75 educators, parents, and students representing districts across the U.S. using a common discussion guide for given groups and focus areas. Educator roles ranged from classroom teachers and instructional coaches to school leaders and district administrators.

Interviews

In addition, we extend a sincere thank you to thought leaders who provided expert insight on the topics and findings of this report:

Tessie Bailey, Ph.D., Principal Consultant, American Institutes for Research (AIR)

Bill Bass, Innovation Coordinator for Instructional Technology, Information, Federal Grants & Library Media, Parkway C-2 School District, MO

Jennifer Bell-Ellwanger, President and CEO, Data Quality Campaign

Jean-Claude Brizard, President and CEO, Digital Promise

Julia Fallon, Executive Director, State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA)

Ryan Gravette, Director of Information and Technology, Idaho Digital Learning Academy, ID

Jennifer Grimm, Director of Information Services, Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, TX

Kris Hagel, Executive Director of Digital Learning, Peninsula School District 401, WA

Michael Horn, Education Researcher and Author

Elaine Howard, Ed.D., Superintendent, Sharyland ISD, TX

Daphne Kaiser, Ph.D., Assistant Superintendent of Community Engagement, Albemarle County Public Schools, VA

Keith Krueger, CEO, Consortium of School Networking (CoSN)

Sherrard Lewis Martin, Former Project Director of Federal TSL & GEAR UP Grants, Iredell-Statesville Schools, NC

Jessica Preisig, Assistant Superintendent for Technology Services, School District of Pickens County, SC

Carla Wade, Executive Director of External Relations, Consortium of School Networking (CoSN)

National Survey

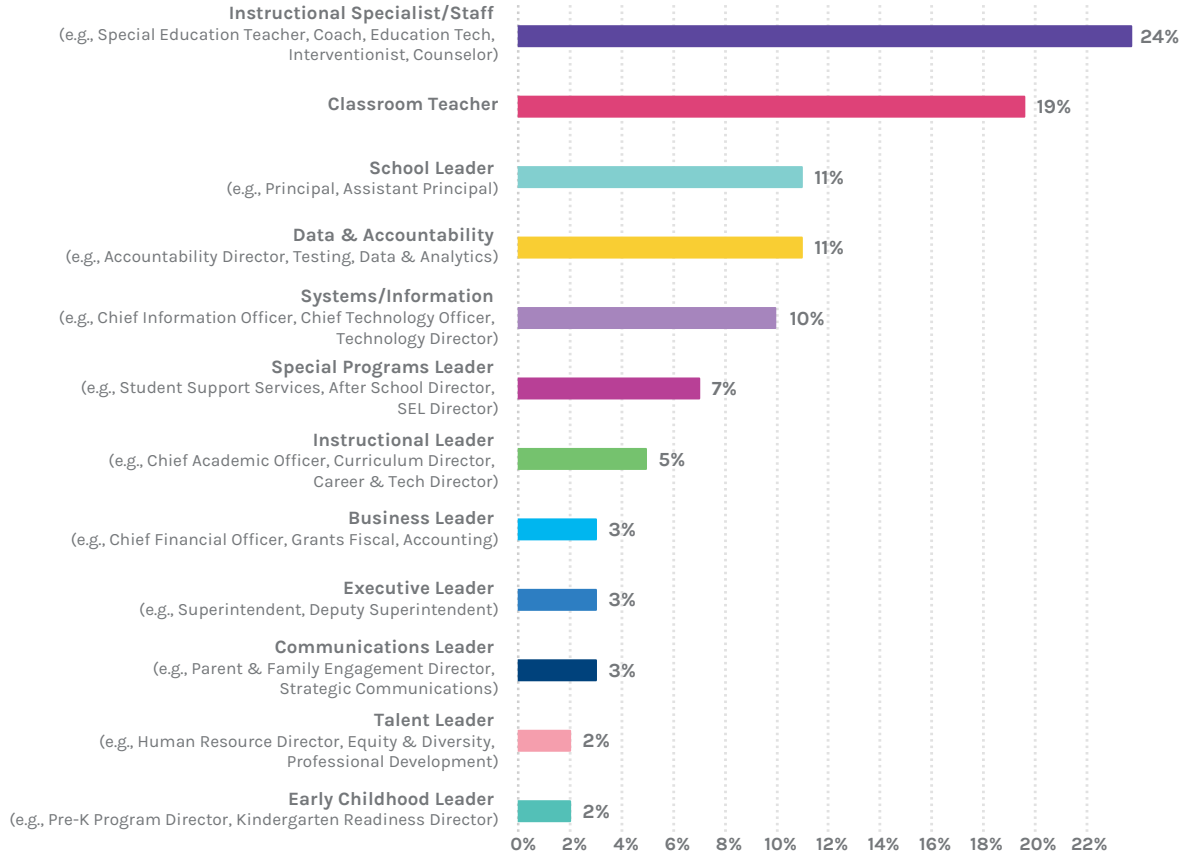
To gather perception data on key topics relevant to this report, we conducted a survey from February 27 to March 26, 2024. The survey limited responses to the U.S. and U.S. Territories. Respondents were asked to identify their role, state, or territory, years worked in education, and size of school district.

We solicited perspectives from educators, support staff, school leaders, and an array of district leaders on the four key education focus areas covered in this report.

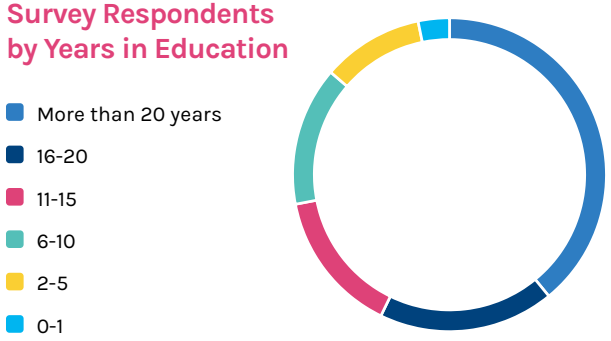
Upon the survey closing, we received 1,620 responses. We included responses that completed at least the first section of the survey and all full responses.

SURVEY RESULTS

Survey Respondents by Role



Survey Respondents by Years in Education



Top Challenges and Priorities—
Education

In our national survey of educators, we asked them to select their top four education and technology challenges and priorities.

Top Challenges

School

1. Keeping students academically engaged
2. Improving student attendance in school
3. Effective student behavior interventions
4. Effective student academic interventions

District

1. Improving student attendance in school
2. Effective student behavior interventions
3. Keeping students academically engaged
4. Addressing teacher/staff vacancies

Top Priorities

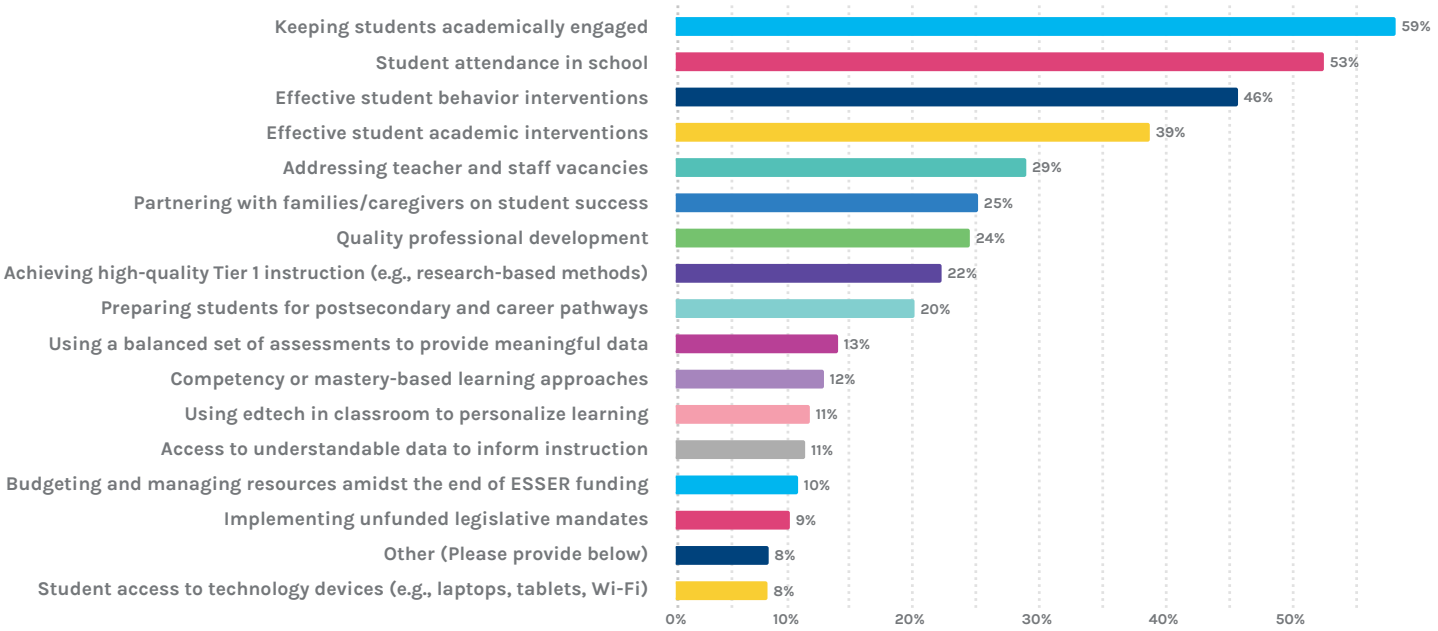
School

1. Keeping students academically engaged
2. Effective student academic interventions
3. Improving student attendance in school
4. Effective student behavior interventions

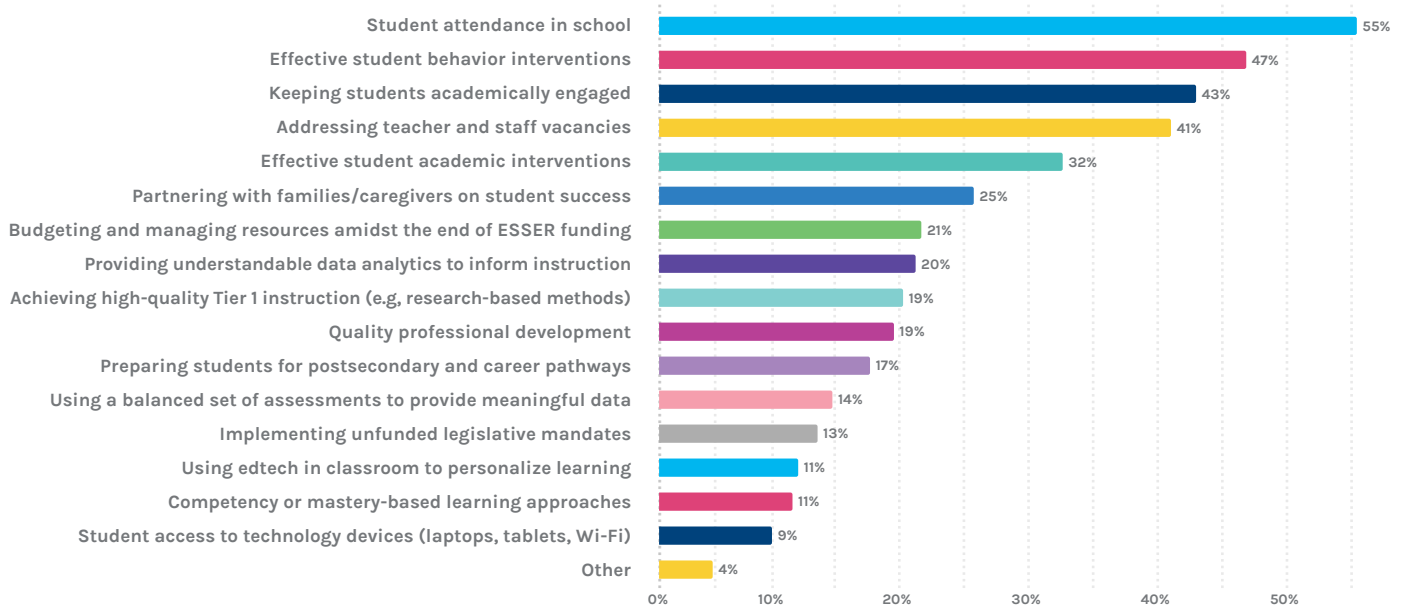
District

1. Improving student attendance in school
2. Keeping students academically engaged
3. Effective student behavior interventions
4. Effective student academic interventions

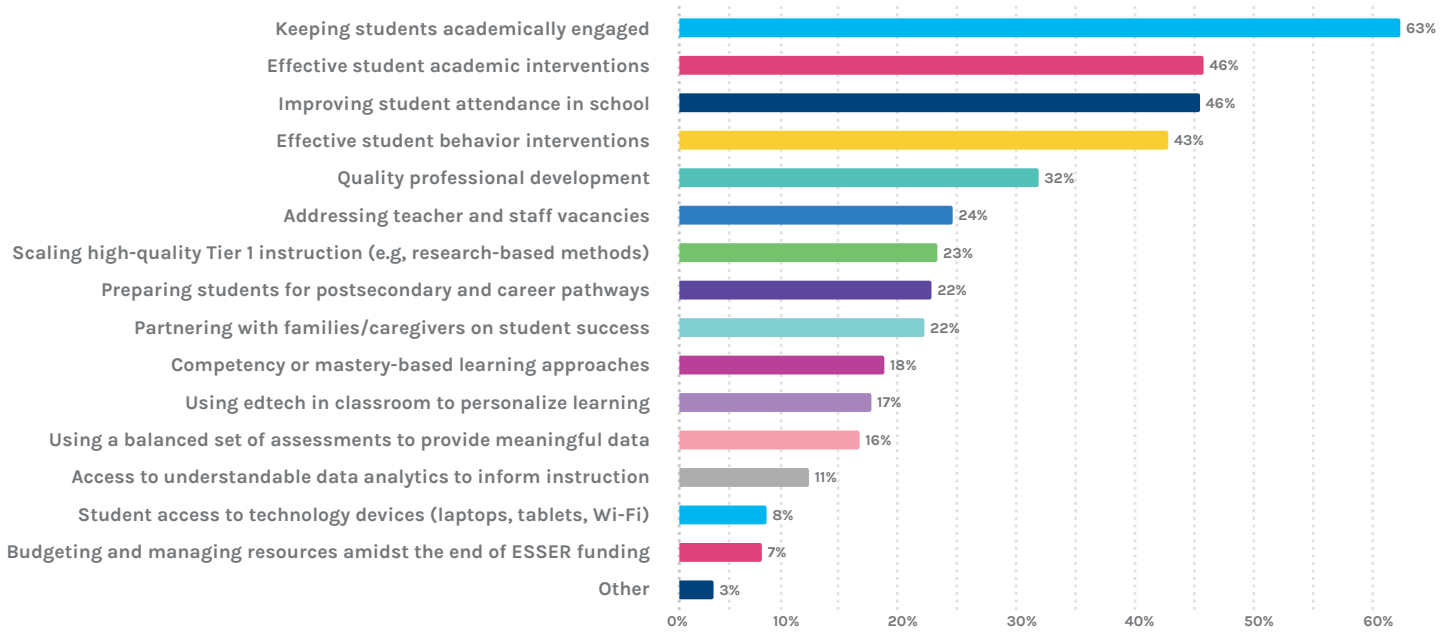
Top Challenges Education [SCHOOL-LEVEL]



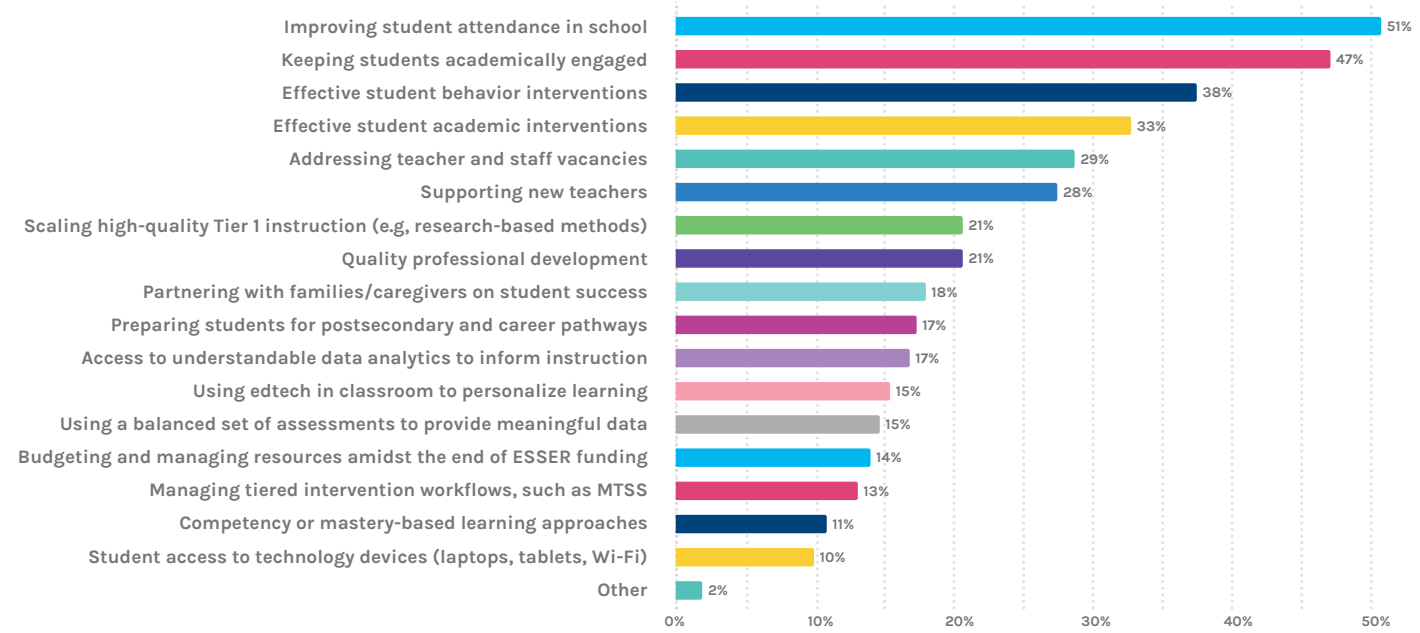
Top Challenges Education [DISTRICT-LEVEL]



Top Priorities Education [SCHOOL-LEVEL]



Top Priorities Education [DISTRICT-LEVEL]



ONE INSIGHT

became a leading theme in our conversations with educators:

Bold leaders don’t let present challenges stifle future work.

