



**Working Conditions  
Listening Tours**  
Missouri NEA

# **Columbia Public Schools**

## Working Conditions Report

Dr. Madeline W. Good & Dr. Charles Munter  
*in partnership with*



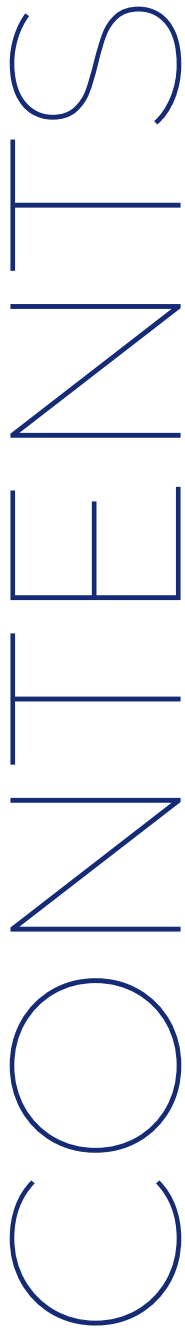
*Great Public Schools for Every Student*



**Columbia**  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS



# 2025



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# WORKING CONDITIONS LISTENING TOURS

In partnership with the Missouri National Education Association (MNEA), Columbia Missouri National Education Association (CMNEA), and the Columbia Public School District, we have compiled this report to provide a comprehensive overview of teacher working conditions within Columbia Public Schools.

Funding was provided from a three-year NEA Great Public Schools Funding Grant that MNEA received in 2024 and we will share this report with Columbia educators, administrators, the Board of Education, and the larger community for the purpose of addressing teacher working conditions within local schools. Findings related to the following constructs of teacher working conditions are reviewed in this report: Teacher Leadership, Retention, Community Support and Involvement, Safety and Wellbeing, School Leadership, Instructional Practices and Support, Facilities and Resources, Managing Student Conduct, Equity, Professional Learning and Support, Assessment and Accountability, Time, and District Leadership.

We have organized this report into four main sections. The first section, “Background, Data Collection, and Data Analysis,” reviews the research methods applied to collect and analyze data for this report. Second, the “Results” section begins with a review of the demographics of survey respondents. It then provides an overview of all 13 of the working conditions constructs before transitioning into individual sections for each construct that explains both quantitative and qualitative results. “Recommendations and Conclusion” is the third section, which provides recommendations based on the results from the project while also encouraging Columbia leaders and staff to review the results themselves and identify issues they see as most pertinent. Lastly, the report concludes with an appendix that includes further resources and information about the project’s implementation.

# BACKGROUND, DATA COLLECTION, & DATA ANALYSIS

Data collection for this project was inspired by the work of Berry et al., (2019),<sup>1</sup> which developed a mixed-methods research project to assess teacher working conditions across the state of North Carolina. Berry and colleagues (2019) utilized quantitative data from the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (NCTWC) survey along with qualitative data from focus groups made up of North Carolina public school teachers. The current project replicated, adapted, and scaled down these high-quality data collection methods to assess the working conditions in Columbia Public School District.

Using the survey adapted from the NCTWC project, we collected quantitative data from Thursday January 16 through Tuesday February 4. The survey was open to all teachers and student services personnel (e.g., counselors, speech language pathologists, media specialists, etc.) within Columbia Public School District and a total of 541 educators completed the survey. Survey items were organized into the 13 working conditions constructs. In addition to calculating summary statistics, we performed tests to determine whether there were significant differences by both grade level and by race/ethnicity.

Using the focus group protocol adapted from the NCTWC project, we collected qualitative data primarily through focus groups that were open and available to all CPS staff. CMNEA executive team and members recruited participants via email and face-to-face conversation; CMNEA was also in close communication with CMSTA to recruit participants as well. We implemented focus groups throughout the week of January 27-31. There were six focus groups for elementary and early childhood teachers, three for middle school teachers, and two for high school teachers. Group size ranged from five to nine participants and lasted between 71 and 119 minutes. Facilitators of the focus groups included two external evaluators, Dr. Madeline Good and Dr. Chuck Munter, as well as staff and leadership members from the MNEA State Affiliate. We collected additional qualitative data through the open-response questions on the survey.

We transcribed and cleaned the focus group recordings before uploading them to Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. Once uploaded, we coded focus group transcripts, as well as responses to the open-response survey questions, using an initial or open coding approach in combination with an evaluation coding approach (Saldana, 2013).<sup>2</sup> We then sorted codes into the working conditions themes as identified within the quantitative survey, and codes that did not fit within previously identified themes were combined into novel themes that emerged. Once all data were collected and analyzed, we compiled results into this report and developed recommendations based on our understanding of the data.

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1. To review the work of Berry et al., (2019), visit [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/productfiles/Leandro\\_Working\\_Conditions\\_REPORT.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/productfiles/Leandro_Working_Conditions_REPORT.pdf)  
2. To learn more about the NCTWC survey, visit <https://www.nctwcs.org/>

# RESULTS

## DEMOGRAPHICS & PROFESSIONAL PLANS

The survey was completed by 541 respondents, the majority of whom were women (82%) and white (87%). Elementary staff were most represented (50%), with only 28 (5%) respondents from the preschool level.

Regarding short-term professional plans, most respondents (83%) plan to continue teaching at their current school. The next largest groups include those who plan to continue working in education but pursue a non-administrative, non-teaching position (4.4%) or plan to continue teaching in this district but leave this school (4.1%).

**Table 1.** Respondent race, gender, and school level.

Race	N	%
Asian or Asian American	3	0.6
Black or African American	8	1.5
Hispanic or Latino/a/e	9	1.7
Two or More Races	9	1.7
White	473	87.4
Prefer Not to Answer	38	7.0
<b>Gender</b>		
Man	74	13.7
Woman	440	81.6
Prefer Not to Answer	25	4.6
<b>School Level</b>		
Preschool	28	5.2
Elementary School	270	49.9
Middle School	116	21.4
High School	127	23.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	541	

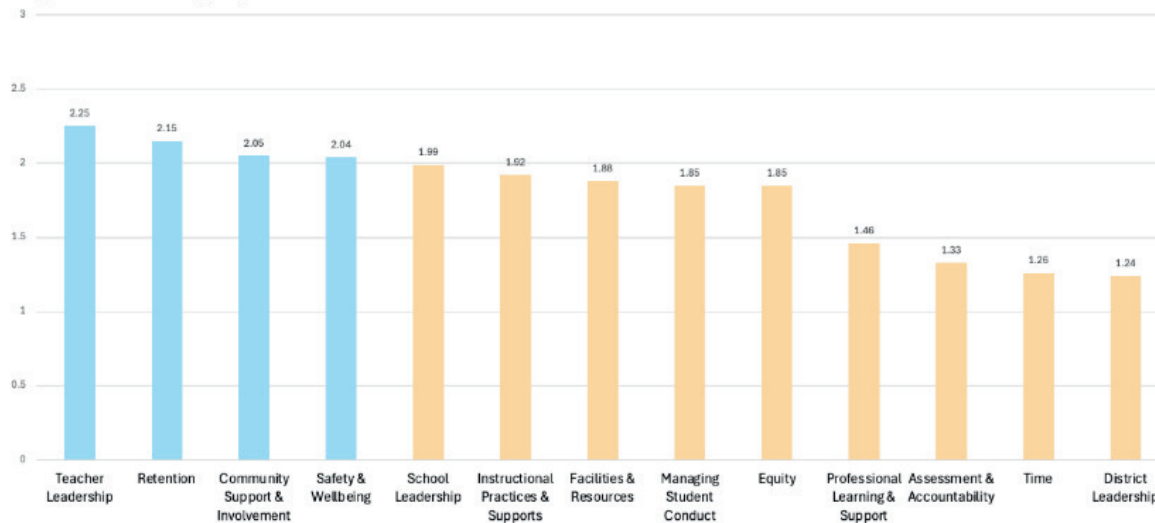
**Table 2.** Professional plans.

Which of the following best describes your immediate professional plans?	N	%
Continue teaching at my current school.	447	82.6
Continue teaching in this district but leave this school.	22	4.07
Continue teaching in this state but leave this district.	7	1.29
Continue teaching in a state other than Missouri.	4	0.74
Continue working in education but pursue an administrative position.	6	1.11
Continue working in education but pursue a non-admin, non-teaching position.	24	4.44
Leave education entirely.	17	3.14
Retire.	14	2.59

# OVERVIEW OF 13 CONSTRUCTS

Figure 1 displays the average scores for each of the 13 constructs on the survey, in descending order of agreement (3 = “strongly agree”; 0 = “strongly disagree”). The highest rates of agreement pertained to items about Teacher Leadership and Retention. Lowest rates were about District Leadership, Time, and Assessment & Accountability.

**Figure 1.** Averages for all constructs.



On most constructs there were significant grade level differences. High school teachers’ rates of agreement were lower than those of all other teachers for Managing Student Conduct. Otherwise, high school and middle school agreement rates were not significantly different from each other but were lower than agreement among other teachers for Retention, Community Support & Involvement, and School Leadership. Elementary school teachers’ rates of agreement were lower than those of all other teachers for Time and lower than just those of preschool teachers for Assessment & Accountability. Preschool teachers’ rates of agreement were higher than those of all other teachers for Instructional Practice & Supports, Equity, Professional Learning & Support, and District Leadership.

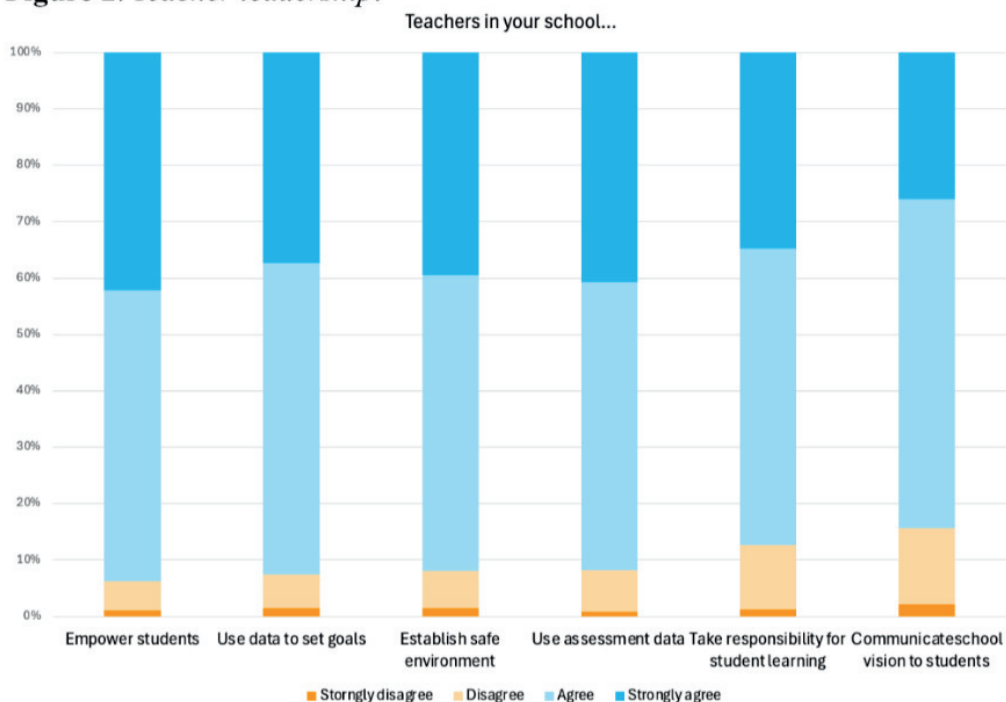
The following sections are organized by the 13 constructs covered in the survey, in the same order as they are presented in Figure 1. For each, we present bar graphs showing the distributions of responses for each item, again in descending order of agreement levels.

