

2022 TRENDS IN K-12 EDUCATION



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INTRODUCTION

As 2022 begins, K-12 leaders and educators continue to grapple with unprecedented disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, economic uncertainty, and a heightened focus on racial equity. While many had hoped the 2021-2022 school year would be an opportunity for revitalization and return to normalcy, many communities are facing both new and continued challenges that have stalled their strategic goals and plans.

District leaders and educators have no shortage of issues with which to contend: shifting COVID-19 response plans in the face of new variants; continuing discussions on how to address diversity, equity, and inclusion in the classroom; supporting students as they readjust to in-person learning; mitigating staffing shortages and turnover; responding to increased political discourse within K-12 education; and leveraging changes in federal funding. While some challenges may be temporary, there is increasing recognition that others may become permanent, requiring substantial shifts in K-12 education management and leadership.

Hanover's **2022 Trends in K-12 Education** report highlights both new and continued challenges and priorities anticipated for 2022, drawn from Hanover's K-12 research and experience advising and collaborating with hundreds of local, regional, and state education agencies across the nation. The trends, recommendations, and case studies outlined in this report can help district leaders make informed decisions about the complex challenges they face — decisions that can have positive, lasting effects on their schools and communities.

Sincerely,

*Leila Nuland, PhD
Marriam Ewaida, PhD
Jessie Kuzmicki*

*Meg Lowe
Heather Popielski
Kenya Shujaa*



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hanover is privileged to partner closely with a broad spectrum of state and regional education agencies, school districts, and K-12 education service providers across the country. Working with more than 350 school districts – from urban, suburban, and rural settings and with varying demographics and

communities served – allows us to see and understand a comprehensive range of perspectives on the education landscape. As we support our members' efforts to serve their communities, we also learn from their experiences, including how they overcome challenges and seize opportunities.

Reflecting on K-12 education over the past year and where we see the sector heading, Hanover has identified **five trends that will shape K-12 education in 2022:**



**TREND 1:
Diversity, Equity,
and Inclusion
Initiatives Face Risk
of Derailment**

Districts reframe DEI initiatives to highlight their communities' shared values and build consensus to move forward in a politicized environment.



**TREND 2:
Districts Confront
Record-High
Teacher Turnover**

Districts strengthen support for teacher and administrator well-being to counter complex staffing shortages and increase retention.



**TREND 3:
Students Continue
to Struggle with
Trauma and
Learning Loss**

Districts support the social, emotional, and academic recovery of students amid ongoing pandemic disruptions.



**TREND 4:
Politically Charged
Atmospheres Create
Challenges for
District Leaders**

Superintendents and school boards work together to build consensus and relationships with communities in the face of increased polarization.



**TREND 5:
Short-Term Funding
Requires Complex,
Collaborative
Decision-Making**

Districts allocate federal relief funding to both meet immediate needs and advance long-term goals to improve student outcomes.

With all these challenges, however, comes hope: K-12 districts now have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to re-envision how they fulfill their missions, to reconsider how teachers teach, to re-examine how students learn, and to re-evaluate how to best engage staff and communities.



TREND 1: DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES FACE RISK OF DERAILMENT

Politicization and mixed signals have resulted in districts pausing or ceasing DEI-related endeavors for fear of legal and financial backlash.

TREND 1: DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES FACE RISK OF DERAILMENT



The number of states that have introduced measures to prevent or restrict instruction related to DEI topics in public schools



The percentage of district employees, parents, and students in 2021 who agree or strongly agree that teachers use books, stories, or lesson material from many different perspectives



The percentage of respondents who report that teachers engage students in meaningful conversations about diversity

