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SUPERINTENDENTS WANTED

Yes, there's a teacher shortage. But districts are also in dire need of superintendents. 12

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The vital importance of social-emotional learning

Dr. Miriam Ortiz explains why SEL skills are important and how SEL and literacy are connected. **Page 19**

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Recommended reading

Summer, a time for relaxation and renewal, might be a little different this year. Last year at this time, many educators were focused on getting students caught up from pandemic disruptions. And while things have improved somewhat, there is still a vast need to address learning loss.

Amid these challenges, many veteran and even less-experienced leaders are walking away. There are more open superintendent positions than ever before, and fewer candidates than in the past. This crisis can be blamed on a combination of pandemic impacts and unprecedented political divisiveness.

So what are districts to do? In this issue we look at some ideas for filling these key leadership roles and explore what the drain on leadership means, on page 12.

Meanwhile, some media reports have raised concerns about districts missing deadlines and having to return COVID relief dollars. Are ESSER funds really going unspent?

Hear what experts say districts should be doing now to ensure that these critical funds are not lost, on page 16.

Finally, educator burnout is a serious concern. A Gallup poll shows that school workers are the most burned-out professionals in the U.S. So what can district and building leaders do to cultivate a welcoming environment and retain teachers?

We break down the top reasons educators say they might stay, and offer some ideas to make those reasons a reality, on page 18.

—Eric Weiss, executive editor

Reasons to visit DistrictAdministration.com

How many of your teachers want to quit? Depends what state you're in

Districts are getting creative with pay by offering stipends and signing bonuses, among other retention strategies.

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3 superintendents to watch: How they're ensuring education is student-centered

Increasing the capacity of its school leaders, expanding academic programming and nurturing positive school climates have helped these three districts.

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How principals can re-energize this summer after a difficult year

Principals should use summer to reaffirm their school's goals and vision after a few turbulent years.

bit.ly/principals-summer

Feds lay out 5-point plan to help districts find more teachers

The Biden administration intends to partner with districts to expand teachers' residencies, access to curricular materials and mental health supports for students.

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Schools can serve free meals this summer but that may change (again) in 2022-23

Some equity advocates say deadline-extension of waivers and increased reimbursements don't go far enough.

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TECH TALENT

How the Great Resignation is Giving Ed-tech a Talent Boost

The chance to make a direct impact on future generations is convincing Big Tech workers to make a change.

The wave of Americans looking for more purpose-driven careers during the "Great Resignation" is causing a shift in workers from Big Tech to ed-tech, according to a leading education company.

The chance to make a direct impact on future generations appears to be the key for engineers, programmers and other specialists drawn to ed-tech. Greg Collins, who left a major cybersecurity firm last year to become Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's senior vice president of platform, says he was driven to solve problems for a different segment of society: students and educators.

"The pandemic has given a lot of professionals time to think, 'Am I applying myself the way I want to?'" Collins says. "The problems we're solving and the way we're solving them is really attractive to tech professionals."

Ed-tech companies are working to smooth the transitions teachers and students are having to make in a rapidly changing K-12 environment, he says. Teachers now have more tools to monitor their students' progress more closely and the data generated removes any ambiguity about whether the learning programs are having the intended impact, Collins says. "What I saw was a confluence of activity that was making teachers' jobs much much harder with an impact on students that was profound," Collins says. "Those are problems tech can help solve."

Software tools that provide data on students' progress and highlight where interventions or enrichment are needed give teachers more time to focus on that direct instruction. Collins adds that he's been fascinated by how quickly teachers and students have adopted new technology since the beginning of the pandemic when some struggled just to join a Zoom meeting.

"It has gone from, 'How do I start a digital class?' to 'How can I overlay digital solutions in my class to change the way I teach?'" he says. "We're seeing teachers customize quite a bit. We're seeing teachers use a couple of dozen technologies to connect learning in that digital-in-person environment."

Ed-tech companies are also having to respond to the massive increase in the number of computers in classrooms, says Alejandro Reyes, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's chief people officer. It is a sign of the long-anticipated convergence between schools having adequate tech capacity and the wide availability of advanced education software. "And there is a group of people who are searching for what technology is going to do for society, who want to see themselves reflected in the betterment of society," Reyes says. "Ed-tech is directed at the future. It's directed at children and it's purpose-driven."

By Matt Zalaznick

Preparation and Training—Not Metal Detectors—Make Students Safer, Expert Says

A school safety expert addresses the potential risks of increasing school security before developing a well-trained student body and staff.

Recent tragedies have led district leaders across the U.S. to consider better options to increase student safety in their schools. However, others question if "hardening" schools will be enough to put an end to mass shootings.

"Hardening" is the term used by lawmakers to describe the process of reinforcing a school for the safety of its student with physical hardware. This includes installing metal detectors, enhancing physical security and increasing surveillance.

Discussion between leaders and lawmakers has exposed the potential negative effects such efforts could have on students' mental health and academic achievement. Research shows that implementing such systems could cause students to feel *less* safe at school. For example, the presence of metal detectors may provoke fear. In addition, students may feel that their privacy is being invaded.

Kenneth Trump, president of National School Safety and Security Services, who has worked on lawsuits involving some of the nation's highest-profile mass school shootings including Sandy Hook, Parkland and San Bernardino, shared his expertise on how districts should be addressing school safety.

Train students and staff

"The first and best line of defense is a well-trained and highly alert staff and student body," says Trump. "The number-one way we find out about weapons, shooting plots and individuals who want to cause self-harm is from students who come forward and tell adults that they trust. Any security technology is only as strong as the weakest human link behind it."

He says that school security and emergency preparedness, especially post-COVID, is lacking. Many schools don't have the fundamental best practices in place to ensure school safety, such as active building and district-level school crisis teams and reasonable safety drills.

Address human factors

Trump's experience as a civil litigation expert witness working on high-profile cases related to mass shootings has shown him that there is a common thread linked to many of these cases: the failure of human factors. These include people, policies, procedures and training. "It is a lot easier to throw up visible tangible things, such as more cameras, door locks or metal detectors, and tell parents they have improved school safety than it is to show them the value of training, relationships and creating a culture of school safety within the school itself," he says.

Be prepared

The bottom line, according to Trump, is that schools need to do more to plan, prepare and practice. Schools must acknowledge and commit to putting school safety on the agenda and weaving it into school culture, even when there isn't a recent crisis in the headlines.

"We are teaching school leaders simple things that they can do that don't require a great deal of time or money but can make important differences in making their schools safer."

By Micah Ward

Leading in Trying Times

How effective superintendents expand their influence in these divisive times.

Bhavna Sharma-Lewis, now well into her third Chicago-area superintendency, has hosted a workshop called "What Happens When the School Board Falls Out of Love With You." The content was born from the experience of clashing with the school board president during one of her previous stints as a district leader.

In an unusual circumstance, the board overturned an election that occurred after she was hired and before her first day on the job. This meant she went to work for a board that hadn't hired her, and the animosity was apparent immediately, she says. For one thing, the board president reached out more often to her male assistant superintendent. She left that position after two years, realizing "whatever I said or did was not going to be good enough."

Still, Sharma-Lewis stuck to her vision and mission of creating positive climates and treating people with dignity. "You have to be aligned with your board, otherwise you're never going to be successful," says Sharma-Lewis, who has been superintendent of Diamond Lake School District 76 since 2015.

That alignment is key to a superintendent's ability to expand their influence and assert themselves politically, says Dan Domenech, executive director of AASA, The School Superintendents Association. Domenech recommends that educators who are applying for a superintendent's job develop a thorough understanding of the school board's goals and beliefs. "If you believe in one thing and you're hired by a board that believes something else, that's not the job you want," Domenech says. "You're stepping into a position that's going to be a short-term arrangement."

He also suggests that superintendents try to navigate school board politics carefully, particularly during a period that's now among the most divisive in the history of K-12 education. "If you're hired by a board that wants every book in the library inspected and anything that's considered critical race theory banned, the superintendent is going to have to do that job—or find work somewhere else," Domenech says.

Operating transparently, particularly by sharing a district's data and its needs, "helps foster partnerships that can lead to advocacy and action," says Terri Bresnahan, superintendent of Community Consolidated School District 59, which is located near Chicago's O'Hare Airport. It's essential to develop relationships with local officials and political leaders across the state. "School districts are heavily impacted by policy changes and community opinion," says Bresnahan, who is also president of the Suburban Superintendents Association. "Building those relationships by being present and vocal builds awareness and support for our schools."

