Big Ideas 2021:
10 Broad Trends in K-12 Education in 10 Charts
Executive Summary

drawing upon the results of a nationally representative survey of nearly 900 teachers, principals, and district leaders that was incorporated into Education Week’s fourth annual report on big ideas in K-12 education, this whitepaper sums up 10 broad trends in 10 accompanying charts. These ideas include the transformation of educational technology, educators’ knowledge of students’ lives outside of school, and educator stress. Given the time period covered by the survey, all of these broad trends were deeply impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, a theme that resonates throughout this report.

Introduction

Each year, for the past four years, Education Week has produced a special report on big ideas in K-12 education. The reports focus on important and timely issues that schools have grappled with in the past 12 months. Not surprisingly, the coronavirus pandemic was a major emphasis in the 2021 edition, Big Ideas for Education’s Urgent Challenges. Initially published in September 2021, this report examined such pandemic-related topics as remote learning, educator stress, and student home environments. The report incorporated the results of a nationally representative, online survey that the EdWeek Research Center, the independent research arm of Education Week’s nonprofit publisher, fielded July 8th-July 24th, 2021. Survey respondents were 886 K-12 educators (182 district leaders, 168 school leaders, and 536 teachers). The pages that follow summarize a selection of 10 broad ideas addressed in this survey, using a series of 10 accompanying charts.
Schools have long been more than locations where academic learning occurs. Eighty-four percent of principals and district leaders say their schools distribute meals not just to students but to the community. Thirty-seven percent say they provide health-related services. Nearly half refer families to emergency assistance with utilities and rent. With COVID, schools have been asked to take on even more activities than before, including those specifically related to the pandemic. Nearly half of school and district leaders say their campuses have hosted a vaccination site and more than a quarter have served as a COVID testing location. Sixty-three percent are now paying for or subsidizing student home internet access. Given pre-existing ongoing demands on schools, these additional activities raise questions about whether our nation’s public schools have the resources they need to serve an ever-expanding portfolio of community-related needs.

Chart 1. Which, if any, of the following activities did your school or district perform for the community over the past 12 months? Select all that apply.

- Distributing meals on-site to students and community members: 84%
- Hosting a vaccine distribution site: 49%
- Hosting and organizing community events: 33%
- Hosting voting stations for national and local elections: 32%
- Hosting a COVID-19 testing site: 28%
- My school or district did not perform any activities for the community in the past 12 months: 7%
- Other, please specify: 6%
This school year is a challenge for students and teachers alike as we all struggle to deal with feelings of uncertainty and fatigue.

What steps do we take to get students up to speed? How do we ensure students remain engaged and educators don’t burn out? Ensuring that students receive equitable access to grade-level content is key to a successful recovery plan, but where do educators find the time for providing that level of attention to each student who needs it?

**Ensuring Equitable Access for All Students**

Providing access to content in alternative, easy-to-absorb formats has long been a way to engage students. Look to storytelling and picture books as examples. Audiobooks, particularly when combined with scaffolds and other supports, take this a step further, giving students *equitable access to authentic* grade-level content aligned to their cognitive ability rather than their ability to decode text.

Is reading with audiobooks the same as reading written text? **The answer is yes.** According to *Journal of Neuroscience*, when comparing participants’ brains as they listened to and read books, words activated the same brain regions with the same intensity, regardless of input.

"Long before writing, people were telling each other stories and the audiobook goes all the way back to that tradition."

— Phillip Pullman
Proven Results: Double the Rate of Reading Growth

In a study of approximately 800 students attending 34 schools in one large Colorado school system, students using the Learning Ally Audiobook Solution™ to read with frequency (at least 20 minutes a day for 33 days) doubled the rate of reading growth in just 50 days.

The Learning Ally Audiobook Solution is a multisensory reading resource for struggling readers that provides anywhere, anytime access to the largest library of curriculum-aligned, human-read audiobooks paired with highlighted text. Rather than struggling to decode text, students are able to read and learn along with their classmates.