TREND OVERVIEW

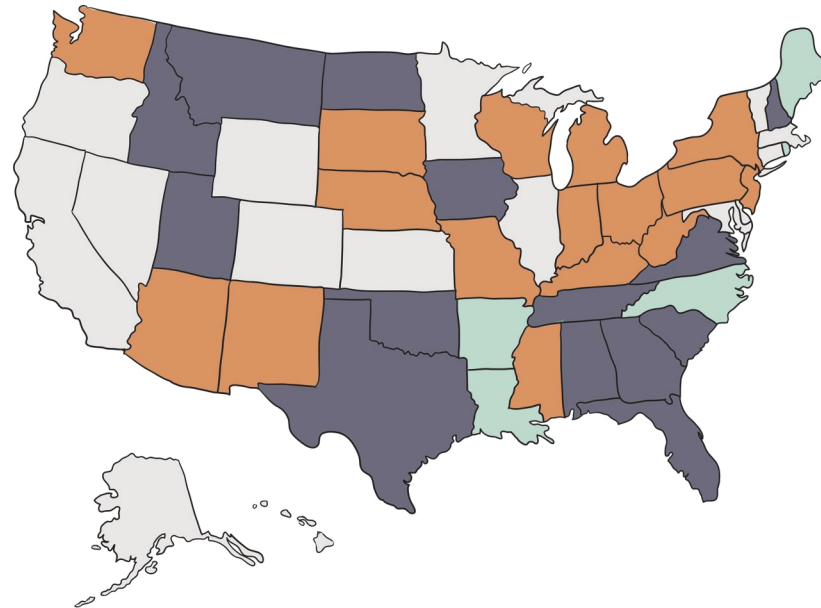
The past two years have seen diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) rise to the forefront of the K-12 landscape. In our 2021 Trends in K-12 Education report, we noted an emphasis on conducting equity audits in districts and adopting DEI frameworks and initiatives. But, on the ground, these efforts have proven complicated, uncomfortable, and, at times, politicized.

FACING RESTRICTIONS

In our partnerships with districts around the nation, we have observed leaders pausing DEI work to reframe their initiatives based on community push back, discomfort, and hesitation. At the time of this publication, 35 states have introduced measures to prevent or restrict instruction related to DEI topics such as racism, sexism, bias, and discrimination. In other instances, similar steps were taken on a local level by school boards. In this cultural landscape,

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STATE MEASURES TO RESTRICT INSTRUCTION OF CRITICAL RACE THEORY



- No state-level action or bill introduced
- Bill has been withdrawn or stalled indefinitely or legislative session has ended with no further action on the measure
- Bill has been signed into law
- Bill has been proposed or is moving through state legislature

Sources: Education Week, Hanover Research

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efforts to advance DEI appear at serious risk of delay (at best) or derailment (at worst), presenting many districts with both philosophical and practical challenges.

REFRAMING DEI INITIATIVES

Philosophically, districts must find a way to reframe DEI initiatives in a manner that highlights their communities' shared values and builds the consensus needed to move forward. Many district leaders will engage their community members in discussions and activities to develop a local definition of DEI that reflects a shared understanding.

In practical terms, districts will need to navigate state and local measures marred by imprecise and subjective language (e.g., prohibiting “divisive topics”), which places the burden of interpretation on teachers. Districts will need to provide teachers with more detailed guidance on what is (or is not) permitted. Otherwise, to avoid legal or financial penalties for themselves and their districts, teachers may err on the side of caution, self-censor, and limit instruction to a greater extent than necessary.

TAKE ACTION

Perceptions of DEI initiatives – and willingness to discuss DEI topics – have strong local meaning and context. To foster a shared understanding and widespread support, districts should engage their communities in conversations aimed at establishing a supportive school climate in which this can advance.

Meanwhile, district leaders should develop rubrics to help teachers determine whether instructional activities and materials comply with state and local regulations and to guide classroom observations and walkthroughs.

RELATED READING

To learn more about the state of DEI in U.S. schools, be sure to check out:

- **Anti-Racism Discussion Guide**, a tool to facilitate district conversations about racism and equity
- **The Current State of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Public Schools**, a report on survey findings from 45 districts with recommendations for addressing inequities
- **School Climate Solutions**, a summary of Hanover's assessment methods and tools to foster an inclusive environment



SPOTLIGHT:
Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS)

For Superintendent Gregory Hutchings of ACPS in Virginia, the murder of George Floyd affirmed the need for a bolder, unapologetic stance toward anti-racism. Based on his experience, Dr. Hutchings encourages district leaders committed to advancing equity in their school systems to:

- ▶ “Lean into your discomfort” and address issues related to cultural competency and racial equity head-on.
- ▶ Strengthen internal capacity and build bridges within the community.
- ▶ Set expectations by embedding equity in the district's strategic plan and educational philosophy.
- ▶ Reinforce these principles regularly through policies, initiatives, and professional development.
- ▶ Use equity audits to identify needs and monitor progress.



