

THE K-12 LEADER PULSE SURVEY

*A new report by XanEdu and
Education Elements identifies
key trends, notable findings, and
solutions to challenges facing
U.S. education leaders*

XanEdu

 Education
Elements

To say our nation's educators are facing challenging times is a vast understatement. Complexities around schooling during a global pandemic, coupled with shifting regulations, needs, and opportunities make the start of 2022 a landmark moment in education history. The good news is that education leaders are not alone in tackling these challenges.

Education Elements and **XanEdu**, leading companies in educational services, conducted a national poll of education leaders in December 2021 to understand what was top-of-mind as they looked ahead to 2022 and planned for the upcoming school year. More than 200 educators across 40 states responded to the K-12 Leader Pulse Survey, sharing their top concerns as well as strategies for overcoming those challenges. In a potentially surprising result, given the dominant narrative of the past 24 months, COVID's impact on learning was not the number one issue for administrators. Although learning loss was ranked highly, more systemic issues around culture and staffing rose to the forefront of administrators' minds as they looked forward to 2022.

The following report highlights the three most urgent issues facing our respondents: **climate and culture**, **staff retention**, and **learning loss**. We also share how these issues are being addressed by K-12 leaders across the country and how they are fundamentally connected. As one respondent framed our common goal, "How can we create a culture of less stress, more grace, and true compassion for our school(s)?"

What are the most urgent issues for K-12 leaders right now?

The majority of respondents to the national survey included campus administrators and district leaders (as well as teachers representing 8% of respondents). Respondents also represented a diverse cross section of districts — ranging from large to small and located in urban, suburban and rural areas. In our survey, the majority of respondents listed the following as, "the three most urgent topics to you, based on the various priorities, interests, and stakeholders you are balancing."

1

Climate & Culture

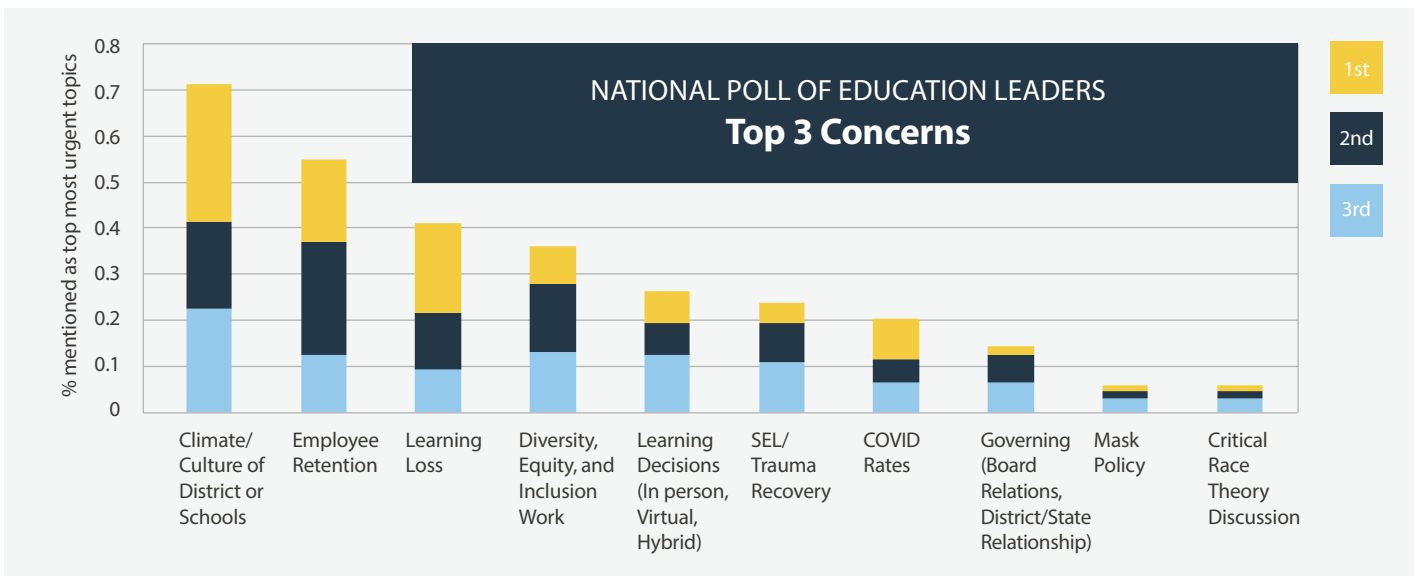
Climate and culture are the most important priorities for district leaders across the country, according to our survey.