Leaders can expand their influence by staying connected with local agencies, committees, the chamber of commerce and legislative forums, and by getting involved in national-level lobbying, adds Paul Gausman, who is taking over as superintendent of Lincoln Public Schools in Nebraska after leading Sioux City Community Schools in Iowa for 14 years. "Aaron Sorkin is known to have written a script where one of his characters said, 'Decisions are made by those who show up,'" Gausman says. "We must invest time with these seemingly outside entities to make a difference inside our organizations."

Sharma-Lewis says it's particularly important for female educators to "celebrate and elevate each other" and not get caught up in professional competitiveness. "We have to make sure there's room at the table for everybody because there are enough jobs out there for all of us," Sharma-Lewis says. "We should be empowered, not threatened, by each other."

By Matt Zalaznick

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Enrollment Rankings

A look at the 2030 forecast for all 50 states.

The first year of COVID wiped out a decade of enrollment growth in the nation's public schools, according to the first nationwide tabulation of the pandemic's impacts on attendance.

Enrollment in prekindergarten through grade 12 dropped from 50.8 million students in fall 2019 to 49.4 million in fall 2020, a 3% drop that brought total enrollment back to 2009 levels, according to the 2022 edition of the annual "Condition of Education" analysis by the National Center for Education Statistics. Though enrollment increased in some states and some grade levels, this was still the biggest drop in enrollment since World War II, when the decline primarily impacted high schools. Here's a breakdown of some of 2009-to-2020 trends:

- From 2019 to 2020, enrollment rates of young children fell by 6 percentage points for 5-year-olds (from 91% to 84%) and by 13 percentage points for 3- to 4-year-olds (from 54% to 40%).
- Enrollment in pre-K through grade 8 increased by 3% (from 34.4 million to 35.6 million) from fall 2019 to 2020 and then dropped 4% to 34.1 million students in fall 2020.
- Enrollment in grades 9 through 12 increased 2% between fall 2009 (15.0 million) and fall 2019 (15.2 million) and continued to increase in fall 2020 to 15.3 million.

The report examined several other aspects of K-12 education, such as rates of violence. The number of school shootings surged to 146 in 2021 from 114 in 2020. The number of shootings where deaths occurred also increased, to 43 from 27.

"Considering last week's tragedy in Uvalde, Texas, this data also shines a light on a dark truth—the growing prevalence of gun violence in our schools," U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said in a statement on the shooting statistics. "I am ashamed that we as a country are becoming desensitized to these horrific tragedies. The time for thoughts and prayers alone is over. We need legislative action."

The report also examined homeschooling as a "spotlight indicator" of the state of U.S. education. The Household Pulse Survey portion of the report found that nearly 7% of adults reported homeschooling at least one child in 2020–21, with the percentage highest among white and Hispanic Americans.

Enrollment slide ahead

Enrollment is projected to fall further by about 4% through 2030 as the school-aged population is expected to keep shrinking. Whereas half of U.S. states actually saw increases from 2009 to 2020, the future declines will be far more widespread, the analysis found. Enrollment in pre-K through grade 8 is projected to decrease by 5% with high school enrollment falling by 2%.

Here's a state-by-state look at the 2030 projections, from the biggest expected declines to the largest gains.

By Matt Zalaznick

2030 Projections

1. West Virginia: -20%
2. Mississippi: -18%
3. New Mexico: -17%
4. New Hampshire: -14%
5. California: -11%
6. Missouri: -10%
7. Hawaii: -10%
8. Vermont: -9%
9. Kansas: -9%
10. New York: -8%
11. Colorado: -7%
12. Michigan: -7%
13. Georgia: -7%
14. Oregon: -7%
15. Connecticut: -7%
16. Montana: -6%
17. Rhode Island: -6%
18. Maine: -6%
19. Wisconsin: -6%
20. Virginia: -6%
21. Washington: -5%
22. Kentucky: -5%
23. New Jersey: -5%
24. Illinois: -5%
25. Pennsylvania: -5%
26. Massachusetts: -5%
27. Wyoming: -4%
28. Louisiana: -3%
29. Florida: -3%
30. Ohio: -3%
31. Maryland: -3%
32. Indiana: -2%
33. Nevada: -1%
34. Texas: -1%
35. Alaska: -1%
36. Delaware: 0%
37. Oklahoma: 0%
38. Iowa: 0%
39. Arkansas: 0%
40. South Carolina: +1%
41. North Carolina: +1%
42. Alabama: +1%
43. Idaho: +1%
44. Nebraska: +1%
45. Arizona: +3%
46. Minnesota: +4%
47. South Dakota: +4%
48. Tennessee: +5%
49. Washington, D.C.: +5%
50. North Dakota: +7%
51. Utah: +9%

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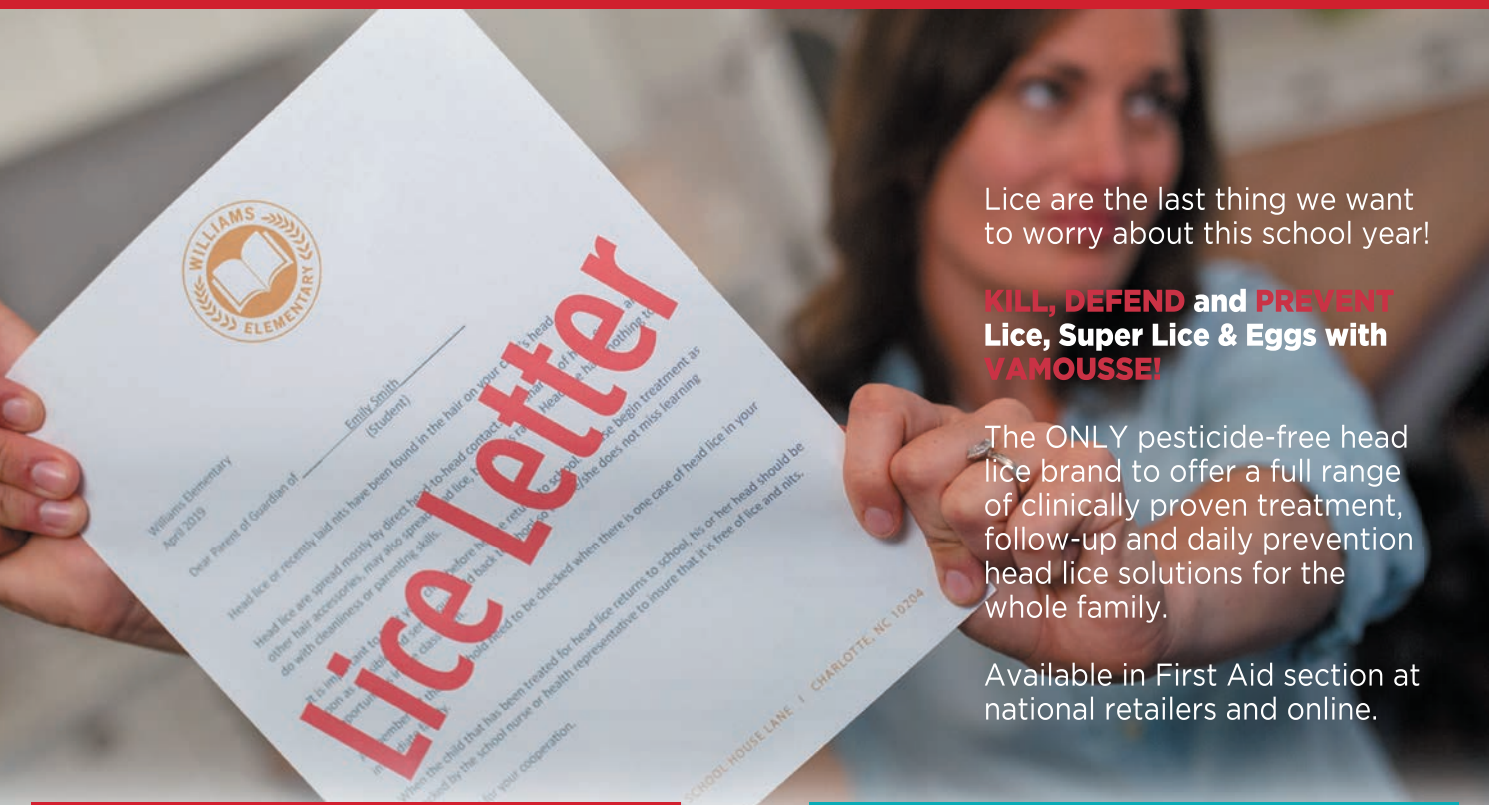

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[1] Clinical trial conducted at Lice Source Services, Plantation, FL, Dec. 2015 [2]As shown in lab studies

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Meet the Team of K-12 Leaders Who Help Guide Schools after Each Shooting

The Principal Recovery Network comprises current and former administrators who've experienced a school shooting.

