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Walking a Fine Line— Educators’ Views on Politicized Topics in Schooling

Findings from the State of the American
Teacher and State of the American
Principal Surveys



KEY FINDINGS

- According to nationally representative surveys administered to principals and teachers in January 2022, 48 percent of principals and 40 percent of teachers reported that the intrusion of political issues and opinions into their professions was a job-related stressor.
- The surveys asked about two salient politicized topics: the implementation of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) safety measures and classroom conversations about race, racism, or bias. In January 2022, responding to families' concerns about COVID-19 mitigation measures was a greater stressor for principals and teachers (collectively referred to as *educators*) than responding to families' concerns about teaching about race, racism, or bias.
- Most educators, especially those in urban schools, supported mandates for requirements on masks, vaccines, or other COVID-19–related safety measures.
- Fifty-four percent of educators believed that there should not be legal limits on classroom conversations about racism and other contentious topics, while about 20 percent of educators believed that there should be. About 25 percent of educators were not sure.
- Educators need more support to address politicized issues in their schools and classrooms, including clearer communication from leadership and support from their preparation programs and in-service professional learning.
- Thirty-seven percent of teachers and 61 percent of principals reported being harassed because of their school's policies on COVID-19 safety measures or for teaching about race, racism, or bias during the first half of the 2021–2022 school year. Harassment about their school's COVID-19 safety policies was more common than harassment about their school's policies for teaching about race, racism, or bias. Students' family members were often the source of such harassment.
- Educators who reported being harassed about politicized issues experienced lower levels of well-being and worse perceptions of their school or district climate; they were more likely to cite the politicization of their profession as a reason for considering leaving their jobs.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has disrupted and permeated nearly all aspects of schooling during the past two years. At the same time, the nation has experienced a historic racial reckoning, which has called out the U.S. education system's role in addressing systemic inequities (Howard, 2021; West, 2021; Álvarez, 2021). On top of the herculean task of carrying out the essential functions of their jobs, educators increasingly find themselves in the position of addressing contentious, politicized issues in their schools (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022) as the United States has experienced increasing political polarization (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro, 2021).

During the 2021–2022 school year, two politicized topics emerged as highly salient in K–12 schools: (1) how to implement COVID-19 safety measures with the return to in-person schooling; and (2) the role and emphasis that discussions about race,

racism, or bias may or should have in schools. In this report, we explore educators' views on and experiences with these two policy areas because many teachers and principals nationally are in the position of implementing controversial policies related to these two topics in their schools.

National polling shows that public opinion has been divided—often along political lines—on how schools should manage the safe return to in-person schooling (Gramlich, 2022; Helmstetter et al., 2021). Public opinion about the extent to which schools should focus on race and teach students about racial inequality is also split along political lines (Sawchuk, 2021): The majority of Republicans support a minimal focus on racial inequality in public schools, and the majority of Democrats advocate for a strong emphasis on racial inequality (Barnum, 2022; University of Massachusetts Amherst, Department of Political Science, 2022). Emotions in response to

these issues have run high within communities, resulting in the harassment of educators, bans against literature depicting diverse characters, and calls for increased parental involvement in deciding academic content (Pollack et al., 2022; Feuer, 2021; Ujifusa, 2022; Harris and Alter, 2022a, 2022b). These tensions persist, even though research evidence suggests that classroom discussions about racial inequities can enhance students' self-efficacy, academic outcomes, and appreciation for racial fairness and diversity (Dover, 2009; Aronson and Laughter, 2016; Hughes, Bigler, and Levy, 2007). Additionally, cultivating students' sense of belonging, especially for students of color who often encounter biases and lower expectations when compared with their White peers, is crucial for developing supportive learning environments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). In this contentious environment, teachers and principals have been pulled in multiple directions as they try to balance and reconcile not only their own beliefs on such matters but also the beliefs of others around them, including their leaders, fellow staff, students, and students' family members. At the same time, educators are tasked with carrying out school policies that have taken on strong political overtones, regardless of whether they agree or disagree with those policies.

In this report, we assess how teachers and principals, whom we collectively refer to as *educators*, view and experience such salient and contentious politicized issues and opinions in their schools, focusing on school policies for implementing COVID-19 safety measures and for teaching about race, racism, or bias. We first explore the extent to which politicization, broadly, is a source of job-related stress. We also investigate how these two highly politicized topics might contribute to elevated job-related stress by examining several potential contributing factors, such as the extent to which educators must manage conflicting beliefs and opinions, the adequacy of support they receive, and the hostility and aggression that they experience from others in response to school policies for implementing COVID-19 safety measures and for teaching about race, racism, or bias.

Teachers and even principals are often subject to policies put in place by others in their district or state; in examining educators' opinions, we seek to better understand the perspectives of those who are

tasked with carrying out these often-controversial policies. Finally, we explore the consequences of politicization for educators' instructional practices, well-being, perceptions of their school and district climate, and intentions to leave their jobs. Drawing from our findings, we provide some recommendations to education policymakers, district and school leaders, and preparation programs on how they can support educators in navigating politicized topics in their schools and classrooms in a way that allows for productive discourse between communities and schools.

We Surveyed Teachers, Principals, and Working Adults and Interviewed Teachers

In this report, we present selected findings from the 2022 State of the American Teacher (SoT) and the State of the American Principal (SoP) surveys related to educators' views on and experiences with politicized issues. This is the second of three reports based on the 2022 SoT and SoP surveys.¹

We use survey data collected from nationally representative samples of K–12 teachers ($N = 2,360$) and principals ($N = 1,540$) through the RAND Corporation's American Teacher Panel (ATP) and American School Leader Panel (ASLP). To add context to our analysis, throughout the report, we compare the survey responses of teachers and principals to those of a nationally representative sample

Abbreviations

ASLP	American School Leader Panel
ATP	American Teacher Panel
CMO	charter management organization
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
ELA	English language arts
LGBTQ	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning
SoP	State of the American Principal
SoT	State of the American Teacher

of 500 U.S. working adults from RAND’s American Life Panel on a set of analogous survey items. Finally, to gain deeper insight into how educators are affected by politicized topics in their schools, we spoke with 60 teachers across the United States, drawing from a pool of survey respondents who consented to be contacted for an interview.

We surveyed K–12 public educators and working adults from January to February 2022, which we abbreviated as *January 2022* in this report. For context, this was during the peak of the omicron wave in the COVID-19 pandemic (Smith, Bosman, and Tully, 2022), which could have influenced educators’ responses. In addition, at the time of our survey administration, 14 states—Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Virginia—had acted to restrict how K–12 teachers could talk about race, racism, or bias and, in some states, other identity characteristics, such as gender, in their schools. Most of these state-level actions occurred during spring and summer 2021, and a few occurred in fall 2021 or early 2022.² According to a summary of policies in these states, these state-level actions limit the teaching or discussion of such topics as “unconscious and conscious bias, privilege, discrimination, and oppression” or the notion that the United States is “inherently racist” (Schwartz, 2021; Ray and Gibbons, 2021).

For the teacher and principal surveys, we oversampled *educators of color*—those educators who did not self-identify exclusively as White—to allow for nationally representative estimates for both groups. For teachers, we also have nationally representative estimates for Black or African American and Hispanic/Latinx respondents. We weighted the samples of teachers, principals, and working adults to ensure national representation.

We explored whether teachers’ and principals’ survey responses differed according to their demographic characteristics, their school context (e.g., school locale), or the characteristics of their students.³ Unless otherwise noted, we reference only differences among educator subgroups that are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). We tested the

robustness of significant differences across educator subgroups to adjust for observable school-level characteristics (e.g., poverty level, student racial and ethnic composition, locale, grade level) and educator-level characteristics (e.g., race and gender). We note where educator subgroup differences are no longer significant after controlling for school-level and educator-level characteristics. These regression analyses are useful for understanding the drivers of differences, but we do not present regression-adjusted statistics because we believe that these educator subgroup differences remain notable even if they could be driven by multiple underlying factors.

Moreover, we present only our unadjusted findings and did not make statistical adjustments for multiple comparisons because the intent of this report is to provide exploratory, descriptive information rather than to test specific hypotheses or causal relationships. In addition, it is possible that numerous other factors unmeasured by our surveys, such as educators’ beliefs about their *own* school policies or the political beliefs of educators and of the communities that they serve, could have played a role in the differences across educator subgroups that we observed. We do acknowledge that some of the subgroup differences that we observed could also be driven, in part, by these unobserved factors.

Furthermore, because teachers self-selected into our sample by consenting to be interviewed, the generalizability of the interview findings might be limited. These findings are meant to be illustrative of survey findings and not necessarily representative of all teachers. When we discuss the interview data, we use *most* to refer to half or more of interview participants in an applicable group (e.g., English language arts [ELA] teachers, teachers of color), and we use *some* or *few* to refer to less than half of the respondents in an applicable group, with *some* meaning more than *few*.

For a full description of our analytic methods, please consult our technical documentation (Doan et al., 2022). We present results by topic rather than by survey to facilitate comparisons; however, readers should keep in mind that principals and teachers are not drawn from the same schools.

