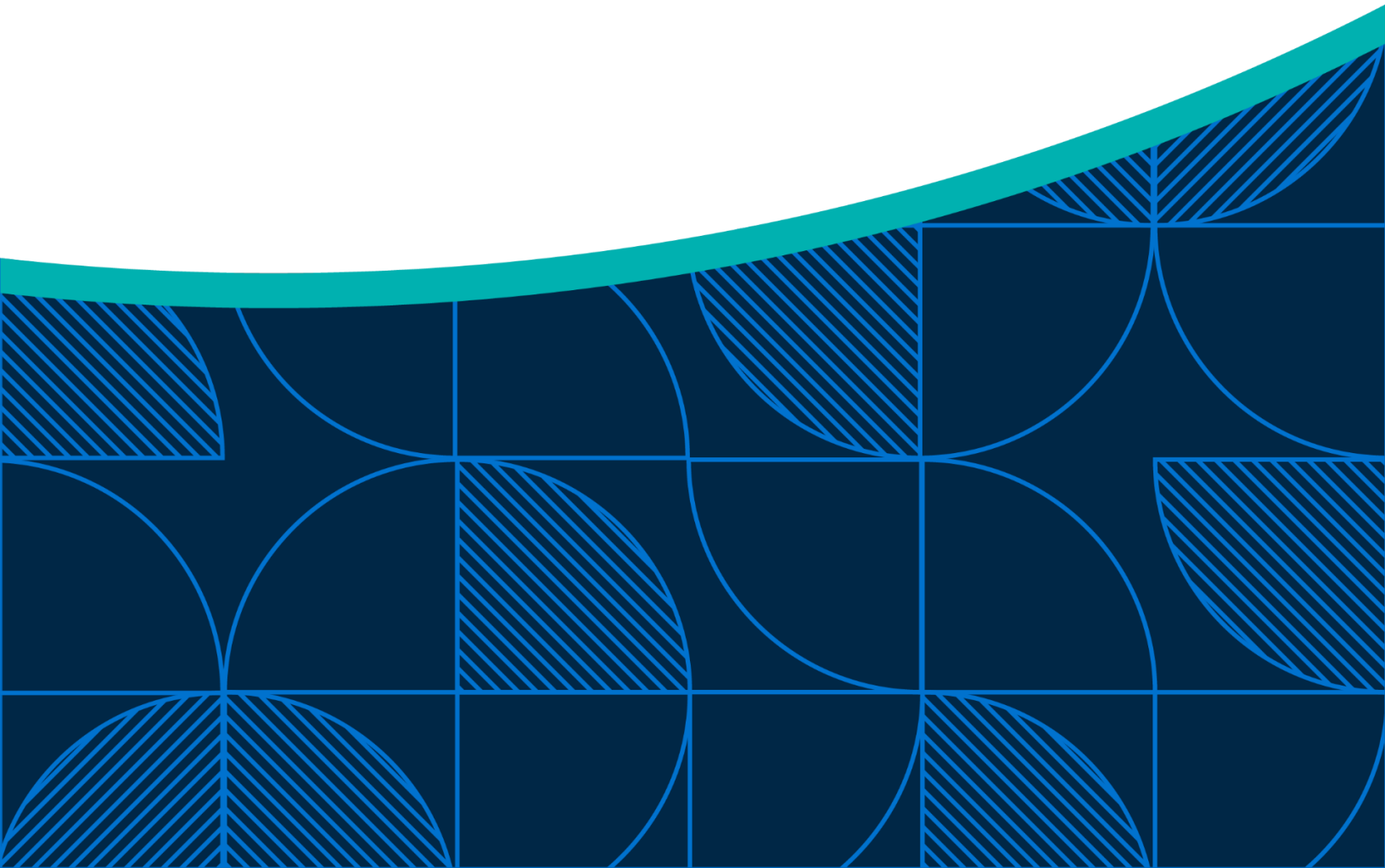




2025 EDITION

The Voice of the Superintendent Survey

Five Current Themes in District Leadership



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About This Survey

Methodology

The 2025 Voice of the Superintendent Survey was distributed online from April 2, 2025 to April 16, 2025.

122 superintendents from 37 states completed the survey¹, which was designed to provide superintendents with data about their current experiences, perspectives, and beliefs, and compare their experiences with peers across the nation.

