

TEACHING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

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At the University of Alabama Human Resources Institute, our mission is to help employees and organizations thrive by finding the ideal relationship between the two. We bring together faculty and students to address the issues you face every day. In the process, we can make your organization more effective, conduct the research that will shape the future of HR, and give our students opportunities to prepare them for a successful career in HR.



The Badass Teachers Association (BATs) is a national grass-roots education activist organization with over 200,000 in our network. BATs mission statement clearly states we are educators who refuse to be blamed for the failure of our society to erase poverty and inequality. BATs are educators who refuse to accept assessments, tests and evaluations imposed by those who have contempt for real teaching and learning.

TEACHING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

[EXECUTIVE SUMMARY]

In August of 2020, in collaboration with the **Badass Teachers Association**, Dr. Russell Matthews of the **University of Alabama Human Research Institute** conducted a large-scale survey of 1,876 primary and secondary educators in the United States. In addition to documenting educators' concerns going into the 2020-2021 school year, this survey is part of a larger project designed to examine changes in U.S. educators' well-being over the course of the school year. This report summarizes critical results from the baseline survey, administered August 02 to 23, 2020, and helps to highlight issues and concerns educators face during this unprecedented time.

Survey Highlights

Results suggest that many educators feel dissatisfied and ill-equipped to handle the 2020-2021 school year in the wake of COVID-19. What's more, respondents do not trust district leadership to make informed, effective decisions regarding health and safety protocols as they return for the 2020-2021 school year. To this end, educators are already reporting poor mental and physical health as they enter the school year. These health effects include concerning levels of stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic and management of the return-to-work process. At the same time, the survey results also point to districtwide opportunities to better support educators moving forward.

Key findings:

Of the 1,876 educators surveyed:

- **51% feel their districts have put in too little effort** developing COVID-19 health and safety protocols.
- **Only 27% feel they can trust their district's superintendent.** Many believe their superintendents lack empathy and will avoid conflict-ridden situations.
- **85% expect negative and/or dangerous consequences** from their districts' health and safety protocols.
- 96% are highly committed to following established health and safety protocols, but 50% worry that their colleagues may not adhere to the policies as carefully.
- **90% feel it is likely they will be infected** with COVID-19 this school year.
- **80% would prefer to teach virtually**, compared to only 16% who would prefer to teach face-to-face.
- Less than 1/3 report they will actually teach 100% virtually this Fall.
- 90% expect that their teaching mode will change as the school year unfolds.
- **83% feel stressed about their jobs** "often" or "all of the time."
- Many indicated they are already not getting enough sleep and are suffering from physical pain and discomfort and mental health challenges.
- Almost **50% consider themselves to be part of a high-risk population.**
- 91% are concerned that they will bring COVID-19 home and infect a family member.
- **83% believe they are risking their lives** by going back for the 2020-2021 school year.
- And yet, despite all these challenges, **91% still feel the work they do is important and personally meaningful.**

Pre COVID-19: What We Already Know

Teaching is one of the world's oldest professions and remains one of the most important. Educators are often drawn to the profession by their passion for disseminating knowledge and making a difference in the lives of the young people they teach and the communities in which they work.¹ To this end, consistent and high-quality education improves students' scholastic achievement^{2,3} and subsequent productivity once students enter the workforce, and as such plays crucial role in individual and national economic success.⁴

Although teaching has the potential to be highly meaningful and satisfying,⁵ it can also be extremely stressful. Teachers experience long work hours, frequently changing expectations, difficulty motivating and managing students, and endless paperwork.^{6,7} According to recent large-scale surveys of education professionals, an estimated 50% to 75% of teachers report their work to be consistently stressful.^{8,9} When twenty-six occupations were rank-ordered from worst to best for their stress-related impacts on health, teaching took second place for both physical health and psychological well-being.¹⁰ Chronic educator stress is thought to be the result of the combined effects of daily exposure to a variety of school-related factors, classified into five main categories: political and educational structures (e.g., lack of support from administration), instruction requirements (e.g., heavy workload), student performance and behaviors (e.g., misbehavior and disciplinary issues), parental involvement (e.g., under- or over-involvement), and school environment (e.g., chronic understaffing and underfunding).¹¹

Research shows that stressed teachers experience extensive physical health (e.g., indigestion, high blood pressure, headaches, body pain), mental health (e.g., depression, low self-esteem), and behavioral health issues (e.g., insomnia, irritability, difficulty managing personal relationships).^{11,12,13,14,15} When stress is chronic, it can result in teacher burnout, involving complete emotional exhaustion and mentally "checking out" from the job.^{16,17} Unfortunately, teacher burnout is common and can start surprisingly early in teaching careers.^{18,19,20}

Stress takes a significant toll not only on the teachers who directly experience it, but on others in their lives. For one, stress can make it difficult for teachers to invest time and energy in their family lives, creating conflict and dysfunction at home.²¹ Teacher stress also hurts students and schools. When teachers are stressed, student learning outcomes are worse,²² and student misbehavior is heightened.²³ Work stress is also a known "push factor" that drives educators out of the profession²⁴ and serves as an underlying cause to the attrition crisis in education.^{25,26,27} Overall, teaching provides irreplaceable value to society, but the considerable stress the job creates is a threat to educators' well-being and family lives and the very value teaching aims to generate for students, schools, and society.

