Reaching toward recovery
Fall 2021 survey of teachers and administrators

By Thomas Arnett

In partnership with Bay View Analytics

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Study details

Since its founding in 2008, the Clayton Christensen Institute has tracked the adoption of online learning across a range of applications. Beginning in the fall of 2020, the Institute undertook a two-year series of nationally representative surveys to make sense of online learning adoption and practice in the wake of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

These factsheets share insights from the most recent round of surveys, which collected responses in October of 2021 from 1,074 respondents (389 K–12 administrators representing 345 school systems from 49 states plus the District of Columbia, and 685 K–12 teachers representing 511 school systems from 49 states plus the District of Columbia).

K–12 education is rebounding from the pandemic

Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimages

Schools are back to in-person instruction

Which arrangement have you used most often this school year?

Spring 2021
- In-person instruction: 34%
- Remote instruction: 33%
- Hybrid instruction: 32%

Fall 2021
- In-person instruction: 96%

Legend:
- In-person instruction
- Remote instruction
- Hybrid instruction
- Other
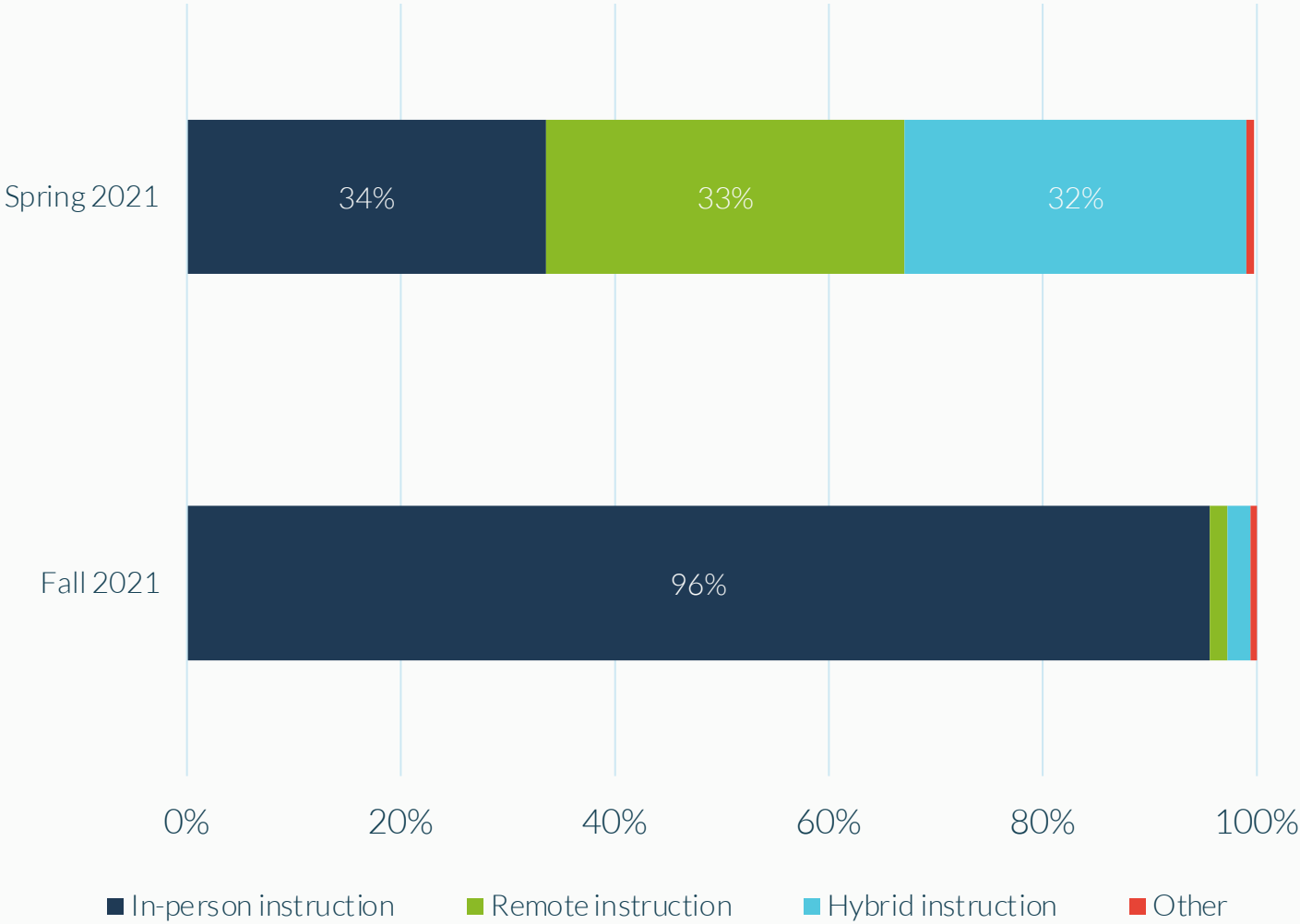
The current school day and schedule follow pre-COVID norms

Students' days at school per week

Days	Percentage
3	0%
4	2%
5	97%
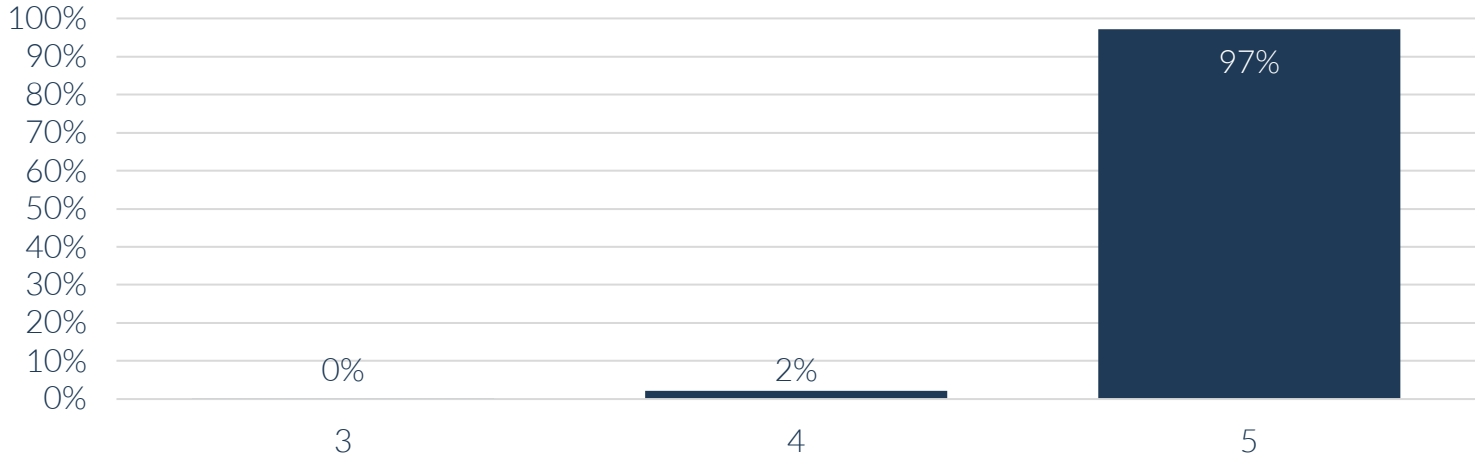
Students' hours at school per day

Hours	Percentage
1	2%
2	0%
3	0%
4	3%
5	12%
6	37%
7	33%
8	12%
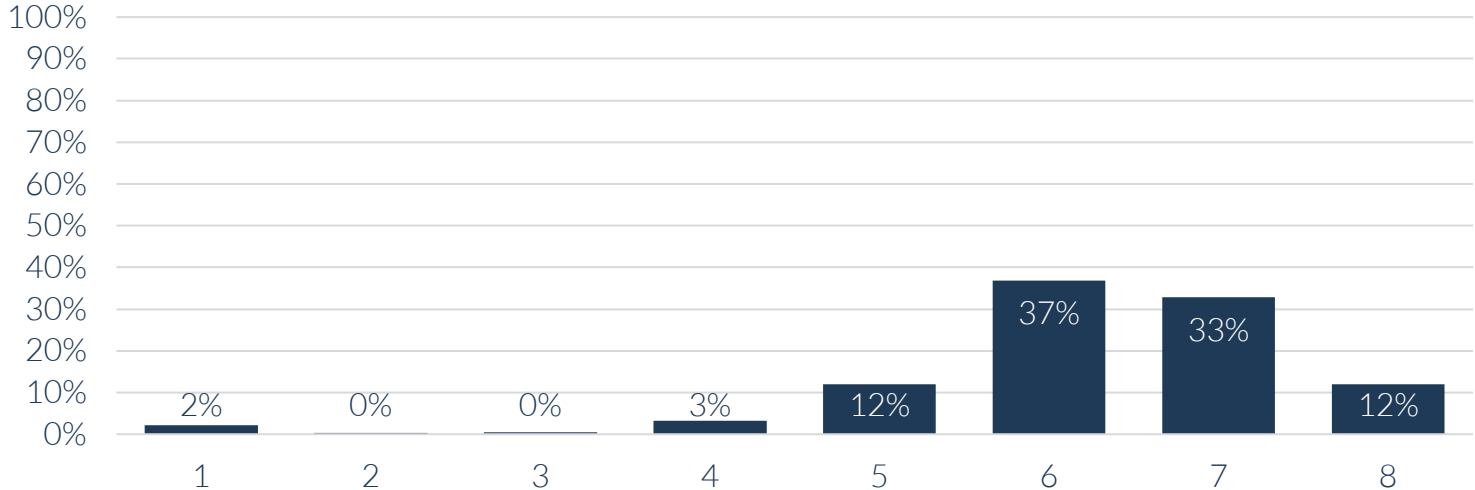
Instruction is mostly single-paced and synchronous

How do students progress in their classes?

