



EXECUTIVE BRIEF

2022 Voice of the Superintendent Survey

5 Windows into the State of District Leadership
and Emerging Priorities for Progress

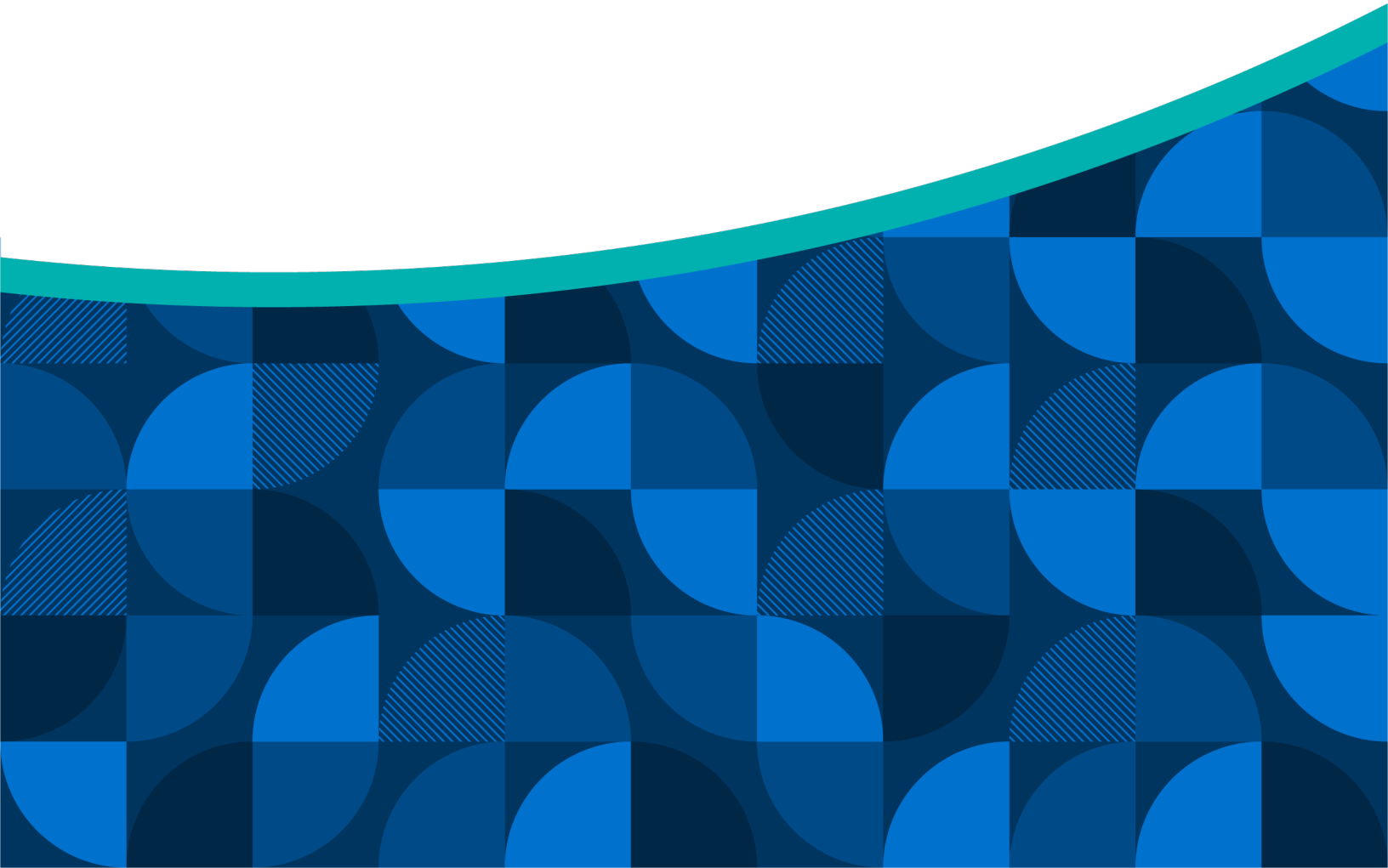


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Introducing the District Leadership Forum

How We Serve Our Members



About the Forum

EAB helps schools to support students from pre-k to graduation and beyond

We identify proven, road-tested best practices from across the nation and support leaders in implementing these ideas in their own districts.