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[Background]

Data reported here come from respondents who indicated they are employed as Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 educators who plan to return for the 2020-2021 school year, work in the United States, and have (or will have) frequent interactions (be it face-to-face or virtually) with students. Post-secondary educators, retired educators, and school administrators were excluded from these analyses.

Overview of Respondents

Respondents were 45 years old on average, with 93% self-identifying as female and 28% indicating they have at least one other paid job in addition to teaching.

Educators were recruited nationally (via various web-based social networking groups) with all 50 states represented. However, the top 10 states (in terms of gross number of respondents) were:

- | | | | |
|-----------------|-----|-----------------|----|
| • Alabama | 11% | • Florida | 4% |
| • Massachusetts | 9% | • New Jersey | 4% |
| • Minnesota | 5% | • New Hampshire | 4% |
| • New York | 5% | • Washington | 3% |
| • Kansas | 5% | • Virginia | 3% |

Job Titles

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----|----------------------------|----|
| • Regular full-time teacher | 84% | • Teacher aide | 1% |
| • Regular part-time teacher | 1% | • Librarian | 2% |
| • Itinerant teacher | 2% | • Other professional staff | 5% |
| • Substitute | <1% | | |

Total Years of Experience as Educators

Educators completing the survey reported an average 17 years of total teaching experience, with 9 years of employment by their current schools.

- | | | | |
|---------------|-----|----------------|-----|
| • 0-2 years | 3% | • 11-15 years: | 19% |
| • 3-5 years: | 7% | • 15-20 years: | 27% |
| • 6-10 years: | 17% | • 21+ years: | 33% |

Race

• Asian Indian	<1%
• Black/African American	1%
• Chinese	<1%
• Hispanic/Latinx/or other Spanish origin	3%
• Middle Eastern	<1%
• Native American/Alaska Native	2%
• Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	<1%
• Other Asian Origin	<1%
• White/Caucasian	83%
• Decline to answer	4%

School Characteristics

• Location	
○ Suburban	40%
○ Town or rural	28%
○ Urban	25%
• School type	
○ Standard public school	86%
○ Charter school	2%
○ Magnet school	4%
○ Independent private school	1%
○ Parochial school	1%

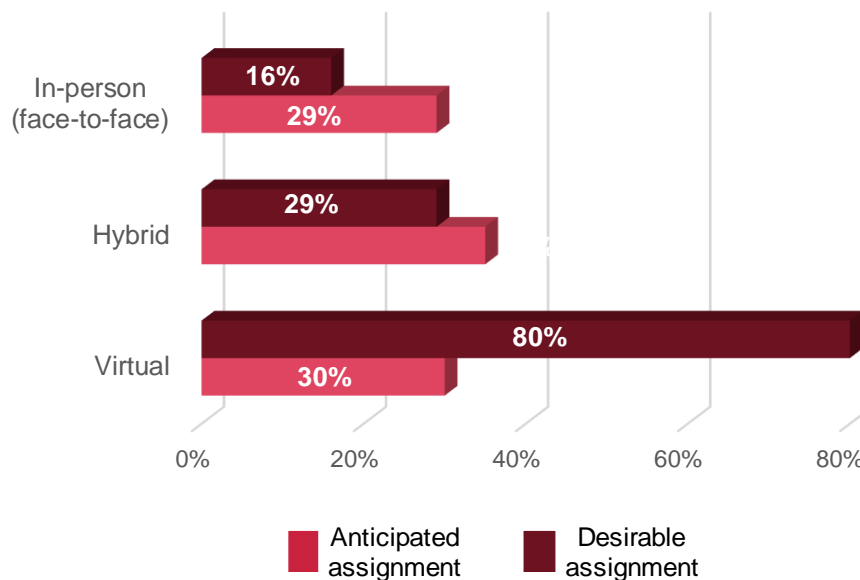
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[Survey Results]

Structure of Teaching this Year

Given the dynamic and complex circumstances of the 2020-2021 school year, respondents were asked a series of questions about the teaching mode they would likely start the school year under and their overall preference (in terms of desirability) for a given modality (regardless of actual assignment). As depicted in Figure 1, respondents' actual and preferred modalities did not align overall. Although most respondents indicated that they find virtual teaching desirable, anticipated teaching modalities are split almost evenly between in-person, hybrid, and virtual set-ups. It should be noted too, as a potentially significant source of stress, **90% of respondents reported their teaching mode will probably change as the school year unfolds**, and 4% of respondents indicated they did not know yet what their teaching schedule might be at the time of survey completion.

