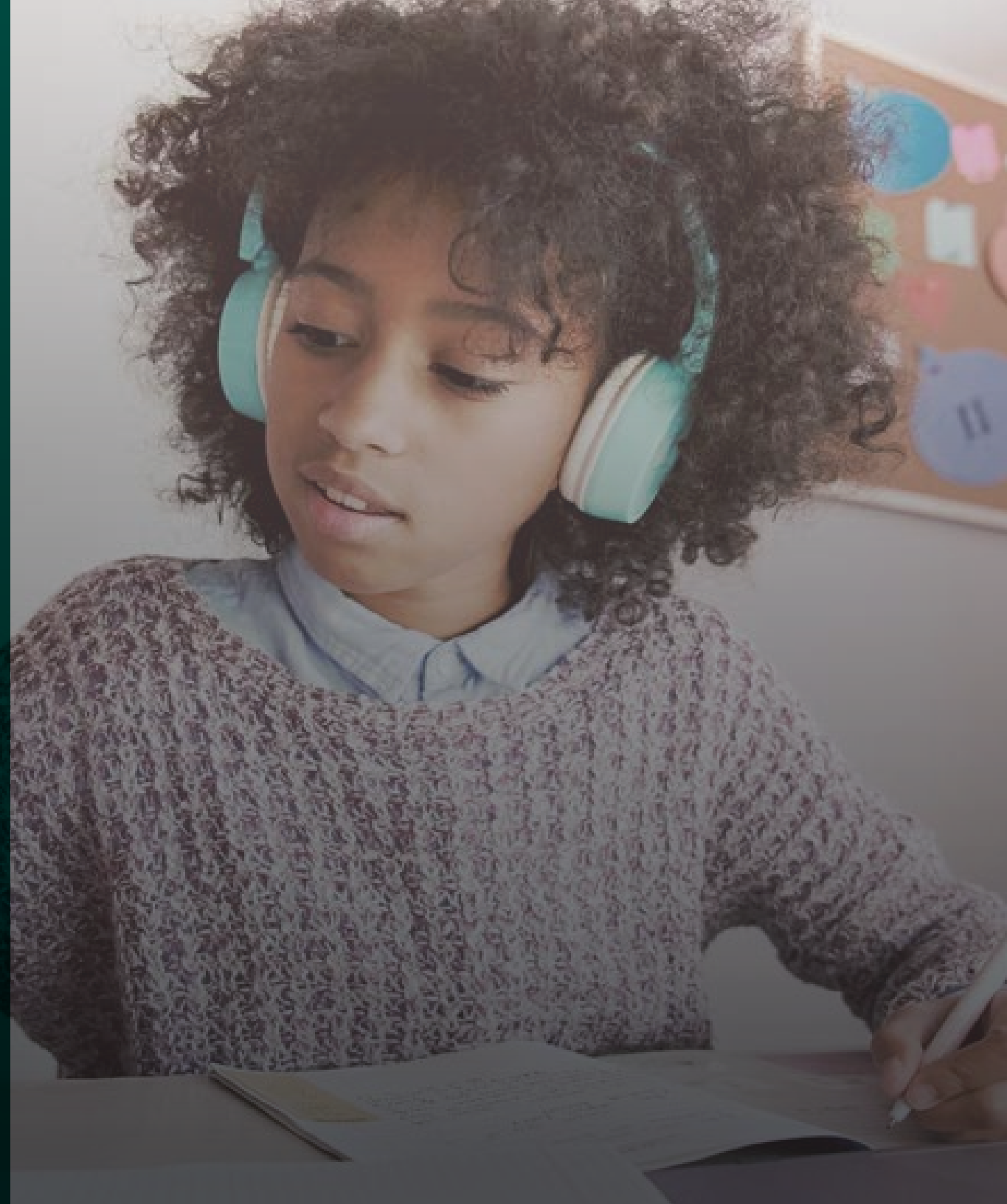


# 2021 TRENDS IN K-12 EDUCATION



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# INTRODUCTION

While the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for K-12 leaders, it has also presented a generational opportunity for transformation and systemic reform across local, regional, and state education agencies. There is universal acceptance that inequities in educational access have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and K-12 leaders have a unique opportunity to leverage the lessons learned during the 2020-2021 school year as a catalyst for change. Hanover's **2021 Trends in K-12 Education Report** summarizes what Hanover's K-12 researchers and advisors observed in their work with hundreds of local, regional, and state education agencies across the country including:

- ▶ A widening educational equity gap;
- ▶ Higher levels of teacher shortages; and
- ▶ Increased demand for mental health and social-emotional services for students and staff;

In addition, these challenges occur alongside decreases in public school enrollments and an impending budget crisis.

In each trends section, district leaders will also find Hanover's recommendations for innovating our K-12 education systems as we look ahead to the 2021-2022 school year.



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# 2021 TRENDS IN K-12 EDUCATION

- 4/ DISTRICTS WILL BUILD FRAMEWORKS TO ADVANCE EQUITY SYSTEMWIDE
- 6/ TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES WILL ENABLE DISTRICTS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS THROUGH MULTIPLE CRISES
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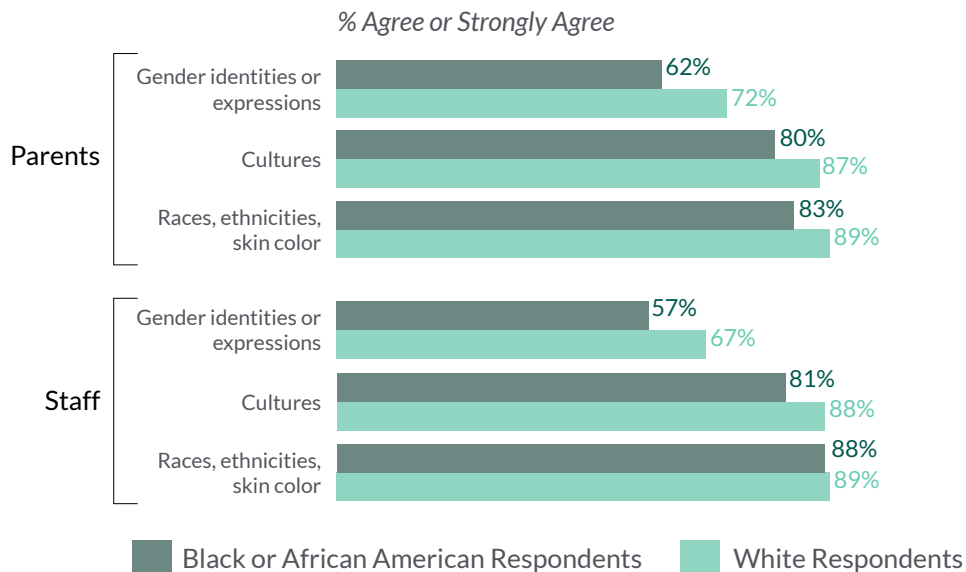
# DISTRICTS WILL BUILD FRAMEWORKS TO ADVANCE EQUITY SYSTEMWIDE