The story is clear: educators are prioritizing urgent challenges today while bringing fresh energy and commitment to shaping an engaging, relevant student learning experience that incorporates new innovations.

National survey data from both school and district staff align on challenges and priorities, with some minor differences in order. The challenges that fell to the bottom this year ("access to understandable data to inform student supports" and "student access to technology devices," among them) inspire optimism about how K-12 educators are resolving some key issues that were at the top of the list just a handful of years ago.

Top overall education priorities in many ways reflect the state of K-12 education. In the clarity of a post-pandemic setting, there’s a recognition that **attendance and academic engagement challenges are symptomatic of a system ripe for revisiting what is valuable in schooling.**

That said, pandemic disruption created the opportunity for system change and, ironically, an appetite for "normal." The need for stability and a vision for the future is both true and necessary. This fact is not lost on bold leaders. Talent vacancies and the pressure to shore up student attendance coexist with questions about what the future of the teaching profession looks like and how student learning will change in a time of massive technological shifts.

- **The Urgent Now** "We have a huge chronic absenteeism problem and if we can’t get kids here, then we can’t do anything else. It has dramatically escalated since the pandemic. We’re figuring out creative solutions for how to get kids motivated and how to educate families around that," says Julie Powell, Director of Instructional Technology, Palatine Community Consolidated School District 15, IL.
- **The Future of Learning** "Leaders must start with a shared focus on challenges. They coalesce around what’s the problem they’re trying to solve—and then focus on the how." They say, ‘This is the problem we’re solving. This is why we’re solving it. We all agree this is important and needs to be solved. ’And innovation streams from those conversations." shares Michael Horn, Education Author and Researcher.

Present challenges that surface can easily delay shifts to new learning designs. Balancing the "now" and sequencing system change effectively is the work.

Top Challenges and Priorities—
Technology

If attendance, engagement, and tiered supports are the overall top priorities, K-12 technology challenges and priorities are a response to how to best take action.

Top Challenges

School

1. Implementing tools to promote more positive student behaviors
2. Implementing attendance tools to address chronic absenteeism
3. Implementing new AI guidance
4. Integrating technology solutions to facilitate personalized learning

District

1. Connecting data across systems (integration)
2. Implementing attendance tools to address student absenteeism
3. Integrating technology solutions to personalize learning
4. Cybersecurity and protecting student data privacy

Top Priorities

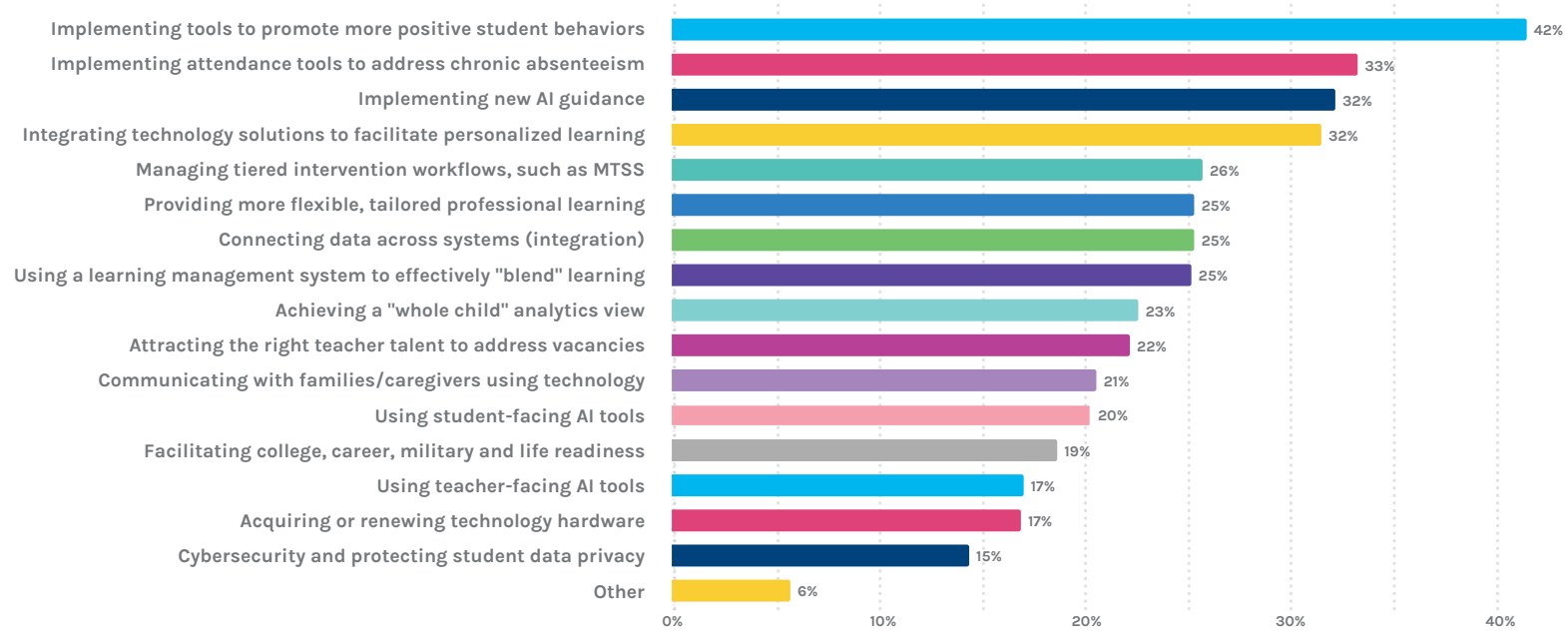
School

1. Integrating technology solutions to personalize learning
2. Implementing tools to promote positive student behaviors
3. Implementing new AI guidance
4. Implementing attendance tools to address student absenteeism

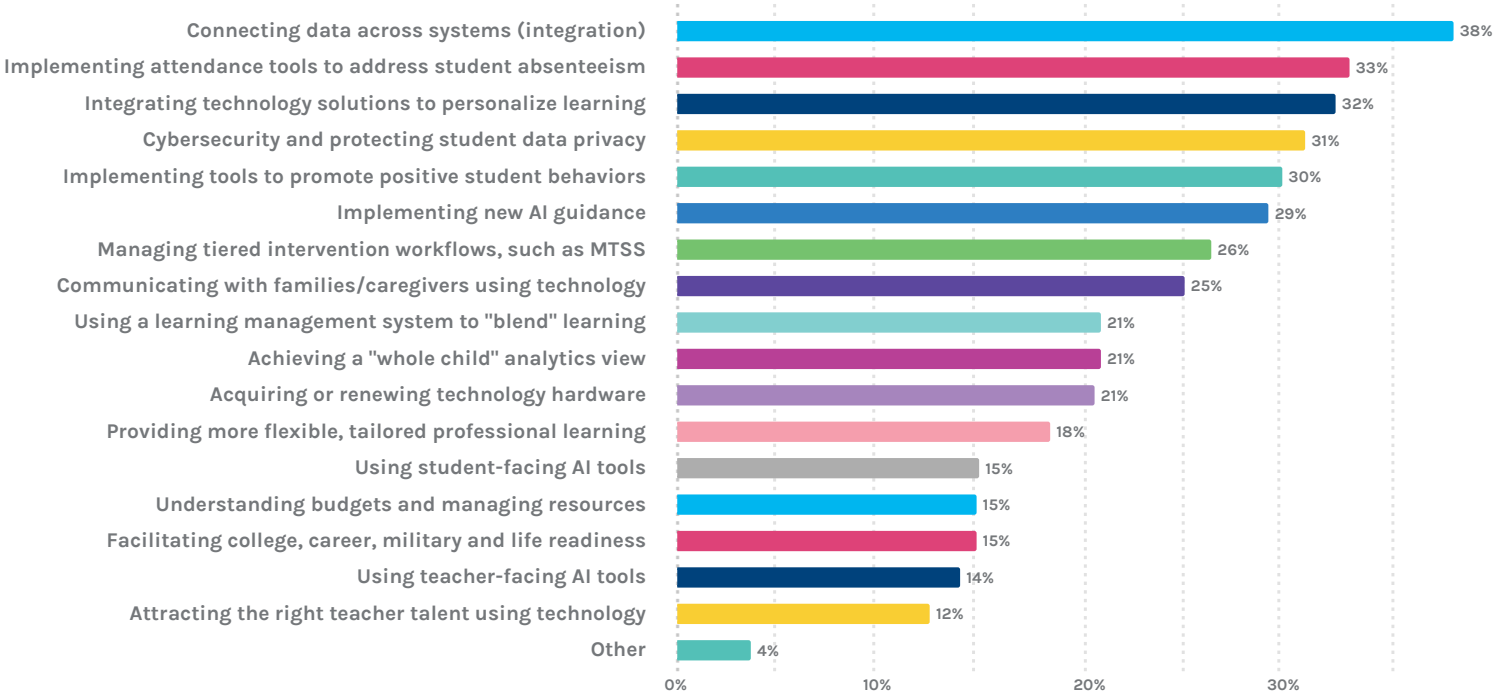
District

1. Integrating technology solutions to personalize learning
2. Connecting data across systems (integration)
3. Implementing attendance tools to address student absenteeism
4. Implementing new AI guidance

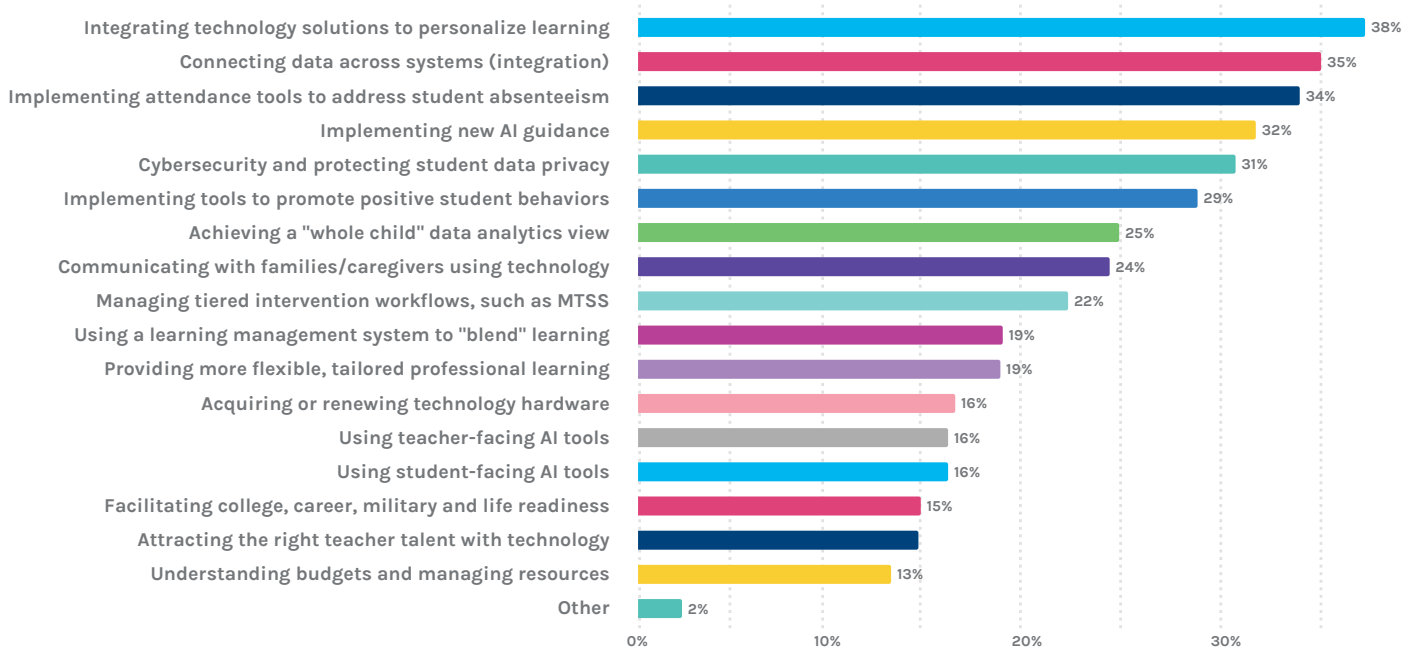
Top Challenges Technology [SCHOOL-LEVEL]



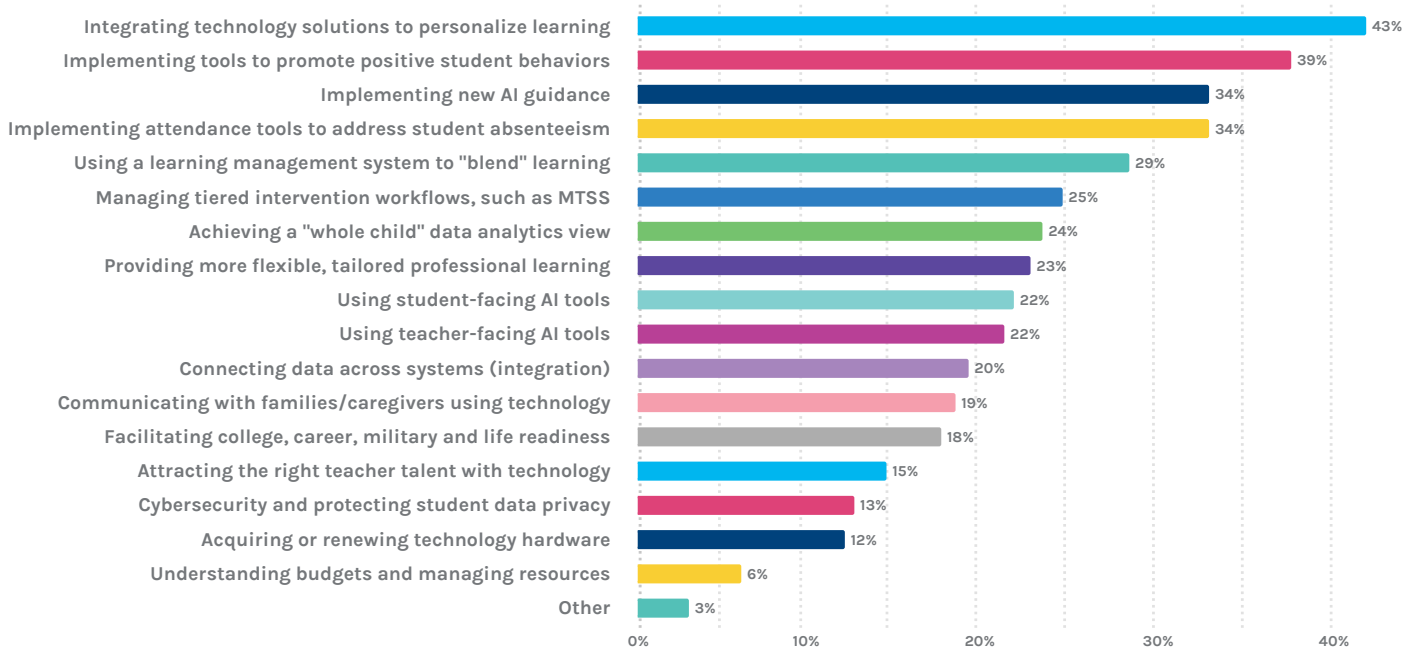
Top Challenges Technology [DISTRICT-LEVEL]



Top Priorities Technology [SCHOOL-LEVEL]



Top Priorities Technology [DISTRICT-LEVEL]



At the school level, **using technology tools to promote more positive student behaviors** tops the challenges list, followed by **attendance tools**, and **AI guidance development**. AI guidance lands in the top five for districts as well, showing that school leaders are grappling with the path forward to harness AI for teaching and learning while safeguarding student data.

