

LISTEN TO YOUR TEACHER!

An Analysis of Teacher Sentiment on
the State of Public Education

AUGUST 2023



NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR
**PUBLIC
CHARTER
SCHOOLS**



The Harris Poll

Harris Insights & Analytics LLC, A Stagwell Company

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INTRODUCTION

The American public education system is in crisis mode, and teachers are arguably the most essential component of our education system. It's hard to think of any solutions in education that don't involve teachers, so it seems fitting to hear directly from them. The team at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools wanted to know more about what public school teachers are thinking and experiencing and commissioned The Harris Poll to conduct a national poll of pre-kindergarten through 12th grade public school teachers, including both public district and public charter teachers.*

Some may wonder why this organization, which is focused on charter schools, would be interested in the views of *all* public school teachers. The answer is simple: we felt that **the challenges faced by district teachers and charter teachers were more similar than they were different, and that all public school teachers deserved to be heard.**

Certainly, we were also curious about the specific experiences of teachers in charter schools. These unique public schools are designed to have greater flexibility and site-level autonomy. They are often smaller. They are also more likely to have a particular academic or cultural focus. We wondered how these factors might impact the teaching experience. We expected there might be some differences, and the survey data proved our hunch to be true.

The Harris Poll survey revealed that the experience of charter school teachers is different in some important ways. For starters, their motivation to remain in the profession increases overtime, and their job satisfaction is higher than that of their district school counterparts. Charter school teachers are also more likely to say they work at a school that ensures they have the tools they need for students, and they are more likely to feel valued and heard by their administrators. There may indeed be something special about working at a charter school, and if teacher retention is a goal, then the experiences of charter teachers should be more closely examined—and perhaps there are practices that should be replicated in other schools.

And yet, putting the differences aside, there is also remarkable consistency across all public school teachers on a number of key points. Across the country, teachers are still feeling the aftereffects of the past three years. Recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show student achievement levels are in free fall after two decades of growth.¹ During the Covid-19 pandemic, achievement gaps widened, progress was lost, and countless students fell behind.

And now, in the pandemic's aftermath, more teachers are quitting their jobs than ever before. According to data from 15 states collected and analyzed by *Chalkbeat*, every state “showed an increase in teachers exiting the classroom, compared to the year before the pandemic.” In Colorado, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Washington, more teachers left in 2021–22 than “at any point on record.”² A recent Brown University study found that, in terms of prestige, job satisfaction, and many other factors, the “state of the teaching profession is at or near its lowest levels in 50 years.”³



The negative effects of teacher turnover are significant, especially on student achievement.⁴ It is clear that we have arrived at an inflection point; if teacher retention rates continue to decline, then what will happen to the public education system? And what, if anything, can be done to reverse this trend? How can we help teachers remain in the profession? How can new teachers be recruited? What kinds of support do teachers need to stay motivated?

We decided to ask those best positioned to answer: teachers themselves.

What we learned was both inspiring and alarming. **Teachers view their profession as a calling, and most began teaching because they like helping children.** Still, teachers report feeling overwhelmed by the numerous roles they have to play—educator, administrative worker, and counselor to their students. Students are stressed, and that stress shows up at school. Bullies are harassing them, social media is affecting their self-esteem, their parents are divorcing, academic pressure is crushing them, or there is just a persistent feeling of sadness or being overwhelmed with the world. In February, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s biannual Youth Risk Behavioral Survey showed that based on data from 2021, 42% of high school students felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for at least two weeks in a row that they stopped doing their usual activities.⁶ Fifty-seven percent of teenage girls had “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” that year—the highest level reported in the past decade—and as many as 30% had seriously considered suicide.⁷

Teachers face many challenges in their work, most notably student behavior and disciplinary issues. In addition to that, they face challenges related to keeping schools and students safe, likely due to record levels of gun violence in schools. Adding to the risk and responsibility teachers take on every day, many still struggle to make ends meet financially, saying that pay is one of the biggest challenges they face. These challenges help explain why almost all teachers understand why other teachers have left the profession.

The impact of this new normal is enormous. According to a 2021 RAND survey, teachers were three times more likely to experience the symptoms of depression than the general adult population.⁸ Our findings bear this out. Almost half of the teachers we surveyed want better access to mental health support, and a quarter want more opportunities to get involved with their community. Morale is low, and teachers feel unappreciated and misunderstood; we found that more than three-quarters of teachers feel that being a teacher is “a thankless job.” The status quo is untenable.

What should we take away from this sobering data? **Teaching is hard work, but there are things we can do to make it less taxing and keep more educators in the classroom.** All we ask is that you listen to our teachers, because what they have to say may surprise you.

**When this report refers to “public school teachers” it means both district and charter school teachers. Any differences noted between the two teacher types are statistically significant.*



METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted online in the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools among 1,211 US adults, employed full time in education as a teacher in Pre-K–12 school settings in either public charter or public district schools. The survey was conducted May 10 through 30, 2023.

Data are weighted where necessary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, total years of teaching experience, school locale, and school level to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population. A post-weight was applied to the total teacher population to bring public charter and public district proportions in line with real world proportions.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within + 3.7 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.



WHY FOCUS ON TEACHERS?



Teachers are the backbone of our education system. According to a 2019 RAND study, teachers are the single most important factor when it comes to student achievement,⁹ even though a recent Educators for Excellence report emphasizes that teachers are often not considered in new education policy initiatives.¹⁰

Intuitively, we know that teachers are an instrumental part of a child's life. They not only instruct students and evaluate their academic performance, but they also help young people develop social and emotional skills. Aside from parents, guardians, and other family members, teachers are the adults who spend the most time with our children, and they've seen it all. Teachers are heroes—and not in a purely abstract sense. In today's world, with increased levels of behavioral issues

amongst students and other safety risks, teachers must also play the role of protector. The pressures placed on teachers are immense.

Though teachers are frequently driven to enter the profession by a sense of purpose or calling, the intensity of this motivation often gets worn down over time for most by the realities of working in public education. Most teachers (63%) report feeling less motivated about being a teacher than when they initially entered the teaching profession, which may cause them to consider abandoning the profession. Given that 60% of public school teachers see teaching as “not just my job, but a big part of who I am and what I represent,” this seems like an incredible loss.

The Harris Poll surveyed 1,211 U.S. adults aged 18 or higher who teach pre-kindergarten through 12th grade in a public charter or public district school. More information about our respondents' demographics can be found in the graphic below.

PUBLIC DISTRICT TEACHERS



GENDER
FEMALE: 77%
MALE: 23%



AGE
MEAN: 43.0
MEDIAN: 43



YEARS OF EXPERIENCE
MEAN: 14.8
MEDIAN: 14



SCHOOL SETTING
PRE-K: 1%
ELEMENTARY: 31%
MIDDLE: 17%
HIGH: 50%



TAUGHT IN ANOTHER SETTING
HAVE: 44%
HAVE NEVER: 56%



PRIOR SETTING TYPE
CHARTER: 16%
PRIVATE: 17%
OTHER: 23%



SCHOOL LOCATION SETTING
URBAN: 26%
SUBURBAN: 39%
RURAL: 35%



WORKED IN ANOTHER INDUSTRY
HAVE: 51%
HAVE NEVER: 49%



OTHER INDUSTRY TYPE (TOP 3)
RETAIL: 33%
HEALTHCARE: 12%
PROFESSIONAL AND BUSINESS SERVICES: 10%



STUDENT SES
LOW-INCOME: 51%
MIDDLE-INCOME: 35%
UPPER-INCOME: 14%



STUDENT RACE / ETHNICITY AVERAGE
WHITE STUDENTS: 56%
STUDENTS OF COLOR: 44%

PUBLIC CHARTER TEACHERS



GENDER
FEMALE: 66%
MALE: 32%



AGE
MEAN: 39.9
MEDIAN: 39



YEARS OF EXPERIENCE
MEAN: 10.5
MEDIAN: 8



SCHOOL SETTING
PRE-K: 2%
ELEMENTARY: 23%
MIDDLE: 24%
HIGH: 50%



TAUGHT IN ANOTHER SETTING
HAVE: 62%
HAVE NEVER: 39%



PRIOR SETTING TYPE
DISTRICT: 44%
PRIVATE: 26%
OTHER: 15%



SCHOOL LOCATION SETTING
URBAN: 50%
SUBURBAN: 30%
RURAL: 20%



WORKED IN ANOTHER INDUSTRY
HAVE: 28%
HAVE NEVER: 72%



OTHER INDUSTRY TYPE (TOP 3)
RETAIL: 30%
HIGHER EDUCATION: 12%
TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY: 9%



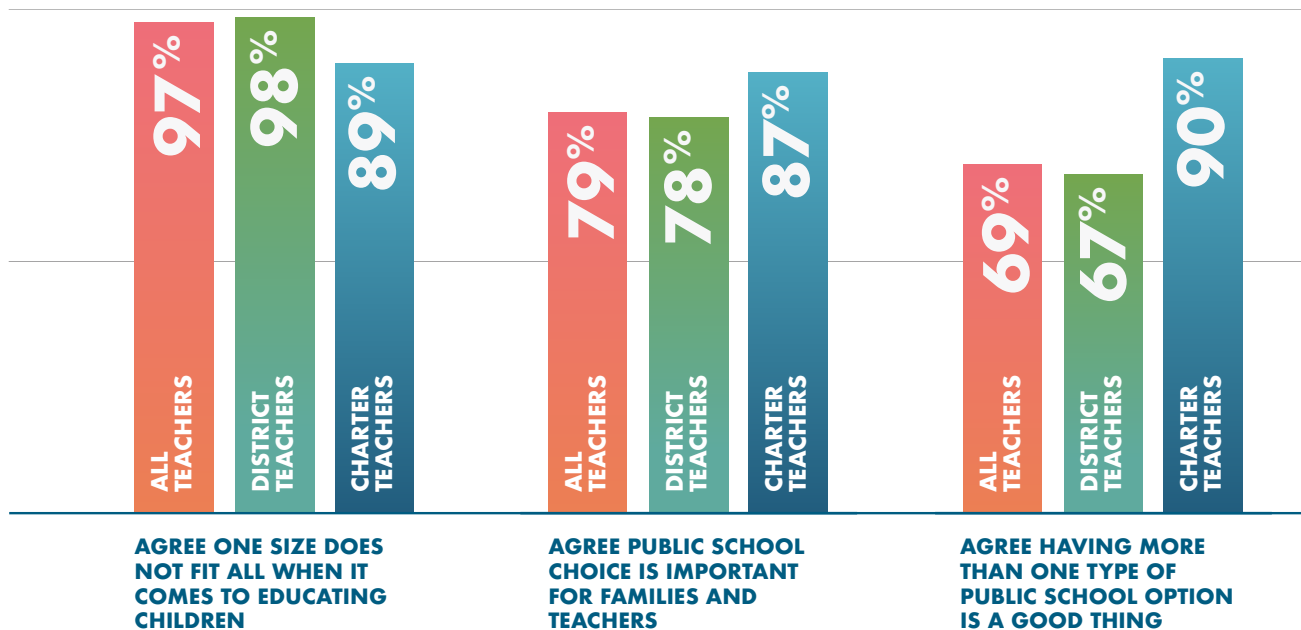
STUDENT SES
LOW-INCOME: 42%
MIDDLE-INCOME: 36%
UPPER-INCOME: 22%



STUDENT RACE / ETHNICITY AVERAGE
WHITE STUDENTS: 49%
STUDENTS OF COLOR: 51%

TEACHERS AGREE: FAMILIES AND STUDENTS SHOULD HAVE EDUCATION CHOICE

Though highly politicized in news coverage and on Capitol Hill, school choice is broadly supported by teachers, regardless of whether they work at district schools or charter schools. **Nearly all public school teachers (97%) agree that one size does not fit all when it comes to educating children, especially district teachers who agree at a resounding 98%.** Eighty-nine percent of charter school teachers also agree with this sentiment.



