



Practitioners' Recommendations to Improve the Academic Success of Economically Disadvantaged Students in Wisconsin

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Practitioners' Recommendations to Improve the Academic Success of Economically Disadvantaged Students in Wisconsin

Abstract

Although policymakers generally appreciate the value of crafting policies that are responsive to teacher and principal voice, doing so in a systematic way is challenging. Educator voices in the room when policies are made are often those of teachers and principals closest to policymakers. In 2019, to broaden the range of educator voices available to policymakers in Wisconsin, we asked more than 2,200 teachers and 700 principals in public schools in Wisconsin how *they* would change policy to improve the academic success of economically disadvantaged students. In total, 1,559 teachers and 601 principals offered suggestions for changing policy across four categories: school level–academic, student level, school level–non-academic, and community level. Though we saw variation in responses based on percent of student body eligible for free and reduced-priced lunch, grade levels served (elementary, middle, high school) and community type (city, suburb, town, rural), many responses appear with similar frequency among practitioners across contexts—indicating promise for making broader changes that impact all schools.

Practitioners’ Recommendations to Improve the Academic Success of Economically Disadvantaged Students in Wisconsin

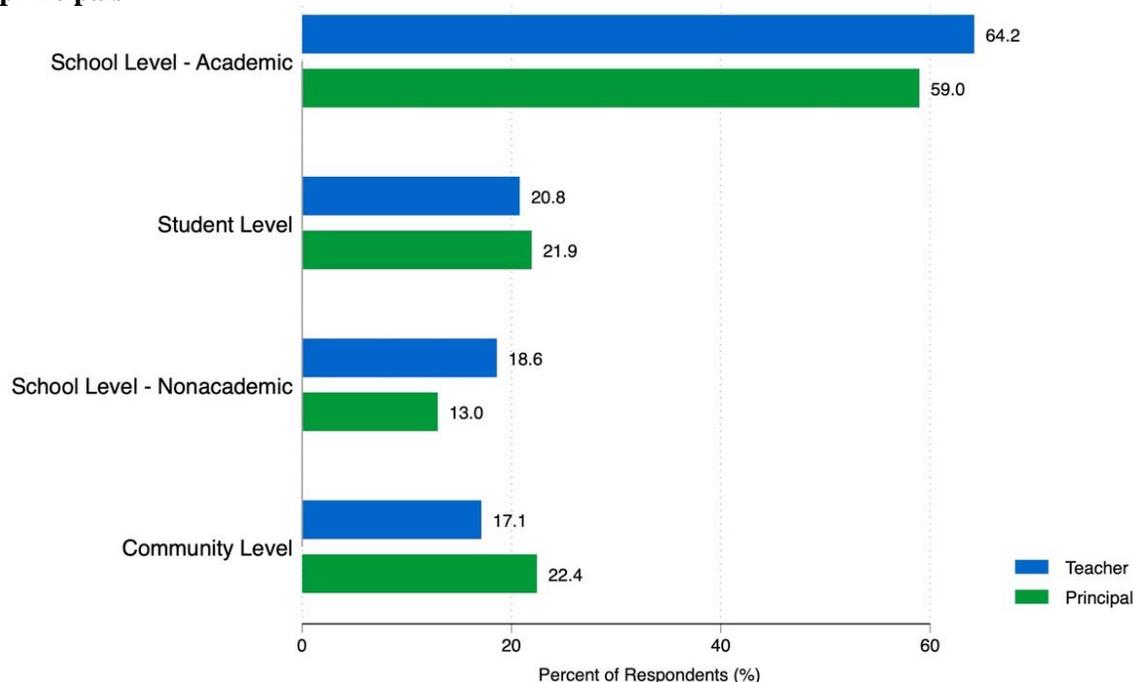
H. Rose Miesner, Chiara Packard, Taylor Laemmler, and Lyn MacGregor

In 2019, the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) surveyed more than 2,200 teachers and 700 principals in public schools across the state of Wisconsin. The goal was to learn about teachers’ and principals’ professional experiences, their strategies for organizing teaching and learning, and their views on policies that could improve the academic outcomes of economically disadvantaged students. This report analyzes their responses to the following prompt:

“If you could make one change to educational policy to improve the academic success of economically disadvantaged students, what would it be?”

In total, 1,559 teachers and 601 principals responded, sharing their perspectives on how to enhance educational equity for economically disadvantaged students in Wisconsin. We coded these responses into four broad categories: school level–academic, student level, school level–non-academic, and community level (see Figure 1). As some participants referenced more than one area of recommendation in their response, the number of recommendations exceeds the number of participants.

Figure 1. Percent of respondents referencing topics at each level. Breakdown by role: teachers and principals



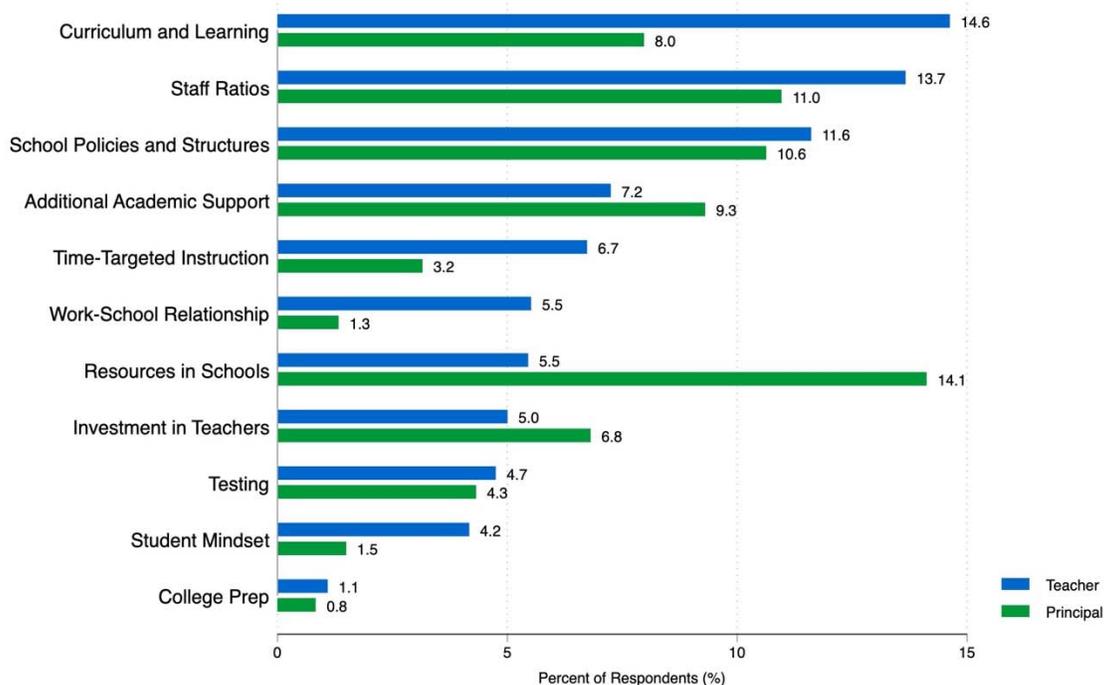
Practitioners offered a wide variety of responses. Just over 1,000 teachers (64.2%) and 355 principals (59%) cited **practices and policies within schools**, including staff ratios and testing practices, as avenues to enhance the success of economically disadvantaged youth. Three

hundred and twenty-four teachers (20.8%) and 132 principals (21.9%) focused on **interventions to support students both in and outside of school**, highlighting student needs for physical support (food, clothing, shelter), psychological support (mental health), and material support (school supplies, transportation, technology). Two hundred and ninety teachers (18.6%) and 78 principals (13%) spoke about the need for **non-academic services in schools**, including more robust student services programs and the importance of building caring relationships with students. Finally, 267 teachers (17.1%) and 135 principals (22.4%) identified **community-level interventions**, such as early childhood educational experiences and issues within the broader sociopolitical context, as important to support students facing economic disadvantage. In the following sections, we further describe the responses that comprise each broad category and analyze responses based on percentage of student body eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) at the participant’s school, grade level served, and community type.