TREND 2: DISTRICTS CONFRONT RECORD-HIGH TEACHER TURNOVER

Complex challenges, including the pandemic, safety concerns, and other stressors, leave districts facing unprecedented teacher shortages and turnover.

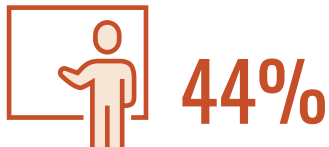
TREND 2: DISTRICTS CONFRONT RECORD-HIGH TEACHER TURNOVER



The percentage of teachers who report they are “very likely” to leave the profession in the next two years, up from 13% before the pandemic



The percentage of teachers who feel “somewhat” or “extremely” stressed



The percentage of new teachers who leave the profession within five years

TREND OVERVIEW

As we approach the two-year anniversary of the first pandemic-related school closures, evidence of COVID-19’s toll on teachers continues to mount. Having performed multiple balancing acts over the past two years – from managing in-person and remote instruction to facilitating their students’ and their own children’s learning – teachers feel exhausted. Concern for their and their students’ well-being weighs heavily on them.

RISING TEACHER ATTRITION

While commitment to their students convinces many teachers to stay, increased rates of depression and anxiety suggest that, lacking additional supports,

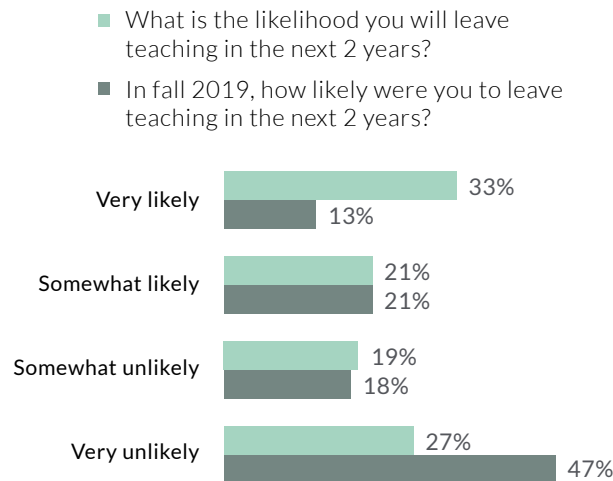
the working environment may place unsustainable pressure on their health. Indeed, compared with other employed adults, a higher percentage of teachers report experiencing frequent job-related stress and symptoms of depression. Now, a greater share also consider themselves likely to exit the profession, an alarming prospect for districts already facing staffing shortages.

INCREASING PRINCIPAL TURNOVER

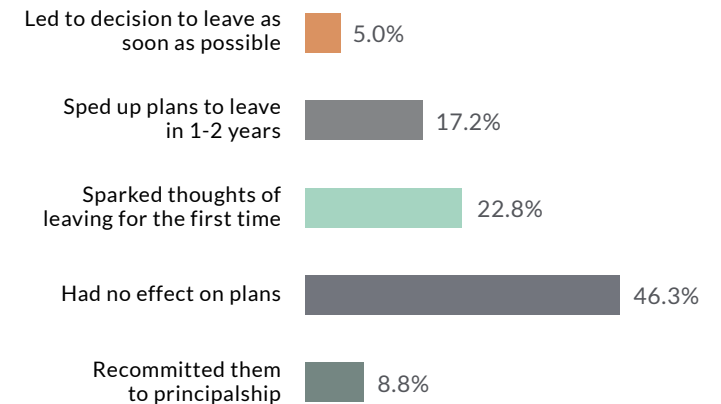
Principals also signal a greater likelihood of leaving, overwhelmed by fears about health and safety, concerns about added responsibilities (e.g., reentering the classroom amid staffing shortages), and frustrations with policy changes and insufficient district support. Principal turnover lowers teacher

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HOW THE PANDEMIC HAS AFFECTED TEACHERS’ PLANS



HOW THE PANDEMIC HAS AFFECTED PRINCIPALS’ PLANS



TREND 2: DISTRICTS CONFRONT RECORD-HIGH TEACHER TURNOVER

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retention and student achievement for up to three years after a principal's departure. Districts, therefore, cannot support students' well-being without supporting the well-being of their teachers and principals.