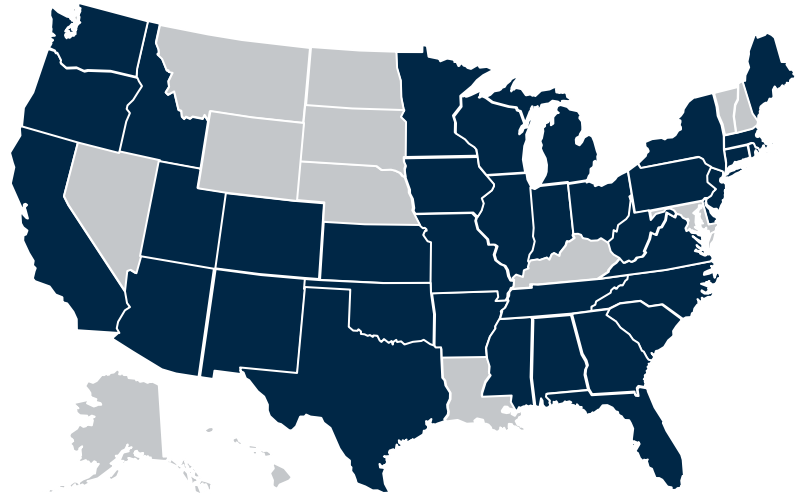
Only school superintendents participated in the survey.

The survey instrument gathered the following information⁴ about respondents:

- Perspectives on current district and nationwide challenges
- Impact of state and federal policy changes
- Outlook on their financial landscape for 2025-26
- Adoption of generative A.I. in their schools
- Relationships and dynamics with their school board
- Advice from current superintendents to their peers

Profile of Respondents

■ Locations of Survey Respondents¹
(n=122)



Gender Identity²

She/her	He/him	Other	Prefer not to answer
39%	55%	3%	4%

Years of Experience as a Superintendent

<1 year	1-5 years	6-10 years	11+ years
6%	59%	23%	12%

District Size

<1,000	1,000-4,999	5,000-19,999	20,000+
3%	59%	30%	8%

Community Type

Urban	Suburban	Rural
12%	60%	29%

Students Qualifying for Free/Reduced Priced Lunch (FRPL)³

0-24%	25-49%	50-74%	75-100%
24%	33%	28%	15%

1) States are reflective of survey respondents who provided their district name

2) Gender identity, community type do not add up to 100% due to rounding

3) Free or Reduced Priced Lunch hereafter referred to as FRPL

4) Full survey results are available upon request.



Introduction

Dear Superintendents,

The Voice of the Superintendent Survey was launched in 2022, at the request of superintendents seeking insight into the experiences and perspectives of peers beyond their region. They sought these insights because there is no job quite like the superintendency. The opportunity to impact lives and communities is perhaps unparalleled. But so are the demands of the role.

Each year, superintendents face a new set of seemingly intractable challenges.

This year's menu includes a new federal administration committed to closing the Department of Education, the end of ESSER funds, and the potential introduction of a nationwide private school choice program at a time when 29 states have already implemented such programs, 90% of reporting states saw an increase in homeschooling over the past 12 months, and 35 states are projected to see a decline in school-aged children through at least 2030.

Our survey results highlight one encouraging message: Superintendents have grown wise through constant crisis management and learned how to stay focused on what matters most. As you flip through the following pages, you will gain a glimpse into how district leaders are responding to federal policy directives, budget constraints, AI integration and more. Most importantly, you will see near-unanimous conviction around the most urgent issue of the day: accelerating student growth in Math.

Ultimately, the themes highlighted in our survey results provide a practical guide to where many superintendents currently focus their attention, time, and discussions as they prepare for the year ahead. Each of these issues demands executive attention, and each has the potential to have a profound effect on student achievement.

To help superintendents distill the latest thinking on these issues and move quickly from uncertainty to action, researchers at EAB will continue to stay focused on these issues in the year ahead. If you finish reading this brief and want to discuss what we've learned about how the most successful districts are navigating these challenges, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Thank you for your leadership,

Molly O'Connor
Managing Director, K-12 Research

Sources: [Which States Have Private School Choice?](#) (2024, January 31). *Education Week*; Watson, A. R. (2024, September). [Homeschool growth: 2023-2024](#). JHU Institute for Education Policy; District Administration. (2024, January 8). [Enrollment rankings: A look at the 2030 forecast for all 50 states](#). District Administration.



Five Current Themes in District Leadership

Key Findings From the 2025 Voice of the Superintendent Survey

- Minimizing Distractions From Washington D.C.
- Building Trust With Politically Divided School Boards
- Navigating Fiscal Uncertainty
- Exploring Opportunities to Use Generative AI
- United in Trying to Accelerate Growth in Math

Minimizing Distractions From Washington D.C.

Federal Policy Changes are Affecting Mental Health But Not Practices in Most Districts

For much of the past decade, district leadership has been an exercise in crisis management.

