



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Education Focus Report: Top District Priorities and Shifts in PK-12 Education

District Leader Considerations for School Year 2022-23



Introduction

Through the Prism of the Pandemic: Key Impacts and Trends in PK-12 Education

Turbulence. Rollercoaster. Blind corners. Whatever the analogy, the pandemic compelled adaptation and learning shifts for PK-12 educators, students, and families, moving all to rethink existing education models and ideas. Technology now plays a more central role in the educational experience than ever before.¹ The technological transformation of schools in the past two years coincided with a growing push to rethink how schools engage students to elevate their voice and choice in learning.

Suddenly, the modern possibilities of personalized learning approaches coupled with learning technology—long hampered by

inconsistent device access, tight budgets, and disparate systems and processes—were seriously reconsidered thanks to new mindsets and generous federal relief funding for schools. Flexible instructional approaches and increased digital literacy shifted personalized learning from possible to plausible in the minds of many educators.

In the 2021-22 school year, districts pivoted from emergency response to recovery of unfinished learning. Districts channeled federal relief funds to key interventions like tutoring, staffing, and expanded learning opportunities. In parallel, school leaders are navigating new technology terrain, asking how their systems and data can help advance key strategic priorities.

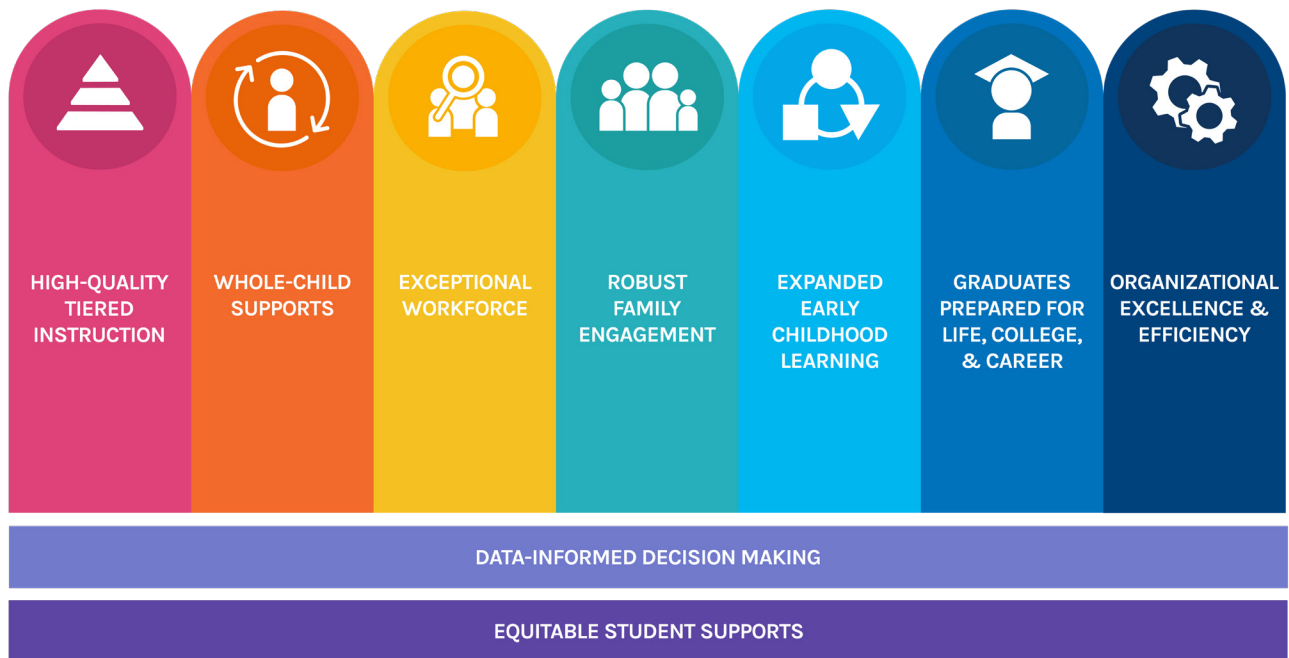
Recentring the Conversation: Top Education Priorities

Our report intends to recentr PK-12 conversations starting with what’s most important to school districts—their priorities to better support students.

PowerSchool conducted a national scan of 25 mid-sized to large districts’ strategic plans, identifying seven common strategic priorities and two grounding concepts. We then invited leaders from across the U.S. to reflect on these priority areas with an eye to lessons learned, hurdles, and insights about the future.