Before and during the study, educators took part in significant professional learning to ensure they were using the solution to its highest potential. They were introduced to the science of reading and taught best practices based on years of real-world experience. Combined with the solution’s embedded progress monitoring and reporting tools, they experienced a significant increase in their instructional capacity.

Learning Ally simply helps level the playing field so that all students can have access to grade-level material.”

— Kristen Trinder, Reading Intervention Teacher, Study Participant
The Human Connection
The Learning Ally Audiobook Solution’s library of human-read audiobooks convey the correct emotion, tone, intonation, and timbre of the text. Students develop an emotional connection to the characters to better identify and visualize the story elements. Access to an abundance of books in an engaging format for a struggling reader will increase motivation and reading achievement.

Increased Comprehension
Reading with the Learning Ally Audiobook Solution bridges the gap between struggling readers’ lower-level reading processes and reading for comprehension and content mastery. Put simply, by removing the lag-time of decoding, you allow struggling readers to focus on the meaning of the text and build background knowledge and vocabulary while developing essential English Language Arts comprehension skills.

Classroom Benefits
Learning Ally’s Audiobook Solution maximizes teacher effectiveness and helps struggling readers see higher academic gains and improved social-emotional outcomes, like greater classroom participation, self-confidence and critical thinking skills.

Administrators can boost their learning recovery plan efforts and educators can look forward to using an evidence-based reading program proven to help level the playing field for K-12 students in all learning environments.

Now that all my students have access to an audio version of the majority of our textbooks, I’ve seen how much growth they’ve had in subjects like science and social studies.”

– Brigid Ryan, 4th Grade Teacher And Study Participant

It is possible to support educators and bring more students up to reading proficiency. The Learning Ally Audiobook Solution is an extraordinary supplemental reading resource designed to turn struggling readers into engaged learners.
Most Educators are Concerned That Student Homelessness Will Increase

As the federal government’s pandemic-era eviction moratoriums expire amid rising home prices and rents, 56 percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders are somewhat or very concerned that the number of students experiencing homelessness will increase significantly during the current and next school years. Levels of concern are highest among educators serving the students who were most impacted by pandemic closure—i.e., those whose districts provided remote-only instruction for most of the 2020-21 school year. Concern is also higher among urban, Western, and Southern educators and in districts that serve higher percentages of students of color and lower-income families. During the pandemic, the majority of educators said their districts or schools had put more effort into providing food, clothing, school supplies, and other basic necessities for homeless students and into ensuring homeless students had the technology necessary to do schoolwork outside of school buildings. Asked what the most helpful thing their local and state governments, as well as the federal government, could do to support students currently experiencing homelessness, educators were most likely to say that their communities needed more affordable housing.

Chart 2. Percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders concerned that their district’s homeless student population will increase significantly over the next two years

- **TOTAL**: 56%
- **West**: 63%
- **South**: 65%
- **Midwest**: 48%
- **Northeast**: 50%
- **Private school**: 32%
- **Public school**: 58%
- **District free/reduced-price meal rate is more than 75%**: 34%
- **District free/reduced-price meal rate is 25% or less**: 68%
- **District is at least 90% white**: 49%
- **Students of color comprise 75% or more of district enrollment**: 61%
- **Urban**: 73%
- **Suburban**: 54%
- **Rural or town**: 53%
- **Hybrid most of 2020-21**: 60%
- **100% in-person most of 2020-21**: 42%
- **100% in-remote most of 2020-21**: 62%
3. The 2020 Summer of Racial Reckoning Hasn’t Transformed Schools

The nationwide demonstrations following the 2020 murder of George Floyd, a Black man, at the hands of Minneapolis police, led to lots of lofty promises and goals. But a year later, the majority of school and district leaders (60 percent) say their districts never even released a statement about its diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in the wake of the event. And 1 in 3 say the movement did not lead to any changes in their districts and schools. That said, two out of three administrators indicated that the movement did lead to some sort of action. Staff training on diversity, equity, and/or inclusion, the formation of diversity committees, and professional development on teaching about race and racism were the most frequently-reported responses.