185+

Districts in the District Leadership Forum

37

States represented

800-200K

Students per district we serve

Our Unique Advantage

EAB's Industry-Leading Approach to Best Practice Research

Expert Interviews and Literature Reviews

3000+

Organizations

Exhaustive Screening for Best Practice

200+

Interviews

In-Depth Case Study Research

50-70+

Case Studies

Final Analysis Recommendations

20-30

Best Practices

All-Inclusive Forum Services



Best Practice Reports

Comprehensive reports containing detailed profiles of dozens of innovative practices, strategies, implementation roadmaps, and advice



Executive Roundtables

These two half-day sessions are held several times throughout the year and are where the Forum presents major research findings and implementation strategies



On-Demand Research

Members of the Forum have unlimited access to short, quick-turnaround research projects on critical issues facing their district



Practice Implementation Toolkits

Audits, assessments, guides, and other tools to assist leaders in implementing change



Expert Onsites and Retreats

Senior Forum staff travel to districts to engage leadership in building team consensus, facilitating strategy sessions or accelerating execution of critical initiatives

Executive Summary

EAB's Annual Survey to Document the Evolving Experiences, Needs, and Perspectives of K-12 Superintendents

The past two years have taken a profound toll on school superintendents.

Most have been working around the clock since March 2020, navigating a constant roller coaster of state and federal mandates, the absence of guidance from authorities when it was needed most, and communities with opposing opinions on every key decision.

Many hoped that lessons learned through the pandemic would provide a silver lining.

Optimists believed that the pandemic would usher in a new era of innovation, with the opportunity to abandon outdated practices to make way for bold improvements in curricula and student support.

Unfortunately, between unrelenting waves of variants and fierce divisions over everything from mask mandates to discussions about racism in classrooms, few have been able to lift up and look ahead. Instead, most district leaders are consumed with searching for ways to raise teacher morale, address growing concerns about student mental health, and keep schools running amid a chronic shortage of staff.

It is no secret that for many, this work has become unsustainable. Reports of superintendents retiring or looking for other work seem to grow by the day. But this story can be changed. As you will read in the following pages, superintendents have become more connected and collaborative through the pandemic and agree on much of the important work that needs to be done in the coming months. But they will need help from peers, partners, and other community leaders to move beyond today's crises and forge a new chapter for public education.

EAB's Voice of the Superintendent Survey aims to elevate the conversation around the evolving experiences, needs, and perspectives of district leaders across the nation. We will use the findings as the foundation for discussion groups over the coming months, and to find new and better ways to support the needs of our public school leaders. We hope others reading this report will do the same.

Executive Summary Continued

Early findings from the 2022 Voice of the Superintendent Survey confirm recent narratives.

Tired from being thrust into the center of every public debate and making thousands of decisions with no easy answers, nearly half of district leaders are considering or planning to move on from their role within the next two to three years.

However, responses also tell a story of hope. Seven out of ten superintendents are optimistic that they will feel more successful in their role a year from now than they do today, signaling that many may still be open to continuing district leadership if conditions improve.

Keeping more of today's superintendents at the helm will require a path forward through community disagreements over politically divisive issues. Eighty percent of superintendents agree that "managing politically divisive conversations is now the most challenging aspect of [their] role." For many, these disagreements are stalling the initiatives they care about most. Eighty-three percent of those who "strongly agree" with the statement also agree that "equity" has become a divisive term in their communities.

Beyond current crises and cultural debates, significant strategic priorities have emerged.

- Nearly all superintendents now agree that schools have a responsibility to provide students with access to mental health care. But across much of the country that responsibility is far easier to acknowledge than it is to fulfill.
- Amid rising competition from charter schools and homeschooling, more than 90 percent of superintendents also now believe that districts should more actively market their schools to the local communities.
- Selling parents on the benefits of public education will require confidence that schools can remain consistently operational, so more than half of superintendents now agree that districts should explore automation as a potential solution to chronic staff shortages in non-instructional roles.
- The biggest question marks exist around how to prepare students for post-secondary success in a rapidly evolving world of work. The "college for all" mindset is now firmly in the past for most district leaders, with just 30 percent agreeing that "the best possible option for most students is to immediately enroll in college or university after graduation."

One thing is clear: Superintendents have learned to lean on each other through the past two years and will work to address these challenges together. Six out of ten superintendents say that their relationships with peers have strengthened through the pandemic, and most believe that spending more time with other superintendents will make them more effective in their role.

About This Survey

Methodology

The first round of the 2022 Voice of the Superintendent Survey was distributed online from December 6, 2021 to February 3, 2022.

141 superintendents from across 32 states completed the survey, which was designed to provide current superintendents with data about the experiences, needs, and perspectives of their peers.