Connecting data across systems is the top challenge at the district level and has a vital connection to AI work. Technology leaders are widely realizing that effective AI is rich in context and leverages local data. If the right data is not connected, the capabilities and benefits of AI are diminished.

Top priorities in K-12 technology indicate that integrating technology solutions to personalize learning remains a persistent effort.

While personalizing education is the number one priority for technology, educators continue to weigh the right use and dosage of technology in classrooms for effective student learning. Educators share that there is a time and place for technology to deliver unique educational benefits, but also many scenarios where tech should take a backseat to peer collaboration and problem solving.

Part of that conversation underscored a clear distinction to be made between technology for education and technology for personal use. School systems are recognizing this, and some state policymakers are guarding against the negative effects of young people's cell phone and social media use on their mental health and behavior.[1]

At the district level, priority placed on connecting data and AI guidance are responses to the challenges outlined above and the interdependency between these efforts.

Pati Ruiz, Ed.D., Sr. Director of Edtech and Emerging Technologies, leads work at Digital Promise with the League of Innovative Schools to consider implications of AI for teacher professional development and use of tools in teaching and student learning. She shares, "School and district leaders are seeing good examples of AI implementation and are able to imagine how those supports can meet the needs of their students. Specifically, we're seeing a focus in assistive technology applications that allow for scaffolded support of writing instruction, multiple modes of representation, and varied examples to meet the diverse needs of learners."

Chris Turner, Special Education Teacher at Michigan's Ypsilanti Community Schools, tells us, "I have 14 students that I need to differentiate learning for. And while I am familiar with the curriculum and pedagogy, there is so much information to organize and put into lesson plans. If I had a resource like AI to produce legitimate scaffolding that I could use for differentiation in my classroom, then it would free up my time for individual attention to students' academic, behavior, and SEL needs."

Integration of AI into existing tools is spurring incremental adoption. In turn, this leads educators to focus on how contextual data in a school system's ecosystem can be used responsibly to strengthen usable data sources. Work to spin up guidance on AI is taking many forms, and leaders are learning from their colleagues alongside national partners such as CoSN and Digital Promise.

ONE

Student-Driven Personalized Learning

Guiding Questions

- What major hurdles must be addressed to embrace more personalized education approaches like competency- or mastery-based education?
- How can assessments change to become more student-centered?
- How is your school or district considering uses of AI, and why? What AI innovations are most promising?

What Student-Driven Personalized Learning Is and Why It's Needed

Student-driven personalized learning has long been a focus of school systems and teachers and perennially popular among students and caregivers. And while education has embraced personalization as a worthy goal, the reality has been challenging to scale.

Numerous definitions of personalized learning abound, mostly centered on customizing learning according to student strengths, needs, and interests, promoting student agency in learning, and leveraging technology to adapt the learning experience for individual learners.[2]

Competency- and mastery-based education models embed these concepts of personalized learning heavily, but comprehensive adoptions are rare despite a strong consensus among education leaders that this model would drive stronger student engagement and outcomes.[3] These models represent a dramatic shift in the pace and design of learning. Every state in the U.S. is now offering flexibility to implement these models of personalized learning.[4]

> As an educational community, we need to consider how our schools are meeting the needs of students who have had a student-centered experience versus students who have had a traditional experience. **What are the pros and cons of both?**

SUSAN MOORE
Director of Technology & Curriculum
Meriden Public Schools, CT

And yet, mainstream U.S. education remains rooted in traditional learning designs. Walk into the average school in the U.S. and you will see:

- 20-30 students in discrete classrooms led by one teacher. Students follow the teacher's lead, and typically have limited choice or agency in their learning.
- Technology is often present, but rarely used in a way that significantly modifies or redefines a learning experience for students.[5]
- Students are required to remain in class for a specified amount of time, regardless of mastery.
- At the end of the semester and year, students complete multiple-choice tests and some constructed responses to measure what was learned in a narrow range of subjects and skill sets. It can take weeks or months for students and educators to understand results.

Distressing student absenteeism rates from schools and the persistent push to engage students in learning—cited by school and district leaders as top challenges and priorities—are clear indicators that a change in learning design is merited and necessary.

Hurdles to Change the Status Quo Education Model

We asked educators across the country what hurdles must be addressed for the adoption of competency- or mastery-based education models.

Kimberly Nidy, Director of Technology for Ohio's North Canton City Schools, shares, "We created the Ohio Blended Collaborative, and we have been working with many school sites trying to dig into the actual pedagogy of what we're doing with kids in the classrooms and to develop systems of personalized learning. We're doing a lot of teacher professional development."

NUMBER ONE response: Changing traditional beliefs about what education looks like.

Michael Horn, who has researched and written extensively on how to change education systems to be more personalized, reports that leaders who achieve change "...don't try to tackle everything at once. Instead, they focus on a specific problem shared by educators, students, and parents. They keep this problem at the center, aiming to solve practical issues like helping kids pass math exams rather than broad goals like 'personalizing learning.' Schools that succeed tend to lead with widely agreed-upon goals and offer optional programs for those interested, rather than forcing everyone to adopt new methods."

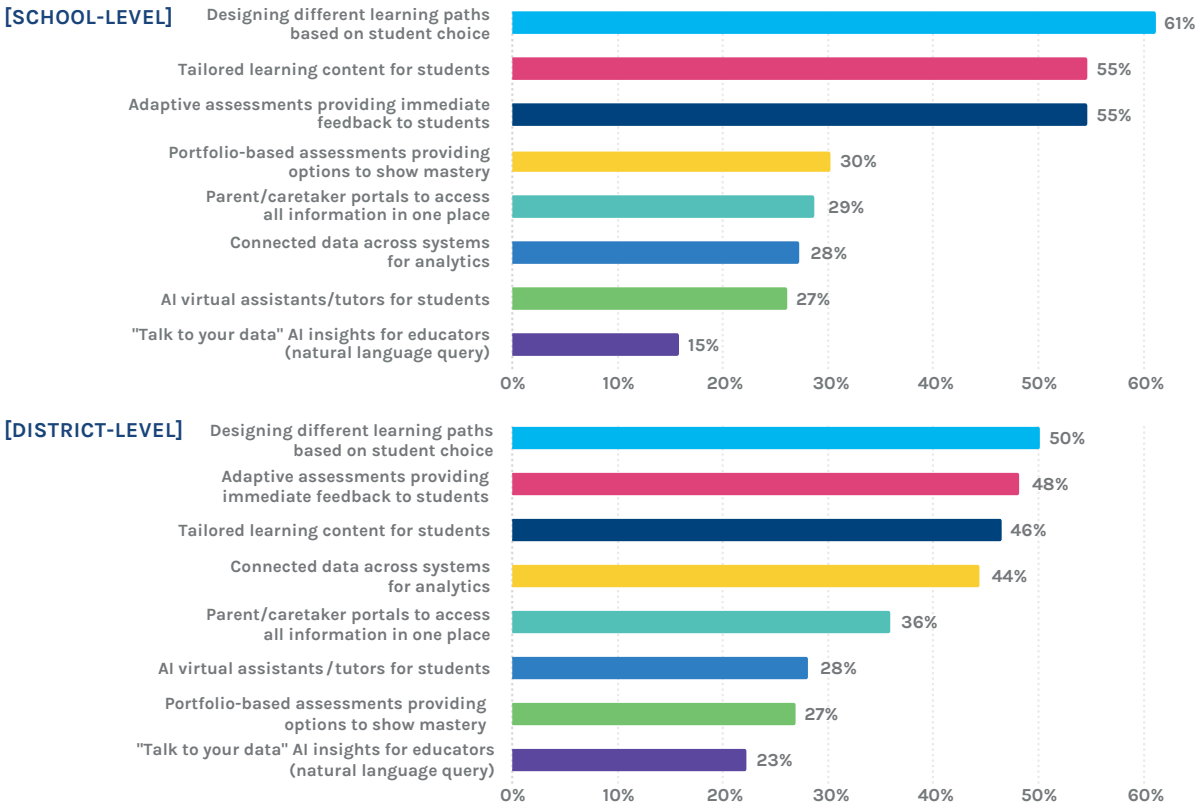
Our national advisory group for this report echoed the message of taking "constant incremental steps to achieve system change." **Many emphasized that innovations could pave a path toward accelerating the pace of transformation.**

Innovations That Hold the Most Promise to Advance Personalized Learning

We asked educators to name the top innovations with the greatest potential to advance personalized education. While ordering was different, both schools and districts selected **designing different learning paths based on student choice, adaptive assessments with immediate feedback, and tailored learning content for students.**

SURVEY RESULTS

Select the TOP THREE innovations with the greatest potential to advance personalized education.



> Any time that it's a personalized approach and you're getting trusted technology involved, **I think it's great.**

RYAN BEAVER
Parent

> The three-hour test is a dated construct that tells us nothing about what a learner really knows. Assessment needs to be embedded in pedagogy and learning activities. It should be transparent and continuous. It should measure learning and tell us what to do to support learners. Those who prioritize accountability will want something that's a bit more independent, however. **The bottom line: let's recognize more learning, not just math and literacy.** There's big work to be done here. But the formative way in which we measure learning needs to be part of the pedagogy and part of the activity. AI may help us get there.

JEAN-CLAUDE BRIZARD
President and CEO
Digital Promise

Assessments Need to Be Rethought

In speaking with leaders across the U.S., one statement rings true: very few are happy with how we currently assess students for purposes of school accountability. We asked leaders to reflect on whether the current ways we assess learning and measure school quality put students at the center.

The resounding response was, "No, they do not."

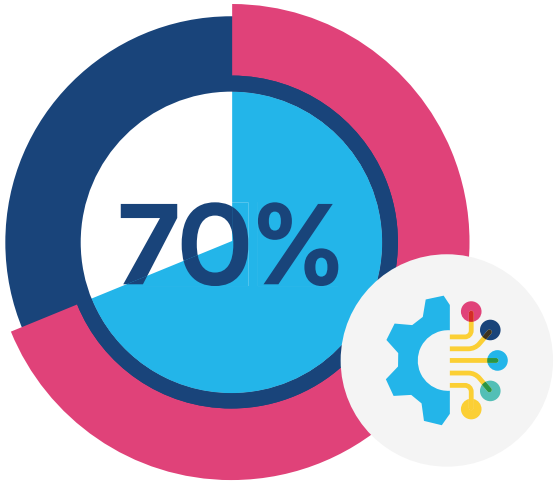
Christine Diggs, Ed.D., Chief Technology Officer at Virginia's Albemarle County Public Schools, shares, "Standardized assessments, which is what we're all measured against from the state level and that are imposed on most public schools, work against the concept of personalized learning and personalized education."

Some leaders point out that assessments for measuring school quality could incorporate elements of tests that inform instructional decisions, and less emphasis should be placed on once-a-year assessments. **Many educators insist that the future of assessment is formative, adaptive, and multi-modal, which places high value on timely feedback to students, teachers, and parents.**

Carla Wade, CoSN's Senior Director of External Relations, points out that from the teacher perspective, assessment is a vital lifeline to making the right instructional decisions: "To truly understand students, we must closely monitor their day-to-day progress," she explains. "It's essential to employ diagnostic tools that uncover each child's unique strengths and needs. By utilizing a variety of diagnostic and formative assessments and triangulating the data, we can more effectively inform instruction to address individual student needs."

> We need to prove our concept [of new assessment approaches] with small pilot programs that have clear learning objectives. By showing a different way to measure success and achieving small wins, we can present these successes to state or national leadership. **Without highlighting our success stories, we are only advocating for an abstract idea.** This method will help us move in the direction we want to go.

JENNIFER GRIMM
Director of Information Services
Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, TX



70% of district leaders agree or strongly agree with the potential of AI to enhance teaching and learning.

This is 17 percentage points higher than the 53% agreement rate we saw in 2023.

AI for What? Tinkering with Use Cases

Education leaders are cautiously embracing AI, productively exploring best uses for administrators and practitioners, and pressure-testing for stringent data privacy, security, and data governance.

Mary Beth Clifton, Ed.D., CETL, from Pennsylvania's West Chester Area School District, says, "We started exploring AI with teachers, admins, and board members. We discussed how to implement it and what tools to use. We sent members of our AI 'think tank team' to a conference. They attended presentations and evaluated various AI tools. We found certain AI tools to be the best for students—especially those that provide sources when offering insights on topics. We began introducing AI with our teacher induction program, and then we presented to new teachers on how they can use AI."

Exploring the value and uses of AI in some districts has been an "all in" exercise.

These examples show that AI will serve as a generator, engager, and activator for personalized learning for students and educators—thus demonstrating its great potential for elevating personalized learning at scale.

