

How are schools responding to board politics and political polarization?

Perspectives from district leaders and teachers



An explosion of culture war laws is changing schools. Here's how.

POLITICS • THE D.C. BRIEF

Most Parents Don't Like School Culture Wars, New Polling Shows

EDUCATION

Orange School District Suspends Digital Library Over Book Concerns From Some Parents

Are book bans discrimination? Biden administration to test new legal theory.

The federal government is investigating a Texas school district over its alleged removal of books featuring LGBTQ characters

POLITICS & POLICY CHARTERS & CHOICE

Why is partisan education conflict on the rise? Blame 'political sorting.'

Democrats and Republicans are parting ways on education.

Fight over gender identity and schools hits small Maine towns

When Students Change Gender Identity, and Parents Don't Know

Educators are facing wrenching new tensions over whether they should tell parents when students socially transition at school.

SCHOOL & DISTRICT MANAGEMENT

Top Superintendents Detail the Toll of Divisive Politics—And How They've Responded

Florida schools directed to cover or remove classroom books that are not vetted

The state said its "Stop WOKE" act applies to books displayed in classrooms.

EQUITY & DIVERSITY EXPLAINER

What Is Critical Race Theory, and Why Is It Under Attack?

WORLD & NATION

School librarians vilified as the 'arm of Satan' in book-banning wars

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Is the hype reality?

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Data sources

	District Leaders	Teachers
Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Nationally representative● Administered Oct-Dec 2022● 300 leaders participated	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Nationally representative● Administered Apr-May 2022● 8,063 teachers participated
Qualitative data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● 22 interviews● 7 superintendents● Four waves between January 2021 and November 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Open-ended responses● 1,452 teachers participated

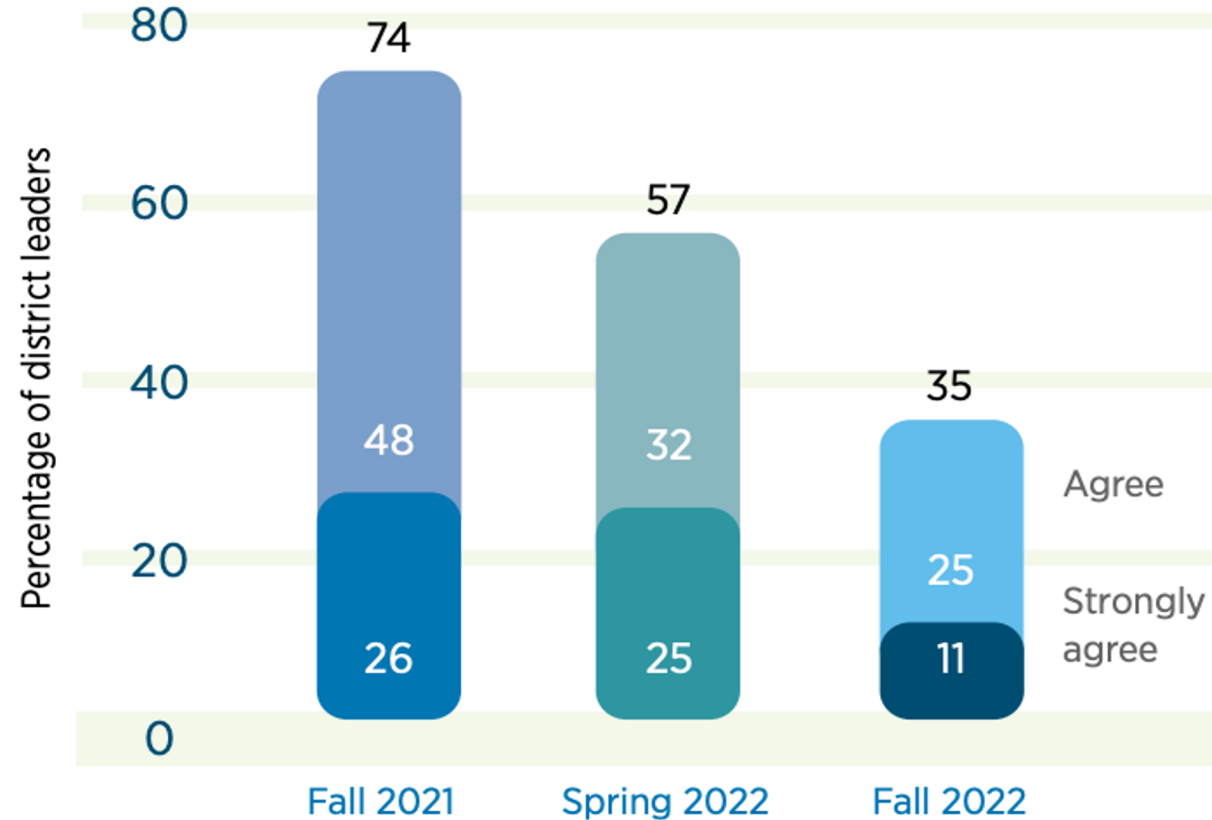
How is political conflict impacting schools and districts?