Every time there is another school shooting, administrators whose buildings have suffered past attacks are forced to relive the worst day of their lives. For George Roberts, that was the first day of school in August 2012, when a student with a double-barreled shotgun shot another student in the back in the cafeteria of Perry Hall High School Baltimore County, Maryland. The attack ended when the shooter, after firing two shots, was pinned to a vending machine by a teacher. The victim spent three months in the hospital, says Roberts, who was the school's principal at the time.

Each time another school community is devastated, Roberts' says his first emotion is anger. "Anger that it continues to happen, anger that as a country we don't seem to be making strides to stem this, anger at the easy availability of weapons," says Roberts, who is now an administrator in organizational development and leadership for Baltimore County Public Schools. "Then I go into support mode."

Roberts offers that support as a member of the Principal Recovery Network (PRN), a team of current and former school leaders assembled by the National Association of Secondary School Principals to help guide building leaders in the immediate aftermath of shootings or other violence. "I go from anger to that sadness I felt 10 years ago, that I'm feeling for the community that is going through it now," Roberts says.

Members of the network will reach out to a principal shortly after a shooting occurs to tell them what to expect (a lot of calls from the media) and help with decision-making (when to reopen school) in the days and weeks that follow the "most severe thing a school community can go through," Roberts says. Members of the network first ask the principals how they are doing emotionally because communities will need strong leadership to cope with grief and anxiety. Principals are encouraged to lean on friends and family for support and seek counseling if necessary.

"A school may not be accessible because it's a crime scene," Robert says. "So decisions have to be made about how to educate children while it's a crime scene, how to reopen, or how to reopen in an alternate location."

Administrators are then encouraged to prioritize support for students and staff who were closest to the attack, such as those who may have had to barricade themselves in a classroom or closet. These individuals may have escaped physical injuries but they have likely suffered psychological damage, Roberts says.

Who do students trust?

Any number of things can trigger students and staff to relive the trauma of surviving a school shooting. Everything from the sound of a starting pistol at a track meet to the smell of the food that was being served the day of the shooting can reignite the panic, says Michael Sedlak, a Recovery Network member who was the assistant principal at Chardon High School in Ohio in 2012 when three students were killed, was paralyzed and two more were wounded by a former student who attacked the cafeteria with a handgun.

"The advice I give to school leaders is to talk to the students, the staff and the community to find out what they

need, and make decisions based on that," says Sedlak, who is now a unit principal at Hudson High School in Ohio's Hudson City School District. "If you're thinking of doing something for the students, run it by the students first."

Having mental health counselors in the building and training teachers in trauma care will help when something triggers an adverse reaction in a student or staff member. Principals should also try to have substitutes ready at a moment's notice if a teacher is struggling and has to step away from their classroom. "There's so much to think about, I would recommend administrators not do it alone," he says. "Use students and a staff as a resource."

Back in 2012 in Baltimore County, Roberts received support from a former Tennessee principal who had experienced a school shooting a year before the attack on Columbine High School. Roberts gathered student leaders after the Perry Hall shooting to discuss what to do for the victims and how the school could move forward. That group decided to let the hundreds of students who were in the cafeteria at the time of the shooting paint a large mural on one of the walls. The mural is still there today, he adds.

The school also implemented a student ID system and check-ins for visitors when both of those practices were far less common than they are now. All school resources officers were given access to hand-held metal detectors to use when they suspected a student might be carrying a weapon. One of the most important steps he says he and his team took was to expand their student climate survey with a question about whether there was an adult in the building each student trusted. They also made a point of asking the same question face-to-face.

"Most school shooters will tell somebody what their plans are, not in full detail but they'll give strong suggestions or hints," Roberts says. "My shooter told two friends about his plan. So we tell students if they see it, say it. They will see it and say it if they trust who they're saying it to."

Therapy dogs were brought into Sedlak's school to help students process their emotions after the shooting. These kinds of activities can rebuild a sense of comfort in the building. "The goal is to create new, positive memories in a spot where something tragic happened," he says. "The tragic event will have always happened there, but it's about the other new great things that can also happen there."

By Matt Zalaznick

By Matt Zalaznick

Superintendents Wanted

It's not just teachers—districts are also struggling to find new superintendents.

There are fewer candidates for superintendent and more open positions at the top than ever before, resulting in a leadership void as schools try to bounce back from years of disruptions, leaders say.

The twin pressures of the pandemic and sharp political divisiveness are among the key reasons veterans and less experienced leaders alike are choosing to abandon their posts, creating "as tight a labor market as I have ever witnessed," says Paul Gausman, who is taking over as superintendent of Lincoln Public Schools in Nebraska after leading Sioux City Community Schools in Iowa for 14 years.

"This is a tricky time in education," Gausman says. "The service to students has become more politicized, and many boards have shown the same political divisiveness that we see in the rest of the country."

During his own recent transition, he found there were hundreds more positions open this hiring season and fewer applicants for each central office vacancy. To stem the exodus, superintendents and school boards who may not always see eye-to-eye will have to find ways to work together to serve their students and communities, says Gausman, who is also president of the Urban Superintendents Association of America and has been involved in superintendent searches as a consultant for over 15 years.

To rebuild the pool of candidates for superintendent, mindsets have to change, Gausman says. "Education will be impacted for many years as a result of the challenges of the politicization of education, the pandemic, and the divisiveness in our country," he says. "We will eventually have to get back to the position of placing greater value on educators and educational leaders to entice more into the labor market."

Great time to grow your own

The depleted pool of candidates could be a sign of the new normal, considering fewer students are graduating college with education degrees. That means the administrator pipeline is not being replenished, says Brian Jordan, executive director of the Kansas Association of School Boards. That's one of the reasons that Jordan is urging district leaders and school boards to focus much more heavily on succession planning when it comes to replacing superintendents.

"You have to identify leaders within your system that display the quality and characteristics that would be a good fit for superintendent," says Jordan, who often advises school boards that are conducting superintendent searches. "You can't do that overnight. You have to think two years down the road."

Jordan's organization has partnered with the state's superintendents association to launch the Western Kansas Leadership Academy. The year-long program will prepare cohorts of administrators to navigate the superintendency licensing process and adjust to serving at the will

of elected boards of education. Districts in rural areas are having the added challenge of attracting candidates to schools and communities that are likely less well-resourced.

"If you take a candidate who has never experienced a rural school district vs. an urban district, they can go through some culture shock when they have to drive 60 miles to the nearest Wal-Mart," Jordan says

Leading a district through the pandemic was a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" job for K-12 leaders, says Dan Domenech, executive director of AASA, The School Superintendents Association. Shifting to remote instruction and following mask mandates angered one group of parents while other families were upset by what they saw as too-early returns to in-person instruction. Those conflicts were then followed by fights over vaccinations, critical race theory and diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

This hostile environment will leave some school boards with no choice but to hire candidates who may have been far from their first choice, Domenech says.

It's creating an "alarming drain on leadership," he says.

"Superintendent is the highest-paying and most prestigious position in K-12 and there will always be individuals willing to take the job," Domenech says. "But they'll be stepping into a position that's the most challenging it's ever been with no practical experience,"

Closing the superintendency gender gap

The fact that more female superintendents have been hired in recent years does not tell the whole story, says Terri Bresnahan, who in 2021 became the first female superintendent at Community Consolidated School District 59 after leading another Chicago-area district for six years.

"Nationally, we are seeing an increase in the number of female superintendents," says Bresnahan, who is also president of the Suburban Superintendents Association. "However, we are still grossly underrepresented in this role."

What progress has been made is a result, in part, of leadership organizations creating professional learning programs and networking events specifically for female educators holding or aspiring to the role. Executive search firms have also been providing school boards with more diverse candidates.

Bresnahan encourages female educators to build a diverse support network of superintendents and leaders who can provide mentoring and guidance and share opportunities for growth. Female educators should also not let a failed first attempt at earning a superintendency discourage them from reaching their goals. "Most importantly, I believe it is females supporting other females to pursue these positions and to break glass ceilings where they currently exist," Bresnahan says. "It is important for me to serve as a role model for other districts who have yet to break the cycle of only males in this role."

> "Superintendent is the highest-paying and most prestigious position in K-12 and there will always be individuals willing to take the job. But they'll be stepping into a position that's the most challenging it's ever been with no practical experience."
>
> – Dan Domenech, executive director of AASA

There is some evidence that female leaders are now losing ground after years of slow but steady gains. Between March 2020 and March 2022, 40% of the nation's largest school districts experienced a turnover of their superintendent. Some 70% of those systems filled the post with a man, according to data compiled by the ILO Group, an equity-focused education consultancy and executive search firm. And just since July 1, 2021, 16 of the 17 new superintendents hired by those districts are men.