FIGURE 1

Seven Common Strategic Priorities and Two Grounding Concepts



These common district priorities reflect schooling both before and during the continuing pandemic. In many ways, they are familiar, mirroring everyday dialogue about schools and key areas of work. In other ways, there are subtle surprises. For example, the emergence of whole-child support as tantamount to students’ academic success is a key development. The increasing local push for early childhood education to provide students with more equitable opportunities is also an encouraging trend. Organizational excellence and efficiency—designing data systems, protecting student information, ensuring budget transparency, and achieving

a modern technology infrastructure—shifted from the back of the office to front and center.

The two grounding concepts—equitable student supports² and data-informed decision making³—are also noteworthy. Ten to 20 years ago, these concepts were on education advocacy banners across the nation to bring needed attention and resources to underserved students. Now they are largely accepted as foundational to impactful schooling. This speaks to the power of data and the necessity of equitable resource allocation in meeting student needs.

Gathering Input from Thousands of Educators

We used the strategic priority areas in *Figure 1* to structure conversations with educators, chief technology officers, academic leaders, and district superintendents, among others. Using a mixed method combining qualitative

and quantitative insights, we engaged over 65 education practitioners and leaders in roundtable dialogues, conducted a dozen interviews with PK-12 sector and thought leaders, and gathered over 3,500 individual classroom, school, and district educator perspectives via a national survey.

Strategic Priority Insights



Teachers Face Competing Priorities Amid Wide Adoption of Tiered Support Models

Reflecting on tiered instruction, district and school leaders shared renewed focus on strengthening Tier 1 universal instruction after two challenging years of learning disruptions and heightened student needs.

"When half of students in each classroom are receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports, that's when you know you have a Tier 1 instructional quality problem."

Ohio school district
Chief Academic Officer

Over the past five to 10 years, district use of Response to Intervention (RTI) as a tiered instruction model began to wane, and the adoption of a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) comprising academic, behavior, and social and emotional learning (SEL) expanded. By 2022, 48 states had embraced a tiered support model different than RTI.

The advantage for many states and districts was that MTSS and similar tiered support systems addressed not only what students were struggling to learn, but also their mental health, as well as social and emotional needs. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) strategies often feature within MTSS models.

While some districts evolved their tiered supports during the pandemic to clarify processes and improve quality, others were in triage mode, effectively pausing MTSS meetings and teachers' professional learning. Several shared the intention to refocus on Tier 1 instructional training and coaching.

“ One thing that has become apparent is that we’ve made education overly complex. We’ve lost the ability to provide the intensity of education to get the desired effects. Teachers are doing more things like intervention, assessment, etcetera instead of teaching and learning. We’ve got to step back to ensure teachers have the time for universal Tier 1 instruction. ”