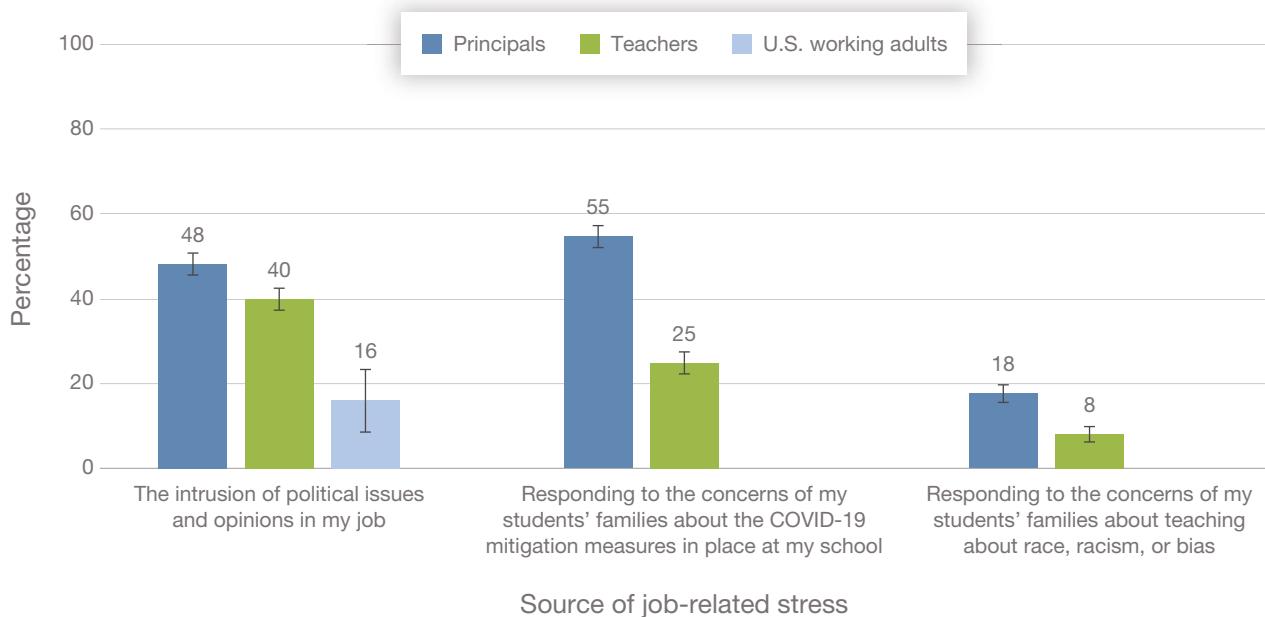
Educators Experienced Job-Related Stress from the Intrusion of Politics into Their Professions

Principals Were Consistently More Likely Than Teachers to Report That Politicized Issues Were Job-Related Stressors

Forty-eight percent of principals and 40 percent of teachers reported that the intrusion of political issues and opinions in school leadership or teaching, respectively, was a job-related stressor. By comparison, only 16 percent of working adults indicated that the intrusion of political issues and opinions in their jobs was a source of job-related stress. This difference demonstrates the especially salient impact that politicized issues have had in schools compared with other workplaces (Figure 1).

Throughout the report, we refer to educators’ experiences of contentious, politicized topics as the “intrusion of political issues and opinions” in their professions because prior research has suggested that political polarization may be impacting educators’ ability to focus on instruction (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022). We also asked educators about two specific politicized issues: responding to families’ concerns about (1) the COVID-19 safety measures put in place at their school and (2) teaching about race, racism, or bias.⁴ In all cases, more principals than teachers reported these issues as sources of job-related stress. For both teachers and principals, responding to families’ concerns about COVID-19 mitigation measures was a greater stressor than responding to families’ concerns about teaching about race, racism, or bias. However, this response pattern could be related to the timing of the surveys, which were administered in January 2022, when the

FIGURE 1
Percentage of Principals, Teachers, and Working Adults Reporting Job-Related Stress About Politicized Topics



NOTE: This figure shows the percentage of principals (dark blue), teachers (green), and working adults (light blue) who reported experiencing each source of job-related stress. The survey item wording for the intrusion of political issues and opinions varied slightly by survey sample. For principals, the survey item asked about “the intrusion of political issues and opinions in the school leader profession”; for teachers, the survey item focused on “teaching”; and for working adults, the survey item focused on their “job.” We did not ask working adults about responding to the concerns of students’ families about either politicized topic. The vertical black bars represent the 95-percent confidence interval for each estimate. Teachers $n = 2,349$; principals $n = 1,532$; working adults $N = 500$.

surge of the omicron variant was at its peak (Smith, Bosman, and Tully, 2022).

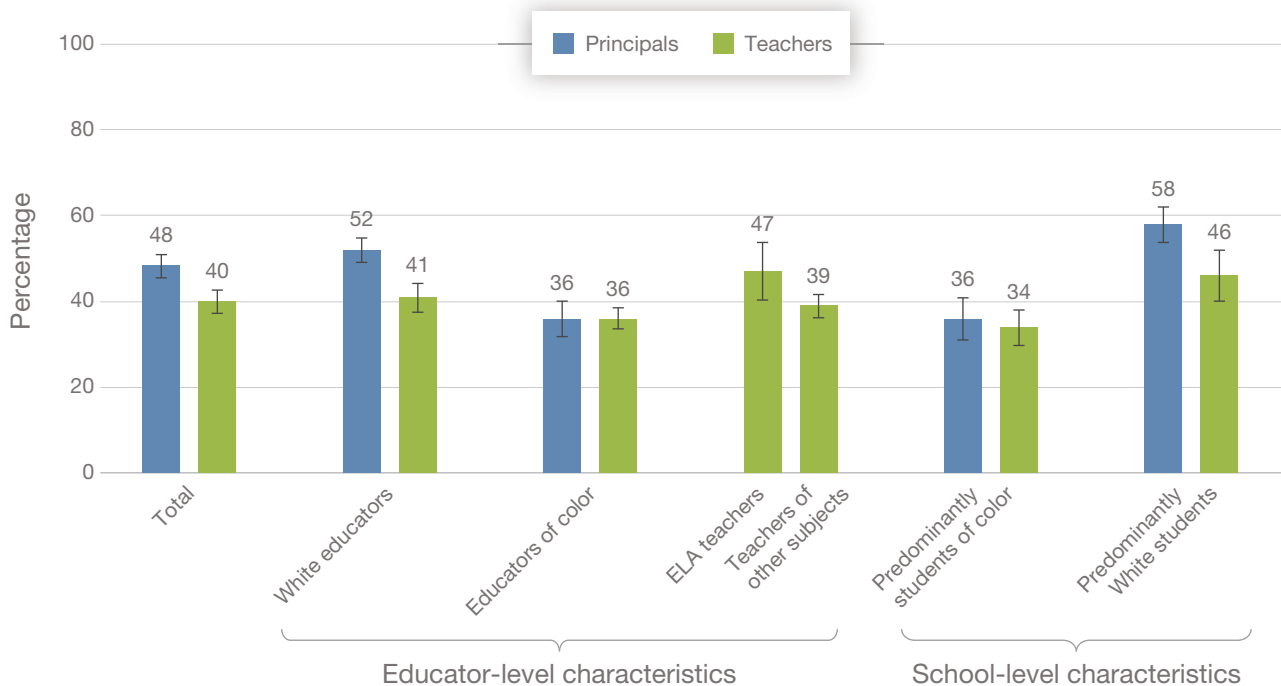
White Educators, Educators Working in Schools with Predominantly White Students, and ELA Teachers Were More Likely Than Their Counterparts to Report That the Intrusion of Political Issues in Their Jobs Was Stressful

Forty-one percent and 52 percent of White teachers and principals, respectively, selected the intrusion of political issues and opinions into their professions as a job-related stressor, compared with 36 percent of teachers of color and principals of color (Figure 2).⁵ Although we focus on two highly politicized topics in this report—the implementation of COVID-19 safety measures and the appropriateness of conversations

about race, racism, or bias in schools—educators may have interpreted this survey item to encompass any number of politicized issues in education, including these two topics. During our interviews, when discussing the ways in which politics have affected their work experiences, White teachers tended to emphasize concerns about possible threats to their instructional autonomy, which in many cases stemmed from parents’ or school board members’ objections to teaching about race, racism, or bias; on the other hand, teachers of color tended to emphasize the tension that stemmed from the politicization of COVID-19 mitigation measures at their school.

Teachers and principals in schools with predominantly White students were significantly more likely than teachers and principals in schools with predominantly students of color to consider the intrusion of political issues and opinions as a job-related stressor

FIGURE 2
Percentage of Teachers and Principals Who Selected the Intrusion of Political Issues and Opinions in Their Professions as a Job-Related Stressor, by Educator Type



NOTE: This figure shows the percentage of principals (dark blue) and teachers (green) who reported that the intrusion of political issues and opinions in their professions was a job-related stressor. *Educators of color* are respondents who did not self-identify exclusively as White. We defined a school as having *predominantly students of color* if its student population consisted of at least 75 percent of students of color, and we defined a school as having *predominantly White students* if its student population consisted of at least 75 percent of White students. ELA teachers are teachers who indicated that their main teaching assignment was English language arts; teachers of other subjects are all remaining teachers in our sample. The vertical black bars represent the 95-percent confidence interval for each estimate. Teachers $n = 2,349$; principals $n = 1,532$.

Politicized issues and opinions were stressors for teachers who were most likely to teach about them.

(Figure 2).⁶ Although these experiences were not universal, a few teachers we spoke with who worked in schools with mostly White students shared how some parents or school board members had expressed concern with teachers' choices about instructional content, such as the inclusion of books that feature people of color or people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ). Two teachers in schools with mostly White students talked about how parents' concerns about curriculum led to conflict among district leaders torn between "hearing parents out" and supporting teachers' choices.

However, these incidents were not confined to schools serving mostly White students. Another teacher working in a school that serves mostly students of color shared that some White parents in their district felt that, when exposed to content about racial injustice, "their kids [were] being taught that they're at fault for something they didn't do." Even so, overall, relatively fewer teachers serving mostly students of color spoke about direct conflicts between parents and their school or district over the content that teachers used to teach about racial issues than teachers working in schools with mostly White students.

Politicized issues and opinions were also stressors for teachers who were most likely to teach about them. More ELA teachers than elementary education, math, science, and social studies teachers reported that the intrusion of political issues and opinions was a job-related stressor.⁷ This is perhaps unsurprising given media reports about efforts across the nation to ban certain books that feature people of color or people who identify as LGBTQ (Harris and Alter, 2022b). This finding suggests the need for subject-specific guidance on how to help teachers navigate

politicized issues in academic content to alleviate job-related stress.