"I don't see progress—I actually see a lot of newly concerning trends," says Julia Rafal-Baer, the ILO Group's co-founder and managing partner. The firm's data also shows that when females leave the superintendency, they are being replaced by men about 75% of the time. However, trends vary across the country: In the Northeast, for instance, 43% of superintendents are women while only about a quarter of superintendents in the Southeast are female.

The gender imbalance is also clearly evident in women's experiences on the pathway to the top role. The route to the superintendency runs through posts such as high school principal and then to deputy superintendent or chief operating officer. Female administrators, however, are more likely to become curriculum directors or elementary school principals, the latter of which is much less externally focused than their high school counterparts, Rafal-Baer says.

Also, women are more likely to be hired as a superintendent when they are internal candidates, especially when they've served as the interim superintendent. "Women have to be in that role and knock it out of the park in order to be promoted into the top role vs. men who are able to come in from outside at a higher rate and get that job," she says. "That's important for us to know when looking at this issue and what to do about it, particularly around bias and what happens during the decision-making process."

There's almost a bright spot at the state level. More women than men hold state superintendents' posts and that would be a sign of progress except for a few other factors, one of which is that women are far more likely to be elected than appointed to the position. Elected state superintendents earn 40% less than the appointed officials. "Women comprise the majority of state-level leaders but they're not being paid the same as men," Rafal-Baer says. "That is not acceptable." DA

Matt Zalaznick is District Administration*'s senior writer.*

Blended Reading Platform Supports Diversity, Equity, and Choice

San Jose Charter Academy Enhances Literacy Instruction Using Scholastic Literacy Pro®

For the San Jose Charter Academy (SJCA) in Southern California, an effort to enrich literacy instruction through culturally diverse books, combined with the need to pivot and adapt during the pandemic, led administrators to implement a new blended reading platform that is making a difference for students. The school serves just over 1,250 TK–8 students and includes 59 teachers; it's unique in design and organizational structure, being divided into three smaller academies of primary (grades TK–2), elementary (3–5), and junior (6–8).

Technology, equity, and diversity

Erin Shiroma has been principal since 2016. Shiroma highlights certain important initiatives that the school had undertaken that enabled SJCA to quickly adapt to the pandemic in March 2020. "Equitable access to technology has always been one of our top priorities, as part of our mission to create 21st-century learners who are ready for college and career," she says. "As part of that mission, we had gone one-to-one with iPads and laptops for all our students, which enabled us to quickly pivot to a remote teaching and learning environment during the pandemic."

At the same time, the academy had been promoting equity and diversity in its literacy tools and materials. "Prior to the pandemic, we had been investing in culturally rich and diverse books that reflected the diversity of our community to use in literacy instruction. We also wanted to emphasize choice and provide enough books that we could empower students to choose books they identify with or are interested in," Shiroma says. "The remote environment of the pandemic presented a challenge, because students couldn't access any of these books in person. So, the next step was exploring digital resources that could also provide a diversity of books to students from their devices. That led us to Literacy Pro from Scholastic."

> **"I've had teachers thank us for implementing Literacy Pro because it is making a difference in how their students are growing as readers."**

Creating continuity between school, home, and grade levels

Literacy Pro is a reading management solution that provides access to a library of over 2,700 ebooks for students in grades K–8, comprehension checks for thousands of books, assessments, and many additional resources for teachers and families. The platform curates a personalized bookshelf for each student, using a reading recommendation engine that works in partnership with teachers to drive students toward books that are aligned with their interests, grade, and independent reading level. As a browser-based program, Literacy Pro is accessible on multiple operating systems and devices, and is available to access in school or at home.

Michelle Ruiz is literacy and data coordinator for the academy. "Literacy Pro caught my attention because it offered the opportunity to provide a lot more books to our students and to help develop their independent reading skills," she says. "And it was the right choice at the right time, because we could use it in a remote learning environment, but also continue to use it when we came back to in-person learning," she continues, noting that the program met their needs far beyond dealing with the circumstances of the pandemic. "Our students commonly access Literacy Pro to

read at home, in addition to their time in school during reading blocks. That is so important for equity, because not everyone has access to a library or can afford many books."

In addition, Shiroma says the program offered continuity. "A significant selling point for us was that our students could use the same reading platform from kindergarten through grade 8, and not have to get familiar with something different every year," she says.

Tracking data for both print and digital reading

Ruiz also highlights the importance of data and reporting in the program. "The program provides a variety of usage data that helps us understand and assess reading proficiency," she says. "We can see which students are using Literacy Pro, what they are reading, how many minutes they are reading, and how they are responding. It's very informative. That also resonated with us because we're very data driven as a school."

As a blended reading platform, Literacy Pro's dual reading log automatically captures the time students spend reading digital texts, while encouraging them to enter in the time they spend reading print texts. Matty Cuevas, a fifth-grade teacher and the elementary social studies coordinator for SJCA, says this feature has been very beneficial. "Prior to Literacy Pro, students didn't log their minutes," she says. "So we did not know how much they were reading. It is amazing for us and the students to see how their minutes add up." As of June 2022, the 137 fifth graders at SJCA tracked over 130,000 independent reading minutes, two thirds of which were devoted to digital and one third to print, for the current school year.

Variety of genres and reading levels

Mary Spickler, assistant principal of curriculum and instruction, says the usefulness of Literacy Pro extends beyond literacy instruction. "Students are making connections to other subjects while they're reading, because they may recognize a person or topic they are studying in science or history class, for example. It's like a portal into more information about what they're studying. Teachers in many different subjects will note in a project or assignment where students can find more information about that topic in Literacy Pro, so it is useful in other classes, not just for reading and literacy."

Spickler also notes that the variety of reading levels is an important aspect of the program. "We have appreciated how Literacy Pro includes books with so many levels of reading difficulty. That makes it helpful for struggling readers, but also offers books for our high-achieving readers, and everyone in between," she says. "Students can access books at whichever level they need and use them throughout the day. That is very powerful."

Helping to develop ownership

"We want to develop curiosity in our students and enable them to pursue their interests and take more ownership of their learning," Shiroma says. "Literacy Pro helps us give our students choices and flexibility, as well as access to some of their own data about how many minutes they've been reading and what our goals for them are, which helps students develop more of that ownership that we want them to have."

Looking to the future, Ruiz says the academy plans to expand its use of the program. "I want to help our teachers in all subjects understand how to incorporate and recommend more books from Literacy Pro into their classes," she says. "I also want to learn more about how to use all the data it provides to better inform our decisions."

"I've had teachers thank us for implementing Literacy Pro because it is making a difference in how their students are growing as readers."

To learn more about Scholastic Literacy Pro, go to **scholastic.com/literacypro.**

ESSER ANGST

Experts say it's unlikely districts will have to return COVID relief funding, unless leaders aren't making plans.

By Matt Zalaznick

Is there really a chance that schools won't spend all their ESSER funds? Most experts are *not* sounding that alarm—not yet, at least.

Some media reports have raised concerns about districts missing deadlines and having to return vital COVID relief funds. One reason may be that districts spent the first two rounds of ESSER funding quickly on immediate needs such as laptops, Wi-Fi hotspots, PPE and COVID tests.

Now, more than two years into the pandemic, administrators are being more deliberate and strategic about using American Rescue Plan money on long-term initiatives such as reversing learning loss and renovating buildings, says Elleka Yost, director of advocacy at ASBO International, the association for school finance leaders.

"It's not always in the best interest to spend the funds immediately," Yost says. "When you're trying to assess community needs, when you're trying to do research on what are the evidence-based and effective tutoring and academic recovery programs, those are things you don't want districts spending willy-nilly on without doing their homework."

By now, districts should have spent most of their ESSER I and II funds. What *should* cause concern if a district has not yet made its ARP spending plan even though the deadline is not until 2024, Yost adds. Also, the initiatives many administrators have in mind for their ARP funds are longer-term—in other words, salaries for new staff to tackle learning loss aren't paid all at once. This could make it appear that districts are dragging their feet on spending.

Some deadlines are already being extended for districts facing extenuating circumstances, such as supply shortages on construction projects, Yost says.

ASBO encourages school leaders to spend on initiatives that don't incur long-term commitments. Paying staff bonuses for hard work done during the pandemic will put less pressure on finances than permanent salary increases. Administrators can also prioritize investments that are more likely to receive local, state or federal funding once the ARP funds run out. "To make a lasting difference, this has to be a partnership between districts, states and the federal government," she says. "These one-time funds are extremely helpful for responding to a crisis but they're not enough to make up for years of underinvestment in education."