TESSIE BAILEY

Director, Center for MTSS

American Institutes of Research

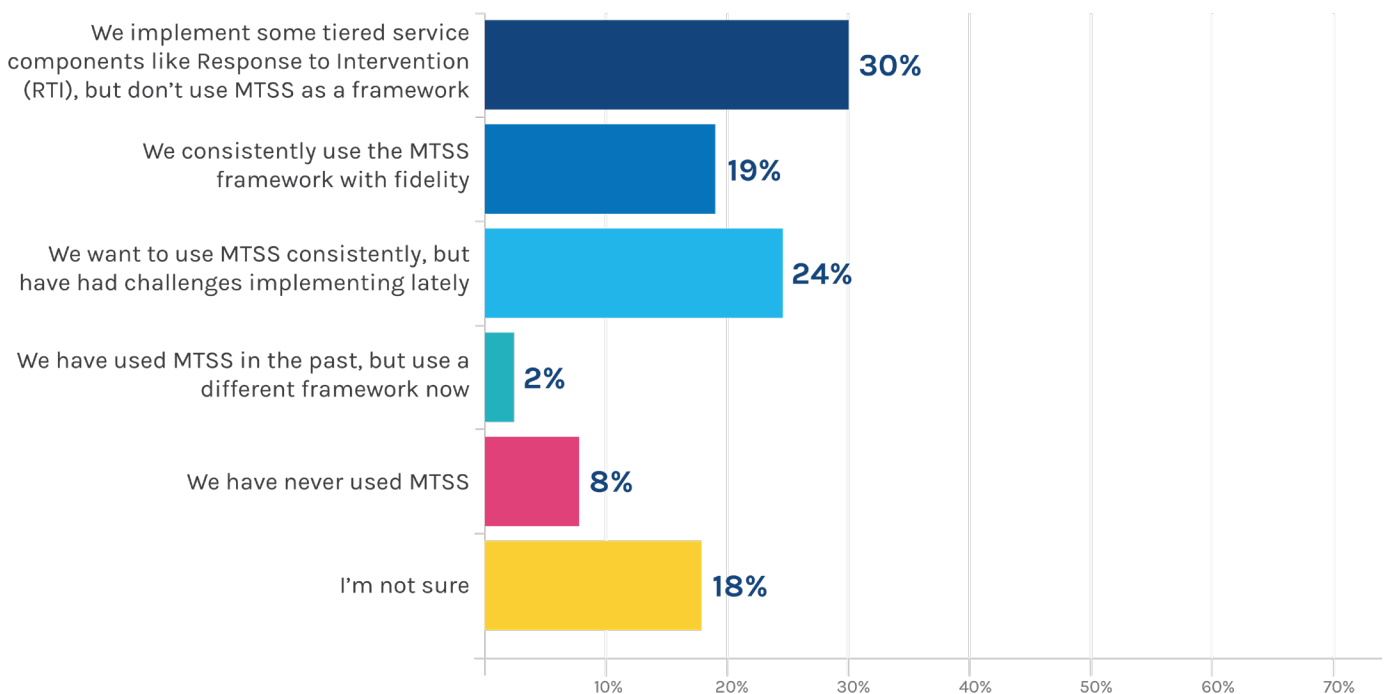
Have tiered supports reached a tipping point in America’s schools? With unwieldy data analysis and intervention coordination competing for teachers’ time and attention, they could be negatively impacting lesson planning and quality instruction. Finding the right balance in teachers’ focus between whole-class instruction, modifications, and formalized interventions is key. In our national survey of educators and district instructional leaders, four out of five respondents signaled that some system of tiered support is in place—demonstrating the broad expansion of the concept and practice in PK-12 schools (see Figure 2).

District leaders, principals, and educators continue to seek a balance in focus between quality universal instruction and refining a system of tiered supports. Personalized learning approaches that leverage technology and emphasize flexible learning paths may provide a way forward.

FIGURE 2: Educators’ Perceptions of Tiered Supports Use in Their Work

Survey Prompt: Select the phrase that best describes your use of a Multi-Tiered Student Supports (MTSS) approach.

(N=1944)



Defining Personalized Learning

What does personalized learning mean? Many things to educators, it turns out. We asked educators to identify terms that best resonated with their perception of personalized learning. Most respondents (54%) selected "All of the above," matching the percentage who selected "differentiated instructional strategies based on student," indicating how central the student is to this concept but also competing elements within the term.

Scaling Personalized Learning through a Framework and Proof-Points

While some districts have achieved system-wide personalized learning, it is nurtured at the classroom and school levels for other districts. This allows them to deliver a proof point to bring practices to scale. Bill Bass, Instructional Technology Coordinator for Parkway School District in Missouri, shared, "Proof of concept is real. Educators need to see personalized learning to feel like they can imagine it. However, somebody has to dream it and create it for themselves."

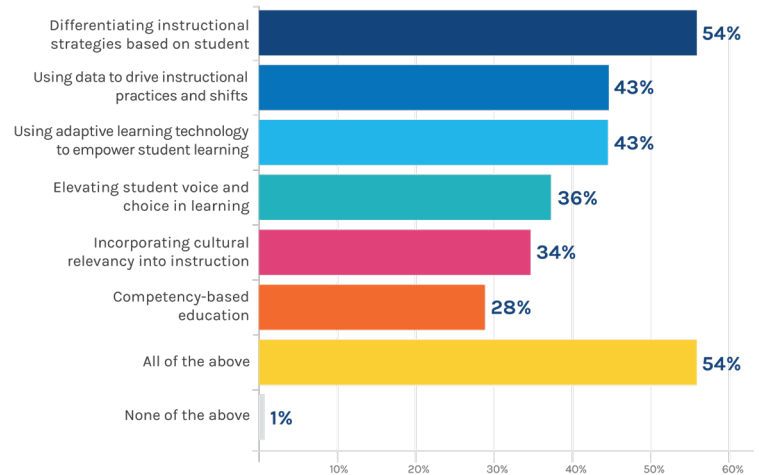
Full implementation of Parkway's personalized learning model began at a relatively small scale. "We have a proof of concept—it is an elementary school. And it is working. We're focusing heavily on expanding that model. We invite school leaders to visit the school to see, hear, feel, and touch what it looks like. We are creating a culture of innovation rather than incrementalism. You have to go all-in on it. There is no halfway to determine whether this works."