# CONSTRUCT 1: TEACHER LEADERSHIP

According to survey results, agreement rates among respondents about Teacher Leadership (e.g., looking out for students, using data) were all above 80% (Figure 2). Agreement rates on these items tended to be higher among preschool and elementary teachers than among middle and high school teachers, especially with respect to communicating a school vision to students, taking responsibility for all students' learning, and using data to organize, plan, and set goals. Respondents were also asked whether teachers have opportunities to participate in nine activities (Table 3). Most frequent were analyzing data and creating a professional learning community. Least frequent were assisting with school budget, establishing student discipline procedures, and developing goals and strategies through the School Improvement Plan.

“I [am] a mentor too. [...] And just like those three times I get to observe and then debrief with them are not enough. But also my plate is so full, it is so hard for me to find extra time to go above and beyond besides what's required, and I don't know. I just wish I could be more helpful.”

**Figure 2.** *Teacher leadership.*



# CONSTRUCT 1: TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Qualitative data indicated that there are many opportunities for teacher leadership in CPS schools, such as committee representatives and new teacher mentors. There was a consistent belief that mentorship for new/less experienced teachers was one of the most important and needed teacher leadership opportunities available. This mentorship, however, takes a significant amount of energy and time from already overburdened teachers, impacting the quality of the mentorship provided and the wellbeing of the mentors. Additionally, the formal mentor role is paid very little, and much of the mentorship occurs in informal and unpaid ways. It also appears that some teachers are tasked with significantly more leadership expectations than others, partly because they are more experienced than their peers and partly because they have peers who do not volunteer their time. This again, is putting undue burden on many teacher leaders.




“Our new teachers are not getting support. They are quitting. They are lost. They need so much support and the veteran teachers from the building are trying, but we are hardly keeping our heads above water right now.”

**Table 3. Teacher leadership opportunities.**


<b>Activity</b>	<b>Percent reporting opportunity</b>
Analyze data	69%
Create a professional learning community	62%
Mentor and support teachers to improve effectiveness	56%
Assist in determining professional development	45%
Participate in hiring processes	43%
Select instructional materials and resources	42%
Develop goals & strategies through School Improvement Plan	37%
Establish student discipline procedures	24%
Assist in determining school budget	6%

## CONSTRUCT 2: RETENTION

According to survey results, indicators associated with retaining current staff were positive. Nearly 90% agreed that they feel good about working in their school (e.g., feel proud, loyal, valued) (Figure 3). Areas with less agreement (though a majority still agreed) pertained to whether respondents would want to work at a different school and whether they feel comfortable raising concerns or there is an atmosphere of trust. Responses were often higher among preschool teachers than for other respondents, especially with respect to the questions about an atmosphere of trust, and whether respondents look forward to work and whether they would recommend the school to parents. Lowest rates of agreement were typically among middle school teachers, especially with respect to whether they wouldn't want to work in any other school, whether they feel loyal to the school, and whether they feel like an important part of the school.



“We are losing people to Kansas City and St. Louis like nobody's business. We had three student teachers last year and none of them could stay because of the financial inability to afford an apartment on what they were getting paid. Literally could not stay and pay rent unless they have roommates.”

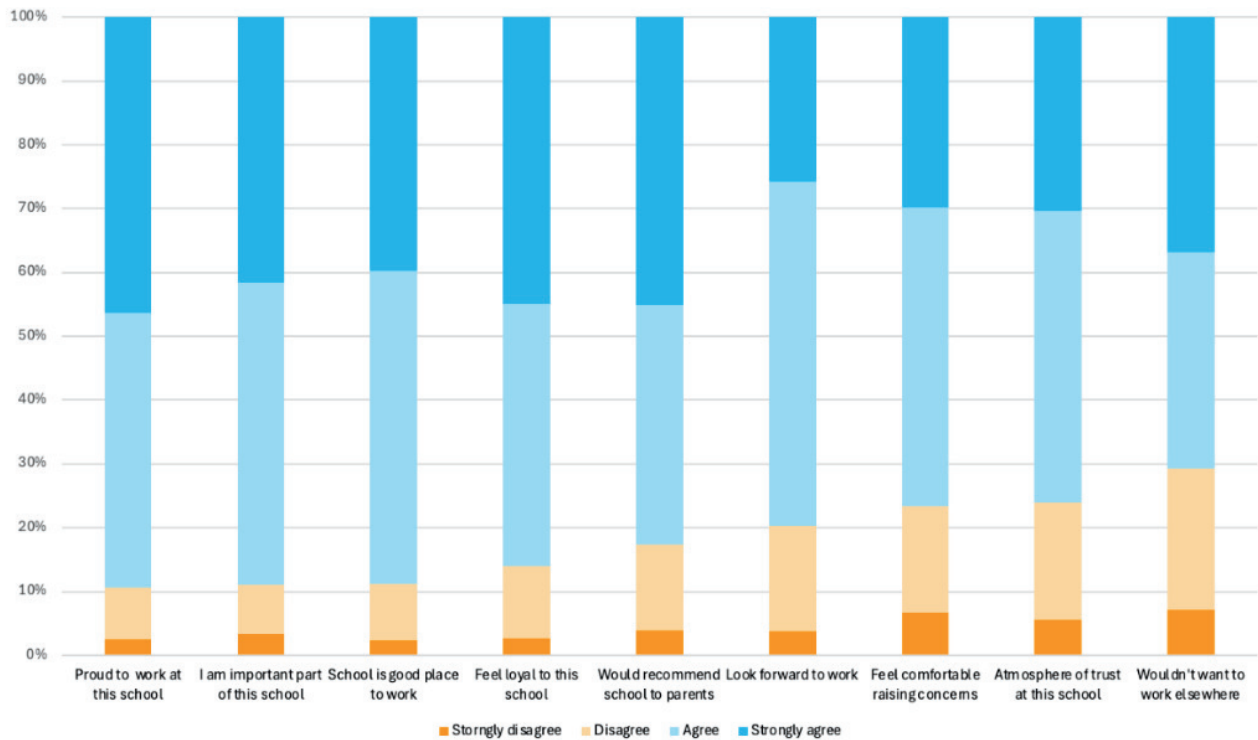


“When I first came to [school], I was surrounded by a wealth of knowledge, a wealth of experience, when I was new. I think the next youngest teacher had like 10 years of experience. Whereas now I'm a veteran and that's weird to me, I'm like... I'm young, you know. When you look around and being in the profession [for] 12 years, there's not many people in our department that have more experience than that.”

# CONSTRUCT 2: RETENTION


Qualitative data indicates that teachers who want to stay working in their building typically share stories about effective and supportive building leadership, which will be discussed further in the report, along with a strong appreciation for their colleagues. Many buildings have close-knit staff or departments, where they describe their school community or team as “tight knit,” “very supportive,” “feel[s] like family,” and composed of “the greatest humans on the planet.” There are also many buildings staffed with a solid cohort of veteran teachers, which benefits all who work in and attend that school as it brings stability to the school community and also ensures that teachers newer to the profession or district can receive support they need.

**Figure 3. Retention.**



## CONSTRUCT 2: RETENTION

While many teachers plan on staying in their current building, some indicated that CPS's reputation as a district that people want to work in has been declining. Issues such as extreme student misbehavior and district leadership concerns, which will be discussed later in this report, appear to be partially related to the desire for teachers to work in the district. Additionally, within CPS, schools serving students from lower socioeconomic communities, or "Title" schools as teachers often describe, appear to struggle with retention significantly more than "non-Title" schools, due to the high demands of the work. Non-competitive pay was also a consistent issue brought up. CPS pays more than rural surrounding districts, yet teachers shared that they cannot compete with pay scales of many districts in St. Louis and Kansas City, and they also do not honor all years of experience for many veteran teachers who are considering transferring in from other districts. Staff in more niche certification areas, including speech and language pathologists (SLPs), also shared that they can get much more money working in hospitals or private practice, impacting retention in the district. One way the district is appearing to mitigate retention concerns is to hire international teachers for unfilled positions. While the teachers who spoke of this program did not share negative perspectives about the teachers themselves, they did share concern that these teachers are not properly supported. This leaves the burden on their teaching colleagues to support them throughout the school year in informal and unpaid ways.



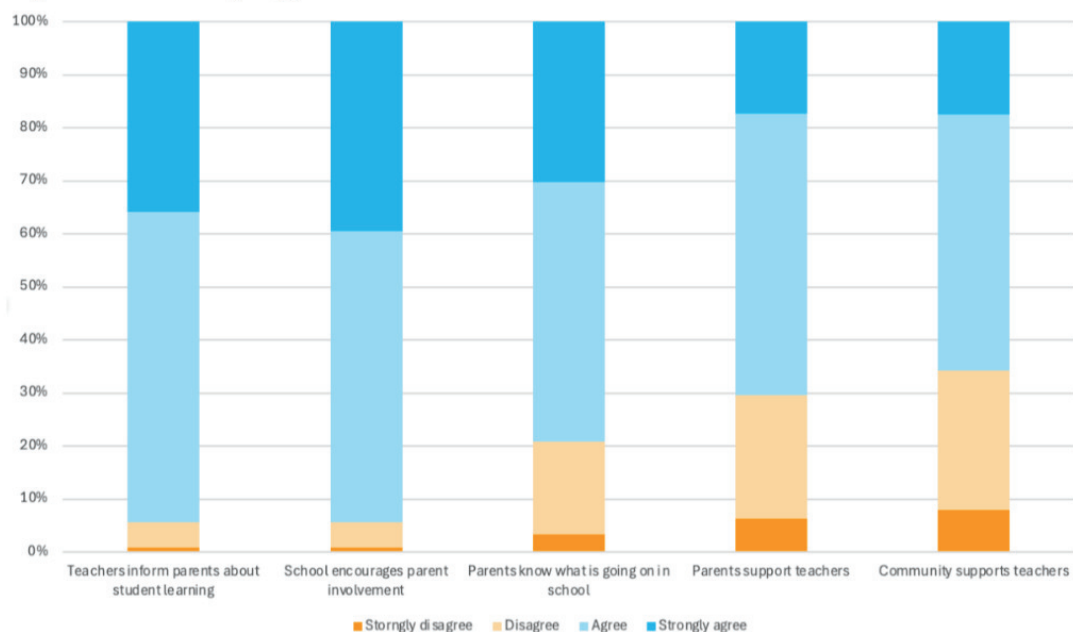
"At one of my schools, the turnover there, it was just every two years we get, it was almost the entire staff every two, like they would come in, they would put in their two years and then they would go somewhere else, like just constant turnover."