TAKE ACTION

To recruit and retain principals, teachers, and staff, districts will need to provide supports that improve and sustain their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. First, districts should seek their input – e.g., through surveys or focus groups – to ensure offerings align with their needs. Then, districts should monitor and evaluate the implementation and impact of support initiatives by tracking indicators of employee well-being (e.g., absences, survey responses), satisfaction (e.g., with working conditions and supports), and retention.

RELATED READING

To learn more about staff retention issues, be sure to check out the following:

- **Staff Well-Being Check-In Toolkit**, a set of strategies for monitoring and supporting staff wellness
- **Engagement Strategies to Improve Teacher Retention**, an infographic that outlines the top strategies for teacher engagement
- **Promising Practices for Staff Support and Retention**, a webinar featuring leaders from districts in three states sharing strategies they use to support employees



SPOTLIGHT: Douglas County School District

Public education stands at a crossroads, says Matt Reynolds, learning services officer at Douglas County School District in Colorado. With 24 years as an educator, Mr. Reynolds has seen how districts' current staffing challenges compare with previous periods. Based on his experience, he foresees drastic shifts in the employment landscape, causing districts to face continued difficulties recruiting and retaining staff. In response, he encourages districts to:

- ▶ Be flexible, emphasizing that schools consider teachers' physical and emotional well-being a priority and critical component of school connectedness and success.
- ▶ Invest in a staff wellness coordinator and building-level "wellness champs" to provide self-care programs and services for staff.
- ▶ Establish partnerships with local agencies and community organizations to expand supports.
- ▶ Grow the teacher pipeline by linking with local universities and fostering a love of teaching among current students.



TREND 3: STUDENTS CONTINUE TO STRUGGLE WITH TRAUMA AND LEARNING LOSS

The pandemic introduced significant stressors for students, not just academically, but also socially and emotionally, with effects that districts will continue to address in 2022.

TREND 3: STUDENTS CONTINUE TO STRUGGLE WITH TRAUMA AND LEARNING LOSS



The percentage of students who felt depressed, stressed, or anxious to the point of it interfering with their learning

TREND OVERVIEW

From the pandemic's onset, it was clear COVID-19 would have significant academic ramifications, especially for historically underserved and lower-income students. But the impact is not limited to grades or learning – and K-12 responses cannot be either.

IMPACT OF TRAUMA AND LEARNING LOSS

With the surge in violence and other behavioral problems in the first few months of the school year, it remains unclear whether districts have the

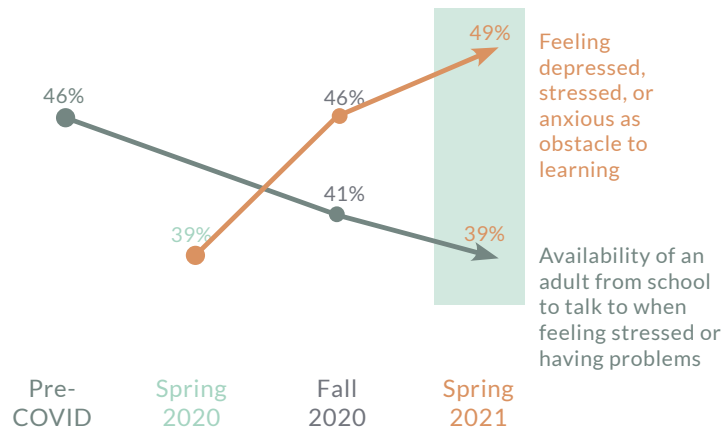
resources in place to address the severity of the student mental health crisis. It is critical, however, that districts realistically assess ongoing trauma and its impact on students' mental and emotional health, alongside a focus on academics. Students ended the 2020–2021 school year having made less progress than usual in reading and mathematics. Moreover, Black students, Hispanic students, and students attending low-income schools progressed less than their Asian, white, and more affluent peers – implying a widening of pre-pandemic achievement gaps.