- Almost three quarters of respondents (71%) ranked “Climate & Culture” among their top-most urgent priorities
- 49% of respondents ranked “Climate & Culture” among their top two priorities

Such an overwhelming focus on climate and culture suggests that K-12 administrators recognize these elements as critical to successfully addressing any of the other priority items facing their districts. Developing authentic strategies for connecting with stakeholders, understanding and co-designing solutions to challenges, and instilling a culture of learning (for children and adults) are necessary for resilient and successful district teams.

82%
indicate ‘high or medium’ priority for incorporating student voice in their efforts to improve school climate.

This type of work does not come easily or quickly. However, survey results imply that districts are willing to invest the time and the funding to help build a team that can successfully address the challenges of teaching and learning at this moment in time.



2

Employee Retention

Employee retention is the second highest priority for district leaders across the country – more than COVID, learning loss, mask mandates, curriculum, or other learning decisions.

Staffing shortages are regularly in the news and in many cases are forcing districts to go remote, adopt hybrid schedules, or cancel classes – strategies that may exacerbate other priority issues like learning loss.

District leaders understand this and are focused on retention:

- **33%** more respondents ranked “Employee Retention” as a top concern as compared to those who ranked “Learning Loss”

In fact,

- **55%** of respondents ranked “Employee Retention” among their top three priorities as compared to **41%** of respondents who ranked “Learning Loss” among their top three priorities

What does this mean? Heading into 2022, teacher burnout is real and strategies to support staff are top of mind for district leaders. They know that teacher quality is among the most important resources that contribute to student achievement, so retaining high-performing educators is key. K-12 leaders likely will be prioritizing efforts to build a supportive culture that makes space for everyone to feel included and be successful.

48%

of 6,000 teachers surveyed by Teachers Pay Teachers last November said they had considered changing jobs in the past month.

3

Learning Loss

‘Learning loss’ – also referred to as schooling loss or unfinished learning – is a significant consequence of the pandemic and educators and policy makers have recognized this.

In fact, more than masking, COVID rates, and other related concerns, respondents are more concerned about forward facing learning issues and how to address these.

- **41%** of respondents ranked “Learning Loss” among their top three priorities
- **20%** of respondents ranked “COVID Rates” among their top three priorities

These results underscore that educators face significant, systems-level challenges due to the pandemic. The scale of this challenge is unprecedented, impacting an entire generation of students. It is also important to note that academic learning is not the only thing that has been lost. Respondents to this question may also be addressing the fact that students have lost out on the learning that happens when spending time with their classmates and teachers, participating in extracurricular activities, as well as the whole child support that schools provide.

This shifting of spotlight between student learning and the urgent challenges of school climate and employee retention highlights how interconnected these issues are. Without a strong supportive culture in a school system, it is difficult to retain employees in the face of the challenges our schools are navigating — deeply affecting schools’ ability to address student learning. Resilience for students, teachers, and systems is deeply connected to a positive, supportive, and inclusive school culture. There’s little doubt that these top three most urgent issues are inextricably linked.

74%

place high or medium priority in student feedback as a tool to improve teacher effectiveness.

How are K-12 leaders tackling these issues?