Funding after ESSER

School leaders are, of course, required to share their ESSER spending plans with the public. And some districts, such as Houston ISD, have been praised for creating online dashboards that are extensive and user-friendly. The district's new superintendent, Millard House II, was determined to show taxpayers that the $1.1 billion of ESSER funds Houston ISD received were being spent equitably and strategically, says August Hamilton, a special assistant to the superintendent.

Houston ISD is a decentralized district, which means funds are distributed to schools where principals have a great deal of autonomy over how the money is spent. The central office distributes funds based on a host of risk factors, such as student performance, absenteeism, teen birth rates and the community's average level of educational attainment.

Now, the district is closely tracking ESSER spending, which is focused on accelerating learning and student safety. Administrators are holding weekly monitoring meetings as they, like every other school district, grapple with tangled supply chains and labor pressures. "This is the largest investment in public education that we may ever see and having transparency is important for taxpayers to know they can trust the school district," Hamilton says.

Many other large districts are planning to invest ARP funding in staff, including counselors, tutors and overtime for teachers, says Bree Dusseault, princi-

pal and managing director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, a think tank and research organization at Arizona State University. But this could also delay spending as districts grapple with a shortage of candidates.

It has been difficult to track ESSER spending on a national scale as not all systems have been as transparent as leaders in districts such as Houston ISD, Baltimore City Public Schools and Indianapolis Public Schools. This lack of transparency could make it harder for districts to get support for future funding requests. "The common narrative around schools is that they're underfunded," Dusseault says. "Now, they have access to an unprecedented amount of funds, and how well they steward these funds can dictate whether they get this kind of opportunity again."

Still time to pivot

Most districts are using the funds to accelerate learning through tutoring, extended days and after-school and summer programs. But because of canceled and postponed assessments, some schools are only now recognizing the full scope of the learning loss that has occurred over the past three years. This slow reckoning has also delayed ESSER spending, says Jessica Swanson, a senior fellow at the Edunomics Lab, a research center focused on K-12 finances.

"The good news is that there is still time to pivot on plans as districts get a better handle on student needs and what has and hasn't worked," Swanson says.

Her organization, which maintains its own ESSER Expenditure Tracker, would like to see more districts sharing data on the impact of initiatives funded by the first two rounds of ESSER. Districts could also be providing more updates as they adjust their recovery plans. Establishing—and publicizing—goals for attendance, graduation rates and other key indicators would also give stakeholders a clearer idea that funds are being spent effectively, says Swanson.

The overarching reason for the slow rate of spending may well be that extended school days, tutoring and other recovery initiatives have never been attempted on such a wide scale, says Dan Goldhaber, director of the education-focused CALDER Center at the American Institutes for Research. "It's probably a lot more difficult to get the money out the door and spent than people thought, given the scale of what we're trying to accomplish," Goldhaber says. "I'm not sure how much money has been spent. I'm not sure anybody knows how much money has been spent."

Despite the longer timeline, educators still need to operate with a sense of urgency to move students back to pre-pandemic levels of academic achievement. "The hole most kids are in academically, it's a pretty deep hole," Goldhaber says. "I'm a little bit worried that schools may not be conveying that to families and parents with as much urgency as they should." **DA**

Matt Zalaznick is District Administration*'s senior writer.*

How 3 ed-tech leaders will help their districts avoid the ESSER fiscal cliff

Ashley Cowger, the executive director of strategy and integration, Indianapolis Public Schools

Cowger is scrutinizing every dollar the district spends on technology through a process called "zero-dollar budgeting." She literally starts from scratch every year and ensures there is funding for every expense.

She's projected spending for the next five years and beyond to sustain the costs of going 1-to-1.

She boosted cybersecurity, adding AI programs that can spot threats and attacks earlier.

She saved millions by discontinuing academic software that wasn't being used and implementing strict spending standards that require review and approval of all purchase requests.

Don Wolff, chief technology officer, Portland Public Schools (Ore.)

Wolff has been working with the district's chief financial officer and academic leaders to determine how to sustain initiatives launched during and prior to the pandemic.

Wolff and the CIO are exploring new funding streams because even with ESSER and a $1.2 billion bond passed in 2020, Portland Public Schools will have to make adjustments when COVID relief expires.

Collaboration only works if all administrators "open up their sphere of influence" and share information and data, Wolff says.

Kenneth Thompson, chief information technology officer, San Antonio ISD

ESSER funding has been dedicated to iPads and Chromebooks and peripherals.

Thompson is hoping to get approval to use ESSER funds to help the district build out its own LTE network to bring the internet to more students' homes.

The district has been providing student devices for free but after having gone 1-to-1, Thompson is seeking approval to impose a small maintenance fee to cover lost power cords and repairs such as damaged screens.

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

WHY THE 'BURNOUT GAP' BETWEEN K-12 EDUCATORS AND THE REST OF THE AMERICAN WORKFORCE IS GROWING.

BY MATT ZALAZNICK

Nearly half of school workers reported feeling "always" or "very often" burned out at work. If that sounds like a high level of frustration, it is—and it's the highest among professionals in all other industries in the U.S., a new Gallup poll shows.

Educators have consistently been among the most burned-out professionals in past surveys but, not surprisingly, the exhaustion worsened during the pandemic. And the gap between the levels of burnout among K-12 workers and other professionals has widened, according to the Gallup poll of more than 12,000 full-time employees that included 1,200 educators. The new challenges of the pandemic—school openings and closures; parent and community-member frustrations with school pandemic responses; and students' increasing social-emotional problems—are likely driving this disparity, the pollsters concluded.

Teachers are the most burned out, at a rate of 52%. And female teachers are even wearier, at a rate of 55% compared to 44% of their male colleagues. While this gender gap holds across the workforce, male educators are significantly more burned out than men in other industries. It's all adding up to a substantial number of educators leaving the profession, the poll says.

"In addition to the well-known problems caused by COVID-19, a growing number of states are navigating complicated political environments related to K-12 curriculum," the poll notes. "And educators are experiencing the impact of that in conversations and interactions with parents and families."

Back when the pandemic first began in 2020, 36% of K-12 workers reported feeling burned out, which was eight percentage points higher than all other workers. This latest poll, conducted in February, revealed a 14-point difference.

PROPELLING PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

Principals should use the summer to reaffirm their school's goals and vision after a few turbulent years. Summer is also the ideal time for principals and other school leaders to reset and focus on self-care, says Angela Allen, the incoming superintendent of the Toutle Lake School District in Washington.

"We've spent so much time focusing on the logistics of managing school, we've gotten away from what our values are and getting those back to the forefront for teachers," says Allen, who is wrapping up a stint as the director of secondary instruction of Battle Ground Public Schools, also in Washington. "We also have to look at climate and culture and how to get back to the fun, togetherness and relationship-building of school."

Principals should now be planning team-building activities to hold with staff before school begins and during the new school year. That includes shared meals and "meaning-making" conversations that reaffirm a school or district's mission statements and slogans. But perhaps the most

The Vital Importance of Social-Emotional Learning


Dr. Miriam Ortiz

Dr. Miriam Ortiz obtained her Ph.D. in education and human development from Southern Methodist University in 2017 with a focus on Special Education and Response to Intervention. She is passionate about improving academic outcomes for children with or at-risk for disabilities, as well as teacher training and professional development, and assisting struggling readers of all ages.

How would you define mental health and social-emotional learning (SEL)?
Mental health encompasses an individual's well-being emotionally, psychologically, and socially. Not only does it impact our feelings, but also how we relate to others, handle stress, and make choices. Mental health is impacted by biological factors, life experiences, and family history. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process of developing self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills, including empathy for others, establishing and maintaining supportive relationships, and making responsible decisions that are vital for success in school, work, and life.

Why are SEL skills important to incorporate in school districts?
SEL gives students the tools to cultivate and maintain critical skills for personal well-being and developing healthy interpersonal relationships. There is a growing body of research supporting the implementation of SEL in schools. Middle school students who participated in SEL programming were statistically significantly less likely to be involved in physical aggression and bullying (Espelage, Low, Polanin & Brown 2013).

Additionally, a 2017 meta-analysis of SEL interventions found that students within districts and schools who implemented SEL programs demonstrated better well-being that was maintained post intervention (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak & Weissberg 2017). Furthermore, the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies of Education at Columbia University found that the return on investment significantly outweighed the cost of implementing SEL programs. SEL can also be used as a tool for promoting equity and disrupting inequitable policies and practices. When approached through an equity lens, SEL can help develop knowledge, beliefs, and practices that improve outcomes for all students.