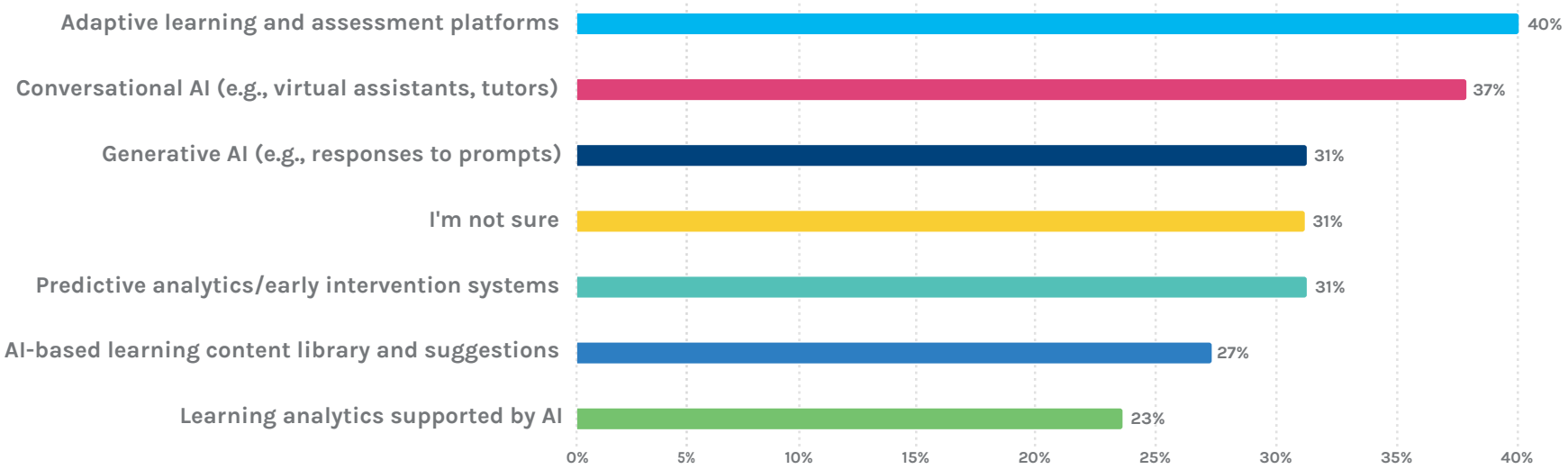
Top AI Use Cases

We asked school and district staff about how they are currently using AI. Three in 10 were not aware of using AI in any way, while 2 in 10 were not sure. Of the half that were using AI, their top uses included **curriculum and lesson planning assistance, automated grading and assessment, and personalizing student learning content.**

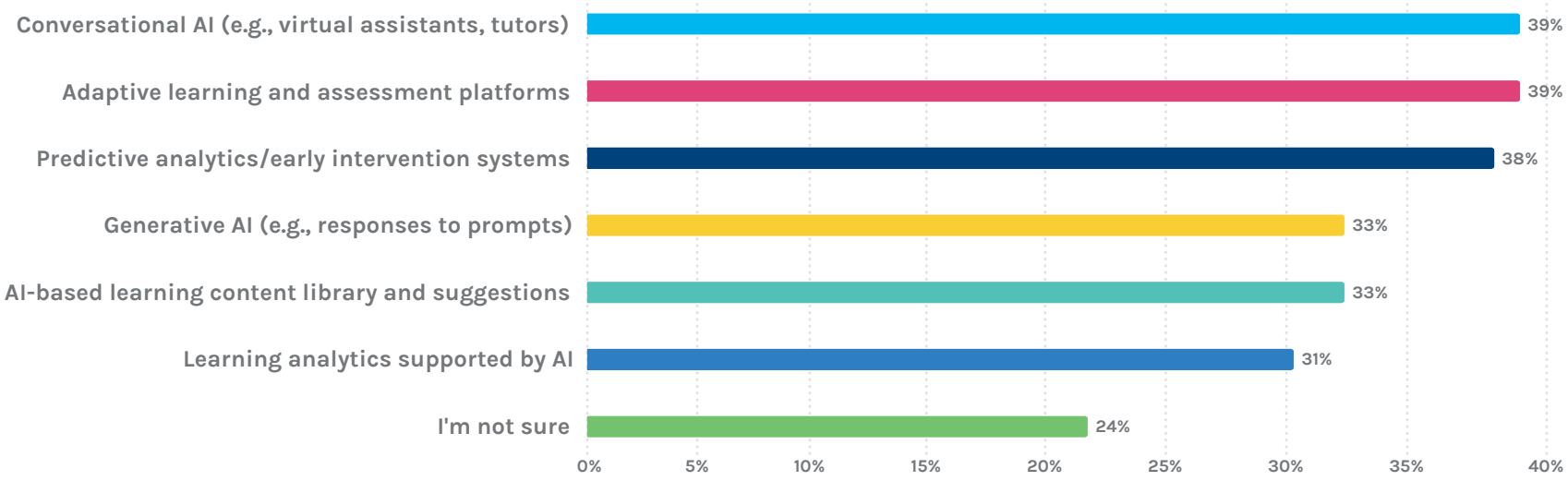
SURVEY RESULTS

What forms of AI have the greatest potential to advance personalized learning? Select all that apply.

[SCHOOL-LEVEL]



[DISTRICT-LEVEL]



Our superintendent and teachers are using AI for administrative tasks. Our learning technology team has partnered with our instruction team to publish AI guidelines for the school division. We're also developing professional development for teachers on using AI with students. **We're embracing AI and moving forward cautiously.**

CHRISTINE DIGGS, ED.D.
Chief Technology Officer
Albemarle County Public Schools, VA

Cybersecurity, Data Privacy Top AI Concerns

Across national survey findings, about 1 in 5 district leaders reported that their school system is developing guidance on AI. **Many educators are unsure about AI guidance or have not begun this work, which indicates that there are:**

- Early adopters pushing into AI
- Cautious or skeptical leaders looking to see what other districts do
- Educators waiting for more formal guidance from their state or trusted partners on AI

While the promise of personalization is real, many technology leaders are taking a hard look at how data ingested by AI is being used—and whether it meets federal, state, and local guidelines.

As Susan Moore says, "We have more resources for personalization available to us than we have ever had before and that brings with it new challenges. There's the challenge of teacher training so that they're able to use it effectively, and how do we continue to ensure student data privacy."

Jean-Claude Brizard, President and CEO of Digital Promise, shares, "When using an AI system, it's important to know its data source. Most, if not all, school systems will not build AI tools. AI will show up in edtech products. AI questions are edtech questions and should align with a system's overall tech strategy. The key relationship in education is between teachers, students, families, and curricula content. Technology should enhance these relationships by augmenting intelligence. When procuring AI tools, ensure they are certified, research-based, safe and reliable. Ask questions to understand what you are buying and its potential biases, relying on reputable companies that focus on effective research design."

> To truly personalize experiences for our students—with data, with the ways they interact with us, with AI, with technology and information—**we are going to be able to make better decisions about what students need because of their sophistication** but also because our tools are just going to get better. When I say a 'personalized approach,' I'm focusing on the students' ability to interact with information and learn effectively.

BILL BASS
Innovation Coordinator for Instructional Technology, Information, Federal Grants & Library Media
Parkway C-2 School District, MO

Collaboration, Integrated Data Top Challenges for MTSS

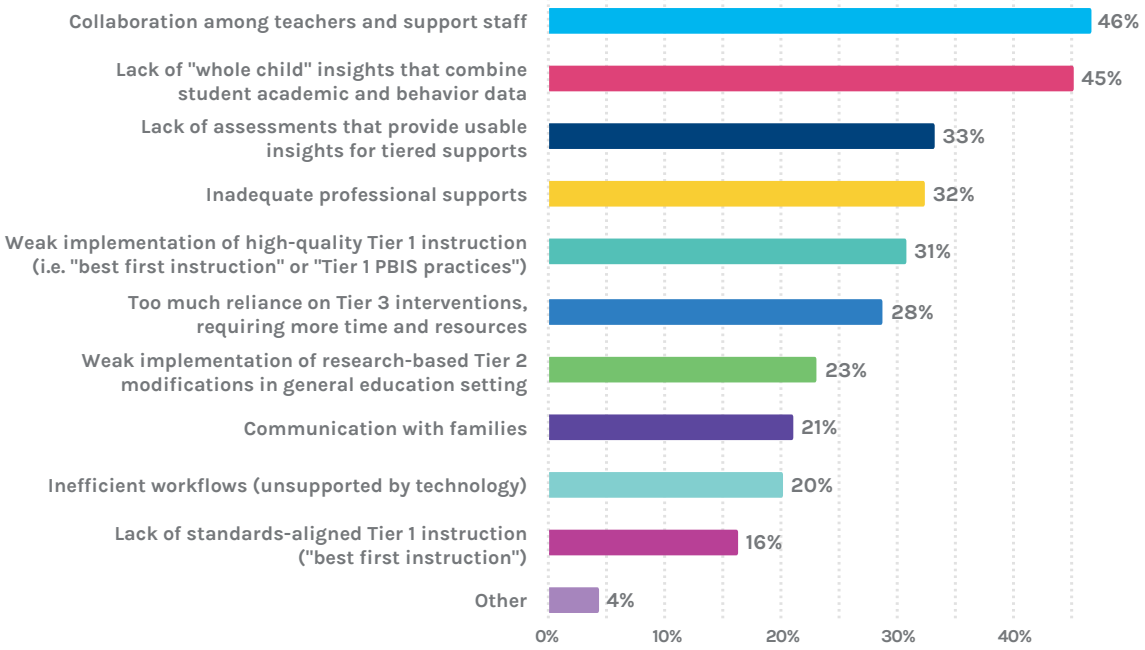
Technology Adoption is Growing

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is a research-based framework that uses data and instruction to support students' academic growth, durable skills, mental health, and behavioral needs.

SURVEY RESULTS

Select the TOP THREE current challenges to implement a tiered system of supports for your school system (whether MTSS, RTI, or similar).

[SCHOOL-LEVEL]



As adoption of MTSS grows, educators say that collaboration among teachers and support staff is the number one challenge, followed by lack of whole child insights that integrate academic and behavioral data.

Ironically, MTSS is a system purposed to structure collaboration among school staff using data. As noted in past Education Focus Reports from 2022 and 2023, MTSS implementation is highly variable across schools, and success depends largely on use of effective systems and clear rules of engagement amongst staff.

Only 34% of district leaders can say which student interventions are working in their school district and 16% say they have the data to back it up.

Tessie Bailey, Ph.D., Principal Consultant at the American Institutes of Research (AIR), reflects on the purpose of MTSS: "The whole intent of MTSS was to make it more efficient and effective for teachers to provide good instruction. And if our systems are getting in our way, then we're losing the intent. If kids aren't getting access to good core instruction, evidence-based practices, and the high-leverage practices, that then requires greater investment in Tier 2 and Tier 3 to fix that."

Educators share that the data systems used to understand student learning and behavior are not easily integrated to the point where they can understand a skill or learning gap according to state standards and can review how positive behavioral interventions are working (or not) for the student – side by side. But where there is technology purposed for MTSS, increasing whole child insights are available. The trick is getting all staff supported to use it.

Technology Still Underused for MTSS, but Streamlining Workflows Where in Place

"When it comes to MTSS technology, it's a mixed bag," Bailey reflects. "We'll eventually see some innovative outcomes, but the process can be inefficient at times. Innovation often involves growing pains, like training staff on new systems and adjusting to changes. If schools don't support teachers by giving them time and coaching to adapt, the implementation can feel clunky. Often, only a few enthusiastic teachers use the new system effectively, while those who could benefit the most aren't ready. **Schools need to be responsive to teachers' needs for the transition to be successful.**"

Still, educators report achieving workflow efficiencies from a cohesive system of data tailored to the MTSS process that facilitates collaboration with peers and clarifies key trends in student data.

> We have great technology, **but it's only effective if everybody knows how to use it.**

JESSICA PREISIG
Assistant Superintendent for Technology Services
School District of Pickens County, SC

I think personalized learning is about having more classes that are going to help in the real world. A lot of what we learn is interesting, but we're not going to need it. For example, I learned a lot of math that I won't use, but if there are classes for life skills—like learning how to fix a tire, learning how to build stuff, gaining skills like CPR—that might actually be helpful to me. I find that smaller, personal classes like those make it easier to learn.

OLIVIA
10th Grade Student

Choice, Tech, and Career Learning

Keys to Student Pathways

Students want more educational experiences that offer them choice in learning—especially experiences that put them on a path to a rewarding career. Parents share the same sentiment, and they want better career-matching and future-planning tools to help their children with postsecondary pathways, including transferable skill-building.

7 OUT OF 10

educators say hands-on experiential learning is the most promising innovation to design secondary education.

Schools have listened, and many now offer high-quality, varied career-based learning pathways during middle and high school. Still, 3 out of 10 educators feel "neutral" about the options and supports for students to explore careers and learn what education and training is needed. Two in 10 educators express strong dissatisfaction with their school's options and support for students' future pathways.

When asked about top innovations needed to redesign secondary education for workforce preparedness, educators selected:

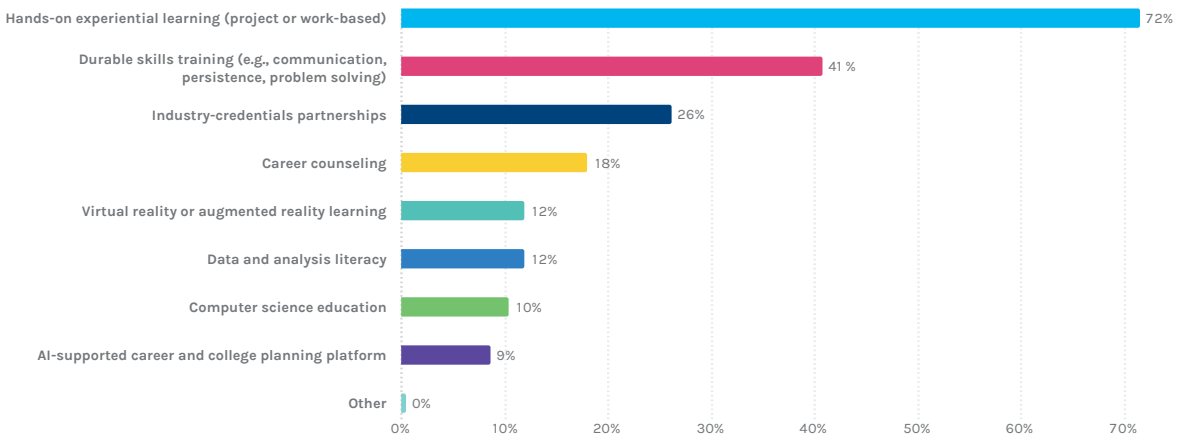
1. Hands-on experiential learning (project- or work-based)
2. Durable skills training (e.g., communication, persistence)
3. Industry credentials partnerships

When asked how technology can help, educators said that structured career and pathways information, work-based learning and credential planning, and online career guidance are all value-adds that edtech can deliver.

SURVEY RESULTS

Select the TOP TWO most promising innovations to redesign secondary education so students are better prepared for work and life.

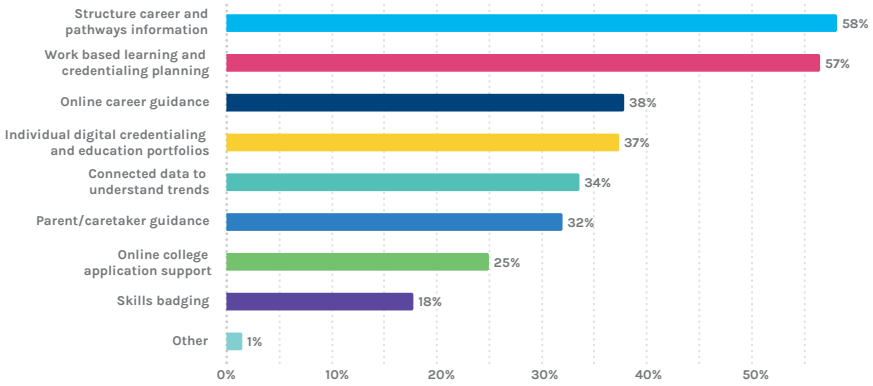
[SCHOOL-LEVEL]



SURVEY RESULTS

Select the TOP THREE ways technology can help bridge the gap between secondary education, career readiness, and postsecondary education and training.

[SCHOOL-LEVEL]



There are key ways in which technology can help bridge education to career.

Parent Karen Recar shares, "It'd be great if there were a platform that combined with AI. When people don't have access to in-person training or internships, they could have access to training with feedback. Some people can't go to a clinic or a shop to fix a car. Our school's aviation program does this. So, ideally it is a combination of both. It becomes personalized through a platform and through a person."

In our conversations with various stakeholders—including survey respondents, interviewees, and focus groups—a common theme emerged: empowering students with personalized learning experiences is paramount, but challenges remain around leveraging innovations like AI, weaving in frameworks like MTSS, scaffolding skills-based and existing future pathways, and assessing personalized educational experiences.

> In order to support individuals on their career pathways, it is essential that states have strong longitudinal data ecosystems and data-informed public tools. **When early education, K-12, postsecondary, and workforce data are integrated, states can use that data to design evidence-based policy to support individuals in acquiring the education and skills necessary for their chosen career path and increase the state's educated workforce in high-demand fields.** And when that data is incorporated into public-facing tools such as digital wallets or Learning and Employment Records (LERs), it empowers individuals to go from saying, 'I worked at X place for two years and I did these things,' to being able to say, 'These are the knowledge, skills, and experience that I have that make me employable.'

JENNIFER BELL-ELLWANGER
President and CEO
Data Quality Campaign

TWO

Bold Leadership and Data

Guiding Questions

- What leadership values are key to changing the status quo student learning experience?
- How can change be sequenced successfully?
- How and why have P20W data systems been useful in your work? What would bring value?
- In what ways can education leaders sustain technology modernization post-ESSER? What is top of list to cut vs. keep?