Multiple high-profile cases of police brutality and ongoing confrontations targeting Black individuals have ignited national conversations around the need for greater recognition and understanding of how issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) unfold in K-12 education. At the same time, COVID-19 has exposed persistent, systemic inequities in access to educational, medical, financial, and other opportunities in America, leading to a dramatic rise in the number of organizations publicly committing to efforts advancing DEI. For many districts, the DEI journey begins with awareness and recognition. However, because meaningful DEI work requires systemwide reforms, districts must act deliberately and

at a pace that will build a broad, sustainable consensus across and within stakeholder groups.

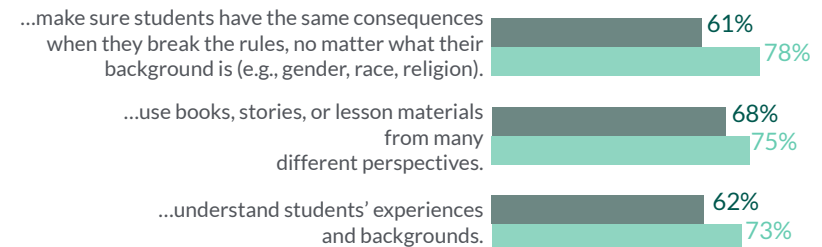
Equity audits provide districts with a framework for identifying and understanding the degree of equity or inequity that currently exists. This understanding, in turn, gives districts insight into the root causes and necessary solutions. While there is no set process, researchers have developed frameworks for conceptualizing and conducting equity audits in a district setting. These frameworks underscore the importance of taking a systemwide approach, relying on an asset-based mindset, and emphasizing community dialogue and engagement as districts undertake this essential work.

## OVERALL, [MY CHILD'S/MY] SCHOOL SUPPORTS PEOPLE FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS, INCLUDING:



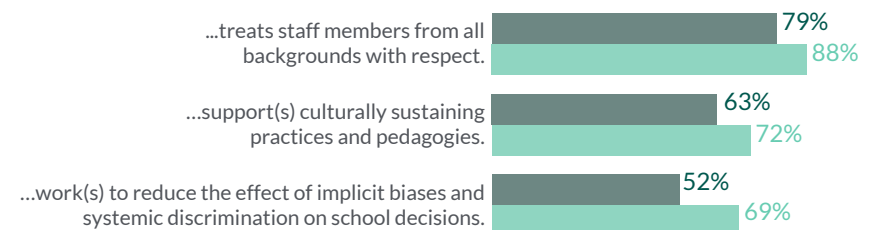
## PARENTS: ADULTS/TEACHERS AT MY CHILD'S SCHOOL...

*% Agree or Strongly Agree*



## STAFF: AT MY SCHOOL...

*% Agree or Strongly Agree*



Source: Survey of 876 parents and 725 school-based staff nationwide conducted by Hanover Research in November-December 2020.<sup>1</sup>

# HOW DISTRICTS CAN BUILD FRAMEWORKS TO ADVANCE EQUITY SYSTEMWIDE

## 1. Create a Taskforce to Guide the District's DEI Efforts and Assist with Community Engagement:

**The Taskforce's Members should include community leaders and diverse representatives of stakeholder groups who can foster a common understanding of DEI concepts, build a consensus for DEI initiatives, and engage the wider community in the process.<sup>2</sup>**

## 2. Conduct an Equity Audit to Gather Actionable Information about the Degree of Equity or Inequity that Exists in the District:

**Districts should approach equity audits as a multi-year process. During year one, districts should focus on diagnosing the magnitude of DEI-related issues systemwide (e.g., in policies and practices, in curriculum and instruction, in staffing and other resources).**

In year two, districts should conduct a comprehensive root cause analysis to understand the systemwide factors that influence the equities and inequities identified in the year one analyses. Year two also should

collect additional stakeholder feedback through focus groups and interviews.

Then, in year three, districts should initiate the changes outlined in their equity framework, implementing research-based best practices to address the inequities identified in years one and two. Districts also should monitor the extent to which changes in policies, programs, and practices impact stakeholder experiences and perceptions, particularly how diverse, equitable, and inclusive the culture and climate feel.



### TAKE ACTION

Plan an equity audit that engages stakeholders in systemwide reform. Audits should include surveys, focus groups, and data analyses to understand the district's what and why.



### SPOTLIGHT: Prince George's County Public Schools (MD)

Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) is shifting the conversation to place equity openly at the center. Most notably, PGCPS' Office of Equity and Excellence is collaborating with the Office of Strategic Planning and Resource Management to develop the 5-year strategic direction for the district aligned to its overarching commitment to equity. First, the district is reviewing its mission and vision, with a focus on establishing transformational goals across five strategic pillars.

This review will provide stakeholders with information on:

- ▶ Trends and disproportionalities in student academic and behavioral outcomes;
- ▶ Stakeholder perceptions of past performance and future priorities related to equity and transformational district outcomes
- ▶ Stakeholder perceptions of district and school culture and climate;
- ▶ Potential equity-focused KPIs for strategic plan progress-monitoring.

This work will help PGCPS define its strategic priorities and select new KPIs to track progress toward equity and other strategic plan goals, which the district will share with stakeholders at least annually.

# TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES WILL ENABLE DISTRICTS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS THROUGH MULTIPLE CRISES

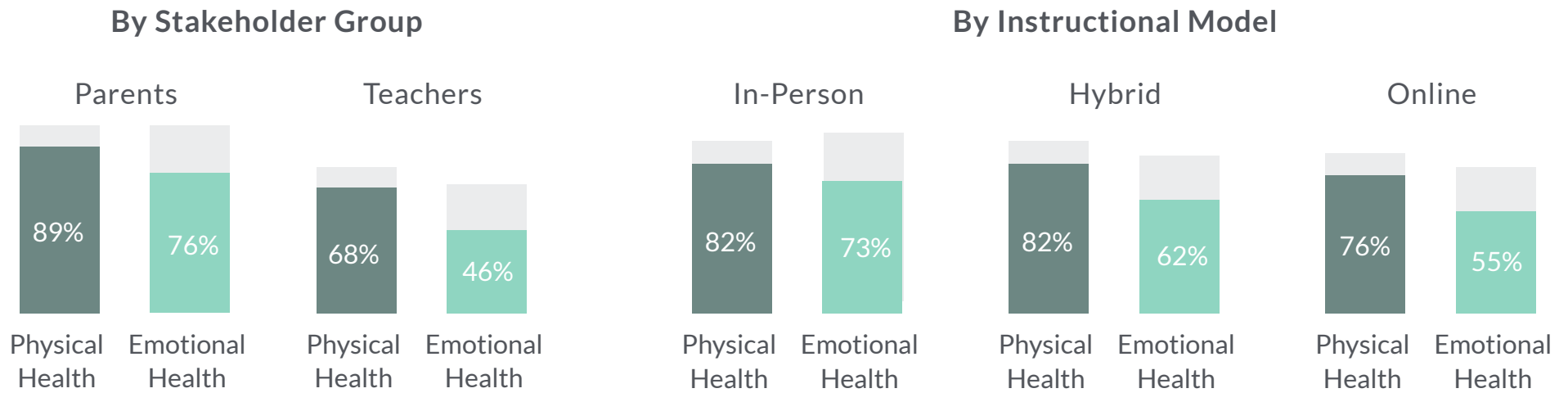
Over the past year, students have experienced multiple traumas, including the COVID-19 pandemic that has taken thousands of lives, a related economic downturn that has left many families food and housing insecure, and numerous cases of racial violence that have led people of color to feel unsafe and unwelcome—even in their own communities.<sup>3</sup> Since the harmful

physical, social, emotional, and academic effects of trauma on children are well-documented,<sup>4</sup> many parents and teachers are understandably concerned about students’ emotional well-being, especially those who are learning remotely. Students in hybrid or online learning models may have less access to social supports (i.e., the peers and adults with whom they have trusting

relationships) and mental health services than during traditional, in-person instruction. Thus, districts must find ways to address trauma while students continue to learn remotely and prepare to re-engage them socially and emotionally once schools fully reopen.

## PARENT AND TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD/STUDENT HEALTH

*% Good or Excellent*



Source: Survey of 494 parents and 545 teachers nationwide conducted by Hanover Research in September 2020.<sup>5</sup>

# HOW DISTRICTS CAN USE TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS THROUGH MULTIPLE CRISES

## 1. Train Staff to Identify and Support Students Currently Experiencing Trauma:

Districts should consider each school's culture, climate, and history; pay added attention to at-risk students; and respect students' racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic differences during implementation. Some districts are using Psychological First Aid for Schools (PFA-S) to support students throughout the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Establish Trauma-Informed Schools and Classrooms:

Trauma-informed schools recognize when students experience trauma and help them recover by embedding understanding of the effects of trauma into all aspects of teaching and learning; reducing triggers and decreasing the likelihood of re-traumatization; and introducing policies and procedures that reinforce a climate of safety and security.<sup>7</sup>

## 3. Leverage Community Partnerships:

Community partnerships enable districts to connect students and families with supports and services that schools cannot provide, including some basic needs (e.g., housing) and some specialized or intensive forms of mental health care.<sup>8</sup>



### TAKE ACTION

Inform reopening efforts by gathering input from students, families, and staff, identifying best practices suited to the local context, developing action steps to introduce such measures systemwide, and then creating a framework for evaluating fidelity of implementation, as well as impact.



### SPOTLIGHT:

Marana Unified School District (AZ)

To support students and staff throughout the challenging circumstances of the 2020-2021 school year, Marana Unified School District (MUSD) has prioritized establishing trauma-sensitive environments and implementing trauma-informed practices across the district.

MUSD has sought to inform these efforts by identifying research-based best practices for building trauma-sensitive environments and studying examples of successful implementation by other districts. Given the impact of COVID-19 on school operations, this research also has aimed to explore any considerations for applying these best practices either in non-traditional work and instructional environments (e.g., hybrid or fully remote/distance learning models) or in support of various student groups (e.g., elementary or secondary students).

### Recommended next steps:

1. Using a trauma-sensitive lens to evaluate current district and school policies and procedures;
2. Gathering staff perceptions of how school environments can effectively address trauma; and
3. Providing staff with professional learning on trauma-informed practices.

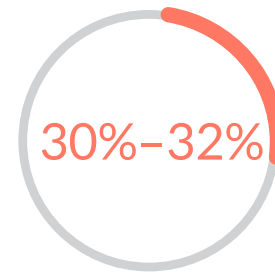
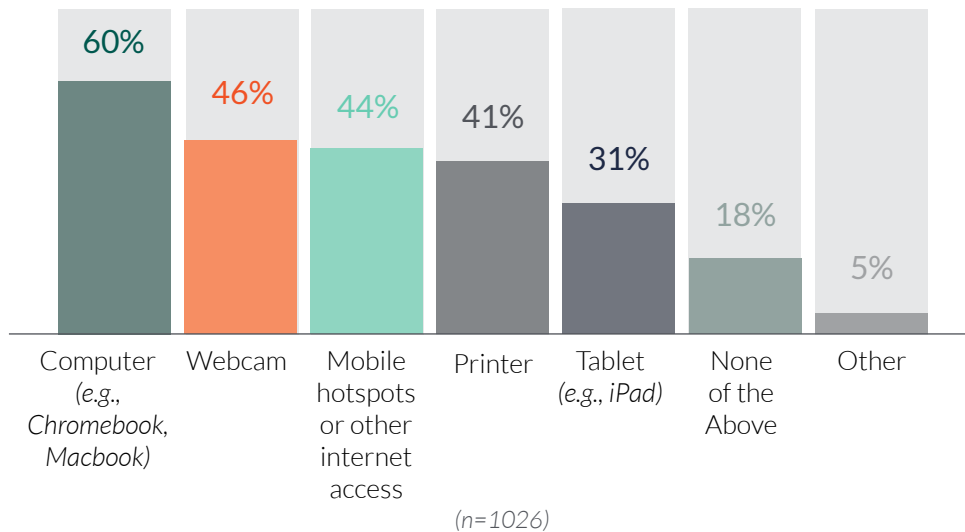
# CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE WILL TAKE ONGOING EFFORTS FROM DISTRICTS