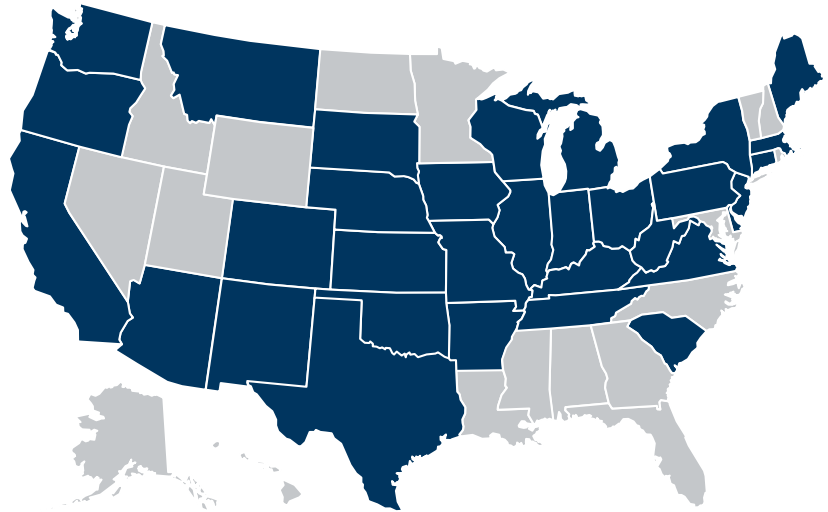
Only school superintendents participated in the survey.

The survey instrument assessed respondents':

- Perceptions of current success and optimism about the future
- Time spent with key stakeholders and how that has changed since February 2020
- Relationships with key stakeholder groups and change over time
- Current needs for additional training and support
- Perspectives on key strategic questions rooted in emerging trends
- Advice from current superintendents to their newly inducted peers

Profile of Respondents

■ Locations of Survey Respondents (n=141)



Gender

Male	Female	Other	No answer
59%	36%	1%	4%

Years of Experience as a Superintendent

<1 year	1-5 years	6-10 years	11+ years
9%	27%	30%	34%

District Size

<1,000	1,000-4,999	5,000-19,999	20,000+
26%	46%	22%	6%

Community Type

Urban	Suburban	Rural
11%	34%	55%



5 Windows into the State of the Superintendency



Most superintendents are...

Optimistic About the Future

But Less Experienced Superintendents Are Less Likely to Feel Successful Today

After two years of turmoil, the most surprising finding from this survey is that most superintendents remain optimistic. Sixty-seven percent of all respondents are optimistic that they will feel more successful in their role a year from now than they do today.

However, veteran superintendents are far more likely than less experienced peers to believe they are making progress today. Those with six or more years of experience as a superintendent are nearly twice as likely to report feeling more successful in their role today than they did a year ago. Only one in five superintendents with experience of five years or less feels the same.

Most respondents believe they will feel more successful in their role next year, but newer superintendents (≤5 years experience) are less likely to feel successful today.

Years of experience as a superintendent	Percentage of respondents who report feeling:	
	<i>More successful today than one year ago</i>	<i>Optimistic about feeling more successful one year ahead</i>
6+ years	41%	67%
.....
≤5 years	22%	68%

These differences in perceptions of progress may, in part, stem from the strength of superintendents' relationships with key stakeholder groups. Those with five years of experience or less were much more likely to report that their relationships with parents, students, teachers, and principals had deteriorated since February 2020.

Newer superintendents are also more likely to report deteriorating relationships with parents, students, teachers, and principals.

Years of experience as a superintendent	Percentage of respondents who say that their relationships with the following groups have weakened "a little" or "a lot" since February 2020			
	Parents/Families	Principals	Teachers	Students
6+ years	22%	8%	16%	23%
.....
≤5 years	39%	24%	31%	33%

Most superintendents are...