Our full report shares more learnings from districts scaling personalized learning.

FIGURE 3: Educator Perspectives on What Personalized Learning Means

Survey Prompt: From the list below, select all terms that best resonate with your perception of personalized learning.

(N=1944)



Educators' Technology Challenges and Priorities in 2022-23

We surveyed educators and district leaders on their top education technology challenges, and three topped the list:

- Juggling multiple digital tools for teaching/learning (46%)
- Lack of parent/guardian involvement or understanding (41%)
- Lack of time to use technology effectively during the school day (37%)

These perspectives reflect the ways technology continues to disrupt existing approaches and mindsets in education and the work it takes to use technology with impact. Far fewer educators reported challenges with students lacking device access, digital curriculum, or getting adequate IT support.

When surveyed on education technology priorities, both teachers and district instructional and technology leaders placed these three issues as top technology priorities for school year 2022-23:

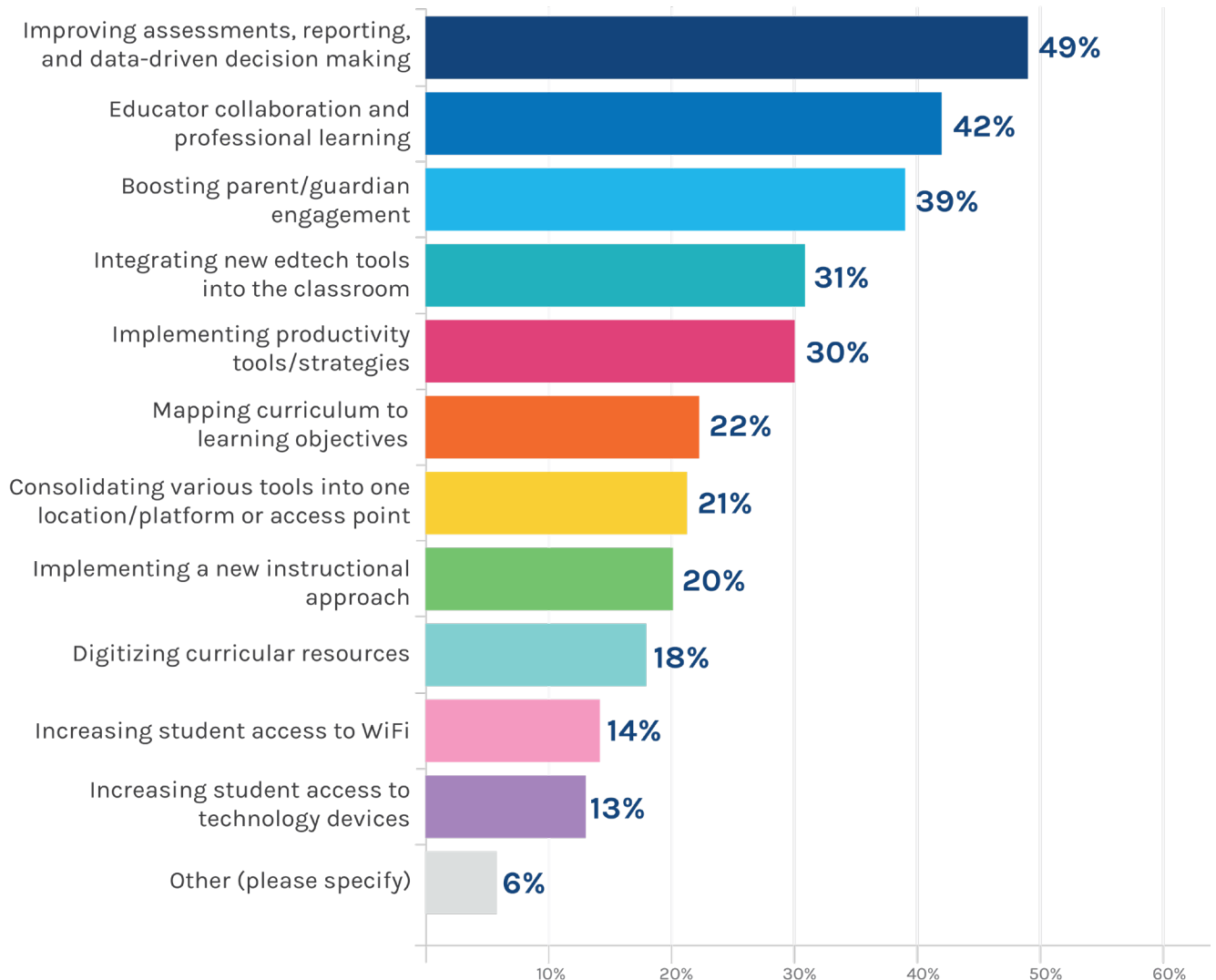
- Improving assessments, reporting, and data-informed instruction (49%)
- Educator collaboration and professional learning (42%)
- Boosting parent/caretaker engagement (39%)