- All at the same pace
- Their own pace within each lesson
- Their own pace within each unit
- Other
- Their own pace through the entire course

71%
17%
7%
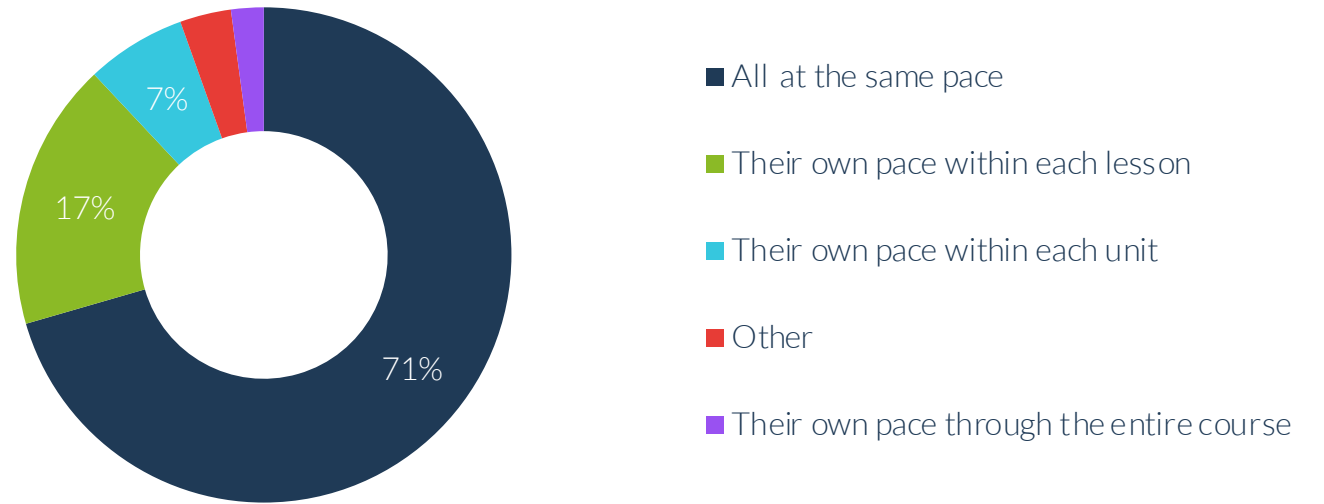
Synchronous vs. asynchronous instruction

Percentage of teachers

80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%

73% 6% 5% 1% 1% 1% 1% 1% 3% 8%

Fully synchronous   Fully asynchronous
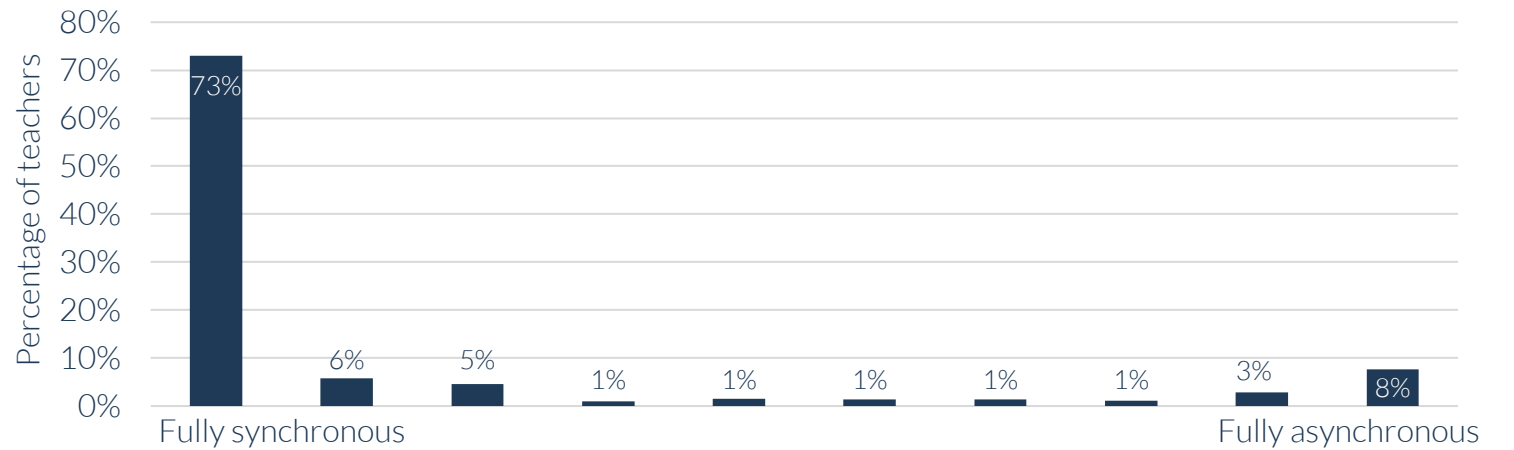
These are challenging times for teachers

Teachers report that their students are behind academically

How did your students' academic preparedness at the start of this school year compare to a typical pre-pandemic year?

■ Ahead ■ Slightly ahead ■ On track ■ Slightly behind ■ Behind

80% behind

	16%	34%	46%

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%
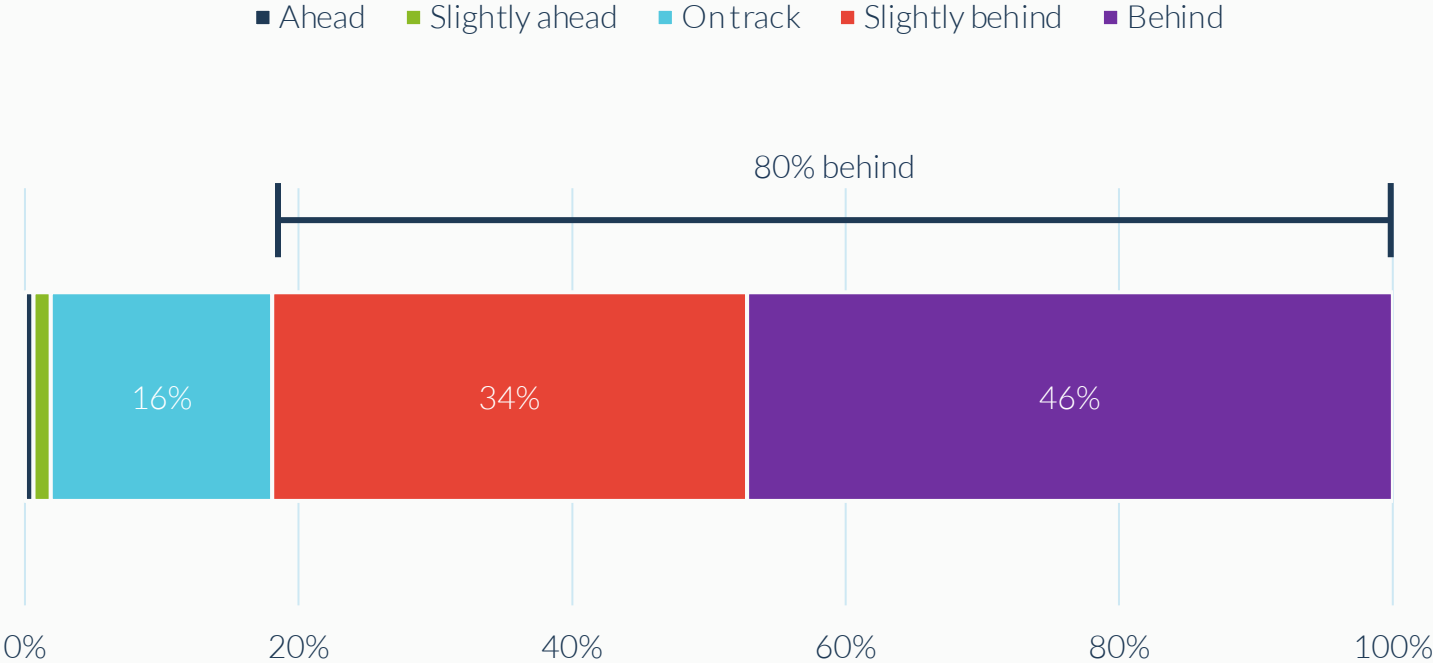
Teachers' workloads are demanding

Weekly total work hours

Range	Percentage
0-20	4%
21-40	16%
41 to 60	39%
61 to 80	21%
81 to 100	11%
101+	10%

78% disagree

I have very little work-related stress: 40% Strongly disagree, 38% Disagree, 10% Neutral, 10% Agree

52% disagree

My workload is sustainable: 19% Strongly disagree, 33% Disagree, 19% Neutral, 24% Agree

Legend: ■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree
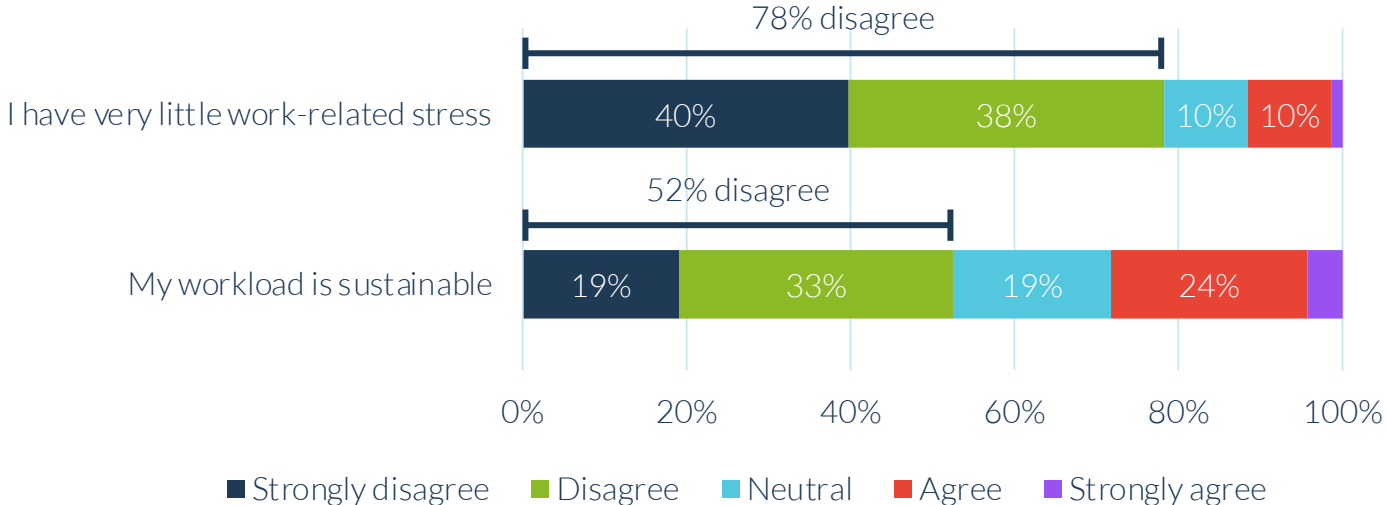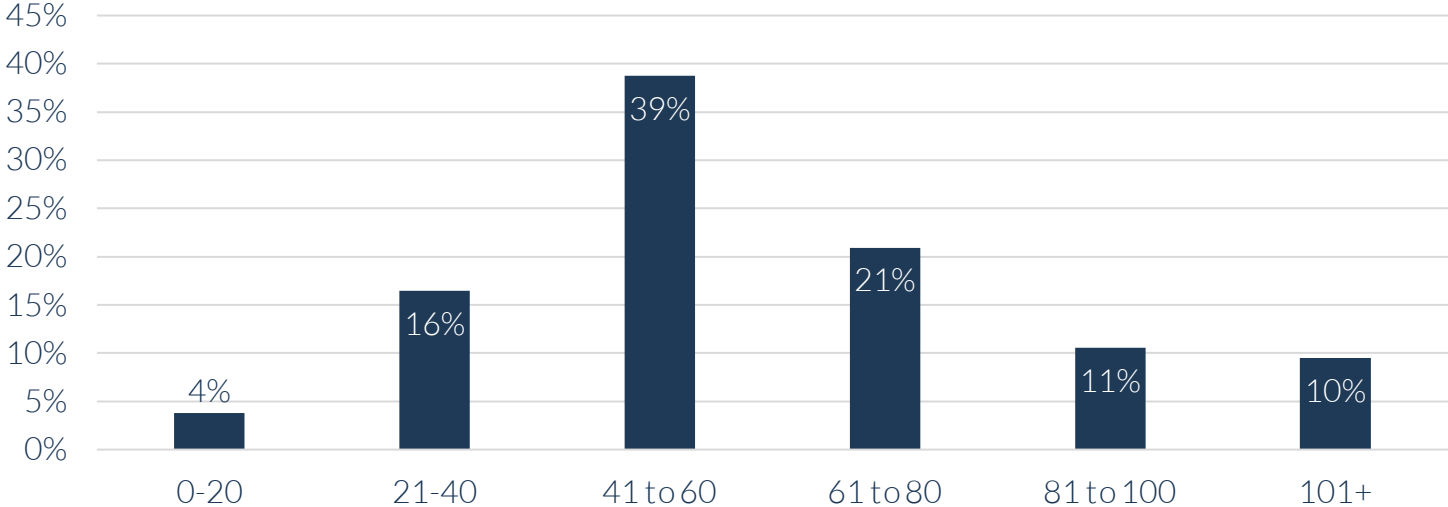
For teachers, difficulties with managing remote and hybrid instruction have subsided, but supporting students is a major challenge now that schools are in-person again