The abrupt shift to remote learning in spring 2020 served as a wake-up call for the nation on the scale and persistence of the digital divide. Throughout 2020, many states and districts addressed the digital divide through innovative, but often short-term, measures to ensure student participation in remote learning. Districts, for example, have conducted outreach to students and families, collaborated with Internet service providers, distributed devices and hotspots, and compiled non-digital instructional resources on an unprecedented scale.

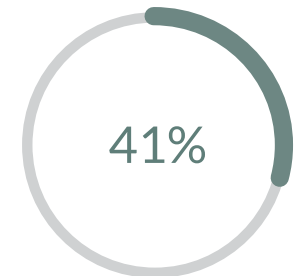
However, this challenge pre-dates and will continue beyond COVID-19. Districts increasingly utilize remote learning for other types of school closures, such as snow days or natural disasters, providing justification for calls to continue expanding technology access post-pandemic. School closures aside, the “homework gap” remains. With many students lacking the technology needed to complete routine schoolwork at home even when schools are open, the digital divide will continue to pose a significant challenge to many districts along with other DEI-related issues.

## TEACHERS/PARENTS: WHAT ADDITIONAL TOOLS OR TECHNOLOGY [DO YOU/DOES YOUR CHILD] NEED TO [ENGAGE IN ONLINE LEARNING/WORK REMOTELY]?

Please select all that apply



of K-12 students lack access to a device or internet connection at home<sup>9</sup>



of teachers/parents sometimes or often have technical problems when trying to use the internet<sup>5</sup>

(n=809)

Source: Survey of 494 parents and 545 teachers nationwide conducted by Hanover Research in September 2020.<sup>5</sup>



# HOW DISTRICTS CAN CLOSE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

## 1. Form Public and Private Partnerships to Identify and Address Disparities in Technology Access Across and Within Districts:

Many Americans hold districts responsible for supplying the devices and Internet access needed to fully engage in remote learning to any students whose families cannot afford them.<sup>10</sup> Districts should seek opportunities—either individually or collectively—to leverage partnerships with local, state, and federal government agencies, technology providers, businesses and financial institutions, nonprofit organizations, and advocacy groups, among others to identify and address these disparities.

## 2. Engage Families and Other Diverse Stakeholders in Detecting Technology Needs and Developing Targeted Solutions:

A larger outreach and engagement strategy ultimately will enable districts to design an implementation plan more responsive to the needs of historically underserved students and families. Stakeholder engagement should include opportunities to develop a shared commitment to increased technology access; identify existing community resources and assets to support this vision; determine areas of unmet need; and form public and private partnerships to close these gaps.<sup>11</sup>

## 3 Provide Funding and Other Resources to Districts Serving Rural Communities to Facilitate Technology Provision:

COVID-19-related school closures have led to many innovations in Internet service provision to rural communities, such as use of school buses to extend rural districts' broadband networks, distribution of wireless hotspots, and creation of private broadband networks. However, many rural districts lack adequate finances to support long-term implementation of such strategies.<sup>12</sup>



### TAKE ACTION

Examine feasibility for permanently offering hybrid and/or fully remote learning options as part of personalized learning initiatives. Survey students and parents to gather information on access to high-speed Internet and other forms of technology needed to complete schoolwork at home and preferred learning models to inform 2021-2022 school year reopening plans.



### SPOTLIGHT:

West Virginia Department of Education

As part of wider efforts to address systemic inequities and support districts during remote learning, West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) is conducting a multi-phase study of the relationship between Internet access and student achievement.

- ▶ An initial analysis will use ArcGIS software to pinpoint individual school attendance zones with the greatest need for additional resources to provide home Internet access.
- ▶ A subsequent analysis will map the locations of state-provided Wi-Fi hotspots to highlight potential gaps and disproportionalities across and within districts.
- ▶ The final analysis will look for evidence of a correlation between home Internet access and individual student achievement, as well as between state-provided Wi-Fi hotspots and regional academic performance.

The state will use the study's findings to inform discussions with potential funders and supporters of initiatives to increase technology and Internet access to students across West Virginia.