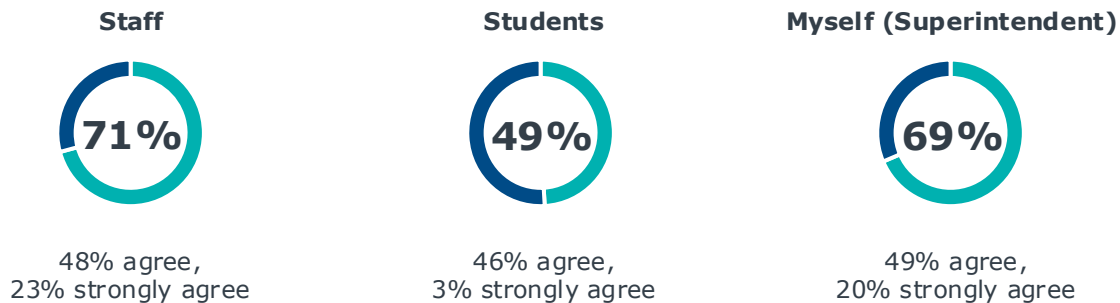
As the second Trump administration arrived at the White House, promising to dismantle the Department of Education and “return education to the states,” many were worried that the constant stream of executive orders emanating from the capital would become the latest distraction to pull superintendents toward politics rather than pedagogy.

The Trump administration’s directives are certainly taking their toll on the well-being of superintendents and educators. 7 out of 10 respondents say that recent changes in federal policy have negatively affected their mental health and the mental health of their staff. 49% say that their students’ wellbeing has also been affected.

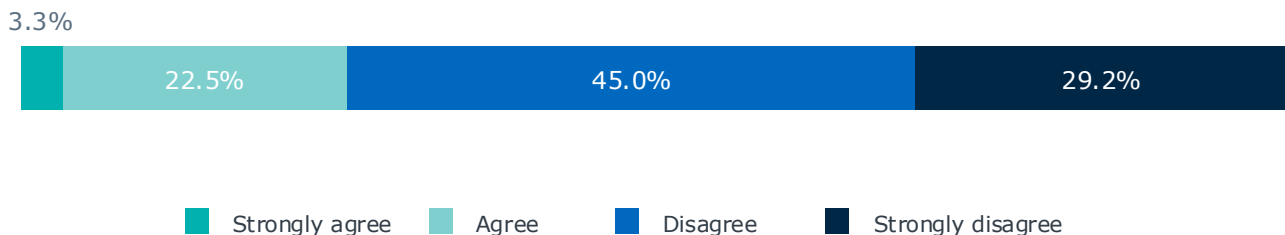
However, among our respondents, recent federal policy changes appear to have had minimal effect on district practices.

Just 26% of superintendents agree that they have made changes to district practices or policies in response to recent federal anti-DEI and gender recognition directives. Approaches to communicating about state and federal policy changes also appear to be muted. Just 34% reserve time to discuss policy changes in board meetings, 16% include a section on policy changes in recurring communications, and 32% send messages to their community when policy changes occur. The largest share, 46%, say they do not proactively send communications on state or federal policy changes at all.

“Recent changes in federal policy have negatively affected the mental health of:”



“We have made changes to district policies, programs, or practices in response to recent federal anti-D.E.I. and gender recognition mandates.”



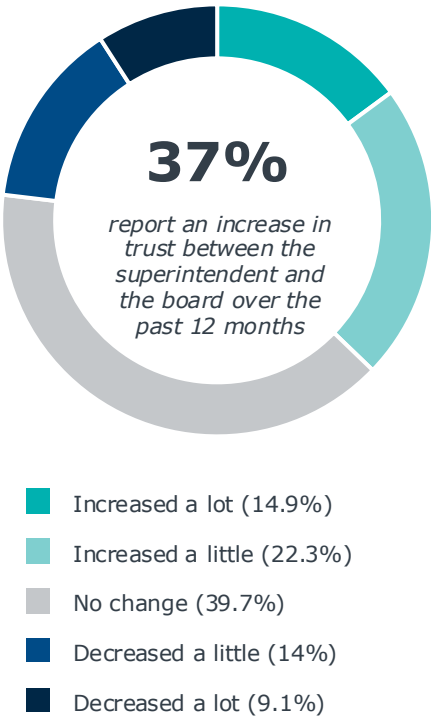
Building Trust With Politically Divided School Boards

Focusing on Alignment and Governance More Effective Than Increasing Communication

Keeping the conversation focused on pedagogy, not politics, is no easy task in the current environment. Growing political division among board members has been a consistent theme over the past three years, and nearly a third of respondents in 2025 say that political division among their board members has risen again over the past 12 months. We frequently hear superintendents say that overcommunication is now critical for sustaining the trust of their boards; therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that 63% of respondents say that the time they spend communicating with the board has increased a little (46%) or a lot (17%) this year.