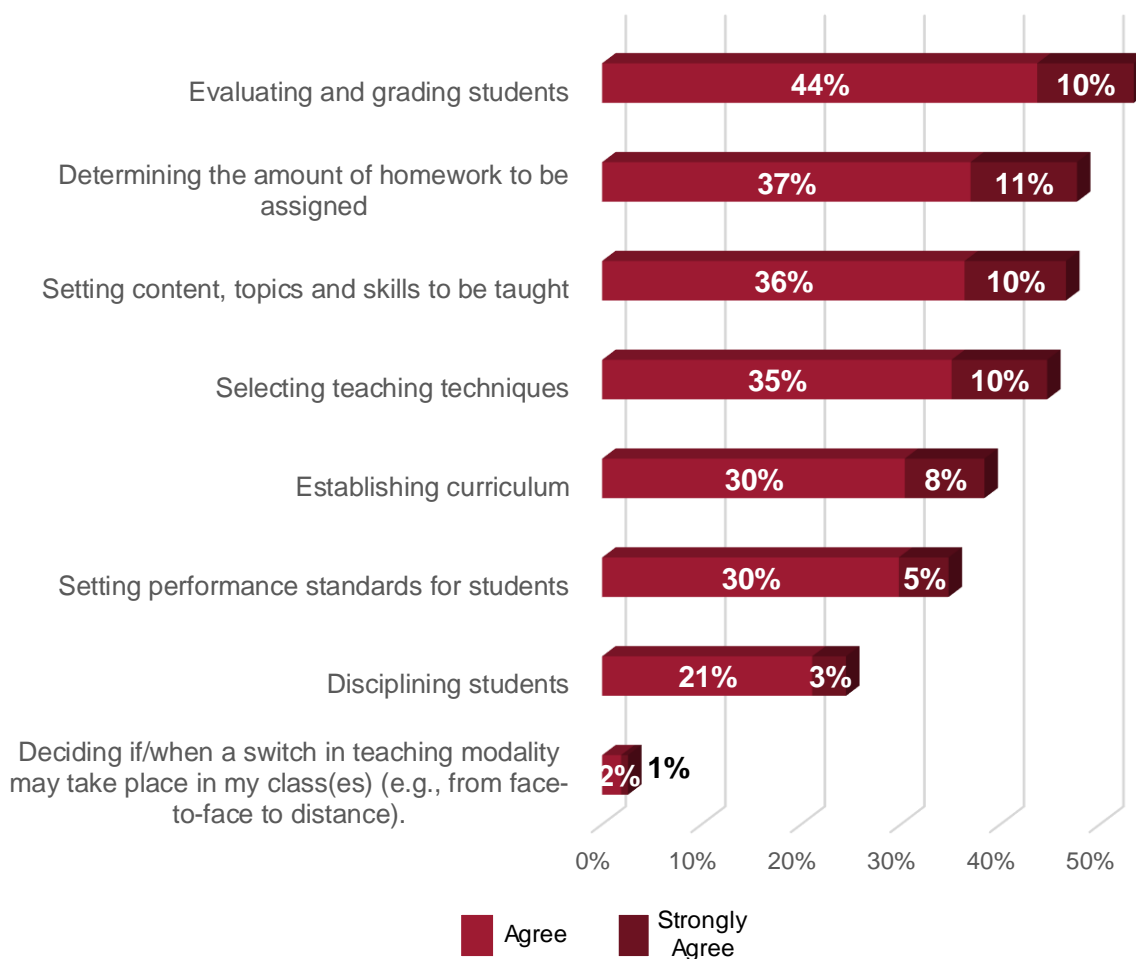
Figure 1: Teaching modality – Desirability vs. Anticipated assignment



Sense of Control & District Level Leadership

In light of the fact that most respondents would prefer to teach virtually but will not actually do so, it is not surprising that respondents feel a limited sense of control over critical aspects of their work life going into the 2020-2021 school year. Low perceived control over critical aspects of the work environment (e.g., establishing curriculum, disciplining students) are concerning because feeling out of control makes it difficult to effectively deal with stressful situations and puts an added risk on personal health beyond that of the stress alone.^{28,29} As depicted in Figure 2, lack of control seems to be a particularly salient issue in terms of student discipline and academic curriculum/standards. On the other hand, some aspects of teaching do still seem generally under the control of educators; for example, 54% of respondents report feeling like they still have significant control over grading processes.

Figure 2: This upcoming school year I feel I will have control over...



District-Level Leadership

When there is a lack of individual control in a stressful situation, leaders (i.e., superintendents) can step up to provide clarity and a sense of preparedness to help mitigate stress.

