

Navigating political tensions over schooling

Findings from the fall 2022 American School District Panel survey

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Key findings

Political polarization about LGBTQ+ issues, critical race theory, and Covid-19 has disrupted schooling.

Roughly half of district leaders in a nationally representative survey (51 percent) reported that political polarization around at least one of these issues was interfering with their ability to educate students as of fall 2022. Leaders of districts serving predominantly white students were more likely to report political polarization was interfering with schooling.

Political polarization has led to public requests for information, instructional opt-outs, and book removals.

Almost half of district leaders (45 percent) reported dealing with more Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests since the start of the 2021–22 school year. Leaders of low-poverty districts were more likely to report requests to remove books from libraries and to opt-out children from instruction about controversial subjects.

Political controversies have resulted in threats against educators.

Nearly one in three district leaders (31 percent) reported verbal or written threats against educators about politically controversial topics since the start of the 2021–22 school year. Reported threats were most common in historically advantaged districts (i.e., low-poverty districts, suburban districts, and majority-white districts). Threats were also more common in “island” districts, or those whose local political context did not match their state political context (i.e., blue districts in red states or red districts in blue states).

District leaders have acted to quell political controversy.

Almost half of district leaders (46 percent) who confronted political controversies in their district reported taking actions that have helped mitigate the impact on schooling. These actions included new processes for teaching controversial content, proactive management of controversies, and increased information sharing. Few districts, however, have changed instructional content or services in response to political controversy.

Introduction

Public schooling has always been politically fraught, but the politics of education seem more heated than ever. The political disagreements that began at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic over school closures, learning modalities, vaccination requirements, and masking policies linger, and have expanded to include debates over teaching about systemic racism and gender identity.¹ Heightened polarization has increased ideologically extreme views and catalyzed greater political engagement in schooling.² In fact, education emerged as a top issue for registered voters of both political parties since the 2020 presidential election.³ Accordingly, concentrating on hot-button, culture-war topics in schools has proven to be a winning strategy for some — though not all — politicians and school board members.⁴

A growing body of evidence suggests that the political conflicts over schooling have significantly affected educators, students, and the families they serve.⁵ For example, as of January 2022, about one-third of a nationally representative sample of teachers and two-thirds of principals reported being harassed about either their school's policies on Covid-19 or about topics related to race, racism, or bias.⁶

To what extent are political polarization and controversy interfering with schooling in 2022-23? And how are district leaders responding?

To answer these questions, we surveyed a random sample of 300 district and charter network leaders across the United States between Oct. 13 and Dec. 12, 2022 (hereafter referred to as fall 2022). We then weighted leaders' responses to make them nationally representative of school districts across the country. To complement these fall 2022 survey data, we incorporated data from other sources as well. First, we used survey data from similar samples of district leaders collected in fall 2021 and spring 2022 to document how the impact of polarization has changed over time. We also drew upon data from 22 interviews with seven superintendents conducted in four waves between January 2021 and November 2022. These interviews sought to understand how districts have responded to Covid-19 and broader educational challenges, including political polarization. These superintendents represent traditional school districts and charter networks in urban and suburban settings selected for geographical and political variation. Throughout this report, we use the terms *districts* and *district leaders* to refer to the 293 traditional public school districts and seven charter network leaders who participated in our fall 2022 survey. We use the term *superintendent* to refer to the charter network executives and district superintendents whom we interviewed.⁷

To understand the extent to which political conflicts were concentrated in certain district types, we disaggregated our survey results by district locale, poverty level, and student racial/ethnic composition. We also considered the extent to which leaders' responses varied by their district's political context. We used 2020 presidential election data to identify as *blue districts* those in counties where President Joe Biden received significantly more than half of the vote; *red districts* as those in counties where former President Donald Trump received significantly more than half of the vote; and *purple districts* as those in counties where Biden and Trump each received about half (or roughly equivalent) of the vote. We provide more detail about our methods at the end of the report, including the demographic characteristics of red, blue, and purple districts. In this report, we describe only those differences between district subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

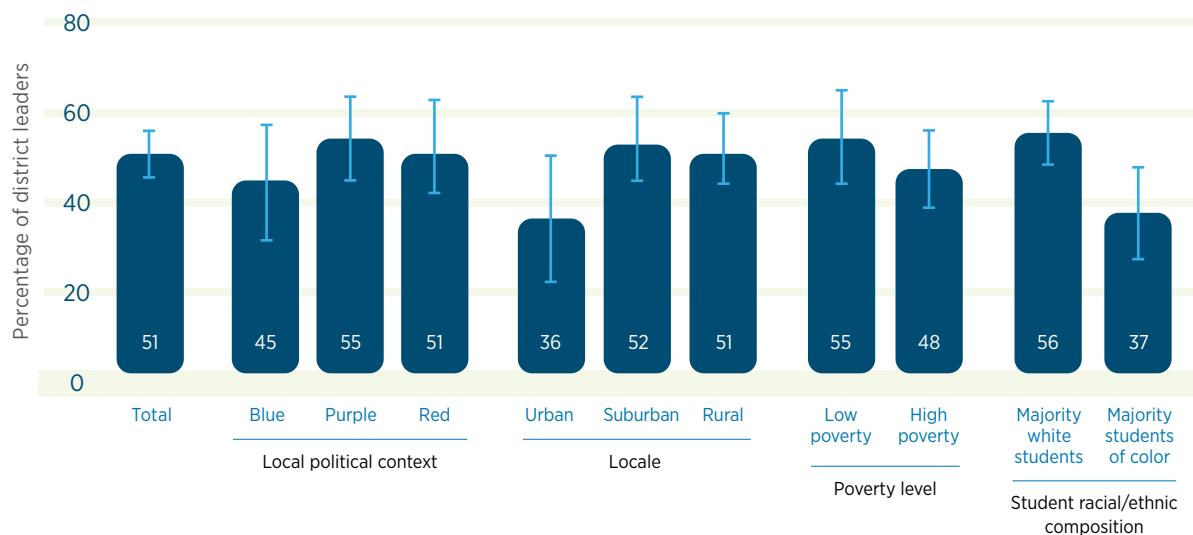
This report is the first to present results from the fall 2022 survey of the American School District Panel (ASDP). The ASDP is a research partnership between the RAND Corporation and the Center on Reinventing Public Education. The panel also collaborates with several other education organizations, including the Council of the Great City Schools and Kitamba, to help ensure we produce actionable

results. In a forthcoming second report, using results from the same survey, we discuss staff turnover at the end of the 2021–22 school year and staff shortages in the 2022–23 school year.

Half of district leaders said political polarization interfered with their ability to educate students

We asked district leaders to what extent political polarization about three controversial topics (Covid-19 safety or vaccines, critical race theory, and LGBTQ+ issues) was interfering with their ability to educate students as of fall 2022. Roughly half of district leaders (51 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that political polarization surrounding one or more of these topics was interfering with schooling (see Figure 1). Notably, a higher percentage of leaders of districts serving predominantly white students than of districts serving mostly students of color (56 versus 37 percent) felt that polarization was a problem.