Although the specific politicized issues that educators may have found stressful likely varied among individuals and by other local or regional factors, our interviews with teachers provide examples of the types of politicized issues that ELA teachers might have found stressful, as well as why. Of the ELA teachers interviewed who said that politicized issues had directly affected their working conditions, some expressed concerns about the possible loss of instructional autonomy or mistrust from parents or their school board about the content taught in their schools. Specifically, a few described parent-led attempts to remove certain books from school libraries and the curriculum or a requirement to submit a list of books, stories, and poems that they planned to teach to their school board for approval—actions that a few teachers felt undermined their professionalism. As one teacher noted, rather than challenging parents, the administrators in her district often compromised by choosing to "find something we all agree on rather than [choosing] what is best [academically]."

Teachers and Principals Generally Agreed on Key Politicized Issues, but Conflicting Opinions Were Always Present

Most Educators, Especially Those in Urban Schools, Supported Mandates for COVID-19–Related Safety Measures

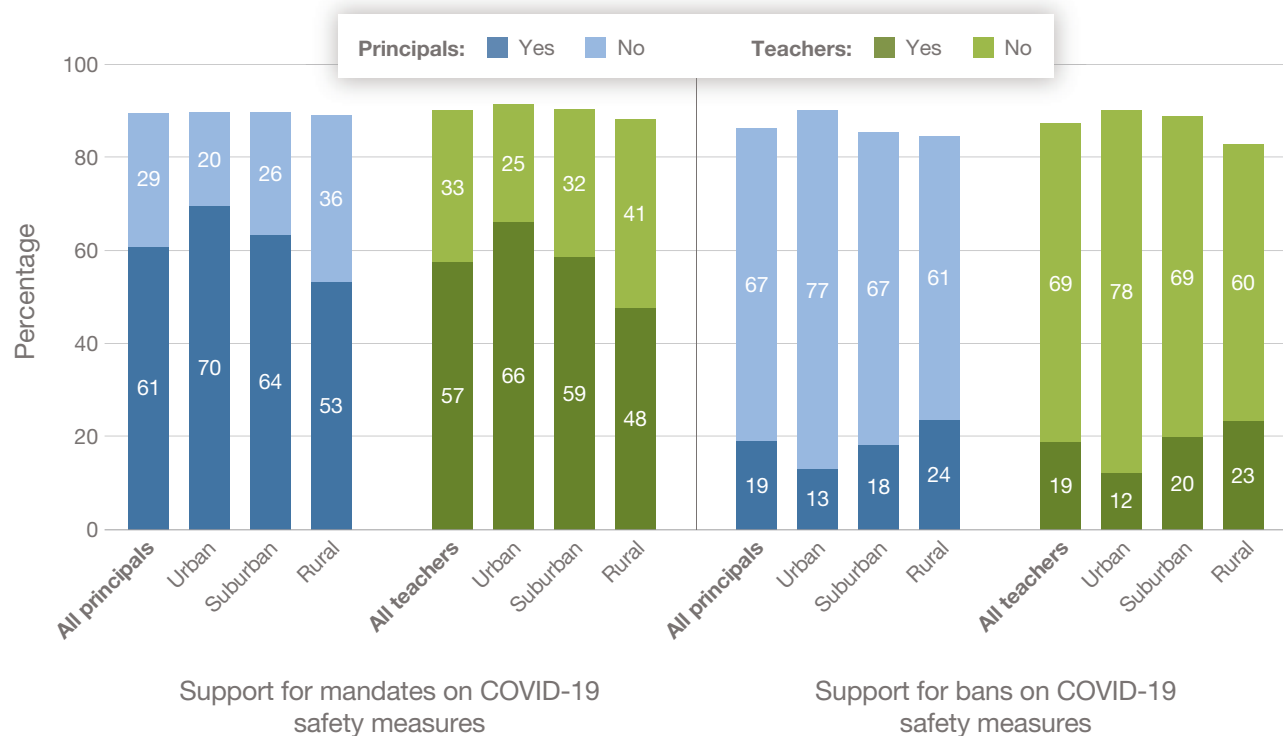
Sixty-one percent of principals and 57 percent of teachers agreed that states and K–12 public school districts *should* be allowed to mandate requirements

for masks, vaccines, or other COVID-19–related safety measures (Figure 3).⁸ Meanwhile, only about 20 percent of teachers and principals supported bans—referred to in our surveys as *legal limits*—on whether schools and districts could mandate masks, vaccines, or other COVID-19 safety measures. Nearly 70 percent of teachers and principals believed that there *should not* be such legal limits.⁹ Some teachers highlighted during their interviews how the politicization of COVID safety measures made the adoption of such policies in schools more challenging. As one teacher explained, “I think [schools] should have a vaccine mandate. . . . You have to be vaccinated for all kinds of things. I don’t see how it’s different for COVID except that it is political.”

Although we do not have data on teachers’ or principals’ political beliefs, prior research suggests

that residents in rural areas tend to lean toward Republican views, while residents in urban areas tend to lean toward Democratic views (Parker et al., 2018). Given that differences in opinion on the use of COVID-19 safety measures often fall along political lines—and political beliefs are highly linked to geography—it is perhaps unsurprising that we found significant differences between urban and rural educators. Principals and teachers in urban schools were consistently the most likely to voice support for COVID-19 safety measures, while principals and teachers in rural schools were consistently the least likely to support such measures. The responses of educators in suburban schools often fell somewhere in the middle. About 70 percent of urban educators reported that states and K–12 public school districts should be allowed to mandate schools to require

FIGURE 3
Teachers’ and Principals’ Support for In-School Mandates and Bans on COVID-19 Safety Measures, by School Locale



NOTE: This figure shows principals’ and teachers’ responses to two survey questions. For the bars on the left, we asked, “Do you think states and K–12 public school districts should be allowed to mandate whether schools can require masks, vaccines, or other COVID-19–related safety measures?” Teachers $n = 2,323$; principals $n = 1,506$. For the bars on the right, we asked, “Do you think that there should be legal limits on whether schools and K–12 public school districts can mandate masks, vaccines, or other COVID-19 safety measures?” Teachers $n = 2,322$; principals $n = 1,509$. Bars do not sum to 100 because educators were also able to respond that they were not sure.

masks, vaccines, and other COVID-19 safety measures, compared with 60 percent of suburban educators and 50 percent of rural educators.

In contrast, principals and teachers in rural schools were more likely than their counterparts in urban schools to report that there should be legal limits on whether schools and K–12 public school districts can mandate masks, vaccines, or other COVID-19 safety measures. Approximately a quarter of rural educators supported legal limits on COVID-19–related mandates, compared with just one-tenth of urban educators. Nonetheless, support for COVID-19 safety measures was still relatively strong among rural educators, roughly half of whom reported support for mandating COVID-19 safety measures in schools.

At the same time, there were differences of opinion among educators in all geographic areas, suggesting that school leaders might anticipate a need to manage these differences. During our interviews, a few teachers shared that differences in opinion among staff on COVID-19 safety measures could result in tension between staff members. One teacher described how the strong relationship she had with a colleague became damaged when she discovered that the colleague was opposed to being vaccinated for COVID-19. The teacher explained, “She is putting that before the health and well-being of my kids.”

Most Teachers and Principals (54 Percent) Opposed Legal Limits on Classroom Conversations About Racism and Other Contentious Topics

Fifty-four percent of teachers and principals reported that there *should not* be legal limits on classroom conversations about racism, sexism, and other topics that some people disagree about, while 21 percent of principals and 20 percent of teachers reported that there *should* be legal limits on such conversations. The remaining 26 percent of teachers and principals were not sure (Figure 4).

At the time that we fielded our surveys, 14 states had enacted some kind of state-level restriction on teachers’ ability to engage in classroom conversations about race, racism, and other forms of bias.

Even in states that had such restrictions, more teachers opposed them (45 percent) than supported them (28 percent), and the remainder of teachers were not sure, suggesting that such policies lack broad support from teachers even in states where they have been passed. We observed a similar pattern among principals.

During our interviews, a few teachers thought limits on classroom conversations about contentious topics intruded on their instructional autonomy. For these teachers, their ability to decide what to teach in their classroom allowed them to develop students’ critical thinking skills and help students process current events, such as Black Lives Matter and the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. As one teacher said, “If I couldn’t hold a space for my students to digest some of this really heavy stuff, I would not be able to teach in [my current] school.”

Some educators were especially likely to oppose legal limits on classroom conversations about racism, sexism, and other contentious topics. Teachers and principals of color, and especially Black or African American teachers and principals, were more likely than White teachers and principals to believe that there *should not* be legal limits on such conversations. For instance, 62 percent of principals of color and 59 percent of teachers of color opposed such legal limits, compared with 51 percent of White principals and 52 percent of White teachers.

Teachers’ views also varied by subject taught. Seventy-five percent of social studies teachers—who may be more likely to address these topics in their classrooms than teachers of other subjects—opposed such legal limits. The experience of one middle-school social studies teacher we interviewed illustrates the challenge of teaching social studies in the face of resistance to such classroom conversations: They explained that a student’s parent “[didn’t] want us to discuss anything political,” but that “[my students] will be talking about politics and controversial issues because that’s in the curriculum.” They further explained their approach to teaching about controversial topics, stating that students themselves “analyze and evaluate” such issues when presented with evidence and sources.

Overall, social studies teachers were significantly more likely than ELA, elementary, and math teach-

FIGURE 4

Teachers' Views About Legal Limits on Classroom Discussions of Contentious Topics, by Teacher Subgroup

Some states have passed legislation that limits how K–12 public school teachers discuss racism, sexism, and other topics that some people disagree about in the classroom. Do you think that there should be legal limits on those classroom conversations?