Districts leaders say political disagreements are interfering with schooling

Politics showed up closer to the boardroom than they [have] since the late sixties.

-superintendent

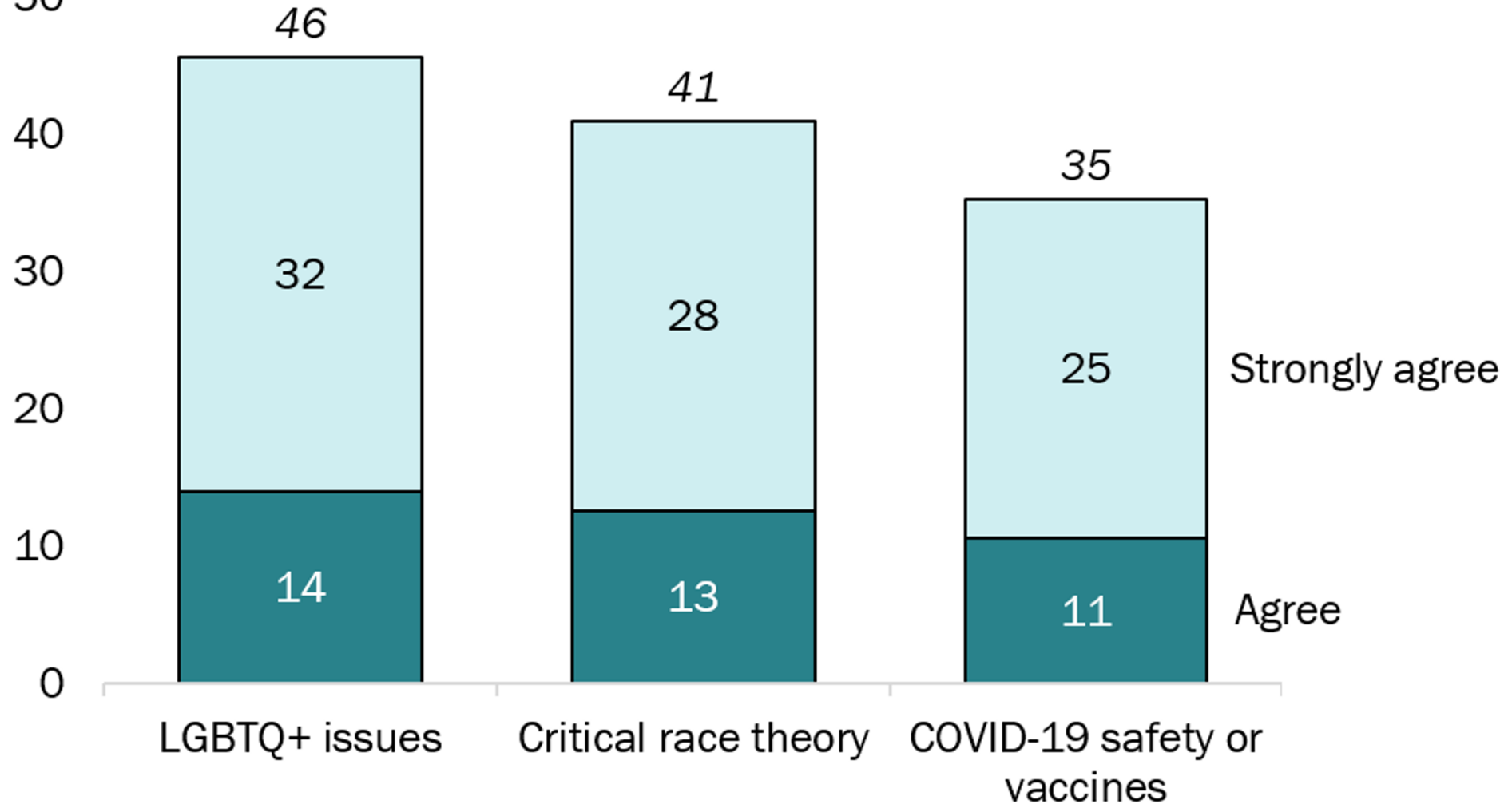


Polarization about covid-19 safety and vaccines over time

New issues have recently replaced health and safety (Fall 2022)