Figure 1. Percentage of district leaders who agreed or strongly agreed they have encountered political polarization about Covid-19 safety or vaccines, critical race theory, and/or LGBTQ+ issues that was interfering with their ability to educate students in 2022–23, by district subgroup



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your district/CMO this school year (2022–2023)?” (n = 292). Respondents were asked about political polarization for Covid-19 safety or vaccines, critical race theory, and LGBTQ+ issues. This figure presents the percentage of district leaders who agreed or strongly agreed that political polarization surrounding one or more of these topics was interfering with their ability to educate students. Vertical black bars represent the 95 percent confidence interval for each estimate.

When asked in interviews about the source of political controversy in their communities, superintendents typically pointed to groups active on one side of the issue (e.g., a city council member, school board member, or vocal group of parents) or conflicts with state officials. They did not suggest that equally mobilized groups on opposing sides were involved in the controversies. For example, one superintendent noted that pressure from a small group of parents over the district’s Covid-19 response fueled chaos and placed enormous demands on leadership: “It was such a small group of parents who were vocal. ... We had people picketing outside school.”

Regardless of the source, superintendents described in interviews how political conflicts in their communities added to the demands of their jobs. As a superintendent of a suburban district on the West

Coast explained, “We’ve had to be far more nimble and creative than I think we ever had to be before, and we’ve had to do it under even more intense pressure and criticism in a job that was already subject to a lot of pressure and criticism.” Another superintendent in a rural, red district described how small controversies — such as when a community member complained that a school textbook featured an image of two young girls holding hands — could consume valuable time and attention, detracting from other strategic priorities. A third superintendent in the South noted that she was only able to manage increased external stakeholder demands because the board had created a second senior leadership position with responsibility for internal operations in the previous year.

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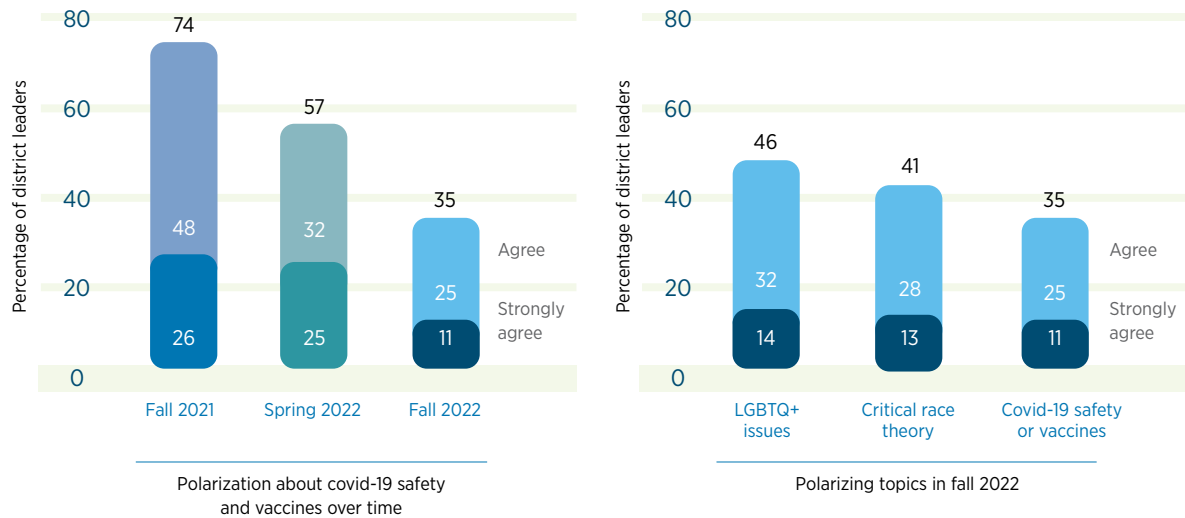
-Suburban superintendent in the West

Disruptions to schooling stemming from Covid-19 have declined, while those related to LGBTQ+ issues and critical race theory were widespread as of fall 2022

We now explore which specific issues (Covid-19, critical race theory, and LGBTQ+) district leaders said were disrupting schooling as of fall 2022. Using survey data that we gathered in fall 2021, spring 2022, and fall 2022, we can also compare how the disruptive impacts of polarization have changed over time. As shown in the left side of Figure 2, district leaders said that interference from Covid-19 polarization has steadily decreased over the last year. In fall 2021, roughly three-quarters of district leaders (74 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that polarization around Covid-19 safety was interfering with schooling. By fall 2022, this percentage had dropped to 35 percent. Nevertheless, this percentage is somewhat surprising since almost all districts had dropped their mask mandates and substantially relaxed their Covid-19-quarantine requirements by then.⁸

Meanwhile, almost half of district leaders (46 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that political polarization surrounding LGBTQ+ issues was interfering with schooling as of fall 2022, and 41 percent reported the same about critical race theory (see the right side of Figure 2). This means that controversies over these issues are now as widespread as those over Covid.

Figure 2. Percentage of district leaders who agreed or strongly agreed political polarization surrounding various issues was interfering with their ability to educate students



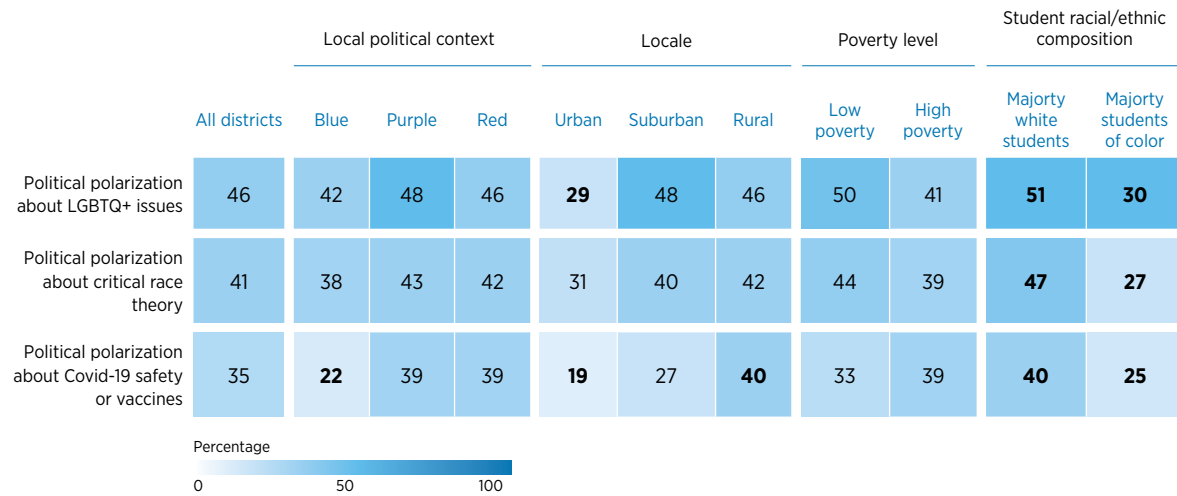
NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: “To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your district/CMO...” in fall 2022 (n = 292), spring 2022 (n = 287), and fall 2021 (n = 357). Figure presents the percentage of district leaders who agreed or strongly agreed that political polarization of these topics was interfering with their ability to educate students. Bars might not sum to totals due to rounding.