School Level–Academic

Survey participants frequently cited academic elements directly under the purview of schools or related to schools as institutions. Two-thirds of teachers and 12.2% of principals referenced academically oriented, school-based programs and policies as avenues to support economically disadvantaged students (see Figure 2). The differences we saw in frequency of teacher and principal responses among these categories likely relate to the nature of participants’ responsibilities, as teachers are primarily tasked with instruction while principals manage the broader school organization.

Figure 2. Percent of respondents referencing each topic in School Level–Academic. Breakdown by role: teachers and principals



Curriculum and Learning

Two hundred twenty-eight teachers (14.6%) and 48 principals (8%) suggested changes to curriculum or learning opportunities that exist within school structures. These changes often focused on instructional content, ranging from calls for increased instruction in reading to accessible honors classes to life skills classes. Several participants focused on the arts, with a teacher noting, “I would require one hour per week (in five-day cycle or 1.5 in six-day) of art, music, and dance/theater for all students the way P.E. is mandated. Those are the kids who need this most. It would make up for less recess time. It would allow for brain breaks/movement. It would lower behaviors.”

Other participants advocated for increasing the diversity of content to which students are exposed. As one teacher explained, “Provide them with more real-world experiences (field trips, exploration opportunities in all content areas). Often, they get one or two trips a year if they are lucky. They lack the experiences that are needed for deeper learning, problem solving, and connections.” Participants also described a need to focus on play and social-emotional development in the classroom. As one teacher stated, “Put the focus back on play. Do not expect kindergarten age students to read or write before they are able to interact with their peers, and problem-solve in basic social situations.” The aforementioned participants connected students’ academic growth to exposure to a broader range of content.

Staff Ratios

Two hundred fourteen teachers (13.7%) and 66 principals (11%) called for increased staffing to better support economically disadvantaged students. While a bulk of participants simply stated, “smaller class sizes,” other participants called for an expansion of team-teaching practices to increase the number of teachers in the room rather than reducing the number of students assigned to each teacher. Participants cited specific benefits to reducing student-to-teacher ratios, including increased facilitation of targeted instruction and fostering closer relationships between students and teachers. As one teacher summarized:

I would suggest creating and implementing smaller classroom sizes. Teachers are not able to provide all of the time necessary to each student when class sizes are so large. We are unable to teach to their needs, abilities, and interests when we have such a wide variety and large number of students.

Several participants suggested capping class sizes at 15 to 20 students, as well as considering the needs of specific children when determining class sizes. While the current Achievement Gap Reduction program allows for schools to cap class sizes, several participants suggested that this practice should be mandatory rather than optional.

Other respondents called for the presence of support staff in their classrooms. Calls for “more adults” and “more hands” often referred to the increased presence of educational assistants, special education assistants, and teachers’ aides within classrooms. While some participants spoke to the relational aspect of increasing adult support, others cited the additional academic

and behavioral support for students that these professionals could provide. One principal felt that economically disadvantaged students could be better supported by “[h]aving enough pupil services staff to support the training and implementation of social emotional learning (SEL) practices for all students and specific tier 2 and 3 structures/interventions for SEL to support students in need.” Other respondents called for the presence of specialized teachers in the general education classroom, including special education teachers, interventionists, and English language learner teachers, to address student need and support school programs, such as inclusive special education.

School-level Structures and Policies

One hundred eighty-one teachers (11.61%) and 64 principals (10.6%) called for changes to the structures of schooling, including school-based policies and format of the school day. Participants focused on the timing of school, suggesting a year-round model of schooling, changing or lengthening school hours, and creating alternative virtual and physical schools that operate outside of typical school hours to accommodate the needs of working families and students. As a high school principal suggested:

Provide students with flexibility and choice to meet their needs. This could happen in the form of academies where students focus on a career choice, through greater opportunities in how school happens for them (blended, online, face-to-face,) and the time school takes place (early, late, whatever is necessary).

Other participants spoke about classroom and grade-level practices. They called for the reduction or elimination of homework, elimination of letter-based grading, elimination of social promotion practices, and introduction of multi-aged classrooms as promising practices for promoting academic growth for low-income students. Several teachers indicated that existing school practices can intensify disparities, with one teacher suggesting, “Do not require homework. It seems those who have support at home do it, those who don’t, don’t do it.” These respondents asserted that long-held school structures can be changed to better support students.

Additional Academic Support and Time for Targeted Instruction

Many teachers recommended increased academic instruction for students either outside of or during the school day. One hundred thirteen teachers (7.2%) and 56 principals (9.3%) called for academic support outside of the school day in the form of before- and after-school programs, summer school, and tutoring programs. Several respondents noted that these extra opportunities can help to address disparities in resources of low-income families in contrast to more affluent families. Suggestions about providing additional services are typified by one teacher, who stated, “One advantage some middle-class/wealthy students have is that they are able to afford a tutor if they want/need one. We could provide free one-on-one or small-group tutoring before/after school.” Participants also spoke about coupling such services with free transportation and meals, as further described in other sections, to facilitate student access.

One hundred five teachers (6.7%) and 19 (3.2%) principals called for increased targeted support for students in academics during the school day. These participants referenced increases in academic interventions, small group work, and one-on-one support for students with academic needs. Some participants called for individualized instruction, while others called for “[m]ore time for one-on-one help to complete homework, projects, or assignments.” Though participants in this camp shared the perspective that students need extra support, they separately viewed this support as facilitating either instruction or work completion. Participants also noted the need for extra personnel and time in the school day to provide this targeted support.

Work and Post-secondary Education

Eighty-six teachers (5.5%) and eight principals (1.3%) discussed the relationship between schooling and student employment. Participants working across grade levels identified the challenges that students face when balancing the responsibilities of paid employment with the responsibilities of their education, proposing above-discussed changes to school structures to accommodate students’ work schedules like those cited above. In a sentiment that was echoed by several respondents, one teacher suggested that schools “allow more flexibility of work hours to apply to credits for graduation.” These suggestions aim to provide students with credit toward graduation for the skills they learn in their jobs.

Other respondents focused on the role of schools in preparing students to enter the workforce. This perspective is summarized by a participant who felt that schools should, “offer programs which help students gain technical certifications so they can gain employment after high school. Too much focus is placed on the four-year model, which is not ideal for most high school students.” Interestingly, only 17 teachers (1.1%) and five principals (.8%) referenced college preparation, calling for help with applications, classes for college credit, and scholarships. This difference in focus on post-secondary paths may reflect participant expectations for students or typical student paths at their respective schools.

Testing

Similar proportions of teachers—75 (4.8%)—and principals—26 (4.3%)—called for a decrease or shift in state assessment practices. Participants noted that state testing takes away time and resources from teaching and learning in their classrooms. They generally shared the sentiment that, to support students, schools should spend “more money educating them and less money testing them.” Others noted that tests did not accurately represent student knowledge or provide useful information to the teachers tasked with their administration, citing racial and linguistic bias as well as a lack of cultural responsiveness within standardized tests. In lieu of state tests, participants suggested several other mechanisms for measuring student progress, including proficiency-based grading, teacher observations, portfolio-based credits, and formative and summative classroom-based assessment.

Student Mindsets

Sixty-five teachers (4.2%) and nine principals (1.5%) referenced the need to cultivate student mindsets regarding schooling. Some of these responses focused on the role that teachers can play in empowering students. One participant summarized, “First make a strong emotional connection with the student, keep expectation levels high so they also begin to believe that they are a learner, and push the idea of grit and resiliency.” Other participants foregrounded the personal responsibility of the student. Sentiments included, “Teach them in a no-excuses and nothing is free learning environment.” While these participants centered the role of student motivation in the learning process, their perspectives diverged regarding the role of schools and teachers in supporting these students.