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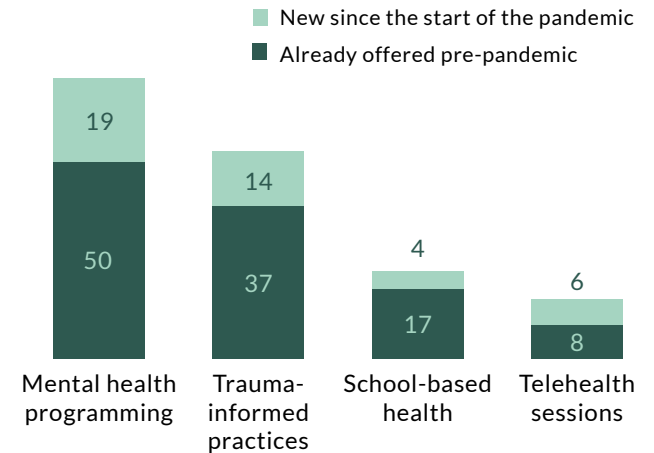
The number of years it took students to recover from academic learning loss after Hurricane Katrina

STUDENT DEPRESSION, STRESS, AND ANXIETY INCREASED WHEN THE AVAILABILITY OF AN ADULT FROM SCHOOL DECREASED



*Note that questions about obstacles to learning including "feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious" as shown above, were introduced in the emergency distance-learning survey in spring 2020; thus, Pre-COVID data are not available. In addition, the "availability of an adult from school to talk to" question was not included in the spring of 2020 emergency distance learning survey, therefore, it does not have a spring 2020 finding.

PERCENTAGE OF DISTRICTS OFFERING STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES IN 2021–2022



The percentage of educators who say student morale is lower than before the pandemic

TREND 3: STUDENTS CONTINUE TO STRUGGLE WITH TRAUMA AND LEARNING LOSS

A FOCUS ON WHOLE-CHILD RECOVERY

Just as districts acknowledged the importance of educating the whole child pre-pandemic, addressing COVID-19's effects on students means helping the whole child recover. Districts must address the academic, mental, social, and emotional impact of pandemic disruptions.

American psychologist Abraham Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of human psychological needs emphasizes that, before students can strive for their full potential, they must feel safe and secure – not only physically, but socially and emotionally. For 2021–2022, many districts prioritized social-emotional learning (SEL) to help students readjust to in-person learning and interaction. Many districts also have anticipated greater need for mental health interventions.

TAKE ACTION

Addressing the spectrum of student needs and experiences requires a comprehensive system of supports, ranging from universal SEL programs to targeted interventions. Implementing such a system requires districts to reconsider staffing levels, expand training offerings, and leverage community partnerships.

Districts should also solicit and raise student voices, allowing them to express what they need. To monitor impact, districts should track feelings of safety, connectedness, and emotional well-being; usage of supports and interventions; changes in academic and behavioral outcomes; and stakeholder satisfaction.

RELATED READING

To learn more about trauma and learning-loss issues, be sure to read:

- **Implementing Social-Emotional Learning in K-12 Schools**, a planning workbook to build effective social-emotional programming
- **Toolkit to Overcome Learning Loss**, a compilation of resources to address pandemic-era academic challenges
- **A Systemic Approach to Social-Emotional Learning and Well-Being**, a webinar with district leaders sharing their trauma-informed practices for supporting students
- **Supporting Families' Social-Emotional Needs During COVID-19**, a summary of in-person and virtual practices to support student and family well-being



SPOTLIGHT: Alpine School District

After transitioning to virtual learning in spring 2020, Alpine School District returned to in-person learning in 2020–2021 amid extensive safety protocols. John Patten, executive director of results and school improvement, says these transitions caused variability in instructional delivery and disrupted student attendance and engagement, leading to academic, social-emotional, and behavioral challenges. To help students recover, Dr. Patten recommends:

- ▶ Acknowledging students' pain and meeting them with "grace" and understanding as they recover.
- ▶ Using community input to realign strategic priorities with students' greatest areas of need.
- ▶ Considering adoption of new curricular materials to support recovery in literacy and mathematics.
- ▶ Expanding teacher and principal coaching to build professional capacity for supporting student recovery (e.g., trauma-informed instruction, high-quality Tier 1 instruction, and academic interventions).
- ▶ Establishing a district wide SEL framework while encouraging schools to set unique goals to promote students' connectedness.



TREND 4: POLITICALLY CHARGED ATMOSPHERES CREATE CHALLENGES FOR DISTRICT LEADERS

From political pressures to verbal abuse and actual threats of violence, the challenges faced by superintendents are leading to high turnover, complex community relationships, and a heightened need for consensus building strategies.