Heightened levels of state legislative activity about LGBTQ+ issues and critical race theory might help explain why high proportions of district leaders reported these topics were interfering with their ability to educate students in fall 2022.⁹ One superintendent we interviewed, who represented an urban district in the South, was put in the difficult position of navigating new state policies related to gender identity that directly conflicted with what vocal members of the district’s community espoused. Citing their commitment to inclusion, staff and families demanded action in opposition to the state legislature. But the superintendent worried that advocacy against state legislation would make the district the target of further scrutiny by state officials and amplify political tensions. The district instead opted to fly under the radar, ignoring state-level policymakers’ calls unless they were accompanied by tight enforcement mechanisms.

Polarization on all three issues was more disruptive in districts serving predominantly white students

In fall 2022, leaders of majority-white districts were most likely to report disruption to schooling due to political polarization across all three topics (see Figure 3). For example, 51 percent of leaders of majority-white districts agreed or strongly agreed political polarization of LGBTQ+ issues was interfering with schooling, compared with only 30 percent of leaders in districts serving predominantly students of color (a 21-percentage-point gap).

Figure 3. Percentage of district leaders who agreed or strongly agreed political polarization surrounding various issues was interfering with their ability to educate students in 2022–23, by topic and subgroup



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your district/CMO this school year (2022–2023)?” (n = 292). Respondents were asked about political polarization about Covid-19 safety or vaccines, critical race theory, and LGBTQ+ issues. Figure presents the percentage of district leaders who agreed or strongly agreed that political polarization of these topics was interfering with their ability to educate students. Numbers in bold indicate that the subgroup percentage of district leaders reporting political polarization of that topic is statistically significantly different ($p < 0.05$) from the remaining district leaders not in that subgroup who said the same.

The disruptive impact of political polarization in majority-white districts is a pattern we can trace back to at least the first time we asked district leaders identically worded questions in fall 2021.¹⁰ At that time, the impacts of Covid-19 political polarization were concentrated in majority-white districts, rural and suburban districts, and low-poverty districts.¹¹ We generally see evidence of similar patterns as of fall 2022. Taken together, these results indicate political polarization has been most disruptive in districts serving predominantly white students — 74 percent of which are located in rural areas and 55 percent of which are red districts (located in counties won by former President Trump in the 2020 election). This finding echoes prior research, which found teachers and principals working in schools serving predominantly white students were significantly more likely to report politics as a job-related stressor.¹²

A superintendent of a large, urban district explained that his district had not received “the pushback” from local constituents seen in other districts, which he chalked up to the fact that his community was composed of a supermajority of working-class Democratic voters who were not motivated by identity politics or culture war issues. The local political context might explain the results shown in Figure 3, where fewer leaders from urban districts — which tend to serve larger shares of students of color and are often located in counties won by Biden — report political polarization on LGBTQ+ and Covid-19 safety interfering with schooling.

Threats, opt-outs, and book bans tended to be concentrated in historically advantaged districts

We queried district leaders about 10 different forms of potential fallout from political polarization, including Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, complaints or threats from parents and community members, and formal legal actions. Figure 4 shows that districts were generally less likely to experience legal actions than other actions like FOIA requests and threats. As many as four of 10 suburban districts, low-poverty districts, and majority-white districts reported receiving verbal or written threats against their educators or school board members since the start of the 2021–22 school year. Likewise, four of 10 suburban districts received requests to remove certain books.¹³

Figure 4. Percentage of district leaders who said their district has experienced the following issues since the start of the 2021–22 school year, by issue and district subgroup

	Local political context			Locale			Poverty level		Student racial/ethnic composition		
	All districts	Blue	Purple	Red	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Low poverty	High poverty	Majority white students	Majority students of color
Threats, opt-outs, and removals											
Heightened number of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests	45	51	45	43	43	46	45	52	38	48	38
Verbal or written threats from the public against educators in your district/CMO about politically controversial topics	31	37	36	25	30	43	26	41	18	35	17
Heightened number of opt-out requests from parents from instruction about controversial topics	30	30	34	28	21	38	27	37	21	34	20
Verbal or written threats from the public against school board members in your district/CMO about politically controversial topics	29	36	33	24	35	39	25	39	17	34	16
Requests to remove certain books from school or classroom libraries and/or curriculum	28	30	35	21	24	42	22	34	20	31	21
Formal complaints about your district's instructional materials or teaching or training related to politically controversial subjects	16	22	20	10	17	28	11	21	10	19	10
Involvement by national or state-wide organizations or donors in your local district operations because of politically controversial subjects	11	13	11	10	20	17	7	13	8	12	8
Legal actions											
Lawsuits or serious threat of litigation about instruction or services in your district/CMO related to politically controversial subjects	7	7	7	7	15	9	6	8	5	8	3
Formal censures or write-ups of one or more educators in your district/CMO for teaching or speech about politically controversial subjects	6	6	5	8	8	11	4	9	3	8	4
Investigations by a federal or state agency related to politically controversial subjects	5	3	7	5	13	3	5	5	5	5	5

Percentage
0 50 100

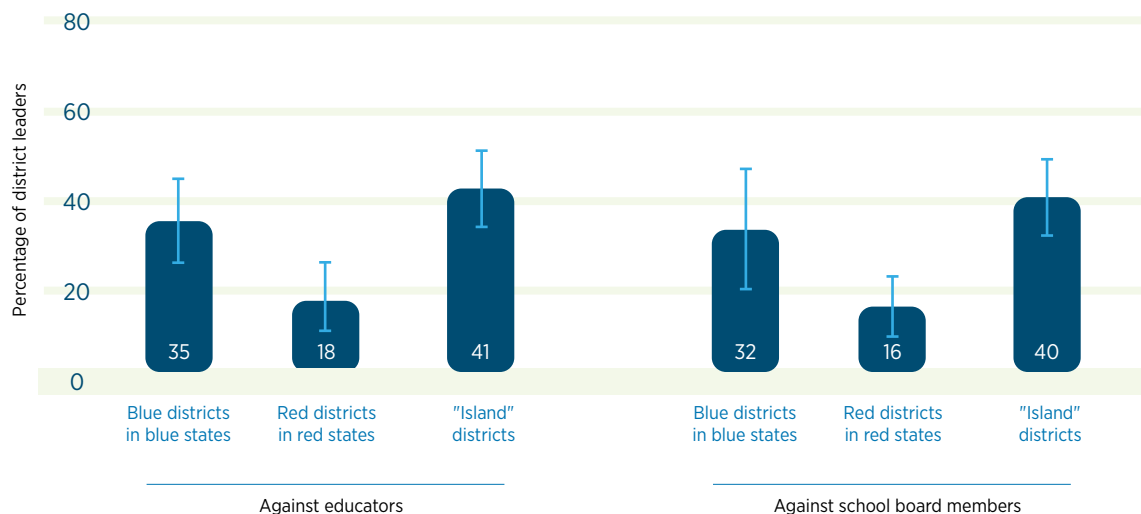
NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “Has your district/CMO experienced any of the following since the start of last school year (2021–2022)?” (n = 286). Numbers in bold indicate that the subgroup percentage of district leaders reporting their district had experienced the issue is statistically significantly different ($p < 0.05$) from the remaining district leaders not in that subgroup who said the same.