Percentage of district leaders

50



The disruptions have material impacts on schools

Percentage of district leaders

50

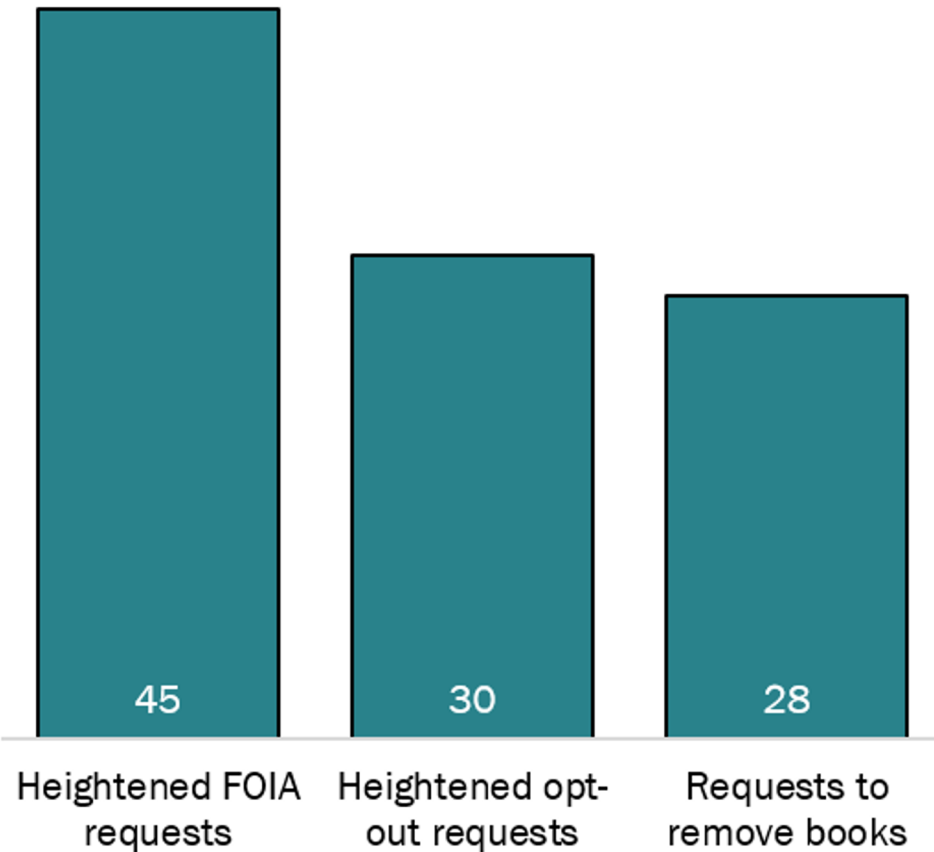