Investing More Time in Parents, Boards, and Staff

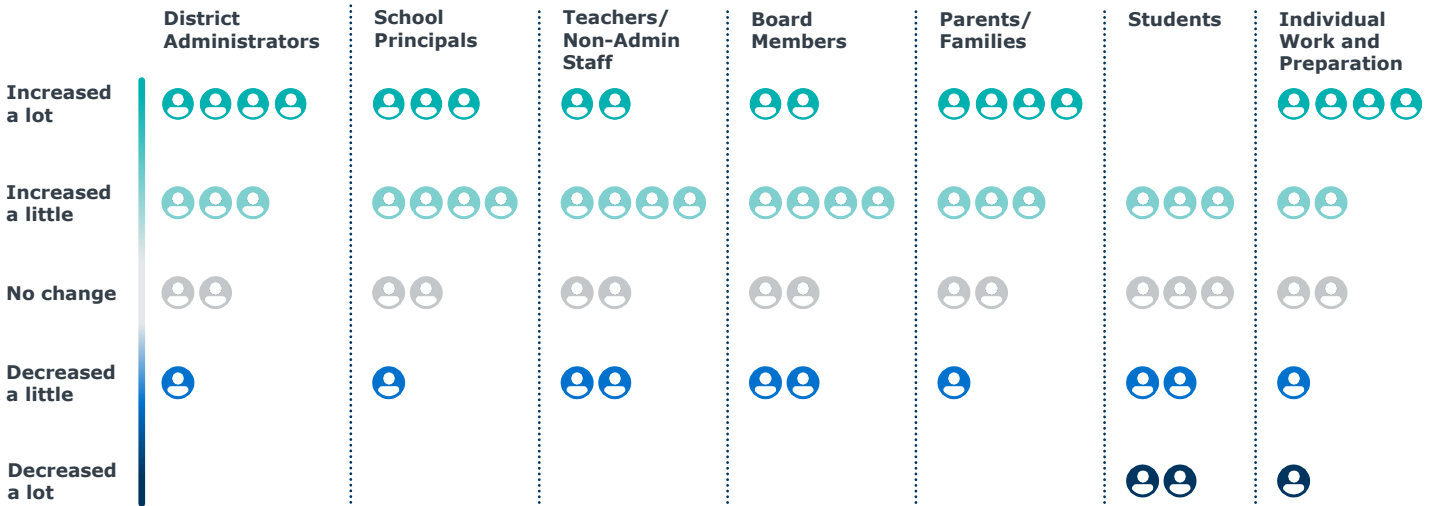
But Feeling the Strain of Fewer Hours with Students

With relationships and collaboration proving crucial for success, many superintendents want to know how peers are deploying their time. Responses show that the majority have significantly increased the amount of time they spend meeting and communicating with their district administrative team, principals, teachers, board members, and parents. Most have also increased the hours they spend on individual work and preparation. This means that superintendents have likely spent more time at work and fewer hours with their families. But constant crisis management has also come with another cost: less time with students.

Changing that narrative is at the top of superintendents' agendas moving forward. Eighty percent of respondents report wanting to increase the amount of time they spend with students. Roughly the same number also believe that more time with students would make them more successful in their role.

Changes in time spent meeting and communicating with key stakeholder groups for the "average" 10 superintendents since February 2020

(n=141. Responses rounded to nearest 10%)



80% of superintendents say that **increasing time spent with students would make them more successful in their role**

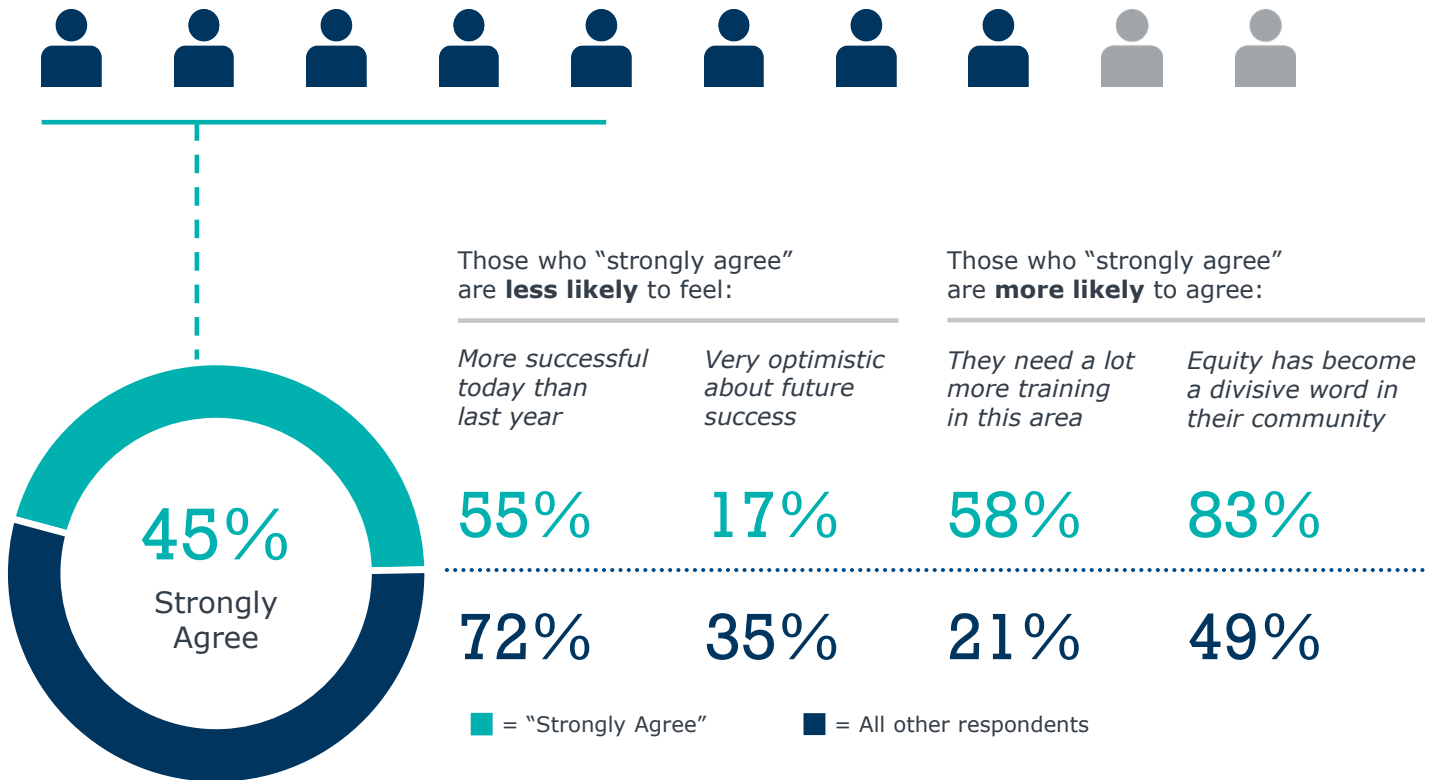
Struggling to Manage Polarized Communities