	No (%)	Yes (%)	I'm not sure (%)
All teachers	54	20	26
Responses by race			
Educator of color	59	20	20
White	52	20	28
Responses by school locale			
Urban	61	15	24
Suburban	52	20	27
Rural	48	24	28
Responses by state			
State without a policy restricting classroom conversations	58	16	26
State with a policy restricting classroom conversations	45	28	27
Responses by subject taught			
Social Studies	75	18	8
Science	64	20	17
ELA	56	19	26
Math	48	25	27
Elementary	46	21	33

NOTE: Teachers $n = 2,321$. Rows may not sum to 100 because of rounding. Lighter shading indicates the lower values across the grid, while darker shading indicates higher values across the grid.

ers to oppose legal limits on classroom conversations about racism, sexism, and other divisive topics.¹⁰ Math, elementary, and ELA teachers were significantly more likely than social studies teachers to express that they were not sure about whether there should be legal limits on conversations about contentious topics—but *not* significantly more likely to support such legal limits.¹¹ This finding suggests that

there may be opportunities to help teachers better understand what such restrictions entail and imply.

We also asked educators whether they believed in the existence of *systemic racism*, which we defined as the notion that racism is embedded in systems and structures throughout society rather than present only in interpersonal interactions. Sixty percent of teachers and 65 percent of principals reported believ-

ing that systemic racism exists. Only about 20 percent of teachers and principals reported that they believe systemic racism does not exist, and the remainder were not sure. More teachers of color (69 percent) reported believing in the existence of systemic racism than White teachers (57 percent).

We saw a similar trend among principals: 79 percent of principals of color reported their belief in the existence of systemic racism compared with 61 percent of White principals. Nearly all Black or African American principals (92 percent) and teachers (87 percent) reported believing that systemic racism exists.

Educators' beliefs in the existence of systemic racism were associated with their beliefs on the appropriateness of policies limiting classroom conversations about racism, sexism, and other controversial topics. Sixty-eight percent of teachers and 66 percent of principals who believed in the existence of systemic racism opposed legal limits on classroom conversations, compared with 39 percent of teachers and 35 percent of principals who reported not believing in the existence of systemic racism. Very few educators who reported their belief in systemic racism—only roughly 10 to 15 percent—supported legal limits on classroom conversation, compared with roughly 40 percent of educators who reported not believing in systemic racism.

Similar to our findings on educators' views about COVID-19 safety measures, beliefs on the existence of systemic racism and views on the appropriateness of legal limits on classroom conversations about racism, sexism, and other contentious topics varied by geography. Roughly half of principals and teachers in rural schools opposed restrictions on such classroom conversations and expressed belief in the existence of systemic racism. In comparison, roughly three-quarters of urban principals and teachers expressed belief in the existence of systemic racism, and approximately 60 percent of urban educators opposed legal limits on such classroom conversations. Suburban educators' views consistently fell in the middle. These differences suggest potentially greater consensus among educators in urban schools than in rural schools.

Educators Need More Support to Manage Politicized Issues

Stronger Communication from Leadership Was Linked to Teachers' Perceptions of Adequate Guidance About Navigating the Pandemic

Only 17 percent of teachers reported that their access to resources, supports, and guidance to navigate the pandemic in their classrooms had been completely sufficient during the 2021–2022 school year. An additional 48 percent of teachers reported that they had somewhat sufficient access to such supports and guidance.

The extent to which teachers perceived that school administrators were doing a good job of communicating COVID-19–related policies and plans to teachers was linked to whether teachers felt supported to navigate the pandemic. Eighty-five percent of teachers who strongly agreed that their administrators did a good job communicating COVID-19–related policies and plans to teachers also said that they had somewhat or completely sufficient access to support, resources, and guidance to navigate the pandemic, compared with just 26 percent of teachers who strongly disagreed that their administrators did a good job communicating such policies and plans.¹²

During our interviews, some teachers explained why they found clear administrator communication—especially communication around contentious and politicized issues—so crucial. Of the teachers who experienced challenges with how their administrators were managing COVID-19 policies at their school, most said that they felt a disconnect between the standards for COVID-19 safety that they were expected to maintain and the support or resources that they received from district- or school-level administrators. As one teacher said,

[Social distancing] is impossible. We are in the inner city. There is not a lot of space. It feels like the leaders who don't know what education is like throw you into these war zones and expect so much out of you and blame you for so much at the same time.

Other teachers talked about the challenges that they encountered enforcing COVID-19 mitigation policies when administrators were not modeling or enforcing the policies. Highlighting the importance of consistent expectations and communication from administrators, one teacher said, “[Masks were] mandated at our school, but certain kids wouldn’t wear [them], and there were certain teachers never wearing [masks], so it [was] hard to enforce. . . . [L]ately, admin started making these announcements and it helped with having everyone on the same page.”

Almost Half of Teachers (47 Percent) Reported That They Had Sufficient Guidance to Navigate Conversations About Race, Racism, or Bias in Their Classrooms

Only 14 percent of teachers reported that they had completely sufficient access to resources, supports, or guidance to help them navigate conversations about race, racism, or bias in their classrooms, and an additional 33 percent of teachers reported that they had somewhat sufficient access. Our teacher interviews provide insight into why teachers might feel that they lacked such support or guidance. As one teacher told us, “I think the biggest thing with teaching about race, racism, or bias is that we don’t know how it is supposed to be done.” In fact, few teachers mentioned participating in professional learning about navigating conversations about race and bias with their students or colleagues. Most teachers who did report participating in such professional learning also described barriers to effective professional learning on racial equity, such as lack of staff buy-in, differences of opinion among staff, insufficient time allotted for essential dialogue or activities, and perceptions that such professional learning was one-sided, alienating, or involved asking staff of color to speak for all members of their racial or ethnic group.

These findings align with results from a nationally representative survey administered in May and June 2021, which found that many teachers do not receive professional learning that adequately prepares them to address such issues as diversity and systemic injustice in their classrooms (Woo et al., 2022). In

our interviews, teachers were also more likely to report that their teacher preparation programs did *not* address such topics as race and diversity than *did* address such topics, which suggests that teacher preparation programs can do more to prepare teachers to navigate these issues in their schools and classrooms.

Teachers also told us that inconsistent messages from principals or other school leaders contributed to their uncertainty about how to address these topics in their classrooms. In response to parents’ efforts to remove books about controversial topics from school libraries, especially those with characters of color or characters that identify as LGBTQ, one teacher said that some administrators in their conservative district have sided with parents, while others have been supporting teachers’ choices.

More Preparation on How to Navigate Politicized Issues Could Help Alleviate Principals’ Job-Related Stress

Principals who experienced job-related stress related to politicized issues—and to responding to families’ concerns—were more likely to desire additional preparation on navigating such topics than their counterparts who did not experience such stress. Fifty-four percent of principals who reported that the intrusion of political issues and opinions in their profession was a job-related stressor wanted more preparation about how to navigate family and community concerns about political issues, compared with just 38 percent of principals who did *not* report experiencing this source of job-related stress.

Similarly, principals who reported experiencing job-related stress about responding to the concerns of families about teaching about race, racism, or bias were more likely than principals who did *not* report experiencing this source of job-related stress to express a desire for more preparation on engaging in culturally responsive leadership and developing culturally responsive teachers. They were also more likely to desire more preparation on navigating issues and conversations about race, racism, or bias at their school and navigating family and community concerns about political issues. Roughly 70 percent of principals who reported that responding to the con-

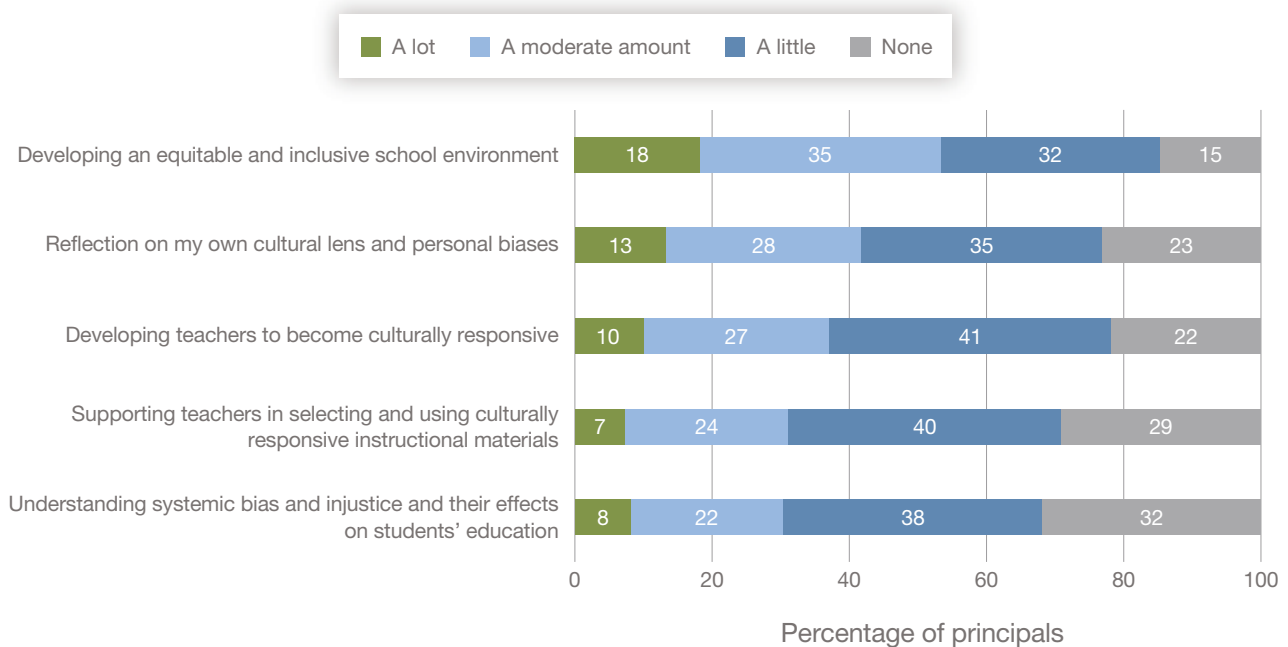
cerns of families about teaching about race, racism, or bias was a job-related stressor desired additional preparation on addressing those topics, compared with 40 to 50 percent of principals who did *not* report experiencing this source of job-related stress. These findings suggest that additional support from principal preparation programs, particularly about how to manage conversations about contentious topics with staff and families and how to engage in culturally responsive leadership, might help principals better manage the stress that they experience from encountering politicized issues in their schools.