TREND 4: POLITICALLY CHARGED ATMOSPHERES CREATE CHALLENGES FOR DISTRICT LEADERS



The percentage of superintendents who plan to leave their positions by the end of 2022, compared with 3% who left the year prior



The number of recall efforts of school board members in 2021, compared with a prior annual average of 23

TREND OVERVIEW

Attrition concerns have not only escalated from the classroom to the principal's office, but to the central office as well. Whether linked to turnover through retirements, resignations, or removals, record-high superintendent turnover has affected districts nationwide. While COVID-19 has brought added responsibilities and stress to the role, many superintendents find another aspect of their operating environment even more challenging to navigate: the increasingly politicized and polarized nature of the communities they serve.

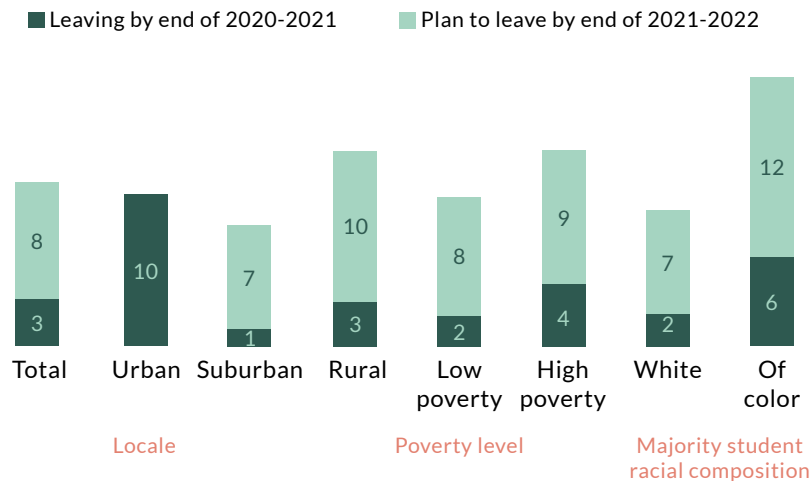
MOUNTING SUPERINTENDENT PRESSURES

When groups hold diametrically opposed and deeply entrenched positions, reaching a consensus that satisfies all sides becomes difficult, if not impossible.

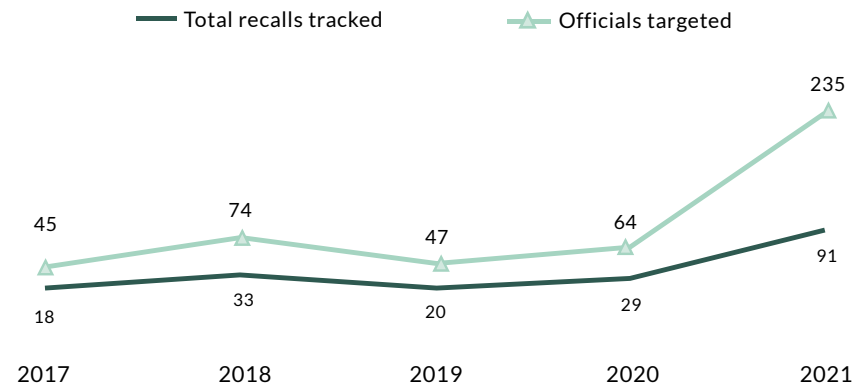
Thus, many superintendents feel destined to disappoint at least one side when making any major decision. At times, disappointment from some community members has morphed into outright hostility, subjecting superintendents and other district officials to verbal abuse and even threats or acts of physical violence. Indeed, greater public attention and political pressure also has contributed to increased turnover of school board members.

In many districts, relations between superintendents and school boards have deteriorated under the weight of these conflicts and transitions. Regardless of the political climate, however, superintendents and school boards need to find a way to work together. Otherwise, district business may become deadlocked, causing the most harm to students.

PERCENTAGES OF SUPERINTENDENTS WHO PLAN TO LEAVE THEIR POSITIONS BY END 2021 OR END 2022



SCHOOL BOARD RECALL EFFORTS BY YEAR



Sources: RAND Corporation, Ballotpedia

TAKE ACTION

Superintendents and school boards can form collaborative, productive working relationships and model civil discourse for their communities by building trust and demonstrating mutual respect.