What have been your biggest challenges this academic year?*
(select all that apply)

■ Spring 2021
■ Fall 2021

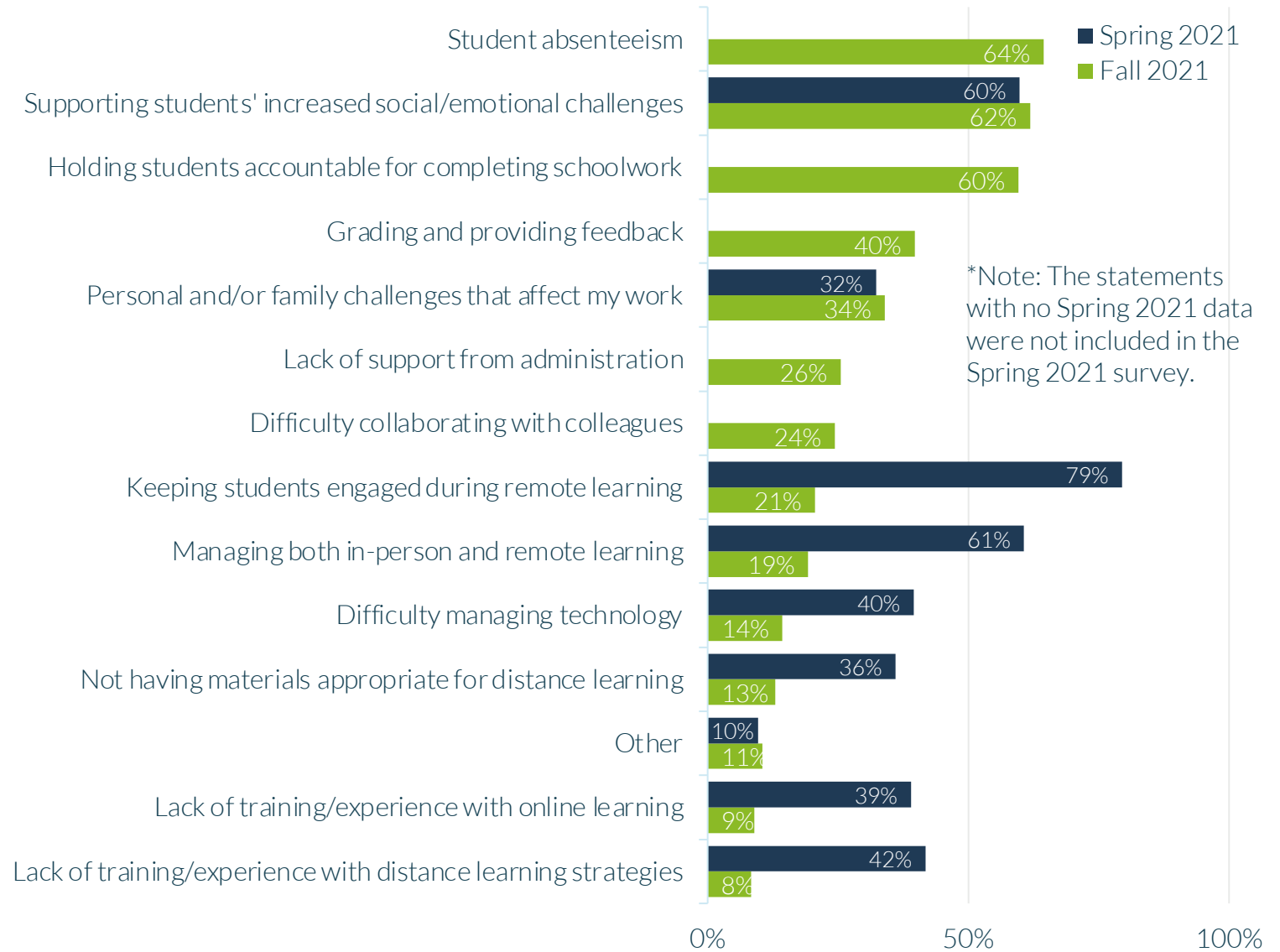| Challenge	Spring 2021	Fall 2021
Student absenteeism		64%
Supporting students' increased social/emotional challenges	60%	62%
Holding students accountable for completing schoolwork		60%
Grading and providing feedback		40%
Personal and/or family challenges that affect my work	32%	34%
Lack of support from administration		26%
Difficulty collaborating with colleagues		24%
Keeping students engaged during remote learning	79%	21%
Managing both in-person and remote learning	61%	19%
Difficulty managing technology	40%	14%
Not having materials appropriate for distance learning	36%	13%
Other	10%	11%
Lack of training/experience with online learning	39%	9%
Lack of training/experience with distance learning strategies	42%	8%

*Note: The statements with no Spring 2021 data were not included in the Spring 2021 survey.

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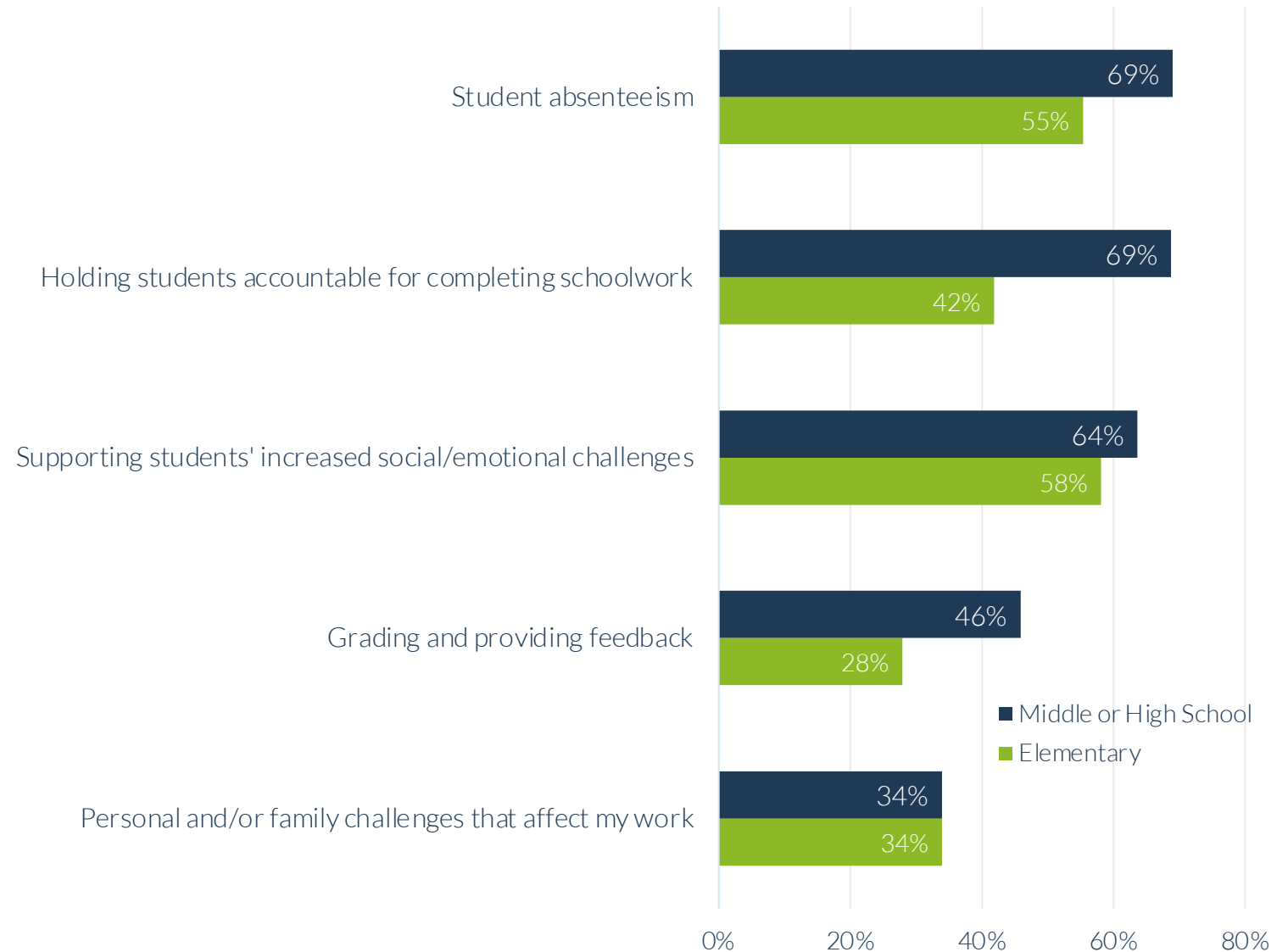
Middle and high school teachers find absenteeism and holding students accountable especially challenging

What have been your biggest challenges this academic year?

Challenge	Middle or High School	Elementary
Student absenteeism	69%	55%
Holding students accountable for completing schoolwork	69%	42%
Supporting students' increased social/emotional challenges	64%	58%
Grading and providing feedback	46%	28%
Personal and/or family challenges that affect my work	34%	34%

Teachers' challenges in their own words

Absenteeism

"Though we are technically 100% in person, we have an exceptionally high absentee rate this year which leads to the need to make everything available online which is a challenge."

"Balancing in-person learning with those who are in quarantine at home learning has been trying to the staff. There are many more hours being put in for getting materials ready and putting assignments on Google Classroom and preparing possible videos."

"We are supposed to be teaching quarantined students online and keeping them at the same place as in-person students."

"There has been a huge increase in the number of students in quarantine for 20 school days. Providing them with online work is a huge project and feels like a second full-time job."