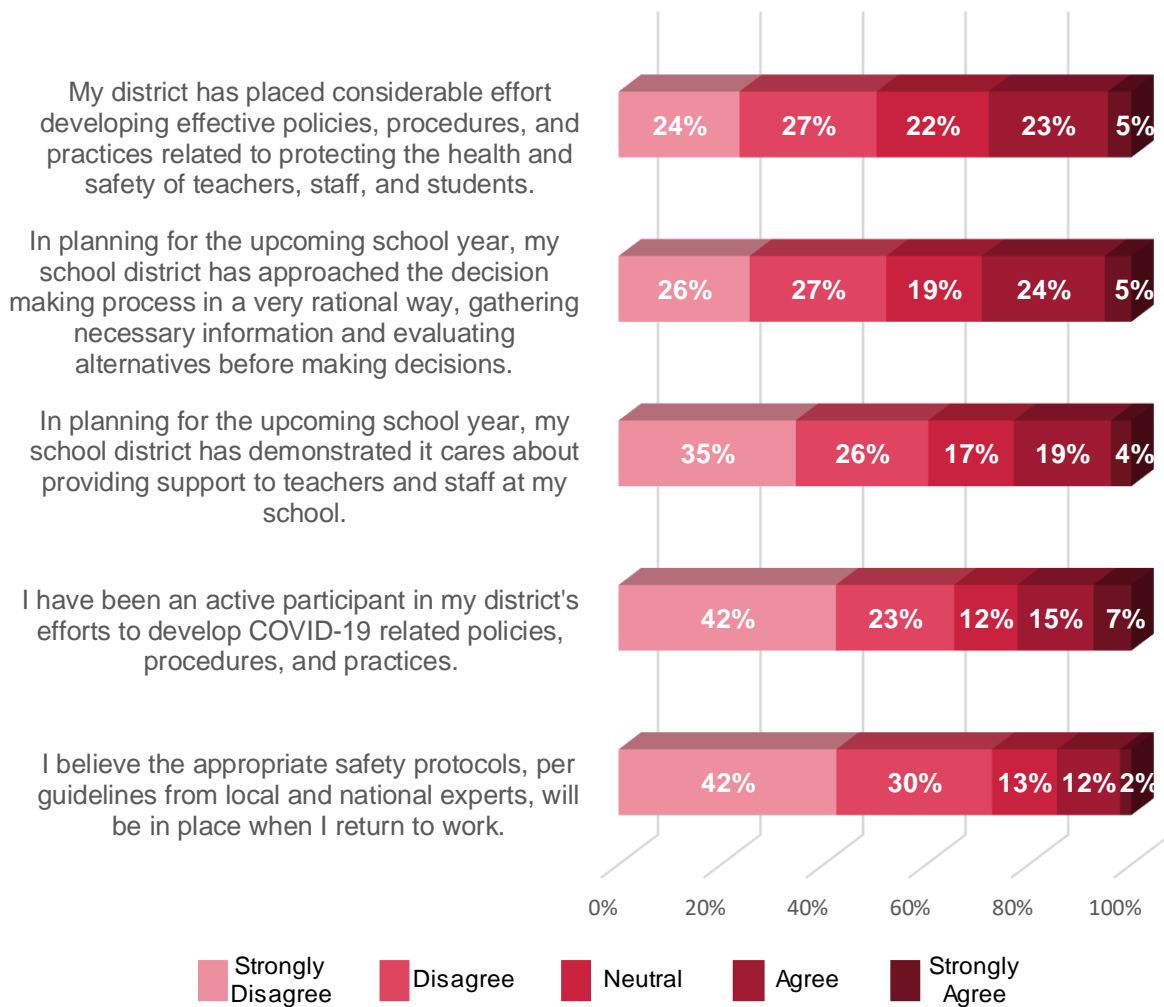
Unfortunately, most respondents do not trust their superintendents to provide the district-level leadership needed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Only 36% feel like their superintendent is competent at his or her job, and only **27% of respondents feel they can trust their district's superintendent.**
- A full third (33%) feel their district superintendent engages in *authoritarian* leadership practices by asserting absolute control and authority over people in the district and demanding their unquestioning obedience.
- 45% feel their district superintendent avoids conflict rather than directly addressing it.
- Only one-third (33%) feel their district superintendent is empathetic and supportive of teachers' efforts to manage their work and family responsibilities.

COVID-19: District Safety Protocols

Beyond the leadership capabilities of superintendents, respondents are also dissatisfied with the formal planning processes and outcomes regarding COVID-19 health and safety protocols in their respective districts. As reported in Figure 3, respondents feel uninvolved and overlooked in these decision processes and worry that the decisions made do not comply with expert recommendations. Consider, only **14% of teachers believe that appropriate safety protocols will be in place at the start of the school year.**

Figure 3: District Planning for COVID-19



By extension, respondents are generally pessimistic that safety protocols put in place by their district will be effective (Figure 4). The majority also expect district policies will have negative consequences for school personnel (Figure 5).

Figure 4: I am doubtful that the COVID-19 related policies, procedures, and practices put in place by my district will be effective.

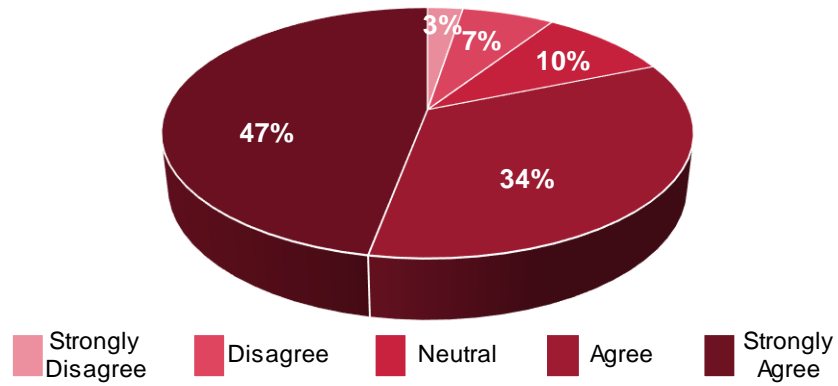
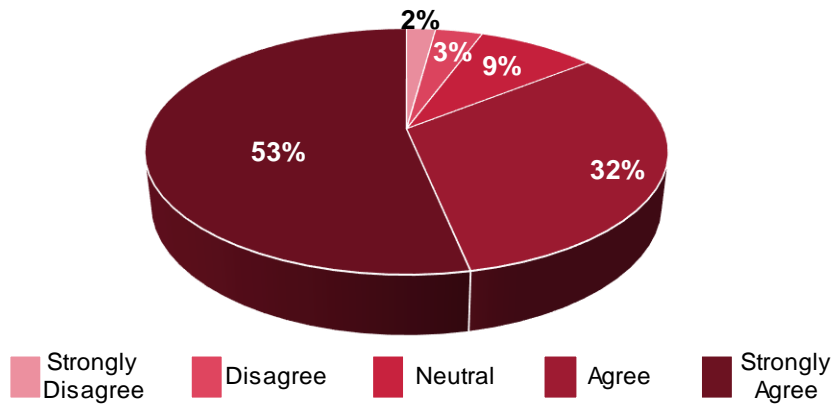


