

# How are schools responding to political polarization?

Perspectives from  
district leaders and teachers

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Reinventing Public Education



# Agenda

- **(20 min)** What does the district and teacher data say?
- **(30 min)** Where do you propose we go from here? (Get ready to move around)
- **(10 min)** Let's debrief and discuss.

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

## EDUCATION

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

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

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

## POLITICS & POLICY CHARTERS & CHOICE

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

Democrats and Republicans are parting ways on education.

**Fight over gender identity and schools hits small Maine towns**

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

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

## POLITICS • THE D.C. BRIEF

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

## SCHOOL & DISTRICT MANAGEMENT

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

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

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

## EQUITY & DIVERSITY EXPLAINER

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

## WORLD & NATION

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

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# Is the hype reality?

# Data sources

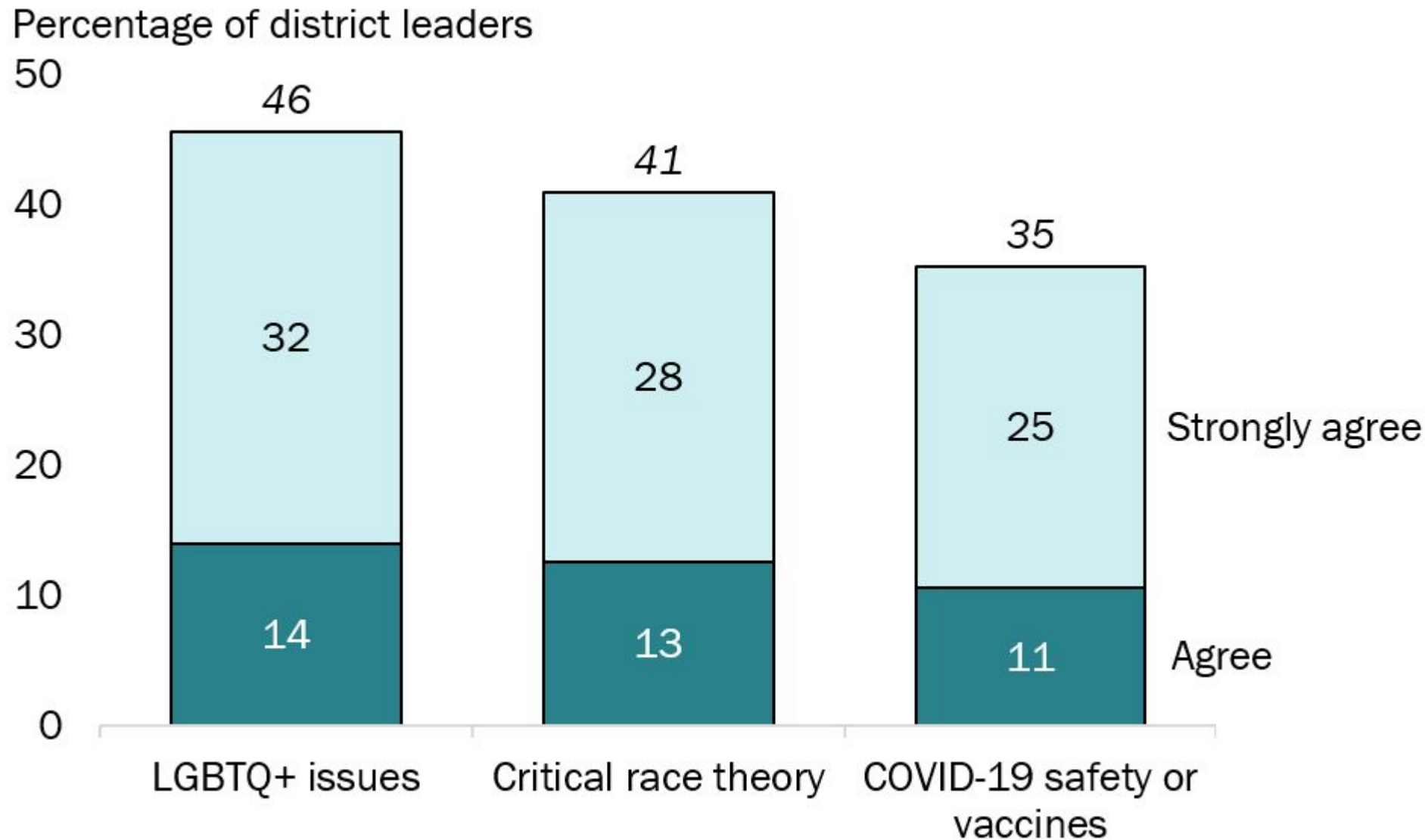
	District Leaders	Teachers
<b>Surveys</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Nationally representative</li><li>● Administered Oct-Dec 2022</li><li>● 300 leaders participated</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Nationally representative</li><li>● Administered Apr-May 2022</li><li>● 8,063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