However, an increase in time spent communicating with the board does not appear to be the best predictor of increased trust between a superintendent and their board. Among those who say that trust between the superintendent and the board has increased “a lot” over the past 12 months, fewer than half (43%) say that their time spent communicating with the board has increased.

Instead, those reporting a significant increase in trust with their board members are most likely to report improvements in two other areas: Alignment between the board and leadership team on strategic vision and goals (87%), and board members’ understanding of effective governance practices (100%). These findings align closely with our research on the Hallmarks of a High-Performance District, which found “shared vision and goals” is a prerequisite to making system-wide progress on any issue in schools today.



What’s Moving the Needle in Those Districts?

Percentage of superintendents reporting that trust between them and their board members has increased “a little” or “a lot” where each of the following have increased “a lot” over the past 12 months

	Increased A Little	Increased A Lot
The amount of time [the superintendent] spends communicating with the board	29%	14%
Alignment between my board and the district leadership team on strategic vision and goals	35%	52%
Board members’ understanding of effective governance practices	0%	100%

Navigating Fiscal Uncertainty

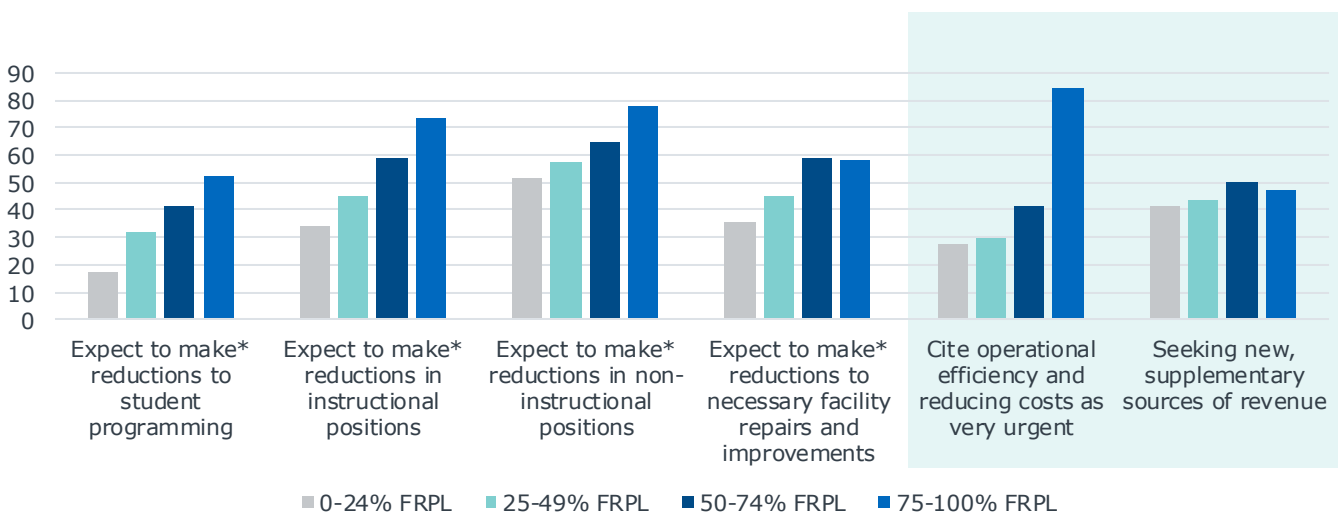
Those Serving Low-Income Families Are Most Likely to Project Cuts

Strategic alignment and effective governance are likely to become even more crucial as the funding landscape for public education tightens. The end of access to ESSER funding will likely be followed by reductions in federal appropriations in the next fiscal year. In addition, if significant cuts to Medicaid are passed, states will likely choose to pick up some of the bill. To compound the problem, these reductions in funding are arriving at a time when 29 states have implemented private school choice programs, 90% of reporting states have seen an increase in homeschooling over the past 12 months, and 35 states are projected to see a decline in school-aged children through at least 2030.

Many districts are already feeling the pain of insufficient funding, with (at the time of our survey) more than a third of respondents expecting to see their districts pass a deficit budget for the 2025-26 school year. Those predominantly serving students from economically disadvantaged households are most affected. Districts where 75% or more of students qualify for Free or Reduced-Price Lunches are more than twice as likely to anticipate cuts to student programming and instructional positions than those serving the most affluent communities.