FIGURE 4: Educators' Technology Priorities

Survey Prompt: What are your education technology priorities next school year? (Select all that apply)

(N=1944)



WHOLE-CHILD SUPPORTS

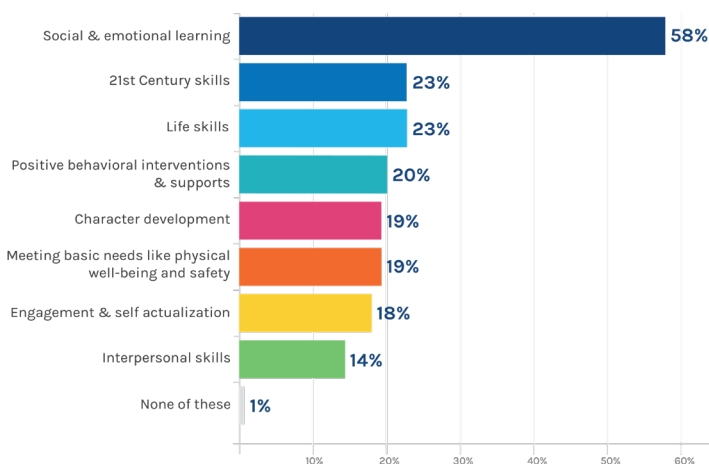
Whole-Child Supports Widely Perceived as Fundamental to Student Learning

As a concept, it seems to defy singular definition, yet "whole-child supports" appeared in various expressions in school district plans across the nation. We surveyed educators, and the vast majority reported that "social and emotional supports" is the most resonant term associated with whole-child support.

FIGURE 5: Educator Perspectives on Terms that Help Define Whole-Child Supports

Survey Prompt: Select two terms from the list below that resonate most with your concept of whole-child supports.

(N=1782)



We asked educators what whole-child support strategies their school or district emphasized, and among the top responses were mental health supports (72%), positive behavioral interventions (59%), classroom culture (55%), and strong student-teacher relationships (52%).

Pandemic Emphasizes Mutual Interdependence of Whole-Child and Academic Supports

When asked, most educators identified whole-child education as "fundamental" to student learning and development (58%), with only a fraction (1%) selecting "unhelpful" to describe it.

Read our full report for more insights on whole-child supports and how these are advancing student learning and development.

“ We have to account for our students’ mental, social, and emotional health needs before we can think about learning. It’s not a separate thing. Not long ago, when working with teachers, I felt I was driving down the road in my academic lane, and then there was an SEL lane, and those were two separate lanes headed down the highway. We really thought these were two separate things, and classroom activities were academic or SEL, and you had to change lanes between them. But they’re actually not—SEL and academic learning are on the same path and intertwined.”

CHRIS CROMWELL

Instructional Technology Coordinator, West Chester Area School District, PA



Stress, Compensation, and Workloads Identified as Top Factors Driving Teachers from Profession

We asked school and district leaders their perceptions of top factors luring teachers from the profession. A majority identified "a less stressful work environment" as the leading factor, followed by higher compensation and a more manageable workload. We also asked leaders what strategies would get the most traction to keep great teachers and support staff in their schools, and they responded:

- Adequate pay or benefits (40%)
- Adequate support and staffing to do the job well (27%)
- Ensuring strong leadership (10%)