Several reasons may account for the lower rates of community actions in rural districts, high-poverty districts, and those serving predominantly students of color. First, educators and leaders in such districts may simply be in closer sync with their communities and thus less likely to experience these threats. However, Figure 3 shows that leaders of high-poverty districts and of rural districts report interference from polarization at similar rates similar to the national average, so we do not find strong support for this theory. Second, the well-documented structural barriers that low-income communities and communities of color experience could limit their agency, efficacy, and likelihood of voicing their concerns to local education officials.¹⁴ By extension, parents in majority-white, suburban, or low-poverty districts could feel both the agency and confidence that their voices will be heard and thus be more likely to complain or make demands.¹⁵ This suggests that the social capital that accrues to more advantaged parents may be key to activating the types of actions leaders in these districts reported.

Finally, fewer reports in high-poverty districts and districts serving predominantly students of color may reflect lower levels of concern with identity politics. As one urban superintendent noted, “Those left-right issues are not an issue here. It’s not in the DNA of this town.” Noting the absence of flare-ups about LGBTQ+ concerns even in socially conservative, Black neighborhoods, the superintendent explained, “What resonates in this town is what’s happening to me and my family, my kids, and my schools. Those are the kinds of issues that end up in front of my board.” Given the disproportionate learning losses experienced by low-income students and students of color,¹⁶ less-advantaged communities may simply have more important concerns on their plate.

Notably, we did not find evidence that districts’ local political context was related to their likelihood of experiencing threats, complaints, and opt-outs (see Figure 4). However, we did find some evidence that districts’ state political context matters. More specifically, “island” districts — or districts whose local political context was out of sync with the state political context — were particularly likely to report threats against educators and school board members since the start of the 2021–22 school year (see Figure 5). For example, 41 percent of “island” districts (i.e., red districts in blue states or blue districts in red states) reported experiencing threats from the public against educators, compared with only 18 percent of red districts in red states.

Figure 5. Percentage of district leaders who said their district has experienced verbal or written threats from the public about politically controversial topics since the start of the 2021–22 school year



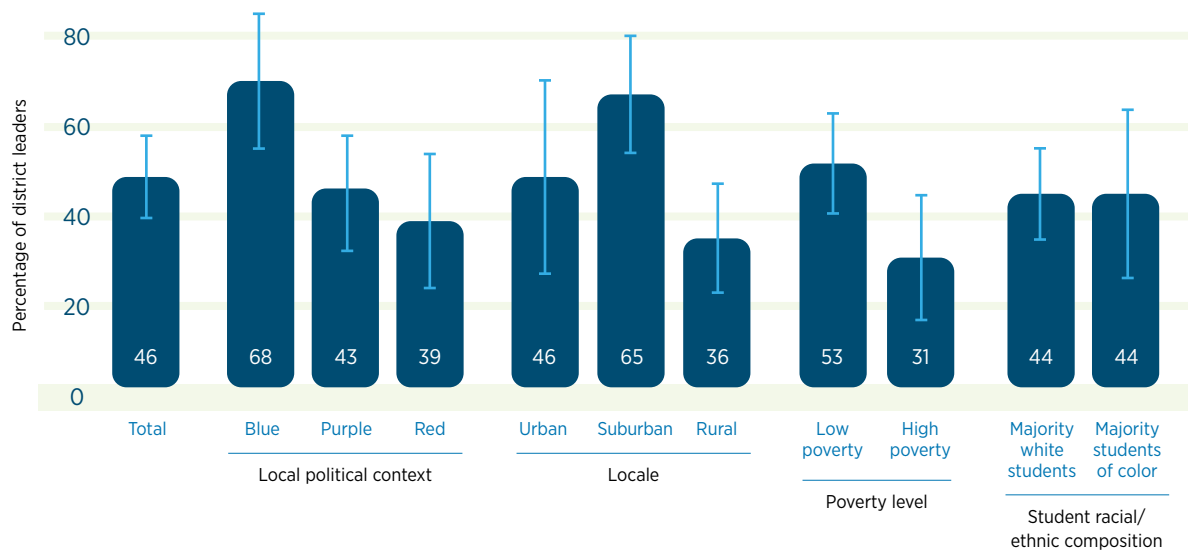
NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “Has your district/CMO experienced any of the following since the start of last school year (2021–2022)?” (n = 285). Respondents were asked about verbal or written threats against educators in their district/CMO and against school board members. Vertical black bars represent the 95 percent confidence interval for each estimate.

We also note that districts of all kinds reported facing heightened numbers of FOIA requests since the start of 2021-22 (Figure 4). We interpret these increased FOIA requests as signs of distrust, or in some cases, as deliberate efforts to impose burdens on the school system. In interviews, superintendents described how information requests could short-circuit district capacity to do other work. One suburban superintendent bemoaned the eight public records requests filed by a local parent that would be challenging and time-consuming to fulfill: “If all we’re doing is scrambling to pull together documentation, we’re not able to focus on the real work we need to do.” Another superintendent pointed to the chilling effect FOIA requests have on school and district staff: “It makes everyone very nervous. ... when people talk about retaining high-caliber and high-quality professionals in leadership and in teaching positions, this isn’t [how].”

Of those districts that have experienced political controversies, almost half took actions that they say have successfully addressed community concerns

About half of the district leaders (46 percent) who said their district had encountered political polarization or controversy reported implementing policies or practices that they feel successfully mitigated community concerns (Figure 6). Leaders of blue districts, suburban districts, and low-poverty districts were more likely than their counterparts to indicate they had successfully addressed parental or community concerns by enacting new policies or practices.

Figure 6. Among districts who said they have encountered political polarization or controversy, percentage of district leaders who said there were policies or practices they have used successfully to address parental or community concerns about controversial school subjects, by district subgroup



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “Are there any policies or practices that your district/CMO have used that have successfully addressed parental or community concerns about controversial school subjects? If yes, please briefly describe the policy or practice.” (n = 162). Fifty-two percent of respondents selected “Not applicable; we haven’t encountered much political polarization or controversy” and are excluded from this figure. This figure depicts the percentage of those who said “yes” out of the remaining 48 percent of respondents. Vertical black bars represent the 95 percent confidence interval for each estimate.