What kind of systematic support do you recommend districts provide?
In order for districts to be successful in the implementation of SEL—policies, resources, and actions need to be aligned. It is important that districts provide SEL programming that is supported by research and evidence. Just as with any other intervention, a specific time needs to be set apart for providing SEL programming. Additionally, school staff need to receive ongoing professional development and coaching to continue to implement programming with efficacy.

What can school districts do to help families better understand SEL?
Communication is key to helping families understand SEL. Specific strategies may include sending home literature and resources, conducting workshops for parents on understanding and implementing SEL, and sharing success stories of the impact of SEL with families. A survey conducted by the Committee for Children found that parents who are aware of the implementation of SEL programs at their child's school "overwhelmingly want them to continue" (Committee for Children 2022).

How can school districts partner with families and communities?
It is vital that districts communicate the importance and impact of SEL to families and the community and provide opportunities to collaborate in providing SEL instruction. SEL instruction has been shown to result in lower rates of anxiety, depression, and risky behavior. These skills also continue to benefit students in college and later careers.

How are SEL and literacy connected?
As of 2019, only 30 to 40 percent of fourth-graders in the United States were proficient in reading (National Institute for Literacy). It is critical that we take intentional steps to remedy this literacy crisis. Research shows that schools and districts that implement SEL programs have statistically significantly higher academic gains compared to those that do not. Implementing SEL programming helps facilitate a nurturing learning environment where teachers can focus on academic instruction rather than managing behavior. Furthermore, students who have a better sense of self-worth and a growth mindset (which are emphasized in SEL instruction) are more likely to take academic risks and be more engaged in learning.

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important work principals and other administrators can do is to take some time off for themselves. "Good leaders are well-prepared and well-rested—they are the support system for their entire building," Allen says. "As leaders, we tend to be giving all of the time, to everyone who comes to us—parents, teachers, students. You need to shut down and care for yourself."

Filling vacant teaching positions is Principal Brian Cox's priority this summer at Johnson Junior High in Wyoming's Laramie County School District 1. At the beginning of June, Cox said he had no applicants for six open positions. "That's the big barrier we're troubleshooting," Cox says. "The experience of the last two years pushed a lot of folks out of the profession, and the shortage of folks entering over the last 10 years has finally hit a tipping point."

Staffing in the coming years will require having some backup plans and remaining flexible. Three teachers left Johnson's school in the middle of the year, leaving a 7th-grade English classroom vacant for three months. With no one applying for the job, even from the local university, Johnson and his team had to look a little harder until they found that one of the school's social studies teachers was certified to teach English. Then, an academic interventionist with a degree in history was transferred into social studies. Cox is also working with the state to grant provisional licenses to potential teachers who have degrees in relevant fields, such as psychology or other life sciences.

To help get instruction and learning off to a quicker start, Cox surveys teachers over the summer about what motivates each student and what might trigger traumatic responses. He combines that feedback with academic and assessment data and uses the school's master schedule to help teachers get a jump on classroom management for the coming year. "I can furnish every single teacher on day one with an itemized student-by-student, period-by-period breakdown of what they're going to walk into," Cox says. "This isn't used to pre-judge kids, and it's been very helpful in advancing achievement scores and making teachers feel more comfortable."

A QUESTION OF CONDITIONS

Well-being is especially poor among Hispanic, female and mid-career teachers, according to the latest educator survey by the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit research organization.

Public school teachers, principals and working adults were asked about five aspects of well-being: frequent job-related stress, ability to cope with job-related stress, burnout, symptoms of depression, and resilience to stressful events. Among the educators surveyed:

- Nearly half of the teachers said supporting students' academic achievement was the top source of stress.
- Two-thirds of the teachers reported taking on extra responsibilities during staff shortages caused by COVID—such as covering classes or bringing additional students into their classrooms.
- For principals, staffing was the leading cause of anxiety.

Another troubling finding is that, among educators of color, more than one-third of teachers and nearly half of the principals reported experiencing discrimination. The most common sources were fellow staff and students' family members. The types of discrimination reported included educators of color being mistaken for foreigners, held to different standards and expectations, singled out for certain tasks because of their race, and harassed in-person or online. Teachers of color were also more likely than white teachers to report struggling with depression.

"Teachers told us that their dedication to working with students kept them in their jobs, even though pandemic conditions have made teaching more challenging," said Elizabeth D. Steiner, lead author of the report and a policy researcher at RAND. "Teaching conditions—not the work of teaching itself—are what they find to be stressful."

Access to district-provided mental health care reduces stress and increases resilience for principals and teachers. But about one-fifth of principals and 35% of teachers said that they do not have access to such support or weren't aware if it was offered. And others in the survey did not find the existing services worthwhile. DA

WHY THEY MIGHT STAY

Many educators surveyed say they are finding joy in their work and managing stress. In the RAND Corporation survey, they ranked the reasons they would stay in their jobs. For teachers, those reasons were:

1. **More pay**
2. **Spending less time on non-teaching duties**
3. **Smaller class sizes**
4. **Working fewer hours per week**

For principals:

1. **Spending more time on instructional leadership activities**
2. **Working fewer hours per week**
3. **Hiring more teachers, teaching assistants, paraprofessionals and counselors**
4. **More pay**
5. **More support, such as coaching, mentoring and professional development**
6. **More decision-making authority (e.g., fewer district or state directives)**
7. **Less interference from national political issues**

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5 Key Elements to Consider as You Update & Enhance Your School Safety Plans

With back-to-school quickly approaching, administrators and communities must come together to focus on solving the complex and multifaceted issue of school safety.

By JP Guilbault

Keeping your staff and students safe is the first step in creating a positive learning environment, but the ever-changing landscape of threats and hazards, as well as the complexities of government regulations, can make developing an all-encompassing school safety plan an overwhelming task for any district leader.

In addition to current societal and continued post-pandemic impacts from the last two years, we've now encountered a particularly tragic increase in aggression, self-harm and violence – with more than two dozen school shootings in the first 6 months of 2022 alone – resulting in staff and students feeling concerned for, and even fearful for, their own personal safety and wellbeing.

As we enter this next school year, we must remember that students can't reach their full academic potential unless they feel safe and supported. Their basic needs – including physical, social and emotional safety – must be met before they are mentally equipped to pursue academic learning.

Whole-Child Safety Takes the Whole Community

School safety is complex and multifaceted and unfortunately, there is no one-size-fits-all answer.

Schools need holistic, comprehensive and integrated solutions focused on the whole child and the communities that surround them. With a framework, or ecosystem, in place, K-12 schools are in a much better position to promote the long-term development and success of children.

Here are **5 key elements to consider as you update and enhance your school safety plans** for this fall:

1. School Culture & Climate – A strong foundation in social-emotional and mental wellness contributes greatly to the quality and character of a school's climate. A positive learning environment fosters favorable student development, as well as the core values and expectations that give rise to feelings of social, emotional and physical safety.

2. Physical & Cyber Safety – To ensure the physical and online safety and security of K-12 schools, a variety of factors must be evaluated regularly – from locks and alarms to cameras and online cyber risks to ongoing assessments of infrastructure for risks associated with weather or other natural disasters. Tools, technology and unbiased, expert knowledge all must be leveraged to gain a deep understanding of how schools are keeping students physically safe.

3. Threat Detection, Assessment & Intervention – Simply put, tips and knowledge lead to prevention. From anonymous reporting to online social listening, technology that captures leakage and spots the early signs of risk are needed. The formation of multidisciplinary threat assessment teams and the application of tools and research built on evidence-based processes to support these teams can help schools detect, assess and apply customized intervention plans that meet the individualized needs of students in crisis.

Team training on an evidence-based model is vital to ensuring a common understanding of processes to follow, as well as proper response and documentation during in-the-moment situations in which individuals pose a threat of harm to themselves or others. This level of fidelity provides peace of mind and greatly reduces liability by increasing schools' standard of care.

4. Emergency Preparedness & Response – Emergency preparedness and response are vital to day-to-day operations, supporting school safety from prevention through reunification and recovery. These are the emergency operation plans, policies and procedures that allow districts to stay compliant, ensuring the training and all-hazards readiness of staff and students for drills and other exercises.

5. Incident Management & Recovery – Safety is not linear. Having and implementing a Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) helps a school begin the long recovery process if needed. Within the days, weeks and months following a critical incident, conversations are certain to circle back to the pillars of support mentioned above, all focused on how to keep those affected feeling physically, socially and emotionally safe while preventing acts of violence from happening again.