# CONSTRUCT 3: COMMUNITY SUPPORT & INVOLVEMENT


According to survey results, responses about community support and involvement were generally positive, though more positive about teachers' and schools' efforts than about parent and community support (Figure 4). There were consistent grade level differences, with teachers of earlier grades more likely to rate each item higher. Qualitative results indicated that feelings about community support are mixed. While some noted that the community is generally supportive, others felt much less supported, and much more scrutinized, by parents than in previous years. There appears, however, to be notable building-to-building differences due to significant socioeconomic disparities. Parent involvement was also discussed in relation to the influence parents can have to make changes occur, as some teachers noted that significant issues related to student misbehavior or water quality were not addressed until parents contacted school or district leadership, even though teachers had made attempts to share their concerns previously.

“Lack of parent support is also inequitable. Teachers at lower income buildings spend more of their money out of pocket because of lack of parent or PTA funds and causes a more stressful working environment overall.”


**Figure 4.** Community support & involvement.



# CONSTRUCT 3: COMMUNITY SUPPORT & INVOLVEMENT



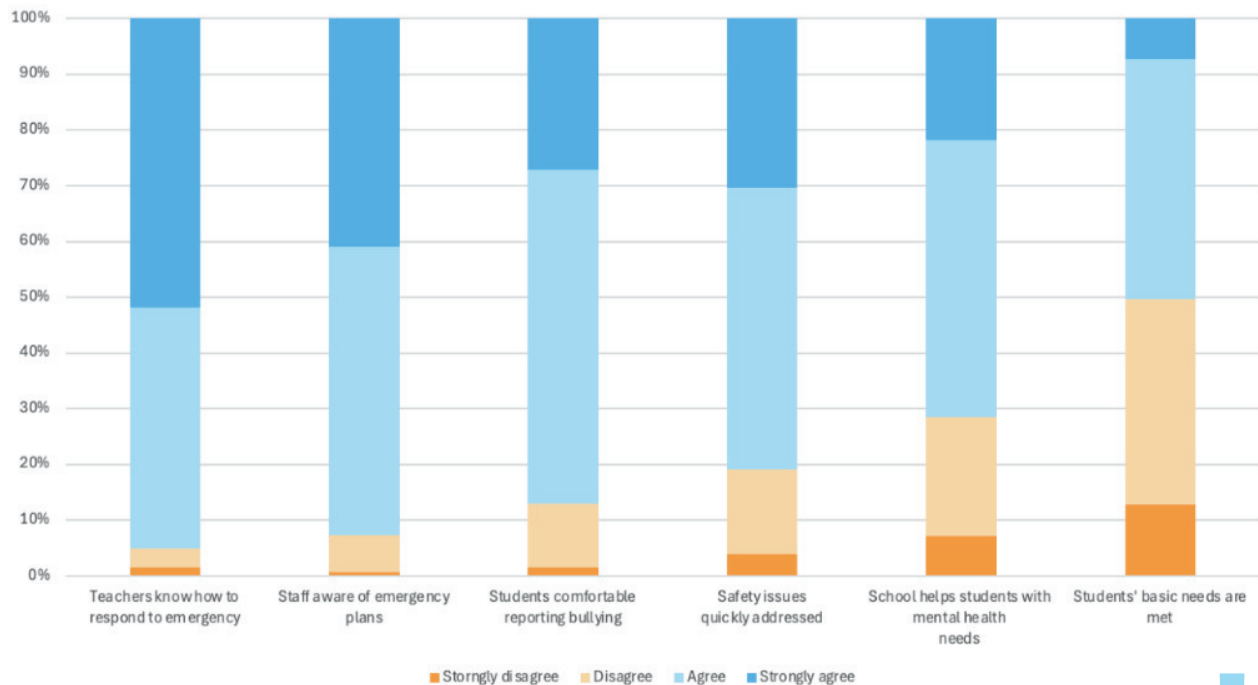
“We're in a building that also has, you know, just whatever extra support that might be from other areas where folks may be a little bit more better off. And it works together when it all melds together and seeing it with the kids and knowing that they all have these different backgrounds socioeconomically and then also multiculturally. I always feel like it seems like we're Sesame Street. And other people do too. So like it's a happy place to be. Positive place.”



“Historically, this community has been very supportive of public education.”

# CONSTRUCT 4: SAFETY & WELLBEING

Figure 5. *Safety & wellbeing.*




“I go [...] to 16 different buildings and overall I feel safe in all those buildings.”

According to survey results, responses about safety and wellbeing were generally high, suggesting that staff have confidence in leaders' and their own responses to challenging situations (Figure 5). One exception was that only about half agreed that students arrive at school with their basic needs met. Although there were no grade level differences for this overall construct, when considering the individual items, it is likely that middle and high school teachers were less likely to agree that students feel safe reporting bullying. Qualitative data indicated that many teachers feel safe in their school and they perceive principals to be taking safety seriously in their building. There are, however, days when all building leaders are pulled for district meetings, which can make handling student behavior more difficult. For those that did have safety concerns, they were often related to extreme student behaviors, such as student retaliation, stalking, threats of violence, classrooms being destroyed, among other issues.

# CONSTRUCT 4: SAFETY & WELLBEING

Teachers feeling unsafe was also closely connected to the lack of consequences for students who engaged in the most extreme misbehavior, which will be discussed further in this report. There also appears to be notable building-by-building differences in feelings of teacher safety, with the demographics of the neighborhoods surrounding the school impacting perceptions and experiences.



“I think that I also feel safe overall, like from our student population, but I do not feel safe from like ... I'll give you an example, I'm a coach. There was a time when a homeless man came inside the track and started arguing with my athletes. There have been times where I've come here on the weekend to set up for volleyball, there's a homeless person inside the gym.”

# CONSTRUCT 5: SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

The strongest agreement regarding school leadership was that teachers are encouraged to use new knowledge and skills obtained through professional development (89%) (Figure 6). In a few areas, agreement dropped below 30%, including helping teachers improve, looking out for their wellbeing, and creating a culture of trust. The lowest agreement rate (62%) pertained to whether school leaders know what's going on in classrooms. Throughout these items there were grade level differences, as scores among high school respondents were consistently lower than those of elementary respondents. And on one item—whether school leaders know what's going on in classrooms—middle grades teachers were also more likely than high school teachers to agree.

“Our principal is probably... I've worked for a lot of people. Our principal is the best leader I've ever had.”

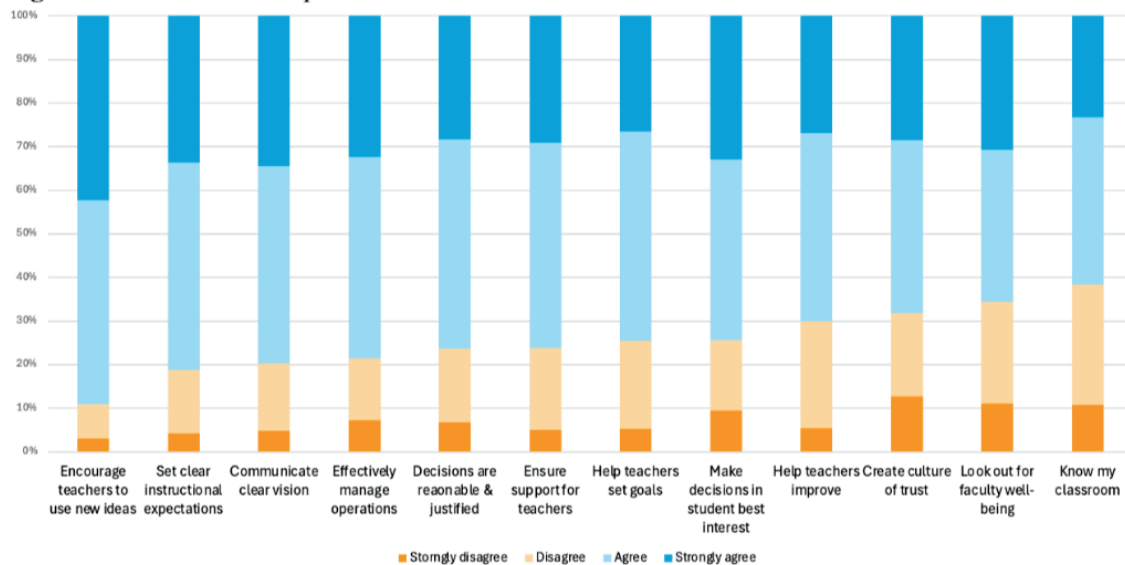
According to qualitative data, while there were notable building-by-building differences in school leadership, a significant amount of teachers believe their school is led by competent and respected principals. Building leaders were described as being “great,” “wonderful,” “amazing,” and “supportive,” among other qualities. Interestingly, especially at the elementary level, many teachers clearly differentiated between their love of and respect for their building principal, while then explaining that most of their issues stemmed from district leadership, which will be discussed further in this report. Additionally, teachers often noted that some of their principals' inability to provide necessary school support was due to needing more administrators in their building, unreasonable district expectations of the building principals, and/or new principals needing more mentorship as they adjust to their new role.

“The administration is very supportive and is all about putting the needs of our our kids first and also making sure that our needs as employees with our families are met also. They strive to make it a "family" to work in and for which makes it so enjoyable to come to work daily. Couldn't ask for better staff to work for and with.”

# CONSTRUCT 5: SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

For those who did not have positive feelings about their building leadership, leaders were described as having “good intentions,” yet struggled with handling student behavior, parent complaints, teacher opinions, etc. Some middle and high school teachers felt that unclear or inconsistent communication from their building administration was a regular issue. Other teachers, however, were more explicit about issues of incompetence, with a small amount of building leaders being described as “lazy,” “incompetent,” and “toxic.” Some see this small group as incompetent leaders who were hired in leadership positions, soon seen as ineffective by their building staff, and then shuffled to new schools so the district could avoid dealing with them directly. Teachers also noted how high building leadership turnover in middle and high schools make it difficult to cultivate and maintain a positive and cohesive school community, especially if the people leaving are highly effective.

**Figure 6. School leadership.**



“[Our principal] wants to be there, but he lacks experience and he doesn't have a mentor and you know, it's hard. Hard because I've had great administrators and he's young. And he just doesn't have the experience and he doesn't communicate well [...] I know he wants to do better. And it's just... our communication is horrible.”

# CONSTRUCT 6: INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES & SUPPORTS

According to survey results, teachers find the evaluation and feedback process to be helpful, with slightly less agreement about whether it leads to specific instructional improvement (with the exception of preschool teachers, whose responses about those items were higher) (Figure 7). Respondents were also asked to select up to 3 supports that would be most helpful from a list of 15. Table 4 lists the frequencies with which each was selected. Time to observe other teachers was the most frequently selected support for all grade levels except high school teachers, for whom opportunities to collaborate with teachers outside their school was most frequent. Qualitative data supports these findings as well, with peer observations, cross-building collaboration, and common planning time all consistently described as beneficial and desired practices.