In the survey and interviews, we asked district leaders to describe what actions they took to successfully address community concerns. We draw upon the 84 written responses to our open-ended survey question,¹⁷ as well as interviews with superintendents in this section to understand their tactics and strategies.

Most often, district leaders reported using new policies and procedures related to the teaching of controversial content. For example, one district created a new checklist for staff to use to determine when to notify parents about potentially controversial content. Another created a formal process for working through requests to review library books. Yet another adopted new board policies and administrative procedures for reviewing instructional materials. In total, among the 84 district leaders who provided written responses, 62 percent reported using strategies like these.

Leaders also emphasized the importance of managing controversies proactively. As one district leader wrote in the survey, “We have addressed the ‘whispers’ we hear about the issues to avoid hearing ‘screams.’” A superintendent of a suburban district we interviewed similarly commented, “I do a lot of very deep relationship building, beyond the boardroom and outside the formal structures of meetings in order to be accessible and help people see our policies and processes are ... the alternative to the political extremes.” This often meant engaging head-on and face-to-face with constituents who had concerns about teaching and learning practices in the district.

Of the 84 written explanations, 37 percent reported using public or one-on-one engagements with parents and community members to manage political controversies. A superintendent of a rural district offered to meet with community members in recurring meetings to discuss their concerns. As he stated, “I felt like they listened, they grew in their understanding. I grew in my understanding ... it was very positive.”

Leaders also reported that sharing information could correct misinformation and increase community members’ knowledge of the process for adopting new instructional materials and the purpose of those materials. District leaders suggested such measures could be used to rebut inaccurate claims about curriculum and library books and address frequently asked questions.

District leaders reported defusing concerns about specific books by increasing parents’ ability to opt out of instruction. Such strategies were most common in the instructional areas of health and sex education and social-emotional learning.

In interviews, superintendents emphasized effective governance and school board management as critical to keeping political conflicts from undermining their ability to educate students. They noted that as political conflicts have bubbled up in communities, school board elections have become increasingly politicized, and board members have increasingly been called on to respond. A superintendent representing a suburban district in the South said, “Politics showed up closer to the boardroom than they [have] since the late sixties.” The leader elaborated, “Board members are operating as independent actors and not functioning as a governance team. ... It’s creating chaos ... and leaves learning to chance.” Another superintendent in a rural district described how a contentious board election added new board members who brought single-issue agendas and less familiarity with all the responsibilities of the board.

“Board members are operating as independent actors and not functioning as a governance team. ... It’s creating chaos ...”

- Suburban superintendent in the South

Managing boards in the face of heated controversies requires diligent leadership, superintendents noted in interviews. As one commented, “Strong superintendents do not impulsively respond to independent

interests.” Another described using communication strategies to counteract false narratives about the district by reframing the debate on her own terms: “We are in a battle right now to accurately portray the work of public education, because I think it’s being inaccurately portrayed. And frankly, I think it’s being manipulated by some for different political [reasons]. ... We’ve got to start talking about the work in ways that bring more people in.”

“We are in a battle right now to accurately portray the work of public education, because I think it’s being inaccurately portrayed.”

-Suburban superintendent in the West

Superintendents we interviewed also reported walking a fine line in their relationships with state officials. On the one hand, state officials can be important allies and supporters of districts’ work. One superintendent from an urban district in the Northeast described how their state commissioner “blocks and tackles” and “takes a lot of hits for us.” But other superintendents described a growing sense of frustration, as the rhetoric and policies coming out of state capitals undermined productive working relationships. One superintendent of an urban district in the Midwest described how his relationship with state officials had deteriorated in the face of increasingly rapid-fire legislation on controversial subjects. The result was a sense of powerlessness to influence state policy debates: “It actually doesn’t matter what you say, because they’re not listening.” As he continued, “For the first time in my career, I’m just gonna hunker down and do what I can do here and continue to find ways to make it work in a poor policy environment.” This leader and another we interviewed both described “tuning out” rhetoric from governors and state legislators as a necessary strategy for staying focused on district priorities.

“For the first time in my career, I’m just gonna hunker down and do what I can do here and continue to find ways to make it work in a poor policy environment.”

-Urban superintendent in the Midwest

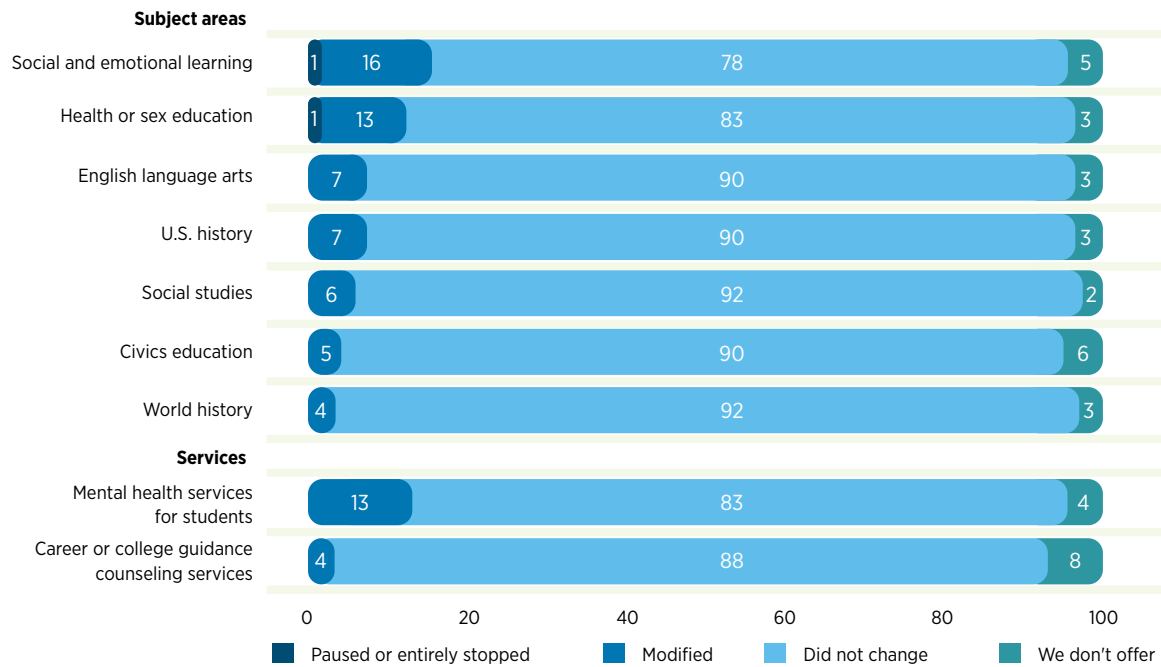
Most districts aren’t modifying instructional content or services in reaction to political controversy

Despite the heated nature of the political disagreements over the last two years, a majority of district leaders reported that they have not changed or curtailed instruction or services. This could reflect the limited influence that outside actors have historically had on practices inside classrooms¹⁸ or the deliberate efforts of district leaders to shield the work of teaching and learning from political debate.