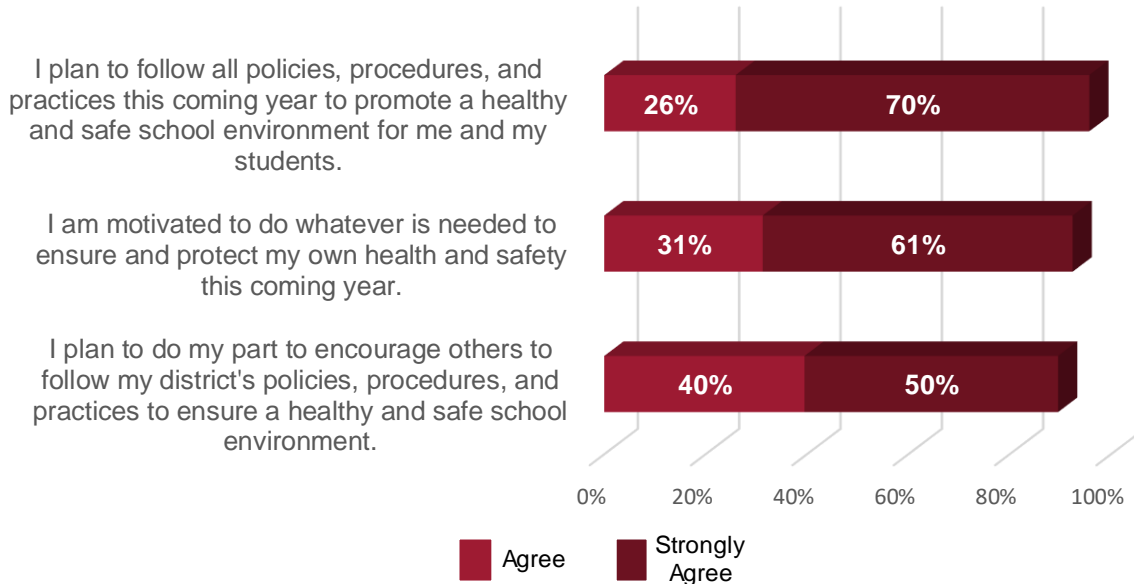
Figure 5: COVID-19 related policies, procedures, and practices developed by my district are going to have unintended and/or unexpected negative consequences for school personnel.



Teacher Commitment to Safety and Health

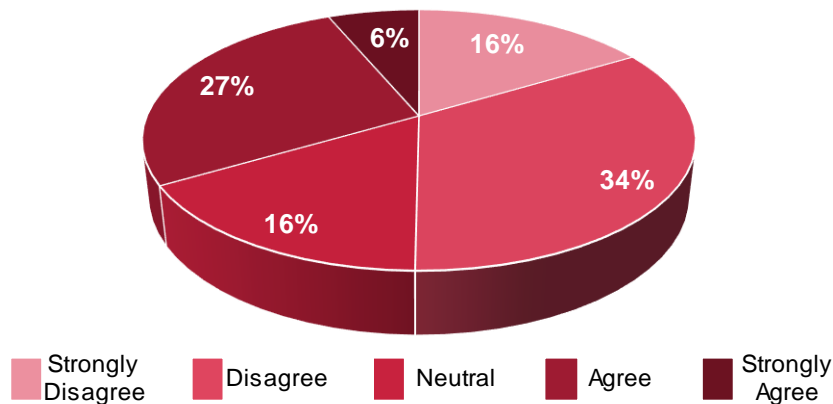
While respondents clearly have concerns about formal policies and procedures put in place by districts, they are committed to engaging in safe practices during the school year. As reported in Figure 6, respondents almost universally indicate that they plan to comply with, and encourage others to comply with, necessary safety protocol and practices.

Figure 6: COVID-19 Health and Safety Attitudes



What is somewhat surprising to note though is that respondents are much less confident that other school personnel will engage in the same high level of care. As depicted in Figure 7, only 33% of respondents believe other school personnel will fully follow all safety policies, procedures, and practices.

Figure 7: I believe other teachers and staff at my school will follow all policies, procedures, and practices this coming year to promote a healthy and safe school environment.



COVID-19: Staffing Concerns

Respondents also express noteworthy concerns about having sufficient school personnel to meet the evolving demands of the 2020-2021 school year.

- Only 17% feel their schools have enough staff to deliver the best possible instructional support to students.
- **Only 2% feel their schools will have enough substitute teachers to cover staff absences required by quarantine or safety protocols.**
- On a positive note, 61% indicate their schools will have a full-time dedicated nurse (or similar healthcare professional) for the 2020-2021 school year.