About 4 in 5 teachers agree that regardless of its politicized nature, public school choice is important for both families and teachers (79% of all public school teachers; 87% of charter school teachers and 78% of district school teachers) and more than two-thirds agree that having more than one type of public school option is a good thing (69% of all public school teachers; 90% of charter school teachers and 67% of district school teachers). The assumption that school choice is just for students and families is incorrect. Teachers' voices have rarely been heard on this issue, but when asked, they speak in favor of it.

Teachers do not appear to necessarily have a preference for one type of public school over another—for either themselves or for families. Many public school teachers have taught in both kinds of public schools. In fact, 44% of charter school teachers report having previously taught in district public schools, and nearly 1 in 5 district school teachers (16%) are former charter school teachers. It is also possible that teachers may choose to enroll their own children in both types of schools, providing a perhaps very personal experience with public education choice.

SOMETHING HAS TO CHANGE

By their own account, teachers are facing significant challenges and need substantially more support from school districts and the public at large. Virtually all public school teachers (99%) report that something needs to change in public education in order to recruit and retain teachers—and a similar proportion (97%) wish people understood how demanding it is to be a teacher. In fact, 78% report that being a teacher is a “thankless job.”

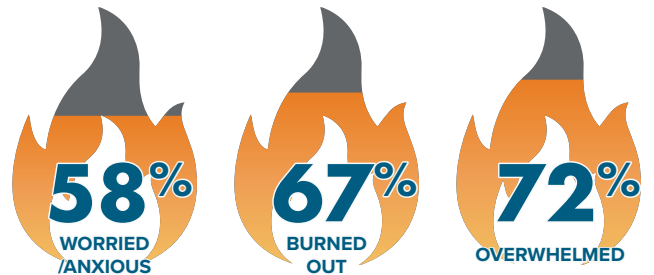
97% OF PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS SAY THEY WISH PEOPLE UNDERSTOOD HOW DEMANDING IT IS TO BE A TEACHER.



78% OF PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS REPORT THAT BEING A TEACHER IS A “THANKLESS JOB.”

Public school teachers, feel overwhelmed (72%), burned out (67%), and worried or anxious (58%) from being a teacher in America over the past few years—and when they look to the public education system for support, they end up feeling adrift and unmotivated. A whopping 84% of district teachers disagree that the current public education system in this country encourages and motivates teachers, with nearly half (46%) *strongly disagreeing*.

TEACHERS SAY BEING A TEACHER IN AMERICA THE PAST FEW YEARS MADE THEM FEEL:



Interestingly, charter teachers seem to have more positive feelings about the system and their jobs: More than two-thirds (69%) feel that the current public education system in this country encourages and motivates them, and charter teachers express other positive sentiments at a significantly higher rate than district teachers. Even with the challenges they face, nearly half (46%) of charter teachers say that in the past few years, being a teacher has made them feel proud (vs. less than a third, or 30%, of district teachers). Charter school teachers are also more than twice as likely to feel hopeful (44% vs. 20% of district teachers), appreciated or valued (37% vs. 17% of district teachers), and supported (31% vs. 12% of district teachers).



CHARTER SCHOOL TEACHERS ARE

2x MORE LIKELY

TO FEEL HOPEFUL, APPRECIATED OR VALUED, AND SUPPORTED THAN DISTRICT TEACHERS

The key to retaining teachers is solutions for teachers, by teachers. Teachers agree that there are problems facing those in their profession today, and almost all of them **(97%) want to be part of the problem-solving and solutions in education**. When teachers are asked what they think needs to be done to improve the profession and the system, three-quarters (75%) cite providing better benefits and compensation as a potential solution to the challenges teachers currently face. Altering the flow of the day-to-day is important, too: 66% of public school teachers think that enabling teachers to have more time to spend on teaching, as opposed to other work, is a potential solution.

At this critical juncture, something has to change. When asked what they think might make teachers more motivated to stay in the profession, public school teachers primarily cite higher pay and better benefits (84%), as well as support from school systems and administrators (68%). But better safety in schools (67%)—and its link to student behavior—is another key component that needs to be tackled, which we address in the next section.



75%

OF TEACHERS BELIEVE THAT PROVIDING BETTER BENEFITS AND COMPENSATION WILL INCREASE TEACHING RETENTION



66%

OF PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS THINK HAVING MORE TIME TO SPEND ON TEACHING, AS OPPOSED TO ADMINISTRATIVE WORK, WOULD MOTIVATE THEM TO STAY IN THE PROFESSION.



UNRAVELING THE CHALLENGES OF STUDENT BEHAVIOR

Eighty-four percent of all the teachers we surveyed agree that student mental health is at an all-time low.

During the 2021-22 school year, more than a quarter of schools changed their academic calendars due to the mental health concerns of staff and students.¹¹

While many schools districts do have licensed mental health professionals on staff at schools, research shows most of them “do not meet the recommended ratios of counselors and/or psychologists to students.”¹² As a result, the responsibility of recognizing students’ mental health issues often falls to teachers¹³—who are already facing myriad other challenges that take up their valuable classroom time. Three out of four teachers (75%) feel they are often asked or required to do things outside of their teaching purview, and they estimate they spend, on average, about 17% of their workday supporting their students’ mental or physical wellbeing and 23% on classroom management — for a total of 40% of time spent on these non-instructional activities.

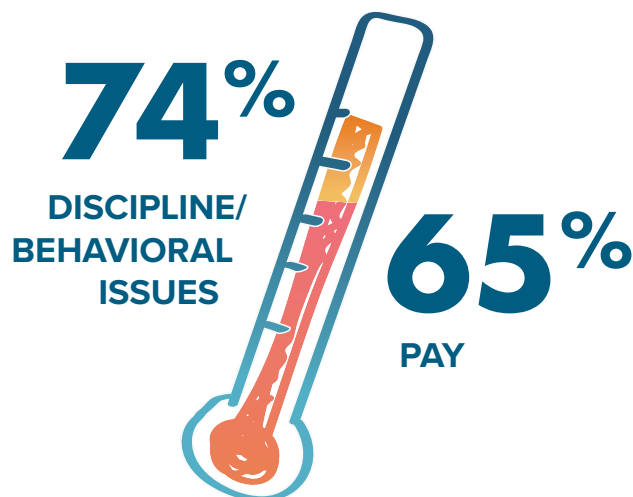
Despite efforts to support students, behavioral problems have only gotten worse. Student behavior and discipline issues are, in fact, the factors most frequently cited by teachers (74%) as the biggest challenges they face—even outpacing compensation by 9 percentage points (65%). Given that students spent much of the pandemic learning from home, they undoubtedly missed some milestones in social and emotional development that can only come through socialization, as well as the more basic, but important, routine of waking up, getting dressed, leaving the house, and arriving at school before the start of class. This lack of structure during the pandemic may have made it even harder for students to re-enter an in-class learning environment. According to a recent *EdWeek* study, many educators noticed that a return to the classroom coincided with a rise in misbehavior when compared to the fall of 2019, which seems not to have abated over time.¹⁴

The fact that student behavior and discipline issues are considered to be more of a challenge than pay is telling.

If many teachers choose the profession because they want to help children learn, then it must be particularly difficult to spend large parts of a workday disciplining, instead of teaching, students.

Though “student behavior and discipline issues” and “keeping schools and students safe” rank in the top five biggest challenges for both district and charter school teachers, district teachers are far more likely to report these issues than charter teachers. Seventy-six percent of district teachers, compared to only 39% of charter teachers, think that student behavior and discipline issues are some of the biggest challenges teachers face. Forty-one percent of district teachers, compared to 30% of charter teachers, think keeping schools and students safe is one of their biggest challenges. It is possible that these discrepancies are related to the fact that charter schools are often smaller schools—and are more likely to have “zero tolerance” policies on violence.

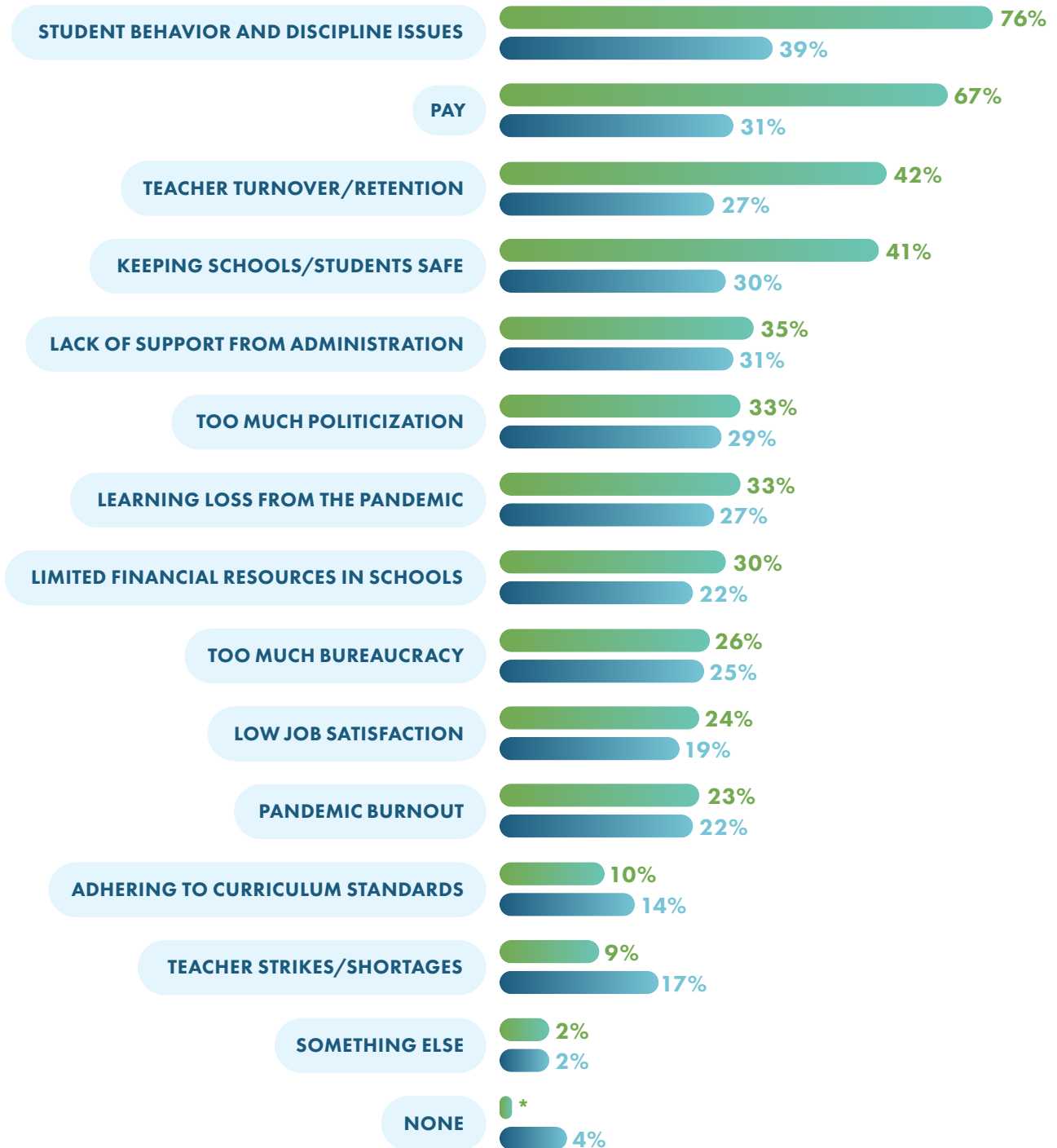
TEACHERS SAY THE TOP CHALLENGES ARE:



Among the top five biggest challenges facing teachers are (1) student behavior and discipline and (4) keeping schools and students safe. Note that the numbers are far worse for district than charter school teachers.

PERCEIVED BIGGEST CHALLENGES TEACHERS CURRENTLY FACE

● DISTRICT TEACHERS ● CHARTER TEACHERS



“THIS IS OUR NUMBER ONE PROBLEM”

GEORGE PARKER

Student discipline may have become more of an issue when schools reopened after COVID-19 closures, but George Parker, a senior advisor at the National Alliance, doesn't “want school districts to blame it solely on the pandemic.” Over the course of his 33-year career as an educator and leader, Parker has seen firsthand the impact of student misbehavior on teachers who lose valuable instructional minutes every day to managing student discipline. Parker is clear that these issues have “definitely become more challenging post-pandemic. However, I don't want this to overshadow the fact that lack of effective student discipline policies and implementation has been a major contributor to the academic failure of many of our public schools for a long time.”

During his tenure as the president of the Washington, D.C., teachers union, Parker worked with former Chancellor Michelle Rhee to add “language in the contract that actually addressed each school having a student discipline and behavior management plan.” Still, many schools and districts avoid establishing such behavior management plans because implementing them universally involves “tough choices,” like whether or not to establish alternative schools. Instead, most districts continue to use the inadequate detention, suspension, expulsion approach and “leave it up to each teacher to find their own solutions”—a burden that, according to our survey, is overwhelming.

School or districtwide behavior management plans aren't the only missing piece, though. Parker adds that there is often a lack of training in classroom management. “Many teacher prep programs are deficient in addressing student discipline” and “school systems have failed to teach their newer teachers how to navigate challenging classroom situations.” While more training is not a panacea, “it can definitely help our teachers better manage the



big destructive elephant in most classrooms today called student discipline.”

Finding a way to deal with discipline issues is critical to academic progress. Parker makes the point that “academic achievement could increase tremendously if we would just address the behavior that causes a teacher not to be able to provide quality instruction to students.” Even though dealing with this issue may be difficult both practically and politically, it has never been more necessary. Parker echoes our survey findings: “Teachers are telling you now: *This is our number one problem. Give us a prescription to solve it. We need your help.*”

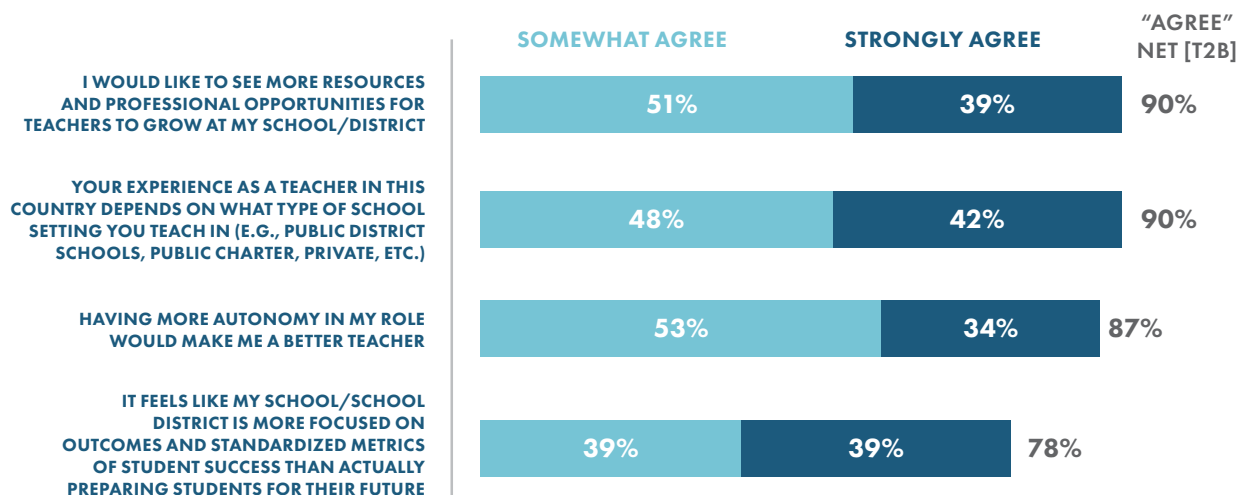
THERE'S SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF CHARTER SCHOOL TEACHERS



Even though all public school teachers are doing heroic work under extremely difficult circumstances, 9 in 10 teachers (90%) agree that teachers' experiences in this country depend on the type of school setting in which they teach. The experiences of charter school teachers seem to be particularly special; they are more satisfied with their jobs than district school teachers (97% vs. 83%)—and appear more motivated the longer they teach.

9 IN 10 TEACHERS AGREE THAT YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A TEACHER DEPENDS ON THE SCHOOL SETTING IN WHICH YOU TEACH.

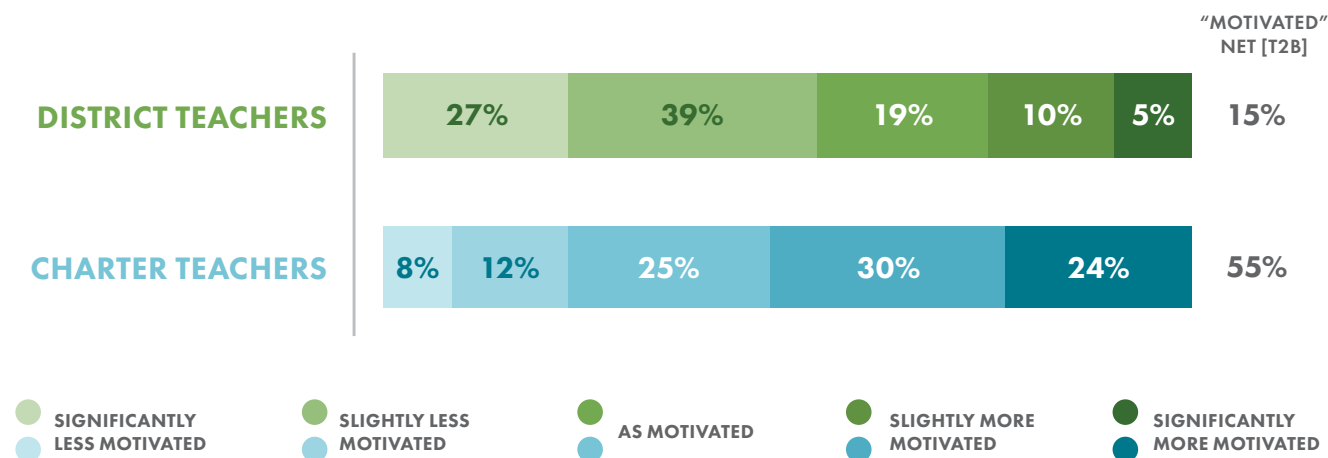
Agreement on Teacher-Related Topics



Compared to district teachers, a much higher percentage of charter school teachers (80%) are as motivated, or even more motivated, to teach today than when they first entered the profession. Only 34% of district school teachers feel this way. We do not believe these stats are in any way a statement about district school teachers themselves. Rather, we believe they are a statement about the district school work environments, which tend to be more bureaucratic, with less room for personal autonomy and individualized decision-making.

Charter school teachers also feel better about what they are doing. They are more likely to have positive sentiments about teaching, saying that by being a teacher in America over the past few years they feel proud (46% vs. 30%), fulfilled (29% vs. 22%), hopeful (44% vs. 20%), appreciated / valued (37% vs. 17%), and supported (31% vs. 12%) compared to district teachers. In the face of the many challenges facing those in the profession today, this is remarkable and encouraging.

Current Level of Motivation About Being a Teacher Compared to When Entering the Profession



In addition to their positive sentiments about teaching, nearly all charter teachers (97%) say they are satisfied in their job as a teacher, a higher proportion than district teachers (83%). They are also more apt to agree that being a teacher is the most rewarding job in the world (90% of charter teachers vs. 74% of district teachers) and that, by being a teacher, they feel like they are fulfilling their true purpose in life (92% of charter teachers vs. 84% of district teachers).

80% OF CHARTER SCHOOL TEACHERS ARE AS MOTIVATED, OR EVEN MORE MOTIVATED, TO TEACH TODAY THAN WHEN THEY FIRST ENTERED THE PROFESSION.

ONLY 34% OF DISTRICT SCHOOL TEACHERS FEEL THIS WAY.



More than a third of charter teachers (34%) say they entered the profession because they wanted to give back to the community, while only a quarter of district teachers (25%) say the same. This connection to purpose may be why charter school teachers are significantly more likely to report they feel their current school’s culture aligns very or somewhat well with their values and beliefs about education (96% of charter teachers vs. 75% of district teachers). They are also much more likely to feel valued by their school administration (90% of charter teachers vs. 68% of district teachers), feel their school or district administrators are receptive to feedback or ideas that come from teachers (87% of charter teachers vs. 67% of district teachers), and report their school ensures they are given the tools they need to meet student needs (82% of charter teachers vs. 69% of district teachers).