Chart 3. What changes, if any, did the nationwide protests following the murder of George Floyd lead to in your district or school? Select all that apply.
Educators are not Okay

The pandemic has taken its toll on everyone, but teachers have faced a special set of obstacles as they pivoted from one day to the next from in-person to remote instruction and then, in many districts, back again. In the meantime, administrators found themselves in the middle of highly-politicized battles over mask-wearing and vaccines. It should come as no surprise, then, that 60 percent of teachers, 59 percent of principals, and 53 percent of district leaders say they always or frequently experience job-related stress. More than half of educators (53 percent) say the strain keeps them up at night, 39 percent say it makes them feel like they are less effective at their jobs, 38 percent say it impacts their physical health, and more than 1 in 5 say it makes them less patient with students and/or leads them to think often of quitting.
5. Schools May Need More Resources to Assist With COVID Mourning

Nearly 1 in 3 school and district leaders say they have lost a loved one since the pandemic started. Close to half of those administrators say the loss was due to COVID. The vast majority (77 percent) of administrators who did lose someone did not seek or desire any support from their districts or schools. However, many doubtless found themselves in the position of dealing with their own grief while also assisting students who had experienced similar losses. Although most principals and district leaders (79 percent) say existing mental health professionals are available to help students in mourning over the loss of loved ones, school counselors also juggle many additional responsibilities, from assisting with behavioral issues to helping students gain admission to college. And just 11 percent of administrators say student grief counseling is available as a specific service. Eighty-four percent indicate that the training and resources available to help them identify and address any grief their students may experience in school as a result of losing a loved one during the pandemic is less than fully adequate.

Chart 5. Percent of principals and district leaders who say their district or school offers some form of grief counseling for students

- Yes, as a specific service: 11%
- Yes, through existing school counselors who also serve other needs: 8%
- No, but we are considering adding student grief counseling services in the next year: 2%
- No, and we are not currently considering adding student grief counseling services in the next year: 79%
6. School Staff Are Embracing SEL

Social-emotional learning has become a buzzword in K-12 education in recent years, with educators increasingly working with students on skills like empathizing with others, recognizing and coping with emotions, and making responsible decisions. But what about staff? Is it really possible to assist students with healthy emotional development if their educators never learned those skills themselves? Likely to help address this very issue, 77 percent of district leaders say they are or will be providing social-emotional learning to employees in the next two years and an additional 14 percent report that they are considering doing so. Of the district leaders offering or planning to offer adult SEL in the next two years, 22 percent say they started doing so at least in part as a result of experiences during the pandemic.
The Pandemic Has Transformed School Technology

The numbers are dramatic: Prior to the pandemic, less than half of district leaders said they had implemented 1:1 computing (at least one device per student). Today, that share has more than doubled to 94 percent. Similarly, the percentage of district administrators saying they use a technology-based learning platform like Moodle or Blackboard to administer and monitor student work has skyrocketed from 50 to 93 percent. And the share using adaptive learning software has risen from 54 to 85 percent. Whether or not this is a positive development will clearly depend upon how these new capabilities are employed in the classroom over time. But regardless of what occurs, it is clear that the expansion of technology has been one of the biggest side effects of COVID.

Chart 7. When did district leaders adopt 1:1 computing, technology-based learning platforms, and/or adaptive learning software?

- **Provide at least one device per student**
  - Before March 2020 [pre-pandemic]: 45%
  - Between March and September 2020: 37%
  - After September 2020: 26%
  - We have not taken this step: 15%

- **Use a technology-based learning platform to administer and monitor student work (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard)**
  - Before March 2020 [pre-pandemic]: 50%
  - Between March and September 2020: 6%
  - After September 2020: 7%
  - We have not taken this step: 8%

- **Use adaptive-learning software to personalize instruction or materials for students**
  - Before March 2020 [pre-pandemic]: 41%
  - Between March and September 2020: 6%
  - After September 2020: 54%
  - We have not taken this step: 5%
8. Educators Learned a Lot About Students’ Home Lives During the Pandemic