Investment in Teachers

Seventy-eight teachers (5%) and 41 (6.8%) principals recommended additional investments in teachers. Some argued for better teacher education, with calls for stronger teacher preparation programs and high-quality professional development in trauma-informed practices; anti-racist education practices; and content such as reading instruction and teaching students from less privileged backgrounds. Other teachers touched on how teacher evaluation systems impacted their ability to teach. As one teacher explained, “Get rid of Educator Effectiveness and all of the other busy work documentation that takes away from teachers planning and implementing effective lessons.” Respondents also referred to professionalism in teaching, calling for increased teacher compensation, professional autonomy, and more time for planning and collaboration throughout the day. One principal suggested, “[h]igher salaries and incentives to teachers in schools with higher rates of economically disadvantaged students. And more training and PD [professional development] for this group.” Such participants expressed that an educated, well-resourced work force is essential for serving low-income students.

Resources in Schools

With the exception of a lone principal who felt that Title I funding should be eliminated, 85 teachers (5.6%) and 85 principals (14.1%) directly cited the need for increased financial or general resources for schools. Respondents noted specific ways that funding could support schools, including snacks, field trips, and art supplies, as well as other categories described within this report. Other participants called for increased funding of schools serving low-income students, expressing concerns for how the current tax-based system perpetuates inequitable educational experiences for low-income students, as further described in the “Sociopolitical Context” section below. A principal highlighted the incongruity they witnessed in schools, urging “that the money actually came with the demands . . . resources are stretched.”

Summary

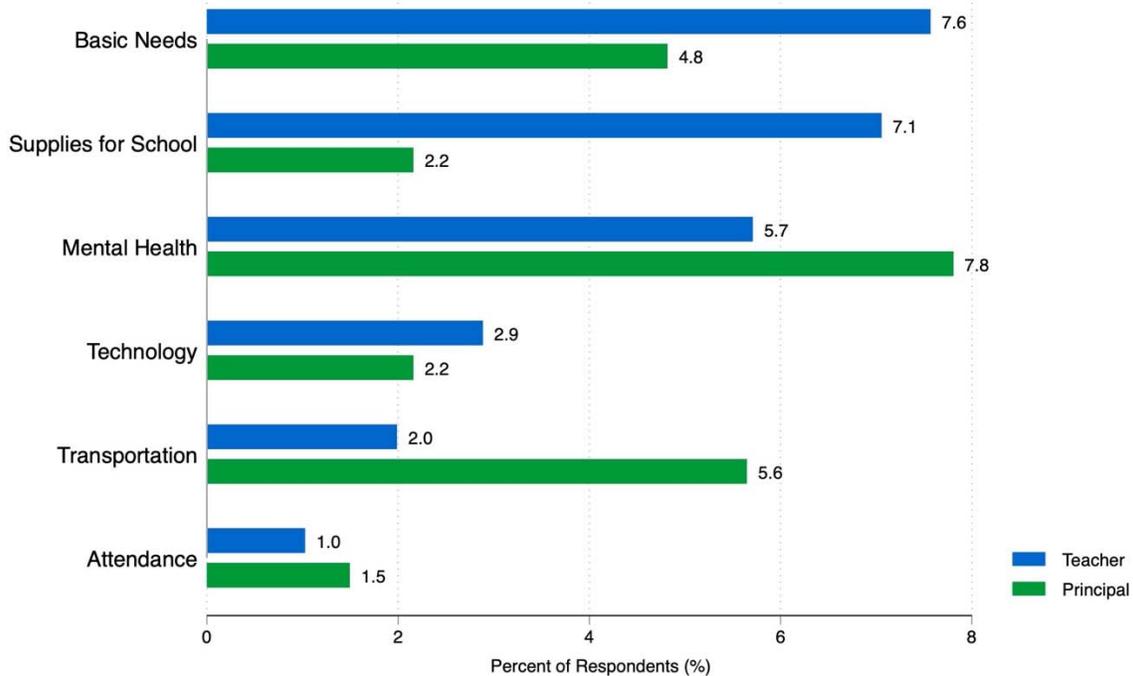
Respondents most frequently cited interventions at the school level pertaining to academics, relative to suggestions at the student, non-academic school, and community levels. This is unsurprising because the survey question explicitly mentions the academic performance of

students. However, the breadth of responses in this category indicates that participants envision a variety of changes to the nature of schools and their professions that could better support academic outcomes for economically disadvantaged youth.

Student Level

Three hundred twenty-four teachers (20.8%) and 132 principals (21.9%) made recommendations directed to supporting individual students. These responses often focused on creating a more equal playing field for economically disadvantaged students through provision of resources (see Figure 3). These changes relate to students’ health and wellness; access to school supplies; access to technology; attendance; and transportation to and from school.

Figure 3. Percent of respondents referencing each topic in Student Level. Breakdown by role: teachers and principals



Basic Needs

One hundred eighteen teachers (7.6%) and 29 principals (4.8%) suggested addressing students’ needs for food, clothing, and shelter. Suggestions included providing student meals before, after, or during school, or providing at-school laundry facilities for students. As one teacher wrote: “Make sure they have clothes, food, and hygiene materials. Students need their basic needs met in order to learn and grow socially and academically.” Participants at all educational levels recognized that some economically disadvantaged students struggle with food and housing security, factors that impact students’ capacity to learn.

Supplies for School

One hundred ten teachers (7.1%) and 13 principals (2.2%) suggested providing school supplies for students. These participants recognized that some students do not otherwise have access to materials requisite for learning outside of school. Respondents mentioned the need for more books in the home and objects like pencils and notebooks in these responses. To ensure access, one teacher recommended, “Have districts provide ALL required materials for every course.”

Respondents in this vein also suggested covering fees for students’ school-based curricular activities, such as field trips or after school clubs. They suggested that economically disadvantaged students should have “the ability to participate in any program that an economically advantaged student could participate in,” and that cost should not limit this participation. One teacher noted an existing model for covering fees within their school, stating, “we already help them have the gear and fees they would need to participate in sports.”

Mental Health

In addition to physical needs, 89 teachers (5.7%) and 47 principals (7.8%) mentioned addressing and supporting students’ mental health through counseling or other mental health supports. This recommendation overlapped to some extent with calls for extended student services in schools. Participants’ responses included general calls for supporting students’ mental health (“I would provide better access to mental health care”), more specific changes, like providing “more mental health counseling within the school day,” and calls for more resources to address mental health needs, including “more monies allocated for mental illnesses and trauma.” These respondents attested to the need for students to feel safe and secure before engaging in learning.

Technology

Forty-five teachers (2.9%) and 13 principals (2.2%) voiced concerns about students’ access to technology (both in and outside of the home). They focused on internet access and the provision of devices such as laptops or Chromebooks to students. Respondents pointed to students’ inability to complete required work without adequate technology. Said one, “Many students struggle with completing their homework outside of school when it requires technology that they don’t have.” They also pointed to inequity in parental access to school communications:

Students on free or reduced meals should be given access to free WIFI. All students are expected to complete assignments on the Chromebook. Not all students have access to WIFI at home. It is unfair to expect that these students need to go to McDonald’s or the library or wherever to do their homework. Many of these students are stuck at home having to care for their younger siblings while their parent/s work. It’s just not right. Also, grades are on Chromebooks as are school communications. This information is inaccessible to these families. It’s wrong to do this to them.

These responses, which predate the COVID-19 pandemic, speak to the essential role that technology plays in schooling and the need to ensure equal access to crucial learning tools.

Attendance and Transportation

Finally, 16 teachers (1%) and 9 principals (1.5%) referred to attendance as an area for improvement. Though some respondents desired stricter attendance policies, others suggested supports to facilitate student attendance. These responses thus overlapped with 31 teachers (2%) and 9 principals (1.5%) who called for more robust transportation systems. As one teacher suggested, “Provide funding to transport children to school who are within the two miles set by the district, but [whose parents] cannot afford a working vehicle and have too many little ones at home to walk. We have to get children to school in order to teach them.” Suggestions also included extending bussing hours to promote student attendance in afterschool activities.