This kind of reinforcing support, along with a sense of personal and professional fulfillment, might also play into why 66% of district teachers report feeling less motivated than before compared to only 20% of charter teachers. In fact, the majority of charter school teachers have never considered leaving the profession (52%), while only 20% of district school teachers never have.



A CLOSER LOOK AT TEACHERS OF COLOR



Charter schools serve proportionately more students of color than district schools and employ more teachers of color and leaders of color, leading to key academic advantages for students and a sense of value alignment for teachers.

About 70% of charter schools students are students of color, compared to 53% of students in district schools. From the 2005-06 school year to the 2020-21 school year, between 55% and 60% of charter school students were Black or Hispanic, while the enrollment of Black and Hispanic students at district schools was 42%, at most.¹⁵ According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics' 2020-21 National Teacher and Principal Survey, there are also higher percentages of both teachers of color and school leaders of color at charter schools than there are at district schools. At charter schools, about a third of both teachers and principals are people of color, in contrast to just 19% of teachers and 22% of principals at district schools.¹⁶

Even with the higher percentages of teachers and leaders of color working in charter schools than in district schools, there is still much room for improvement in terms of diversifying teacher talent throughout the public education system. Recruiting more teachers of color will require creative strategies, such as teaching residences and education fellowships for college students.¹⁷ Schools of education may want to recruit college graduates of color into their programs more proactively, as well.¹⁸ These efforts will be critical to the success of students—and a sense of fulfillment for teachers.

The academic benefits of race-matching, or pairing students with teachers who share their race or ethnicity, are clear: students have better relationships with their teachers,¹⁹ and absenteeism and suspension rates go down.²⁰ Some students see positive impacts in reading and math,²¹ while still others are more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college.²² Students aren't the only ones who benefit, however. A full 96% of charter school teachers report feeling aligned with their current school's culture in terms of values and beliefs about education. Only 75% of district school teachers feel this way, which may partly explain the difference between the two groups in terms of feeling motivated.

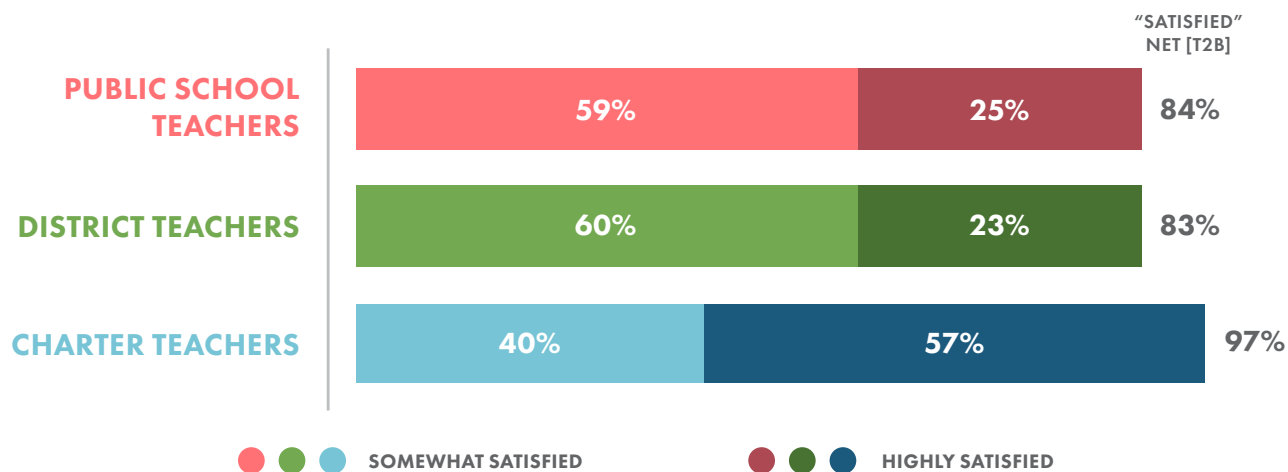
96%

OF CHARTER SCHOOL TEACHERS FEEL ALIGNED WITH THEIR SCHOOL'S CULTURE IN TERMS OF EDUCATION VALUES AND BELIEFS.



NEARLY ALL CHARTER TEACHERS SAY THAT THEY ARE SATISFIED IN THEIR JOB AS A TEACHER, A SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER PROPORTION THAN DISTRICT TEACHERS

Overall Job Satisfaction By Teacher Type



“WE ALWAYS HAVE OUR COMMUNITY TO PICK US BACK UP”

STACEY COONSIS

When a teacher feels culturally aligned with students and the school in which they teach, the benefits are enormous for both students and teachers. As Ms. Stacey Coonsis, the Elementary Head of School at the Native American Community Academy (NACA) in Albuquerque, New Mexico, says, “We didn’t have the words for it as kids, but we can have those words now: representation matters.”

About 90% of the student population at NACA is Native American or identifies with an Indigenous nation, and “securing one’s identity” is a major part of the curriculum. “For families of Native American descent,” Ms. Coonsis says, “because of forced relocations, some of us are stuck here in a metropolitan area, and we don’t want our kids to lose their identity.”

Many students opt to leave district schools in favor of NACA, a public charter school, because they see their own experiences reflected in those of their teachers. “I know that students frequently come to our school from the [district] public school system because of their long hair,” Ms. Coonsis says, “Especially boys. They’ll get teased for having their long hair.” The environment at NACA is completely different, though. “At one point, even our executive director had his hair long,” Ms. Coonsis adds. “So seeing that as a sense of representation is very important for us and our students.”

At NACA, students are taught a rich curriculum that includes all the basics like math, reading and science, as well as topics ranging from food sovereignty to land-based healing. Students have the opportunity to learn Native American languages, including Navajo, Zuni, Tiwa, Keres, and Lakota. Educators at NACA developed their own Native American literature curriculum, which is “open



source” and free to all, because students “didn’t see themselves” in the stories available through other reading programs. Social studies classes, like history, are grounded in the experiences of Native Americans.

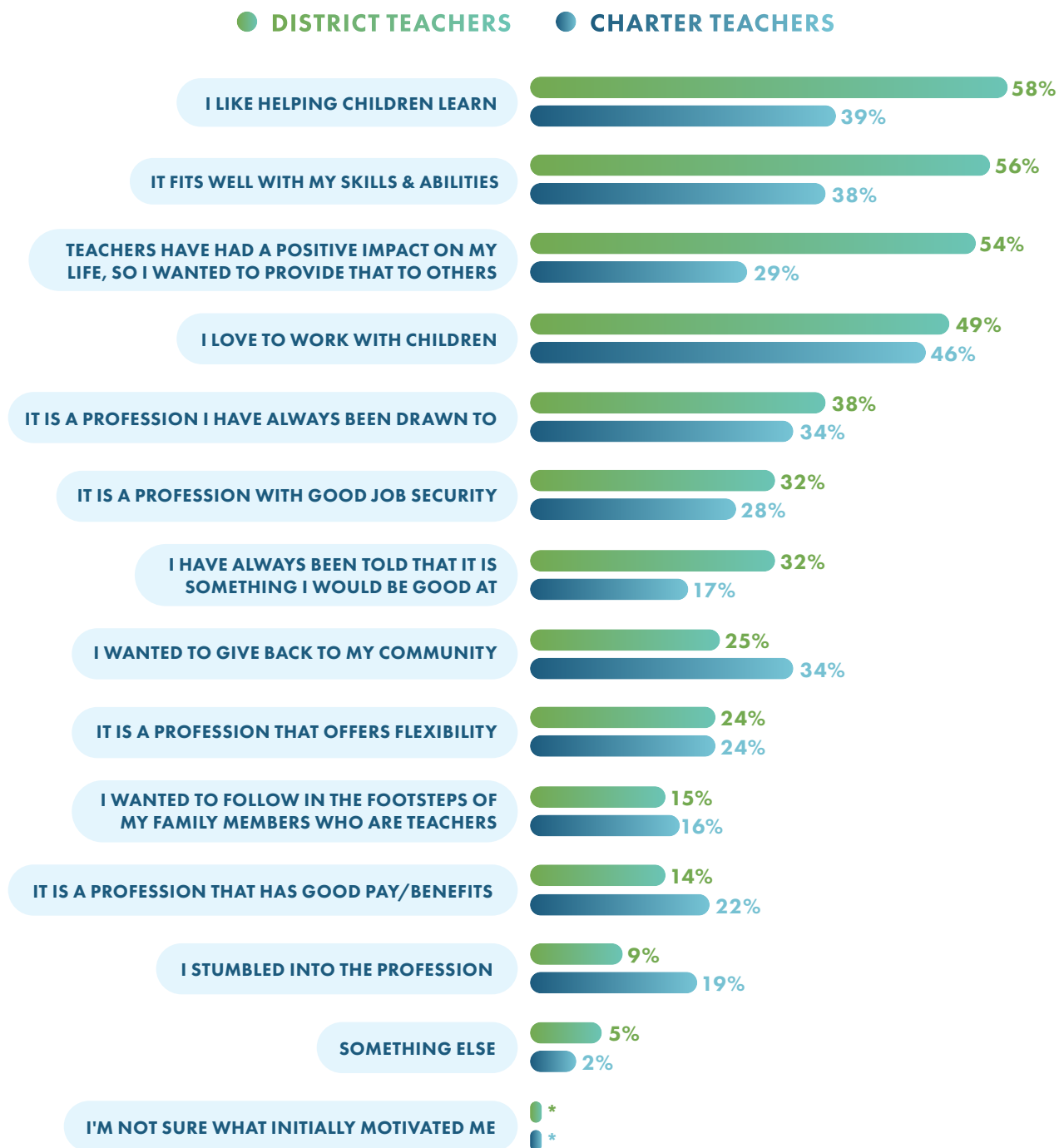
Students learn outside the classroom walls, too. During the 2022–23 school year, the 4th grade class was responsible for creating a “waffle garden”—a method of Indigenous farming in semi-arid regions, and the 5th grade class learned about irrigation systems and how to keep the garden irrigated.

“What draws educators in is that we have that autonomy,” Ms. Coonsis says. “We have that drive, and...we always have our community to pick us back up.”

DIFFERENT PATHWAYS TO THE CLASSROOM

We often think of teachers as coming straight out of teacher preparation programs and into the classroom. In reality, the path is not always so direct. But how does a public school teacher find their way into the classroom initially—and does this entry affect the experiences they have as their career progresses?