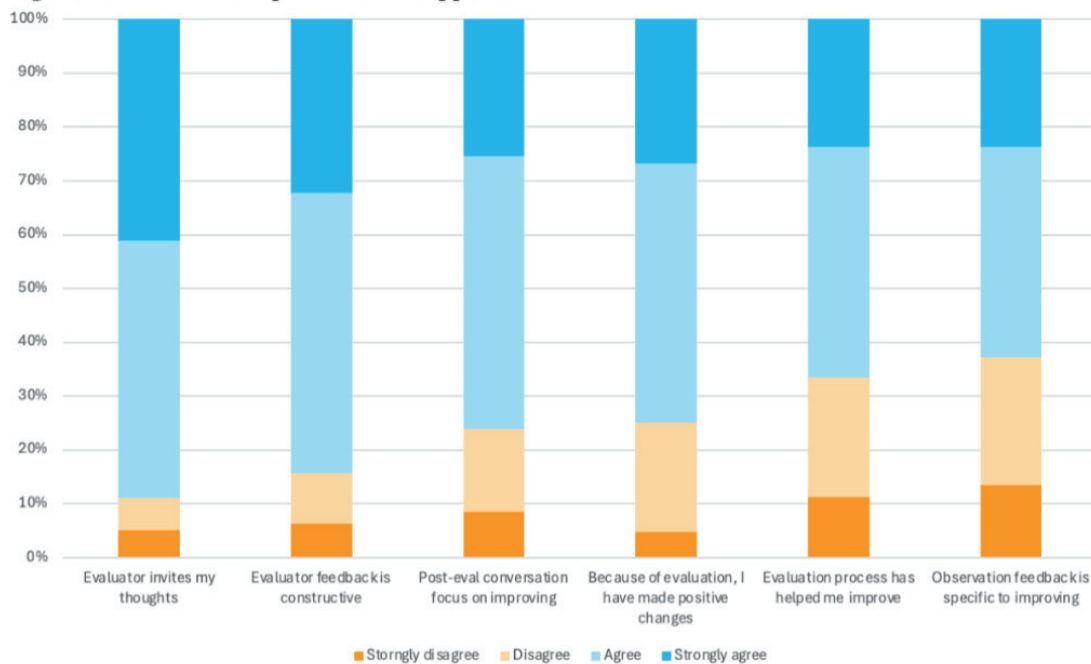
**Table 4.**

<b>Instructional support</b>	<b>Percent selecting</b>
Time to observe other teachers teaching	35%
Opportunities to collaborate with teachers outside of my school	29
Common planning time with other teachers	24
Opportunities to attend teacher-related conferences	22
Developing lesson plans with other teachers	18
Analyzing student work and assessments with other teachers	16
Co-teaching	16
Non-evaluative feedback from observations of my teaching	12
Reflecting on effectiveness of teaching with other teachers/coaches	10
Time to meet with professional learning communities	10
Regular communication with principals/administrator/dept chair	8
Access to an instructional coach	6
Opportunities to participate in research	5
Time to meet with a mentor	4
A formally assigned mentor	1

“But then they have to do the kick ups and that is useless. It's useless. Like I don't get any feedback on it whatsoever. It's if I have my learning target on the board, are the kids engaged, am I doing threshold and a strong start and then check, check, check.”

# CONSTRUCT 6: INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES & SUPPORTS


**Figure 7.** *Instructional practices & supports.*



“We actually get to do this [...] thing that our principal is calling “Beg, Borrow, and Steal” where we can just sign up to go see other teachers teaching. Which is amazing and it's great.”


Qualitative data indicated that teachers have mixed experiences with the evaluation process. Some teachers found the feedback meaningful, especially when the evaluator was in the classroom long enough and had enough pedagogical knowledge to provide specific classroom and instructional insights to the teacher. There were also times when the evaluation process helped teachers feel appreciated for their work. Others, however, felt that the feedback was unhelpful, not relevant to their context, or that it was simple “box checking.” Similarly, the district-required “kick-ups” were typically viewed poorly due to their limited time frame and scope, with teachers finding little benefit in them and feeling like they are only completed due to district mandate.

# CONSTRUCT 6: INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES & SUPPORTS



“My principal is amazing. He's done all my [evaluations]. It's really once a month or every other month, and he will sit in the back for 10 minutes [...] The kids love him being in there and then [the principal] always will follow up within a day or two, and he'll be like, ‘So that strategy that you did [...] that's really effective in math. I think you did a great job at it,’ or, ‘Hey I noticed this kid was kind of staring off, maybe you could try this.’ [...] My principal is really good at feedback.”

Some teachers did not receive any feedback from their building administration or they received feedback from someone they did not personally know who worked at the district administrative office. Teachers typically described the observations done by district staff negatively due to the evaluator lacking building- and classroom-level knowledge and there being no previous relationship between the teacher and district evaluator. Additionally, elementary teachers described “fidelity checks” from district-level staff that seemed to serve an evaluative purpose. This feedback was often stifling and felt punitive, which will be discussed further in this report.



“In the past I [got meaningful feedback]. It's gotten harder when [principals are] so stretched. I used to have a meeting once a year with my principal. He doesn't have time to do that anymore unless he writes in the note, ‘If you want to know more, set up a time with our secretary and we will pencil you in.’”

# CONSTRUCT 7: FACILITIES & RESOURCES

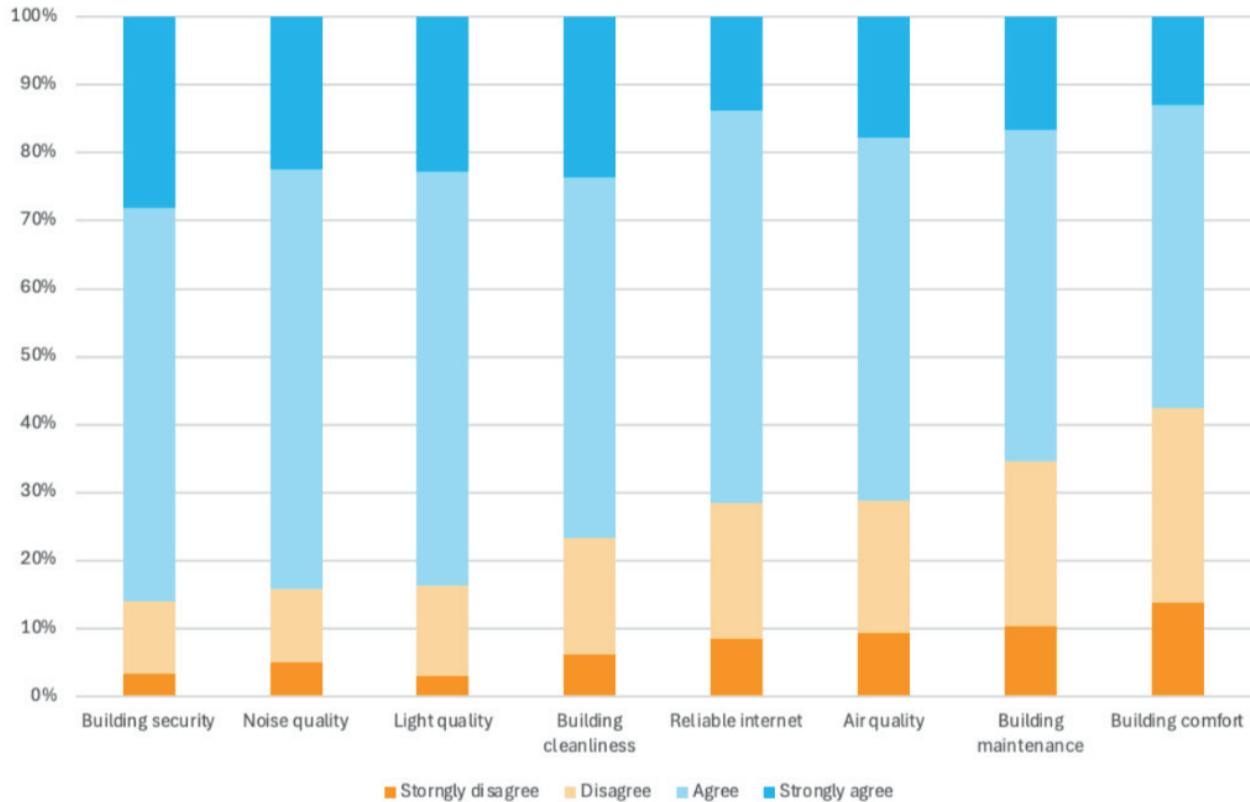
With respect to facilities and resources, building security and noise and light quality earned the highest ratings (Figure 8). The lowest ratings went to building comfort and maintenance and air quality (although the last was perhaps lower among preschool and middle school teachers). Ratings of building comfort were especially low among middle school teachers and it seems that preschool teachers may have the most difficulty with reliable internet. Qualitative data suggests that there are notable building-to-building differences across the district, especially due to the needs of old versus new building structures. Teacher-noted issues were often related to air quality, mold, unstable heating/cooling, broken printers, and non-potable drinking water. There were additional concerns that arose more commonly in the secondary focus groups, including general cleanliness of buildings for middle and high schools, limited classroom space for middle schools, and problems related to bathroom options/cleanliness for high schools. When facility-related issues did arise, teachers noted that work orders are submitted in an attempt to get the problems fixed, but extended periods of time can pass before the issues are addressed, if they are addressed at all.

“There are not enough classrooms for teachers. Many teachers have to teach in other teachers’ classrooms on their plan period. I teach a math class in the Spanish classroom. The band teacher teaches one of her classes in an English classroom [...] I have no private space to make phone calls home. I have to use my personal cell or use another teacher’s room during their plan. There are so many things wrong with not having a classroom. Some students I teach 3 hours a day in 3 different classrooms and I have to have different rules and routines for each class because I have to respect whatever classrooms rules are already in place.”

“I haven't had climate control in my office in [school building] for the entire year. When it's hot, I have to open the window until it gets too hot and then I close it and now it was like 54° in our rooms last week. We put in multiple work orders.”