Educator Health & Wellbeing

Thus far, results suggest educators are not happy with their assigned teaching modalities, feel a lack of control in the current situation, and do not trust district leadership to develop safe, enforceable health and safety protocols for the 2020-2021 school year.

How, then, is this affecting teachers' health and well-being?

When asked about job-related stress over the past two weeks, as depicted in Figure 8, **83% indicate their job is either 'often' or 'always' stressful.** And, as depicted in Figure 9, **79% indicate they had only 'fair,' if not 'poor,' sleep over the past two weeks.**

Figure 8: Thinking about the past TWO WEEKS, how often did you find your job stressful?

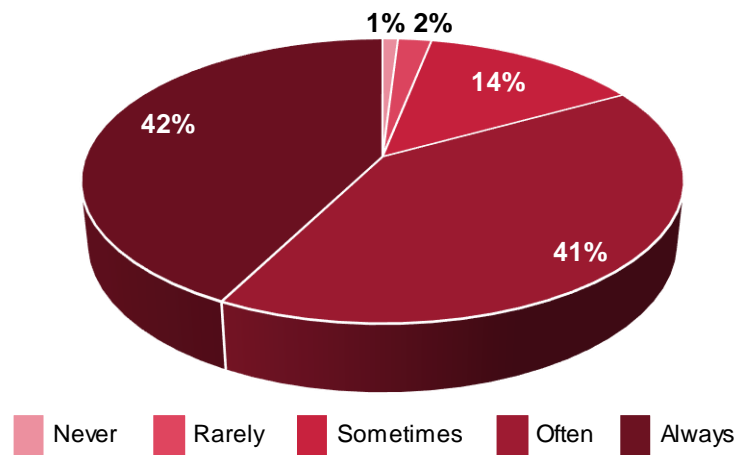
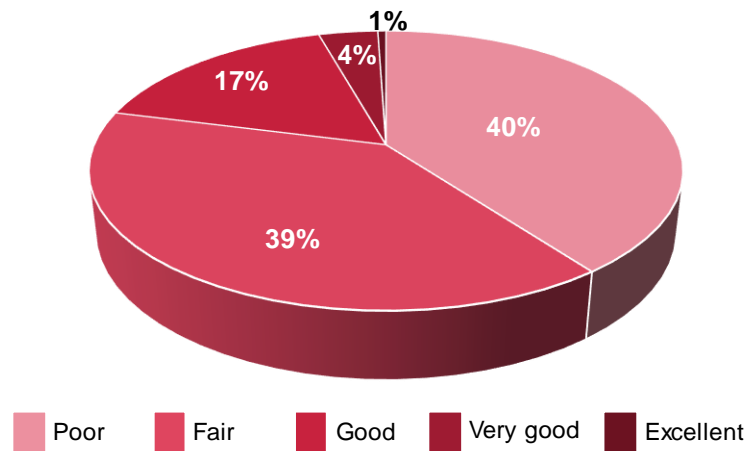


Figure 9: Thinking about the past TWO WEEKS, how would you assess your overall sleep quality?



Additionally, on average, out of the last 14 days, respondents indicate their **mental health was 'not good' for 7.6 days** and their **physical health was 'not good' for 5.0 days**.

Figure 10: Thinking about your mental health, which includes stress, depression, and problems with emotions, how many days during the past two weeks was your mental health not good?

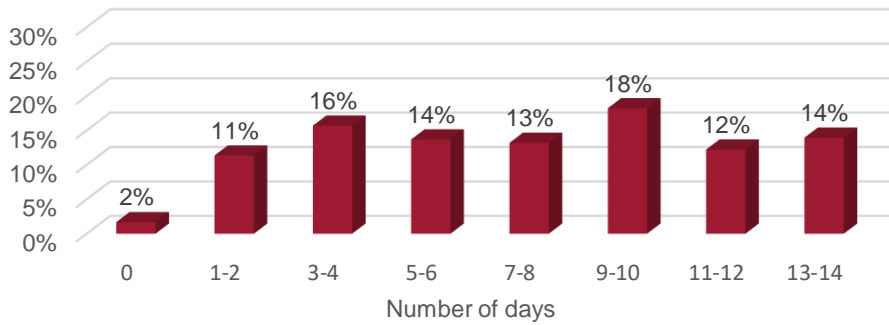
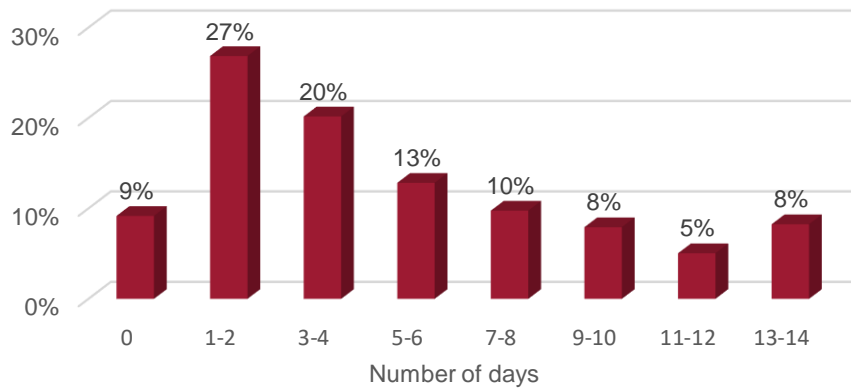
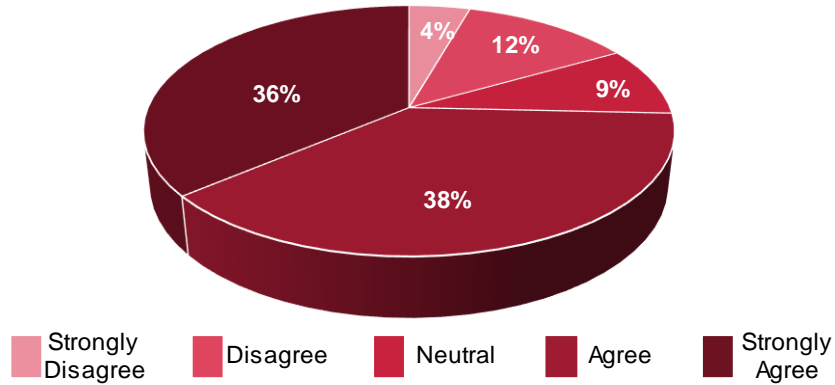