Navigating Divisive Conversations is Now the Hardest Part of the Job

To spend more time in classrooms, superintendents will need a way to spend less time quelling community unrest and managing crises. But in today’s polarized political climate, many superintendents are working with families who find little common ground on any issue. As a result, 80 percent of survey respondents agreed that managing divisive conversations is now the most challenging aspect of their job. Seven in ten also say that they would benefit from additional training in this area—indicating that they do not feel adequately equipped to manage these conversations today.

Successfully navigating political divides will also be essential for making progress on strategic objectives. Political prowess is especially important to progress on initiatives designed to improve outcomes and support for students from low-income backgrounds and communities of color. We discovered that, among those who “strongly agree” that managing divisive political conversations is now the most challenging aspect of their role, 83 percent also agree that “equity” has become a divisive word in their communities.

8 out of 10 superintendents agree that managing politically divisive conversations is the most challenging aspect of their role today



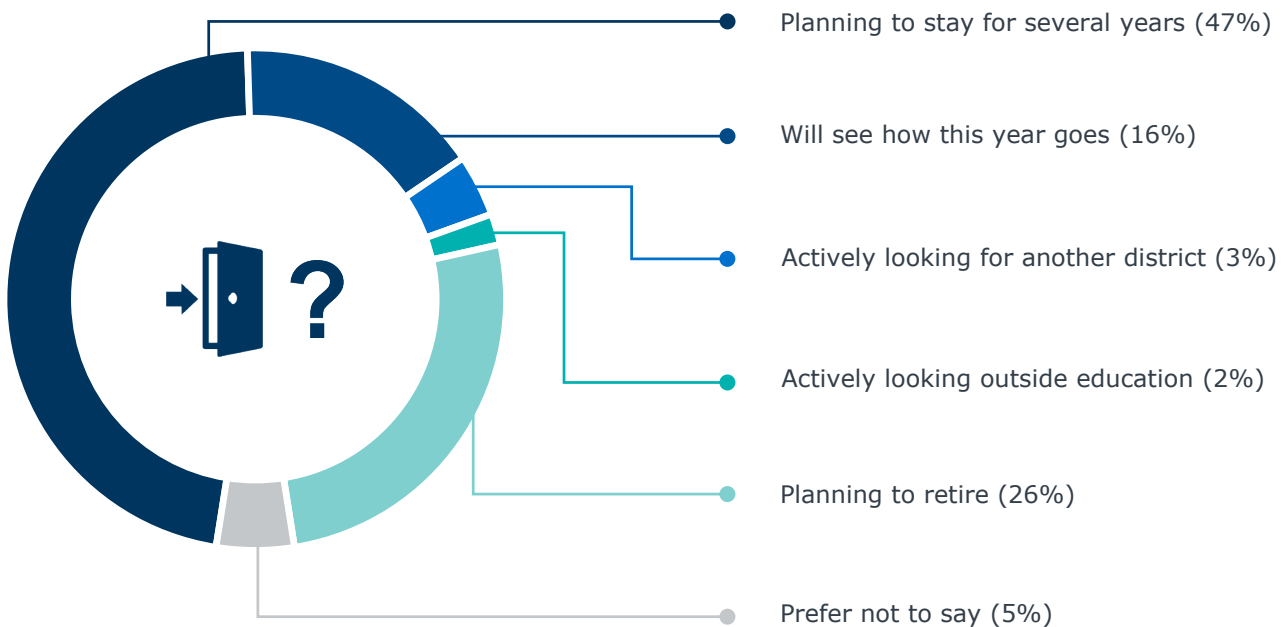
One Eye on the Exit

Many Are Looking for a Change, But Some Could Be Convinced to Stay

The “greatest exodus of leadership at the district level that we have seen in this country”¹ looks likely to continue. Despite the tendency for superintendents to feel optimistic about the future, many have reached their breaking point. Around half of our survey respondents report considering or actively planning to leave their role within the next two to three years.