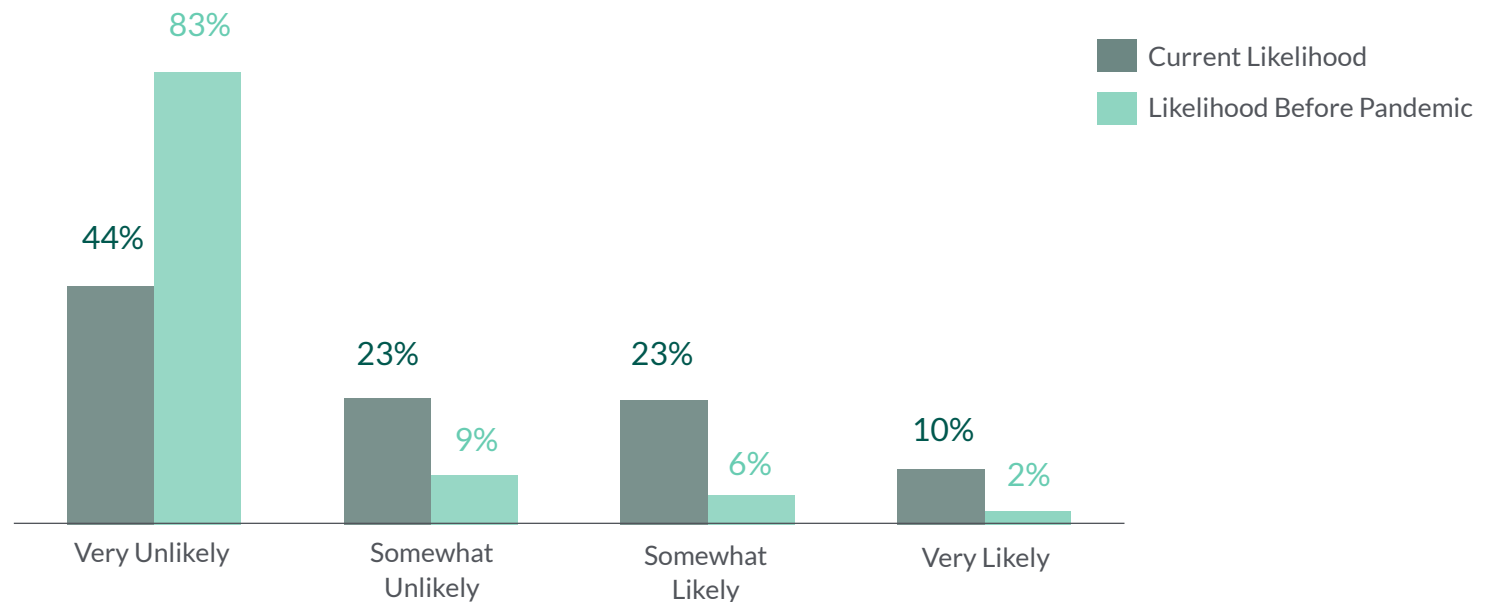
# INCREASE IN TEACHER SHORTAGES WILL REQUIRE INNOVATIVE RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

COVID-19 has already adversely impacted the teacher labor market.<sup>13</sup> Approximately one-third of teachers report that they are somewhat or very likely to leave their jobs during the 2020-2021 school year.<sup>14</sup> These concerns arise amid declining numbers of teacher candidates available to fill open

positions. Total enrollment in teacher preparation programs fell from 940,520 students in 2010 to 604,264 students in 2018, and the number of enrolled students completing these programs declined 28% over roughly the same time period.<sup>15</sup> Limited in terms of financial incentives, districts will

need to adjust retention strategies to keep the teachers they have and adopt innovative recruitment practices to attract and hire strong candidates for open positions.<sup>16</sup>

### Teacher Turnover More Likely Now than Before the Pandemic



Survey Prompt: NOW what is the likelihood you will leave your job this year?

Survey Prompt: BEFORE the coronavirus pandemic, what was your likelihood of leaving your job this year?

Source: Education Week<sup>17</sup>

# HOW DISTRICTS CAN ADDRESS TEACHER SHORTAGES

## 1. Anticipate Openings Before They Occur:

Districts should identify vacancies and new positions that will be created as soon as possible to take advantage of early outreach and hiring timelines.<sup>18</sup> As districts take longer to identify staffing needs, the pool of teacher candidates becomes more diluted in experience and qualifications, making early hiring integral to finding the best candidates.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Transform Recruitment Strategies:

Districts should deploy multi-pronged recruitment strategies,<sup>20</sup> including diversifying print, digital, and other career advertisements (e.g., online career fairs) to appeal to highly-qualified candidates from a range of backgrounds and build sustained pipelines of applicants.<sup>21</sup> COVID-19 furthers the need for innovation given that restrictions on in-person meetings necessitate that recruitment and hiring occur remotely.<sup>22</sup>

## 3. Improve Working Conditions:

Districts must work harder to incentivize teachers to remain in their current positions (or apply to open positions) by improving work conditions, providing adequate professional development opportunities, and designing competitive compensation packages.<sup>23</sup>



### TAKE ACTION

Analyze staffing data to identify the schools, grade levels, and subject areas most affected by existing teacher shortages. Districts also should survey teachers regarding their likelihood of leaving the profession and the factors influencing their decision.



### SPOTLIGHT:

Green Bay Area Public School District (WI)

Even before COVID-19, Green Bay Area Public School District (GBAPS) had a teacher shortage, which threatened to widen due to the pandemic. At the start of the 2020-2021 school year, GBAPS leveraged a distance learning model for most students, although some students (e.g., students with disabilities) received in-person instruction.

GBAPS found that, when given the choice to return to school, many teachers planned to resign. Thus, the district established a medical process for teachers to document their need to perform job functions remotely. Teachers without medical exemptions who had concerns about returning to work were allowed to take an unpaid leave of absence while retaining their position of record for the 2021-2022 school year. These steps not only alleviated recruiting and hiring needs, but also enabled the district to cooperate with teachers in good faith at a time when stress levels were high.

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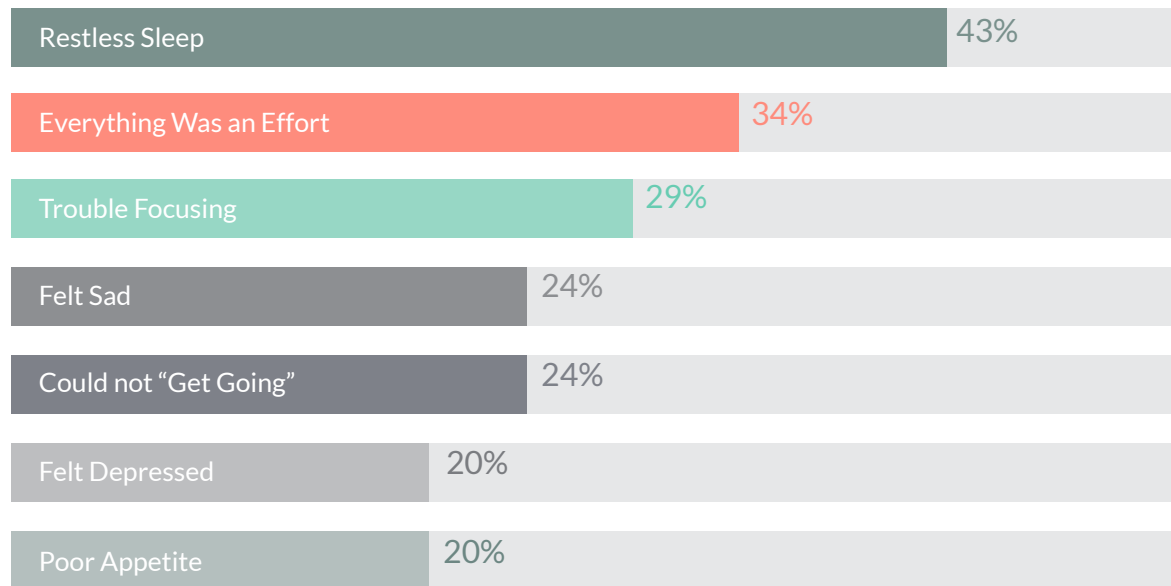
# TEACHER WELLNESS WILL REQUIRE TARGETED SUPPORTS AND SELF-CARE