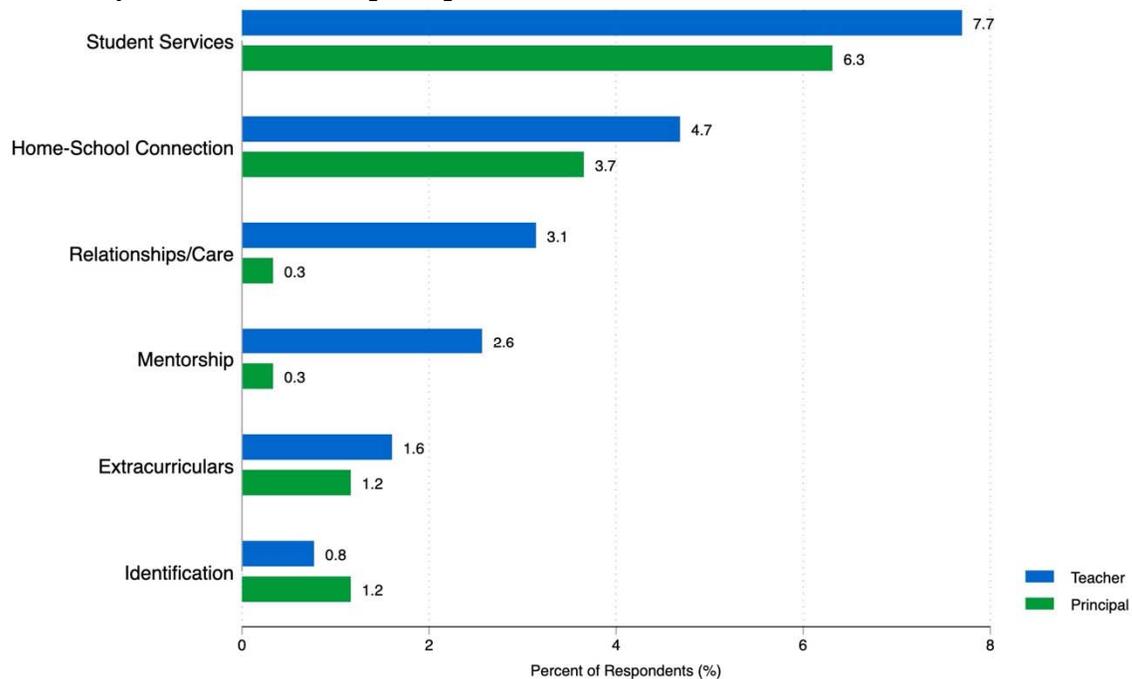
Summary

Many teachers and principals expressed concern about how material inequality contributed to educational inequity. Their responses indicate that meeting student needs outside of school is an essential step towards promoting learning within school. Importantly, the range of respondent suggestions includes solutions that can be generated both within schools and outside of schools.

School Level–Non-Academic

Two hundred ninety teachers (18.6) and 78 principals (13%) referenced non-academic and socially oriented, school-based changes (see Figure 4). These responses focus on areas outside of instruction that can contribute to improved academic outcomes for economically disadvantaged students. Participants centered the role of schools in nurturing students and extending support to families.

Figure 4. Percent of respondents referencing each topic in School Level–Nonacademic. Breakdown by role: teachers and principals



Student Services

One hundred twenty teachers (7.7%) and 38 principals (6.3%) suggested increasing student access to student services and staff. Respondents mentioned a range of services intended to support economically disadvantaged students, including school-facilitated support groups, wrap-around programming, and hiring of guidance counselors, psychologists, and social workers. One principal situated such services in terms of resources, explaining a need for

[m]ore resources, FTE [full-time equivalent employees], etc. available to those schools that have higher economically disadvantaged students. This could include more resources in counseling, behavior support, academics, etc. By having more resources for some non-academic pieces allows us to support those areas and then we can focus on, or the students can focus more on, the academics appropriately.

These respondents converged in their assertion that increasing non-academic supports could positively impact academic outcomes for students.

Home–School Connection

Seventy-three teachers (4.7%) and 22 (3.7%) principals pointed to the importance of developing relationships with families. Such responses refer to school-initiated family connection, whereas another category, “Families,” refers to a need for increased parental involvement, not necessarily initiated by the school. Respondents in this category described the need to build communication and connection between families and schools, with the assumption this would benefit students. One teacher described this as “[w]orking with families to build trust and a collaborative relationship through which family interaction and support of learning could increase.” Some suggested that connecting with families could make families more comfortable and supportive of the goals of education. Other participants suggested that communication with families could make it easier for knowledgeable teachers to refer families to support agencies. Several respondents combined these areas by suggesting that formal in-school programs for families, such as an in-house at-risk support center for families struggling financially, would be helpful.

Relationships and Care

In addition to building relationships with families, 49 teachers (3.1%) and 2 principals (0.3%) cited building relationships between students and staff. Respondents expressed the need for additional time to build relationships with their own students, and wanted students to receive more care in general at school. Exemplifying this sentiment, one teacher wrote: “School should be a soft place to land for all students.” Some teachers simply suggested that students who are economically disadvantaged need flexibility, understanding, connection, and compassion as part of meeting their basic needs. Overlapping with several student-focused categories one teacher wrote: “Make sure all students have their basic needs met: Food, clean clothes, they feel safe while in school, and the feeling they are important and belong.”

Unsurprisingly, this response category overlapped with others. For instance, it is difficult to offer students direct care and strong relationships when schools are understaffed. One teacher explained, “They often need extra attention and instruction to help them build a relationship with at least one trusted adult and I believe we do not have enough resources (teachers, staff, money, etc.) to effectively meet their needs.” Another teacher noted, “I would add more support staff and teachers so there are more caring adults to interact and devote time to each child.” Participants emphasized the necessity of relationships and care, while also recognizing how other elements influenced their capacity to support these relationships.

Mentorship

Though only two principals (0.3%) mentioned mentorship, 40 teachers (2.6%) suggested students would benefit from being connected to adult mentors. These suggestions implied school-led efforts to match students with school staff or adult community members for advice, support, and attention. One respondent spoke to the need for continuity in such initiatives: “Assign them each a mentor, have someone help them get through each educational year. NOT a new person every year, someone to build a relationship with over the years. It could be another teacher, retired educator, business owner or someone in the community?” Mentorship was sometimes tied to teachers’ interest in student mindsets, suggesting that mentorship would help students attain greater academic success by shifting their attitudes toward schooling.

Extracurricular Activities

Twenty-five teachers (1.6%) and a similar proportion of principals (7, or 1.2%) expressed concern about ensuring students’ access to non-academic extracurricular activities. Teachers pointed at financial inequality as a barrier to accessing extracurricular activities. As one teacher suggested, “Continue (or add) voice lessons, band lessons, and orchestra lessons in the music program—otherwise only the families that have the finances and connections for music lessons will receive lessons.” Some suggested removing fees and other barriers for participation for students who are economically disadvantaged: “I would try to give these students access (money, transportation, confidence) to [join] clubs and extra-curricular activities that they often times can’t be a part of.”

Identification

Finally, some participants spoke to the need to identify students who are economically disadvantaged. Twelve teachers (0.8%) and 7 principals (1.2%) suggested clearly identifying such students in order to appropriately direct school-based supports to them. As one teacher noted: “Confidentiality makes it hard for me to do what is best for my students when I am not aware of their situation. Allow me to have that information, and updates as needed.” Other response categories implicitly rely on identifying economically disadvantaged students. These include matching students with mentors, providing school supplies, and providing students with targeted instruction or extra help after school.