Only one-third of district leaders (32 percent) said they paused or changed one or more subjects or service areas we asked about since the start of the 2021–22 school year. Among the subjects most impacted were social and emotional learning (SEL), health or sex education, and mental health services. As shown in Figure 7, 17 percent of district leaders reported pausing or modifying SEL content, 14 percent said similarly about health or sex education, and 13 percent said similarly about mental health services. Fewer district leaders reported pausing or modifying instructional content in social studies courses like U.S. history, civics, and world history. Among the few districts that did report instructional or service changes, leaders overwhelmingly indicated they curtailed their instruction or services in some way as

opposed to stopping them entirely. In results not shown, we did not find many differences by district subgroup, with the exception that suburban districts were more likely to modify or pause health or sex education and social studies than districts nationally.

Figure 7. Percentage of district leaders who said their district paused or modified instructional content or services due to potential or actual political controversy or state or local directives about race, gender, or sexuality since the start of the 2021–22 school year



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: “Since the start of last school year (2021–2022), has one or more schools in your district/CMO changed instructional content in any grade level due to potential or actual political controversy or state or local directives about race, gender, or sexuality?” and “Since the start of last school year (2021–2022), has one or more schools in your district/CMO changed the services it offers in any grade level due to potential or actual political controversy or state or local directives about race, gender, or sexuality?” (n = 291). Bars may not sum to totals because of rounding.

If a district leader indicated on the survey that their district had modified instructional content or services, we asked them to describe the nature of the change. Curricular changes addressing the scope, sequence, topics, or texts taught in the subject were most common.¹⁹ One district leader referenced moving discussions of gender identity from the elementary school curriculum up to middle school. Another mentioned eliminating discussions of elections. A third leader referenced scrubbing their curriculum of controversial topics altogether.

Among district leaders who wrote about changes to SEL, nearly one in five reported modifying surveys and assessments focused on student mental health and well-being in response to political controversies. One district leader noted completely abandoning efforts to survey elementary students about SEL; another delayed participation in the [Youth Risk Behavior & Resiliency Survey](#) — an effort by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to monitor six categories of health-related behaviors. A third district leader used a new vendor for the district’s assessment on social and emotional well-being because the community associated the prior assessment with a “critical race theory” agenda.

In many cases, districts’ changes to instructional content were spurred by directives from state officials. District leaders attributed nearly half (46 percent) of their reported changes to health and sex education to state directives as well as 28 percent of changes to social studies, and 25 percent of changes to SEL.

Other districts described more modest changes. For example, one rebranded their efforts to support student well-being as “student support;” another reframed the work around “career skills.” Such communication strategies were used by 20 percent of district leaders who provided open-ended responses to manage political controversies around SEL specifically, which suggests that superintendents are finding success reframing debates.

Implications

Superintendents have always had to navigate political conflicts about schooling.²⁰ However, the nature of these conflicts has changed since the Covid-19 pandemic first closed schools in March 2020. Since then, the conflicts that began over Covid-19 safety protocols have expanded into disagreements about the teaching of race, racism, and gender identity. By fall 2022, half of district leaders reported that political polarization interfered with their ability to educate students, a trend particularly prominent in majority-white districts. These trends have created new pressure points for districts and increased the demands on district leaders to think and act politically.

This report shows the impacts of heightened levels of political polarization as of fall 2022 and the tactics district leaders have used — often successfully — to quell controversy. Leaders have emphasized the importance of proactive engagement with community members on controversial subjects, clear policies and procedures for managing criticisms, more transparency, and savvy communication. For the most part, they report being able to manage controversy without wholesale changes to curriculum.

However, even though many district leaders have risen to the challenge, such conflicts have still had an impact. This report adds to a growing body of research that shows political polarization is materially affecting educators’ ability to do their work. For example, as many as four of 10 suburban, low-poverty, and majority-white districts have received verbal or written threats against their educators or their school board members since the start of the 2021–22 school year. Four of 10 districts have received more FOIA requests, which interviewees described as time-consuming, getting in the way of other work, and having a chilling effect on teaching. In one of our previous surveys administered in January 2022, one-quarter of teachers said that they had been directed to limit classroom conversations about politics and social issues; these teachers worked in many more than the 14 states that had enacted state-level restrictions on classroom conversations at the time of the survey.²¹

Furthermore, polarization also might have longer-term impacts on the stability of the educator workforce. About half of a nationally representative sample of principals said in January 2022 that the intrusion of political issues and opinions into their profession was a job-related stressor. In that same survey, principals and teachers who reported being harassed about political issues reported lower levels of well-being, and they were more likely to cite the politicization of their profession as a reason for considering leaving their jobs.²² Similarly, in a spring 2022 survey, superintendents identified politics as among their top reasons for considering leaving the profession.²³ This is an important trend to track given that morale among educators has plummeted since the Covid-19 pandemic began.²⁴

The superintendents we interviewed were steadfast in their commitment to addressing the political controversies in their communities. They were also transparent about the impact on school operations: The disputes consumed valuable time and leadership capacity, distracted them from other strategic priorities that merited attention, and made their jobs more difficult. State officials and board members sometimes amplified these political controversies and sometimes dampened them — suggesting that policymakers have essential roles to play in mitigating the impacts of political polarization on schooling.

The superintendents we interviewed were steadfast in their commitment to addressing the political controversies in their communities. They were also transparent about the impact on school operations.

The political controversies surrounding public education are unlikely to go away any time soon. District leaders will need support to effectively mitigate the impacts of such conflicts. This can happen by:

- **Preparing superintendents and district leaders for the political demands of their jobs.** Superintendent associations, superintendent training programs, and state departments of education can help develop strategies for engaging stakeholders on controversial topics, establishing clear policies and procedures for managing community concerns, developing communication strategies to address controversial topics, and managing relations with local boards and state officials.
- **Creating mechanisms to support more effective school board governance.** Increasingly politicized school board elections may impede effective oversight of superintendents and school systems. State departments of education and school board associations could address this concern by providing training for prospective board members on their responsibilities and the consequences of increasing polarization. North Dakota, for example, is using federal stimulus dollars to support the “Be Legendary School Board Leadership Institute,” a [statewide effort](#) to support more effective governance by school boards. States could also create rules that support more collaboration among board members and fewer single-issue interests by requiring board members to engage in collective action when introducing new policies or making requests of the superintendent. Such rules could reduce opportunities for single-issue candidates to dominate absent broader, collective concerns.
- **Supporting additional research to identify effective leadership strategies for managing political conflict in education.** District leaders reported using a range of strategies to address community concerns and insulate schools from the consequences of heated political conflicts. These include creating policies and procedures for teaching controversial content, proactively engaging with community members who have concerns, and increasing information and transparency. This report, however, has only scratched the surface in identifying effective strategies. While a growing body of research has documented increasing conflict and its fallout on educators and schools, little research has yet considered how district leaders can more effectively mitigate these impacts. Researchers could address this gap and provide an evidence base to support work by organizations that train and support district leaders.