The question many superintendents are asking in today's environment is, "how can we offset reductions in funding to ensure our students have access to the support they need?" While those with 75%+ FRPL are significantly more likely to cite operational efficiency and reducing costs as "very urgent" today, nearly half of all districts, regardless of community economics, are now seeking new, supplementary sources of revenue. Supplemental grants are likely still the most common source of alternative revenue. However, advertising, creative leasing, foundation partnerships, and even agricultural production programs have been mentioned in recent discussions on this topic. While no alternative revenue source can replace tax dollars for public schools, these marginal sources of revenue can unlock unique opportunities for students and schools, so we expect to see more school systems explore these opportunities in the year ahead.

Percentage of respondents who agreed with the following statements, by percentage of students in their district who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL)



* = Agree or strongly agree that their district will need to take this action due to budget constraints in 2025-26

Sources: [Which States Have Private School Choice?](#) (2024, January 31). *Education Week*; Watson, A. R. (2024, September). [Homeschool growth: 2023-2024](#). JHU Institute for Education Policy; District Administration. (2024, January 8). [Enrollment rankings: A look at the 2030 forecast for all 50 states](#). District Administration.

Exploring Opportunities to Use Generative AI

But Perhaps Overlooking the Foundations Needed For Successful Integration

In a world where public schools are being asked to do more with less, recent advancements in Generative A.I. present a potentially unprecedented opportunity to increase district capacity, reduce strain on staff and educators, and free teachers to focus on the uniquely human aspects of helping students to learn. Superintendents have recognized that opportunity from the outset. Last year, 92% of respondents to our survey agreed that A.I. will transform the way we educate students within five years.

However, the long list of urgent and important challenges facing schools today have made it difficult for school systems to invest sufficient time and resources into preparing their district for A.I. In 2024, just 4% of respondents cited “determining district policies and best uses for A.I.” as “very urgent (the smallest percentage across all issues) and the 2025 survey results show the consequences. While 60% of respondents report having established a task-force to explore innovative uses of A.I. in their schools, just 35% have established clear guidelines for when and how teachers can use A.I. and 39% have done the same for students.

Why does creating policies and guidelines for the use of AI matter when the technology is still relatively nascent? The two most significant threats to the successful integration of AI are likely misunderstanding and misuse. We frequently hear from district leaders that many parents are still uneasy about teachers using AI or their child’s exposure to the technology. At the same time, many teachers are frustrated by the thought of students cheating or, worse still, the perception that they are “cheating” in their own work. After all, an AI agent grading an AI-generated paper benefits nobody. Creating clear guardrails and guidance on how AI should and shouldn’t be applied will create clarity for all parties, which will be essential as this technology rapidly evolves.

In 2024, Superintendents Saw A.I. As Transformational, But Not Very Urgent

% of respondents who agreed that schools have a responsibility to teach students how to use A.I. effectively and responsibly



% of respondents who agreed that A.I. will transform the way we educate students within five years



■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

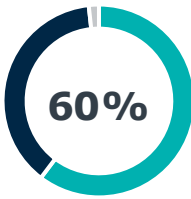
How superintendents rated the urgency for “determining district policies and best uses for A.I.”



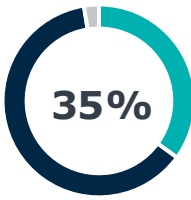
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■ Very Urgent ■ Mild/Moderately Urgent ■ Not Urgent

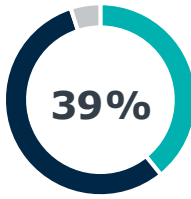
In 2025, Most Have Focused on Experimentation Rather Than Expectations



Have established a task force for exploring innovative uses of A.I.



Have established clear guidelines for when and how teachers can use A.I.



Have established clear guidelines for when and how students can use A.I.

■ Agree or strongly agree
■ Disagree or strongly disagree

United in Trying to Accelerate Growth in Math

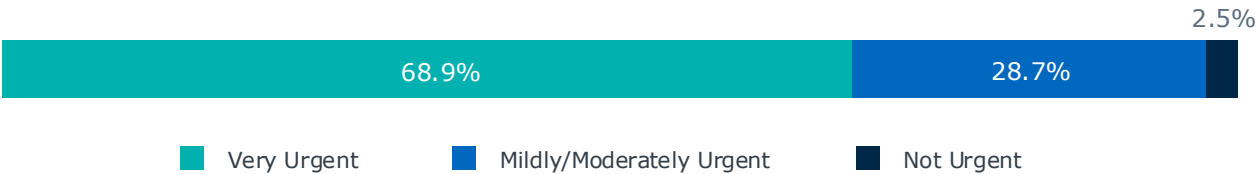
Every Subgroup of Superintendents Cited Math as the Most Urgent Issue in 2025

While politics, the economy, and technology each seem to change by the day, our results show that superintendents and their school systems remain laser-focused on their core mission in 2025. Each year, we ask superintendents to rate the urgency of a long list of current issues to gauge where they—and their teams—are most likely to be investing their time and resources. This year, the top five issues on our “urgency list” represent the foundations of effective schools: Accelerating growth in math and reading, recruiting high-quality teachers, reducing disruptive behavior, and improving student attendance.