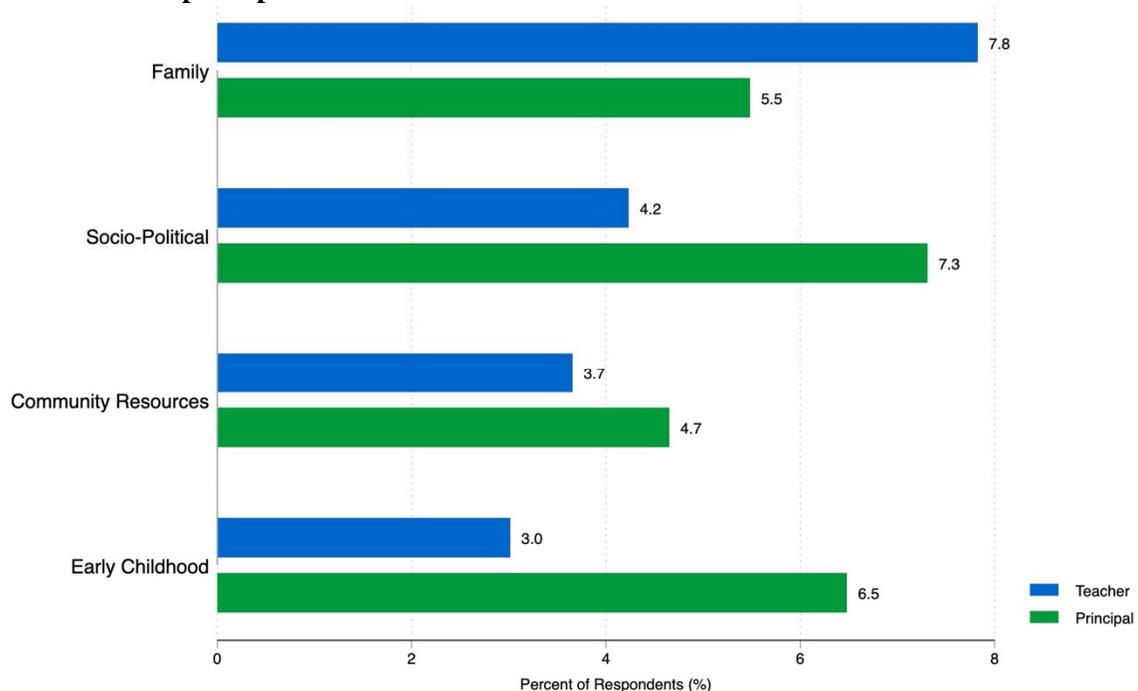
Summary

Many teachers and principals pointed out the need to support students in non-academic ways at school. Many of these suggestions overlap with other categories. For example, increasing accessibility of transportation and waiving activity fees could increase student access to extracurriculars. Reduced class sizes and more support staff could benefit development of relationships and provision of care; and additional school funding could provide more student service staff. The extent to which these categories are intertwined suggests that supporting students through one avenue can create other opportunities for support.

Community Level

Some of the recommendations that teachers provided for addressing inequities in academic success lie at the community level, outside the immediate purview of schools themselves (see Figure 5). We distinguish between four different types of community-level recommendations, which combined make up 17.1% of teachers' and 22.4% of principals' survey responses: 1) calls for family engagement, training, or education; 2) calls for sociopolitical changes related to the distribution of resources across schools as well as policies addressing underlying socioeconomic inequalities between students; 3) calls for resources for families or community services to be provided outside of the school; and 4) calls for access to early childhood education.

Figure 5. Percent of respondents referencing each topic in Community Level. Breakdown by role: teachers and principals



Family

The first type of community-level recommendation directs attention to the role of family in children's educational outcomes. One hundred twenty-two surveyed teachers (7.8%) and 33 principals (5.5%) discussed the need for familial engagement or training in some form. While some teachers simply made general calls to educate or train parents and families, others suggested specific programs such as parenting classes, coaching, or support groups to help promote literacy or inform families about their child's development and education. Several teachers focused on family outreach before kids even reach schools. As one teacher argued, "Parents need to know what to do with their babies." These recommendations may stem from teacher perceptions that students do not receive adequate support at home or from racialized and classed framings of familial engagement. Responses that foreground inadequate family engagement may not consider the challenges faced by families that struggle financially, differential forms of engagement that families can exhibit, or familial divestment from school structures viewed as racist or classist.

Sociopolitical Context

Sixty-six teachers (4.2%) and 44 principals (7.3%) called attention to the broader sociopolitical context within which schools operate, either making broad calls to address socioeconomic inequalities between families or critiquing the distribution of funding across school districts. Several participants pointed out the challenge of addressing inequities in light of stark economic inequities between families. One teacher noted, "To truly make a change for these kids and their families, society as a whole would need to change. Educators/school districts are just one cog in that wheel." Another teacher suggested that to address educational inequities, we need to "make sure students don't have to pay the family bills," hinting that families should be making a living wage rather than depending on their child's employment.

The bulk of recommendations that focus on the broader sociopolitical context discussed school funding and distribution of resources across schools within the state. Respondents called for increased resources and funding and, more specifically, "statewide equitable funding" across schools, with more spending for schools with higher poverty rates or more economically disadvantaged students. As one teacher pointed out, "Economically disadvantaged students often have fewer resources in their schools, lower paid teachers, poorer buildings, etc." Some participants claimed that rural and disadvantaged schools should receive the same, if not more, resources compared with schools in wealthy areas if we want to improve the academic success of economically disadvantaged students. While one principal suggested that charter schools did not get enough state funding as compared with public schools, other participants suggested that too much state funding went into charter schools and vouchers. Finally, one principal pointed to the programs to which money is tied, stating, "Stop adding more initiatives. The state creates more initiatives with money at first, then the money goes away and we still have the program that we have to fund. It is impossible."

Community Resources

The third type of community-level recommendation called broadly for increased access to resources outside of schools and in the community. Fifty-seven teachers (3.6%) and 28 principals (4.7%) made these types of recommendations. Some participants made general suggestions for “more resources,” “more support,” or “more services” for families that are struggling financially. Others provided more specific suggestions for this resource allocation, such as counseling and mental health services for families outside of school, or health-related support that are not hampered by familial access to health insurance. Most of these suggestions focused on providing services that do not yet exist in the community. However, some participants pointed out the importance of connecting families to existing community resources. As one teacher pointed out, we need to “make sure the parents are made more aware of what’s available” and connect them to state, county, or district resources and programs.

Early Childhood Education

Finally, 47 surveyed teachers (3%) and 39 principals (6.5%) discussed the importance of early childhood education in addressing socioeconomic inequities in education. As one teacher pointed out, schools face a key challenge because “the gap happens before [students] enter kindergarten.” For this reason, these respondents argued that the state should invest in early childhood education to “lay a better foundation for little ones entering school.” Recommendations for early childhood education varied. Some respondents called for specific programs such as free daycare for kids from birth to 4 years old; fully funded and mandatory 4K with free wrap-around care for at-risk students; or a comprehensive early literacy program. Others made broader calls for “early intervention programs” or “preschool for all students.” Participants offered varied routes toward achieving the same goal: increasing access to early childhood educational opportunities so students are better prepared for K–12. As one teacher put it, “Early success would in my opinion help everything else fall into place.”

Summary

The recommendations at the community level lie outside the immediate purview of schools. However, they highlight how addressing inequities in academic success requires interventions at multiple levels in addition to school-level changes.