During a normal school year, teaching is a demanding profession that generates a high level of stress.<sup>24</sup> COVID-19 has only intensified the pressure many teachers feel by abruptly changing the way they instruct their students, raising fears of infection, increasing social isolation, and creating economic uncertainty.<sup>25</sup>

Teachers' physical, mental, and emotional health affects their ability to meet their students' needs and support their colleagues' work. Districts must rise to the challenge of supporting teacher wellness—during the pandemic and beyond—by offering targeted supports and building teachers' capacity

to engage in self-care through innovative professional learning opportunities.<sup>26</sup> Such efforts will equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to face COVID-19 and other traumatic situations in the future.<sup>27</sup>

## Teachers Who Reported Experiencing Various Symptoms of Depression at Least Occasionally During the Past 7 Days



Source: EdPolicyWorks, University of Virginia, and Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California Los Angeles<sup>28</sup>

# HOW DISTRICTS CAN PROVIDE TARGETED SUPPORTS AND PROMOTE TEACHER SELF-CARE

## 1. Implement a Comprehensive Employee

**Wellness Program:** Self-care enables teachers to perform their role effectively without experiencing burnout.<sup>29</sup> Employee wellness programs, community-building initiatives, and other interventions can grow capacity for self-care.<sup>30</sup>

## 2. Build Supportive Staff Communities:

Districts should create and sustain professional learning communities and other connections among teachers to strengthen their protective factors and increase their self-efficacy.<sup>31</sup>

## 3. Offer Robust Professional Learning

**Opportunities:** Districts should provide trainings as diverse as the stressors faced by teachers.<sup>32</sup> For example, due to COVID-19, teachers need training in instructing and assessing students in hybrid and fully online learning environments.<sup>33</sup> Districts should consult with teachers to determine which topics to prioritize and which delivery methods to use.<sup>34</sup>



### TAKE ACTION

Survey teachers to understand their perceptions of current supports and identify common areas of additional need.



### SPOTLIGHT:

Ceres Unified School District (CA)

During the last three school years, Ceres Unified School District (CUSD) has actively tracked staff's familiarity and comfort with social-emotional learning (SEL) concepts embedded in the curriculum. This information guides the district's decision-making, particularly with respect to professional development.

For example, CUSD surveys staff semi-annually regarding their knowledge of SEL. The most recent iteration of this survey in fall 2020 found that staff need additional support with the SEL intervention process and integrating SEL competencies into their instruction. Such findings have led CUSD to provide targeted assistance and supports to staff, such as SEL-related modules and technical assistance documents from Hanover's Educator Learning Center (ELC). Providing strong professional development support during this challenging time can support teacher well-being.

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# DISTRICTS WILL NEED TO ENGAGE PARENTS VIRTUALLY

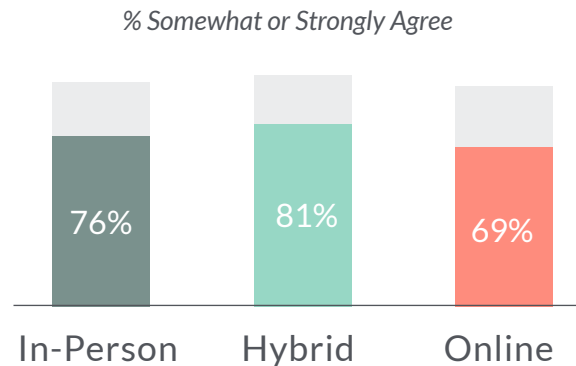
Parents play a critical role in their child’s education,<sup>35</sup> and, with many schools delivering instruction fully or partially online, parents now contribute even more directly to their child’s academic outcomes by supervising and facilitating their learning at home. Many parents need additional resources and guidance on how to support their child effectively.<sup>36</sup> Some parents also struggle to balance their child’s school schedule with work commitments

and childcare pressures—challenges that often disproportionately affect families experiencing economic hardship and families of color.<sup>37</sup> With many schools unable to leverage some methods traditionally used to communicate with and involve parents, including in-person conferences and events, districts have had to rethink what parent engagement means in a virtual environment.<sup>38</sup>

Promising practices suggest that, to form strong, sustainable parent-school partnerships in a virtual setting, districts should establish trusting relationships with parents, build their capacity to support their child’s learning at home, and maintain clear, consistent communication, especially regarding academic expectations.

## Surveyed Parents in Online Instructional Models Typically Have Less Positive Perceptions of District Communications

### Parents Understand District and School Plans for the Coming Weeks



Source: Survey of 494 parents nationwide conducted by Hanover Research in September 2020.<sup>5</sup>

# HOW DISTRICTS CAN ENGAGE PARENTS VIRTUALLY

**1. Form Trusting Relationships:** Teachers should openly communicate how remote learning differs from in-person instruction and describe their own strategies for adjusting to the challenges this new learning model presents. Such honesty encourages parents to share their experiences, enabling teachers to gain insight into students' home environments (e.g., Internet connectivity, need to care for younger siblings) and then provide targeted supports.<sup>39</sup>

**2. Establish Effective Two-Way Communication:** Districts should give parents frequent updates on school operations and instructional models—explicitly noting how any changes will affect them and their child. Teachers, meanwhile, should regularly inform parents of content being taught in the classroom.<sup>40</sup> For example, teachers can post brief classroom newsletters online, indicating the content standards the coming week's lessons will address in each subject area and sharing related activities parents can conduct with their child to reinforce their learning.<sup>41</sup>

Effective two-way communication means

that teachers also should encourage parents to offer input and ask questions.<sup>42</sup>

**3. Build Parents' Self-Efficacy:** Many parents may feel they lack the knowledge, skills, or resources (including time) to assist their child academically. Thus, districts should work with parents to build their self-efficacy by emphasizing the strengths they (and their family) already bring to their child's learning. These supports may range from instructions on how to create a quiet learning environment to directions for using specific online learning platforms to guidance on how to monitor and facilitate lessons, activities, and assignments.<sup>43</sup>



## TAKE ACTION

Survey parents to understand their communication preferences, perceptions of existing district and school supports, and need for additional resources during the COVID-19 pandemic.