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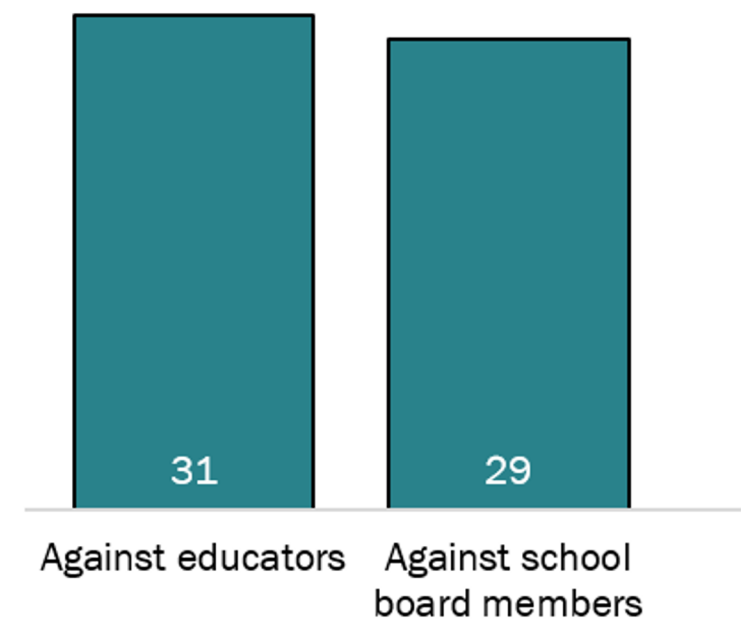
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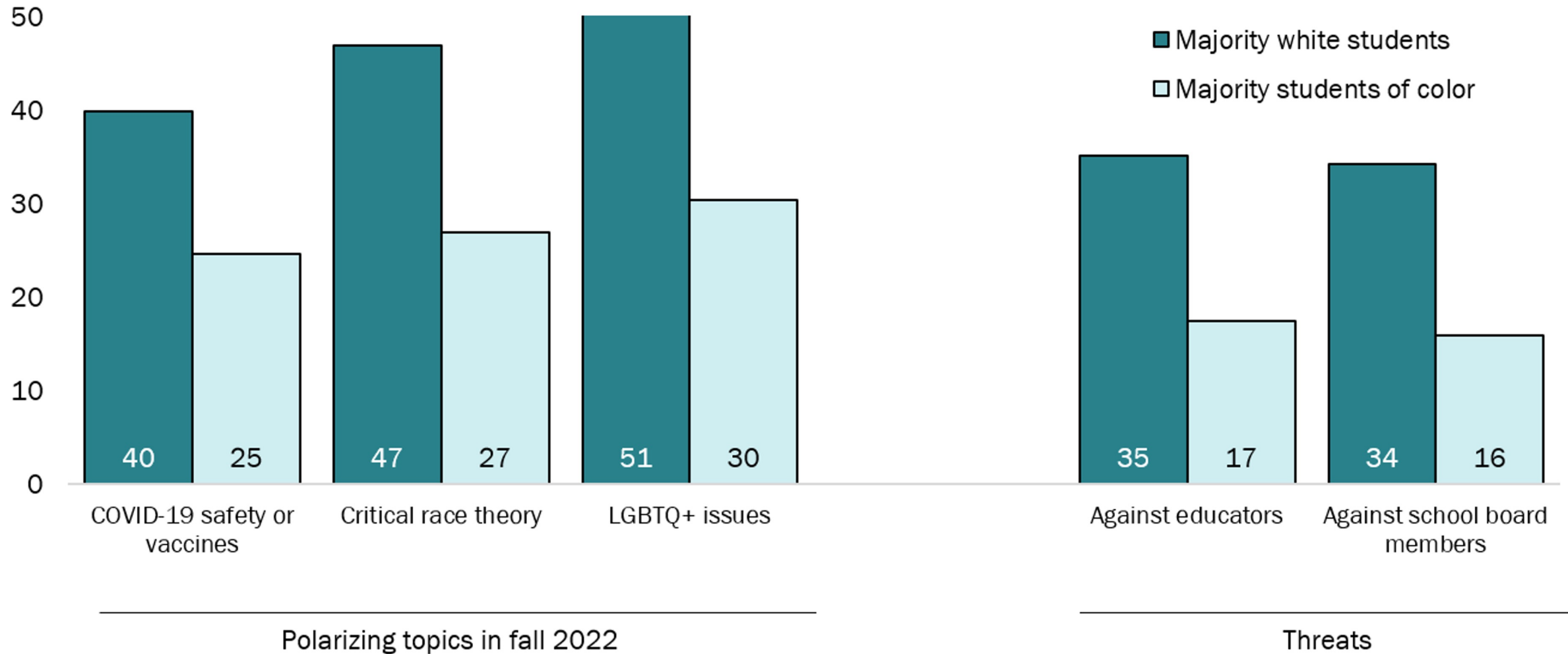
Additional burdens