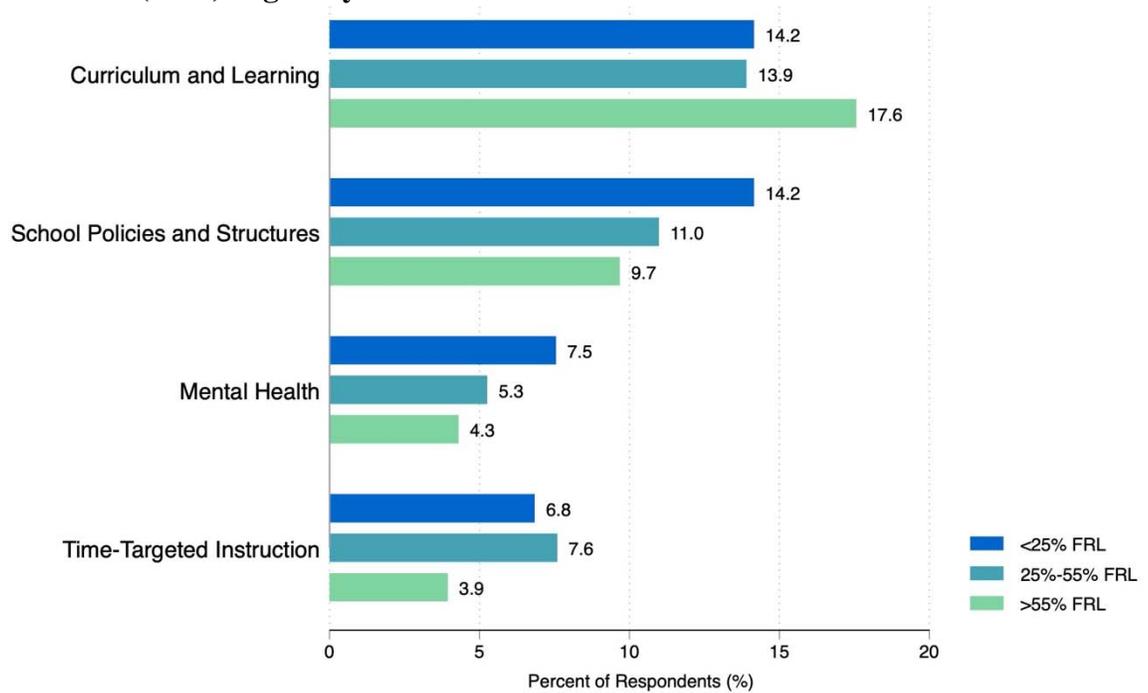
Variation by Eligibility for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch, Grade Served, and Community Type

We next examine categorical variation among teacher and principal responses. As there was relative consistency of response frequency within the categories, we examine incidences in which teacher responses deviate by 3% or more among subgroups, and principal responses deviate 5% or more among subgroups. While this section highlights areas in which we saw variation, it is important to recognize that numerous areas resonated with school staff across diverse settings with similar frequency.

Percentage of Student Body Eligible for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL)

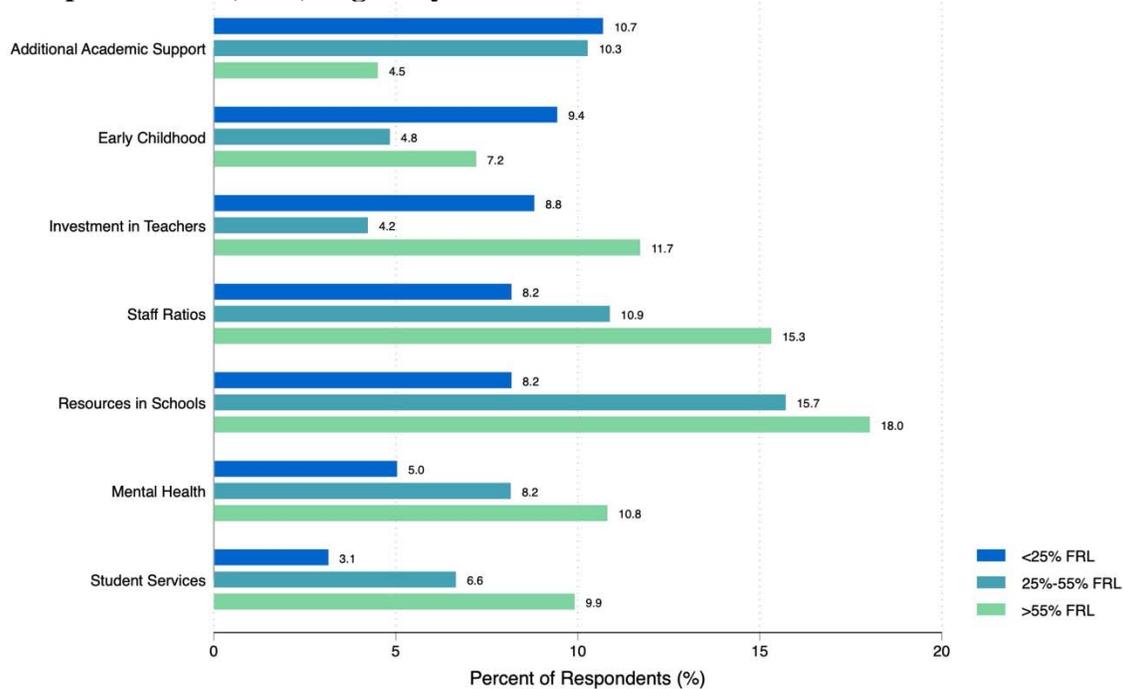
We saw some variance across four categories for teachers and eight categories for principals based on the percentage of students eligible for FRL within respondents' schools (see Figures 6 and 7). Of our sample, 424 teachers (27.2%) and 159 principals (26.5%) were in schools where fewer than 25 percent of students received FRL. Eight hundred fifty-six teachers (55%) and 331 principals (55.1%) served in schools in which 25% to 55% of student received FRL, and 279 teachers (17.9%) and 111 principals (18.5%) worked in schools in which more than 55% of students received FRL.

Figure 6. Percent of teachers referencing each topic by percent student body free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) eligibility



While teachers at schools with relatively low rates of student poverty cited support for mental health (7.55%), this percentage declined to 5.26% for schools serving 25% to 55% students receiving FRL and further to 4.3% for schools where over 55% of students receive FRL. Further, participant references to school structures also declined as the percentage FRL increased. Conversely, teachers at schools serving 55% or greater FRL more frequently cited changes to teaching and learning (17.6%) than the other two groups, which were relatively similar (14.2% and 13.9%) Similarly, they less frequently recommended spending additional time in the school day on targeted instruction for students.

Figure 7. Percent of principals referencing each topic by percent student body free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) eligibility



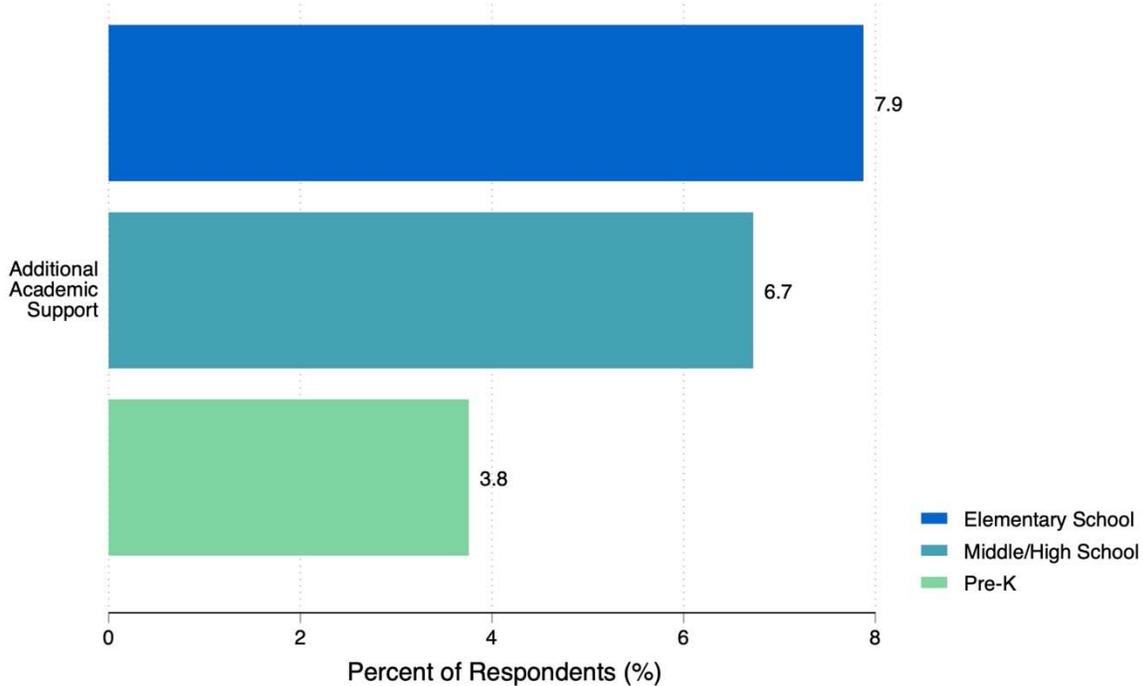
Principals also displayed some variation in response type based on FRL. Principals serving <25% FRL most frequently cited the need for student support in early childhood (9.4%), slightly more than those serving >55% FRL (7.2%) and more than those serving >25% and < 55% FRL (4.8%). Interestingly, whereas teachers at schools serving fewer than 25% FRL less frequently cited mental health concerns compared with other schools, principals serving these schools most frequently cited mental health support (10.8%) compared with 25% to 55% (8.2) and <25% (5.03%). Principals of schools serving 55% FRL spoke most frequently about staff-related issues, including calling for increases in staff (15.32 %), teacher support (11.7 %), and student services (9.91%). With similar high frequency, these principals called for increased resources in schools (18%) and increased resources, generally (19.9%). However, akin to teachers at these schools, principals of 55% FRL schools spoke the least about providing extra academic help for students.