Supporting students' social/emotional needs

"My students need LOTS of social emotional support right now, so my priorities are different from admin."

"I am surprised by the major social/emotional problems the 4th and 5th graders are having. It's almost as bad as a Pre-K student when they first start school and cry for their parents. I've had 4th and 5th graders break down crying saying they want their mommy."

"I have students who need extra support for social emotional learning. I don't have enough resources and time to meet and talk with them."

Teachers' challenges in their own words

Student accountability

"It is also next to impossible to determine who is chronically absent and who is quarantined until they return which makes holding students accountable for assignments difficult."

"Students lack motivation to complete work when they were given so much forgiveness for COVID. Why do anything if you can just say you're 'having a rough time' and get it forgiven?"

"Parents and school districts are continually talking about how 'difficult' this is for our students and giving them free passes which do not help the students but enable them to use the 'cop out' of 'I am a COVID kid'."

"As educators, we definitely need to meet students where they are to the best of our ability, however, students must continue to be held accountable for their own learning. Many teachers used the pandemic as an excuse to pass students who were giving no effort, and that is the biggest disservice to these kids that I have ever seen."

Managing student behavior

"Student behavior is a huge problem. I spend more time redirecting than presenting instruction. Many students have learned non-school practices that make it difficult to create a high functioning independent learning environment."

"The children are here face-to-face but lacking social skills and work habits."

"Students are trying to learn how to be back in a school setting again and exhibit problem behaviors."

"Students have forgotten how 'to school' … They forgot how to deal with deadlines, time management, and what it was like to show up to the building 5 days a week."

"Students have been out of school for 2 years. It is taking a lot time to get them used to the routine of school."

"Students are making up for lost time away from friends and school activities, and they are having trouble balancing 'normal' class loads."

"[Students] struggle with peer interaction and following directions in a class setting."

Teachers' challenges in their own words

Overall workload

"Most teachers feel like zombies just going through the motions of the day."

"The workload is unreal. The pressure on teachers during this time is more than ever before."

"This job entails too much—it's not teaching as much anymore, it's social work. I am not trained in that area, nor do I want to be a social worker. This is the position the schools have been placed in, and therefore I do not plan on continuing teaching or working in schools."

"We are short staffed in every possible area from bus drivers and custodians to teachers and principals and therefore constantly losing planning time to cover someone. This leads to ridiculously long hours when the planning and grading must now be done 100% on our time most days. Teachers are more exhausted and burnt out then I have ever seen before and leaving the classroom in droves making the situation even worse. Unfortunately, it is impossible to keep all the balls we are juggling in the air all the time and important things are slipping through the cracks more often than we are comfortable with."

"There are not enough hours in the day to email every child and parent that is out for COVID-related issues AND create assignments and learning materials for those students along with the normal school day duties. I leave school every day with a major headache and fatigue due to wearing a mask all day long while using my presenter voice. I have had a sore throat since school has started. I do not foresee me making it through this school year. There comes a point when my personal health and my physical and emotional wellbeing need to come first before major burnout happens."

"Definitely the most stressful year for teaching that I've had."

Some teachers also shared positive comments about the circumstances created by the pandemic and their experiences during the current school year

Technology

I learned a lot. Especially about using materials/resources to provide instruction via virtual learning. Some practices and online resources I have kept and adapted to in-person learning.

The upside of being forced into remote learning is that it made me embrace a number of technologies that I wouldn't otherwise have been motivated to learn. [These technologies] have offered valuable alternatives to in-person instruction which some students find beneficial. It's also allowed for more effective substitute lessons when I cannot be there in person. It also has simply allowed for alternative teaching strategies and methods which can potentially reach more students.

This school year is a practically normal year for me and it has been going really well. A big part of that is that I am more familiar with Canvas and have most of my grading/feedback go through there, which is faster for me and for the students.

Student success

I have a few students who have really benefitted from learning at home. They really did a great job from home and this year being in person, I believe it was a positive affect on their social well being. I see them participate more and make more friends.

While this time has been extremely challenging, it has pushed me to find newer, better, and more effective ways to meet the various learning needs of my students.

Positive changes

Why would we ever go back?! This forced us into a better paradigm, or at least sped up the process. Students learn best on their own with assistance, direction, and the proper encouragement.

I completely changed how I teach. The pandemic gave us permission to change and upgrade.

School systems have responded to pandemic challenges with new programs

After satisfying health needs, school system leaders report spending ESSER funds to date largely on remote learning and new approaches to instruction

In what areas has your school system spent federal ESSER funds?
(select all that apply)

Area	Percentage
Health-related equipment and measures	68%
Infrastructure for remote instruction	61%
Instructional resources for remote instruction	58%
Professional development	45%
Creating new programs	44%
Staff compensation	41%
Wrap-around services	19%
Don't know or does not apply	12%
Other	2%
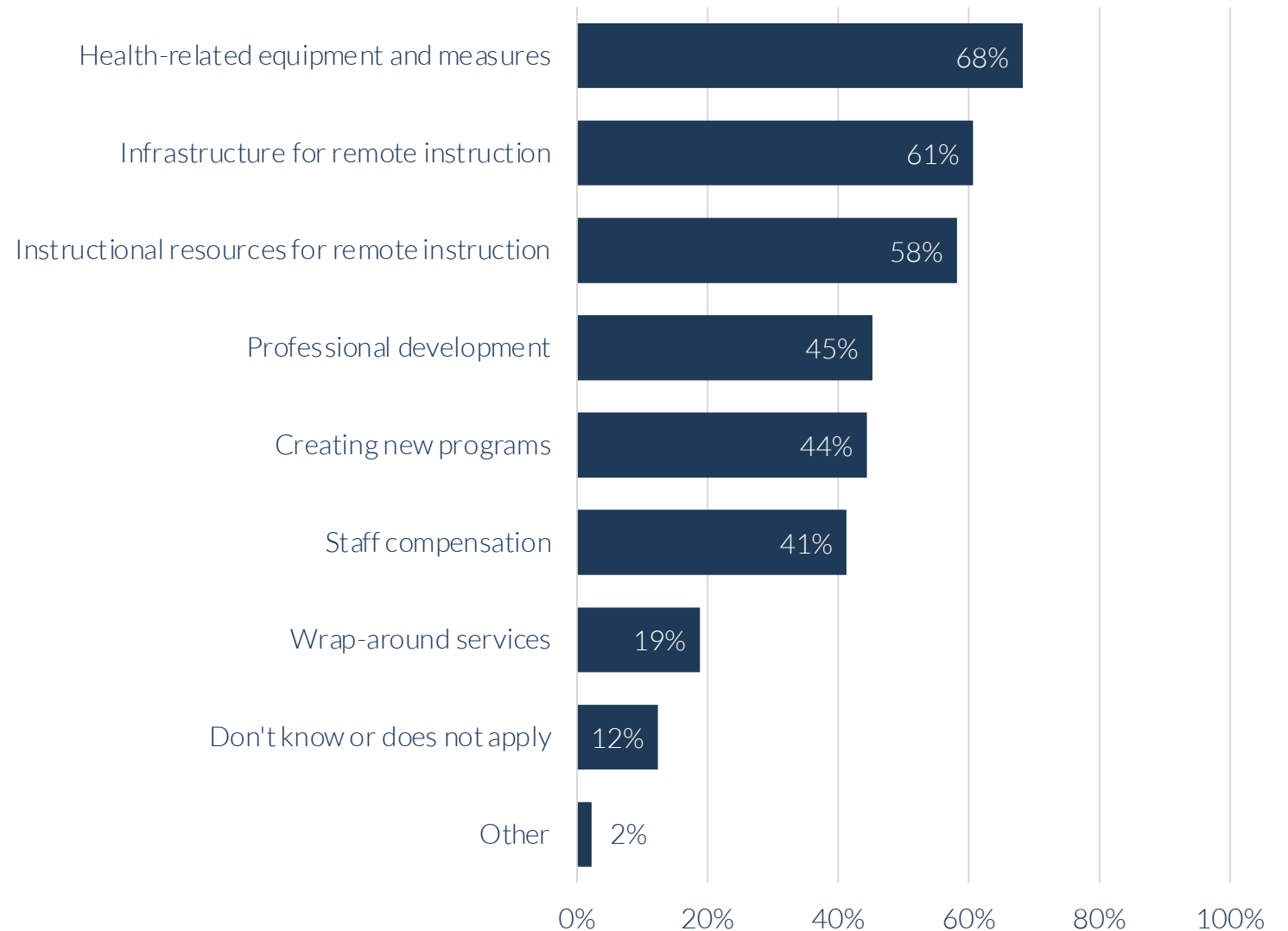
Tutoring, virtual schools, and supplemental online courses have grown in popularity, while blended learning, learning hubs, and full-time remote-learning options have declined

Instructional programs offered by school systems
(select all that apply)

Tutoring services
- Offered previously: 29%
- Offering currently: 65%
- Plan to offer post-pandemic: 22%

A full-time virtual school option
- Offered previously: 30%
- Offering currently: 43%
- Plan to offer post-pandemic: 13%

Online courses as supplements to school-based instruction
- Offered previously: 28%
- Offering currently: 40%
- Plan to offer post-pandemic: 15%

Blended learning
- Offered previously: 49%
- Offering currently: 29%
- Plan to offer post-pandemic: 9%

Full-time remote-learning options for students enrolled at in-person schools
- Offered previously: 44%
- Offering currently: 26%
- Plan to offer post-pandemic: 6%

"Learning hubs" or "pods"
- Offered previously: 19%
- Offering currently: 10%
- Plan to offer post-pandemic: 5%

Legend:
- Offered previously
- Offering currently
- Plan to offer post-pandemic

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Trend: Tutoring

Used by 65% of school systems

Participation in tutoring

In school systems that have tutoring programs, 18% of students participate on average.