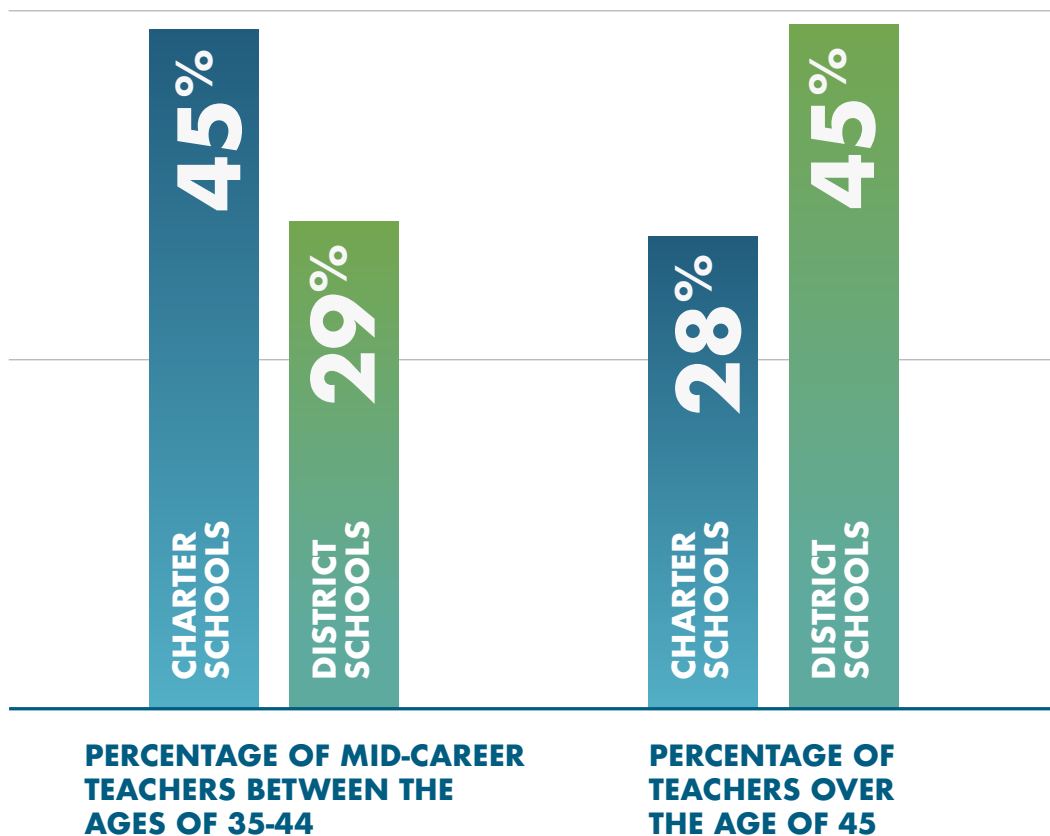
INITIAL MOTIVATION TO BECOME A TEACHER BY TEACHER TYPE



Charter school teachers are more likely to say they “stumbled into” the teaching profession than district teachers (19% of charter teachers vs. 9% of district teachers), but their teaching qualifications do not significantly diverge. Almost the same percentage of charter teachers (33%) have a teaching certification or license as district teachers do (34%), and younger teachers are about evenly split between district and charter schools.

Demographic differences between charter and district teachers begin to emerge as teachers’ careers go on. **Charter schools have a higher percentage of mid-career teachers aged 35-44 (45%) compared to district schools (29%), while district schools have a higher percentage of teachers over age 45 (45%) compared to charter schools (28%).** Sixty-two percent of charter teachers have taught in another setting, while only 44% of district teachers have, so it is possible that at least some early career teachers leave a district setting and move to a charter setting as their careers progress.

About one-half of district school teachers (51%) report having worked in other professions. However, 72% of charter school teachers say they have never worked outside the education profession. So, while they are more likely to have worked in different types of schools, charter school teachers are also far more likely to have only ever worked in education. Charter school teachers are also an important pipeline to leadership, either as school founders, administrators, or school leaders in charter schools.



KEEP POLITICS OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

Teachers are politically engaged—but that does not mean they want politics to influence their work in the classroom. An overwhelming 91% of public school teachers feel like they’ve gotten caught in the “crossfire of a culture war.” This response was consistent across all geographies and political affiliations.

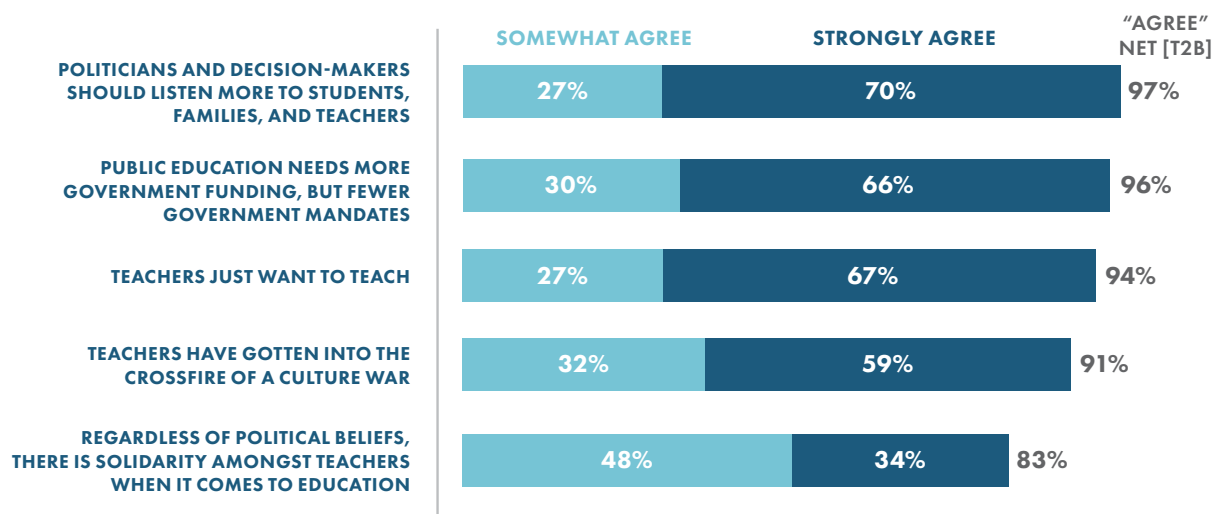


On a personal level, teachers follow politics. Ninety-two percent of them say they vote in state, local, or federal elections, and nearly all of them report that it is important to them that a political candidate’s platform includes support for public district education (97%). School choice, while widely viewed as a polarizing topic, is actually supported by the majority of school teachers, both district and charter—a data point discussed in detail earlier in this report.

Regardless of personal political beliefs, teachers report that there is “solidarity” when it comes to education (83%), and almost all public school teachers (97%) think politicians and other decision-makers should listen more to students, families, and teachers. Pre-kindergarten through 12th grade education is publicly a divisive issue among pundits and politicians, but teachers are remarkably unified in their stances on many issues. A vast majority of public school teachers agree public education needs more government funding but fewer government mandates (96%).

Even though they may be personally interested in politics at home, in the classroom, almost all public school teachers “just want to teach” (94%).

Perceptions on Impact of Politics on Education



SAFETY IS A CONSISTENT AREA OF CONCERN

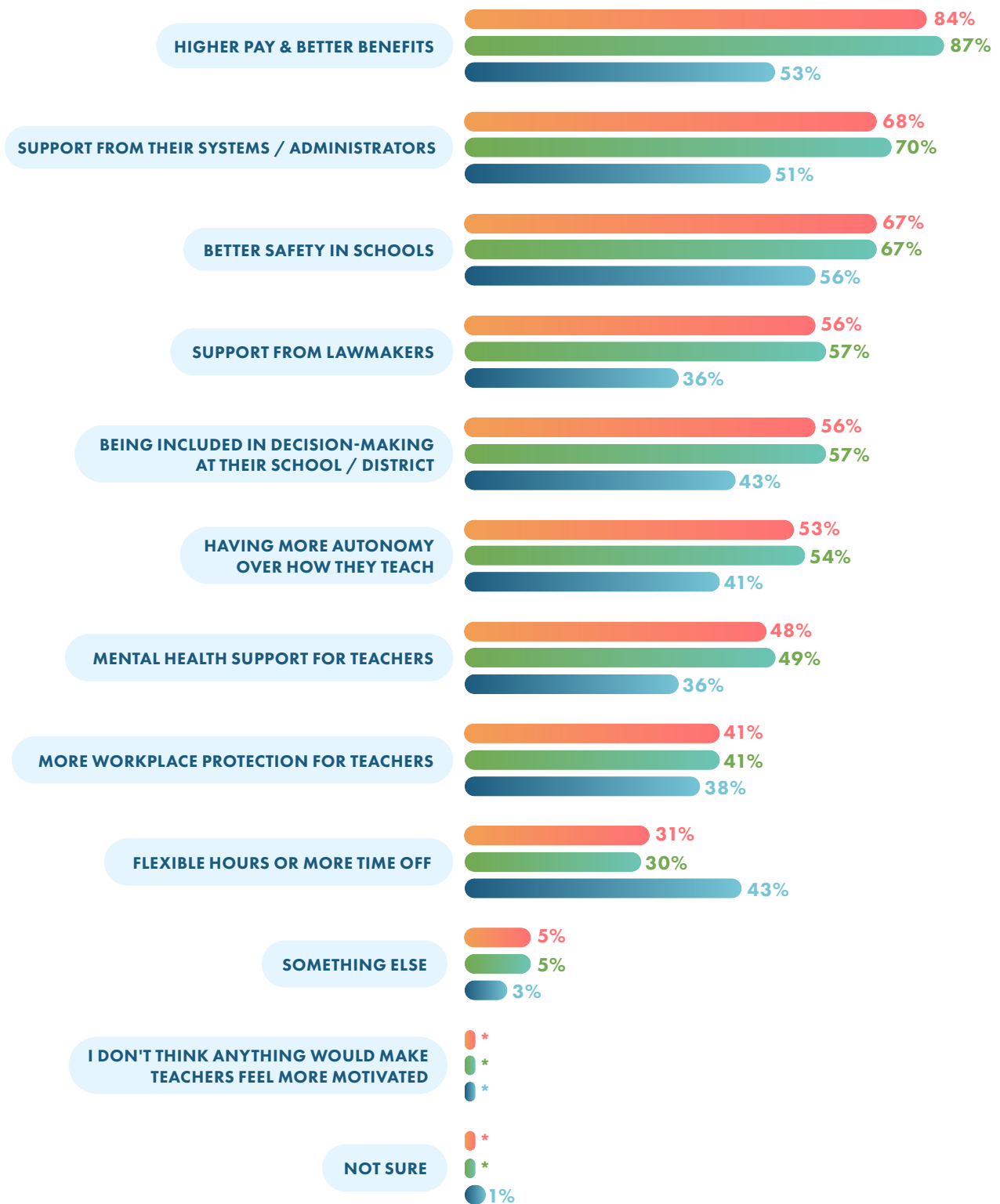


School shootings were at a record high in 2022, with 304 incidents at U.S. schools involving a gun.²³ They were also at a record high the prior year in 2021, when there were 250 incidents—more than doubling the numbers from 2018 (119), 2019 (119), and 2020 (115).²⁴ At the time of this report’s writing, there were 191 incidents so far in 2023, with about five and half months left in the year.²⁵ By contrast, there were only 32 such incidents 20 years ago in 2003 and just 19 incidents 50 years ago in 1973.²⁶

It is no surprise, then, that safety is consistently cited by teachers as a major issue. **When asked what would make teachers more likely to stay in the profession, “better safety in schools” was the third most popular answer (67%).** When asked about the major challenges teachers face, “keeping schools/students safe” was ranked number four (41%). When asked to identify education-related crises, 84% of teachers agreed that “being a teacher feels like it becomes less and less safe by the day.” In all, across multiple topics, safety was cited in the top five of teachers’ concerns.