Teachers and principals at 55% FRL or more schools, then, prioritized slightly different recommendations than their peers at other schools. This difference may be attributed in part to the lived experiences of these professionals, who serve a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students and therefore may be better attuned to the needs of students in this group. Additionally, the needs of economically disadvantaged students may appear different based on elements of school contexts otherwise related to the percentage of economically disadvantaged students served. For example, schools serving lower proportions of economically disadvantaged students may have more in-school resources than schools serving higher proportions of economically disadvantaged students.

Grade Level

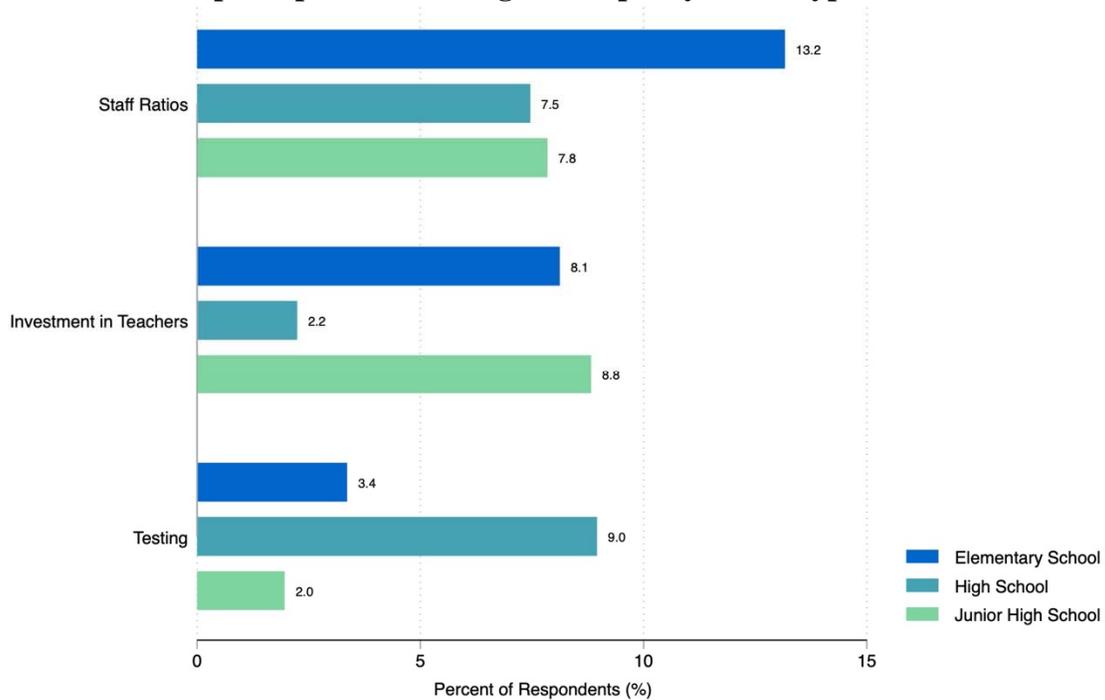
We saw variation across one category for teacher responses and across three categories for principal responses by grade level (see Figures 8 and 9). Of our 1,559 respondents, 351 (22.5%) identified as Pre-Kindergarten teachers, 924 (59.3%) identified as elementary teachers, and 571 (36.6%) identified as middle or high school teachers. Some teachers identified with more than one category based on their professional responsibilities. Three hundred fifty-seven principals (59.4%) served elementary schools, 102 (17%) served middle schools or junior high schools, and 134 (22.3%) served high schools. Eight respondents (1.3%) of principals served schools in which elementary schools were combined with middle and/or high schools; we have excluded this group from this portion of analysis because of the relatively low number of respondents in this category.

Figure 8. Percent of teachers referencing additional academic support by grade level



Discussion of additional academic support appeared more frequently among the responses of elementary teachers compared with other teachers. Whereas Pre-K teachers mentioned additional academic supports such as after school programming and tutoring only 3.7 percent of the time, elementary teachers mentioned these supports 7.9 percent of the time. Middle and high school teachers mentioned these supports 6.7 percent of the time. The relative infrequency of responses among Pre-K teachers may relate to the nature of their work, as school based pre-kindergarten generally takes a half-day format and is not as academically driven as other grade levels.

Figure 9. Percent of principals referencing each topic by school type



We again saw variation regarding academic-related categories among principals of different school levels. High school principals spoke of the need for investing in teachers infrequently (2.2%) compared with principals in elementary schools (8.12%) and middle schools (8.8%). This may relate to the differential expectations for teachers’ knowledge of pedagogical strategies based on the developmental level of their students. High school principals also more frequently discussed changes to testing policies (9%), whereas only 3.6% of elementary school principals and 2% of middle school principals discussed such changes. Elementary school principals most frequently mentioned the need for increased staff (13.2%), while principals at high schools and middle schools called for increased staff 7.5% of the time and 7.8% of the time, respectively. These varied frequencies may relate to the differential levels of independence displayed by elementary students compared to older peers and thus the need for additional teacher support at this level.

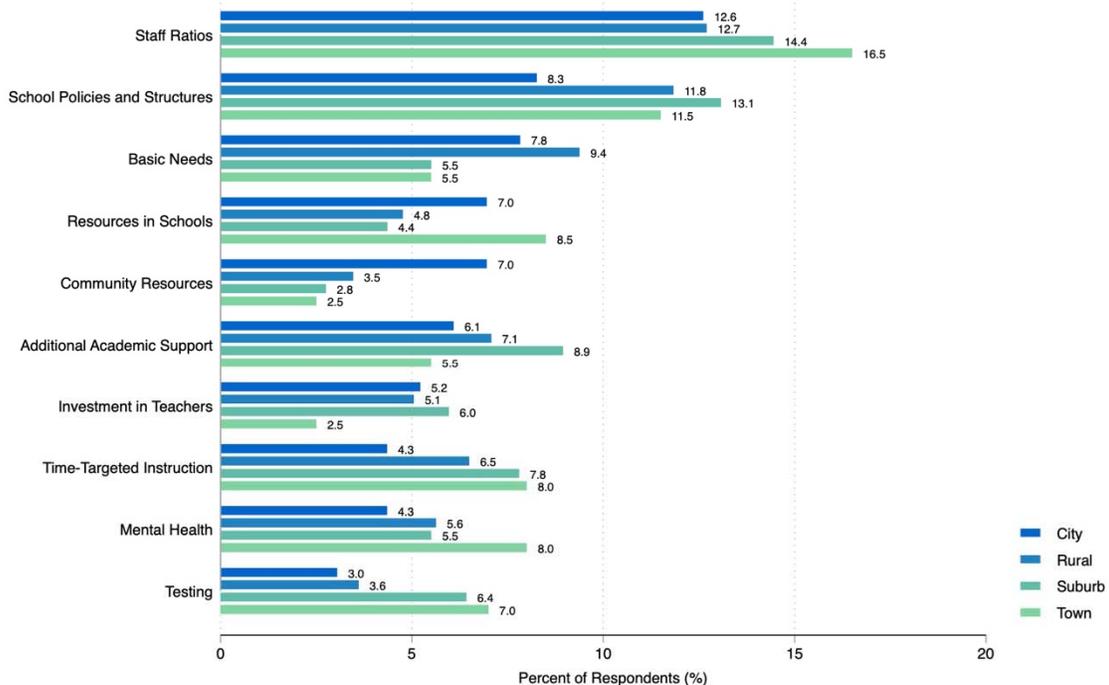
We saw the least variation in teacher and principal responses based on grade level. This relative consistency across topics indicates that the suggestions that teachers and principals have are applicable to students of all ages, rather than specific to a specific developmental stage. Further, the few categories in which we saw differential frequencies related to school-level academic issues. The nature of these topics may relate to the differential nature of academic instruction for students of different ages.