“

It goes back to this idea of leadership. **We must develop strategic agility**—where we see the connection between systems-level regulations or policies to what happens in the classroom and vice versa. **Change cascades down and flows up.**

JEAN-CLAUDE BRIZARD
President and CEO
Digital Promise

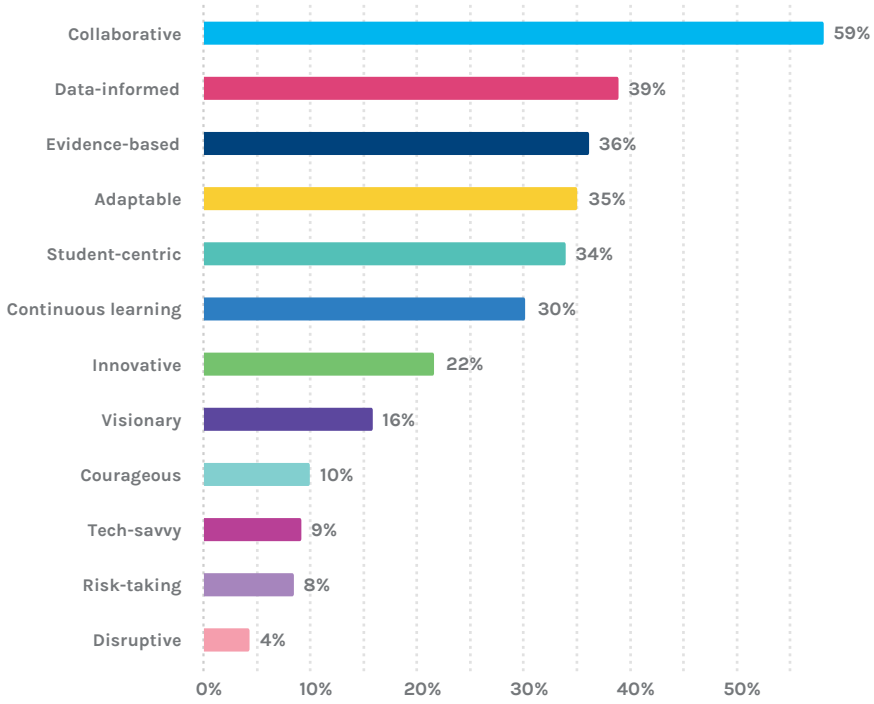
We spoke with education leaders and experts extensively about the importance of leadership and the values and skills vital for changing the education experience to make it more learner-centered. We also surveyed over 1,600 educators on the topic. **The takeaway: bold leaders must be collaborative at the core and use data to drive change.**

Bold leadership is about seeing a bigger picture and inspiring others to take steps toward a shared vision. While we heard varying perspectives on what it takes to steer a system to new goals and work, we discovered that relationship building, adaptation, and reliance on data and evidence are the most significant levers that advance meaningful shifts in K-12.

SURVEY RESULTS

For student-centered learning designs like personalized or competency-based education to become more widely adopted, different thinking and values must take root. From the list below, which TOP THREE leadership values are key to bringing key stakeholders like school board, parents/caretakers, and local leaders together around personalized learning to change the status quo?

[SCHOOL- AND DISTRICT-LEVEL]



As Bernadette Scheetz, Supervisor of Virtual Learning at Maryland's St. Mary's County Public Schools, shares, "You have to have that willingness to let people fail to see if it's going to work or not. And when it does fail, don't throw it out. Recognize where the failure points are and start remodeling that part of the program."

Examining the Connection Between Bold Leadership and Data

In this section, we consider which leadership styles shape the future of education and how data is a part of the equation.

We did this for several reasons:

- Education has become a data-rich sector. To speak of leadership without data is to attempt to describe how to pilot a plane without discussing its instrument panel.
- The future of education will be data-informed. The corpus of data that school systems manage—if connected in a way to yield insights—has incredible potential to change how decisions are made in schools.
- State-level leaders like governors, state legislators, commissioners of education, and leadership staff care deeply about K-12 system outcomes like career and technical preparedness, postsecondary enrollment and completion, and workforce entry—particularly into growth sectors and high-need occupations. P20W systems must modernize to inform these leaders' vast decisions about strategy, priorities, and budgets.
- We have entered a new budget context post-ESSER. Data in the edtech sector may be more important than ever before.

> In order to be bold in your leadership, you have to be willing to take risks and take criticism, but you can't do it alone. **That collaboration component is probably the most critical of anything, as far as bringing people together around a topic.** I like to consider it in terms of a collective think tank that is better together.

BILL BASS
Innovation Coordinator for Instructional Technology, Information, Federal Grants & Library Media
Parkway C-2 School District, MO

> Leadership is essential. You can have lots of little islands of innovation, but nothing scales without leadership. If leadership is the one thing we need, the one thing we lack is trust. **In a system that doesn't trust its leaders, it's challenging to make progress.** Conversely, in high-performing systems like Singapore, Finland, and New Zealand, there is trust at all levels. Teachers trust the principals, and the principals trust the central office. Until you have that, it's really hard to get transformation.

KEITH KRUEGER
CEO
Consortium for School Networking (CoSN)

Leading Through Data

Top Priorities

As it turns out, educators have strong perspectives on leadership. Here are takeaways from what they told us:

- Bold leadership is about building effective and committed teams willing to take on new ways of work, not simply bold decisions.
- Trust is a challenge in our society now. The use of data can build transparency, enabling trust between K-12 communities to enact change.
- Schools went through significant upheaval during the pandemic. In the current moment, there's a need for leadership that is bold, but in a way that aligns change with educators' ability to implement it.

Data and trust are inextricably linked. Data shines a light on claims about efficacy, decisions about resource allocation, and petitions for change.

We asked what data priorities were top of mind in 2024 for education leaders, and they pointed to whole child analytics (visualizing student behavior data), data integration as a service (connecting data for ease of insights), and learning analytics (visualizing student academic data).

These priorities show the need for insights into student behavior and durable skills and how these have surpassed the need for academic insights where a lot of progress has been made. Data as a service (DaaS) climbed to the No. 2 data priority spot in 2024, up from No. 3 in 2023.

Top 4 Data Priorities

School

1. Whole child analytics
2. Learning analytics
3. Providing training on using data to make informed decisions
4. Data integration as a service

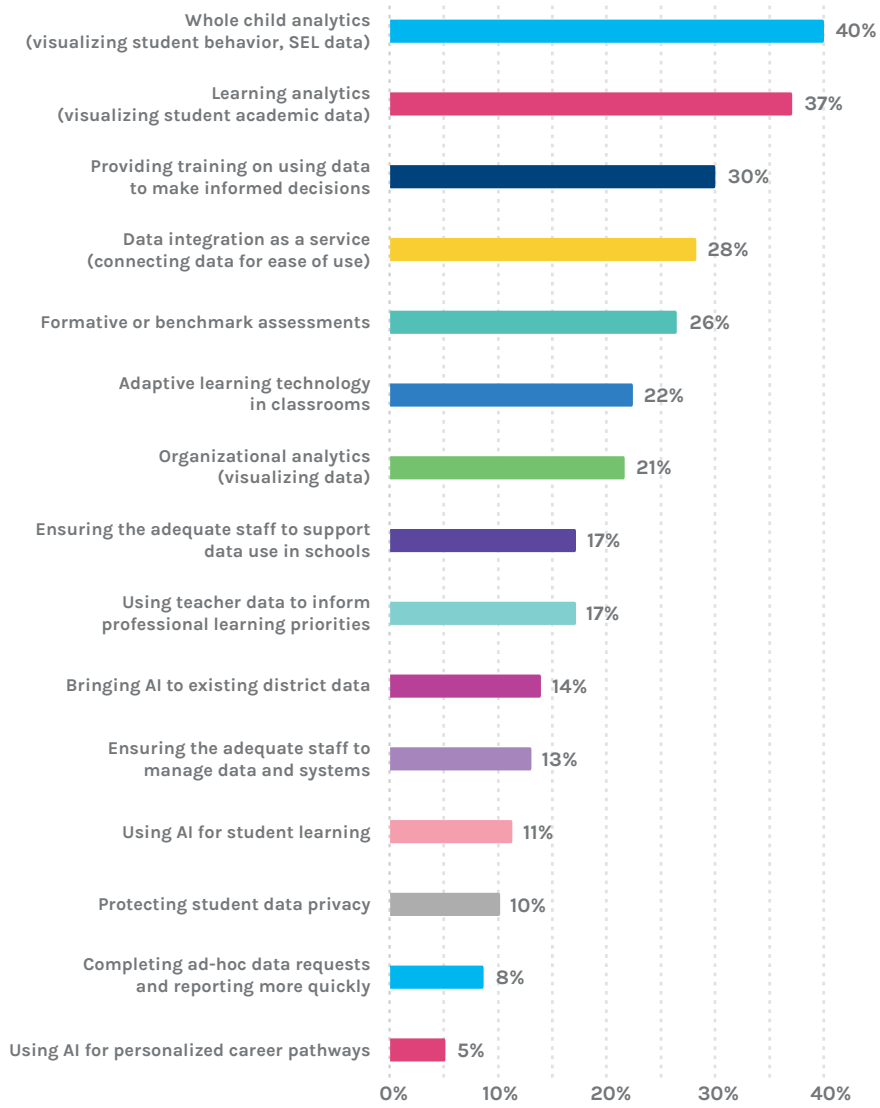
District

1. Whole child analytics
2. Data integration as a service
3. Learning analytics
4. Providing training on using data to make informed decisions

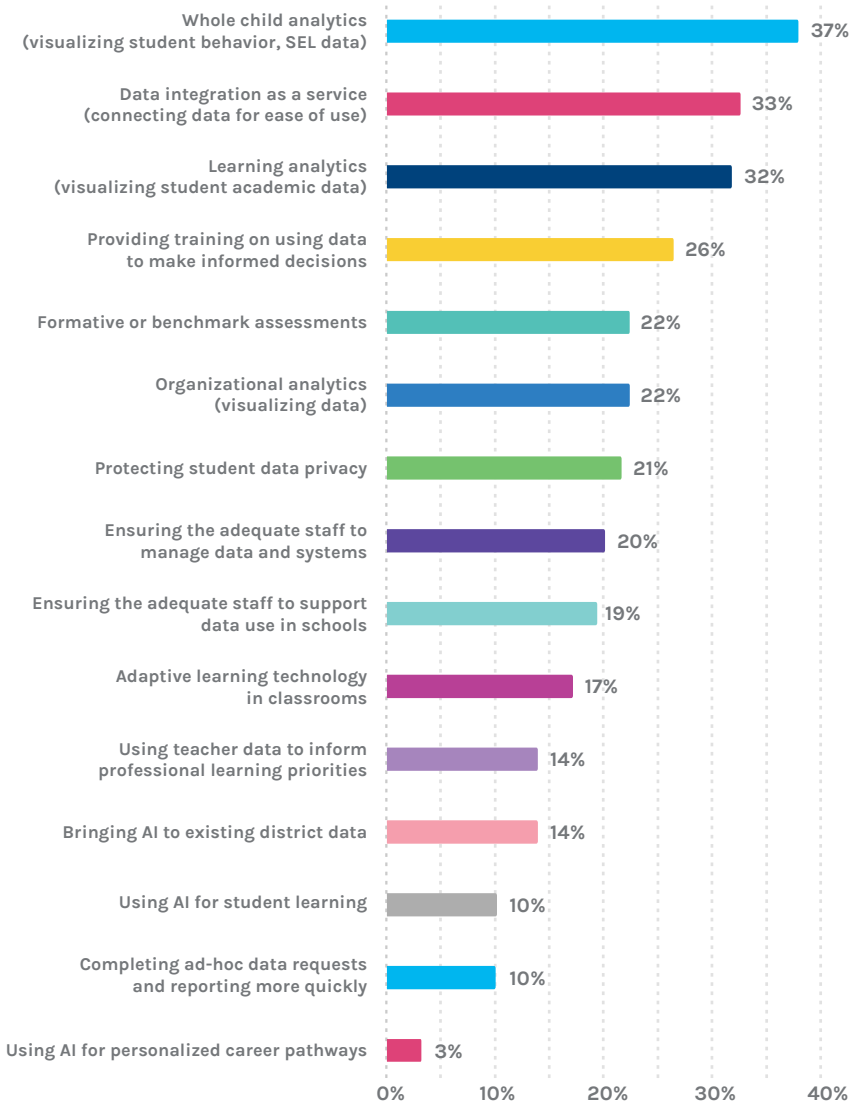
SURVEY RESULTS

In terms of data priorities for school year 2024-2025, select the TOP THREE from your perspective.

[SCHOOL-LEVEL]



[DISTRICT-LEVEL]



Top Data Priorities, According to K-12 Leaders

Tony Campbell, Director of Learning & Innovation at Utah's Washington County School District, shares, "We are working on connecting data systems that align more directly with standards and provide a clear picture of student learning. This involves integrating attendance, behavior, curriculum, and assessment data from various sources. Additionally, we are focusing on our PLC process, collaborative teams, and associated proficiency skills."

So, leaders are prioritizing the connection of data for the shifting of instructional approaches.

Many leaders shared that data-driven decision-making is a key to school success. Their top-of-mind challenges were around ensuring data efficacy, security, and governance. They reported that these challenges can be overwhelming at times, especially when they're working with data spread across various systems.

As Julie Powell, Director of Instructional Technology at Illinois' Palatine Community Consolidated School District 15, says, "Our interventions are being tracked here, there, and all over the place. So, our top priority is to get clear data on what is working, what isn't working, and see how we can build supports."

Lower on this list was using AI to leverage existing district data and using AI for student learning. When we asked educators why, they said leaders may not be considering AI as a data priority. And if they do, many of the use cases, such as conversational tutors or natural language queries of data via AI, are new and haven't climbed the priority list just yet (but likely will).

> For change to happen, it takes time, and my pitch for leaders to invest time is: **It's hard to imagine a career with a more meaningful legacy than leading a school community that resonates with your view of the purpose of education.** You and your team can help bend the arc of lives—not only the individual students you educate, but also their families, family trees, and the broader community—for good. That is the potential for impact and meaning in one's life: fulfilling what you believe the purpose of education to be in a supportive community.

MICHAEL HORN
Education Researcher and Author

Don’t Underestimate the Power of Incremental Change

When considering larger visions of change to achieve a more personalized education experience for students, many feel that leaders must be focused on sustainability for the long term.

Tessie Bailey, Ph.D., shares, "Some leaders think, ‘I’m going to come in with the new great thing and I’m going to lead my team through that change.’ But, those things tend to drain staff quickly. So, the sustainability of leadership is a major concern of the work we do, and we support leaders to help their teams feel comfortable with making moves alongside staff."

"During the pandemic, nobody missed chemistry lab or the bell schedule," says Julia Fallon, Executive Director at SETDA. "They missed a sense of community and relationships—the social aspects. We don’t need to follow outdated models with the bell and inflexible environments. **Learning sciences show that we don’t need the traditional structure that was built for the industrial complex, especially now, 50 years later."**

Michael Horn, Education Researcher and Author, reflects on ways that leaders can sequence change: "Find a place where the group of parents upset by something opt in—and it is successful. Have a few more join next year, and more over time. It takes bold leadership, and it takes understanding sequence to achieve long-term change. It also takes being there for some time."

“

I believe in the power of incremental change. We’ve revised our grading policy to give students more opportunities to succeed and redo work, focusing more on standards. Leaders need to think about the steps leading to bigger changes. **Incremental changes can have a significant impact, and while they don’t get us all the way to our goal, they help bring everyone along on a shared vision.**

CHRISTINE DIGGS, ED.D.
Chief Technology Officer
Albemarle County Public Schools, VA

Leadership In a Time of Changing Budgets

Bold leaders also share that sometimes they must say "no" to certain investments or initiatives to prioritize impact for students and eliminate processes that don't deliver.

"We've got to stop doing certain things, and in education, we're never good at stopping doing things. We just find new things to do. So, I do think subtracting is necessary and a quality of good leadership," says Kris Hagel, Executive Director of Digital Learning at Washington's Peninsula School District 401.