# CONSTRUCT 7: FACILITIES & RESOURCES

Figure 8. *Facilities & resources.*



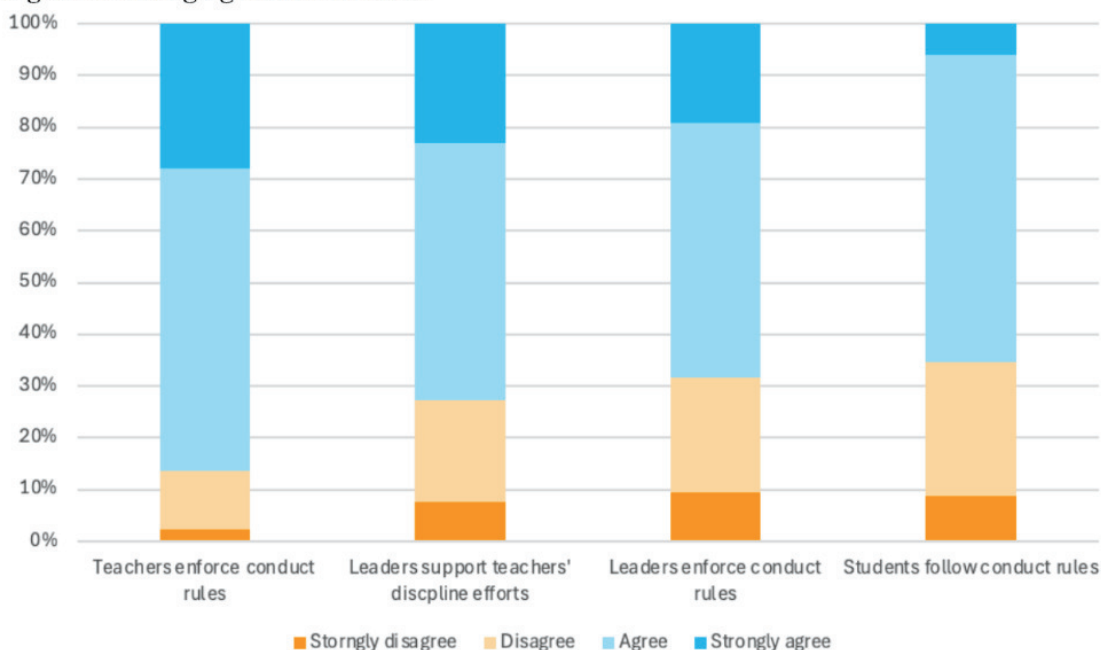
“We tend to sometimes focus on procedural [stuff] because, just like infrastructure, [school] is 120 years old. So we can't really quite yet fix how we want to organize our leadership teams because our pipes are broken and we have non-potable water. And there's one working male bathroom upstairs with a door that locks.”

# CONSTRUCT 8: MANAGING STUDENT CONDUCT

According to survey results, respondents were less likely to agree that students follow conduct rules compared to other items in this category, although preschool teachers were more likely to rate student conduct higher (Figure 9). High school and middle school teachers were less likely to agree about teachers enforcing the rules, and high school teachers alone were less likely to agree about leader rule enforcement and leader support. High school teachers also had lower rates of agreement in general within this construct as compared to other school levels. Respondents were also asked about 15 possible conduct issues. Table 5 lists the frequencies with which they reported the occurrence of those issues and for which ones a majority of teachers within each grade band agreed.

Based on the qualitative data, issues related to student behavior appeared urgent in many, although not all, buildings, as this was the most common theme to arise in focus group data. As noted previously, extreme student behavior includes things such as students screaming, cussing, destroying classrooms, kicking, punching, and throwing desks, among other issues. Large class sizes and lack of paraprofessional and classroom aid support appear to make extreme behaviors even more difficult for teachers to appropriately handle.

**Figure 9.** *Managing student conduct.*



# CONSTRUCT 8: MANAGING STUDENT CONDUCT

While the behaviors themselves created distress among teachers, some of the problems arose not from the behaviors, but from the lack of consequences when incidents occur. When extreme student behavior is not handled by building and district leadership, teachers shared that they were then left alone to deal with persistent disruption that harmed their classroom environment. Many teachers believe that extreme student behavior is not dealt with due to pressure from the district and/or state to decrease behavior referral numbers, to the detriment of the school. Additionally, some building administrators say they must follow a behavior matrix that does not give them the leverage to remove students from the classroom after extreme incidents. Overall, this has left some teachers and students to have to work and learn in unsafe classroom/school environments due to the unaddressed behavior of a small group of students.



“Talking about consequences, I see kids [...] get chance after chance after chance for fairly significant behaviors. And if teachers approach admin about it, they say well it's the matrix, we have to follow the matrix.”

**Table 5. Student conduct issues.**

Conduct issue	Percent reporting
Disorder in unstructured areas (e.g., hallways, cafeteria, bathrooms)	66% <sup>e,m,h</sup>
Student disrespect of teachers	63 <sup>e,m,h</sup>
Disorder in classrooms	56 <sup>p,e,m</sup>
Tardiness/skipping class	45 <sup>m,h</sup>
Physical conflicts among students	44 <sup>m,h</sup>
Bullying	36 <sup>m</sup>
Phone/personal device usage during class time	29 <sup>h</sup>
Drug/tobacco products use	22 <sup>h</sup>
Cheating	20
Vandalism	19
Threats of violence toward teachers	13
Cyberbullying	11
Robbery or theft	10
Gang activity	6
Student possession of weapons	5


<sup>e</sup>Reported by a majority of preschool teachers

<sup>e</sup>Reported by a majority of elementary teachers


<sup>m</sup>Reported by a majority of middle school teachers

<sup>h</sup>Reported by a majority of high school teachers

# CONSTRUCT 8: MANAGING STUDENT CONDUCT



“We're getting hurt, kicked, bit. Our rooms are torn to shreds. Our principal, our main principal on Friday was vomiting because a kid, she was holding a kid and he threw his head back so hard into her throat that she was choking and vomiting. They won't give us an admin assistant. [The student] was in school, I do believe he was back in school today, wasn't he? He was back in school today.”



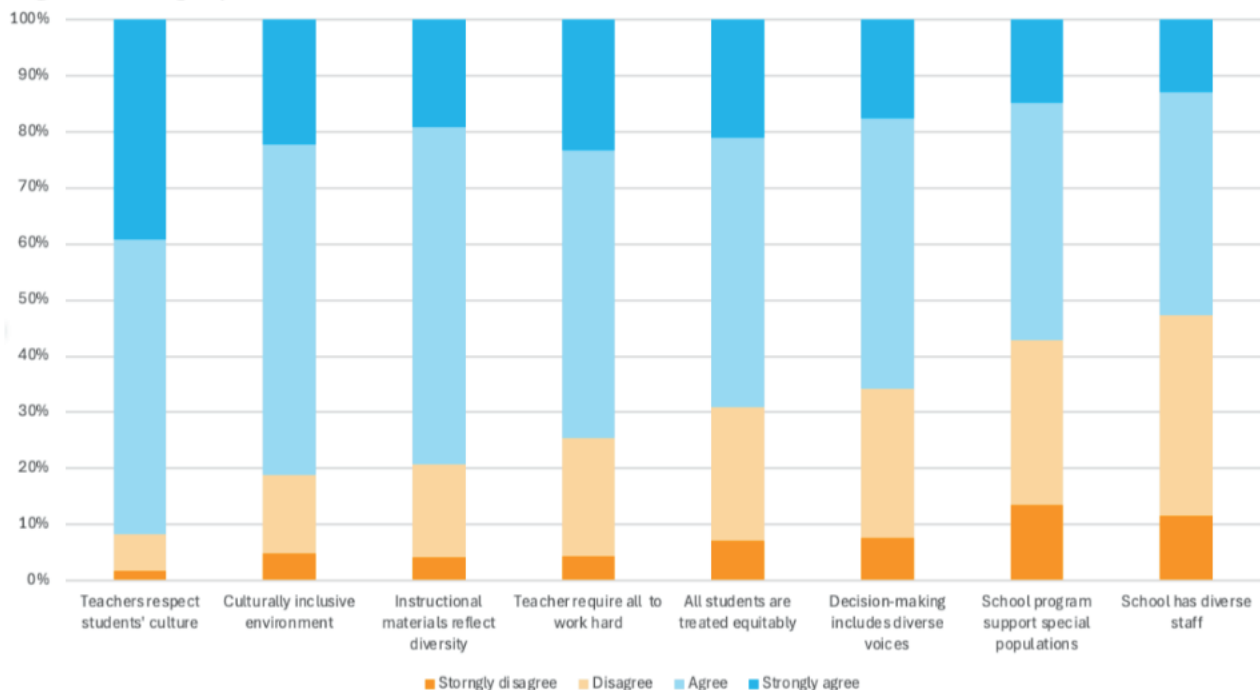
“I've literally heard that from our children, going the principal's not really, not a big deal. That person, you know, threatened kids and or that person just punched somebody in the bathroom and they don't even [get a consequence]. And I feel like that sets a really big precedent. And we've heard from lots of middle school teachers that especially children at our school, it's a problem when they filter into middle school because they don't know what a consequence is.”

# CONSTRUCT 9: EQUITY

Regarding issues of equity, teachers tended to agree that they respect students' cultural beliefs and practices, that there is a culturally inclusive environment, and that instructional materials reflect the diverse backgrounds of students and the community, but were less likely to agree that there is diversity in the school's staff or that school programs and resources are adequate to support special populations (Figure 10). Respondents were also asked whether their school is attentive to concerns facing populations historically marginalized with respect to 7 social dimensions. Figure 11 shows the rates of agreement for each, with race and religion garnering the most agreement, and LGBTQI+ identities and IEP status the least (though still well over a majority agreement). According to qualitative data, some similar issues were noted, especially related to the need for a more diverse teaching staff, the barriers to supporting multilingual students, and the need for more support for LGBTQI+ students, particularly at the middle school level.

“As a child growing up in Columbia, I could probably name on one hand, probably got up as high as three African American teachers [...] that I had [...] it was very lacking and it's still very lacking. I don't think that number has gone up very high in the [many] years I've been here.”

**Figure 10. Equity.**



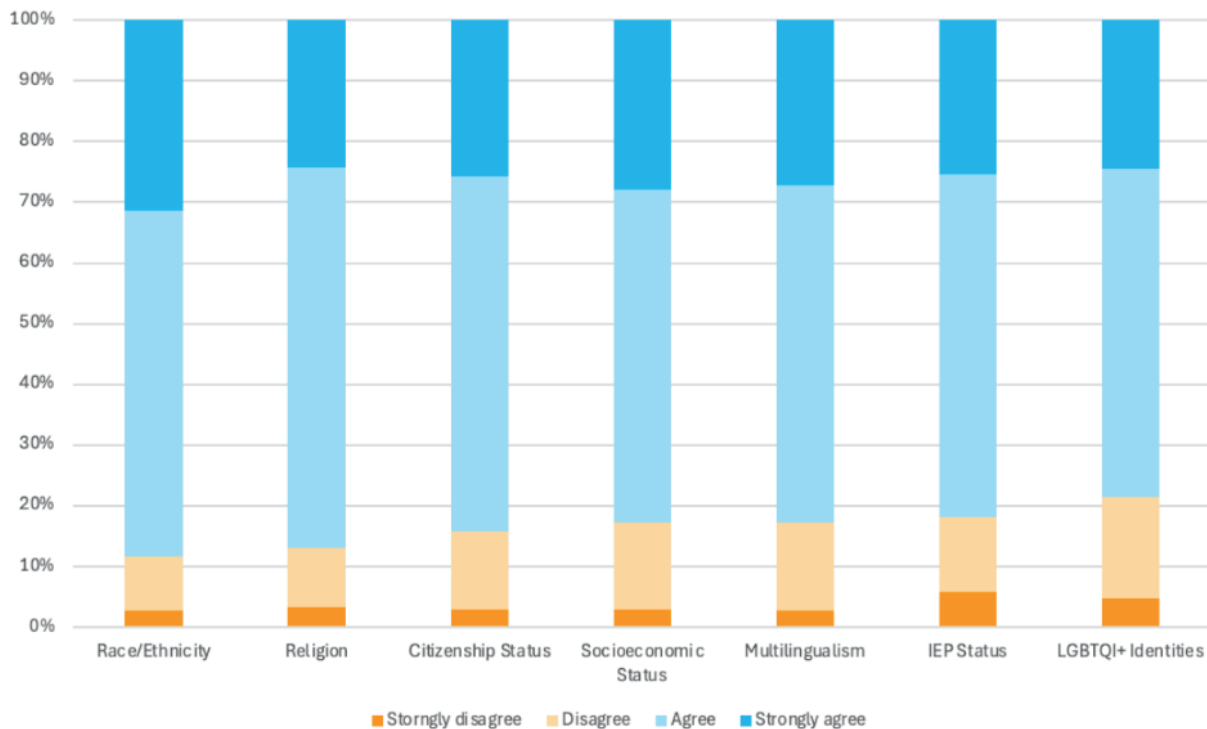
# CONSTRUCT 9: EQUITY



“My school is not a safe place especially for LGBTQ+ students & staff. Admin does not take homophobic/trans slurs seriously.”