Threats

Problems are concentrated in historically advantaged districts

Percentage of district leaders



Superintendents emphasized that policymakers could amplify or dampen the impact of politics on schools

School Board Members

School board members motivated by “culture war” concerns may not understand the role of the board and their broader responsibilities as a governance team

Board members are operating as independent actors and not functioning as a governance team...It's creating chaos...and leaves learning to chance.

State Officials

State mandates could amplify conflicts with the community when they were out of step with community values and undermine productive collaboration between districts and states

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.

**Why should we care
about the impacts
of political conflict?**

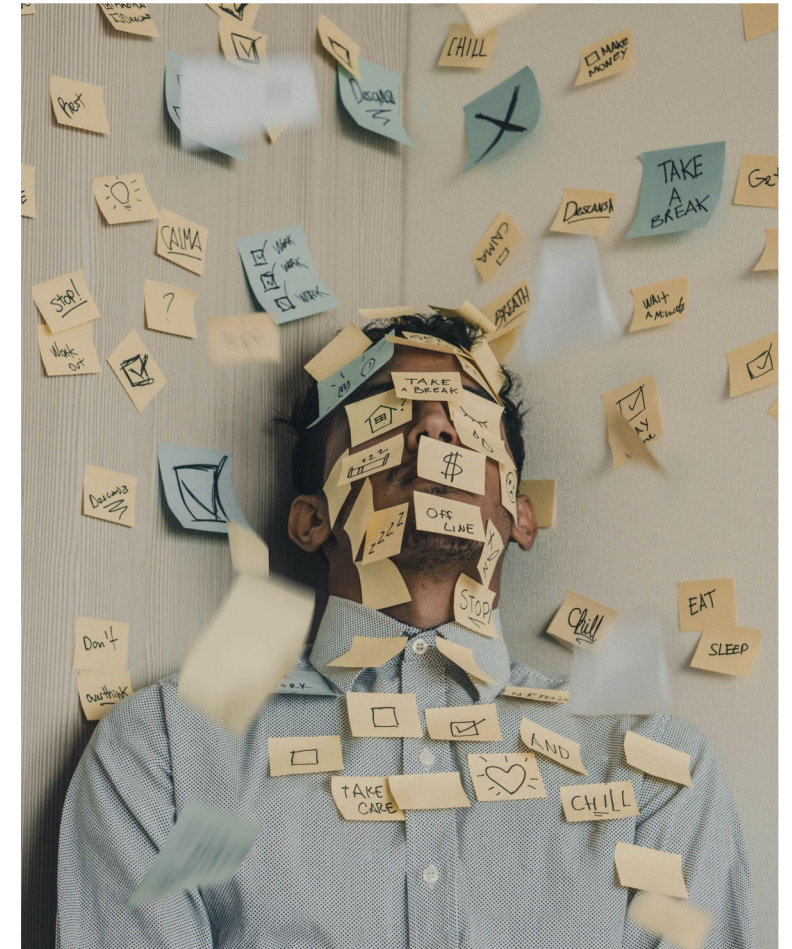


Political conflict contributes to difficult working conditions for both teachers and district leaders

Superintendents said political conflict could consume valuable **time** and **attention**, distract from other **district priorities**, and require added **organizational capacity** to manage.