Figure 11: Thinking about your physical health, which includes physical illness and injury, how many days during the past two weeks was your physical health not good?



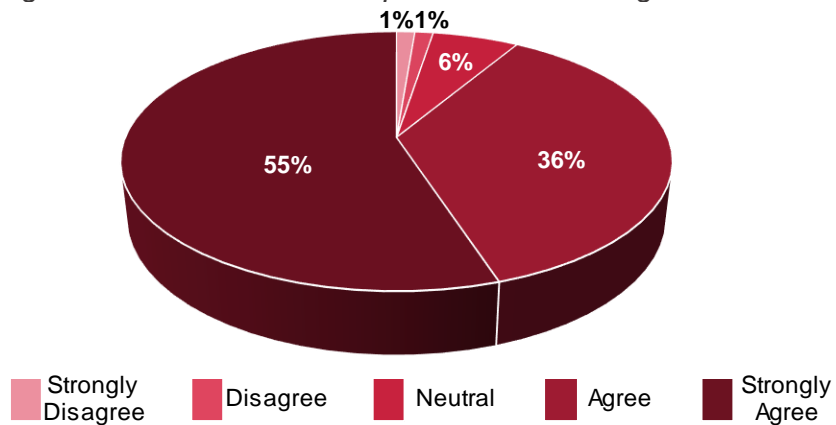
With these factors in mind, **74% of respondents feel less enthusiastic about their jobs now compared to when they first started teaching** (Figure 12).

Figure 12: I don't seem to have as much enthusiasm now as I did when I began this job.



And yet, as depicted in Figure 13, **91% still find their work to be important and personally meaningful.**

Figure 13: The work I do is important and meaningful to me.



COVID-19 Related Concerns

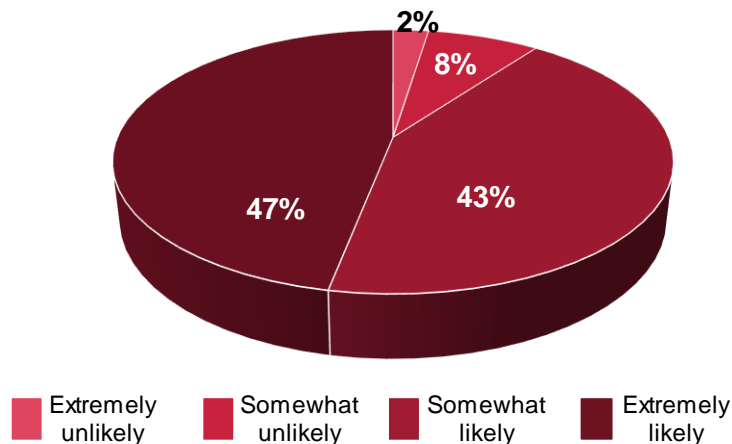
Recognizing that existing health conditions might influence educators' perceptions and concerns as they enter the 2020-2021 school year, it is important to understand what percentage of teachers are in a "high risk" population for complications associated with COVID-19.

Respondents were also asked if others in their household were at elevated risk. In total, **nearly half of respondents consider themselves high-risk, and 67% self-report living with at least one person in a high-risk category.**

- In a "high risk" population (self-reported)
 - Respondent 49%
 - Respondent's partner 34%
 - Other adults living in the house (when applicable) 14%
 - Children living in the house (when applicable) 14%