Controversy around public education is a fact of life, but its disruptive impact on classrooms needn't be. Positioning district leaders to mitigate the impacts of political conflicts is the first step toward ensuring they don't undermine districts' abilities to serve students.

Appendix

Methods

Survey

Our methodology for analyzing survey data remains consistent between American School District Panel survey waves. Therefore, the description of our methods below is an update from a previous publication.²⁵

RAND Corporation researchers fielded the sixth survey of the ASDP from Oct. 13, 2022 through Dec. 12, 2022. Researchers randomly sampled districts and CMOs to invite them to enroll in the ASDP. All enrolled districts were invited to complete this survey. Of the 1,148 districts and CMOs that enrolled in the panel between fall 2020 and fall 2022, 300 district leaders completed fall 2022 surveys on behalf of their districts (26.1 percent completion rate). This completion rate is on par with those from previous ASDP surveys. Responses reflect district leaders' perceptions, which might or might not align with districts' actual experiences. Also, respondents might not have consistently interpreted terms on the survey, such as "political polarization," which could affect how they completed survey items.

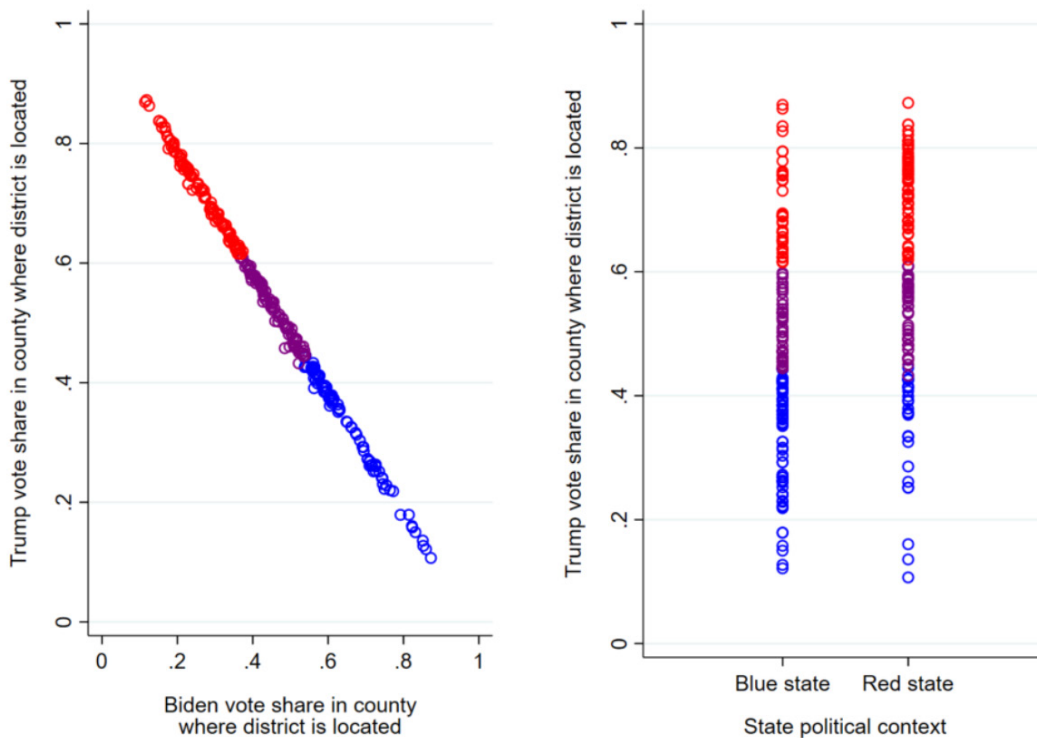
Survey responses have been weighted to be representative of the national population of public school districts, not the national population of public school students. Students are not evenly distributed across school districts. For example, readers should keep in mind that although rural district leaders represent a majority of school *districts*, they do not represent a majority of public school students. Forthcoming accompanying technical documentation provides more information about the weighting procedures.²⁶

Because districts' experiences vary, we examined differences in district leaders' responses by district characteristics as well as by their state and local political context. We obtained the data on district characteristics by linking survey data files to the 2020–2021 Common Core of Data (CCD) issued by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). We also used some data from the 2019–2020 school year, given lower-than-normal levels of data quality on student poverty status in the 2020–2021 CCD. We obtained data on each district's state political context — proxied by the political party of the state's governor as of October 2022 — from the National Governors Association. We obtained data on each district's local political context from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)'s Education and Science Data Lab. We constructed our measures of local political context by using the share of the votes that went to President Joe Biden versus former President Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election in the county in which the district is located (see Figure 8). We use these data sources to analyze district leaders' responses by the following categories:

1. Locale (*urban, suburban, and rural*). Our locale definition aligns with the four-category locale definition used by NCES, with the exception that we collapsed the districts located in towns into the rural category for sample size reasons.
2. Student racial and ethnic composition (we categorize districts in which more than half of students are Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, or of two or more races as having *majority students of color*, with the remaining districts categorized as having *majority white students*)
3. District poverty level (districts in which half or more of students qualify for a free or reduced-price meal are categorized as *high poverty*, whereas the remainder are categorized as *low poverty*)

- 4.State political context (districts in states with a Democratic governor as of October 2022 are categorized as *blue state districts*, whereas districts in states with a Republican governor are categorized as *red state districts*)
- 5.Local political context (districts are categorized based on the relative share of the votes received by Biden versus Trump in the 2020 presidential election in the district’s county. We calculated the difference in vote shares and then sorted districts into three quantiles based on this difference; *blue districts* are those in counties in which Biden received the greatest vote shares; *red districts* are those in counties in which Trump received the greatest vote shares; *purple districts* are those in the middle of the distribution in counties where Biden and Trump received similar vote shares).²⁷
- 6.State and local political agreement (for each district, we first determined whether Biden or Trump received a greater share of the votes in the district’s county. We then compared it to the state political context. Districts in counties where Biden received a greater share of the votes and in a state with a Democratic governor were categorized as *blue state and local control*. Districts in counties where Trump received a greater share of the votes and in a state with a Republican governor were categorized as *red state and local control*. The remaining districts were categorized as *island districts*, or *districts* in counties in which Biden received a greater share of the votes but the state had a Republican governor or vice versa).