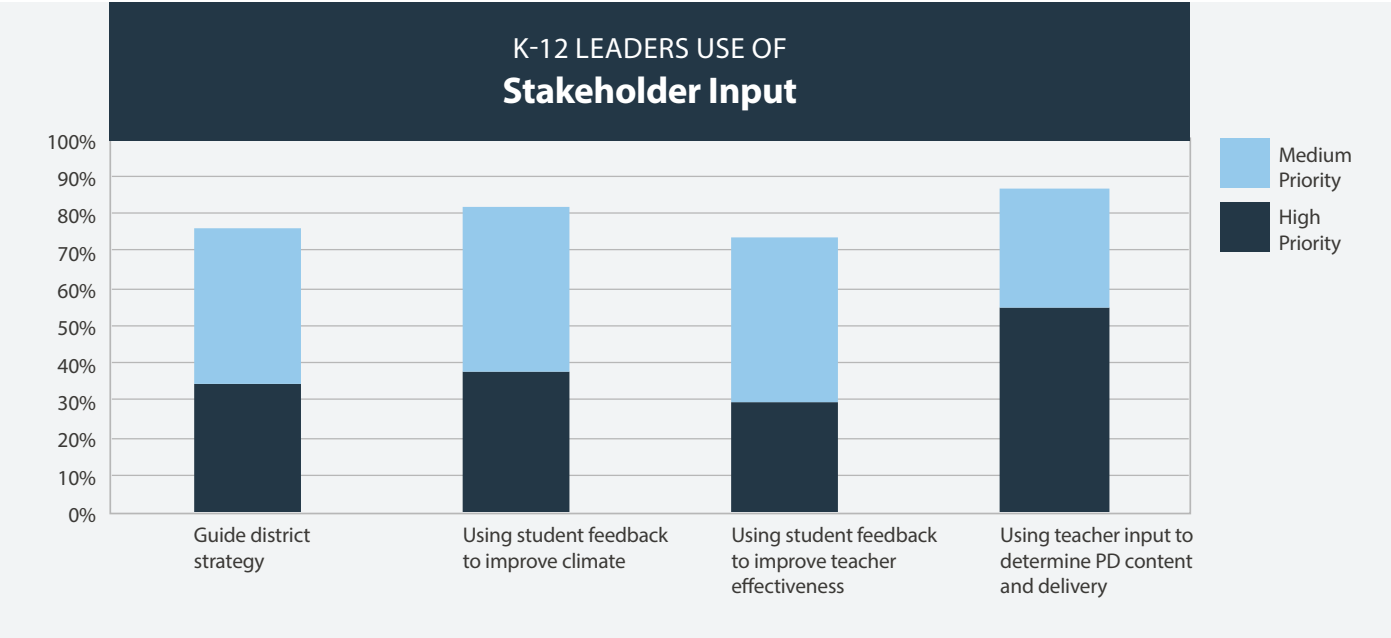
With the urgent issues of climate and culture, employee retention, and learning all fundamentally connected, our survey uncovered that authentic stakeholder input and customization were key ways K-12 administrators are working to address these challenges.

Stakeholder Feedback

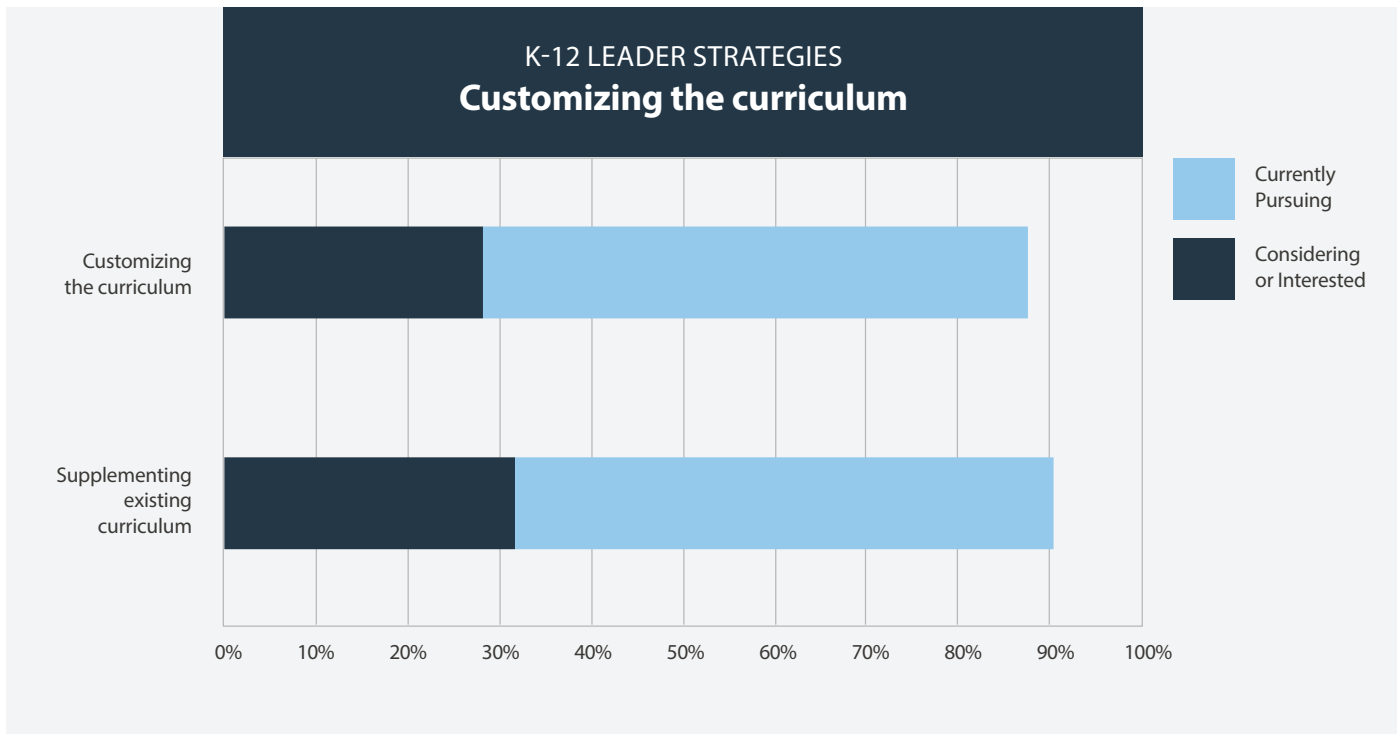
Our respondents indicated that stakeholder input is more important than ever as district leaders work to improve school climate and retain staff. **63%** of responding district leaders are currently conducting stakeholder surveys to gain insights.