The departure of veteran leaders (6+ years of experience) is expected, with 36 percent planning to retire within two to three years and another 14 percent who will see how this year goes before deciding. More concerning is the potential exodus of newer superintendents (5 years experience or less), with 23 percent either seeing how this year goes or actively looking for other work. The clock is ticking on this make-or-break year, and it is critical that we help those uncertain about the future to feel that district leadership is a sustainable path forward.

Question: Which of the following best describes your long-term plans?



A Make-or-Break Year

% of superintendents who say they will "see how this year goes" before deciding on future plans:

- 18% of those with 5 years experience or less
- 30% of those who feel less successful today than 1 year ago
- 23% of those who agree managing politically divisive conversations is now the most challenging aspect of their role

Connection, Collaboration, and Community

Recent Challenges Have Sparked a New Era of Connected Leadership

The path to sustainable district leadership starts with greater connection to peers. In recent interviews, superintendents have repeatedly expressed that their regional networks have become much stronger during the pandemic. Our survey respondents agree. Sixty-one percent stated that their relationships with peers from other districts had improved since February 2020. Fifty-six percent also said that increasing the amount of time they spend collaborating with peers would make them more effective in their role.

Creating more protected time for superintendents to connect, collaborate, and feel like part of a community might be the best near-term bet for convincing district leaders to stay in educational leadership. But raising awareness of a truly nationwide network of support may also be key to convincing talented individuals to see the superintendency as a viable option in 2022 and beyond.

Our survey respondents appear eager to support new superintendents. More than 100 respondents chose to leave words of wisdom for their newly minted peers. This outpouring of advice leaves us optimistic that a “golden era” of connected public school leadership may still be yet to come.

Words from the Wise: 4 Themes in Advice From 100+ Current Superintendents to Newly Inducted Peers

Question: What is the best piece of advice you could give to a new superintendent this year?

Board Management & Communication

"Communicate challenges and issues openly and honestly with your Board, collaboratively form goals, but don't overpromise outcomes that may not be deliverable in this era of political division."

Community, Connection, and Collaboration

"Leadership is about influence. It is essential to understand where you can exercise influence and where you can't. Building coalitions and connections with effective influence is the hallmark of leadership in schools today."

Navigating Complex Decisions

"Focus on establishing a decision-making process that includes all voices and can be repeated as needed. It will be impossible to find a solution that everyone agrees on, but it is possible for everyone to respect the process used to get input and make recommendations."

Purpose, Perseverance, and Hope

"Remember why you started on the journey you are on. You advocated for children and their families, and now more than ever children need a voice of reason, empathy, and caring. Be that voice."



4 Priorities for Post-Pandemic Strategy and Debate



No Rest for the Resilient

Responses Highlight Clear Themes and Big Questions Ahead

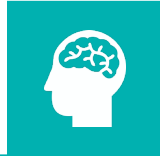
Beyond mask mandates and community polarization, district leaders face even bigger questions around the design and operation of schools in the post-pandemic era. When asked to share opinions on emerging strategic questions, respondents surfaced surprising levels of consensus on several topics, either confirming the continuation of changes that have been growing in recent years or heralding a significant shift in mindset as we enter a new chapter for public education.

4 Priorities for Post-Pandemic District Strategy and Debate

Expand Access to Mental Health Care

89%

Somewhat or strongly agree that schools have a responsibility to provide students with access to mental health care



Explore Automation as a Solution to Staff Shortages

56%

Somewhat or strongly agree that districts should explore automation as a solution to staff shortages in custodial and technology functions



Market Public Schools to Local Communities

92%

Somewhat or strongly agree that amid the rise of charters and homeschooling, districts should more actively market their schools to the community



Evaluate Preparation for Post-Secondary Success

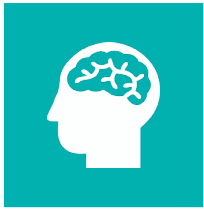
69%

Somewhat or strongly disagree that immediately enrolling in college is the best option for most students after high school



Find Scalable Solutions for Student Mental Health Care

Priority #1



Expand Access to Mental Health Care

89%

Somewhat or strongly agree that schools have a responsibility to provide students with access to mental health care

A need to increase support for student mental health is not controversial, but near consensus on districts having a *responsibility* to provide students with access to care represents a significant shift from what EAB researchers heard in interviews just three years ago.