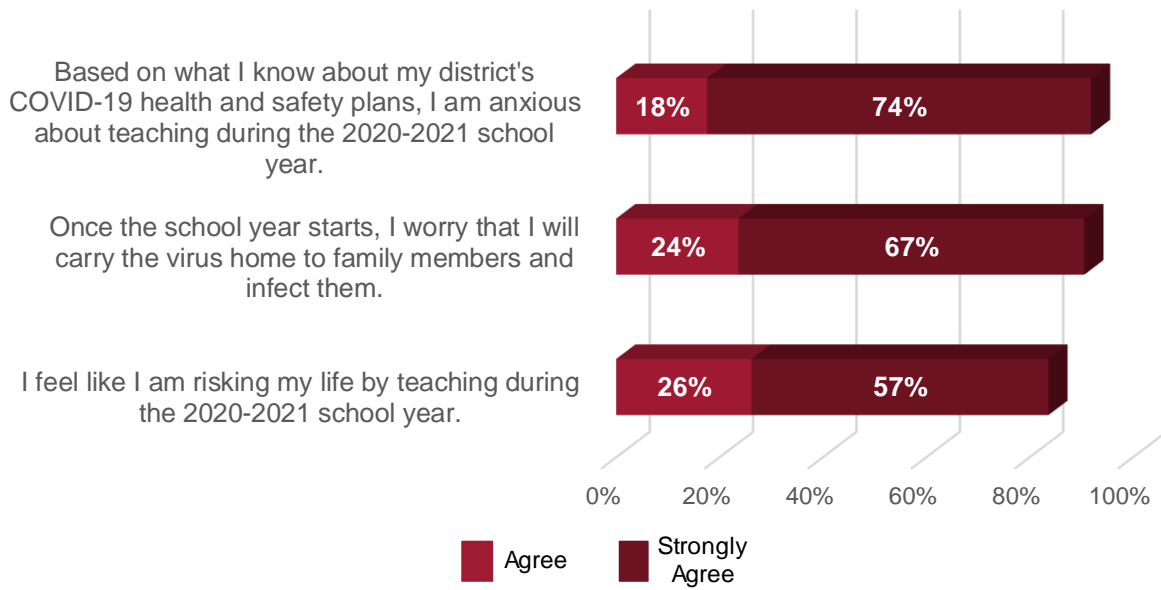
Furthermore, respondents express significant health and well-being concerns — not only for themselves, but for their families as well. As reported in Figure 14, a full **90% feel it is likely they will be exposed to COVID-19 during the school year.**

Figure 14: What do you think is your chance of getting infected with COVID-19 during the 2020-2021 school year?



In turn, as reported in Figure 15, **92% of educators are anxious about teaching**, and **84% worry they are risking their lives** by working during the 2020-2021 school year. The vast majority are also concerned they may expose family members to COVID-19 once school is in session.

Figure 15: COVID-19 Related Concerns



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[Concluding Remarks]

Anecdotal stories in the popular press have consistently highlighted the stress and anxiety educators are facing as they return for the 2020-2021 school year. Empirical results from this sample of 1,876 educators across the nation further underscore and systematically delineate the unprecedented situation educators in the United States find themselves experiencing this year. Educators are navigating the challenges of ensuring their own health and safety, as well as their family members' and their students', all while working diligently to deliver high-quality instructional programs, and they report doing so under conditions of chronic stress, anxiety, confusion, and distrust. Put simply, while educators overwhelmingly still find their work to be meaningful and important, they feel a sense of helplessness when it comes to doing their jobs safely and competently this year.

Schools and school districts have been planning and adapting for months to prepare health and safety protocols that offer protection and guidance for educators during this time. While educators are strongly committed to following health and safety protocols, they are worried about the effectiveness of these protocols and have significant concerns regarding the intentions and even competence of those responsible for designing and implementing these policies and programs.

The stress and complexity of returning for the 2020-2021 school year has already taken a toll on educators' mental, physical, and emotional health. As the school year unfolds, districts should be conscious of and supportive of educators, both for the sake of the health and safety of those educators but to also ensure students' learning outcomes are achieved. Moving forward, particular attention should be paid to ensure 2020-2021 working conditions and demands do not result in a mass exodus of highly qualified educators from the profession.

At the same time, it is important to note that results from this study also point to several potential steps that can be taken to address these concerns before they escalate further:

- **Involve educators in decisions that affect their health and safety.**
As the science related to COVID-19 evolves, so too must the health and safety plans of school districts. Educators serving on the front lines must have a voice in the development, implementation, and revision of district health and safety protocols and procedures and have a clear understanding of how, for example, staffing needs will be addressed.
- **Engage educators in clear and proactive communication.**
Uncertainty is stressful, and transparent communication is key for navigating the school year during COVID-19. School districts must implement effective and respectful communication plans that are more proactive, and less reactive, to ensure educators have a holistic understanding of the issues faced by their school district, as well as the policies and procedures being developed and implemented to address these challenges in a more dynamic and expeditious manner.

- **Empower educators with control over their direct work environments.**
Districts, working in conjunction with individual school leadership, should find ways to delegate more classroom decision-making authority to teachers while also providing instrumental support to address educators' specific instructional needs and contexts.
- **Promote positive educator well-being.**
It is imperative that school districts recognize the physical and psychological burden being placed on educators as they manage the evolving demands of this school year. Districts should proactively work to implement and promote the utilization of mental health services (e.g., the use of employee assistance programs). Districts should also work to create a climate that protects (and, ideally, advances) educator well-being. Districts could, for example, enact policies that limit work-related communication and workload expectations to what can be reasonably managed during formal work hours (e.g., 7 am to 4 pm) to allow educators adequate time to recuperate and prevent burnout.

As we continue to collect data over the course of the 2020-2021 school year, as part of our larger research endeavors, we hope to gain additional insights into opportunities for educators and administrators to collaborate on the development and execution of plans that advance the health, well-being, and performance of students, staff, schools, and districts across the nation, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and for many years to come.

For more information about the larger research study, or opportunities to engage and collaborate with the research team on topics discussed in this report, please contact Dr. Russell Matthews (ramatthews2@ua.edu).

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