SUPPORTS FOR TEACHERS TO FEEL MORE MOTIVATED TO STAY IN THE PROFESSION BY TEACHER TYPE

● ALL TEACHERS ● DISTRICT TEACHERS ● CHARTER TEACHERS

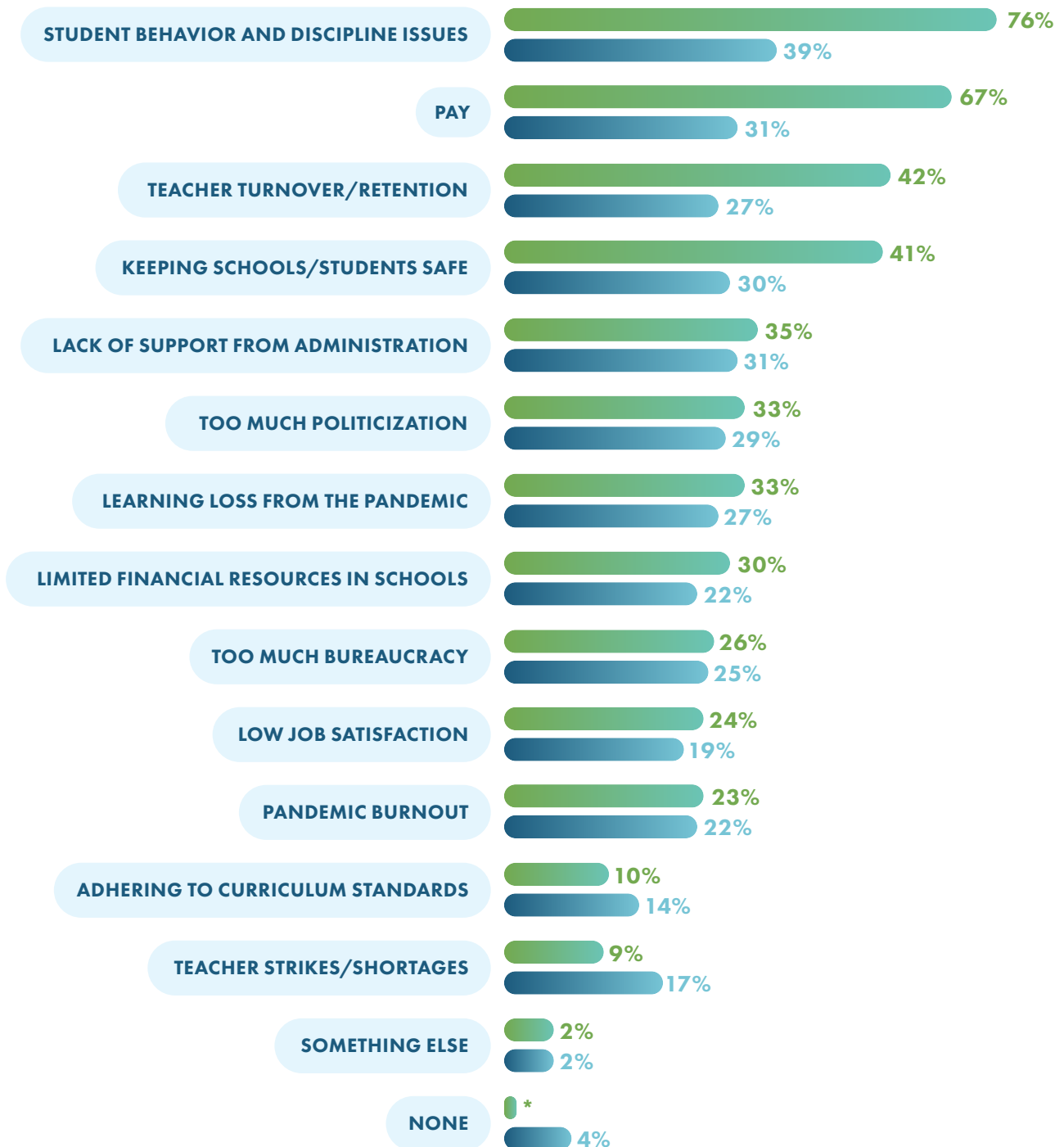


*Please note that "All Teachers" refers to all school teachers in the survey — those in both district public schools and charter public schools.

In terms of the biggest challenges teachers currently face, “student behavior and discipline issues” is cited as a top challenge for both district and charter teachers, though district teachers are far more likely to mention it (76%) than charter teachers (39%).

PERCEIVED BIGGEST CHALLENGES TEACHERS CURRENTLY FACE

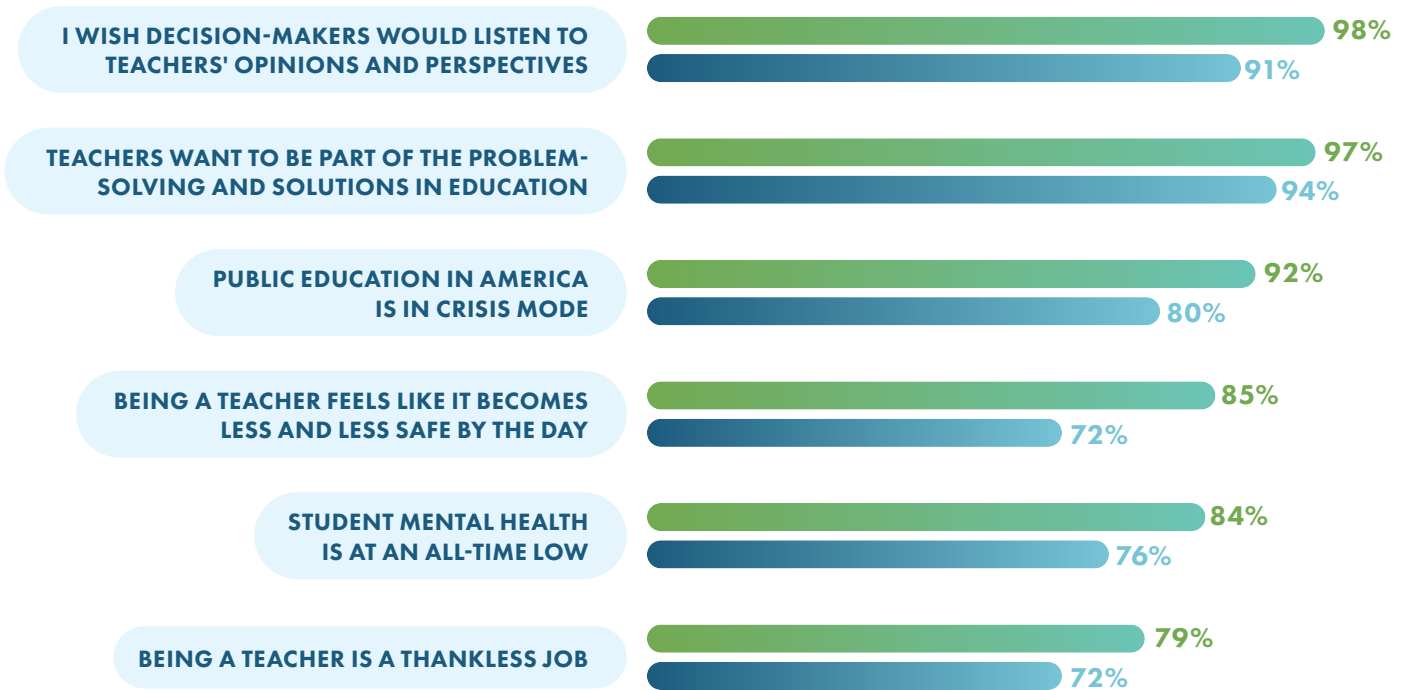
● DISTRICT TEACHERS ● CHARTER TEACHERS



As discussed in the section on student behavioral challenges, safety issues may be less of a concern in charter schools because of their smaller size and zero tolerance for violence. Still, even though school safety is less of a problem for charter teachers, it is still one that has a clear impact and should be addressed.

AGREEMENT ON EDUCATION CRISIS-RELATED TOPICS BY TEACHER TYPE

● DISTRICT TEACHERS ● CHARTER TEACHERS



TEACHING SEEMED LIKE A GOOD IDEA AT THE TIME

Most public school teachers agree that teaching is more than just a job. In fact, only 7% of public school teachers say they are motivated to teach because it pays well, while **a massive 89% say that “education is a calling, not just a profession.”** But the strength of this initial calling, as well as the conviction that goes along with it, tends to fade over time as teachers experience the reality of what it means to work in the public education system.

Though they were driven by purpose when they entered the profession, a lot of teachers report feeling less motivated now than they did when they started teaching. Sixty-three percent of public school teachers feel less motivated (though, when separated from district school teachers (15%), it becomes clear that 55% of charter school teachers actually feel more motivated

now, as discussed in an earlier section). Still, this lack of motivation, and disconnection from a sense of purpose, may be contributing to issues with teacher retention.

The vast majority of both district (97%) and charter (88%) teachers say they understand why other teachers have left the profession, and 39% of public school teachers have either seriously considered leaving the profession in the past or are seriously considering or planning to do so by the end of the year. Eighty-four percent of public school teachers believe that higher pay and better benefits would make teachers feel more motivated to stay in the profession—though it seems that perhaps more resonant forms of support will be necessary for the majority of professionals who, above all else, are currently motivated by the fact that they can “positively impact the lives” of their students (59%).



UNDERSTAND WHY OTHER TEACHERS HAVE LEFT THE PROFESSION.

NEARLY
40%
OF PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS HAVE EITHER SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED LEAVING THE PROFESSION IN THE PAST OR BY THE END OF THE YEAR.

“WE SEE TEACHERS AS PEOPLE”

PETER ANDERSON AND DIANA SMITH

Teacher retention is a major problem, but Washington Latin Public Charter Schools in Washington, D.C., are creating solutions. And they must be doing something right because 95% of their teachers chose to stay last year, even as competition for teachers in the District of Columbia is fierce. Washington Latin has found multiple innovative ways to keep lines of communication open and meet teachers' needs.