Leveraging stakeholder input from students, teachers and even parents can go a long way to improving culture — positively impacting both staff retention and student engagement. Many districts use stakeholder surveys as a starting point for strategic planning because they not only provide a tangible way to prioritize actions but also deliver a mechanism to measure improvement. While culture change can be a lengthy process, leaders understand that seeking feedback can positively inform their work, and can help staff and students feel heard and valued.

- **40%** of Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents state that the top reason for gathering stakeholder feedback is to inform their district or school work and **70%** ranked this within their top three reasons for gathering feedback. Survey respondents indicate that feedback is used to guide district strategies, and that student input is being used to improve school and district climate as well as to improve teacher effectiveness.
- K-12 administrators value student feedback and are actively using this information to make improvements. According to our survey respondents, **82%** indicate 'high or medium' priority for incorporating student voice in their efforts to improve school climate and **74%** place high or medium priority on student feedback as a tool to improve teacher effectiveness.



- Input around professional development is a priority for district leaders as they seek to improve climate and retain talented teachers. **54%** of district leaders place a ‘high priority’ on teacher input to guide professional development content and delivery.



Customization

Our survey confirmed that districts are looking for ways to engage students by making shifts towards personalized learning and customized curriculum. Districts also see virtual and personalized professional development as an important effort to better support teachers.

We see this response in part because communities are asking for more alignment to their values — how they want to experience school, instructional content, and how they want to engage — particularly in light of the last 18+ months. When asked what efforts districts have undertaken, or are considering, to better serve and support their students, parents, and teachers, respondents reported as follows:

- The majority of survey respondents are currently pursuing some degree of curriculum customization. More than **60%** report that they are currently engaged in efforts to customize their curriculum and **59%** report current work to supplement curriculum. Even among those who aren’t actively pursuing customization, interest is high — more than **28%** are interested or considering some degree of customization.
- **56%** of district leaders cite virtual professional development as ‘currently underway’ or ‘piloting’ and another **28%** report that they are interested in pursuing this.

Key Takeaways:

District leaders are concerned about their staff:

- Climate and culture, along with employee retention were the top concerns of survey respondents, even outweighing other high profile challenges like mask mandates, COVID rates, and diversity efforts.

Leaders are seeking stakeholder input:

- Feedback tools to engage stakeholders, both students and teachers, to improve school climate and teaching effectiveness are in use by the majority of respondents. Additionally, many districts are using teacher feedback to directly guide professional development initiatives.

Curriculum is being customized:

- The majority of districts report that they are currently supplementing or customizing their curriculum. These initiatives are driven by the desire to provide students with more engaging materials as well as address diversity initiatives.

About the K-12 Leader Pulse Survey:

The Education Elements / XanEdu “K-12 Leader Insight Survey” was completed in December 2021 by more than 200 respondents across the United States. Respondents represented a diverse cross section of districts ranging from large to small and representing urban, suburban and rural districts. Respondents included teachers, campus administrators, and district leaders.

About Education Elements and XanEdu

Education Elements is a national K-12 consulting firm. We work with districts to address complex challenges that touch leadership, equity, brand, teaching & learning, and strategic planning. We help K-12 leaders make the transformational change - we do it together through buy-in, responsiveness, and expertise.

XanEdu’s customer-first approach is focused on enhancing student engagement and outcomes through customized development of affordable and accessible learning tools, accessible through print, digital or courseware, that are designed to meet the unique needs of each learning community we serve.

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We believe that schools grow when people grow.

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