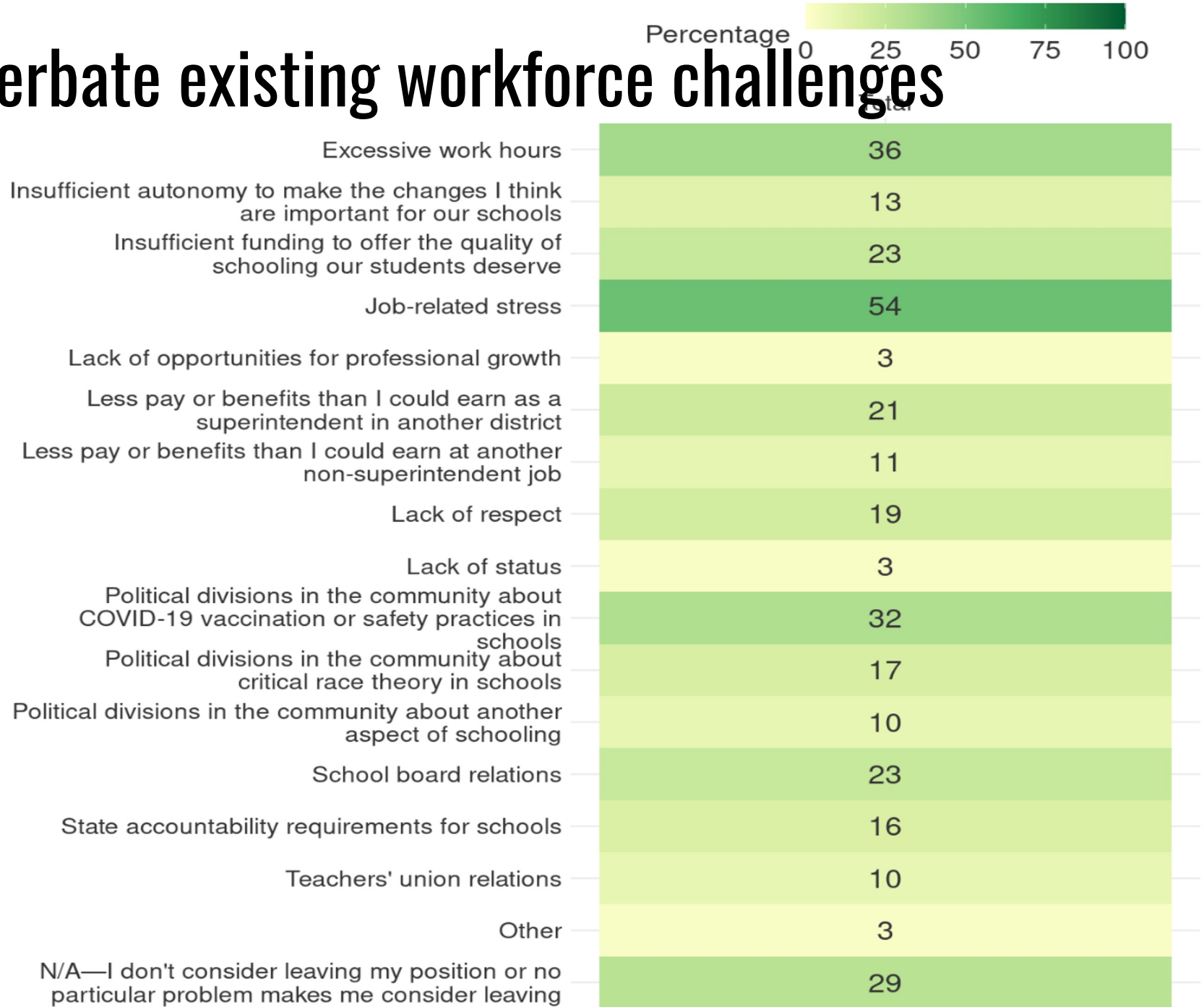
Teachers experienced increased **fear** and **anxiety** and said politics made the work of teaching **more difficult**.