Some of the school's strength comes from addressing the basics. Diana Smith, Chief of Classical Education, says, “We ask a lot of our people in terms of out-of-school time as well as work time, but we do a lot for them.” Peter Anderson, Head of Schools and CEO, says that Washington Latin has “a very strong operations director...Very seldom do I have a teacher come to me and say, ‘I need this to be able to do my job’ and us not being able to meet that need.”

Support for teachers is a key theme, whether it comes in the form of coaching or mental health and wellness reimbursements. Anderson echoes our findings when he says “We’ve seen an increase in overt, expressed interest in mental health support. It’s greater than at any point in my career.”

Beyond these more fundamental supports, Washington Latin also recognizes “the deep need in teachers for intellectual stimulation,” according to Smith. The school offers a teacher-administered grant program called “Inspire,” which encourages teachers to “pursue anything that they think would support their growth and development,” says Smith. Over the past eight years, teachers have used these grants to learn new skills, travel to destinations as far afield as Rome and Morocco, and even climb Mount Kilimanjaro. Smith adds that Washington Latin also



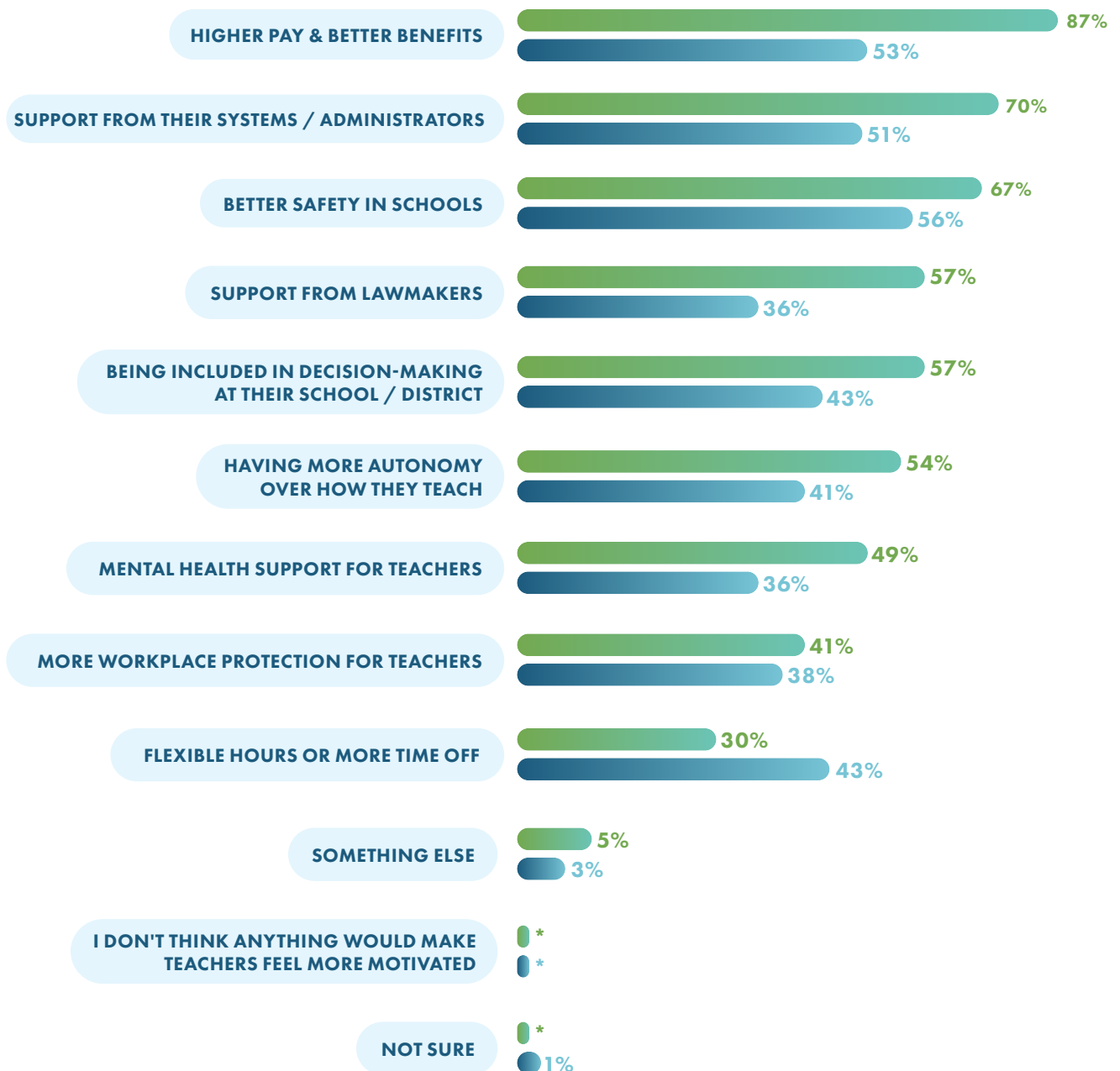
spends “at least \$10,000 a year on books that the faculty want to read and that we read together in book groups.” They are also regular “soirees” which engage faculty in deep discussions on personally meaningful topics.

When it comes to what Washington Latin is doing differently, Smith's words are particularly poignant: “We don't see teachers as tools. We see teachers in their own right as people who need to grow and develop, and we give them a lot of autonomy.”

MONEY MATTERS, BUT SO DOES HAVING A VOICE

SUPPORTS FOR TEACHERS TO FEEL MORE MOTIVATED TO STAY IN THE PROFESSION BY TEACHER TYPE

● DISTRICT TEACHERS ● CHARTER TEACHERS



Teachers want their voices to be heard and valued by those who can take action on their feedback.

Teachers want their voices to be heard and valued by those who can take action on their feedback. Nearly all public school teachers (97%) wish decision-makers would listen to teachers' opinions and perspectives, and almost half of them (48%) think having a less bureaucratic, or top-down, education system would help. More than half think teachers feel it would be a potential solution to the challenges they currently face if they were given more control and say over how education systems operate (56%) or would be more motivated to stay in the profession if they were included in decision-making at their school or district (56%).

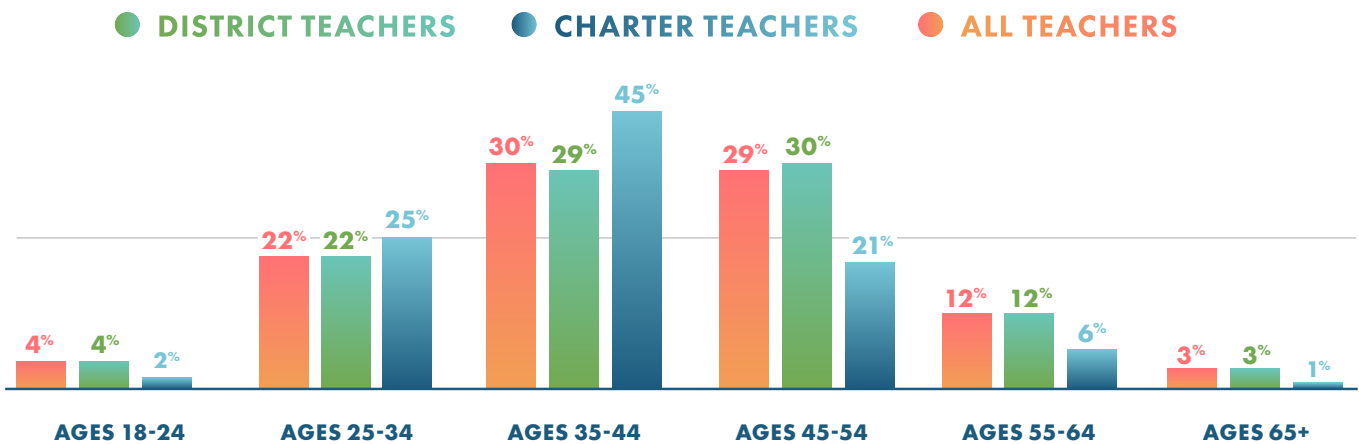
What teachers say they need goes beyond compensation and being included in the conversation, however. They also want access to a more holistic kind of support. Given the numerous responsibilities teachers have to shoulder in the classroom, especially those related to student wellbeing, it is perhaps not surprising that nearly 1 in 2 public school teachers (48%) want greater access to counseling for themselves. Currently, only about a third (31%) of teachers seem to have access to mental health supports. While most public school teachers (74%) seem to have access to professional development opportunities, only 37% of teachers have opportunities to get involved with their community—a kind of interconnectedness that could likely reinforce continued motivation to teach, especially given that more than a quarter of teachers (26%) joined the profession because they wanted to give back to their community. Charter teachers especially would like greater access to community-involvement opportunities (33%), in contrast to district

teachers (24%). Only 24% of teachers have access to networking opportunities, which would further increase community connection.

Charter school teachers are generally less well compensated than their counterparts at district schools.²⁷ Yet, they are more likely to say that being paid well (21% of charter teachers vs. 6% of district teachers) and having good benefits (34% of charter teachers vs. 25% of district teachers) motivate them to go to work each day. There seems to be a tension between these two points. If charter teachers are making less, then why are they more motivated by their pay?

It is possible charter teachers are highly invested in the impact their teaching is having on their communities, meaning that they are motivated by the pay and benefits that support them and allow them to remain in the profession. After all, if a teacher cannot afford to live and retire comfortably on their salary, then they are unlikely to continue teaching over the long run. It may also be a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Though the compensation is an external factor, charter school teachers are more aligned with the values of their schools—and more intrinsically motivated as a result.

Another possible explanation is the age difference between district and charter school teachers. District public schools have the highest percentage of teachers over age 45, and compensation expectations could be greater as teachers age. By contrast, charter schools have a significantly higher percentage of teachers in the 35-44 age range.



*Please note that "All Teachers" refers to all school teachers in the survey — those in both district public schools and charter public schools.

“THE TIME IS NOW”

TEACHER, NATHANIEL DUNN III

Compensation emerged as a major issue in our survey of public school teachers. Even though only a small percentage of teachers (7%) said they are in the profession because it pays well, 84% of them agreed that “higher pay and better benefits” might motivate them and other teachers to continue teaching. We also noticed that although charter school teachers are generally not as well compensated as their district school counterparts, they were more likely to say that pay and benefits motivate them to stay in the profession. To take a closer look at these tensions, we asked Mr. Nathaniel Dunn III, one of our 2023 Changemakers and a 3rd grade charter school teacher at i3 Academy in Birmingham, Alabama, for his perspective.

“I think it is important to recognize that individual motivations can vary among teachers,” Mr. Dunn explained, “and the reasons why some charter school teachers express higher motivation regarding pay and benefits [can vary] from case to case... While compensation is an essential factor, we do find value in non-monetary rewards such as personal fulfillment, recognition, and motivation.” Mr. Dunn, who was also honored as the 2021 Henry Nelson Teacher of Excellence by the Alabama Charter School Commission, noted that teachers are “working harder than ever” and better compensation could go a long way toward attracting “high-quality teachers.”