One clear winner emerged as the most urgent issue for superintendents today: accelerating student growth in Math. After several years of focusing on early literacy and the science of reading, many are starting to ask whether research can provide similar insights into how to raise student achievement in Math; a subject that is often described as “ruthlessly cumulative.” This is by no means an isolated challenge for districts serving students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Accelerating growth in Math was the issue most frequently cited as “very urgent” by respondents in every subgroup within our survey.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for superintendents on this issue will be to help their school system move past the “Math Wars” and unproductive debates about whether direct instruction or inquiry-driven learning is the “right path.” Recent research suggests that proponents on both sides of the argument are asking the wrong question and should refocus on determining *when* each instructional method is most effective.

How Superintendents rate the urgency of accelerating growth in Math (April 2025)



Percentage of Superintendents who rate accelerating growth in Math as “very urgent,” by subgroup

Student Enrollment		Locale (Urban, Suburban, or Rural)		Percentage of students qualifying for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	
20,000+	81.8%	Urban	100%	75%+	100%
5,000 – 19,999	69.4%	Suburban	60.8%	50 – 74%	82.4%
1,000 – 4,999	66.2%	Rural	74.3%	25 – 49%	65.0%
0 – 999	75.0%			0 – 24%	37.9%

Five Priorities for Superintendents in 2025-26

We believe that the five themes highlighted in this report frame the issues that the majority of superintendents can focus on to have the greatest positive impact on their school system this year.

1

Minimizing Disruptions Caused by Changes in Federal (and State) Policy

Minimizing the distraction caused by changes in policy will be crucial to sustaining morale and ensuring that teachers can focus on instruction. But having a communications plan ready when major policy changes do arise will be critical for sustaining confidence and avoiding panic. Crafting a risk register for proposed policy changes and creating action plans for the top three risks in advance will help to bring peace of mind to your leadership team and board.

➡ [Preparing for District Flashpoints](#)

2

Strengthening Alignment and Governance Across the Leadership Team and Board

Strengthening alignment between the board and the leadership team and cultivating effective governance practices helps superintendents establish a solid foundation for key decisions. These investments also equip leadership teams to say “no” to new requests when budgets and resources are strained. Unfortunately, the rapid growth in responsibilities and expectations placed on school districts over the past decade has made alignment and prioritization surprisingly difficult. Conducting an annual alignment assessment helps superintendents to identify areas of oversight and inefficiency while helping team members (and the board) to focus on the most important work.

➡ [Organizing for Excellence in the Central Office](#)

3

Protecting the District From Fiscal Uncertainty

Operational efficiency and cost reduction will be top of mind for many district leadership teams this year. But in an industry with high fixed costs and growing student needs, there is only so much fat that can be trimmed without causing considerable harm. Therefore, while it may not initially remove dependency on tax revenues, they can secure marginal dollars that make a real difference to students and programs. Creating an inventory of current supplementary funding sources across the district and then comparing lists with peers can help uncover creative opportunities that are currently being overlooked.

➡ [10 Strategies to Generate Revenue for Your School District](#)

4

Building the Foundations for “Next Gen” A.I.

Generating supplemental revenue may still be a “nice to have” for some districts. But building the foundations for successfully and safely integrating AI is now non-negotiable. Beyond concerns about safety and ethics, the conversation will soon advance from how individuals can use tools like ChatGPT and Magic School toward the application of agentic AI in schools. Ensuring that the district has clearly defined policies and guidelines in place today will help to secure the trust and support needed to harness those game-changing innovations as they arrive.

➡ [Preparing Students \(And Your District\) for a Future with AI](#)

5

Generating Success Stories in Student Achievement (Especially Math)

However, if there is one thing that districts could do to strengthen community trust and support for public education as budgets tighten and school choice expands, it would be to raise student achievement in Math. Success stories that span across every type of school and district on an issue that every parent, community member, and politician can get behind would be transformational for K-12 at this pivotal moment. Superintendents have a unique opportunity to lead the national conversation away from divisive rhetoric and toward productive solutions that are firmly within reach.