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. - Superintendent



And may exacerbate existing workforce challenges

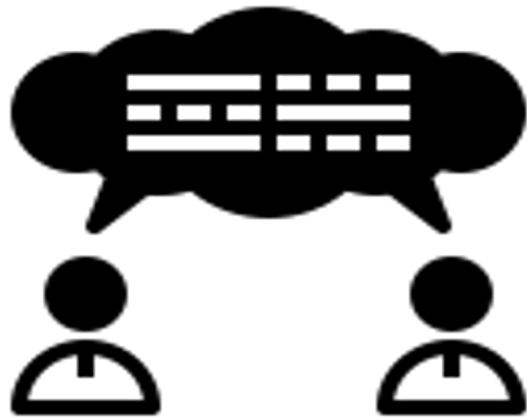
District leaders cite political divisions and board relations as reasons they'd consider leaving their job.



**Where do we go
from here?**



Districts said they are taking action to quell controversies and manage their boards



46% of district leaders
report taking action to
address community concerns

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. - Superintendent

Strong superintendents do not impulsively respond to independent interests. - Superintendent

Insulating students, families and educators from the negative impacts of political conflict will be critical

Political conflict will not go away. Districts may be able to reduce its impacts by:

Preparing superintendent to manage board and community politics

Creating mechanisms to promote more effective board governance

- **Training for prospective board members on their responsibilities and the consequences of increasing polarization, e.g. North Dakota.**
- **Creating rules that limit or channel the scope of authority that school boards have. uch rules could reduce opportunities for single-issue candidates to dominate absent broader, collective concerns.**

Investing in more evidence-building board politics

Want to learn more?



Research Report

ASHLEY WOO, SABRINA LEE, ANDREA PRADO TUMA, JULIA H. KAUFMAN, REBECCA ANN LAWRENCE, NASTASSIA REED

Walking on Eggshells— Teachers’ Responses to Classroom Limitations on Race- or Gender- Related Topics

Findings from the 2022 American
Instructional Resources Survey

By spring 2022, 17 states had passed policies restricting how teachers can address topics related to race, gender, and “divisive concepts” in the classroom (Schwartz, 2021). Advocates of these policies purport that they prevent the indoctrination of students, allow families to have greater transparency into and control over the educational content to which their students are exposed, and refocus educators’ focus to core academic content like reading and math (Aldrich, 2021; Butcher and Burke, 2022; Izaguirre and Gomez Licon, 2022). Conversely, opponents of these policies are concerned that they deprive students of the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills and both learn about and interrogate our nation’s complex history (Wolfe-Rocca and Nold, 2022; Morgan, 2022; Waxman, 2021).

One in three public school teachers across the nation—that is, more than 1 million teachers—are working in one of the 17 states where restrictions on how teachers can address race or gender have been enacted (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). (See the “How State Policies Limit Teachers’ Instruction” text box.) PEN America, a nonprofit organization, found not only that state legislators have accelerated the introduction of these restrictions over the past year but also that the bills proposed during the 2022 legislative session were even more punitive and expansive in nature than the bills introduced in the 2021 session. For example, they extended restrictions to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, questioning, and more (LGBTQ+) topics and beyond just classroom conversa-

Navigating political tensions over schooling

Findings from the fall 2022 American
School District Panel survey

Ashley Jochim, Melissa Kay Diliberti, Heather Schwartz,
Katharine Destler, and Paul Hill

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Research Report

ASHLEY WOO, REBECCA L. WOLFE, ELIZABETH D. STEINER, SY DOAN, REBECCA ANN LAWRENCE, LISA BERDIE, LUCAS GREER, ALLYSON D. GITTENS, HEATHER L. SCHWARTZ

Walking a Fine Line— Educators’ Views on Politicized Topics in Schooling

Findings from the State of the American
Teacher and State of the American
Principal Surveys





DISCUSSION & QUESTIONS

THANK YOU