When issues of equity arose in the focus group conversations, teachers most often discussed it in relation to “Title” or “North side” schools versus “non-Title” or “South side” schools. Frequently, “Title” or “North side” schools were framed as needing more support, such as smaller class sizes, more building administration, more fundings due to low PTA involvement, etc. There was also a sense that they dealt with significantly more pressure from the district due to low test scores, which will be discussed further in this report. Yet, some teachers also noted that this common “Title” vs. “Non-title” framing actually prevented some schools from getting the support they needed. It might be falsely implied that all “non-Title” schools do not have pressing needs, especially those who are on the brink of getting a “Title” designation or who have had significant changes in student population in recent years.

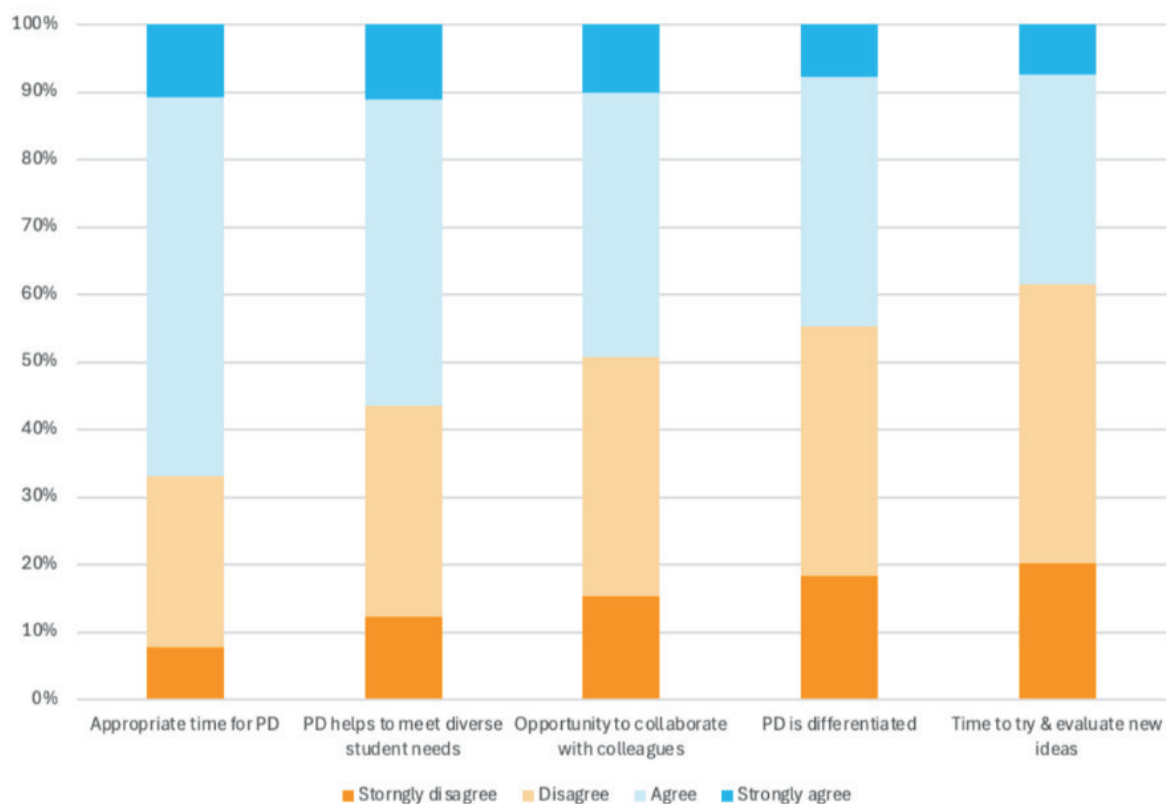
**Figure 11.** School support for historically marginalized populations.



# CONSTRUCT 10: PROFESSIONAL LEARNING & SUPPORT

Regarding professional learning and support, most agreed that appropriate time is provided for professional development (PD), but a majority disagreed that PD includes enough time to think carefully about, try, and evaluate new ideas, or that it is differentiated (Figure 12). Preschool teachers rated most items higher, but otherwise there were no grade level differences. Respondents were asked to select up to 3 areas of PD that would be most helpful from a list of 13. Table 6 lists the frequencies with which each was selected. Social-emotional learning was the most selected topic among all but middle school teachers, for whom supporting special populations was the most frequently selected. For high school teachers, “knowledge in my own content area” was a close second.

**Figure 12.** *Professional learning & support.*




# CONSTRUCT 10: PROFESSIONAL LEARNING & SUPPORT

Qualitative data indicated that teachers believe the district provides many opportunities for PD, but it is often not relevant to what teachers need, is poorly timed, and the topics are repeated/redundant, although including choice in the PD structure helps slightly with some of these limitations. Respondents noted that the district often mandates new initiatives tied to increased classroom expectations, yet these are not always paired with timely, structured PD that clarifies what these initiatives are and how they should best be implemented. Overall, teachers would instead appreciate more differentiation between content areas and levels of experience, as well as increased opportunity to meaningfully collaborate with people teaching similar age levels and classes across buildings in the district.


**Table 6.** *Professional development needs.*

<b>Professional development area</b>	<b>Percent selecting</b>
Social-emotional learning	33%
Supporting special populations (e.g., Students with Disabilities, Academically and Intellectually Gifted Students, Students with Historically Marginalized Identities, etc.)	29
Classroom management	23
Literacy strategies	22
Instructional strategies	21
Knowledge in my own content area	21
Supporting emerging multilingual learners	17
Personalized instruction	16
Student assessments	13
Educational equity	9
Competency-based education	8
Career and college options for students	5
Safety procedures (e.g., lockdown training or fire drills)	2


# CONSTRUCT 10: PROFESSIONAL LEARNING & SUPPORT



“A lot of times when we have building [PD] days, we get a spot that was [already designated]. And then a lot of times the district has some kind of initiative that's getting pushed through to us in our buildings. So that means that we don't get a lot of PD that's specific to what we teach. And I think people are really, really craving that. And we're not getting it. And then the district level PD is even less specific to what we're teaching on the day-to-day basis [...] it's usually directives and things that are being communicated to us and not so much about like... how is the best way to teach this? Or what is an innovative program that you've tried that is amazing that you should share with?”




“I think we've gone to way more PD days than we've ever had without a clear focus and purpose. And we're not differentiating between veteran teachers, new teachers and I feel like PD has become not as useful because it's not as targeted.”




“It would be great if we could do that during district and building time, rather than sitting in meetings that are scheduled and coordinated and we have no control, the few moments where we have gotten time during district PD days to sit with a colleague and just talk about what we're doing has been really valuable. I think people want to do it. It would be nice if we were given the time and I think people would be more than willing to share across buildings, across grade levels, across all kinds of things.”

# CONSTRUCT 11: ASSESSMENT & ACCOUNTABILITY

Survey responses about assessment and accountability were fairly consistent, with no grade level differences (Figure 13). Nearly two-thirds disagreed that the approach to assessment supports students' interest in school. According to qualitative data, unless you are a teacher who teaches in a content area or grade level with no ties to district and state assessments, there is a generally negative view of the district's approach to assessment and accountability. The most common sentiment shared was that the district focuses on assessments to the detriment of students' learning and school experiences. Teachers in schools that do not typically earn high test scores appear to feel the most overwhelmed with assessment pressure, consequently hurting morale in schools already facing many barriers. Many teachers feel that the scores from state assessments, such as MAP, and district assessments, such as iReady, do not provide helpful data to improve teaching practices due to flawed testing structures and low student motivation to try when completing the assessments.



“All we do is test, test, test, test. And then we throw in the district assessments that they want us to do [...] it's like OK, cool. Let's just test them to death, because that's going to make them do a whole lot better.”

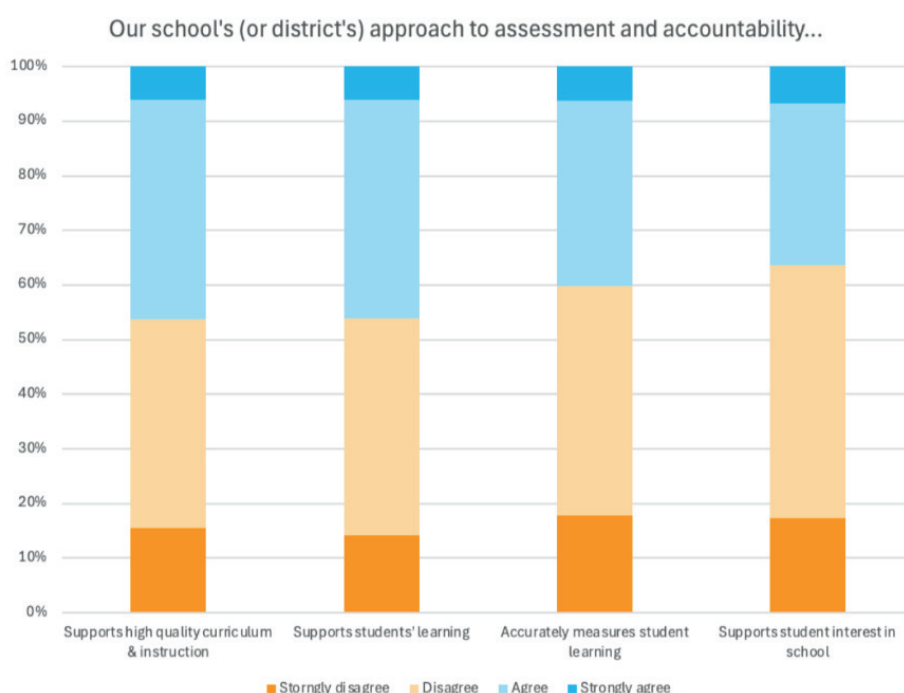


“So, the [middle school] MAP test last year, they were like, we're going to find the data for the kids, we're going to show them their scores. We're going to put it out of grade level content and then we're going to tell the kids right before they take their MAP test. And so what I had to do was, I had to pull up the kids, I found their iReady data, most of whom were testing 3rd or 4th grade levels. I had their MAP test which most of them were Below Basic. And I had to tell them here's what your scores were. What do you think you can do to make it better? And they were like, I don't know. I was like, I don't know either. But then they walked away, feeling stupid because they're like, well, if I'm Below Basic and I'm four grade levels below, what's the point of trying in the 6th grade one? I'm never going to get better. And it was a nightmare.”