> **Start with the best interest of students, organization, then adults.** Get rid of things that don't serve those three, and work with the willing.

JUSTIN HUNT
Deputy Superintendent of Instruction
Epic Charter Schools, OK

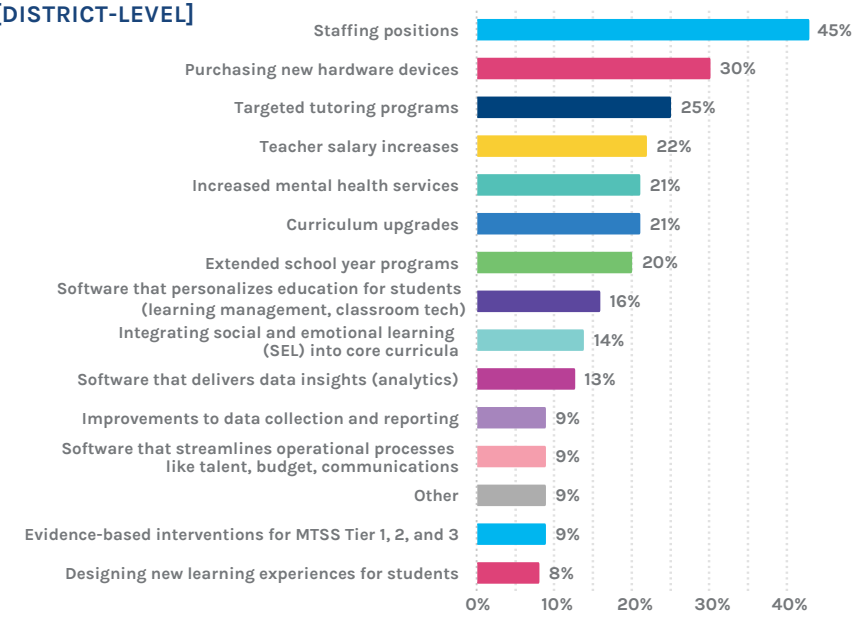
Among the top items to taper off or cut back, high on the list were staffing positions (which leaders qualified were connected to addressing pandemic impacts), purchasing new hardware devices, and tutoring programs. And while software to streamline operational processes was low on the "consolidate or stop entirely" list, there is a need to rein in the manifold of teaching and learning edtech tools that exploded on the scene during the pandemic.

Hagel continues, "We need to do a better job of not allowing 1,400 edtech applications to be brought into the classroom and maybe focus on the top 50 that make a difference."

SURVEY RESULTS

Pandemic relief funds are sunsetting. What initiatives are you most likely to consolidate or stop entirely in school year 2024-25 and beyond? Select all that apply.

[DISTRICT-LEVEL]



Good leaders come together to get commitment from the community. This can be a school community, a district community, or your greater community. When a vision is communicated to that community, it has everything to do with people's willingness to go down that path. **Despite constraints we may face, we must stay true to our mission—to support our students to become citizens that are going to be strong contributors to our communities.**

BILL BASS

Innovation Coordinator for Instructional Technology, Information, Federal Grants & Library Media
Parkway C-2 School District, MO

Updates from States

The effort to build P20W systems, which encompass learning from preschool through K-12 to workforce, is not new. However, few states have developed systems that deliver usable data for stakeholders such as district leaders, boards of education, policymakers, and state leaders.

Historically, the range of data in P20W systems and degree of relevance for instructional purposes or leadership decision-making has been limited. In some cases, there have been reasons behind this.

For example, Tony Campbell, Director of Learning & Innovation in Washington County School District, Utah shares, "Each local educational agency (LEA) has different benchmarks, scopes, and sequences, making it difficult to get consistent, ongoing formative data at the state level. Some people wouldn't want this as it could add another layer of accountability and reduce local control. While state systems can house data, they can't provide the day-to-day insights that teachers need. We need the state to make it easier to access state data and integrate it with our formative data. This way, we can evaluate our progress, identify areas for improvement, and ensure we're on the right track."

Getting these systems to be accessible and relevant has been an ongoing project.

Stacy Royster, Program Coordinator at the Alabama Department of Education, shares the groundbreaking work her state is doing: "Our Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) has been useful for top-tier administrators but doesn't reach teachers, so it doesn't directly benefit students. Our major focus this year has been integrating various programs into a unified system. This system includes student profiles, plans, and MTSS interventions, allowing teachers to see the entire lifecycle of a student during professional learning meetings. This helps personalize learning and saves instructional time by eliminating the need to sift through multiple programs. The new system also ensures that student data, including assessments and interventions, moves with the student when they transfer schools, preventing the need to start from scratch. This initiative has taken a year to implement, and teachers and curriculum coordinators are very excited about its potential benefits."

This kind of approach to P20W systems is evidence of a clear vision for the purpose of the system and its use cases.

A Way Forward with P20W

In May 2023, Data Quality Campaign released a report tackling these exact challenges arising from P20W systems that lack clear vision of "what data works for whom and why."

Jennifer Bell-Ellwanger, President and CEO of the Data Quality Campaign, shares, "Too often, leaders focus solely on data collection without considering how people will access and use that data. Throughout their education and career journeys, individuals need data from multiple sources at different transition points to make decisions about how to navigate their futures. Without access to robust data, individuals and those who support them are left in the dark. States must work to understand who needs what kind of data and how they will use it—and use that information to focus on building a system that prioritizes access to data that enables decision-making and planning for everyone from the high school student to the governor."

Ultimately, the key is not just collecting data but also ensuring that it is accessible and usable for those who need it.

We asked educators about their usage of P20W system in their state and what it would take to improve the system. One out of 3 respondents selected "I am not sure"—underscoring how these systems remain a necessary priority to deliver on the promise of accessible, usable data.

By exploring bold leadership in education, we discovered that leadership isn't just about forging ahead. It's about setting a vision and working collaboratively to build upon small wins through collective effort.

For many leaders, this journey is underway, and they have begun to streamline their edtech systems and communicate their vision to stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, other leaders, and communities.

THREE

Modern Education Workforce

Guiding Questions

- What are the top talent challenges and priorities for your school system?
- Is the current mainstream "One teacher: 25 students" model working for student learning? Do you see value in alternative models?
- How can teacher teaming models support a new generation of teachers and offer leadership opportunities for veteran teachers?

Leaders of school talent are seeing the need to break from tradition to meet the changing profession of teachers.

A new generation of teachers seeks a sustainable work-life split, the chance to work in teams and grow in their profession, earn a good wage, and use technology that opens new possibilities for student learning. Specifically, teachers want to advance in their career without leaving the classroom, exercise voice and choice in their learning, and use intuitive tools that achieve tactical value from data and AI.

Again, in the realm of teaching, we observed educators juggling the demands of "now" and possibilities of tomorrow.

In this section, we review top talent priorities, and think about alternative talent models. We also explore edtech for back office and educator support.

> I am all about embracing the workforce that we have to create ways for them to integrate and teach. I don't think we should hold on to this traditional image of an educator. **We may need to change the concept of education to align to this new generation of teachers.**

ELAINE HOWARD, ED.D.,
Superintendent
Sharyland ISD, TX

Top Talent Priorities and Teacher Workloads

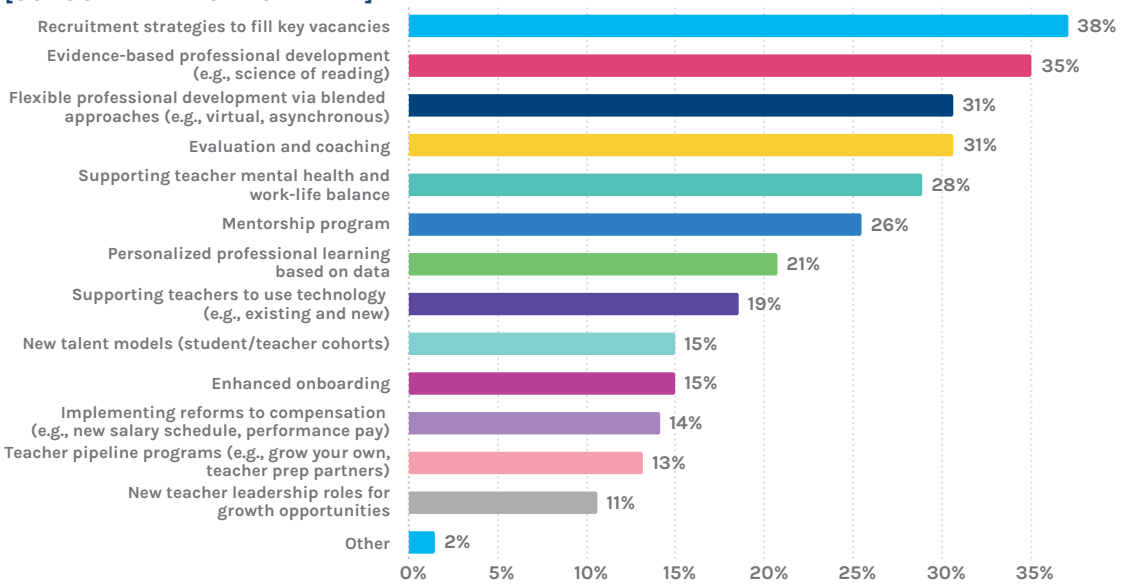
Many districts are still tackling persistent teacher and staff vacancies and working to offer flexible professional development (PD) to support the key science of reading as well as whole child supports that address disruptive student behaviors.

According to national survey results, district leaders' top priorities are recruitment, evidence-based PD, and flexible PD. We also asked what top three things must be addressed to make the teaching profession more sustainable. Leaders say, student behavior, student interventions, and parent communication workloads.

SURVEY RESULTS

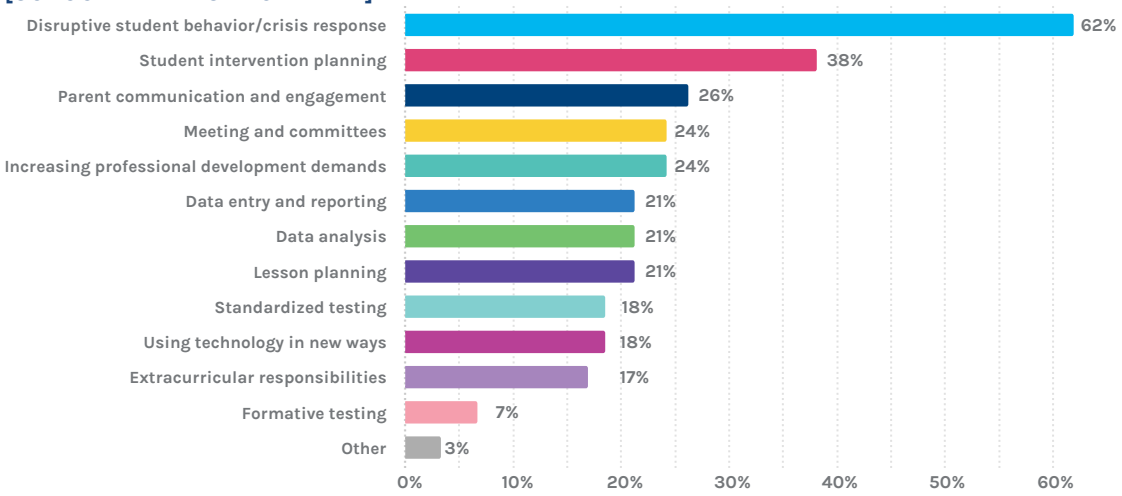
Select the TOP THREE talent priorities for your school/district

[SCHOOL- AND DISTRICT-LEVEL]



Select the TOP THREE things adding to teachers' workloads that must be addressed for the profession to be more sustainable.

[SCHOOL- AND DISTRICT-LEVEL]



A significant change that has happened with the advent of technology and access is there's a need for immediacy. Nowadays, our parents see a score in a portal, then send an email. Students do this too, and both tend to hope the teacher will respond in the moment, even if it's nine o'clock at night. And we've created this in our society with the need for immediacy and response. As a result, teachers need clear boundaries that need to be communicated to families and students.

MICHAEL MARASSA, ED.D., CETL
Chief Technology Officer
New Trier District 203, IL

Rachel Blackwell, Digital Learning Facilitator at Arkansas' Pulaski County Special School District, shares, "When I first started in the classroom 18 years ago, I gave up all my time. I got there early, and I didn't have kids. Nowadays, it's just thought that this is something you have to do. It seems like, if you're not giving your extra time, then you're selfish as a teacher. There is not a work-life balance. And I think teachers are seeing that they need that now."

A Changing Profession

The teacher workforce is changing. In recent years, teachers have expressed higher demands for work-life balance and career advancement.

Kadion Phillips, Director of Information Technology at Massachusetts' Shrewsbury Public Schools, says, "Teachers, especially younger teachers, are finding great opportunities and higher starting salaries that lead them to move and build a career somewhere else. As administrators, you worry that there's no consistent coaching where you're getting that teacher better and better over time. I was in the classroom, and I know it took many years to start to get to mastery. But if you're constantly changing, it just never really becomes effective."

When explaining the cultural landscape of the modern teacher workforce, Julie Powell, Director of Instructional Technology at Illinois' Palatine Community Consolidated School District 15, says that there is a visible shift. "It's a coupling of teacher burnout from the pandemic as well as people reprioritizing their lives throughout the pandemic. They're making a shift in what's the significance of what is important in their life and then coming out on the other end and reprioritizing," she says.

The shifting sands of the teaching profession have posed new challenges for school system leaders.

"We're losing teachers mid-year," says Kadion Phillips, "I don't remember that ever happening as much as it is right now. When that teacher leaves, we have to plug someone in or get a substitute—and with the hiring environment, it all becomes very disruptive."

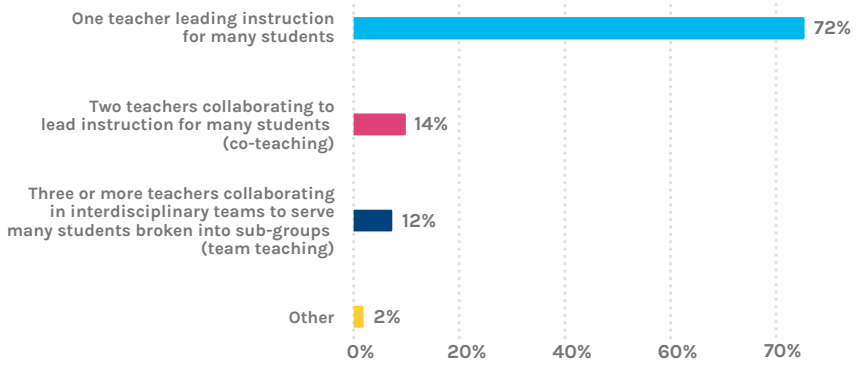
Beyond Teaching and Even Co-Teaching

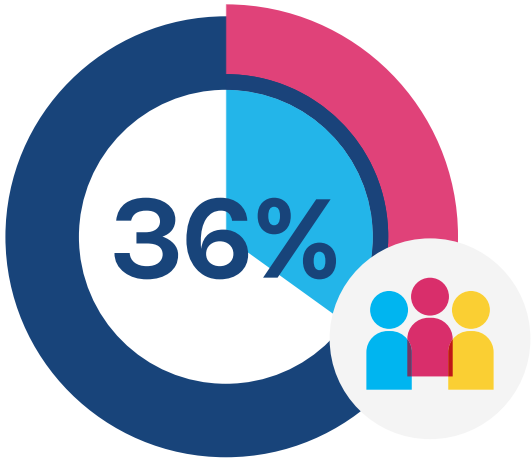
Considering Teacher Teaming

SURVEY RESULTS

If you visited our school/district, the main teacher talent structure you would see is:

[SCHOOL- AND DISTRICT-LEVEL]





36% of educators say the "one teacher, many students" model is not working for students

another 36% felt neutral. Only 29% said it was working.

The "one teacher, many students" model is the industry standard for classroom design, but we wanted to verify. We asked district leaders what model we would see if we walked into their schools.

Unsurprisingly, over 7 in 10 responded that the "one teacher, many student" model is the mainstay. However, nearly 3 in 10 respondents indicated alternative models were in place where two or three teachers (or more) were collaborating to deliver instruction.