Given that many principals have experienced job-related stress as the result of politicized topics, it is unsurprising that about half of principals thought their preparation programs should have spent more time on topics related to engaging in culturally responsive leadership and developing culturally responsive teachers; navigating family and community concerns about political issues; and navigating issues and conversations about race, racism, or

bias at their schools. Very few principals—only 5 to 7 percent—thought their preparation programs should have spent less time on these topics, while the remainder felt that their programs should have spent the same amount of time.

Our data also suggest that topics related to culturally responsive leadership were not a strong focus of principals’ in-service professional learning during the 2021–2022 school year, even though these topics could have supported principals in navigating issues and conversations about race, racism, or bias. Fewer than half of principals reported that their professional learning placed a lot or a moderate amount of emphasis on four of the five topics related to culturally responsive leadership shown in Figure 5. With the exception of just one topic—developing an equitable and inclusive school environment—22 to 32 percent of principals reported that their professional learning did not emphasize any one of the listed topics.

FIGURE 5
Level of Emphasis on Culturally Responsive Leadership in Principals’ Professional Learning



NOTE: This figure shows the percentage of principals who indicated each level of emphasis for each professional learning activity during the 2021–2022 school year. Principals $n = 1,504$.

Principals Considered Their Colleagues to Be the Most Helpful Source of Guidance on Navigating Conversations About Race

We might expect that principals receive guidance from numerous sources to help them navigate these often-contentious issues at their schools. Roughly 80 percent of principals reported that they received guidance from their district or charter management organization (CMO), their supervisors, or their principal colleagues about how to navigate issues and conversations about race, racism, or bias at their school. Seventy-one percent of principals reported receiving guidance from state-level entities, such as their state legislature or state education agency, and 64 percent of principals reported receiving guidance from their professional association.

Yet, principals did not view all sources of guidance as equally helpful. Principals were most likely to find guidance from state entities, such as their state education agency, unhelpful, while they were most likely to consider guidance from their supervisors and especially their principal colleagues as very helpful (Figure 6). Our findings about the extent to which principals found state-level guidance unhelpful could suggest that they disagreed with the substance of that guidance, that they found it difficult to interpret or apply state-level guidance on these topics, or both. Although our survey data do not describe the quality or content of guidance that principals received from these various sources, these findings suggest that principals receive guidance from numerous places, highlighting the importance of ensuring that the guidance that they do receive is clear and rooted in evidence-based or evidence-informed practices. Providing principals with routine opportunities to meet with their peers and supervisors to share lessons learned and strategies for navigating conversations about race, racism, or bias in their schools may be an especially high-leverage strategy not only to provide principals with support that they find useful but also to disseminate such evidence-based practices.

We might expect that principals in states that have passed policies limiting classroom conversations

about racism and other forms of bias might have an even greater need for guidance, given the need to interpret and implement state-level policies in their schools. It is striking, therefore, that nearly one-third of principals in the 14 states that had passed such policies reported that they did not receive any guidance from any state-level entities, such as their legislature or state education agency, on how to navigate such issues. This is somewhat surprising because state legislatures or, less commonly, other state entities, such as state boards of education, were often responsible for passing laws or rules restricting classroom conversations about race, racism, or bias. Principals in states with policies restricting such conversations who did report receiving guidance from their state-level entities were more likely to report that they found state-level guidance unhelpful (45 percent) than principals who were not in a state that had passed policies restricting classroom conversations (38 percent). These results are consistent with media reports that describe the confusion that educators experience when attempting to implement or interpret state laws that contain broad directives without clarifying guidance from the state (Pollock et al., 2022; Lopez, 2021; Cineas, 2021; Belsha, Barnum, and Aldrich, 2021).

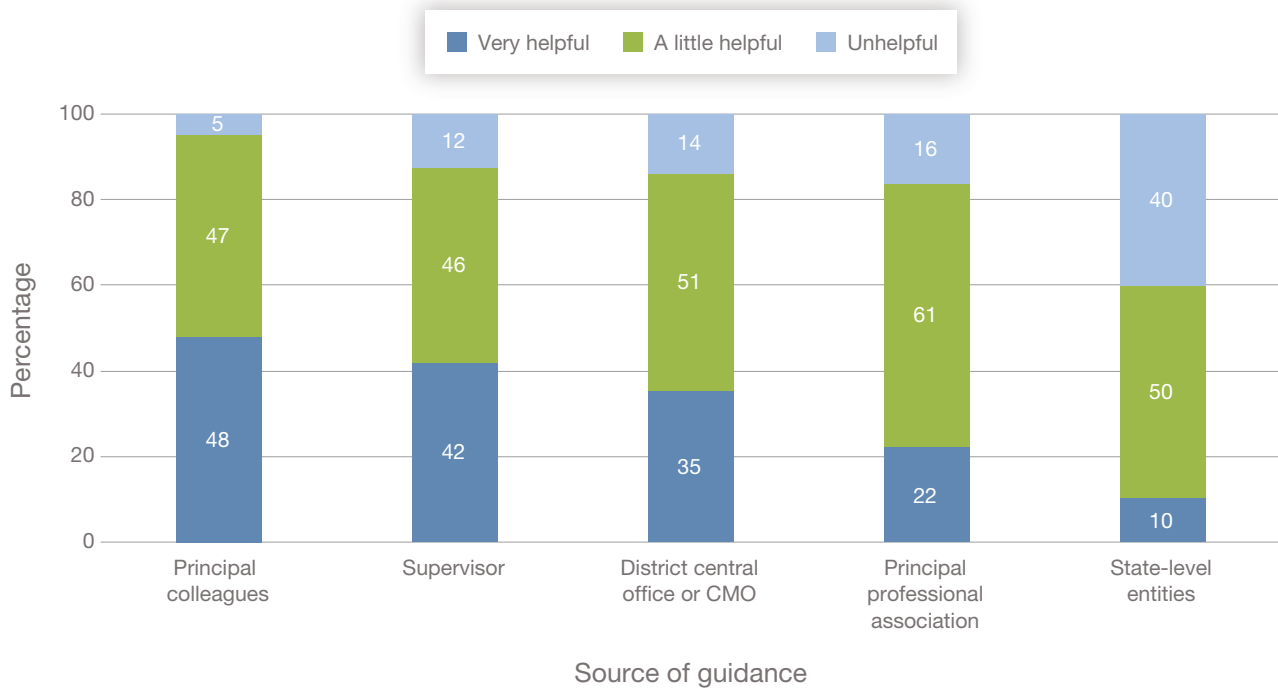
Some Teachers (37 Percent) and 61 Percent of Principals Experienced Harassment Because of Their School's Policies on COVID-19 Safety Measures or for Teaching About Race, Racism, or Bias

Harassment About COVID-19 Safety Policies Was More Common Than Harassment About School Policies for Teaching About Race, Racism, or Bias

Thirty-seven percent of teachers and 61 percent of principals reported experiencing *harassment*, which we defined as experiences of hostility or aggression, related to their school's policies on COVID-19

FIGURE 6

Principals’ Sources of Guidance for Navigating Issues and Conversations About Race, Racism, or Bias



NOTE: This figure shows the percentage of principals indicating whether each source of guidance was very helpful (dark blue), a little helpful (green), or unhelpful (light blue). These percentages represent only principals who reported that they received guidance from the source and exclude principals who reported that they did not receive any guidance from the source, which ranged from 20 to 36 percent of principal respondents, depending on the reported source of guidance. Principals $n = 1,502-1,504$.

mitigation measures or teaching about race, racism, or bias during the first half of the 2021–2022 school year. We refer to these experiences as *harassment about politicized topics*. When considered with our earlier finding that principals are more likely to experience job-related stress as the result of politicized issues, these findings suggest that principals are bearing the brunt of political tensions in their schools. Additionally, only 17 percent of the general population of working adults—and 23 percent of adults who spent the majority of their time working in person rather than remotely—experienced hostility or aggression about COVID-19 policies in their respective workplaces. Although the public-facing and in-person nature of educators’ work could potentially account for this difference, it could also suggest that politicized topics have permeated the

work lives of educators in a way that is distinct from other professions.

Most of the harassment about politicized topics that educators experienced by January 2022 was related to their school’s COVID-19 safety policies. Moreover, of the COVID-19 mitigation policies that we asked about (Figure 7), mask requirements for students and staff were the most commonly cited source of conflict reported by both principals and teachers. Harassment related to other COVID-19 mitigation policies, such as vaccine requirements or bans on safety measures, were relatively rare. However, these results may stem from the relative rareness of such vaccine requirements and bans against mitigation measures. In schools that did have vaccination requirements for students, 39 percent of principals reported harassment related to that vaccination

FIGURE 7

Educators’ Experiences of Harassment About Politicized Topics, by School Policy

	All principals (%)	All teachers (%)
Experienced harassment about politicized topics	61	37
Harassed about any school policy related to COVID-19 mitigation measures	57	32
A requirement that staff and students wear masks	49	28
A ban on requiring students and staff at my school to wear masks	16	8
COVID-19 vaccine requirement for students	14	6
COVID-19 vaccine requirement for staff	13	8
A ban on requiring COVID-19 vaccines for students and staff	6	4
Harassed about any school policy related to teaching about race, racism, or bias	27	14
Teaching about race, racism, or bias	23	11
Not teaching about race, racism, or bias	7	3
A ban on teaching about race, racism, or bias	4	3

NOTE: This figure shows the percentage of principals and teachers who reported that they experienced harassment about politicized topics, defined as hostility or aggression about any of the school policies listed. This figure also shows the percentage of principals and teachers who experienced hostility or aggression about each of the school policies listed related to COVID-19 safety measures or teaching about race, racism, or bias. Principals $n = 1,522-1,523$; teachers $n = 2,334-2,336$. Lighter shading indicates lower values across the grid, while darker shading indicates higher values across the grid.

requirement. These results suggest that, should these policies become more prevalent, harassment related to these policies might also become more prevalent, highlighting the need for schools and districts to provide teachers and principals with training on how to diffuse potentially tense conversations and proactively build systems to promote productive discourse among educators and families.