# CONSTRUCT 11: ASSESSMENT & ACCOUNTABILITY

Pressure to raise assessment scores appears to be distinctly impacting “Title” buildings, which are already facing significant barriers. The pressure to improve test scores can lead to increased rigidity in pedagogical expectations, where scripted lessons from the curriculum or iReady program are expected to be implemented with little flexibility. Additionally, some schools are required to implement weekly data team meetings that, teachers say, are not useful in actually improving classroom instruction as they are used to simply show data that teachers are already aware of. Heavy focus on assessments also appears to impact elementary schools distinctly. Kindergarten and early childhood teachers say that testing and curricular expectations are increasing in the youngest grades, which is pushing out opportunities for more developmentally appropriate activities for 3-6 year-olds. All elementary grades also voiced concerns about the new Pear Deck assessment platform being implemented in the district, which they were required to integrate into their classrooms this year without proper training on how the platform works. Teachers viewed it as another form of district oversight, as opposed to a useful tool to improve instruction, that takes further time away from teaching and learning.

**Figure 13.** *Assessment & accountability.*



# CONSTRUCT 11: ASSESSMENT & ACCOUNTABILITY

“We are far too focused on test scores and not focused enough on students.”

“So our standardized testing scores are not great at [our school] right now. And part of the district’s way to like help with that is to give us more data team meetings. And I’m just like, you just come and you talk about the same numbers over and I’m like, I already know this. I know this. I live this. This is my job.”

“These kids have become numbers.”

# CONSTRUCT 12: TIME

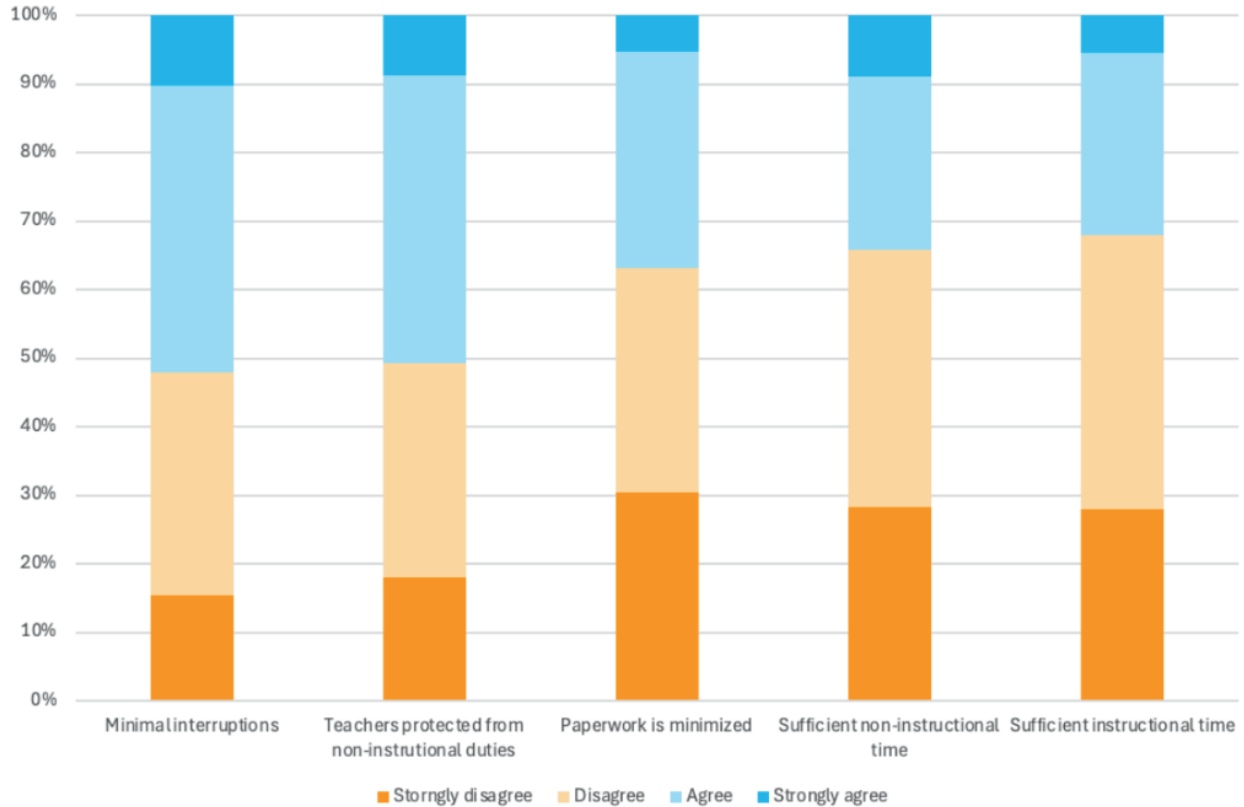
A slim majority agreed that there are minimal interruptions and that they are protected from non-instructional duties. But most teachers disagreed that there is sufficient instructional time to meet all students' needs, that they have sufficient non-instructional time, and that paperwork is minimized. Similarly, qualitative data indicates that many teachers feel like they do not have enough time to be as effective as they can be in their roles. The most pressing issue noted was plan times for many teachers consistently being interrupted or filled with team meetings, IEP and 504 meetings, paperwork, subbing for colleagues, etc., leaving little time to actually plan lessons or genuinely collaborate with their teaching peers. This appears to most significantly impact special education teachers who have case management and paperwork they must complete as well as elementary teachers who often have less planning time than most middle and high school teachers. To add, many teachers are burdened with working outside of their contract hours on a weekly basis, often in unpaid roles. Survey responses showed that on average, teachers are working seven extra hours outside of contract time every week, and over 20 percent of survey respondents work eleven or more extra hours per week.

“We have a meeting first hour twice a week that takes away from that time which I get. We have an administrative meeting and we have an eighth grade team meeting. Then, because all of the SPED students are only in science and social studies as cores, we end up picking up a lot of IEP meetings that happen during our plan time. There have been weeks where we have 10 slots that we could potentially team together, my co-teacher and I, but we've only had one available because we've either been in some other meeting. It's all meetings.”

“The amount of plan time in relation to the workload is dismally inadequate. And made even more inadequate by the amount of plan time taken away for extra meetings and extra work required by the district outside of planning for students, prepping material, communication with parents, problem solving behaviors in the classroom and answering tons of emails. The dismal lack of plan time is what has me seriously considering finding other work outside teaching.”

# CONSTRUCT 12: TIME

Figure 14. *Time.*




“The amount of work that elementary teachers must do during a school week is not sustainable. I work many hours outside of contract time on planning, grading, communicating with parents, filling out paperwork for SPED/504, etc. Elementary teachers need to plan at least 7 whole-class lessons per day, multiple small reading groups, and multiple intervention groups. We need to adjust the pacing guide so we have more time to teach deeply, and we need to add more plan time for elementary teachers.”

# CONSTRUCT 13: DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

The area of lowest levels of agreement pertained to district leadership. A majority of respondents agreed that district leaders encourage teachers to use new knowledge and skills obtained through professional development (70%) and ensure that teachers receive coaching and support to implement new practices (51%) (Figure 15). Otherwise, a majority disagreed about all items pertaining to district leadership (although, as noted previously, rates among preschool teachers were often higher). The lowest levels of agreement were with respect to whether the district leadership creates a culture of trust (19%), whether they know what's going on in schools (20%), and whether their decisions are reasonable and justified (26%). Qualitative data largely reflects what the quantitative data shows: there is overwhelming distrust of district leadership amongst teachers. Teachers often do not feel valued by, listened to, or supported by district leadership. From student discipline, to facility updates, to curricular implementation, participants feel that many leaders within central office care little about legitimately addressing pressing issues within their schools.

One consistent issue that arose was how and when the district chooses to implement new initiatives or directives. Participants felt that these decisions are often made with little consideration of the wider repercussions on teachers and students. For example, it appears that even though building leaders will communicate concern about increased enrollment and large class sizes for an upcoming year, the district will sometimes wait until the school year has already begun before they will add an FTE, or additional staff member, to a school, causing significant disruption and work for teachers impacted. Additionally, teachers share there are too many initiatives that are implemented with little-to-no consideration of teachers' perspectives. As mentioned previously, Pear Deck was chosen as an additional program to house assessment, yet it was implemented mid-year and framed as a district mandate to teachers with little-to-no support for those who were expected to implement the program.

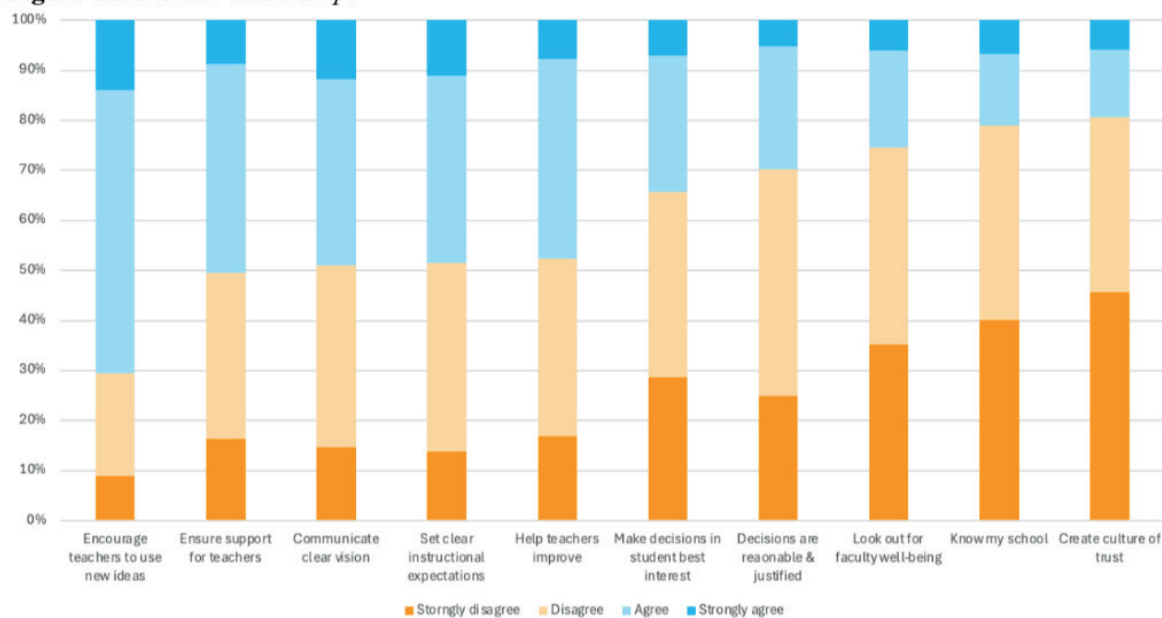


“I think what you just said about autonomy, I think that's a huge thing for retention because I feel like we feel less and less like we're treated as professionals in terms of knowing what we should do with our kids.”