## SPOTLIGHT: Washington Association of School Administrators

The Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) supports more than 1,600 educational administrators in central office, building management, and educational agency positions across Washington State.<sup>1</sup>

Since the onset of COVID-19, districts have shared with WASA the challenges their parents face supporting their child's learning at home. Parents have looked to districts to provide them with the skills and resources they need. However, as districts have sought ways to help parents, communicating and engaging with them has proven difficult at times.

In response, WASA partnered with Hanover to research how districts can effectively engage parents and build their capacity to support their child's learning during remote instruction. To identify promising practices, Hanover not only synthesized findings from the literature, but also interviewed experts at organizations known and respected for their work in this area, such as the Global Family Research Project.

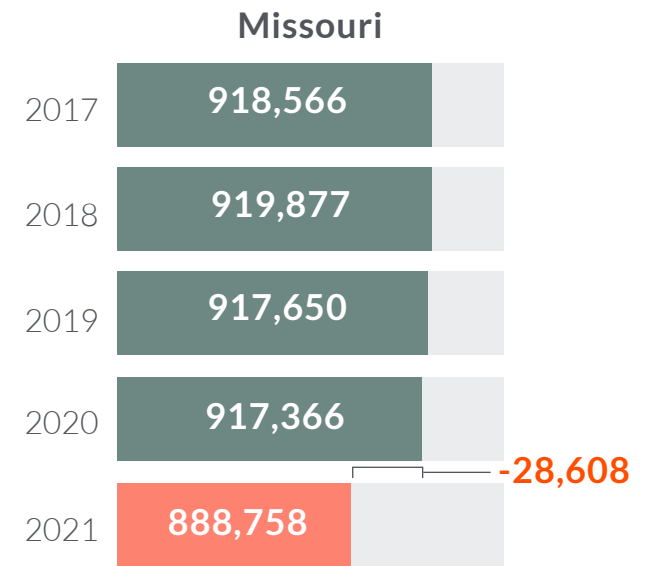
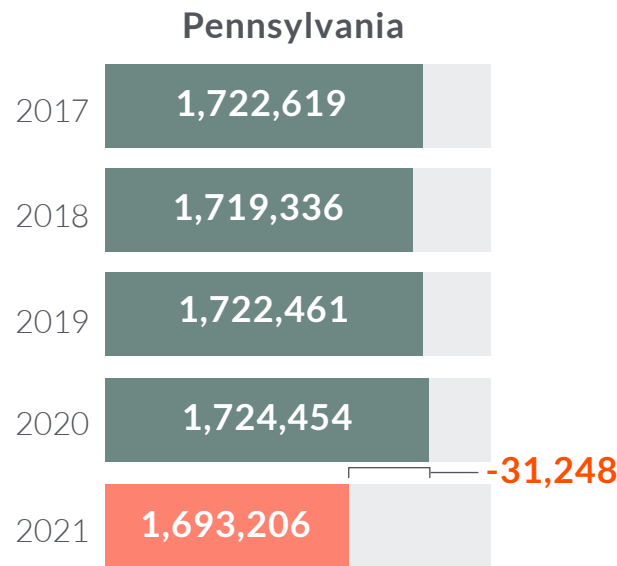
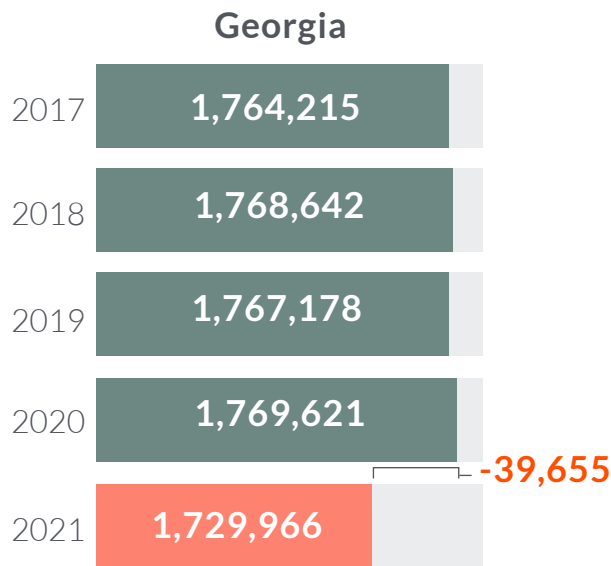
# EXPANDING AND STRENGTHENING EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS WILL HELP DISTRICTS RESTORE ENROLLMENT

When the 2020-2021 school year began, districts across the country saw fewer students enroll in public schools. Although preliminary data indicate negative effects on elementary and secondary schools, some grade levels may be disproportionately impacted, such as pre-K and Kindergarten. These declines in public school enrollment often reflect families' concerns about risks of COVID-19 infection and

dissatisfaction with districts' ability to deliver hybrid and online instruction effectively. For some families, financial pressures also factor into decision-making, as older children may need to enter the workforce or help care for younger siblings instead of focusing on school. While some of these considerations may fade once the public health crisis subsides, whether all families who opted out of public education

in 2020-2021 will return their children to public schools next school year seems far from certain. Districts will need to reimagine education, offering students alternatives and choices with respect to what and how they learn and strengthening teachers' capacity to provide instruction across different models and settings.<sup>44</sup>

## Preliminary Data Indicate Declines in PK-12 Public School Enrollment Nationwide



Source: Georgia Department of Education<sup>45</sup>

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education<sup>46</sup>

Source: Missouri Department of Education<sup>47</sup>



# HOW EXPANDING AND STRENGTHENING EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS CAN HELP DISTRICTS RESTORE ENROLLMENT

## 1. Gather Stakeholder Feedback and Analyze Data to Understand the Causes and Effects of Changing Enrollments:

Districts should examine enrollment data to identify the schools and grade levels most affected by changes in student counts and consider shifts in student demographics as well, such as changing proportions of English learners, students with disabilities, and students experiencing poverty. Districts can also work to understand why parents did (or did not) enroll their child in public school in 2020-2021 and the factors that will influence their enrollment decisions for next school year. Findings from these analyses will help districts make more informed operational decisions, particularly with respect to facilities, staffing, and student supports.