Hostility or aggression related to school policies for teaching about race, racism, or bias were reportedly less common at the time of our surveys. We asked educators whether they had experienced hostility or aggression about school policies or practices for *teaching* about race, racism, or bias; for *not teaching* about race, racism, or bias; or for a *ban* on teaching about race, racism, or bias. This allowed us to determine whether educators experienced harassment as the result of teaching about such topics or as the result of omitting these topics from classroom instruction. For both teachers and principals, most of this harassment arose from school policies for

teaching about race, racism, or bias rather than either a *ban* on teaching about such topics or *not teaching* about such topics.

Educators Serving Schools with Predominantly White Students, ELA and Social Studies Teachers, and Teachers with Fewer Years of Experience Were More Likely Than Their Counterparts to Experience Harassment About Politicized Topics

Our data suggest that educators in some contexts are even more likely than their counterparts in other contexts to experience harassment about politicized topics. Harassment about politicized topics was more commonly reported by principals working in schools with predominantly White students than principals working in schools with predominantly students of color.¹³ Principals serving schools with a majority of White students were

also more likely to report experiences of harassment related to teaching about race, racism, or bias than principals serving schools with a majority of students of color. This finding is especially important given that teaching White students about racism can help them develop more-positive attitudes toward historically marginalized groups (Hughes, Bigler, and Levy, 2007).

Teachers' reports of harassment related to school policies for teaching about race, racism, or bias differed depending on their main teaching assignment, suggesting again that the politicization of conversations about racism and bias may be more salient for teachers of subjects where such conversations are more likely to arise: Roughly 20 percent of social studies and ELA teachers reported that they were harassed about policies for teaching about race, racism, or bias, compared with 10 percent of elementary teachers and 6 percent of math teachers.¹⁴

Finally, teachers with fewer years of experience were more likely than veteran teachers to experience harassment about politicized topics. Forty-four percent of teachers with one to five years of experience and 41 percent of teachers with six to ten years of experience reported experiencing harassment about politicized topics, compared with 33 percent of teachers with 21 or more years of experience, which suggests that less-experienced teachers may especially be struggling with harassment about politicized topics.¹⁵ During our interviews, a few veteran teachers expressed that they felt deeply embedded and respected in their communities because they had served in their communities for so long. It is possible that these strong relationships within their communities—which younger teachers or teachers newer to their school communities may still be developing—could have shielded more-experienced teachers from harassment.

Students' Parents or Family Members Were the Most Common Source of Harassment About Politicized Topics

Looking across teachers' and principals' survey responses, we found that students' family members were generally the most commonly cited source of

harassment about politicized topics (Figure 8). A few interviewed teachers shared specific instances in which they witnessed hostility or aggression directed toward another staff member or experienced hostility or aggression themselves because of issues related to COVID-19 mitigation in schools, such as disputes about masking or policies requiring students to be sent home when they are sick. A few other teachers described instances in which parents objected to having a student group for students of color or certain books in the library that featured people of color or characters who identify as LGBTQ, although teachers also noted that some of these disputes took place at the district level rather than at the school level.

Our interviews with teachers suggest that parents' beliefs about COVID-19 safety policies and the extent to which parents agreed with school and district personnel may have contributed to tension within the school or district. As one teacher explained, once mask mandates were lifted, district officials had "to walk a fine line of not upsetting the community regardless of what their opinions were." However, although students' parents and family members were reportedly the most common source of harassment about politicized topics, the surveys did not ask how many people were involved in these incidents. It is likely that not all students' parents and family members engaged in this type of behavior. In addition, we did not ask about whether experiences of harassment were single events or part of a more organized effort (Harris and Alter, 2022a).

It is notable that a relatively high percentage of principals—from 25 to 40 percent—stated that they did not know the views of their students' parents toward various politicized issues, such as school policies related to COVID-19 safety measures or for teaching about race, racism, or bias. This suggests a potential need to support principals in better understanding parental sentiment on these important and divisive topics, especially given the influence that parents could have over school and district policies, the potential for conflict when they oppose school policies (Pollock et al., 2022; Koenig, 2021), and the importance of ensuring parent engagement within schools (Jeynes, 2007; Wilder, 2014; Smith et al., 2022).

FIGURE 8

Sources of Harassment About Politicized Topics, by School Policy

Principal-reported source of harassment						
School policy	District administrators (%)	School staff or teachers (%)	Students (%)	Students' parents or family members (%)	Individuals outside of my school community (%)	Number of principals who reported harassment about each policy
A requirement that staff and students wear masks	7	28	29	94	39	719
COVID-19 vaccine requirement for students	6	19	13	91	40	215
A ban on requiring students and staff at my school to wear masks	5	34	19	87	38	232
A ban on requiring COVID-19 vaccines for students and staff	7	36	18	80	48	95
COVID-19 vaccine requirement for staff	5	75	7	48	34	199
Teaching about race, racism, or bias	5	15	7	86	49	345
Not teaching about race, racism, or bias	11	32	20	82	46	98
A ban on teaching about race, racism, or bias	6	24	12	80	64	61

Teacher-reported source of harassment						
School policy	School administrators (%)	Other school staff or teachers (%)	Students (%)	Students' parents or family members (%)	Individuals outside of my school community (%)	Number of teachers who reported harassment about each policy
A ban on requiring students and staff at my school to wear masks	4	25	23	66	63	180
COVID-19 vaccine requirement for students	6	21	19	61	54	172
A requirement that staff and students wear masks	10	20	34	58	55	632
A ban on requiring COVID-19 vaccines for students and staff	10	39	20	54	63	95
COVID-19 vaccine requirement for staff	10	49	4	30	52	222
Teaching about race, racism, or bias	8	11	10	54	67	241
Not teaching about race, racism, or bias	17	28	18	48	66	76
A ban on teaching about race, racism, or bias	18	13	4	29	72	66

NOTE: This figure shows the percentage of teachers and principals who reported each source of hostility or aggression related to each of the school policies shown. These percentages only include educators who reported experiencing harassment related to each of the school policies. Across the grid, lighter shading indicates lower values, while darker shading indicates higher values.

Our interviews with teachers suggest that the pandemic may have disrupted educators' ability to build relationships with the families that they serve—relationships that, under ordinary circumstances, may have checked harassment against educators. A few teachers spoke of how COVID-19 and school mitigation policies created an environment where mistrust and misunderstanding between students, parents, and staff were perhaps more common than in the past. As one teacher explained, “Ever since COVID hit, parents have not been allowed in the building. I feel like it has actually put a pretty big divide between parents and teachers. . . . You don't know the parents as well, so . . . you don't have the rapport like you used to.”

Individuals outside the school community were another frequent source of harassment about politicized topics. During our interviews, a few teachers spoke about feeling disrespected by the media; comments posted online; or during casual interactions with community members outside school hours, especially those related to school policies for remote learning or quarantines. One teacher told us, “There's a lot of teacher bashing [online]. People saying that teachers are overpaid and glorified babysitters and they complain too much about going into work during the pandemic because there's nothing to be afraid of.”

Politicization Has Consequences for Instruction and School Climate

One-Quarter of Teachers Have Been Directed to Limit Classroom Conversations About Political and Social Issues

To gauge how the political environment has affected teachers' instructional practices, we asked teachers whether they have been directed by their school or district leaders to limit discussions about political and social issues in class. Twenty-four percent of teachers reported that they had been directed to limit such conversations, while 68 percent of teachers reported that they had not received such direction and 8 percent did not know.

District officials had “to walk a fine line of not upsetting the community regardless of what their opinions were.”

— Teacher

During our interviews, a few teachers raised concerns about not being allowed to adjust their curriculum to include more voices of color, having to check their content against district-wide policies on critical race theory, or navigating state-level legislation related to critical race theory. As one teacher explained, “I have had parents come in and say, ‘If this is what you're going to teach, my student doesn't need to know about this. . . . [T]hen [the principal] will say, ‘I don't really think this is a good topic.’”

Directives to limit classroom conversations about political and social issues were not confined to the 14 states that had enacted state-level restrictions on classroom conversations about racism, sexism, and other contentious topics. Thirty-one percent of teachers in such states reported that they had been directed by their school or district leaders to limit classroom discussions about political and social issues, compared with 21 percent of teachers in states that had not passed such restrictions.

Teachers of color working in schools with mostly other teachers of color or mostly students of color were less likely to report that they had been directed to limit such classroom conversations than their counterparts working in schools with fewer teachers of color and students of color. These results suggest that teachers of color who work with mostly other teachers of color or students of color may experience working environments that support classroom conversations about political and social issues as critical and valuable to student learning. It's also possible that they might interact with parents who find such conversations less objectionable.

These directives to limit classroom discussion about certain politicized topics may be sowing confusion among teachers. Fifty-six percent of teachers who have been asked to limit classroom discussions reported completely or somewhat insufficient guidance to navigate conversations about race, racism, or bias in their classrooms, compared with 38 percent of teachers who reported that they have not been asked to limit their classroom discussions of politicized topics.¹⁶ Echoing prior research (Pollock et al., 2022), this finding suggests that teachers may not clearly understand what is or is not allowed or how to carry out instruction within the confines of these directives.