Proportion of school systems (y-axis): 0% to 45%

- 1-10%: 41%
- 11-20%: 27%
- 21-30%: 18%
- 31-40%: 5%
- 41-50%: 5%
- 51-60%: 1%
- 61-70%: 0%
- 71-80%: 0%
- 81-90%: 0%
- 91-100%: 1%

Proportion of students who participate
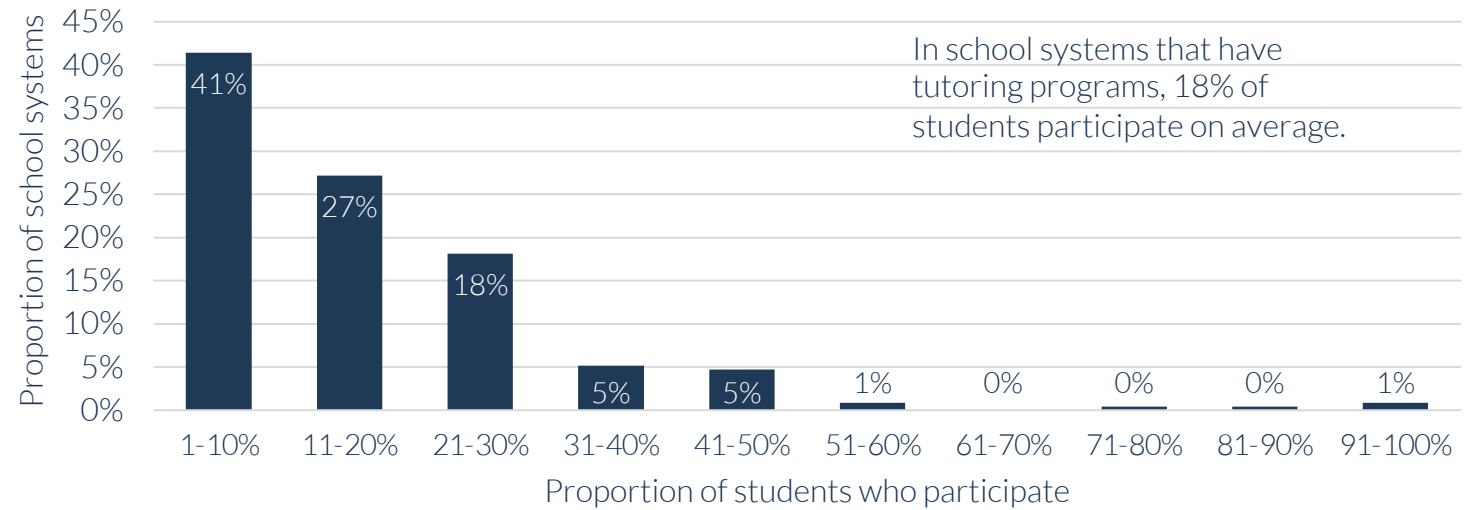
Who provides tutoring services?
(select all that apply)

- Certified teaching staff: 93%
- Non-certified staff: 38%
- Select K–12 students who attend our schools: 16%
- Community volunteers: 12%
- College students: 10%
- An organization that specializes in tutoring services: 9%
- An online platform that facilitates tutoring: 6%
- Other: 1%
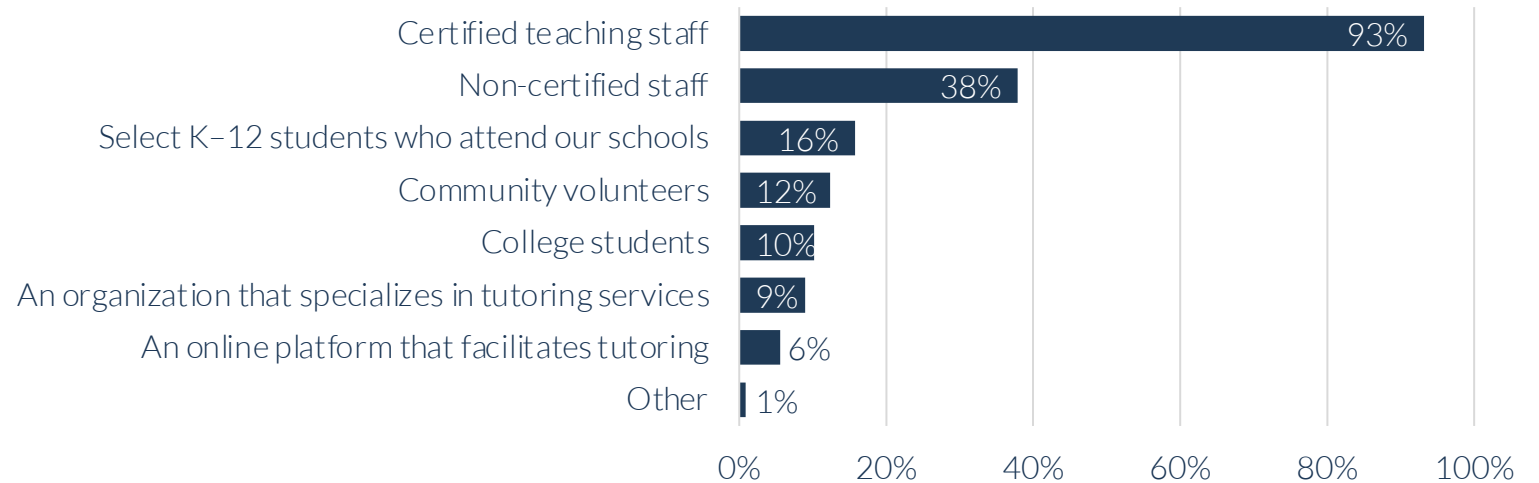
Trend: Virtual schools

Used by 43% of school systems

Participation in virtual schooling

In school systems that have virtual school programs, 8% of students participate on average.

Proportion of school systems (y-axis)

Proportion of students who participate	Percentage
1-10%	79%
11-20%	15%
21-30%	3%
31-40%	2%
41-50%	0%
51-60%	0%
61-70%	0%
71-80%	0%
81-90%	0%
91-100%	0%
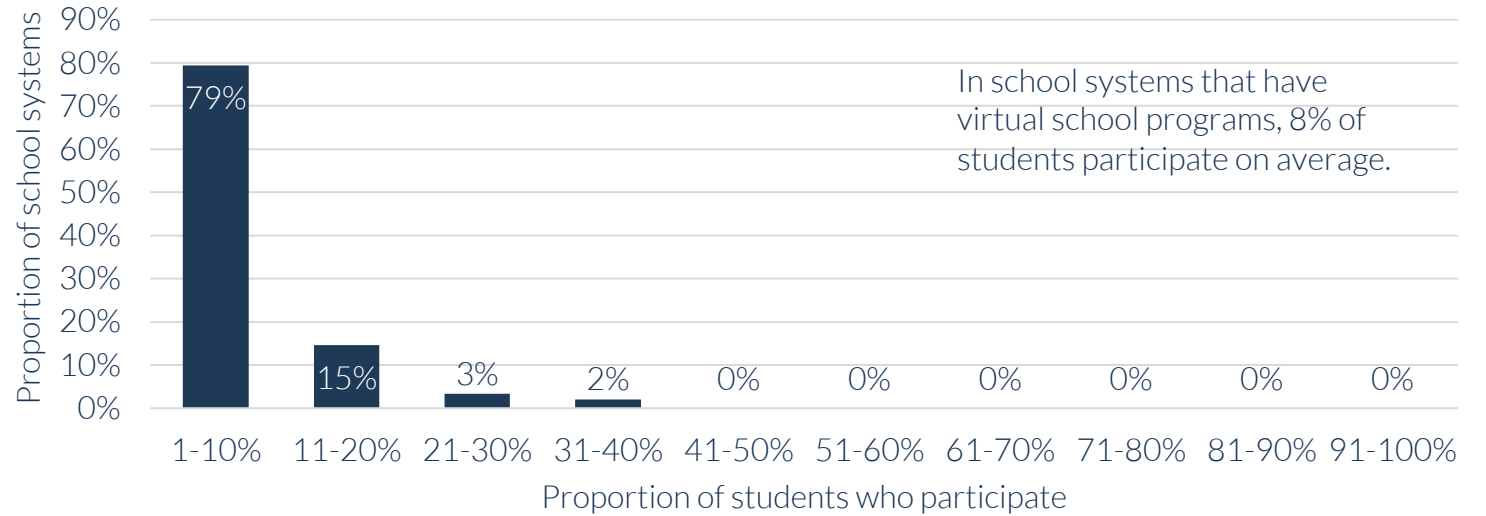
Who provides virtual schooling options?
(select all that apply)

Our school system	71%
A state virtual/online program	20%
A regional virtual school program	10%
A private virtual school provider	8%
Other	6%
A virtual charter school partner	3%
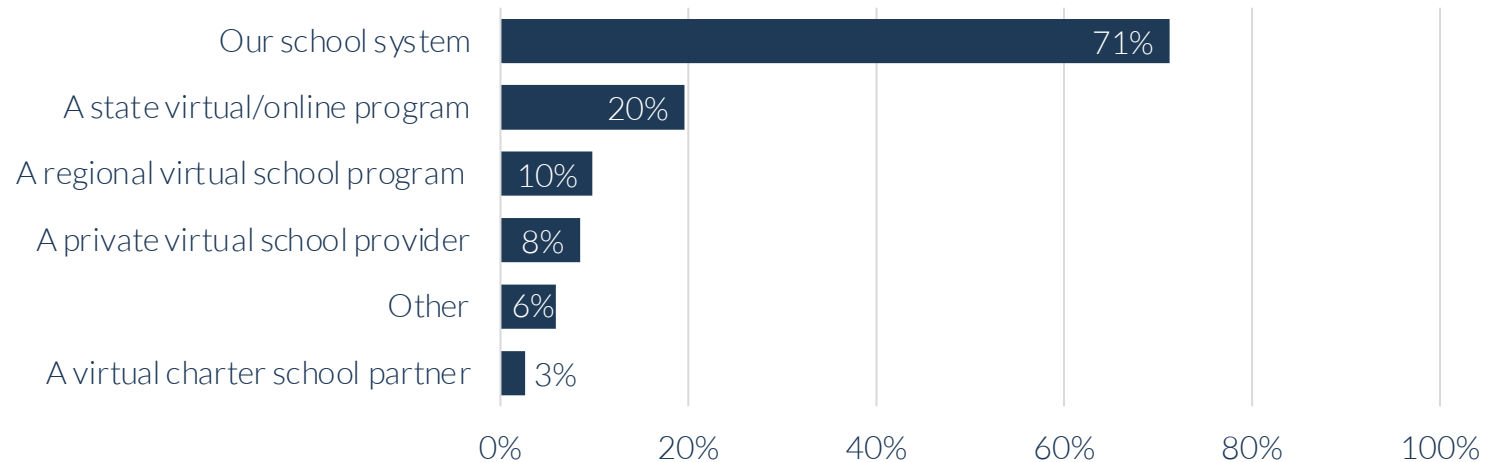
Trend: Hubs and pods

Used by 10% of school systems

Participation in hubs and pods

In school systems that have hubs or pods, 14% of students participate on average.