Agreement on this responsibility is encouraging, as schools are best positioned to identify and respond to mental health concerns before crises develop. But consensus does not diminish the magnitude of the challenge. Large areas of the country have few, if any, local clinical providers, and clinically trained school counselors or psychologists are scarce.

Meanwhile, rates of adolescent anxiety and depression have been rising steadily for a decade, and recent reports indicate that the pandemic has spurred yet another increase in students visiting the hospital for mental health-related emergencies.

Scaling access to mental health care in schools will require systems-level solutions, as few schools are equipped to meet this challenge alone. District leaders should take the following steps today:

1. Work with community partners to reduce stigma around mental health through year-round awareness campaigns
2. Focus on identifying student needs at the earliest possible stage through a regular cadence of universal screening in schools
3. Expand mental health support by training district counselors and psychologists to provide evidence-based small group interventions, such as Group Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
4. Establish district coordination of external mental health providers to ensure students have access to clinical care within their schools, either through in person delivery or a dedicated space for teletherapy

▶ Learn more about EAB's recommendations at eab.com/k12-mental-health

Combat Cracks in Community Confidence

Priority #2



Market Public Schools to Local Communities

92%

Somewhat or strongly agree that amid the rise of charters and homeschooling, districts should more actively market their schools to the community

The success of public schools is contingent on community support. From sustaining enrollment to passing bonds to providing students with real-world opportunities to learn, public schools cannot function effectively without the support of the public. But after two years of turmoil, growing competition from charter schools, and steadily rising numbers of families choosing to homeschool, the vast majority of district leaders are feeling an urgent need to rebuild faith in public education.

A recent RAND Corporation survey² found enrollment declines to be a top concern for district leaders in Fall 2021. Most concerning is that 40 percent of those surveyed by RAND were concerned about declines in enrollment for reasons other than delayed kindergarten. In addition, Gallup polls³ found that trust in public schools declined further (nine percent) than trust in any other public institution in 2021.

With these troubling statistics in mind, it is likely that proactive efforts to market the benefits of public education to the community will become even more important for district leaders throughout 2022 and beyond.

Rebuilding community trust and confidence requires reclaiming the narrative.

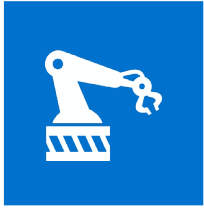
EAB's experience working with districts across the nation has highlighted three steps that superintendents can take to build a foundation for positive momentum:

1. Design a district-level strategy for achieving and celebrating small wins in areas that communities can agree on, in order to sustain media (and social media) attention on each school's successes
2. Implement new strategic initiatives in collaboration with peer districts from across the region, or across the nation. This will help to build positive attention and public perceptions of validity to district efforts, and helps to embed the shared accountability needed to see plans through to results
3. Develop a strong foundation of formal training in systems thinking among district administrators, as this will enable teams to design equity-focused initiatives with higher likelihood of success

► *Build the foundations for community support at eab.com/public-vote*

Consider the Role of Robots in Schools

Priority #3



Explore Automation as a Solution to Staff Shortages

56%

Somewhat or strongly agree districts should explore automation as a solution to staff shortages in custodial and technology functions

The Great Resignation has arguably hit schools hardest outside the classroom, leading to chronic staff shortages that have caused schools to periodically close⁴ and required too many superintendents to drive a school bus. Schools are built on the people that interact with students every day, so in previous conversations we have seen extreme reluctance to broach the topic of automation. However, the situation today appears to be prompting many district leaders to rethink that stance.

Urban and suburban superintendents are more likely to be interested in exploring automation than those in rural districts, while those with five years of experience or less are more open to automated solutions than those who have been in seat for six years or more.

Conversations about automation outside of the classroom may also increase interest in ways to automate routine tasks for teachers. This would not be an effort to replace staff, but to free them up to perform their most important functions. With teacher morale at an all-time low and shrinking numbers of applicants for open positions, many hope that such innovations could help to retain more teachers and make K-12 education more sustainable and attractive to the next generation of college graduates.

To approach these conversations with care and a strategic lens, district leaders should start by collaborating with employees to identify tasks that increase employee stress and reduce morale, both inside and outside the classroom. Those tasks provide fertile ground for exploring automation with the purpose of increasing employee success and pave a road to redesigning job functions in ways that maximize the potential of both people and technology in schools.