Educators Who Experienced Harassment About Politicized Topics Had Lower Levels of Well-Being and Worse Perceptions of Their School Climate

In our first report in this series, we found that teachers and principals who reported experiencing harassment about school policies for COVID-19 safety measures or for teaching about race, racism, or bias were more likely to experience burnout, frequent job-related stress, symptoms of depression, and difficulty coping with their job-related stress (Steiner et al., 2022).

Harassment can have consequences for school climate and the extent to which educators feel safe and a sense of belonging in their workplaces. Principals who experienced harassment about either of the two politicized topics on which we focused were twice as likely as principals who did not experience any such harassment to report that they sometimes or often feared for their own physical safety at school (16 percent versus 8 percent). We observed a similar pattern among teachers.

Prior research demonstrates that teachers of color are more likely than their White counterparts to engage in anti-bias topics in their classrooms, which focus on such issues as supporting students' development of their social identities, fostering comfort with diversity, and helping students understand systemic inequities. This was, in part, because teachers of color sometimes felt underrepresented

in their own experiences as students (Woo et al., 2022). Therefore, experiences of hostility or confrontation related to conversations that educators of color consider important might reduce the sense of belonging that these educators feel in their schools and districts. Indeed, we found that 43 percent of teachers who experienced harassment related to school policies for teaching about race, racism, or bias felt that their school did not cultivate a sense of belonging for teachers of color or only to a small extent, compared with 26 percent of teachers who did not experience such harassment. Similarly, principals who experienced harassment about policies for teaching about race, racism, or bias were more likely than their counterparts who did not experience such harassment to report that their district did not cultivate a sense of belonging for school leaders of color, or did so only to a small extent (39 percent versus 29 percent).

Harassment About Politicized Topics Was Linked to Principals' Intentions to Leave Their Jobs

Given the consequences that harassment about politicized topics has on educators' sense of individual well-being and perceptions about their school or district climate, the politicization of schooling and the ensuing conflict and strife could play a role in educators' decisions about whether to stay in their jobs. Educators who experienced harassment related to COVID-19 school policies were more likely to report that they intended to leave their jobs than those who did not (Steiner et al., 2022). Among principals who reported that they were considering leaving their jobs, regardless of whether they had experienced harassment about politicized topics or not, 37 percent reported that the politicization of their profession was one of their top three reasons for doing so. However, principals who experienced harassment about politicized topics were even *more* likely to report that the politicization of their jobs was one of their top three reasons for considering leaving their jobs (42 percent of principals who experienced harassment about politicized topics versus 27 percent of principals who did not). We observed a similar pattern among teachers, but the difference was not statistically significant.

Political discord can have profound consequences on teachers' work experiences and the instruction that students receive.

Implications

Politicized topics, and the tensions that arise with them, are a feature of American life and of U.S. public education, although exactly which topics are most contentious may change over time. In the 2021–2022 school year, COVID-19 safety measures and teaching about race, racism, or bias were two among many politically contentious topics in the national discourse. Although conflict surrounding the implementation of COVID-19 safety measures may be more or less salient depending on local case rates and public health guidance, centuries-old racial tensions in the United States suggest that the contentious nature of conversations about racism and bias is likely to endure.

However, we know that these are not the only politicized issues with which educators are grappling. Since the administration of our surveys in January 2022, other highly politicized issues have emerged, such as debates about the place of social and emotional learning in academic instruction (Goldstein, 2022), the role that teachers play in helping students understand and navigate issues around gender and sexual identity (Belsha, 2022; Blume and Gomez, 2022), and policies to prevent gun violence in schools (Pierre and Turner, 2022). Educators should be equipped with the tools to create school climates that promote healthy and productive discourse while nimbly responding to emergent political tensions and maintaining high-quality instruction and safe and affirming environments for students—all of which may take significant time, resources, and effort to achieve.

Although politicized topics are more contested in some school settings and geographic areas than in others, our survey results suggest that educators' beliefs about how schools should manage politicized issues vary within all kinds of school communities. Even though the majority of surveyed educa-

tors appeared to agree on politicized issues, such as states' and districts' ability to mandate school requirements for COVID-19 safety measures and the notion that there should *not* be legal limits on classroom conversations about racism, sexism, and other contentious topics, there was less consensus among educators in suburban and rural schools than in urban schools. Teacher interview participants shared stories of disagreements among school staff and between families and educators at all levels—from teachers, to district personnel, to school board members. Such political discord can have profound consequences on teachers' work experiences and the instruction that students receive.

These consequences include job-related stress about the intrusion of politicized topics into education. Educators experienced this stress for a multitude of reasons: They found themselves having to navigate constantly changing policy environments; implement policies that they found unclear or difficult to implement; and reconcile different political beliefs held by the many stakeholders in their school environment, including their fellow staff, administrators, students, families, community members, and themselves. Data from both our interviews and surveys suggest that educators need more guidance or support from their in-service professional learning and their pre-service preparation programs to manage politicized issues in their schools and classrooms. This is especially true for principals, who are more likely than teachers to experience job-related stress as the result of the intrusion of politics into their profession and more likely to experience harassment about politicized topics. Thus, principals appear to be bearing the brunt of political polarization in schools.

Another consequence of political discord in education is that teachers can be asked to change what and how they teach, sometimes in ways that entail fundamental shifts to their instruction. About a quarter of teachers said that they had been directed to restrict their classroom conversations about social and political issues; this was true even in states that have not passed any policies requiring educators to do so. Even more sobering are the instances in which political tension spilled into aggression and hostility toward educators. These experiences are especially concerning because educators who experienced harassment about politicized topics reported lower levels of well-being and poorer perceptions of their school or district climate. Tellingly, principals who experienced harassment about politicized topics were more likely to select the politicization of their profession as a top reason for considering leaving their jobs. Together, these challenges can have negative consequences for student learning (Pace, Soto-Shed, and Washington, 2022).

The recommendations that follow extend beyond navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and conversations about racism, sexism, and other contentious topics. Our intent is to help educators and school systems navigate new and existing politically divisive topics in education; these suggestions are both (1) proactive, in that they can potentially temper or apply checks against tension and disagreement; and (2) reactive, in that they intend to equip educators with the tools to manage tensions that have the potential to become conflicts. Our recommendations aim to support policymakers and education leaders in providing a supportive, cohesive learning environment for students. This involves ensuring that educators have the tools and strategies to engage in productive dialogue, minimize discord,

and build a school community resilient enough to withstand political tumult.

Recommendations

Provide Training and Resources to Help Principals and Teachers Communicate Effectively and Manage Conflict About Contentious Topics

Educators should be equipped with the skills and resources to manage differences in opinion—among their colleagues, with students’ family members, and with members of the broader community—in ways that foster fruitful dialogue. Our data suggest that principals, in particular, could benefit from these skills and resources.

Skills such as conflict management and effective communication about controversial topics might be particularly useful to educators. Managing people is a core school leadership skill (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay, 2021), and effective communication and conflict management are both essential people management skills. To better manage and respond to conflict, school leaders and teachers might consider extending their use of restorative practices, which are already commonly used in schools. Restorative practices allow individuals who have engaged in conflict to express their perspectives, come to a mutual understanding, and take the steps necessary to repair harm and relationships (Whitehead, 2020; Fronius et al., 2019). These practices could also be used to mend and strengthen relationships among school staff and between families and school staff. Although building a school culture that is conducive to the use of restorative practices can require significant time and effort, as well as fundamental shifts in adult rela-

Improving communication and providing positive touchpoints between educators and families are important steps in helping schools navigate the current political environment.

tionships, such an investment could be worthwhile to build relationships that are resilient to stressful and tumultuous events.

Principals are often in the position of enacting policies passed at district and state levels in their schools. Educator preparation programs and in-service professional learning are logical starting points for building the competencies that would support principals in providing clear, consistent messages to staff and families and in navigating politicized issues.

District leaders might also consider providing other resources, such as sample communication materials, to principals. Such materials could help principals support consistent messaging across schools within a district and relieve principals from the burden of reinventing the wheel in their communications with staff and families. District leaders could also consider routinely convening principals for peer-to-peer learning to share experiences, lessons learned, and best practices on how to navigate politicized issues in their buildings.

Given that many principals find state-level guidance unhelpful, districts might also consider how they can support principals in interpreting state-level guidance. This is especially important when principals are in the position of enacting state-level policies. When principals do not clearly understand their state's policies and requirements, they may face challenges in communicating the purpose of implementing such policies to teachers and families, which could create stress or conflict. Districts might consider issuing their own guidance about how to interpret and implement state-level policies in the district context, while taking care to ensure that district policy stems from evidence-based practices for creating inclusive, affirming learning environments for all students and especially for students who have been historically marginalized.

Developing effective communication and conflict management skills is likely to take time. To address the immediate consequences of politicization in schooling, district leaders might consider how they can support educators' mental health, especially given evidence that harassment about politicized topics is linked to lower levels of well-being (Steiner et al., 2022).

Build Systems to Promote Understanding Between Educators and Parents and Engage Families in Decisionmaking

COVID-19 fundamentally altered how schools engaged with parents and families, creating an environment where in-person interactions—and, therefore, in-person opportunities to build rapport and relationships with families—were less frequent. Even though educators reported that students' family members were often the source of hostility or aggression about the two politicized topics that we focused on in this report, in many schools, principals were not sure what parents thought about their school's COVID-19 mitigation policies or their practices for teaching about race, racism, or bias. Taken together, these findings underscore an opportunity to strengthen school-family relationships.