# CONSTRUCT 13: DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

Additionally, many teachers feel that they have lost autonomy in their pedagogical choices due to district initiatives and expectations, often related to assessments such as iReady, taking the joy and creativity out of their work. It appears that elementary teachers are dealing with this most directly, with many saying that the district is micromanaging their work and expecting rigid implementation of curriculum. Teachers in elementary buildings have to manage punitive-feeling curriculum “fidelity checks,” where they can get reprimanded for not being on a specific curricular page at a specific time, regardless of the needs of their students. It appears that these most distinctly impact hard-to-staff schools that are already struggling with low morale and high teacher turnover.


**Figure 15. District leadership.**




“There is no trust. There hasn't been for a long time and I think every survey they send out is a joke because it's clearly very seldom, if ever, [do they] actually do anything with that survey or care about what we actually think.”

# CONSTRUCT 13:


## DISTRICT LEADERSHIP



“I personally feel the district is failing. There are too many things being put on teachers and the amount of assessments is ridiculous. While it seems the school board is trying to raise questions, I don't think anyone really understands the extent of how bad teachers feel. Too many teachers are scared to comment on anything due to worrying they will be retaliated against.”



“I was going to say building-level autonomy feels fake now, like any building level choices are extra work and fake, is how I feel [...] They used to feel like there was some agency to [things] like, we're going to be a small group instruction school and there's data to support that. No, you're not allowed. You gotta do this with fidelity exactly like the program says, and it's like, I feel like we can't get a good understanding of what the best practices are for our community and our culture because there's no actual autonomy on a building level.”



“I will say teaching is partly a creative profession. And when they do this, they are nixing the creativity, which is very contradictory because one, they want kids to come to school and the creativity and fun things we do is what gets them to come to school. Two, what is more likely to be in the paper? Just on a regular basis, not our yearly test scores. What are they more likely excited about and put in the district newsletter? A test score or this project a classroom did? So what they want to put in a newspaper is, oh, this is this fun project this classroom did, but we don't have the time or the autonomy or the trust to get to do that stuff in our classroom.”

# RECOMMENDATIONS OVERVIEW

Based on the results of this report, we suggest that CPS leadership considers the following recommendations as starting points for conversation regarding changes in future policy and practice. We also hope that those already implementing these recommendations are affirmed in their practices and continue them. Lastly, we encourage Columbia leaders and staff to review the results themselves to identify issues and potential solutions that most align with their district's and school's strategic goals.

## **Recommendation 1:**

Prioritize meaningful structural and cultural adjustments in response to the lowest scoring construct.

## **Recommendation 2:**

Make systemic changes related to the next lowest scoring constructs.

## **Recommendation 3:**

Further bolster and amplify areas of strength.

## **Recommendation 4:**

Examine the current approaches being taken to address extreme student behavior.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Recommendation 1:**

Prioritize meaningful structural and cultural adjustments in response to the lowest scoring construct, *District Leadership*.

Prioritize meaningful structural and cultural adjustments in response to the lowest scoring construct, District Leadership. As seen across both quantitative and qualitative data, most teachers do not trust district leadership. They feel like district decisions are making their working conditions worse and although teachers try to share these concerns, they do not feel like they are taken seriously. We recommend that the new CPS leadership and school board take advantage of this moment of leadership transition and make actionable steps to rebuild trust by prioritizing visibility and transparency while also opening lines of communication that may have previously been stifled. We also recommend district leaders consider how many initiatives have been adopted in recent years, identify which ones are/are not most necessary, and prioritize the proper support and time needed to implement them effectively while taking seriously the workload teachers face.

## **Recommendation 2:**

Make systemic changes related to the next lowest scoring constructs, *Assessment & Accountability* and *Time*.

Specifically, be aware that many teachers feel strong pressure from state and district testing. The district's previous strategy of simply intensifying that pressure appears to be causing undue harm to teachers and students, especially in buildings with the highest needs. Instead, we recommend working collaboratively with principals and teacher leaders to come up with strategies that can help schools achieve academic goals without overlooking other district and school needs/priorities. Additionally, we recommend protecting teacher planning time from interruptions and other scheduling conflicts as much as feasible, and collaboratively considering how elementary, SPED, and other teachers with limited plan times/extra duties can be better supported in their work.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Recommendation 3:**

Further bolster and amplify areas of strength.

The highest scoring construct, Teacher Leadership, suggests that teachers believe in and appreciate their colleagues, so the district might be wise to increase the visibility of teachers acting as leaders without overburdening them with new duties and expectations. District and school administrators could also bolster already established teacher leadership positions by considering teacher recommendations earnestly and being transparent about why their recommendations cannot be implemented when that is the case. Another area of strength includes Retention. In general, most teachers see their school building as a place they want to work, so we recommend district leaders implement practices that make teachers feel connected to and valued by their district, in addition to their school building. Some approaches might include following through with building maintenance requests as much as feasible, avoiding micromanagement of teachers' pedagogical practices, addressing the issue of large class sizes, considering pay increases during the next opportunity for pay negotiations, and ensuring effective building leaders feel valued and are well-supported.

## **Recommendation 4:**

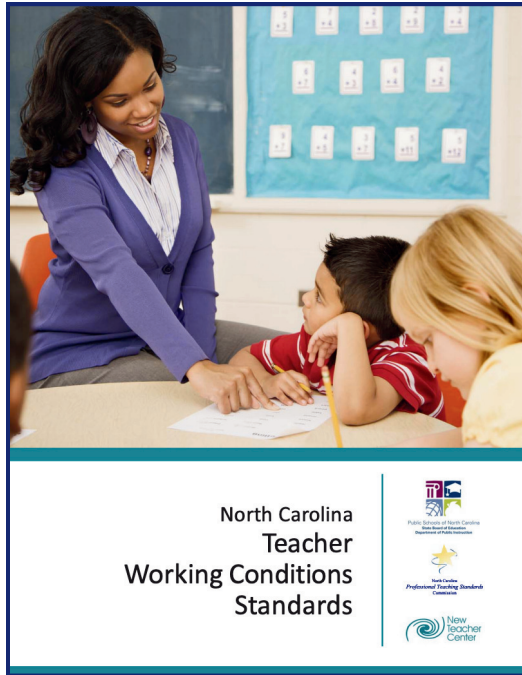
Examine the current approaches being taken to address extreme student behavior.

While it does not appear to be a significant issue in every building, many teachers in CPS regularly face extreme and/or consistent student classroom disruption and violence. This causes feelings of stress and burnout, which becomes more burdensome when there appears to be no consequences for such conduct. We recommend that building and district leaders revisit the behavior goals, policies, and practices currently in place to ensure that schools in CPS are safe for teachers and students alike, making changes to ensure that the most extreme and persistent student behavior concerns are addressed fairly and swiftly. We also recommend that during these conversations, behavior data is examined alongside teacher perspectives since it appears that some buildings might have felt pressured to lower their referral numbers, which could skew how accurately data represents behavior incidents.

We acknowledge that these recommendations are comprehensive and take time, energy, and resources to address.

Consequently, we hope that next steps are chosen thoughtfully and strategically. It is especially important that solutions are developed in collaboration with diverse stakeholders invested in protecting and improving Columbia Public Schools, including district and school leaders, teachers, support staff, local CMNEA leaders, etc. Reports such as these are often compiled with little follow-up action taken to address concerns, but we are hopeful that CPS will feel empowered from this new knowledge and take earnest action to make meaningful change in their local schools.

CONCLUSION



WCLT Standards

# APPENDIX



Columbia Public Schools Working Conditions Survey

**Demographics**

\* 1. Please indicate your current position:

- Classroom Teacher (certified or non-certified)
- Student Services Personnel (e.g., school counselor, school psychologist, social worker, media coordinator, instructional coach, etc.)
- None of the Above

\* 2. How many total years have you been employed as an educator?

\* 3. How many total years have you been employed in the school in which you are currently working?

\* 4. Which of the following best describes your immediate professional plans?


- Continue teaching at my current school.
- Continue teaching in this district but leave this school.
- Continue teaching in this state but leave this district.
- Continue teaching in a state other than Missouri.
- Continue working in education but pursue an administrative position.
- Continue working in education but pursue a non-administrative, non-teaching position.
- Leave education entirely.
- Retire.

\* 5. What school level are you located within the majority of the time?

- Preschool
- Elementary School
- Middle School
- High School

Other (please specify)

CPS Survey

  
**Focus Group Protocol and Question Guide**  
 Adapted from [Herry, et al., \(2019\)](#) (p. 39-40)




**Protocol**

**Introduction:** Thank you for participating in today's focus group. My name is [insert your name here]. I work for [insert your employer here]. Your feedback today about the working conditions in your school will be compiled into a report by an external evaluator for your local MNEA affiliate to advocate for better working conditions in your district. Today's discussion should last around 60-90 minutes.

*While the Working Conditions Listening Tour is a grant-funded initiative through NEA and MNEA, we encourage all educators, regardless of teacher association or union membership, to participate fully in both the survey and focus groups.*

**Confidentiality:** What you tell us will be kept confidential in that we will not use your name and we will not attribute any quotes to individuals in the report that we create. All the data we gather from focus groups will be synthesized and summarized, and you will not be identifiable in our reports. However, we will record today's conversation for transcription purposes. We promise to not identify you in any summary of these focus groups. We also explicitly ask you as participants not to share what other participants/your colleagues share in this focus group. Please respect the privacy and confidentiality of this focus group and agree/pledge not to share what you hear in this group with others who are not present.

**Process:** There are no right or wrong answers; we are seeking your experiences and observations, and we are also seeking your opinions, so please be as candid as possible. This is an informal session; think of it as a conversation among yourselves. My role is to ask questions, listen, and keep you on track. We have a lot of topics we want to cover, so I may move us along in the conversation — apologies in advance if I cut a topic short. We want to be sure everyone has a chance to contribute, but we do not expect everyone to respond to each question and we don't expect everyone to agree. We welcome all ideas, opinions, and points of view. If you are uncomfortable sharing something or think of something later today or tomorrow that you wish you had shared, please feel free to contact Samantha Hayes at [samantha.hayes@mnea.org](mailto:samantha.hayes@mnea.org). Are there any questions before we begin?

Focus Group Protocol and Question Guide

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**Missouri NEA believes that Great Public Schools are possible for all students.** Further, we believe that an educators working conditions are students' learning environment. With an explicit focus on working conditions within districts, more effective action will result in optimal learning environments for all students.

## **Special thanks to...**

All CPS Educators who trusted us with their input via Survey and/or Focus Groups. This was not possible without your participation, honesty, and trust.

Noelle Gilzow, CMNEA Local President & the CMNEA Executive Team

Dr. Chris Belcher, Columbia Interim Superintendent, and Columbia Board of Education

Columbia District and Community

Kyle Olmstead, MNEA UniServ Director

MNEA Leadership

Audrey Swaine, MNEA Professional Practice Intern

Olivia Compton, MNEA Program Services Assistant & WCLT Graphic Designer

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*We extend our immense gratitude to all those working every day to ensure great public schools for Missouri students.*

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