We all know that maintaining school safety is a complex, multifaceted and ever-changing initiative that requires diligent effort from everyone who is part of the school community. The good news is that achieving this goal can start with school leaders as you work to develop and implement holistic, dynamic school safety programs that take the whole child into consideration. Nurturing the next generation into happy, healthy adults must begin in our schools, where children have the right to feel safe, supported and able to achieve their full potential and thrive.

JP Guilbault is the chief executive officer of Navigate360 and a father of five. With a passion for helping people and organizations reach their full potential, he leads a purpose-driven vision to build safer tomorrows, create a world absent of fear and violence, and advocate for the advancement of the underserved.

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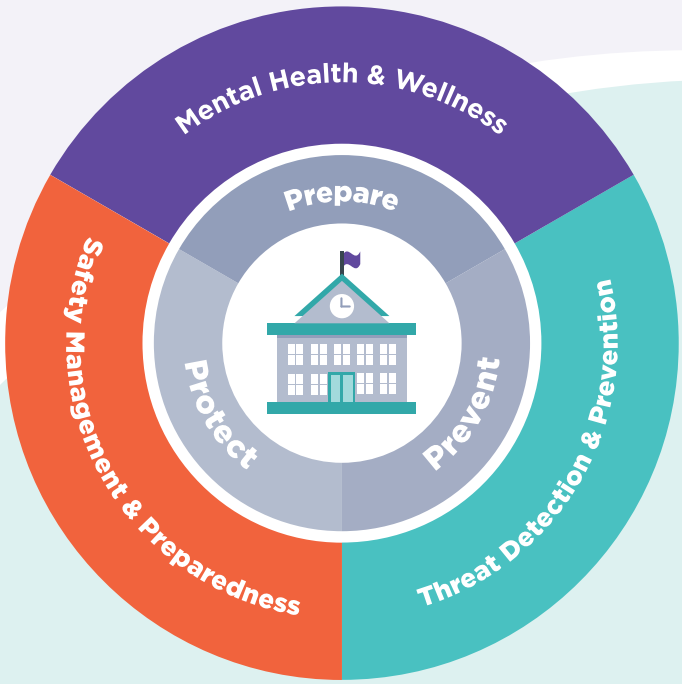

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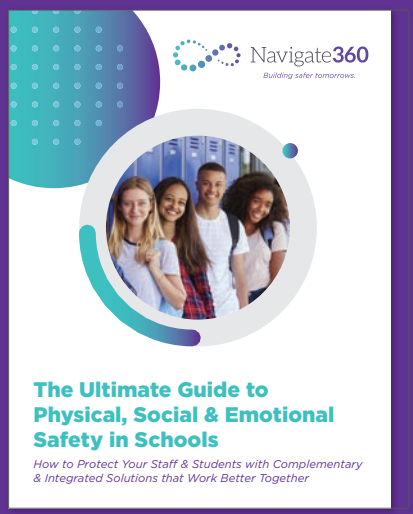

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Why Districts Need to Start Measuring College and Career Readiness Now

Districts can do better to ensure their students are effectively prepared for college and careers by administering readiness feedback surveys as early as middle school.

By Jennifer Coisson. Ph.D.

Research shows that less than half of graduating seniors feel prepared for life after high school. This includes academically, such as writing a paper, as well as non-academically with life skills, such as time management. These feelings of unpreparedness are not uncommon and can have a negative impact when these students go on to college or a full-time job.

Before joining *K12 Insight* as its head of research, I served as an academic coach and advisor at Florida Atlantic University. In that position, I was able to work with first- and second-year students who were on academic probation.

Oftentimes, it wasn't necessarily the course content that they struggled with, but rather things like how to properly take notes; balance school, work, and a social life; or manage their new independence and unstructured schedules.

Looking back and taking what I do now into consideration, I wonder what their experiences would have been like had they had the opportunity to share their feelings on how prepared or unprepared they felt for life after graduation with their K-12 school district.

Many school districts will distribute some form of college and career readiness evaluation or survey to seniors before they graduate. However, districts could be even more proactive in ensuring their students are effectively prepared for 21st-century postsecondary education and careers by administering college and career readiness feedback surveys as early as middle school.

By gaining an understanding of college and career readiness, including at the middle school level, districts can better ensure students have a well-rounded experience that prepares them for life.

When done correctly, college and career readiness surveys offer impactful information about student investment, profiles of graduates, and the overall educational experience. These surveys can provide valuable feedback on how prepared students feel academically—including writing papers, researching topics, or speaking a foreign language. Surveys can also offer up insights on non-academic preparedness—such as interview skills, proper virtual/Internet etiquette, and budgeting finances.

The data collected from such surveys can help districts develop the most effective curriculum and programs that support all students—not just the ones who are headed to college.

Surveying middle and high school students is a cost-effective, student-centered way to collect the data needed to make informed decisions that will help support a successful future for all students. **DA**

Dr. Jennifer Coisson is the Head of Research at K12 Insight. She has extensive experience in education research, including college and career readiness; diversity, equity, and inclusion; employee engagement; school quality; student engagement; strategic planning; and superintendent searches. She earned a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership from Florida Atlantic University, a master's degree in Counselor Education, and a bachelor's degree in Communication, as well as a graduate certificate in Student Affairs and a certification in Appreciative Advising.

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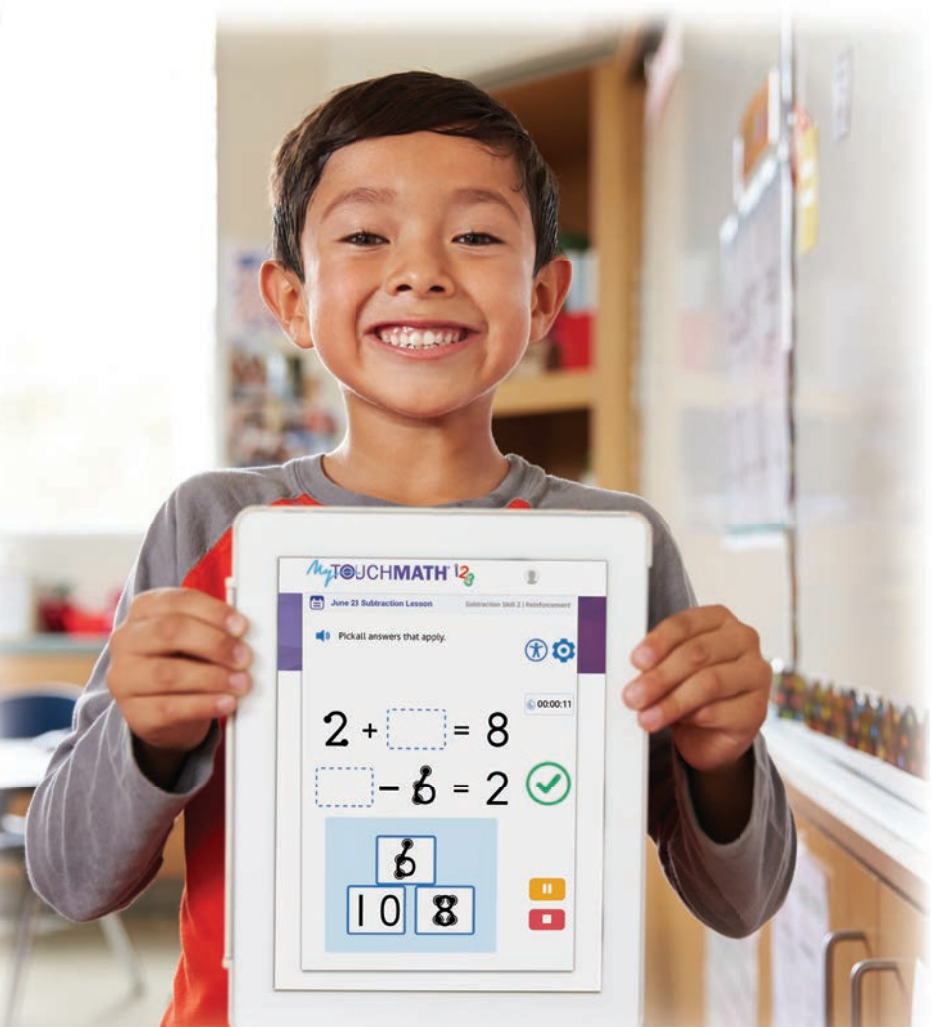

Build Personalized Learning Progressions based on a diagnostic tool that informs educators which key foundational skills need to be improved. The algorithm moves students forward-or back along the visually distinct Skills Rainbow depending on their responses, in an intuitive, meaningful way.