Connecting and building relationships with individual school board members outside of regular school board meetings will play a critical role in achieving this. Superintendents also should gather with the entire school board to discuss how to reflect the district's core values in their interactions and communicate to the community that abusive language and behavior will not be tolerated.

RELATED READING

To learn more about consensus-building strategies, be sure to check out the following:

- **Effective Board and Superintendent Collaboration**, a guide to establishing a productive governance structure
- **The Why and How of a Positive School Climate**, an infographic that outlines how stakeholders benefit from a positive school environment
- **Strategic Plan Implementation Framework**, a resource for building strategic plans that unite board and district administrator priorities



Michigan Association of
Superintendents & Administrators

SPOTLIGHT:

Washington Association of School Administrators and
Michigan Association of Superintendents & Administrators

Controversies divert superintendents' attention from their educational and operational leadership, says Joel Aune, executive director of Washington Association of School Administrators. Tensions, including conflicts between school board directives and superintendents' ethics, have contributed to a 40% increase in attrition among Washington superintendents over the past year.

Sarena Shivers, deputy executive director of the Michigan Association of School Administrators, encourages superintendents to seize this moment as an opportunity to advance equity and social justice by enhancing communication, understanding, and collaboration among diverse community voices.

To navigate politicized landscapes, Aune and Shivers recommend:

- ▶ Sharing best practices with regional and national contacts.
- ▶ Bolstering unity and resiliency via a strong district culture.
- ▶ Building relationships with school board members and identifying shared goals.
- ▶ Strengthening communication to clarify goals and dispel misconceptions.
- ▶ Alleviating conflicts by promoting community education and tempering language.



TREND 5: SHORT-TERM FUNDING REQUIRES COMPLEX, COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING

With an influx of short-term funding, many districts are grappling with how to use those dollars collaboratively, effectively, and in a way that yields the best outcomes for students.

TREND 5: SHORT-TERM FUNDING REQUIRES COMPLEX, COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING



The number of large, urban districts (out of 100) who gathered community input on how to spend their allocation of ESSER funds



The percentage of K-12 administrators who cite funding as the primary barrier to program evaluation



The deadline for K-12 districts to spend or commit their remaining ESSER dollars

TREND OVERVIEW

Since March 2020, the U.S. Department of Education has allocated a total of \$190.3 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to pre-K-12 education – a historic amount indicative of the unprecedented challenges confronting districts. Those funds come with a broad mandate to use the resources to safely reopen schools, support student academic, social, and emotional well-being, and address learning loss (especially among the most vulnerable students).

In 2022, districts will continue to have flexibility to allocate these resources in the ways that best serve their communities. With greater autonomy, however, comes added responsibility.

IDENTIFYING THE BEST USE OF FUNDS

Districts, in consultation with students, parents, and staff, must identify the best uses for these funds.

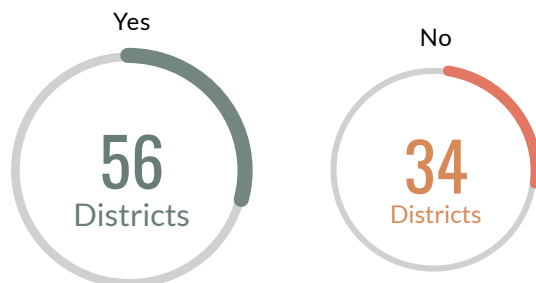
Once needs assessments have been completed, districts must consider:

- Which research-based interventions to implement to meet these needs
- How they can create an implementation plan and ensure they have the required resources
- How they can monitor fidelity of implementation and assess the impact on students

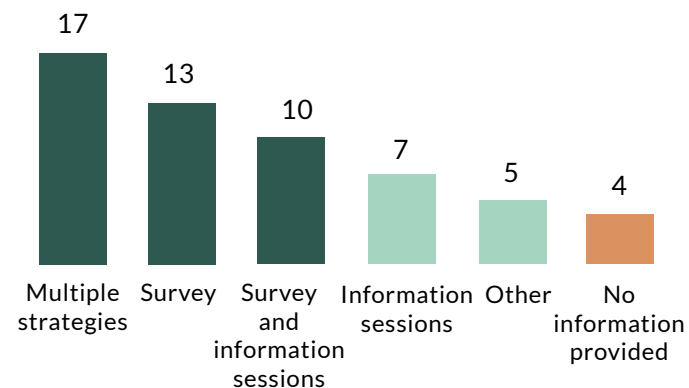
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HOW 100 LARGE, URBAN DISTRICTS ARE GATHERING FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INPUT INTO ESSER SPENDING PLANS