► *Establish a systematic approach to raising employee morale at eab.com/morale-collaborative*

Challenge Assumptions About Post-Secondary Success

Priority #4



Evaluate Preparation for Post-Secondary Success

69%

Somewhat or strongly *disagree* that immediately enrolling in college is the best option for most students after high school

Questions about the cost and value of a college education are not new. But the rise of lower-cost credentials,⁵ a steadily growing “alternative workforce,”⁶ and the rapidly shrinking half-life of skills⁷ are causing many in K-12 education to reexamine the pathways to success for students in schools today.

Nearly 70 percent of respondents *disagreed* that transitioning directly from high school to a college or university is the best option for most students, signaling a strong reversal of the “college for all” movement that was pervasive across K-12 for more than a decade. Among our respondents, rural superintendents were less likely than suburban or urban superintendents to agree that immediate college enrollment is the best option for most graduating seniors, but no more than 51 percent of superintendents agreed with the statement across any of the primary subgroups.

However, this shift does not signal a closed debate. In recent years, most new jobs created in the United States economy have gone to those with at least some college education⁸, and the average bachelor’s degree holder still earns more than a million dollars more than high school graduates over the course of a lifetime.⁹

Much more discussion is needed between leaders across K-12, higher education, and a range of industries for schools to effectively prepare students for a rapidly evolving world of work. In the near-term, EAB recommends district leaders take the following steps:

1. Track data on higher education enrollment and completion rates for students from across your district to ensure that students are guided to institutions where they have the highest likelihood of securing a diploma
2. Focus on integrating career-focused elements into core programming for all students, regardless of whether they will head to higher education or the workforce upon graduation
3. Collaborate with local business leaders to ensure that certificate programs offered within the district center on skills that will continue to have market value for several years

► Find guidance and resources to improve post-secondary outcomes at eab.com/k12-student-success

Segmented Responses to Strategic Priority Statements

Percentage of superintendent survey respondents that "somewhat" or "strongly" agree with the following statements, by subgroup:

5 years experience or less (n=50)	6 years experience or more (n=90)	Urban (n=16)	Suburban (n=47)	Rural (n=77)	Male (n=83)	Female (n=50)
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Schools have a responsibility to provide students with access to mental health care

90%	89%	88%	92%	88%	90%	85%
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With homeschooling and charter schools on the rise, districts should more actively market their schools to their local communities

92%	92%	100%	89%	92%	94%	92%
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Districts should explore automation as a solution to staff shortages in custodial and technology functions

66%	52%	69%	66%	48%	67%	42%
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The best possible option for most students is to immediately enroll in college or university after graduation

28%	34%	50%	51%	16%	38%	24%
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Conclusion

There is a window of opportunity to convince current leaders to keep their talents in public education. However, achieving that goal will require helping all superintendents, especially those newer to the job, to feel successful in their role. Creating more time for superintendents to connect with students and collaborate with peers will be part of the solution. But finding ways for district leaders to efficiently navigate challenging conversations with their communities must be at the top of the list.

Collaboration will be key to answering pressing strategic questions. Meeting the demand for mental health care in schools will require networks of districts and clinical providers to coordinate and share resources. Rebuilding community confidence in public schools will require partnerships with regional business and community leaders. Overcoming chronic staffing shortages will require deliberate collaboration with employees to design solutions that increase morale and the sustainability of working in schools. And preparing today's learners for post-secondary success in tomorrow's economy will require breaking down silos between K-12, higher education, and employers to build pathways to possibility for all students. Today's challenges are too large for any district to tackle alone.

This is just the beginning of the conversation. These findings provide an anchor point for critical discussions about how to make district leadership more sustainable—and public schools more successful—in the months ahead. If you are a superintendent reading this report, do these experiences and perspectives reflect your own, or do you have a different story to tell?

Bring your perspective to the table.

Participate in *Round Two of the 2022 Voice of the Superintendent Survey* to ensure that discussions about how to support district leaders reflect your reality.

Visit eab.com/superintendent-survey

Accepting responses from February 16th – March 16th, 2022



Learn how the EAB can help your district to get further, faster by visiting eab.com/k12

Endnotes

1. <https://www.newsweek.com/great-exodus-superintendents-resigned-droves-culture-wars-hit-schools-2021-1662382>
2. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-8.html
3. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/352316/americans-confidence-major-institutions-dips.aspx>
4. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/staff-shortages-affect-students-too-heres-where-schools-are-shutting-down/2021/10>
5. <https://eab.com/insights/daily-briefing/adult-learner/the-future-of-non-degree-certificates/>
6. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2019/alternative-workforce-gig-economy.html>
7. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/reskilling-revolution-jobs-future-skills/>
8. <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/nine-out-of-10-new-jobs-are-going-to-those-with-a-college-degree-2018-06-04>
9. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/the-college-payoff/>

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