➡ [Why the Math Isn’t Adding Up \(and What Districts Can Do to Bridge the Math Gap\)](#)

The Urgency List

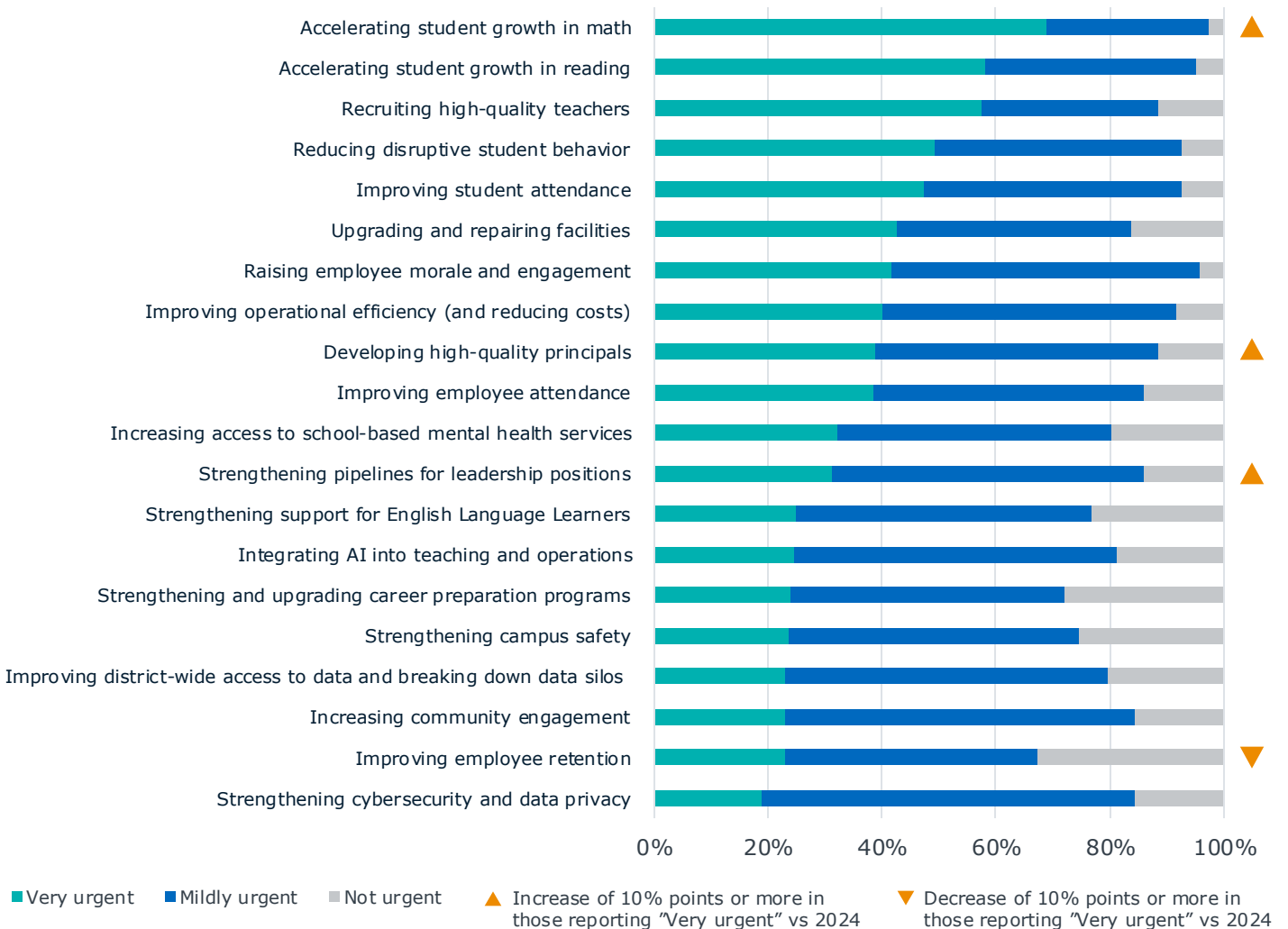
How Superintendents Rate the Urgency of Key Issues in 2025

Each year, we ask superintendents to rate the urgency of current challenges for their district.

This year, some familiar themes top the list: Accelerating progress in math, accelerating progress in reading, recruiting high-quality teachers, and reducing disruptive behavior. These are the same issues that topped the list last year, indicating that, despite myriad distractions, most districts remained laser-focused on improving student success in engaging, safe, and productive environments.

What has changed from last year? There are two issues in which the share of superintendents selecting “very urgent” has increased by 10 percentage points or more. The first is “accelerating progress in Math” which vaults to the top of the list after several years of the national narrative being dominated by early literacy and the science of reading. The second is investing in leadership development, which has only increased in importance as the range and complexity of challenges facing schools today continues to grow. Conversely, there is just one issue in which the share of superintendents selecting “very urgent” has dropped by 10 percentage points or more: improving employee retention. While it is clear from our calls that district leaders still care deeply about supporting employee morale and engagement, these results support the sentiment that turnover has stabilized somewhat since pandemic conditions, so now requires less immediate attention.