We asked whether the current mainstream model of "one teacher, many students" is working for personalizing education for students.

We dug deeper, thinking systemically, and were inspired by recent work to rethink teacher teaming, collaboration, and growth models out of Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teacher College effort called the "Next Education Workforce."[6]

In this project, ASU considers larger teacher teaming efforts to provide all students with deeper and personalized learning by building teams of educators with distributed expertise. The project empowers educators by developing better ways to enter the profession, specialize, and advance.

As stated by ASU's Next Education Workforce, "Instead of asking all educators to be all things to all learners at all times, we need to unpack the tasks we ask each professional to do and reallocate those tasks, sustainably, across teams. **An effective education workforce made up of professionals with diverse expertise requires meaningful opportunities for educators to acquire expert depth, explore functional breadth, and have opportunities for advancement that don't necessarily require leaving the classroom."**[7]

A shift towards collaborative teaching teams is one example of an opportunity to reimagine education beyond the traditional structure. Team teaching is a broad model that involves engaging parents, communities, and schools as stakeholders.

"Everybody in the system comes with a different level of expertise," notes Tessie Bailey, Ph.D., Principal Consultant, American Institutes for Research (AIR). "And when we look at the model, if we're all in it together, then we're able to move the needle exponentially." She adds that it's important to help stakeholders focus on the long-term benefits of team teaching, since shifts to innovate education come with a need for patience and flexibility.

Some leaders express hesitation about the teaming model, pointing to friction with accountability systems. Tony Campbell, Director of Learning & Innovation at Utah's Washington County School District, shares, "There's a major hurdle to this line of thinking in terms of accountability measures. These measures tend to be assigned to individuals instead of team performance." He suggests that a significant change in state and federal measures for accountability would have to take place.

"If that were the case," he continues, "if those measures did change and people were doing things collectively, then there are some pros to that. Some of those pros are learning from each other, building collective efficacy, and building capacity within each other."

Michael Horn shares, "I think there are two main strategies to pursue to change talent designs:

- Go where the regulation isn't to innovate. For example, you can work with teachers in subjects that are not English language arts or math. Start this work where teacher evaluation regulations are much looser.
- Revisit existing contracts with teachers. Rework these to reflect teaming models, including but not limited to teacher of record and responsibilities and expectations, and how these things are evaluated."

The use of AI is becoming more common in education, such as in data systems and supporting the delivery of instruction that does not replace the teacher. With so many teachers struggling to provide sufficient practice and feedback opportunities, which is essential for kids in Tier 2 and Tier 3, leveraging AI could be a feasible way to increase the intensity of student support. It could really help.

TESSIE BAILEY, PH.D.
Principal Consultant
American Institutes of Research (AIR)

AI and Teaching

Based on dozens of conversations with education leaders, we learned that they welcome AI that assists teachers and students, but they oppose AI that is not human-centered.

Innovative school systems like Washington's Peninsula School District 401 are thinking creatively about AI to enhance the feedback process for educators.

Kris Hagel, Executive Director of Digital Learning at Peninsula School District 401, shares, "We're using AI in several ways. Many teachers are using it to adjust reading levels or language so that all students, even those who can't read at grade level or understand English well, can still access core grade-level content. Our director of research and assessment is starting a project using AI to listen to teachers' lessons and provide different styles of feedback. Teachers can choose the feedback they find most helpful, and this is used to guide their evaluations. This approach aims to improve instruction by tailoring feedback to each teacher's preferences."

Hagel continues, "We could use AI to listen to teachers teaching a lesson and then have it give feedback. Meanwhile, a leader would know what the teacher would respond to best. So, AI will say, 'here's some feedback for instructional strategies,' but coaches would take that feedback alongside the ones the

teacher said are the most helpful. Overall, this could be shared with the principal to say, 'If you really want to improve this teacher's instruction, this is the way that they respond best to feedback.'"

Mary Beth Clifton, Ed.D., CETL, Coordinator of Instructional Technology at Pennsylvania's West Chester Area School District, shares, "If I had a coaching session and the coach came in with AI, and we saw how much my students were engaged or twiddling their thumbs, that would be great, but it would happen with a coach, and not with a walkthrough or official observation from an administrator. I don't want to see big observations that take the human part out of it."

Aaron Hooper, Director of Finance at Missouri's Grain Valley R-5 School District, adds, "Right now I wouldn't be ready to say that schools will use only AI. It goes back to this: I know the education system has a bias that AI does not, but we do sometimes go too far. We might say, 'Hey, my colleague has been a teacher for all these years. I'm not going to go in there and rake them over the coals if they're not doing their best work.' With AI, it goes in and says, 'This teacher is really not performing the way that they should.' And, actually there is a balance. We need to look at both perspectives—one from administrators and one from AI—to see whether a teacher is close or off track. If they're way off, why? If they're close, then it is something that leaders can look at."

Many educators stated that the best pathway through current technological innovations is to combine human knowledge with the skills of AI. This sentiment is similar to many parents' responses to using AI in their own child's education.

"It's important to coach teachers on using technology effectively, creating opportunities for students to engage with it meaningfully." added Carla Wade, Senior Director of External Relations, CoSN. "We must guide teachers in developing ways for students to leverage technology for deeper learning rather than simply using apps to replace paper or perform basic tasks."

Across respondents, we saw that there are burgeoning use cases of AI for improving instruction, but we noted that educators need time for experimentation as well as support to leverage it carefully—especially when it comes to observing or providing feedback on a teacher's craft.

60% of school leaders and educators indicated that AI can enhance teacher practice and development

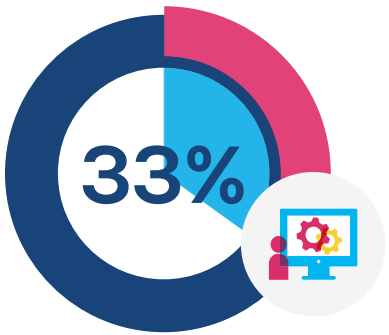
68% report that they have not received any PD around AI.

Modernizing HR Systems

HR technology includes systems for recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and tracking educator growth. Leaders have mixed opinions on their current hiring and onboarding systems.

Marty Mills, Ed.D., Director of Human Resources Systems & Processes at Kentucky's Fayette County Public Schools, shares how integral data and technology are to their operations, and how far they have come. Encompassing 40,000 students and 9,000 employees, Fayette County Public Schools prioritizes the use of data for decision making and informing the public of funding uses.

"Fayette Co Public Schools prides itself on offering the highest starting pay in the state for teachers, reflecting our commitment to attract top talent. We've brought innovative technology to human resource processes, shrinking our hiring processing from more than 20 days to less than 7 days," Mills shares.



Only 33% of respondents say

that their current talent records management technology supports their needs.

Mills and his team also use HR systems and data analysis to inspect staff demographics in relation to student populations to achieve greater alignment and resonance.

Cross-functional collaboration is another cornerstone of their strategy. Their leadership team, led by the superintendent and board, is deeply invested in recruitment, retention, and diversity, meeting weekly to track progress using a goal sheet and a stoplight system to identify areas needing attention. Proactive recruiting using state data and maintaining professional standards through certification records are made possible by use of best-in-class HR technology.

The district's innovative thinking extends to addressing the profession's evolving needs, with a dedicated team focusing on employee wellness. This shift towards relational, rather than transactional, interactions with staff is supported by regular surveys. The HR leader emphasized the importance of empathy and problem-solving, advocating for a balance between providing support and encouraging resilience among teachers. This holistic approach ensures that educators not only remain in the profession but thrive within it.

Many districts are applying new thinking to how teachers are supported, both in their resilience and their actual craft.

For example, about half of educators report that they can easily access and use evaluation feedback when building PD plans while the other half find it more difficult. Many leaders lack insight on what kind of development teachers received prior to hiring them and even face challenges tracking their ongoing learning in their own systems.

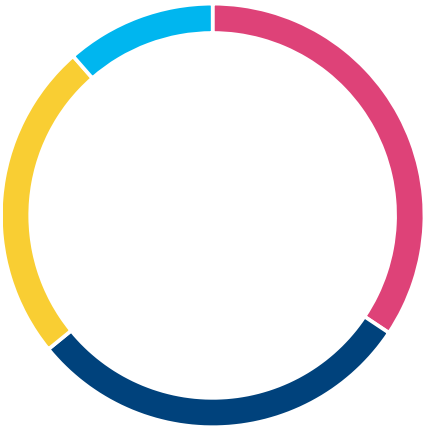
Phil Boltz, Ph.D., Director of Accountability, Reporting, and Data at Indiana's Muncie Community Schools, speaks about a change taking place across many district HR departments. Over time, HR staff have become interested in measuring teacher strengths and prior training. "HR wants to know who's good at what, who's been trained in what, and how they were supported from the time of hire until now. How can schools provide ways to keep them growing? That's something that must be knowledgeably managed, not just at the building level but at district and system levels. That is what we have been seeing, and we're trying to adjust our system to accommodate that."

On average, it takes 5-10 minutes to find the information needed relating to hiring and onboarding.

SURVEY RESULTS

On average, how quickly can your organization find the information it needs related to hiring and onboarding?

- 5-10 minutes
- 10-30 minutes
- 30 minutes or more
- Under 5 minutes



I don't think we are utilizing technology well. For the evaluation process, it's too paper based. So, it's hard for me to see and monitor growth from the district level to the campus. I would have the expectation that I could get a window into the classroom at any time, not physically, but through the data. And that collection is very tough. **We use three systems for one evaluation, because we've not had a system that does it all.**

ELAINE HOWARD, ED.D.,
Superintendent
Sharyland ISD, TX

Teacher Support

In our research, we uncovered educators' views on what boosts teacher effectiveness and what challenges can decrease teacher effectiveness.

Many responded that strategic planning around professional development was essential. Frequently suggested topics for well-supported PD included coaching on technology initiatives, data use for decision making, and classroom management skills—especially in light of shortened pathways for alternatively certified teachers. Often-noted challenges that impacted teacher effectiveness included delays in accessing important tools and some cases of sub-par training.

Educators and school leaders noted that turnover at teacher and administrator levels makes it challenging to maintain consistency with PD or initiatives. They suggested that one possible solution is technology that enables asynchronous learning and tailored development foci.

Howard shares, "Part of teacher growth is ensuring that everybody is getting similar professional development with regards to technology, innovative instruction, and technology use. Superintendent down, we need to make sure everybody gets that same type of exposure. We also need to make sure that all technology initiatives are aligned directly to a strategic plan so that it's part of a bigger picture. Tech planning should be just as involved in the entire direction of the district each year as it is when we do planning on what curriculum we're selecting for kids."

> If a teacher has management skills, no matter where they are and no matter how they're placed, you'll find that they're a master teacher there**—they're successful in helping kids grow in their learning**.

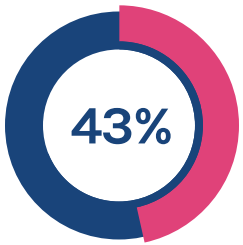
MARY JANE (MJ) WARDEN
Chief Technology Officer
Palatine Community Consolidated School District 15, IL

When considering teacher training challenges, Bill Bass, Innovation Coordinator for Instructional Technology, Information, Federal Grants & Library Media at Parkway C-2 School District, MO, shares, "We haven't done a really good job holistically of training teachers about how to use data in meaningful ways to make decisions."

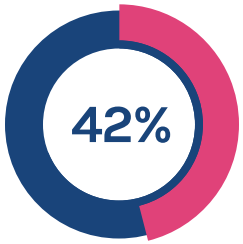
A scan of the evolving landscape of the educator workforce makes it clear: teachers, staff, and leaders are calling for opportunities to receive ongoing personalized professional development and work with leaders who support data-based decision making.

Teachers seek a modernized approach to education, recognizing the importance of improved work-life balance, enhanced support systems, and crucially, easy access to data that is actionable and complete.

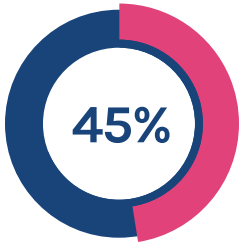
It's clear that deeper insights and analytics are not just desired but essential for empowering leaders to provide effective coaching and fostering of a positive school culture. This section closes with the following survey results:



of educators agree they have the talent analytics in place to make informed decisions about support, promotion, retention, and hiring decisions.



of educators agree their current talent records management technology supports their school/district needs.

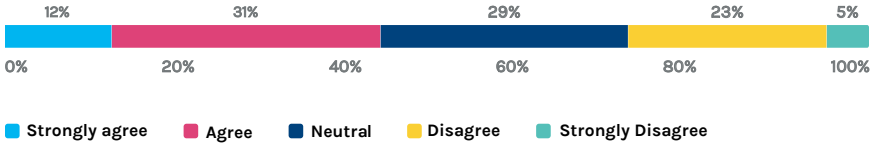


of educators agree current teacher evaluation technology supports their school/district needs.

SURVEY RESULTS

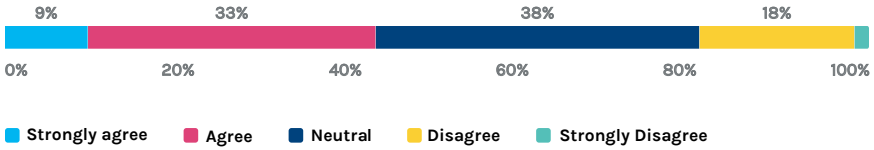
We have the talent analytics in place to make data-informed decisions about support, promotion, retention, and hiring decisions.

[SCHOOL- AND DISTRICT-LEVEL]



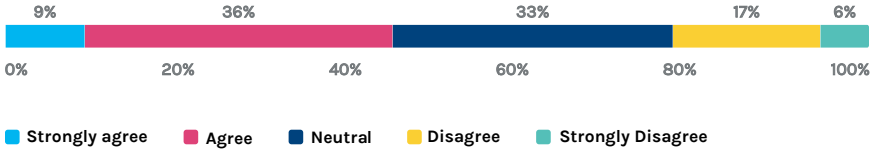
Our current talent records management technology supports our school/district needs.

[SCHOOL- AND DISTRICT-LEVEL]



Our current teacher evaluation technology supports our school/district needs.

[SCHOOL- AND DISTRICT-LEVEL]



FOUR

School and Home Connection

Guiding Questions

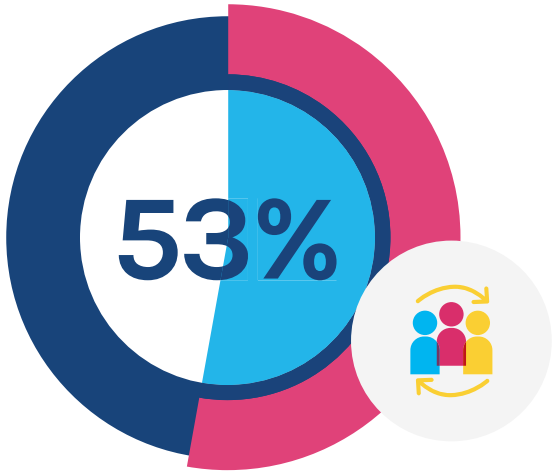
- What parent engagement strategies have gotten traction to improve student attendance? Has technology meaningfully helped?
- How do you know you're reaching families in ways they prefer? Are your strategies working?

As every parent and caretaker knows, home is the first place of education.

During the pandemic, the separation between home and school dropped away, with learning happening in living rooms and kitchens. In some ways this was beneficial, and it opened channels for parent input on students' learning experiences based on an understanding of their children's needs.

While there were many stories in the news describing antagonism between schools and parents, the reality is that education improved when schools relied on parents and caretakers. At the same time, families gained an appreciation of the complexity and effort it takes to facilitate student learning.

In this section, we look at attendance and communication specifically and investigate the ways in which school systems are achieving improvement in both areas through technology.



53% of educators

indicated that the partnership between home and families has grown stronger since the pandemic.