NUMBER OF DISTRICTS GATHERING INPUT



ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES



Sources: Center on Reinventing Public Education, Hanover Research, US Department of Education

TREND 5: SHORT-TERM FUNDING REQUIRES COMPLEX, COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING

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Because such high-stakes decisions will not only affect students now, but also in the future, how districts approach this process will have important short- and long-term consequences for student outcomes.

TAKE ACTION

If districts make decisions informed by data and guided by stakeholder input, relief funds will be more likely to meet immediate needs and support long-term goals. To identify their greatest areas of need, districts should analyze their data to understand how the pandemic is affecting students. Because data and metrics only tell part of the

story, districts also should engage students, parents, and staff, asking them how well current offerings support them and where they require additional assistance.

RELATED READING

To learn more about how to make the most of ESSER funds, be sure to check out the following:

- **ESSER Funds Resource Center**, a summary of planning and evaluation services to help districts spend ESSER funds wisely
- **Critical Steps to Successful Program Evaluation**, a toolkit to guide districts and schools through a program evaluation process



SPOTLIGHT: Harford County Public Schools

As superintendent of Harford County Public Schools (HCPS) in Maryland, Sean Bulson says his district's use of ESSER funds reflects how the school system's needs changed throughout the pandemic — beginning with meals and necessities, transitioning to sporadic one-time purchases (e.g., technology), and evolving to semi-permanent investments to support learning recovery and fill staffing gaps.

Dr. Bulson, who credits ESSER funds with giving HCPS its “biggest equity-oriented leap forward” by improving access to learning, suggests districts take the following steps when allocating resources:

- ▶ Leverage multiple methods (e.g., surveys, task forces) to gather community input.
- ▶ Use community input to direct ESSER funds toward areas of greatest community need.
- ▶ Consider how ESSER funds can achieve short-term objectives and long-term goals.
- ▶ Acknowledge the difficulty of measuring ESSER funds' impact on student outcomes, as the resources primarily represent a “stopgap against more negative effects” of the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

The impact of the pandemic will continue to shape districts in 2022 and beyond. It is a reality reflected in the five trends we share in this report and one we are committed to helping our clients navigate.

Conflicts surrounding school closures, mask mandates, and vaccine requirements have polarized communities and eroded superintendent-school board relations. Hardened political divisions have, in turn, complicated efforts to advance educational equity. Greater pressure on staff has burned out an already-stressed workforce, causing many to choose another career. Students have lost instructional time and many of the social interactions and experiences that connect them to their school and peers. With so many challenges facing districts, ESSER funds provide a unique opportunity to support students' academic, social, and emotional recovery – if used wisely.

A CHANCE TO REIMAGINE K-12 EDUCATION

With all these challenges, however, comes hope: K-12 districts now have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to re-envision how they fulfill their missions, to reconsider how teachers teach, to re-examine

how students learn, and re-evaluate how to best engage staff and communities.

We see signs of this in districts' renewed focus on strategic planning. Many of the district leaders we work with will revise strategic plans in 2022 to reflect the current context or will start from scratch. Both scenarios require districts to answer difficult questions ("What are our goals?") and make difficult choices ("What strategies will enable us to succeed?").

District leaders have a critical opportunity in 2022 to step forward in bold new directions, equipped with data-informed research, a sense of cooperation and collaboration, and a willingness to acknowledge that some of the solutions that worked in the past may no longer work in the future.

**“District leaders have a critical opportunity
in 2022 to step forward in bold new directions...”**



How will today's challenges affect your district's tomorrow?

Learn more about how Hanover can help school and district leaders make future-focused decisions with tailored research and data analysis.

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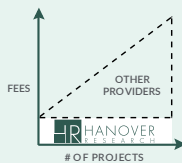
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Headquarters

4401 Wilson Blvd.
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Arlington, VA 22203
(202) 559-0050

Charlottesville

609 E Market Street,
Suite 302
Charlottesville, VA 22902

New York City

42 Greene Street
4th Floor
New York, NY 10013