As learning moved online and parents served as de facto school teachers, K-12 educators got a unique glimpse of their students’ lives at home. Seventy-seven percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders say that the amount of parent-educator communication increased during the pandemic. The share of teachers, principals, and district leaders who say they know a lot about their students’ home lives has more than doubled, from 19 percent prior to the pandemic to 43 percent now. Elementary educators made especially big gains. The share of teachers and principals at that grade level who know a lot about their students’ lives at home increased 32 percentage points to 55 percent as compared to a 22 percentage-point gain to 36 percent at the middle school level and a 19 percentage-point gain to 31 percent for high school educators. Teachers, principals, and district leaders in the highest poverty districts where more than 75 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals also made big strides. The share of educators who know a lot about students’ lives at home increased 27 percentage points to 53 percent as compared to a 23 percentage-point increase to 35 percent in lower-poverty districts in which the free or reduced-price meal rate is 25 percent or less.

### Chart 8. Share of educators who know a lot about their students’ home lives, now versus pre-pandemic

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<thead>
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<th>District free/reduced-price meal rate is 25% or less</th>
<th>District free/reduced-price meal rate is more than 75%</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Elementary</strong></td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>26%</td>
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<td><strong>Middle</strong></td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>High</strong></td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>23%</td>
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**TOTAL**

- **Elementary school teachers and principals**: 19% to 55%
- **Middle school teachers and principals**: 14% to 31%
- **High school teachers and principals**: 12% to 36%
- **District free/reduced-price meal rate is more than 75%**: 26% to 53%
- **District free/reduced-price meal rate is 25% or less**: 12% to 35%

- **How much do you know now about your students’ home learning environments?**
- **How much did you know about your students’ home learning environments prior to the pandemic?**
Especially in Districts That Embraced Remote Learning, Educators Say Schools Could More Effectively Meet Student Needs

Just 34 percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders say their district or school is very effective at meeting students’ academic needs. The remainder perceive their schools are somewhat effective (52 percent) or very or somewhat ineffective (14 percent) at meeting this need.

An even smaller share of educators (23 percent) perceive that their district or school is very effective at enhancing student well-being. Sixty-one percent say their schools are somewhat effective at enhancing well-being and the remainder (16 percent) perceive they are ineffective.

The models of instruction adopted during the pandemic may have shaped these perceptions. Compared to their peers in districts where most of last year’s learning was remote or hybrid, educators in districts where most of the instruction last school year was provided in-person were significantly more likely to say that their schools were very effective at serving students’ academic needs and enhancing their well-being.
In two open-ended questions, teachers, principals, and district leaders were asked what their districts or schools have done well during the pandemic and also what they could have done better.

Adapting to different teaching models was the thing educators were most likely to say their district had done well.

“We transitioned well from in-person to remote and back again smoothly,” wrote a district superintendent in Washington. “We offered support to our most vulnerable/at-risk students including in-person learning during remote instruction time.”

Educators also singled out their employers for praise for keeping students and staff safe by following health protocols.

“We had the students remain in their classrooms and the teachers moved between classes, not the students,” wrote a Texas principal. “We felt like that was a safety factor that led to only one short closure due to COVID.”

Educators were most likely to criticize their districts’ communications and decisionmaking processes.

“The administrators figured out late in the game that more ongoing communication was needed, but we still lost so much cohesion as a staff,” said
a Vermont special education teacher. “I believe this could have been prevented.”

The second most frequent criticism was that schools could have done a better job of adjusting expectations of teachers, especially when it came to evaluations and workload. “We kept right on like nothing had changed,” wrote a middle school English teacher in Arkansas. “Except it had, and teachers were drowning. All of our normal work plus all the additional online students and cleaning that had to be done constantly.”

After all, adapting to the pandemic was often a herculean task, as summed up by this Wisconsin high school principal:

“We sponsored a virtual mental wellness series; we conducted hundreds of home visits; we made thousands of phone calls; we leveraged positive student-teacher relationships and had zero fights during our in-person instruction; we continued our use of restorative practices; we took great care to care for one another; we focused on the positive.”