Proportion of school systems (y-axis):
- 1-10%: 70%
- 11-20%: 10%
- 21-30%: 7%
- 31-40%: 3%
- 41-50%: 3%
- 51-60%: 7%
- 61-70%: 0%
- 71-80%: 0%
- 81-90%: 0%
- 91-100%: 0%

Proportion of students who participate (x-axis)
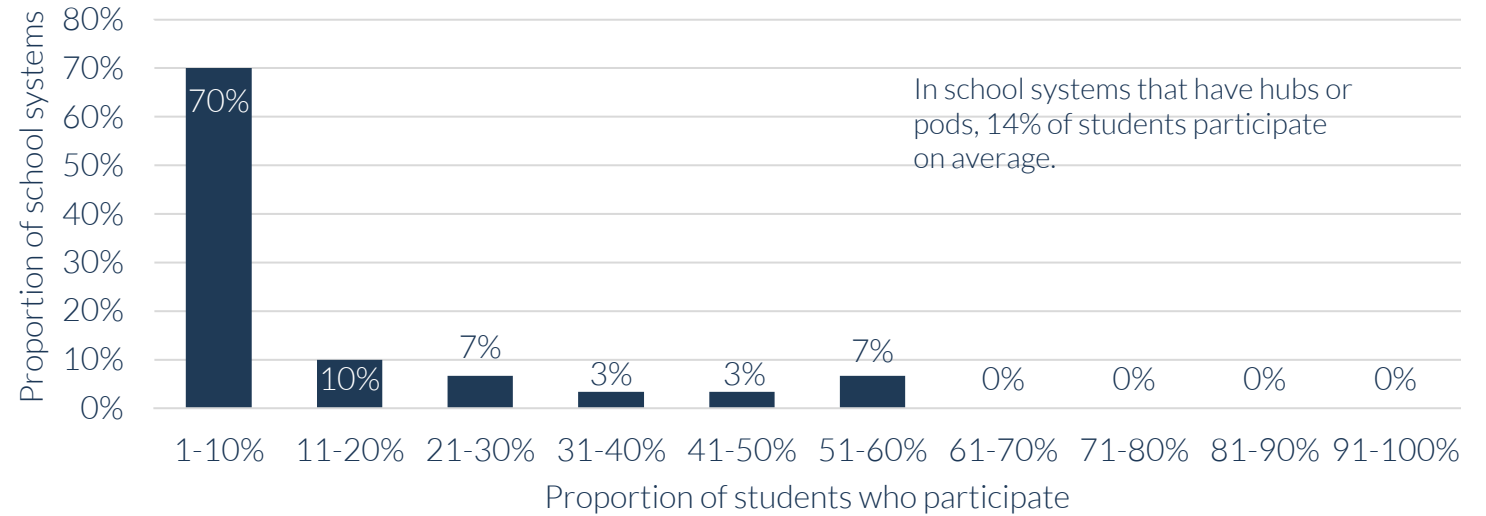
Where do students access learning hubs or pods?
(select all that apply)

- School buildings: 76%
- Students' homes: 30%
- Public locations: 15%
- Community organization sites: 9%
- Other: 6%
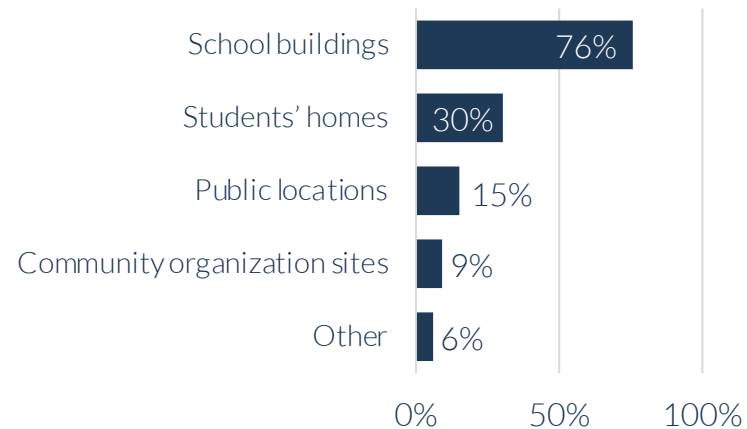
Who organizes learning hubs or pods?
(select all that apply)

- Our school system: 59%
- Staff at individual school sites: 34%
- Individual teachers: 31%
- Individual families: 6%
- Community organizations: 6%
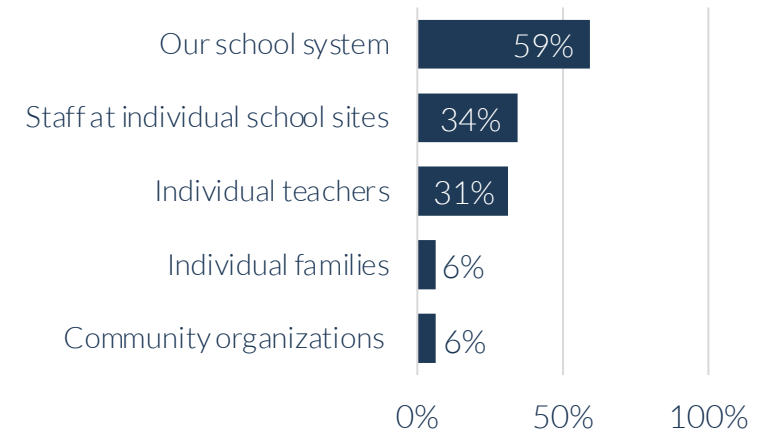
In setting up their current instructional programs, school systems have needed to juggle the priorities of various stakeholders

Which factors influenced your current instructional programs?
(select all that apply)

Factor	Percentage
Teacher/staff input	83%
COVID-19 state and/or community guidelines	75%
Parent and community input	69%
Research on best practices	52%
COVID-19 infection rates	46%
Teacher/staff availability	35%
Concerns about equity	34%
Student input	33%

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%
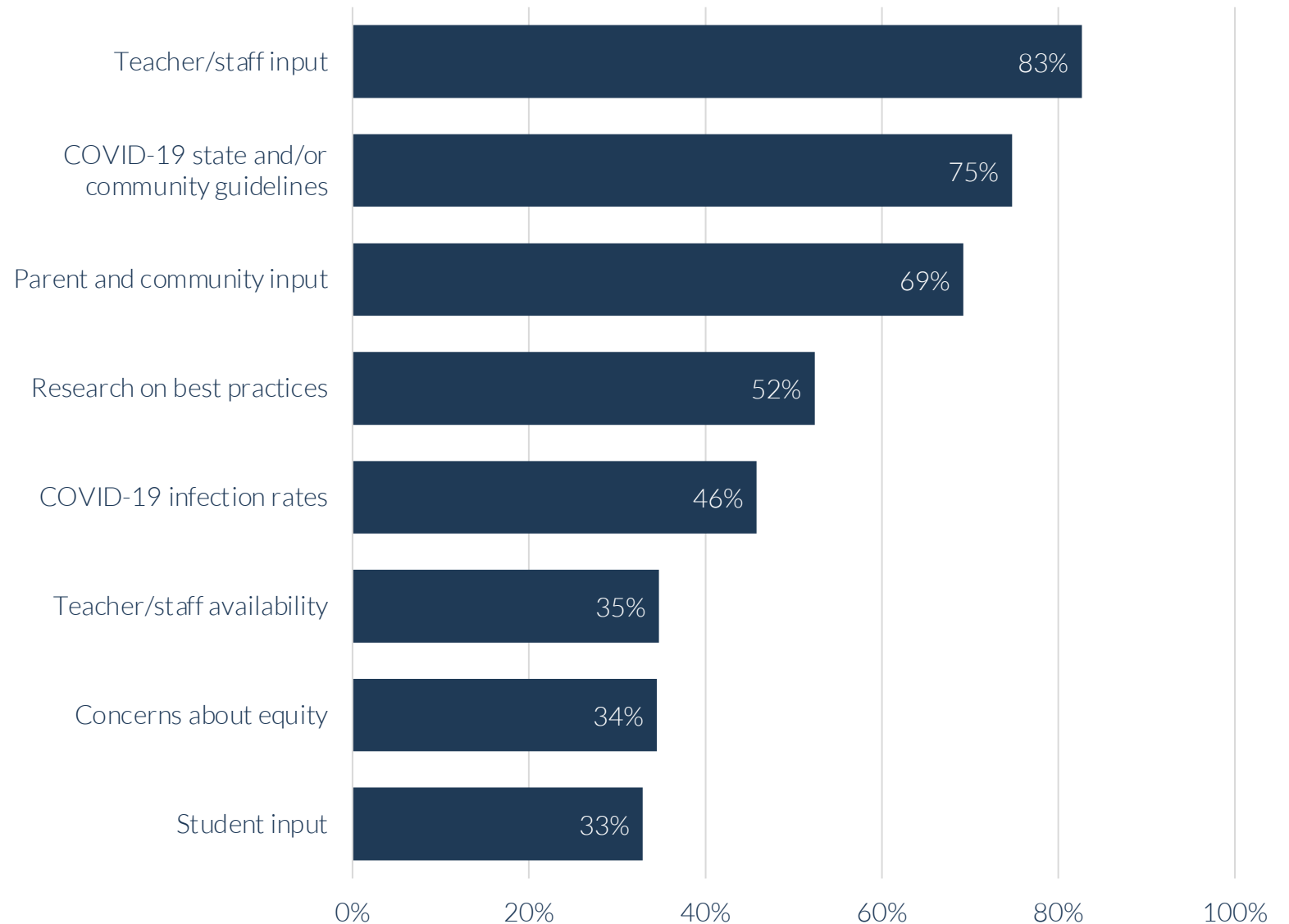
Survey data reveals interesting patterns in blended learning use

What is blended learning?

A formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path and/or pace, and at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home (such as school). The modalities along each student's learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.

Blended learning includes various classroom models

Station rotation — Students rotate through stations on a fixed schedule, where at least one of the stations is an online learning station.

Lab rotation — Students rotate on a fixed schedule between teacher-led instruction in class and online learning in a separate room designated for computer-based learning.

Flipped classroom — Students receive online learning assignments that cover class content for homework and in-person instruction focuses on discussions, projects, practice problems, etc.

Individual rotation — Students rotate on an individually customized schedule among online and offline learning activities.