Community Type

We saw the most variation in response frequency by participant community type, with teachers and principals demonstrating variance across ten and six categories, respectively (see

Figures 10 and 11). Of teachers who responded, 230 (14.8%) worked in cities, 693 (44.5%) worked in rural areas, 436 (28%) worked in suburbs, and 200 (12.8%) worked in towns. Of principals surveyed, 105 (17.5%) worked in cities, 238 (39.6%) worked in rural areas, 126 (21%) worked in suburbs, and 130 (21.6%) worked in towns. Two principals did not list their locale and are therefore excluded from this portion of analysis. Looking at patterns in responses across community type helps us understand the variation in concerns held by teachers across different types of communities in Wisconsin. While there was a great deal of consistency across community types overall, there was some variation worth noting.

Figure 10. Percent of teachers referencing each topic by community type

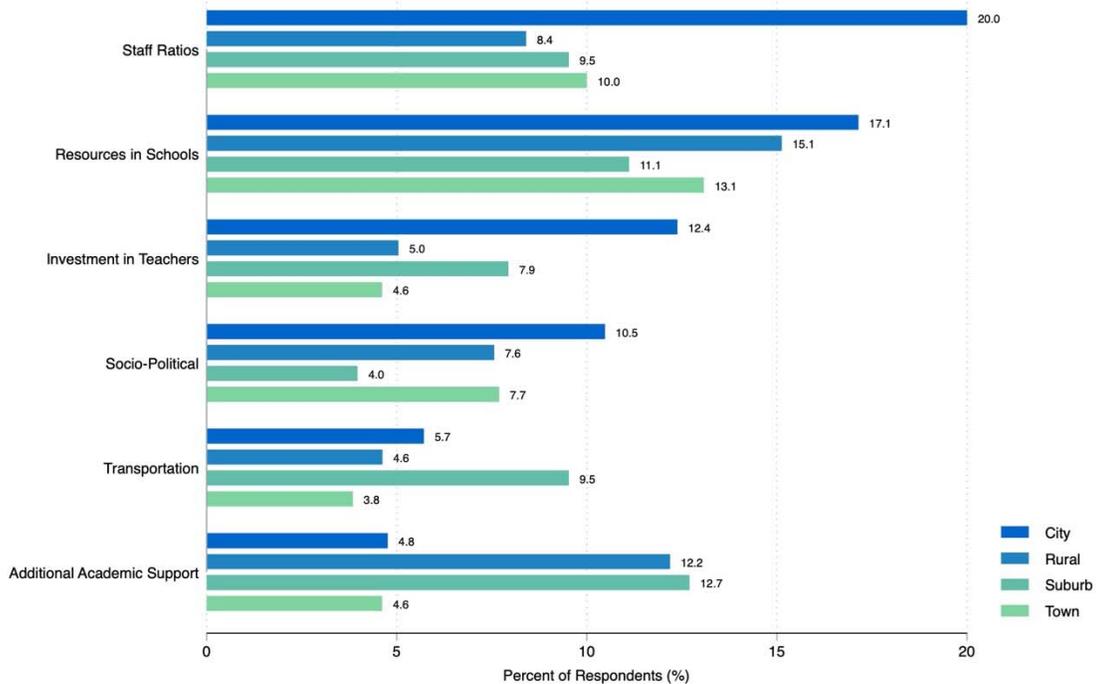


We saw varied frequencies in responses concerning academic instruction and assessment. Suburban teachers frequently mentioned providing additional academic support and making changes to school policies and formats (13.1%), particularly in comparison with teachers in cities (8.3%), and they cited the promise of providing extra academic help for students through tutoring and through before and after-school programming more frequently than other teachers (8.9%). Teachers in towns most frequently called for changes to standardized testing (7%) and increased time for targeted instruction (8%), whereas teachers in cities referenced these two categories with the least frequency (3% and 4.3%, respectively).

Several categories in which we saw varied response frequencies related to personnel and material resources. Teachers in towns cited investment in teachers less frequently than their peers in other districts (2.5%); however, they spoke most frequently of the need for increases in staffing (16.5%). Teachers in towns also referenced the need for additional resources in schools most frequently (8.5%), particularly in relation to rural and suburban teachers (4.8% and 4.4%, respectively).

We saw varied frequencies in three categories outside of academic-related responses. Urban teachers most frequently cited the need for out-of-school resources at the community level (7%), whereas teachers in towns mentioned this subject with the least frequency (2.5%). Conversely, urban teachers least frequently discussed supporting student mental health (4.3%), whereas teachers in towns recommended mental health supports more frequently (8%) than their colleagues in other districts. Rural teachers most frequently mentioned students' physical needs (9.4%), whereas this response was less frequent among teachers in suburbs and towns (both at 5.5%.)

Figure 11. Percent of principals referencing each topic by community type



Principals in rural areas most frequently called for increased resources (18.49%), with principals in cities trailing closely behind (18.1%). Teachers in suburbs called for resources with the lowest frequency (11.9%). Interestingly, urban principals specifically called for increased staff much more frequently than any of the other groups (20%), with rural (8.4%), suburban (9.52%), and town-based teachers (10%) calling for staff increases with more comparable frequency. Similarly, urban principals called for investments in teachers most frequently (12.4%) relative to their colleagues in other districts. Principals in cities also more frequently cited the need to effect change at the sociopolitical level (10.48%), whereas principals in suburbs cited sociopolitical changes with the least frequency (4%).

Rural and suburban principals recommended providing additional academic support with more frequency. Urban principals and principals in towns, by contrast, suggested the addition of such supports with 4.8% and 4.6% frequency, respectively. Suburban principals also most frequently cited the importance of ensuring student transportation to and from school, and after programs (9.5%). Principals in towns mentioned transportation the least (3.6%).

In sum, we found several patterns in teacher and principal responses, depending on the type of community in which the school resides. Both teachers and principals demonstrated variation in response frequency pertaining to academic changes. However, teacher responses additionally varied in relation to student physical needs and mental health supports in schools, whereas principal responses varied regarding changes to broader sociopolitical contexts and the need for transportation. Further, at times, participants in cities and rural areas responded with closer frequency to one another than either did to suburbs or towns, indicating that elements of rural areas and cityscapes may have more in common regarding the challenges they face than is often assumed.

Conclusion

Teachers and principals hold practical experience that can largely inform and benefit education policy. The range of responses featured in this report illustrates the varied elements that can be leveraged to better serve economically disadvantaged students. Though we saw some variation in responses based on school contexts, many of these responses appear with similar frequency across contexts—indicating promise for making broader changes that impact all schools. It is also important to note that participants were asked to prioritize the changes that seemed most important to them. However, this does not preclude their potential agreement with other participants’ recommendations.

These data were gathered before COVID-19 forced us to rethink schooling, but much of the input from participants remains applicable to the current crisis. Nearly a third of participants referenced the multi-faceted needs of students and families, many of which may be heightened or exacerbated by the economic losses associated with COVID-19. Principals and teachers alike called for increased investment in public schools, whether through specific calls to increase staffing and provide afterschool programs, or more general calls for better financial support for schools. The survey responses of 2,200+ teachers and 700+ principals across the state of Wisconsin can thus serve to highlight which elements to prioritize when serving students now, while also providing guidance to support Wisconsin schools in the future.