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Bots as Personal Tutors? Yes

AI-enabled tech is the key to delivering personalized learning.

By Ramesh Balan and Dr. Ericka Johnson-Allen

From New Jersey to Texas to California, the pandemic has left our public schools reeling. In addition to lives lost, disengaged students and overall burnout, schools are facing these challenges:

- A significant teacher shortage. According to Learning Counsel Research, we're down by 638,000 teachers—and we already had a shortage before the pandemic.
- A rise in mental health issues. In the 2022 Crisis Communication and Safety in Education Survey, student mental health ranked number 1 among K–12 education professionals' concerns.
- A steady decline of students to private schools, homeschooling, or dropping out. Since the pandemic began, public schools have lost more than 1.2 million students.

But perhaps the biggest challenge our schools face today is learning loss. Earlier this year, Brookings reported that math and reading test scores from 5.4 million students in grades 3 through 8 between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2021 fell significantly, with the gaps between low- and high-poverty elementary students increasing by 20 percent in math and 15 percent in reading.

Severe teacher shortages, limited budgets, exhaustion, and the prohibitive cost of 1:1 tutoring means districts are struggling to meet students' specific learning needs. Teachers lack a dynamic learning delivery solution—not to mention the training—to provide students with high-quality, dynamic learning resources and after-hours support that can free up time for core instruction. It's time for outside-the-box thinking to meet every student's personalized learning needs.

But first, a quick look at why we haven't scaled personalized learning yet.

Why aren't all schools delivering personalized learning?

For starters, the technology isn't smart enough. The offerings are lifeless, with stagnant content and limited (at best) interactivity. Video is better than paper, but it's only one-way. Tech-based solutions like Quizlet, Kahoot, and Nearpod are great at what they do, but they don't go far enough.

We need to develop bots that will be useful for teachers and students at scale. This process has already started, with the Texas Education Agency approving Amira Learning's voice A.I.-powered reading tutor as a state-approved solution to address COVID-19 learning loss. The software uses speech recognition to assess mastery and deliver personalized guided practice. Tutors can use Amira's software for assessment, progress monitoring, and other tasks to try and close skills gaps.

Why not a math, social studies, or science bot? An AP physics bot?

As school districts and state agencies realize the value of having these bots work with children to provide personalized learning support and bridge the gaps—while not overworking our teachers any further—we can begin to move toward desired outcomes while spending much less than hiring an army of tutors.

A vision for a next-generation personalized learning system

We envision bringing to life bots that can handle active learning and understand the district's subject matter, lessons, and activities. It must recognize the context of what is being taught and the stages by which learning develops so that it can see where a student is deficient. Data is the key to this process. We can train the bot with structured information so that it learns to respond to a student asking a question, taking an assessment, provide contextualized feedback, and so on.

Our company, Knomadix, has developed a learning platform that combines artificial intelligence and active learning to deliver personalized instruction and intervention to help maximize student potential. The platform allows state- and district-level curriculum developers, instructional coaches, and teachers to transform static lessons into delivering machine-assisted one-on-one learning support. It also enables publishers and course developers to embed LessonBots into their existing digital courses.

How does this type of technology change the classroom?

With Knomadix, the teacher can use the data to see exactly where students are having difficulties. Imagine having 25 virtual teaching assistants that are collecting real-time data and simultaneously aggregating findings into an easy-to-read dashboard. Virtual bot teaching assistants provide support for students so that teachers can navigate through all the student interactions and see who needs what help, where they need help, and gain deep insights into every student's learning development.

Wouldn't that be a great step in the direction of learning gain? **DA**

Ramesh Balan is founder, chief architect, and CEO of Knomadix. The child of a K–12 educator, Balan has bootstrapped several enterprises and mobile software companies.

Dr. Ericka Johnson-Allen currently serves as superintendent for one of the largest charter networks in Texas and is CEO and founder of Imagine That Consulting, where she engages leaders through professional coaching and transformational experiences.

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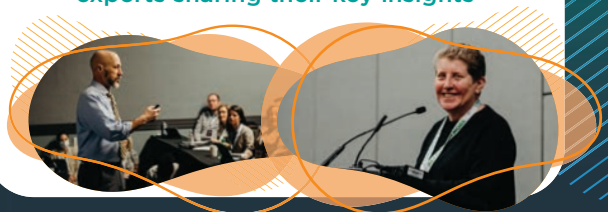

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How to Ease Educators' Mental Load

And free them to devote more time to their passion: teaching.

By Erin Pinter

There's no doubt education leaders are facing a hiring and retention crisis. According to a recent survey from the National Education Association, more than half (55%) of members are considering leaving the profession earlier than planned. If that's not alarming enough, 67% report their burnout is a very serious issue (90% said it was at least a somewhat serious issue). The stress and stakes could not be higher.

The disconnect between the reality and the perception of teachers' workloads contributes to a misunderstanding of the profession. While this conflict has been simmering under the surface for a while, the effects of pandemic-era stressors have brought it to a head. The idea that teachers practice their trade because of the intangible benefits they get—purpose, fulfillment, passion—isn't entirely off-base, but reducing teaching to a "work of heart" and a "calling" creates a breeding ground of overwork and underpay.

This brings us to the next harsh reality: school districts aren't exactly rolling in the dough. In fact, several factors including declining enrollment have led to an overall loss of funding for many public schools. Without the funds to provide much-needed pay increases, benefits, and bonuses, how can school districts attract the educators and staff they need to survive? One investment can go a long way to easing the administrative task burden.

Administrative tasks are not a calling

Let's for a moment continue to indulge the idea that teaching is a passion-driven art (because for many educators, it absolutely is). Let us also anchor this scene within the reality of school today.

Recordkeeping isn't a work of passion. It's, well, work. Even if the routines in place are airtight, the sheer amount of executive function needed to remember and complete the administrative tasks behind managing a classroom of 25+ students is exhausting.

That's where an oft-overlooked benefit comes in: Automation.

Automation saves time and energy

How does automation shift to becoming a benefit? By streamlining crucial administrative tasks to save time, energy, and brainpower for overworked educators.

Administrative tasks are particularly good fits for automation. Research shows automated letters improve chronic absenteeism. And parent engagement soars when families have access to a portal with grades and other achievement and school info at their fingertips.

Data automation must deliver the data educators need when they need it. It must speed manual processes and eliminate processes that shouldn't require human intervention (like reporting and recordkeeping). It should be easy to extract data from the system. And it must preserve the privacy of students by only allowing those with a vested educational interest access to their data (FERPA guarantees this right for every student).

The concept of data-driven instruction differentiated by students' most recent achievement scores has become an expectation for personalized teaching and learning. Educators need access to that data to make differentiation happen. But automation can even take data analysis a step farther by empowering educators to manipulate the data they're working with to see real-time trends.

Automation is not just for teachers

Facilities management can benefit from scheduling maintenance during low occupancy and making consumable resource replenishment automatic. Low funds reminders can help cafeteria lines zip along and ensure no one goes hungry.

The process of hiring gets way easier when the legwork is automated. In the business office, automation can even head off fraud and make payroll less of a headache. And the time and effort saved for IT teams assigning hardware to students and classrooms is fantastic, but nothing is better than the security automatic updates and data backups offer in the event of a breach or disaster.

The bottom line

Automation requires thoughtful and deliberate implementation, which costs time and budget up front. It's always daunting to imagine replacing antiquated, legacy systems. But the benefits to the team in the long run can add up quickly—and your team will get the message you'll do anything to support them a little better.

The benefit of lightening the mental load for educators is passed directly on to students. Every administrative task that can be automated frees up the working memory educators and staff use—energy to focus on students' needs. While data automation can't erase teacher burnout by itself, it can contribute more to educators' metal health, job satisfaction, and happiness.

Retaining high-performing staff is a challenge. Why not investigate creative solutions for improving the quality of life at work?

You may find the quality of your workforce improves along with it. DA

Erin Pinter is the vice president of customer success at Skyward wher shee develops strategies to achieve the highest level of staff engagement as well as processes to encourage the highest standards needed to provide customer satisfaction.

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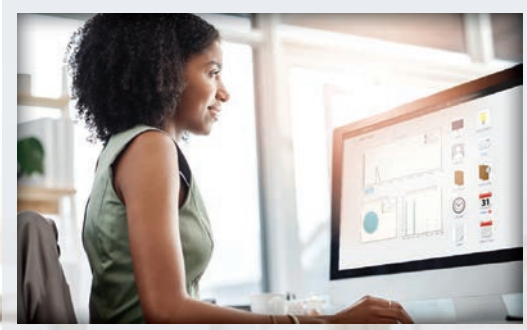

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