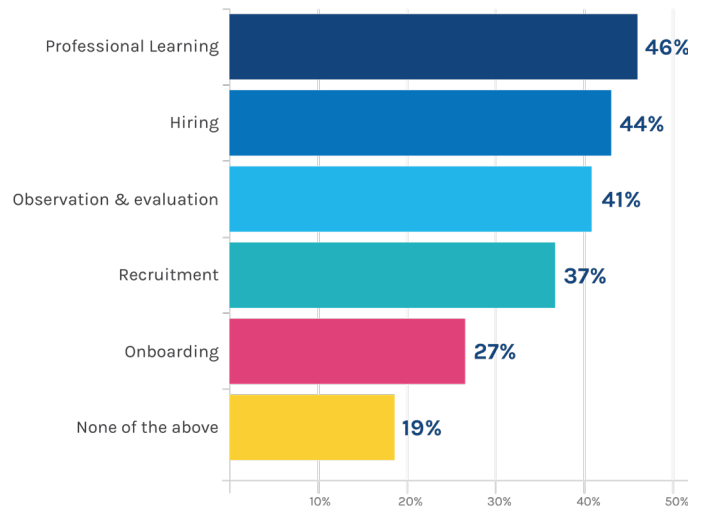
Fewer Than Half of Survey Respondents Say Technology Is Used Effectively to Support Talent Needs

We asked education leaders where technology was being used effectively to support talent needs, and while results are encouraging, there is much progress to be made. The use of technology in professional learning, observation, hiring, and recruitment—while generally seen as effective—was only selected by less than half of respondents. And about one in five respondents feel that technology supports "none of the above" talent needs.

FIGURE 6: Perceptions on Use of Technology to Support Talent Needs

Survey Prompt: My district uses technology effectively to support the following talent needs (Select all that apply):

(N=882)



Families and Community Members Share More Common Ground than News Coverage Suggests

Refuting perceptions of widespread controversy⁴ stoked by news cycles, many school communities reported a more collaborative parent, family, and community reality. We asked teachers, superintendents, and district communication leaders their views on whether they agreed that stakeholders seek common ground to identify solutions for student learning and wellness. A majority (68%) said "yes." Only one in 10 communication leaders and two in 10 teachers disagreed.

Nine in 10 Educators Say Parent and Family Engagement Can Help Reverse Recent Enrollment Declines

The pandemic impacted student engagement, increasing absenteeism and tapering enrollment, which stoked concern about root causes and funding implications.

When asked, "How important is effective parent, family, and community engagement to reverse recent enrollment declines across student populations—particularly early grades and high school students?" over half of respondents said it was "critical," and nearly 40% said it was "important." These findings demonstrate how much educators value family involvement and partnership in reversing recent declines in student engagement.

EXPANDING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Educators See Early Education as Critical and Long Overdue

Decades of research and growing public perceptions backing the investment in early childhood education are causes for optimism. We asked educators their perceptions of early childhood education, and 54% said these programs are "a critical educational service that should have been offered long ago," while 38% felt early childhood is "a promising investment that should be evaluated further for efficacy."

Our full report shares considerations for district leaders looking to expand early childhood programs.

GRADUATES PREPARED FOR COLLEGE, CAREER, AND LIFE

Districts and States Anchor Future-Ready Conversations to Portraits of a Graduate, Striking Resonance with Personalized Learning Frameworks

What does it mean to be future-ready? Many districts have painted a portrait or profile of a graduate, which the Aurora Institute deemed "a modernized vision for student learning and achievement."⁵ These portraits emerged in our national scan of district priorities as a common device to communicate, in simple terms, what students should demonstrate upon completion of their PK-12 schooling journey. In addition to individual districts, states like Washington⁶ and Utah⁷ lead the charge to set a clear, widely adopted benchmark of student aptitudes—many of which are skills-based.

“ These portraits are answering critical questions like, ‘How do we prepare our students to be able to innovate and maneuver in the changing world in which we live?’ They are also driving strategic planning for CCLR efforts that are more about being life and future-ready than four-year degrees. We are hearing increasingly more about how important essential employability skills and social and emotional skills are. ”

ANDY TUCKER

Former Director of Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness, Colorado Department of Education

We also asked educators to consider whether technology was being used to advance student readiness. An encouraging two-thirds of respondents indicated that districts do a good job of leveraging technology to empower students in their exploration and consideration of future pathways.

Our full report shares further details about district priorities for developing college, career, and life readiness (CCLR) and future-ready frameworks.



ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE AND EFFICIENCY

Top District Technology Modernization Investments

In response to our survey, districts shared that they have modernized the following top systems over the past two years: learning

FIGURE 7: Survey Responses of Districts Who Have Modernized Systems

Survey Prompt: My district has modernized the following technology in the past two years (Select all that apply):

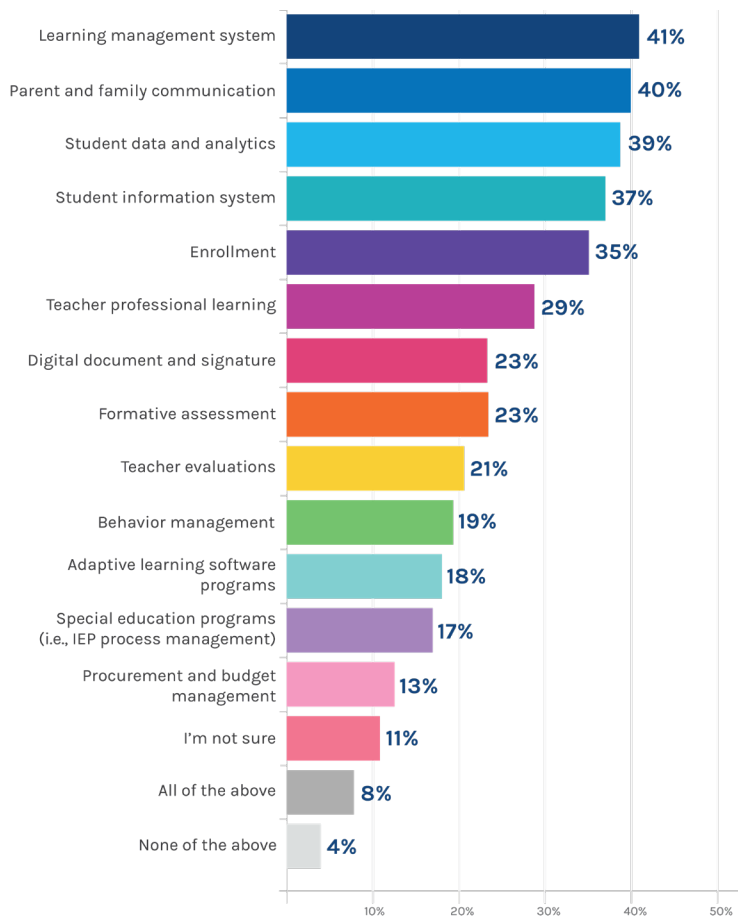
(N=477)

management, family communication, student information, data and analytics, enrollment, and parent and family engagement tools.

Most of these investments were driven by shifts in types of instruction, as well as the urgency to understand student learning needs and identify recovery priorities. A noteworthy 8% reported that their district modernized a comprehensive spectrum of tools (all of the above) in recent years. And of course, it is possible that districts modernized some or many of these systems before two years ago.

Key Considerations for Smart, Long-Term Technology Investments and Successful Diffusion

Pandemic relief funds and the opportunity to modernize essential student information and learning management systems, among others, have required more intentional thinking and coordination among district and school leaders.



“It’s a constant hard look at what we believe our future should hold and where our priorities lie. It’s easy to throw money into technology purchases and not think about the long-term impact. So, for each of our [technology] initiatives, there are three buckets of considerations: obtain, train, and sustain. When we obtain a tool, we ask: Does it align with our instructional goals? Is it something we can support and scale? In terms of training, we set aside 10 to 20 percent of overall product investment to ensure the staff is supported. And we ask what will we do to ensure this product is sustained into the future.”

MICHELLE BOURGEOIS

Chief Technology Officer, St. Vrain Valley School District, CO

How PowerSchool Can Help

The Role of Technology in a Promising New Era for Education

PowerSchool believes that every student deserves the best, most personalized education possible. We view technology—like education itself—as a powerful tool to advance opportunity. We believe that technology holds the key to providing educators with the tools to make informed decisions about student learning needs to break through entrenched gaps in learning outcomes and open new panoramas to conceptualize educational programming.

PowerSchool Professional Services

At PowerSchool, we approach each project as a relationship with our customer. Our long and successful history in education has roots in establishing and maintaining positive relationships with state departments of education, school customers, and their

agents. To build trusting relationships, we establish clear expectations, maintain open communication, and strive to deliver on time and within budget. Our methodology focuses on achieving customer-defined objectives by delivering quality services that utilize and maximize resources effectively and efficiently during the planning, development, and implementation of a solution.