Figure 8. Distribution of districts by candidate vote shares in our sample

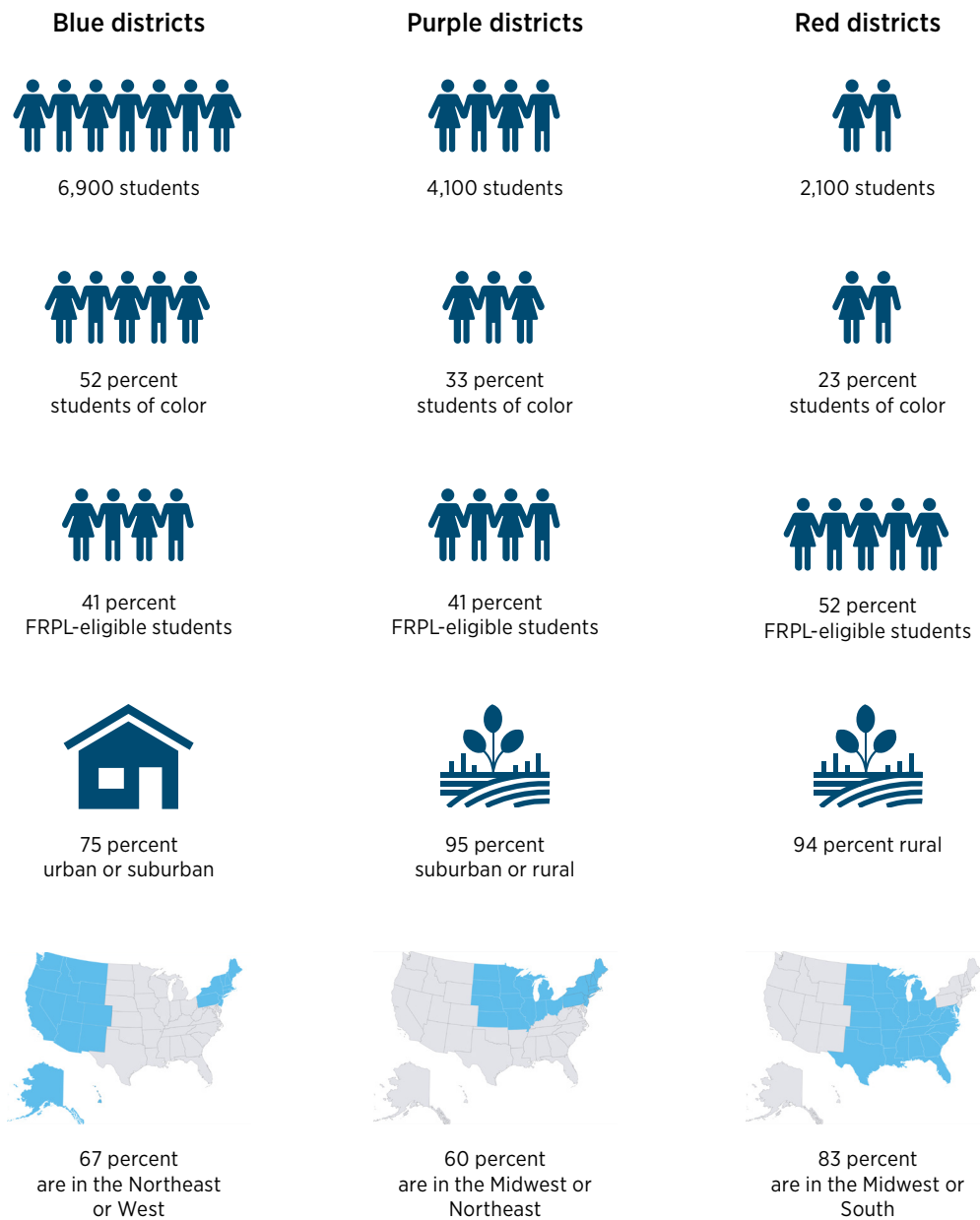


In this report, we do not separately analyze differences between traditional public districts and CMOs due to the small number of CMO leaders who completed our surveys.

Each district in the survey belongs to multiple subgroups — for example, a single school district that is suburban, low-poverty, enrolls mostly white students, is located in a state with a Democratic governor, and in a county in which Biden received a majority of the votes. Importantly, district characteristics as

well as their local political context are highly correlated with each other (see Figure 9). For example, blue districts — 75 percent of which are located in urban and suburban areas and 67 percent of which are in the West or Northeast — tend to have larger enrollment sizes than purple and red districts. In contrast, red districts tend to be small, enroll high proportions of white students, and tend to be located in rural areas, often in the South or Midwest. Thus, patterns observed across locale, poverty status, student racial and ethnic composition, and political context might be driven by the same set of districts that share multiple characteristics.

Figure 9. Demographic characteristics of blue, purple, and red districts



In this report, we describe only those differences among district subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5 percent level, unless otherwise noted. For all fall 2022 survey estimates, we conducted significance testing to assess whether subgroups were statistically different at the $p < 0.05$ level. Specifically, we tested whether the percentage of district leaders in one subgroup reporting a response was statistically different from the remaining district leaders who took the survey (e.g., leaders of urban districts versus other respondents who did not lead an urban district). However, we did not conduct formal significance testing of differences across survey waves (e.g., comparing district leaders' responses on survey items from fall 2021 versus fall 2022) because of a lack of longitudinal survey weights that properly account for the partial overlap in respondents and changes in representativeness of survey respondents across years. Estimates for each survey are separately produced using cross-sectional survey weights designed specifically to provide nationally representative estimates at the time point at which the survey was administered. Comparisons across time points should be made with caution. Furthermore, because of the exploratory nature of this study, we did not apply multiple hypothesis test corrections.

Interviews

The survey is complemented by a set of interviews with superintendents of four districts and three public charter management organizations conducted over four waves between September 2021 and November 2022. These systems range in size from less than 4,000 to over 40,000 students and were selected for structural and geographical variations. The systems covered in our qualitative data are more urban, and serve more students from low-income households and more students of color than those in the nation as a whole.

The first three waves of interviews were designed to capture superintendents' and senior leadership's experiences responding to the Covid-19 pandemic and addressing its implications for students, families, and educators. The fourth wave, conducted between November and December of 2022, specifically focused on the current political pressures superintendents experienced and the strategies they were using to address those pressures. For this wave, we added an additional rural school district to our sample.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. Researchers analyzed transcripts to understand the following research questions:

1. What political pressures do superintendents experience and how, if at all, have these evolved over the course of the pandemic?
2. Who are the key stakeholder groups influencing the superintendent's and school district's work?
3. How have political pressures shaped the superintendent's ability to lead the district?
4. What strategies have superintendents used to manage these pressures?

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About the American School District Panel

The ASDP is a research partnership between the RAND Corporation and the Center on Reinventing Public Education. The panel also collaborates with several other education organizations, including the Council of the Great City Schools and Kitamba, to help ensure we produce actionable results.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center affiliated with Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. We develop, test, and support bold, evidencebased, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Questions about CRPE and its research can be sent to crpe@asu.edu.

About RAND Education and Labor

RAND Education and Labor is a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. This report is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. For more information and research on these and other related topics, please visit [gatesfoundation.org](https://www.gatesfoundation.org). More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this report or about the ASDP should be directed to hschwartz@rand.org.

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