Mr. Dunn echoed the views of the 89% of teachers we surveyed who view education as a calling. He was drawn to the profession because he “completely” believes in serving “the whole child and the communities where our children come from.” His feelings about teaching “evolve each year,” and his thoughts about the tougher times



are inspiring: **“On hard days, I often reflect on the genuine hearts of my students. I often think about how kind and thoughtful they are to me as their teacher.”** Though he is deeply motivated to remain in the profession himself, Mr. Dunn emphasized that teachers “are hoping that one day they will be compensated for the intense work” they do in the classroom. “Oftentimes, he added, “we feel undervalued and overlooked.”

So, what is the key to fair compensation for teachers? In the words of Mr. Dunn: “Realizing that the time is now.”

KNOWLEDGE GAP ON CHARTER SCHOOLS



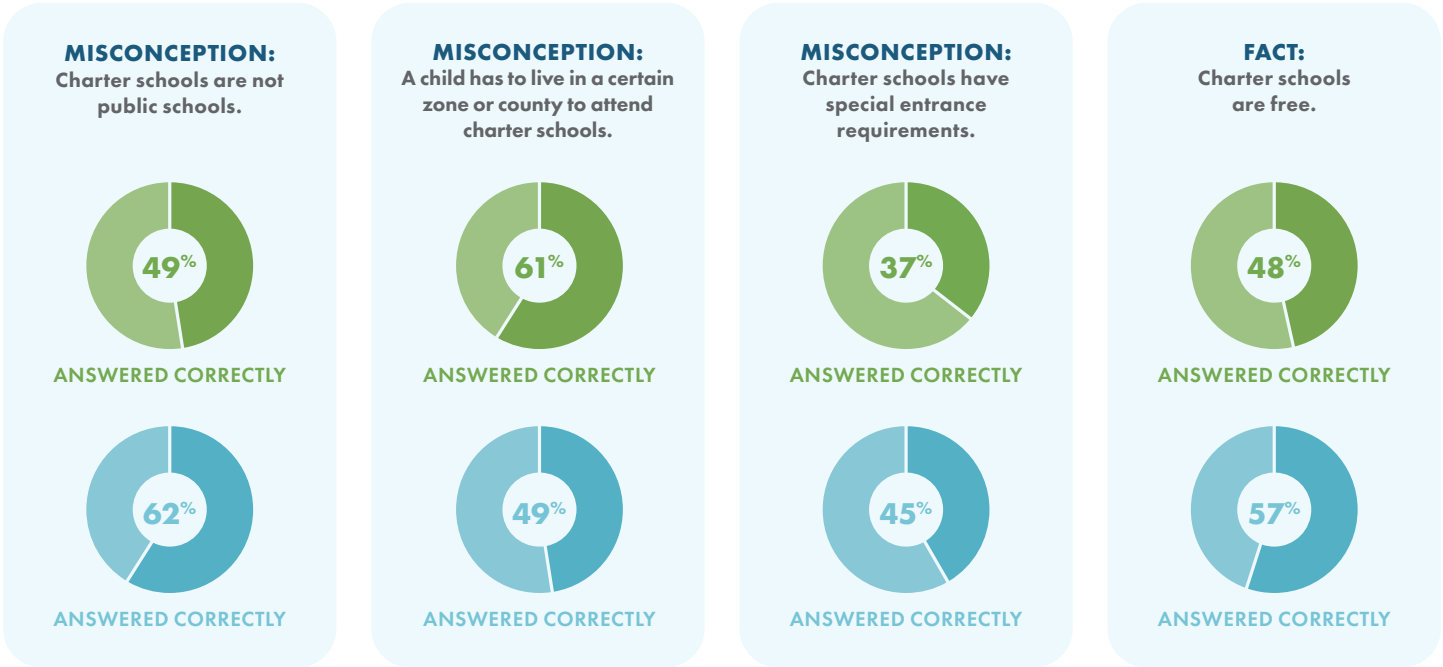
The first charter school opened more than 30 years ago,²⁸ but confusion remains about what a charter school actually is. As recently as 2019, 29% of the general public thought that charter schools could charge tuition, while 44% did not know whether or not they could.²⁹

This knowledge gap extends to teachers, especially those who work at district schools. Fifty-two percent of district school teachers and 43% of charter school teachers do not realize that charter schools are free, and 51% of district teachers and 38% of charter teachers do not know that charter schools are public schools. Sixty-three percent of district teachers mistakenly think that charter schools have special entrance requirements, and more than half (54%) of district teachers do not know that charter schools are open to all children. Some charter teachers share these misconceptions: 55% think charter schools have special entrance requirements, though a full three quarters (75%) know that charter schools are open to all. Only about a quarter of district teachers (28%) recognize that charter schools primarily serve marginalized populations, while half of charter teachers do.

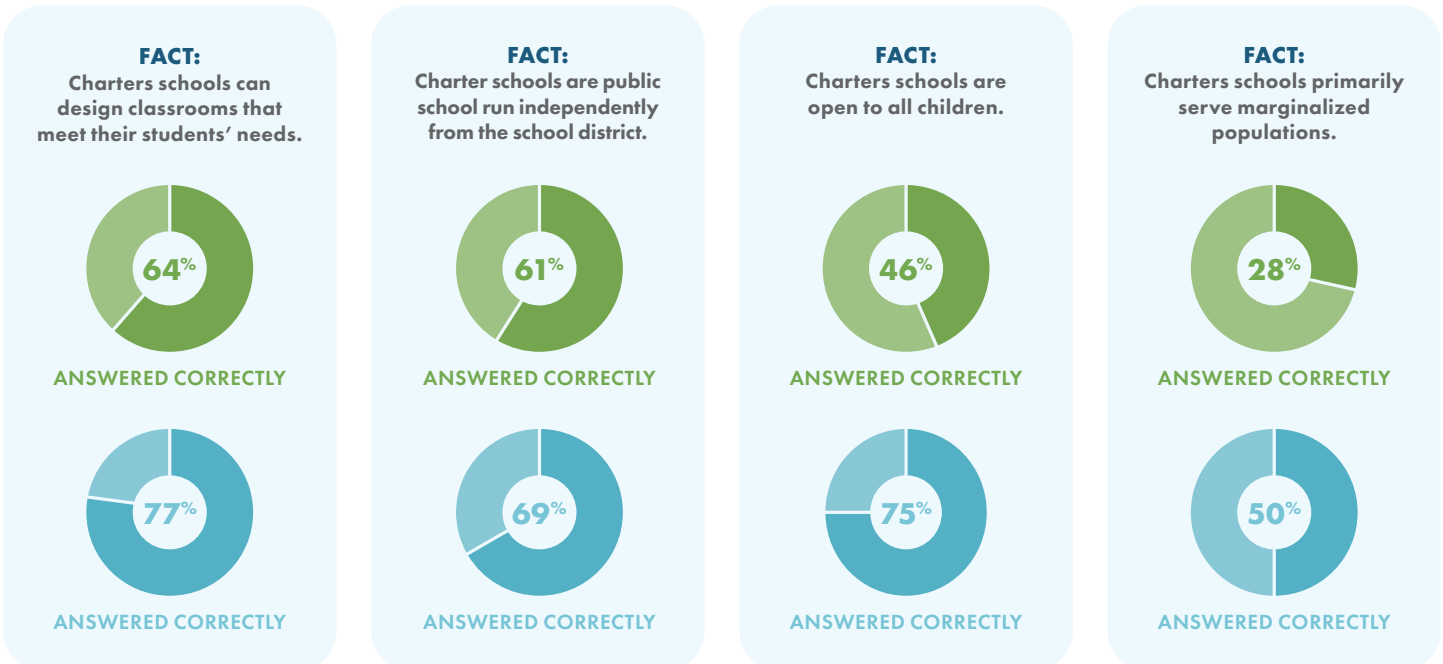
These widespread misunderstandings about charter schools, even among teachers who work at them, seem to indicate that more and clearer public discussion about the unique features—and benefits—of charter schools is needed.

THERE IS SOME CONFUSION ABOUT THE SPECIFICS OF CHARTER SCHOOLS, PARTICULARLY AMONG DISTRICT TEACHERS

● DISTRICT TEACHERS ● CHARTER TEACHERS



ONLY A QUARTER OF DISTRICT TEACHERS KNEW THAT CHARTER SCHOOLS PRIMARILY SERVE MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS



CONCLUSION

For too long, teachers have been missing voices in discussions about education, even though polling says they are a trusted source of information.³⁰ This report adds to a growing body of research that provides important insights on teacher perspectives.

- In May 2023, EdChoice found that teachers in district schools were much more pessimistic about the teaching profession compared to both private school and charter school teachers. They also found that more than half of teachers feel a “sense of purpose” and “hopeful” when thinking about the future, and nearly 30% say they feel “overwhelmed.”³¹
- Also in May 2023, a poll conducted by Merrimack College in conjunction with EdWeek found that 42% of teachers say their mental health and wellness is impacting their work, and 35% indicated that they were “very/fairly likely” to leave the profession within two years.³²
- Researchers at RAND found that teacher turnover increased 4 percentage points above pre-pandemic levels, reaching 10% nationally at the end of the 2021-2022 school year.³³
- RAND researchers also found that in Spring 2022, 54% of school principals reported that they regularly do not have enough teaching staff to cover their classrooms.³⁴
- In 2023, Educators for Excellence found in their annual survey of teachers that only 30% of teachers have received the training to effectively implement their materials.³⁵

When asked about the challenges, the realities, and the best parts of teaching in the U.S. public school system, the teachers we surveyed validated the findings of prior research and further illuminated the landscape—a landscape that is, in some ways, bleak, but also ripe for reinvention and regrowth.

So, what can be learned from what teachers are telling us? Perhaps most importantly, that connection to purpose and community provides a solid defense against the challenges of day-to-day teaching. There may be other lessons, too: that being aligned with the culture of a school and working with receptive leaders make teachers feel more supported; that, from a practical perspective, smaller schools with fewer disciplinary issues might feel safer to teachers. Many of these conditions already exist in charter schools, but can also exist in district schools if there is the will to make changes.

On average, charter schools are funded at about 25% less than their district counterparts. Despite a significant funding inequity, these unique public schools are finding a way to succeed and support their teachers. All public schools should be fairly and equitably funded. And while we do not make an argument for doing more with less, charter school results speak for themselves. If funded equitably, the impact could be even greater. Charter schools are an integral part of public education, and lessons learned in these special, community-based public schools can be replicated across the public school spectrum. Charter school teachers are public school teachers, and support for them translates directly into better support for students and moves us closer to the goal of providing a quality education to all children.

Perhaps the most important lesson may be that, if we want to grapple with the issues facing the public education system, we would do well to listen to our teachers. They are the ones navigating this system day in and day out, and their perspective is critical not just for our students, but for our country and our collective future.

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