Flex — Online learning is the backbone of instruction. Students move on a flexible, fluid schedule through their learning activities according to their needs and preferences.
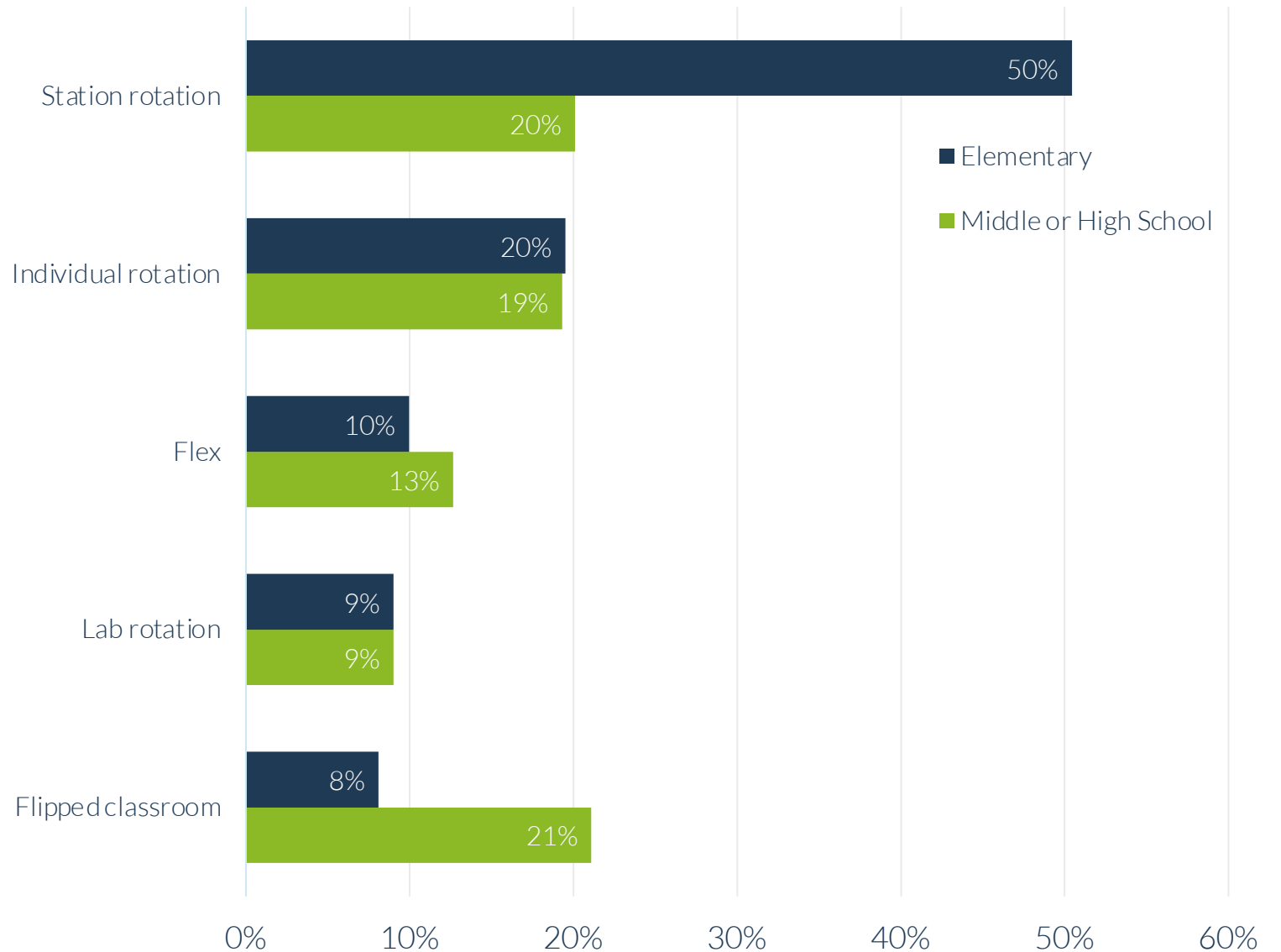
Station rotation is most common among elementary teachers
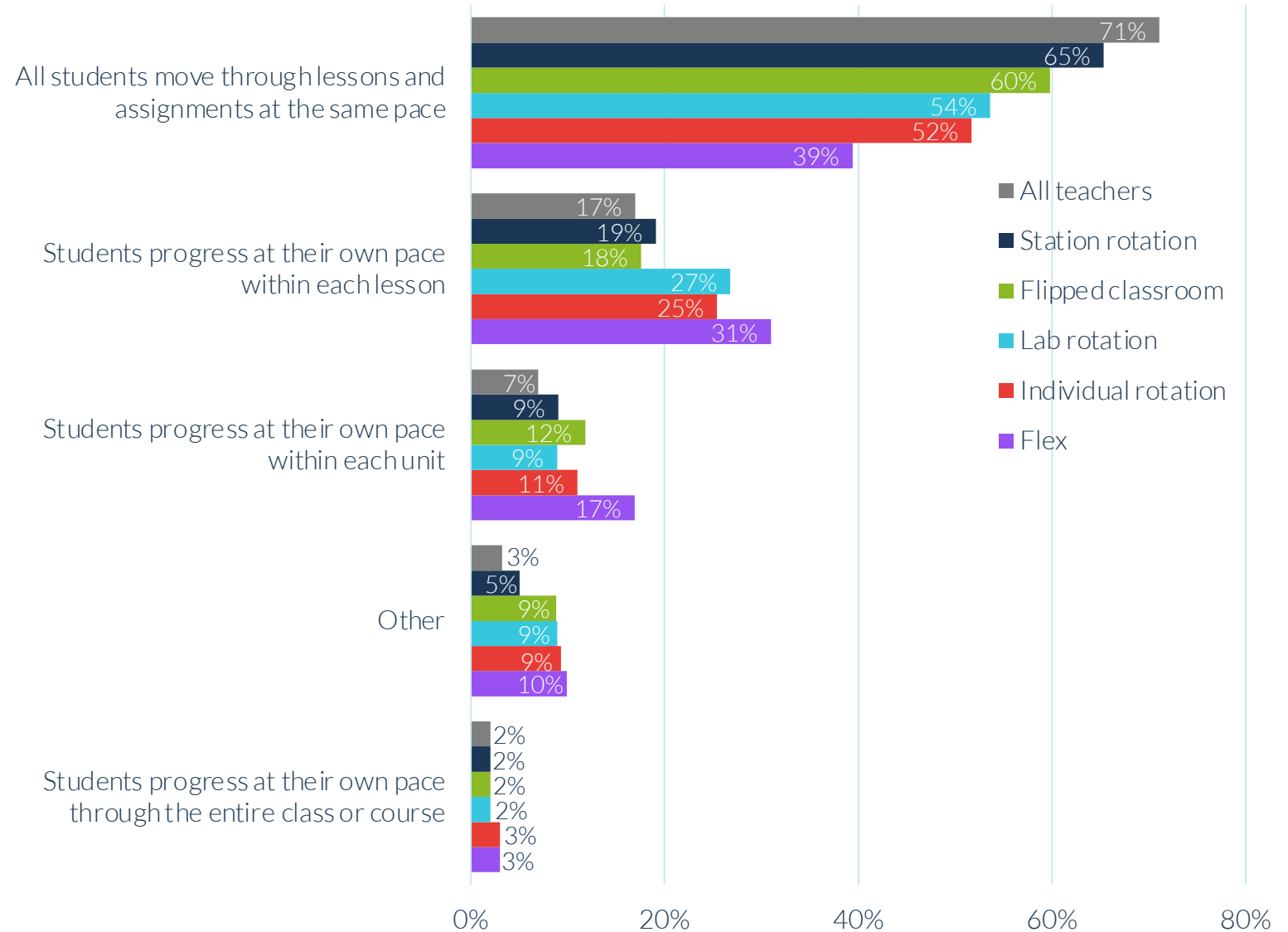
Flipped classroom is used most in secondary grades

Blended learning use by grade span
(select all that apply)

Category	Elementary	Middle or High School
Station rotation	50%	20%
Individual rotation	20%	19%
Flex	10%	13%
Lab rotation	9%	9%
Flipped classroom	8%	21%

Blended learning teachers are more likely to let students progress at different paces according to their needs

Pacing practices
(select all that apply)

All students move through lessons and assignments at the same pace
- All teachers: 71%
- Station rotation: 65%
- Flipped classroom: 60%
- Lab rotation: 54%
- Individual rotation: 52%
- Flex: 39%

Students progress at their own pace within each lesson
- All teachers: 17%
- Station rotation: 19%
- Flipped classroom: 18%
- Lab rotation: 27%
- Individual rotation: 25%
- Flex: 31%

Students progress at their own pace within each unit
- All teachers: 7%
- Station rotation: 9%
- Flipped classroom: 12%
- Lab rotation: 9%
- Individual rotation: 11%
- Flex: 17%

Other
- All teachers: 3%
- Station rotation: 5%
- Flipped classroom: 9%
- Lab rotation: 9%
- Individual rotation: 9%
- Flex: 10%

Students progress at their own pace through the entire class or course
- All teachers: 2%
- Station rotation: 2%
- Flipped classroom: 2%
- Lab rotation: 2%
- Individual rotation: 3%
- Flex: 3%

Legend:
- All teachers
- Station rotation
- Flipped classroom
- Lab rotation
- Individual rotation
- Flex

0% 20% 40% 60% 80%

Teachers are using less blended learning this fall and plan to use it even less post-pandemic

Teachers' use of blended learning

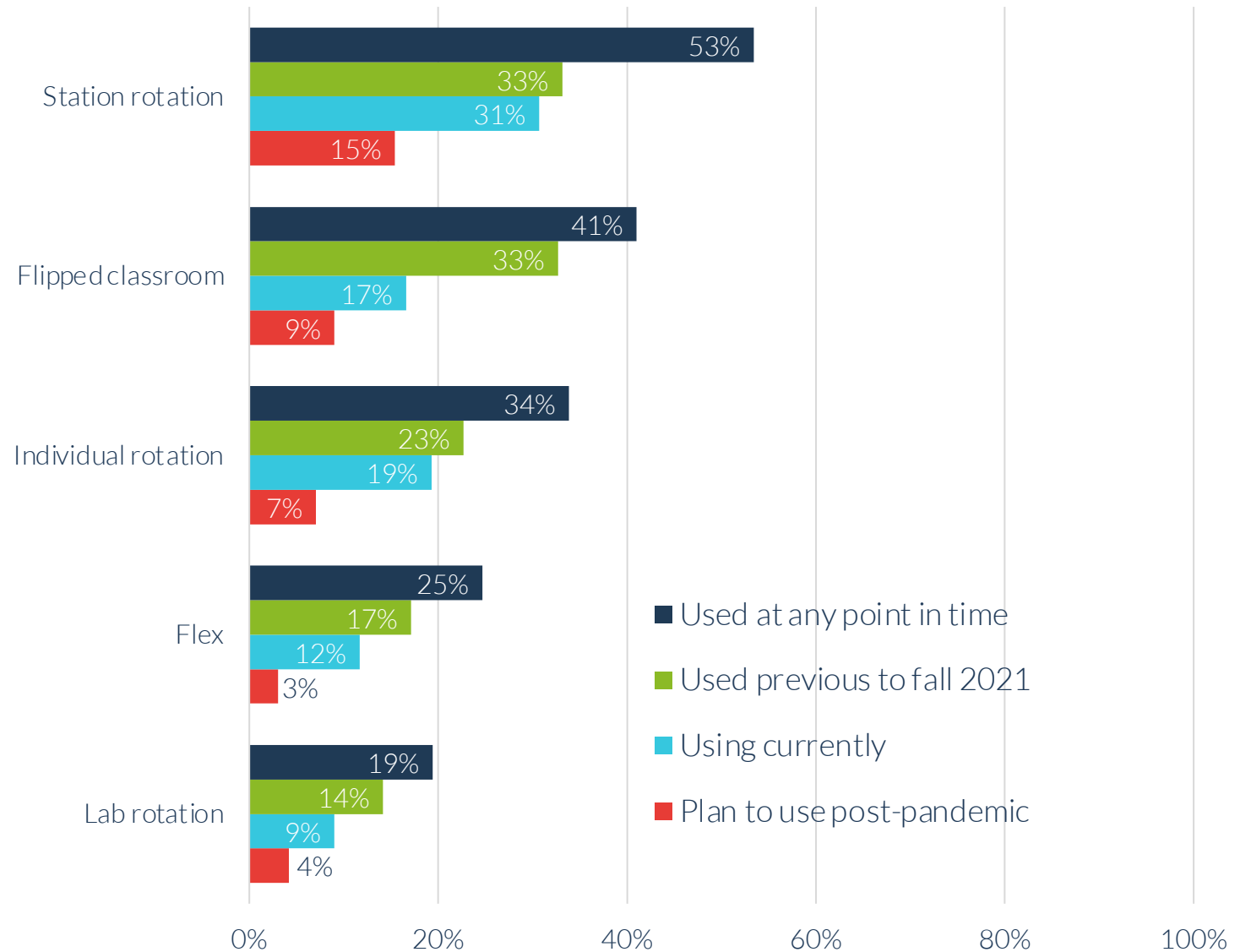| Category	Percentage
Used at any point in time	75%
Used previous to fall 2021	56%
Using currently	48%
Plan to use post-pandemic	21%