## 2. Strengthen Teachers' Capacity to Provide High-Quality Instruction Across Different Learning Environments:

Districts need to respond to families' frustrations with the content students learn during remote instruction and the methods teachers use to deliver it. Thus, districts should assess the suitability of grade-level curricula, instructional units,

and instructional resources to different learning environments and make adjustments as needed. Districts also should offer professional development opportunities that enable teachers to build the skills and confidence required to effectively communicate with, instruct, and assess students in each of these settings.<sup>48</sup>

## 3. Offer Students and Families More Flexibility and Choice in Learning Environments:

Districts need to explore ways to provide students and families with greater choices in learning environments. Districts may consider offering more personalized experiences by creating small learning communities, providing permanent online learning options, and expanding supports, including tutoring, mentoring, and counseling.<sup>49</sup>



### TAKE ACTION

Survey or conduct focus groups with parents to understand the factors motivating their current and future enrollment decisions.

## SPOTLIGHT:

### District in Southeastern United States

This District enrolled roughly 7,000 fewer students than anticipated for the 2020-2021 school year. Given the impact unexpectedly low enrollment may have on district funding and operations, the district has commissioned a data analysis exploring how students who left the district differ from their peers who re-enrolled.

In particular, the data analysis is examining how these students differ in terms of: school level; grade level; academic achievement (e.g., test scores); behavior (e.g., disciplinary incidents); program participation (e.g., special education, English language learner, gifted and talented); demographics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity); and family characteristics (e.g., experiencing poverty).

The district will use the findings from the data analysis not only to develop targeted strategies for re-engaging these students and their families, but also to inform the district's budgetary and operational planning for future school years.

# DISTRICTS WILL NEED TO PRIORITIZE PROGRAM AND RESOURCE EFFECTIVENESS WITH IMPENDING BUDGET CUTS

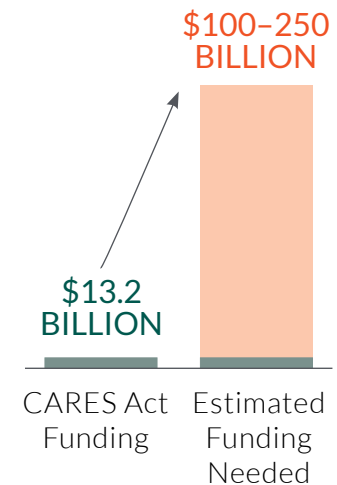
For districts nationwide, budget uncertainty will persist throughout 2021 as many states grapple with sharp and sustained declines in tax revenues. Initial estimates suggest that some states may experience contractions in revenue ranging from 10% to 20%. A 10% decline could translate to a \$21 billion decrease in state spending on PK-12 programs.<sup>50</sup> Such cuts would occur alongside increasing district expenditures on efforts to provide safe, equitable learning environments amid the pandemic, exacerbating pressures on district budgets.<sup>51</sup>

The Great Recession of 2008 provides some insight into the potential impact of the current budget crisis on students, especially in districts that experienced the greatest economic downturns and districts that enrolled higher proportions of Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students.<sup>52</sup> Such districts are more likely to rely on state

funding, in general, and emergency aid, in particular—important factors to consider in the current context.<sup>53</sup>

The March 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act included \$13.2 billion in funding for K-12 education to address costs related to COVID-19 and school reopening.<sup>54</sup> Some estimate that K-12 education needs an additional \$100-250 billion to fully overcome current and projected budget deficits.<sup>55</sup>

All of the above will require districts to reevaluate and realign budgets in 2021 to determine how to allocate increasingly scarce financial resources across a growing list of priorities.



**Estimated amount needed to fully overcome current and projected budget deficits in K-12 education versus what schools were given from the CARES act**

# HOW DISTRICTS CAN EFFECTIVELY ADDRESS BUDGET UNCERTAINTY

## 1. Enhance Transparency and Communication Around Budget Decision-making:

While some states and local school boards granted districts special emergency powers to make necessary spending decisions more rapidly during the pandemic, districts may confront intense criticism if the community perceives leaders as having allocated funds without public consultation.<sup>56</sup> The following tips can help districts navigate this process effectively.

## 2. Carefully Vet Any New Spending Items:

Districts should carefully allocate and closely monitor any new spending supported by emergency funding, both to protect against any public criticism and comply with any reporting or accountability requirements.

## 3. Frame Budget Decision-making Processes Around Students:

Stakeholders may be more receptive to budget cuts when they are framed as tradeoffs needed to ensure the highest possible level of service to students.<sup>54</sup> Thus, districts should provide stakeholders with the context needed to understand budget decisions.

## 4. Prioritize Spending that Supports the District's Most Vulnerable Students:

When deciding how to allocate pandemic relief, districts should maximize supports for the students and families most affected by COVID-19. For example, districts may consider prioritizing students with disabilities, English learners, and students from newly and historically economically disadvantaged households.

## 5. Conduct Program Evaluations and Use the Findings to Inform Budget Decisions:

Districts seeking to downsize or eliminate programs should examine outcome data to determine which initiatives benefit students with a return on investment that justifies the cost.<sup>58</sup> Using program evaluations to inform spending decisions can help districts align the budgeting process with student achievement goals.<sup>59</sup>



### TAKE ACTION

Conduct outreach (e.g., through focus groups and in-depth interviews) to understand stakeholders' budget priorities and inform communication plans.



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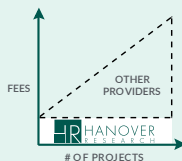
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