# How is political conflict impacting schools?



# Districts say political disagreements are interfering with schooling



# The disruptions have material impacts on schools

Percentage of district leaders

50

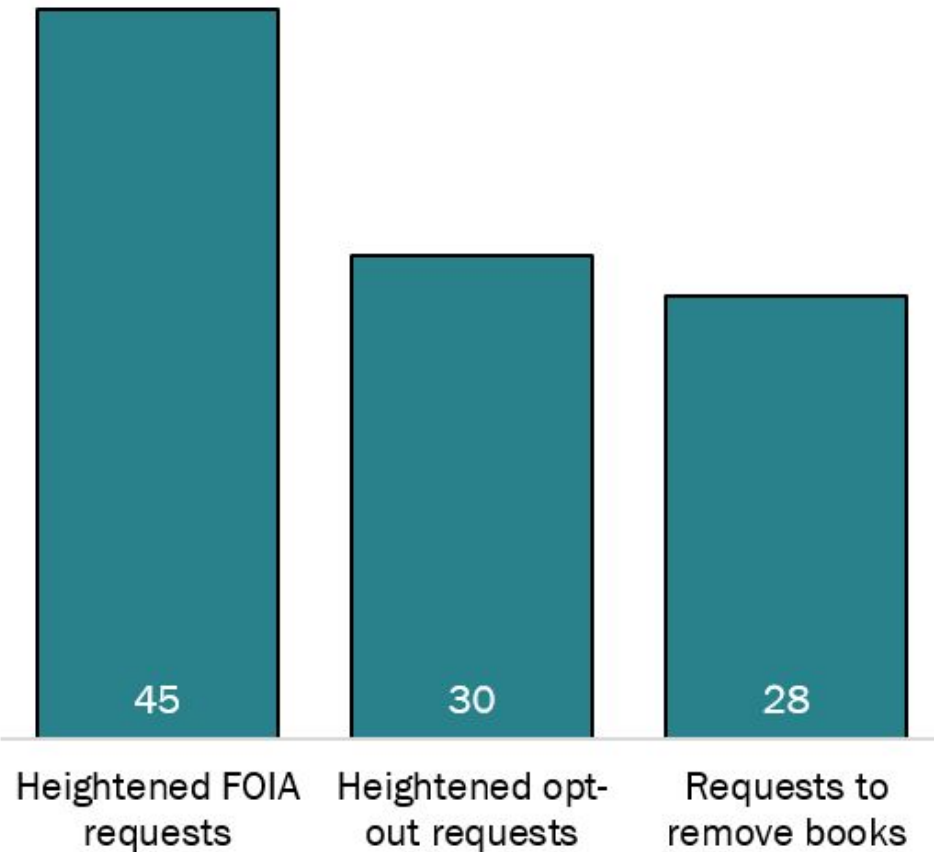
40

30

20

10

0

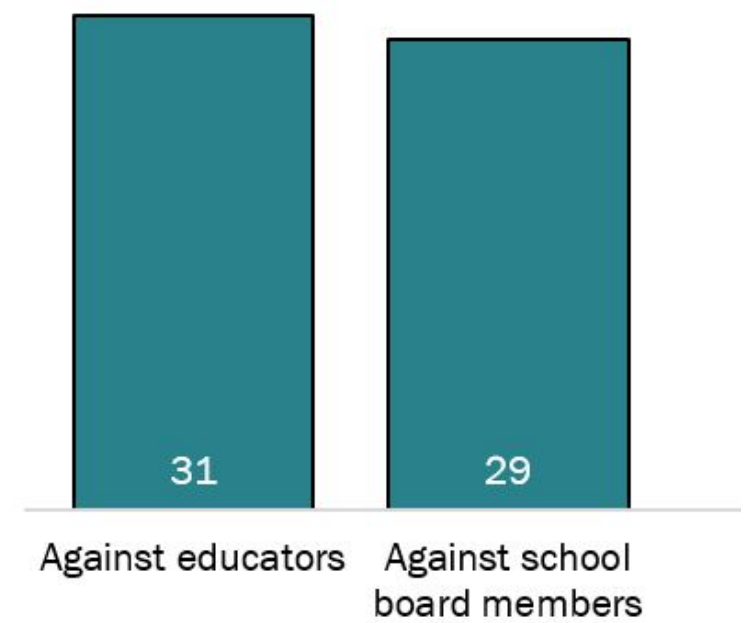


Heightened FOIA requests

Heightened opt-out requests

Requests to remove books

Additional burdens



Against educators

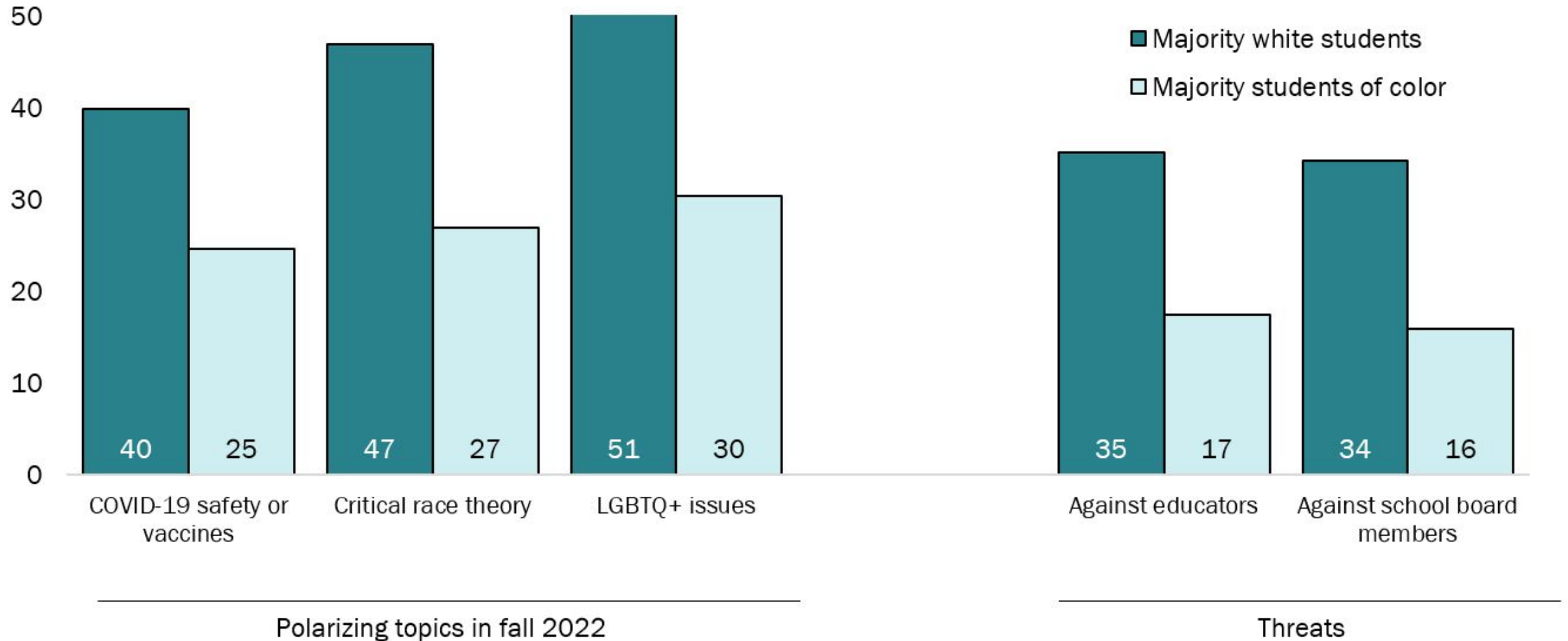
Against school board members

Threats



# Problems are concentrated in historically advantaged districts

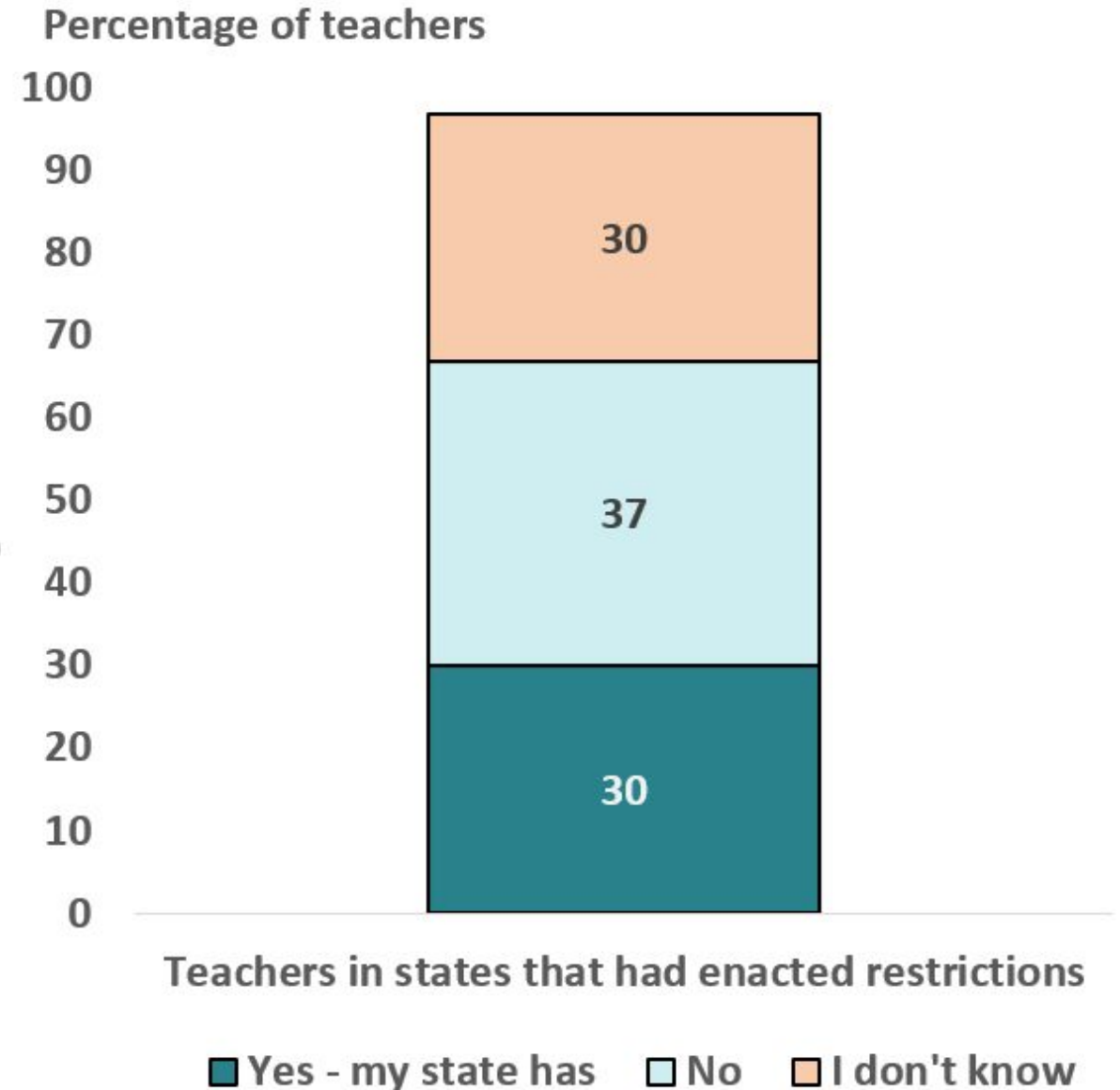
Percentage of district leaders



# Many teachers don't know whether their state has enacted restrictions

*I feel as though I struggle selecting certain pieces because I am unsure of which topics/materials would be considered inappropriate or things I should not be using.*

– Teacher



# Confusion is made worse by lack of clarity and support from district leaders

Some teachers felt that **messages from district leaders** were **implicit, lacking, or unclear.**

Some teachers reported that they **lacked guidance or resources** and that race and gender issues were left “**ignored.**”

*While it was never explicitly stated by my district not to discuss gender or race-related topics in the classroom, I know that my district would not have my back should I choose to add instruction on these important issues.*

– Teacher

# Parents are a key source of pressure on teachers

Teachers **most commonly pointed to parents** as a source of limitations on their instruction

Most of these teachers were in **majority White** or **low poverty** schools

Teachers faced **increased scrutiny, parental complaints, fear of parental objection or backlash, and parental influence** over school and district leaders

*I feel like I have a sword over my head and any parent is able to cut the string if they disagree with the curriculum, for legitimate reasons or not.*

– Teacher

*I am extremely cautious. Not because of my school district but because of the parents and their social media reactions. They can ruin a teacher's reputation in a single post.*