FIGURE 8: Building a Culture of Continuous Improvement with PowerSchool

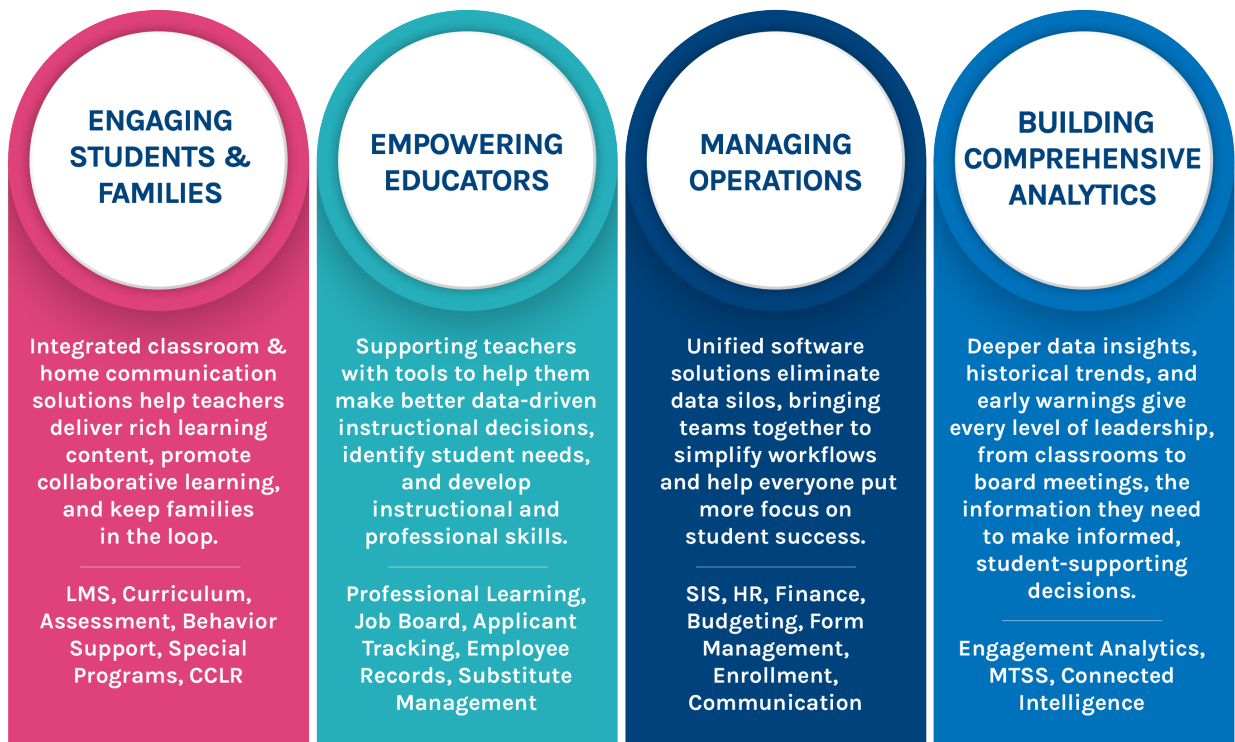


Our Vision for the Future Starts with Listening to Educators Today

In response to the needs and priorities of schools and districts, PowerSchool is building toward the next generation of education technology. Where students, teachers, and parents can be fully engaged in building pathways to success. Where students and teachers have the insights and tools they need to achieve their best selves. Where educators inspire leaders of learning and kids' passions

to grow. Where students own their educational journey from start to finish. Where graduating students have the necessary skills to engage in a life of learning.

Given PowerSchool's sizeable reach and impact, we have the responsibility to improve PK-12 education. PowerSchool has identified four organizing product drivers to advance PK-12 education for students, educators, and families:



Striving to support the priority areas districts have outlined for the next school year, PowerSchool commits to helping districts keep students and families engaged, retain and support effective educators, optimize processes with secure data management, and leverage advanced analytics to gain deeper data insights with integrated edtech.

Read more in our full report about what we've heard from educators and what the future holds.

www.powerschool.com/edtech-focus-report-2022/

References

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² Louis S. Nadelson, et al., "Principals' Perceptions of Education Equity: A Mindset for Practice," *Journal of Education and Learning* 9.1 (Nov. 2019): online, Internet, 15 June 2022. Available: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1234502.pdf>

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⁵ Alexis Chambers and Natalie Truong, "Profile of a Graduate to Redefine Student Success for the Future," Aurora Institute (4 May 2020): online, Internet, 15 June 2022. Available: <https://aurora-institute.org/blog/profile-of-a-graduate-to-redefine-student-success-for-the-future/>

⁶ Washington State Board of Education, *Profile of a Graduate*. online, Internet, 15 June 2022. Available: <https://www.sbe.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/images/POG%20PDF.pdf>

⁷ Utah State Board of Education, *Portrait of a Graduate*. online, Internet, 15 June 2022. Available: <https://www.schools.utah.gov/file/bccb96eb-e6a6-47cf-9745-cf311675ad8b>



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