School and district leaders should consider how they can engage parents and families, re-establish trust, and channel politicized conflict into productive conversations about student well-being and learning. This might involve creating meaningful opportunities to engage families as partners, identify shared goals, and exchange feedback (Mapp and Kuttner, 2013; Winthrop, 2022). Research shows that schools can improve relationships between educators and families by providing opportunities for educators and family members to engage in activities such as collaborative problem solving, teacher home visits, and school-facilitated relationship-building exercises (Smith et al., 2022). Leaders could draw on numerous existing resources to inform their approach (for examples, see Bodenhausen and Birge, 2017; Mapp and Kuttner, 2013; Winthrop et al., 2021; and Jacques and Villegas, 2018). Improving communication and providing positive touchpoints between educators and families are important steps in helping schools navigate the current political environment because, as we hypothesize, families who have strong relationships with their children's teachers and schools might be less likely to engage them in a hostile or aggressive manner. Indeed, strong engagement with parents is associated with greater job satisfaction among teachers (Markow and Pieters, 2012) and positively contributes to school climate (Darling-

Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013; Baker et al., 2016).

There is no universal approach to improving relationships between schools and families (Posey-Maddox and Haley-Lock, 2020). Every school is different, and the barriers that schools and families face to engagement (e.g., poor communication, language barriers, parents' perceptions of an unwelcoming environment, teachers' attitudes toward parents, work constraints, lack of childcare) depend on context (Baker et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2022). Whatever approach school leaders select should be informed by the needs and strengths of the populations that they serve (Smith et al., 2022; Posey-Maddox and Haley-Lock, 2020).

Clarify the Purpose of Classroom Conversations About Race, Racism, or Bias; Develop Educator Mindsets; and Provide Clear, Content-Specific Guidance

More support to have productive conversations about race, racism, and other forms of bias with school staff, students, and parents could help improve educators' well-being. Our data suggest that clarifying the purpose behind classroom conversations about race, racism, or bias, developing educator mindsets, and providing content-specific guidance might be useful entry points for such conversations in local communities, where educators can leverage existing relationships to create openings for productive conversations.

Educators' beliefs regarding the existence of systemic racism—which vary in all communities—may influence their views on school- or district-level initiatives related to creating equitable and inclusive school environments and how they approach instruction, especially for students of color. Our teacher interviews suggest that the purpose and goals of discussions about race, racism, and other forms of bias could be communicated more clearly to highlight the benefits of creating safe and affirming learning environments for all students and especially for students who have historically been marginalized and underrepresented in mainstream schooling. Educators and

policymakers might also consider highlighting the research evidence that emphasizes the importance of ensuring that students feel valued and have a sense of belonging in order to create an environment conducive to learning, as well as the link between culturally responsive practices and student engagement in learning, greater student self-efficacy, and other positive academic and behavioral outcomes, such as increased attendance (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Dee and Penner, 2017; Aronson and Laughter, 2016). Providing greater clarity about the purpose and benefits of conversations about race, racism, or bias to educators could then support clear messaging to families and community members.

Educator preparation programs might consider the integration of concepts about racial and systemic injustice to support the development of educator mindsets. In addition, district leaders might recognize that educators' mindsets about racial equity are likely to be in different phases of development, requiring a tailored approach for further development. Thus, leaders should consider collecting data on where their local educators are in their development and provide professional learning that meets educators where they are. Educators of color, and particularly Black or African American educators, are especially likely to believe in the existence of systemic racism, so listening to and elevating their voices and perspectives in discourse about systemic racism and its impacts on students could be especially valuable and illuminating.

Finally, district and school leaders should focus on supporting social studies teachers and ELA teachers—whose classroom subjects most naturally touch on the topics of race and bias—with clear guidance about state and local policies and strategies for communicating about their instructional content with students' family members. To the extent possible, district and school leaders should ensure that their guidance to teachers is rooted in best practices and evidence-based strategies to support student learning. Clarity around school policy and the support of district and school leaders could also provide teachers who experience harassment about politicized topics with recourse or a buffer against such harassment when it occurs.

Notes

¹ Because this is the second report in a series of three based on SoT and SoP survey findings, we have recycled some text from the first report to describe our methods (Steiner et al, 2022).

² Some were laws passed by state legislatures and some were executive orders, rules promulgated by state boards of education, or opinions issued by state attorneys general.

³ We examined teacher and principal survey responses for differences by the following respondent characteristics: gender (male or female) and race and ethnicity (White; Black or African American; Hispanic or Latinx; Asian American, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander; other race or ethnicity; and person of color, which we defined as anyone who did not identify exclusively as White). In addition, for teachers, we examined survey responses for difference by subject (math, science, English language arts [ELA], and social studies) and the following school characteristics: locale (urban; suburban; town/rural, which we abbreviate throughout as *rural*); proportion of students eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch; proportion of students identifying as White or people of color; and state (those that have enacted restrictions on classroom conversations about race, racism, or bias). As of the administration of these surveys, such states included Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Virginia.

⁴ We acknowledge that there are other ways in which political polarization has seeped into classrooms; for instance, in our interviews, teachers spoke about navigating conversations about gender identity, centralized control over curriculum, and the perception in the media that school closures meant teachers were not working. Therefore, when we asked teachers about the intrusion of political issues and opinions into their professions, they could have responded with other politicized topics in mind beyond the two that we focus on in this report.

⁵ The difference between White educators and educators of color remained statistically significant for principals but not for teachers after we controlled for school- and educator-level characteristics.

⁶ In our discussion of survey findings, we use the term *predominantly* to indicate that a school's student population consists of at least 75 percent of students of color or White students. We use *mostly* to indicate that a school's student population consists of at least a majority of students of color or White students (i.e., more than 50 percent).

⁷ Teachers were asked to name their *main teaching assignment* during the 2021–2022 school year, defined as the subject of most classes that they teach, and teachers were able to select from elementary education, ELA, math and computer science, natural sciences, and social sciences, among other subjects. Most teachers who selected elementary education as their main teaching assignment taught grades K–5. Most teachers selecting ELA, math, science, and social studies as their main teaching assignment were secondary teachers. Forty-seven percent of ELA teachers reported that the intrusion of political issues and opinions into teaching was a job-related stressor, compared with 38 percent of elementary education teachers, 42 percent of math teachers, 37 percent of science teachers, and 30 percent of social studies teachers. Only the differences between ELA teachers and

elementary teachers and between ELA teachers and social studies teachers were statistically significant.

⁸ At the time of our surveys, in January 2022, most teachers and principals reported that COVID-19 mask-wearing or vaccination policies were in place at their schools. Bans against mitigation measures were relatively uncommon. Roughly two-thirds of teachers and principals reported mask requirements for students, staff, or both; fewer—roughly 20 percent—reported vaccine requirements. Bans against masking requirements were reported by roughly 10 percent of principals and teachers. Less than 25 percent of educators reported that their schools had bans against vaccine requirements.

⁹ Thirteen percent of teachers and 14 percent of principals reported that they were not sure whether schools and districts should have legal limits on their ability to mandate mask wearing, vaccination, or other COVID-19 safety measures. Ten percent of teachers and principals reported that they were not sure about whether states and districts should be allowed to mandate requirements for masks, vaccines, or other COVID-19–related safety measures.

¹⁰ In comparison, 64 percent of science teachers, 56 percent of ELA teachers, 48 percent of math teachers, and 46 percent of elementary teachers opposed legal limits on such classroom conversations. Differences between social studies teachers and ELA, elementary, and math teachers were statistically significant, whereas the difference between social studies teachers and science teachers was not statistically significant.

¹¹ There were no significant differences among teachers of core subjects (social studies, math, ELA, science, and elementary education) in terms of the proportion of teachers reporting that they support legal limits on classroom conversations about racism, sexism, and other topics some people disagree about. However, elementary education and math teachers were more likely than science and social studies teachers to report that they were not sure, and ELA teachers were more likely than social studies teachers to report that they were not sure. After controlling for educator-level and school-level characteristics, math, ELA, and elementary education teachers were still more likely than social studies teachers, and math teachers were still more likely than science teachers, to report that they were not sure about whether there should be legal limits on such classroom conversations.

¹² This analysis excludes teachers who reported that they did not have a need for resources, supports, or guidance to help them navigate the COVID-19 pandemic in their classroom, which accounts for only 5 percent of teachers.

¹³ We observed a similar pattern among teachers, but the difference was not statistically significant.

¹⁴ The differences between math versus ELA teachers and social studies versus math teachers remained statistically significant after controlling for school- and educator-level characteristics but not for ELA versus elementary teachers and social studies versus elementary teachers.

¹⁵ The differences among the following teacher subgroups were significant: teachers with six to ten years of experience versus teachers with 21 or more years of experience and teachers with 11 to 20 years of experience versus teachers with 21 or more years of experience. The differences between *novice* teachers (i.e.,

teachers with five or fewer years of experience) and other teacher subgroups may not be significant because of small sample sizes; only 5 percent of our sample falls into this category. We did not observe this same pattern among principals.

¹⁶ This analysis excluded teachers who reported that they did not have a need for resources, supports, or guidance to help them navigate conversations about race, racism, or bias in their classroom, which accounted for 17 percent of teachers.

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About This Report

In this report, we draw on January 2022 surveys of teachers from the American Teacher Panel (ATP) and surveys of principals from the American School Leader Panel (ASLP). The ATP is a nationally representative sample of over 22,000 teachers across the United States. The ASLP is a nationally representative sample of over 8,000 principals from across the United States. The ATP and ASLP are two of three survey panels that comprise the American Educator Panels (AEP), which are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country. For more information about any one of the survey panels, visit www.rand.org/aep.

For technical information about the surveys and the analysis presented in this report, please see *State of the American Teacher and State of the American Principal Surveys: 2022 Technical Documentation and Survey Results* (RR-A1108-3, www.rand.org/t/RR-A1108-3). If you are interested in using AEP data for your own surveys or analysis or in reading other AEP-related publications, please email aep@rand.org or visit www.rand.org/aep.

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