– Teacher

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



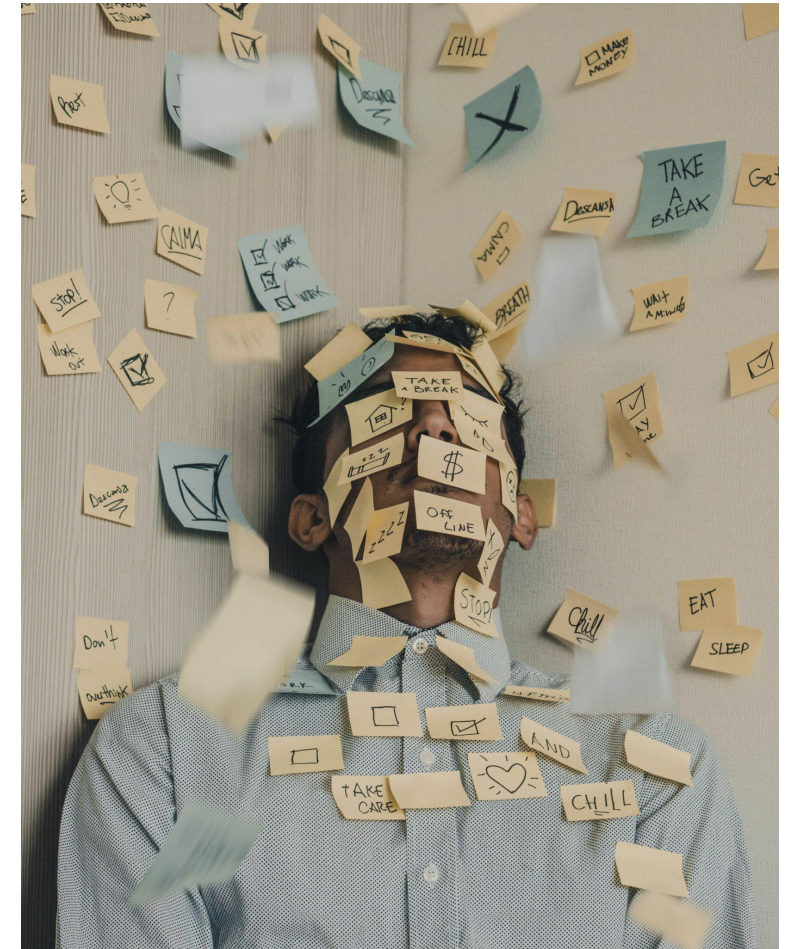


# Political conflict contributes to difficult working conditions for both teachers and district leaders

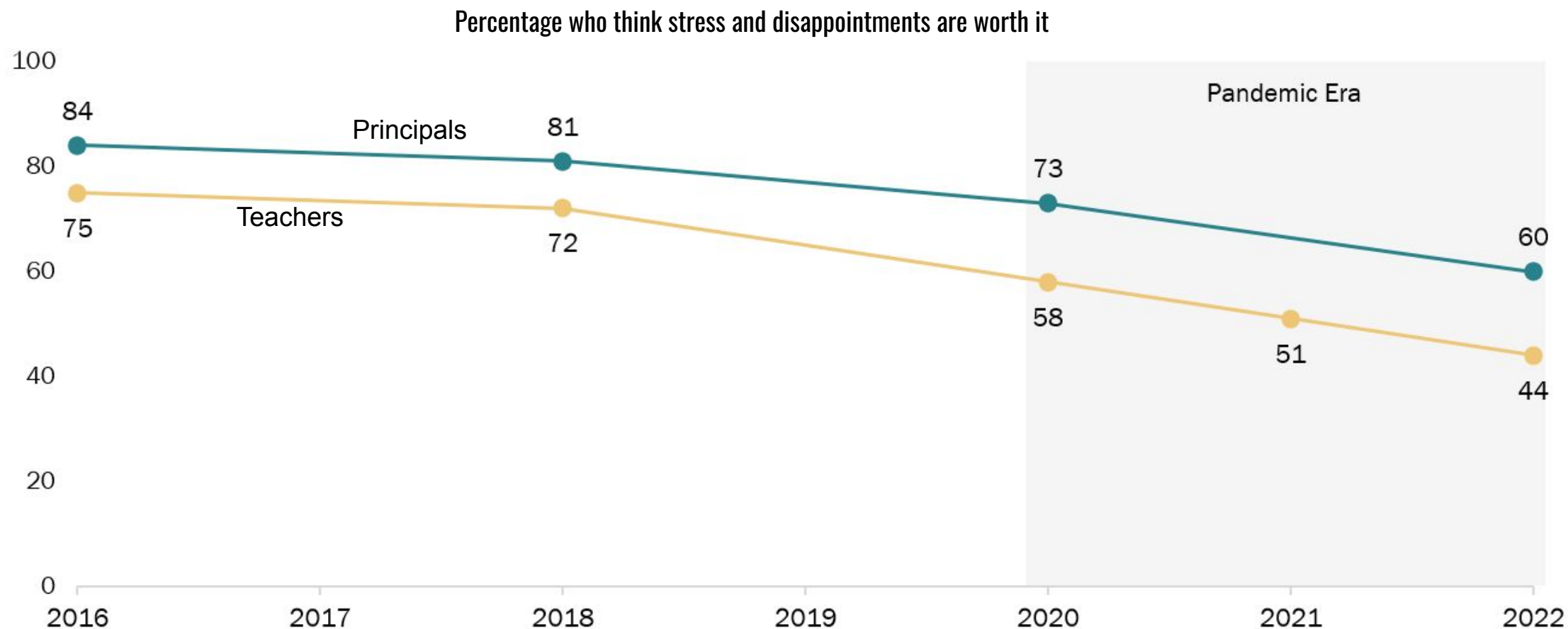
**Superintendents** said political conflict could consume valuable **time** and **attention**, distract from other **district priorities**, and require added **organizational capacity** to manage.