To Improve Attendance, Engaging Learning Experiences and Family Connections are Needed

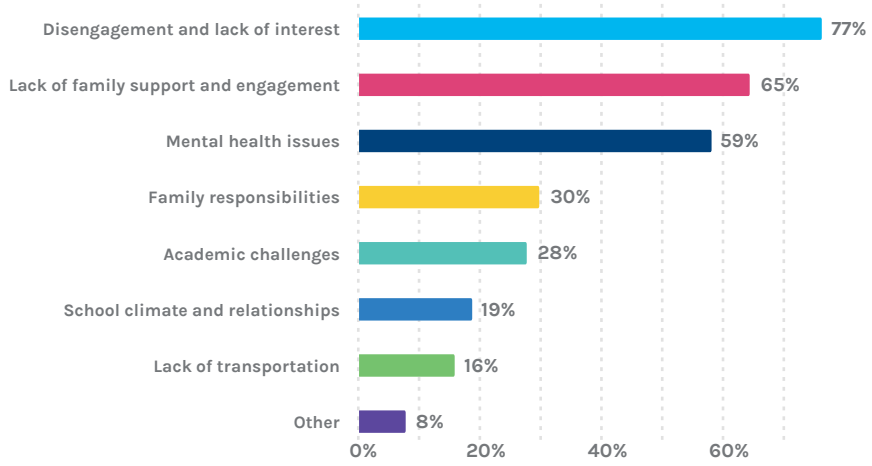
According to our national survey, 7 in 10 educators agree that student attendance has been a significant challenge in their school system since the pandemic. Root causes include disengagement, lack of family support, and mental health issues.

Countless districts have implemented reward systems, accountability measures, and family engagement strategies to improve attendance. Many have achieved progress, blunting the sharp impacts of the pandemic, but schools still experience absenteeism rates above the ones they saw before the pandemic.

Whether or not a district offers incentives, most leaders note that improving relationships with parents/caregivers helps reduce absenteeism. In turn, lower absenteeism is linked to increased student engagement, motivation, collaboration, and agency in learning.

SURVEY RESULTS

Select the TOP THREE underlying reasons for absenteeism in your school or district.



Julie Powell, Director of Instructional Technology at Illinois' Palatine Community Consolidated School District 15, shares, "We have a huge chronic absenteeism problem, and if we can't support getting kids here, we can't do any of the other stuff. And that has been something that has dramatically escalated since the pandemic. So, we're figuring out creative solutions for how to get kids to come and want to come and then considering how we educate families around that."

Daphne Keiser, Assistant Superintendent of Community Engagement at Albemarle County Public Schools in Virginia, shares, "Our school district is very focused on addressing chronic absenteeism and has partnered with the Education Advisory Board (EAB) for strategic direction. Albemarle collaborates with EAB on research projects, working with the district leadership's strategic planning team."

Top Factors Impacting Student Attendance (Albemarle County Public Schools, VA)

Health-Conscious Decisions:

During the pandemic, families prioritized health by keeping their children home when they were unwell. This vigilance continues as parents remain attentive to their children's health.

Opportunities for Family Engagement:

There is an opportunity to reconnect with families about the benefits of in-person education and encourage active participation in their children's school experience. By fostering strong school-family partnerships, we can enhance student engagement and attendance.

Adaptability to Learning Environments:

Families who adapted to remote learning have demonstrated remarkable flexibility. Recognizing this adaptability, we can work together to highlight the advantages of in-person learning.

Community Support for Socioeconomic Challenges:

Addressing food security, transportation, and employment issues can further support student attendance. By leveraging community resources and support networks, we can help families overcome these challenges, ensuring students have consistent access to education.

Family Mental Health and Shared Responsibilities:

Acknowledging the importance of mental health, we can provide resources and support to families to manage stress and responsibilities. We can create a stable environment that encourages regular school attendance by promoting mental wellness and offering assistance.

Empowering Students to Overcome Anxiety:

Anxiety among students themselves is a significant factor contributing to absenteeism. Understanding that student anxiety can affect attendance, we can empower students with coping strategies and a supportive network. This can help them feel more comfortable and motivated to attend school regularly.

A big part of low attendance is disengagement. If kids are engaged and doing something where they find value, even if the parents are not super supportive, the kids will make a larger effort to be there, online or in person.

KIMBERLY NIDY
Director of Technology
North Canton City Schools, OH

To address chronic absenteeism, Keiser shares that Albemarle schools have implemented several strategic initiatives. They have hired social-emotional coaches, initially funded through ESSER but now incorporated into the long-term budget, to support students directly in the classroom. These coaches help with anxiety, avoidance issues, and family outreach, providing an extra layer of support.

Each school has an attendance team that meets weekly to review student lists and apply tiered support, digging into the needs of families to improve student attendance. A district-level attendance director & division-level team have been put in place to support these efforts. Additionally, the district has taken intentional steps to communicate and educate families on the importance of attendance, supported by the engagement of local university athletes and various incentives across schools.

To further engage students, Albemarle County Schools has built out afterschool programming, including successful STEM programming and student clubs. They have also established a Student Senate, comprising students from different high schools, to voice their needs and priorities such as hands-on activities and real-world career learning. This initiative includes monthly meetings between student groups and their principal and has led to the launch of career learning centers offering internships and externships. The district leaders also utilize technology like their student information system and communications platform to stay in constant contact with families, students, and the community.

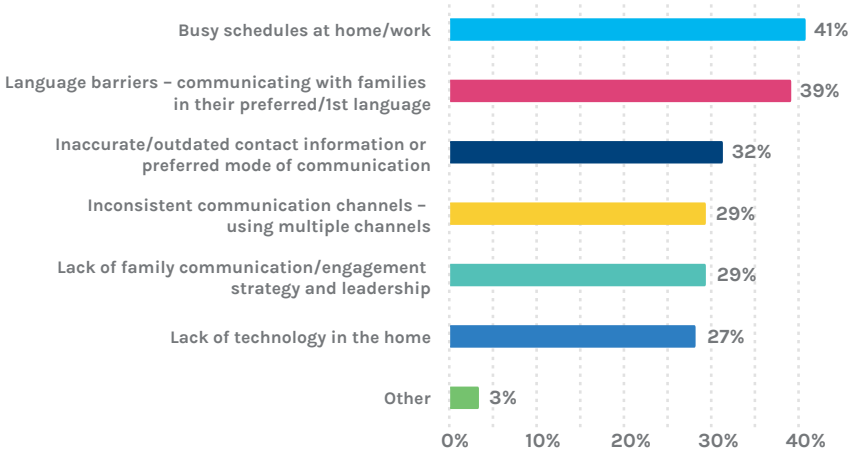
Communication Can Be Streamlined and Simplified

Communication is vital to achieve the shared goals parents and educators hold for children. Caretakers are busy and must navigate a complex stream of information about their child's education daily.

For this year's report, we interviewed parents and caregivers about their experience communicating with schools. They shared that they would be more engaged with schools if their notifications were personalized and streamlined, especially regarding topics like schedules, policies, and key milestones. Ideally, they said, this all would be available through one tool and not many.

SURVEY RESULTS

Select the TOP TWO barriers encountered to communicate with families.



> We have a huge number of apps, systems, and processes. And it's not only classroom communications going out; it's also attendance, grades, and behavior. **It would be great to have a single spot for this that also includes alignment with things like transportation feeds.**

PHIL BOLTZ, PH.D.,
Director of Accountability, Reporting, and Data
Muncie Community Schools, IN

Parents and caregivers also expressed that they are rarely asked about communication preferences. For example, some shared they receive texts for one child and emails and physical mail for another child without being asked which method was best for them. Overall, parents expressed interest in periodic requests to confirm and update contact preferences.

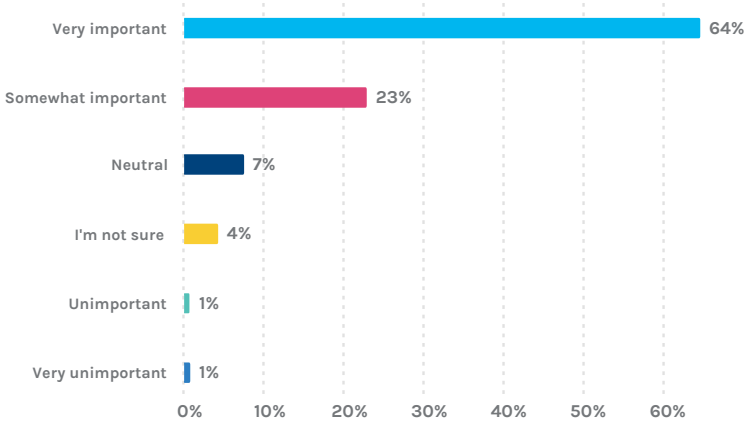
School leaders stated that they want to respond to these needs, but they struggle as well, since both educators and families navigate multiple systems and logins to understand a student's progress. At the same time, 87% of respondents say that a single-pane-of-glass view would improve home communication.

As education leader Matthew Ketchum, Director of Educational Technology at California's Modesto City Schools, says, "We have heard comments from parents that there's too much information coming from the district and teachers, so we are working with our communications department to build a schedule that we can share with parents so they know which types of posts will come on which days."

And Phil Boltz shares, "We have a huge number of apps and systems and processes. And it's not only classroom communications going out, it's also attendance, grades, and behavior. So, it would be great to have a single spot for this that also includes alignment with things like transportation feeds."

SURVEY RESPONSE

How important would a "single pane of glass" technology solution that consolidated all information in one place be to improving home communication?



> What we've learned in terms of communication is that generally, parents don't answer the phone anymore, but they'll respond to a text message. **Often, we'll try to call families with no response and then send a text message and get an immediate response.**

JUSTIN HUNT
Deputy Superintendent of Instruction
Epic Charter Schools, OK

Educators remain focused on building the connection between home and school, and they're relying on technology to help improve communication with families. Parents, in turn, are responding with great interest in receiving personalized information from their school or district. **Despite encountering some hurdles as they select a tool that meets the needs of their school community, leaders are eager to find solutions that aid families and support student success.**

> One of the things that we've focused on is family engagement, so we told our teachers that we're moving away from free messaging apps and getting a district-wide platform to have something universal. Our platform had great adoption right off the bat, which showed us that was a big need as far as having that interaction between families. **Not every family emails. Not every family texts. So, having options was important to us.**

CHRIS TASKEY
Director of Information Services
Rockford Public School District, IL

CONCLUSION

The 2024 Education Focus Report examines the forces that drive, support, challenge, and accelerate education today. We uncovered the ways technology has begun to reshape education to fit students' unique strengths and needs. We noted the ways that educators are attuned to the promise of innovations, like AI, that offer new means of learning, assessing, and providing feedback—while also navigating the critical responsibility of ensuring its ethical use.

To support quality learning experiences and operational efficacy, leaders must leverage new advancements responsibly, collaborate, streamline operations, and remain focused on personalized learning.

When education is personalized, schools meet students where they are and in the ways they learn best. This approach bolsters student engagement and helps address issues like absenteeism and academic disengagement.

This report revealed:

- The need to design learning based on student strengths
- The possibilities of AI to tailor educational experiences
- The necessity of integrating data for MTSS processes that meet diverse needs
- Gaps in preparing students for future careers through personalized pathways

Innovative approaches, like using AI for data analysis and personalized learning, are becoming more mainstream. At the same time, leaders are responsibly managing system-wide challenges involving teacher support, student attendance, and technological advancements.

A school's greatest resource is its teachers, and the modern educator workforce is evolving as schools acknowledge some friction caused by inherited structures and traditions. Teachers are seeking better work-life balance, comprehensive support for current challenges, and actionable data. They are curious about the potential of AI to enhance—but not replace—teaching.

In hiring top educators, schools have begun to consider technology's role in recruiting and developing teacher talent, the importance of effective PD and coaching, and innovative talent models like team teaching.

Alongside these structural needs, student success relies on a strong school-home connection. Education leaders are now seeking tools to keep students engaged, track progress, and improve family partnerships. Despite some challenges, educators see opportunities in using data-driven strategies and streamlined communication processes to bridge these gaps.

Educators and K-12 leaders say that the path to a positive future becomes clear through collaborative effort and data-based decision-making. Bold leaders in the field are those who accept the challenge to inspire others, work tirelessly toward a shared vision to prioritize student success, simplify processes, and focus on what truly matters.

How PowerSchool Can Help

Our Education Focus Report findings show that educators, administrators, and families are focused on improving student outcomes. They crave modern tools, data, and direction to personalize learning for every student.

To get there, it's critical to improve student engagement, attendance, and behavior—and perhaps most importantly—the systems and tools that address these issues.

Student-Driven Personalized Learning

Educators told us that when students have more agency over their learning, they are better engaged and more successful. Personalized education engages students where they are, and it helps improve attendance while fostering a positive school community.

At PowerSchool, leading edtech products ensure that students receive tailored education, fostering engagement and growth, by supporting:

- Competency- and mastery-based education
- Student agency
- Customized learning experiences
- Data-driven approach
- Generative AI
- Centralized access

Bold Leadership and Data

According to the educators and education leaders we interviewed, collaboration is vital to effective and innovative leadership.

Building relationships that maintain a communicative atmosphere, creating efficient and streamlined edtech systems, and stepping outside of traditional structures are all keys to modern leadership initiatives that work.

PowerSchool supports bold choices that are grounded in innovation, drive real change in education, and maintain a mindful focus on student success.

Modern Education Workforce

The modern educator workforce is changing. Faced with an increasingly stressful and demanding job, educators need tools that save time, improve productivity, and offer accessible data that informs the critical decisions that impact student instruction.

While that may seem like a tall order, PowerSchool addresses these needs with easy-to-use, interoperable, and innovative products improve the lives of teachers and students.

At PowerSchool, leading edtech products support teachers and HR leaders with:

- Actionable data across systems
- Student insights
- Classroom management
- Meaningful professional development
- Talent management and recruitment

School and Home Connection

Students are more likely to succeed when their families engage in their education, and our conversations with educators and parents support this claim. PowerSchool understands the need for reliable communication and collaboration between families and schools to drive student success.

We heard that schools need streamlined tools to improve family engagement and that parents/caregivers want to receive personalized communication from their school or district.

PowerSchool Support

PowerSchool believes that every student deserves the opportunity to learn in a way that matches who they are, where they are, and what motivates them. But with the demands on educators, schools, and families, truly personalized education has not been possible—until now.

That's what drives us forward at PowerSchool. We support every step of the learning journey so that each student can succeed. We connect the information educators need to envision each student's unique needs. By connecting the best K-12 technologies, we enable schools to create and deliver personalized student experiences.

We're guided by an inspiring purpose: every student deserves to learn in a way that's right for them. Through our research for the Education Focus Report each year, we listen intently and strive to innovate effective edtech solutions that address the needs of educators today and empower the future.

Our PowerSchool Clouds combine all the digital tools needed for each role in education.

Student Information Cloud
Manage student information, enrollment, organizational data, and special programs while addressing cybersecurity and data privacy challenges.

Personalized Learning Cloud
Move closer to a personalized, competency-based model of teaching while leveraging assessment, learning management, curriculum planning, and instructional content tools.

Student Success Cloud
Reduce chronic absenteeism, promote positive behavior, and tiered instruction (MTSS) to boost attendance and engagement.

College, Career, & Life Readiness Cloud
Provide support to help students prepare for their futures with robust tools to drive career exploration, college and military research, and workforce development skills.

Talent Recruitment & Retention Cloud
Attract, hire, and develop effective educators leveraging streamlined recruitment processes, a modern candidate experience, advanced data analytics, and the ability to transform real-time instructional coaching data into personalized goals and professional development recommendations.

Resource Planning Cloud
Optimize finance and HR operations to allocate resources that best support students in transforming and modernizing processes and reporting for budget, finance, payroll, and other critical administrative and HR functions for schools and districts.

PowerSchool also supports engagement, data-informed decision-making, and personalized learning.

MyPowerHub and Communications
Empower better school-to-home communication by providing families with a single access point for their student's academic information.

PowerSchool AI
Leverage AI responsibly to personalize education and help students learn in a way that's right for them.

Analytics & Insights
Provide critical insights with integrated transactional data securely shared via role-based dashboards to help staff take actions that improve student outcomes.

Data
Use K-12's first Data as a Service (DaaS) platform to centralize data, ensure data security and governance, and give the ability to build a foundation for AI.

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Credits

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