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%
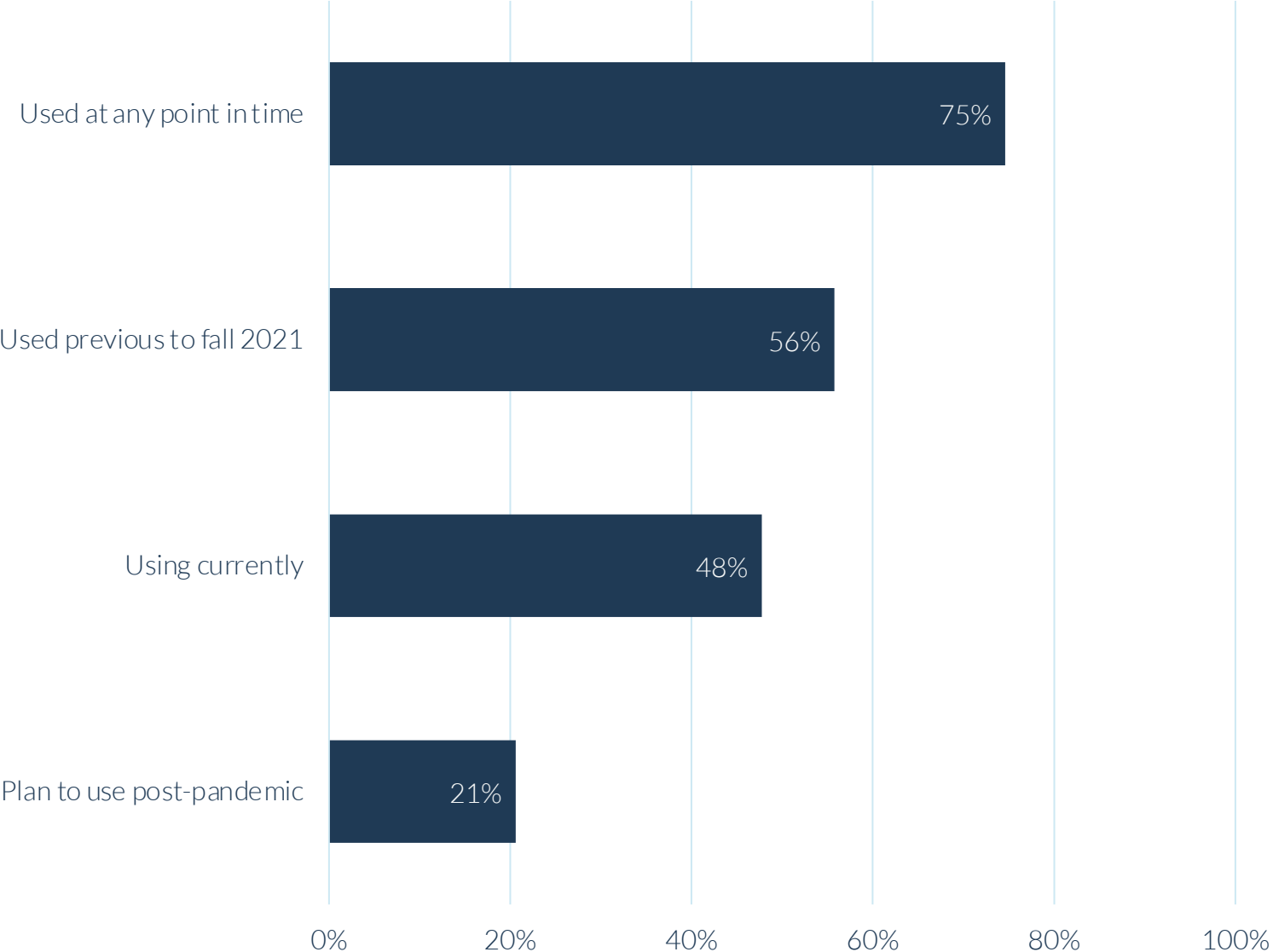
Some blended models are more popular than others, but all are losing popularity
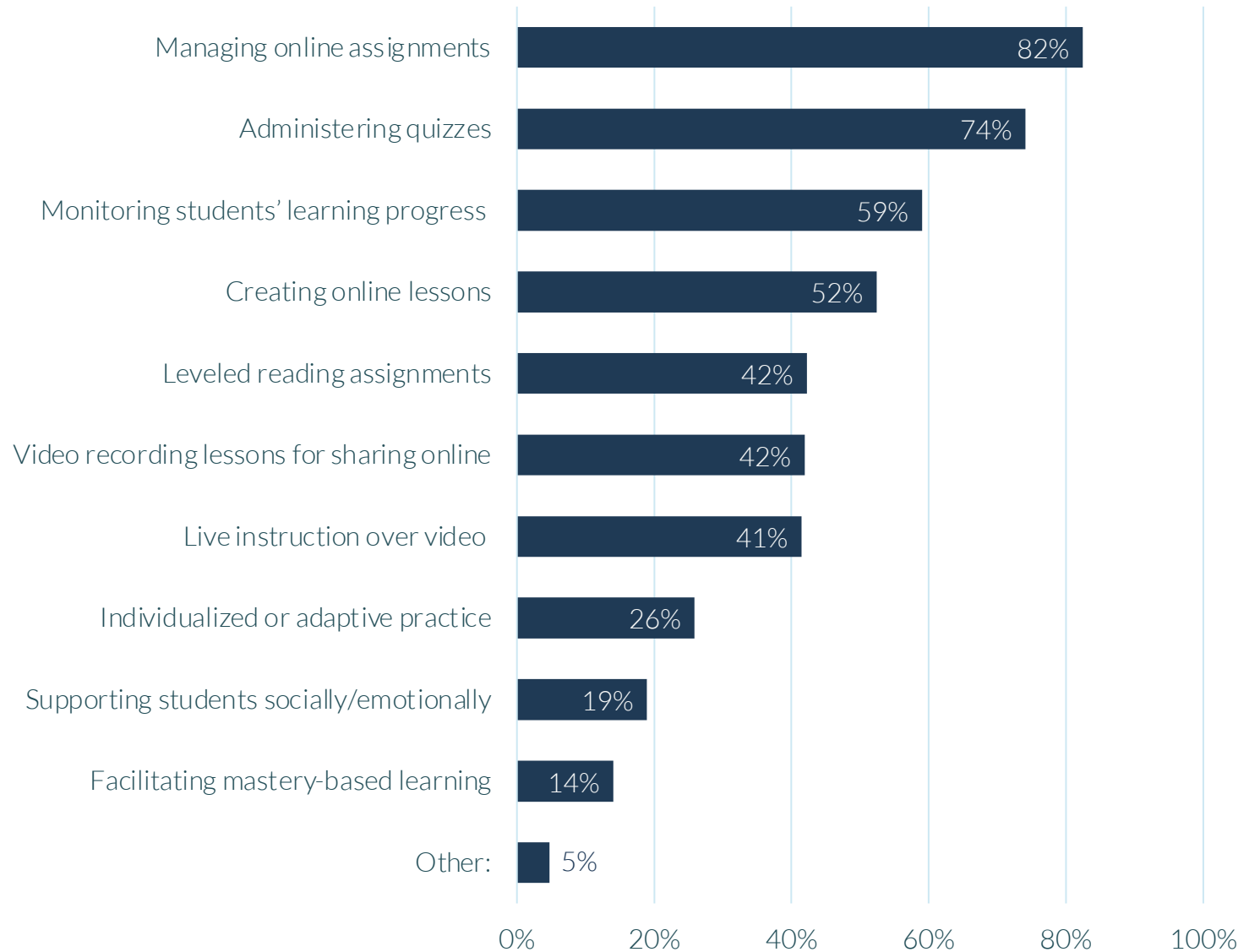
Teachers' use of blended learning models

Station rotation
- 53%
- 33%
- 31%
- 15%

Flipped classroom
- 41%
- 33%
- 17%
- 9%

Individual rotation
- 34%
- 23%
- 19%
- 7%

Flex
- 25%
- 17%
- 12%
- 3%

Lab rotation
- 19%
- 14%
- 9%
- 4%

Legend:
- Used at any point in time
- Used previous to fall 2021
- Using currently
- Plan to use post-pandemic

The online learning resources teachers use most are those that enhance conventional instruction, not those that enable new models of instruction

Teachers' use of online instructional resources
(select all that apply)

Category	Percentage
Managing online assignments	82%
Administering quizzes	74%
Monitoring students' learning progress	59%
Creating online lessons	52%
Leveled reading assignments	42%
Video recording lessons for sharing online	42%
Live instruction over video	41%
Individualized or adaptive practice	26%
Supporting students socially/emotionally	19%
Facilitating mastery-based learning	14%
Other:	5%

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Acknowledgments

About

The **Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to improving the world through Disruptive Innovation. Founded on the theories of Harvard professor Clayton M. Christensen, the Institute offers a unique framework for understanding many of society's most pressing problems. Its mission is ambitious but clear: work to shape and elevate the conversation surrounding these issues through rigorous research and public outreach.

Bay View Analytics, formerly known as the Babson Survey Research Group, is a survey design, implementation, and analysis organization. Bay View Analytics partners with and conducts research for universities, businesses, foundations, and agencies including the London School of Business, Hunter College, the College Board, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Gates Foundation, and Tyton Partners. Bay View Analytics' activities cover all stages of projects, including initial proposals, sample selection, survey design, methodological decisions, analysis plan, statistical analyses, and production of reports.

Thomas Arnett is a senior research fellow in education for the Christensen Institute. His work focuses on innovative instructional models enabled by online learning and the role of Disruptive Innovation in transforming K–12 education. He holds a BS in Economics from Brigham Young University and an MBA from the Tepper School of Business from Carnegie Mellon University, where he was a William G. McGowan Fellow. Earlier in his career, he taught middle school math for Kansas City Public Schools and served as a board member for the Morgan Hill Unified School District in Morgan Hill, California. He is currently the chair of the board for Compass Charter Schools, a network of virtual schools in California.