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

*We've had to be far more nimble and creative than I think we ever had to be before, and we've had to do it under even more intense pressure and criticism in a job that was already subject to a lot of pressure and criticism.* - Superintendent



# And may exacerbate existing workforce challenges



*I don't know how much longer I can continue to teach under these constraints.*

– Teacher

# Where do we go from here?



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

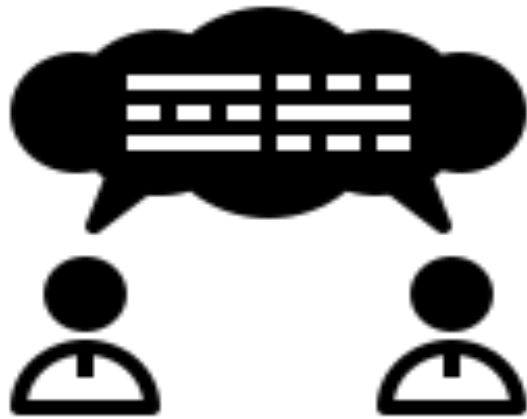
School Board Members	State Officials
<p>School board members motivated by “culture war” concerns may not understand the role of the board and their broader responsibilities as a governance team.</p>	<p>State mandates could amplify conflicts with the community when they were out of step with community values and undermine productive collaboration between districts and states.</p>

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

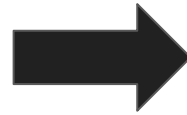
*For the first time in my career, I'm just gonna hunker down and do what I can do here and continue to find ways to make it work in a poor policy environment.*



# Districts said they are taking action to quell controversies and address community concerns



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



Districts leaders reported:

1. **Implementing new policies** and procedures related to the teaching of controversial content
2. **Proactively engaging** with community members about their concerns
3. **Increasing transparency** and sharing information with community members



# Teachers say district practices can help them better navigate teaching about controversial topics

District practices that teachers perceived as helpful:

- Providing **guidance, professional development, and opportunities for collaboration** to clarify how they can talk about controversial topics
- **Providing endorsed instructional materials** that appropriately address controversial topics

*I would feel more confident if I had materials and . . . curricula suggested and vetted by my district. If a parent complained, I could direct them to the curriculum materials and to my district curriculum supervisor.*

– Teacher

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

Political conflict is unlikely to go away. Districts may be able to reduce its impacts by:

1. **Increasing engagement** with their community (teachers and families) over controversial topics
2. **Providing more information** about the *what* and *why* of teaching related to controversial topics
3. **Establishing clear processes** for complaints and opt-out requests so that school staff aren't navigating these issues on their own
4. **Supporting teachers with resources** and professional development related to the teaching on sensitive subjects

# Do you like coffee?

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**I must have coffee to  
function everyday.**

**I do not drink coffee.**

# Are you comfortable providing district endorsed instructional materials that address controversial topics?

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**I'm not comfortable**  
**providing district**  
**endorsed instructional**  
**materials** that address  
controversial topics (e.g.,  
race and gender).

**I am comfortable**  
**providing endorsed**  
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# DISCUSSION & QUESTIONS

THANK YOU

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