Question: Please rate the urgency of each of the following issues for your district over the next 12 months



Advice for New (and Seasoned) Superintendents

The role of the superintendent is challenging, especially for those new in seat. Every year, we ask participants to share advice for their peers who are stepping into the role. We believe the advice isn't just applicable to new superintendents and can be valuable whether in year one or year twenty. Perhaps hang this next to your desk as an encouraging reminder – your why is worth it.



First, be present and listen to your community.

- "Try to observe and collect as much information and data as you can before trying to make everything better. Do not try to fix everything in your first year."
- "Make time to visit buildings and your staff to see what is actually happening!"
- "Take the time to deeply understand your district—its history, people, and culture—before making big changes."
- "Take stock of your context in the first year – ask questions and listen."



Prioritize building relationships and expectations with your board.

- "Plan to work harder on your relationships with the Board than you think is necessary."
- "Make sure to establish systems for Board communication, document efforts and artifacts you use when communicating, and remain flexible."
- "Establish functional relationships with the BOE - top priority!"
- "Put in consistent time to build a rapport with each Board member."



Take your time to make thoughtful decisions.

- "Research implications before solving problems."
- "Don't be reactive and get discouraged with issues and alleged changes. Do your research and respond with what is factually true."
- "Don't make significant moves without proper planning, communication and feedback."
- "Pay attention to details. Take your time to work through difficult issues."



Prioritize your well-being.

- "Be good to yourself. Unplug. Set boundaries."
- "Work-life balance is imperative."
- "Take it one day at a time"
- "Enjoy the job---it is enjoyable with the right disposition."



Stay powered up with a support system.

- "Make sure you have a trusted mentor who you can call on."
- "Do not try to get through your first year alone. Being a Superintendent is extremely difficult. It is tough making the right decisions and often it feels terrible. Reach out to colleagues. It is super beneficial!"
- "Take it one day at a time and reach out to other superintendents."
- "Lean into local, regional, and national networks - don't go it alone!"

Achieve More With Less, Together

How Forward-Looking Districts Are Moving From Uncertainty to Progress

EAB's District Leadership Forum helps superintendents make progress on their most urgent challenges without adding staff or burning out their teams. Our 2025–26 Success Pathways combine expert guidance, practical tools, and time-saving templates to help your team move faster and deliver results on the highest impact priorities – with less friction and greater confidence.

Where Districts Are Making Progress in 2025-26

Organizing for Excellence in the Central Office

Establish clear roles and ownership to improve your leadership team's alignment and efficiency.

- Learn the characteristics of high-performing teams
- Evaluate the maturity of your team's structure and practices
- Capture your team's experiences and pain points
- Identify the highest impact changes to target each year

The AI Playbook for District Leaders

Create or strengthen your district-wide A.I. strategy to harness its potential and mitigate its risks.

- Establish a cross-representative AI task force
- Build leadership understanding of AI's urgency and impact on students and staff
- Assess your existing AI policies and practices for gaps and opportunities
- Identify proven tactics to develop a more responsive approach to AI

Leading for Literacy

Adopt a sustainable system to align instruction with the science of reading in all schools.

- Establish a district-wide vision of early literacy instruction
- Set non-negotiables for consistent implementation across schools
- Equip principals to lead instructional change
- Provide teachers agency and shared learning to accelerate progress

Bridging the Foundational Math Knowledge Gap*

Prepare a protocol and plan to effectively identify and target gaps in foundational math skill mastery.

- Bolster district leader expertise in the science behind efficient math skill recovery
- Identify needs and opportunities to streamline your existing math intervention strategy
- Develop a plan to build buy-in and implement a math MTSS protocol
- Launch an evidence-based math intervention pilot

Hardwiring Effective Communications to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

Build partnerships with families through coordinated, empathetic outreach to improve attendance.

- Assess gaps and opportunities to improve existing communications about attendance
- Establish a best-in-class prevention campaign
- Design a scalable system for targeted outreach
- Define and communicate roles and responsibilities for district and school leaders

Preparing Principals to Lead Change*

Equip principals with the strategic and interpersonal skills needed to lead change in their building.

- Understand the essential executive skills most principal prep programs fail to develop
- Build a P.D. calendar targeting principals' needs
- Learn time-saving strategies that enable principals to focus on the most impactful work
- Improve principal hiring practices by evaluating change leadership skills

*Limited seats available for nationwide cohorts starting in Fall 2025

Let's discuss where your district can make progress this year.
Learn more and connect with our team at eab.com/k12





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