Serving Those With the Greatest Needs Will Benefit All Students

Results From a COVID-19 Education Survey

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic will severely impact K-12 education budgets across the country. As of early summer, 24 states had alerted school districts to expect revenue cuts.[1] With fewer resources, states and school districts will need to think carefully about how to allocate their finite resources. It will be critically important that they find ways to continue to serve the students with the greatest needs, including those in foster care, involved with the juvenile justice system, or experiencing homelessness. We propose that in doing so, they may be able to simultaneously improve systems for all students.

To find out how states and districts can meet the needs of these — and other — special populations of students[2] amid the risk of COVID-19, we surveyed leaders in systems of care across the country, including those in education, social service agencies, nonprofits, and the juvenile justice system. We asked them how they're using their time differently due to COVID-19, what the most significant barriers are that they and their students face, and what states and districts might do to support them during this crisis.[3] Although staff cuts are often one of the first reductions in even modest revenue shortages of 2 to 3%,[4] our survey results suggest that would be a mistake.

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Survey Responses

Based on the responses to our survey, we found that 20% of leaders across systems of care, including those serving the most vulnerable students, had their jobs entirely repurposed in response to COVID-19, while another 42% expanded the types of services they provide to young people and their families. These data suggest what many already suspected: This moment requires more people — both in number and in type of role — to do more of the things that might be outside their job descriptions to meet the needs of special populations of students. (Note: Tables A8-A12 in the Appendix include a detailed description of the specific activities in each category.)

How leaders from systems of care spend their time changed during COVID-19. As shown in Figure 1, assuming an unchanged 50-hour work week, respondents increased the amount of time they spend ensuring access to technology and school supplies by 60%, from five hours to eight hours a week.

But focusing a greater number of hours on expanding technology access likely necessitates fewer hours on other critical activities. In fact, respondents reported spending on average four fewer hours a week focused on building and maintaining relationships with youth and families, as well as ensuring they receive high-quality care, academic support, and other services supporting their lives outside of school. Across a city or community, that amounts to hundreds of fewer hours a week spent providing the kind of services youth and families need most.

Figure 1 | **How Leaders Have Spent Their Time Before and During COVID-19**
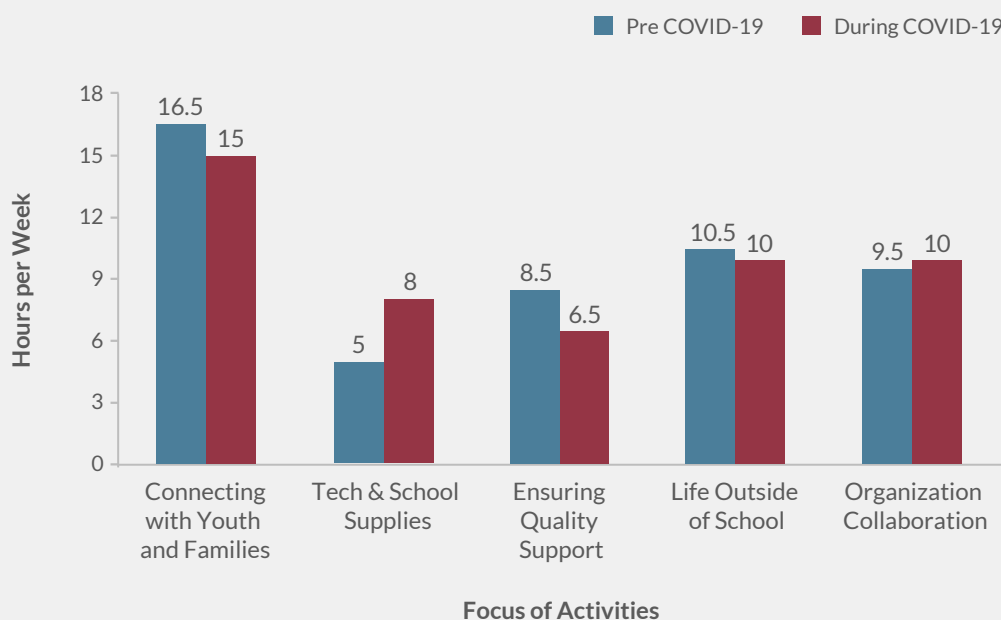
N=55

But it is important to note that there are exceptions. The organizations that are experiencing success noted that they have been intentional about maintaining a focus on nurturing meaningful relationships.

> *We were lucky enough to get a Payroll Protection loan so we were able to give our staff a small pay increase. This has helped to keep morale up and keep the staff focused on continuing to help the clients. I think our greatest asset has been our ability to use this time to forge closer relationships with the clients. They see the sacrifices that staff are making and most recognize that we are all in this together.*
> – Nonprofit Leader

How respondents have spent their time before and during COVID-19 was most stable among public agencies, including juvenile justice systems. But for nonprofits and others, COVID-19 significantly shifted how respondents spend their time across a range of typical activities.[5] As shown below, respondents working at nonprofits reported spending 9.5 more hours per week on access to technology and school supplies, and 10.5 fewer hours connecting with youth and families and ensuring they're receiving high-quality support. Refer to the Appendix for more detailed data.

Table 1

How COVID-19 Affected How Leaders Across Systems of Care Spend Their Time

Field	Connecting with Youth and Families	Tech & School Supplies	Ensuring Quality Support	Life Outside of School	Organization Collaboration
Nonprofits (n=4)	-7.5 hours	+9.5 hours	-3 hours	+2 hours	-1 hour
Agencies (n=9)	-2 hours	0	-1 hour	0	+2 hours
Justice System (n=5)	-2 hours	+3 hours	-1 hour	0	-1 hour
Schools (n=16)	0	+4 hours	-2.5 hours	-2 hours	+0.5 hour
No Response (n=20)	-5 hours	-7 hours	-8 hours	+5 hours	+6 hours

Nonprofits and schools simply have fewer hours per week to perform many critical functions and provide essential services to special populations of students. And facing a significant economic downturn, it is likely that they will have fewer resources and fewer staff to support children in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or involved in the juvenile justice system.

Even though the survey was conducted in the early months of the pandemic, respondents already felt that time and money were significant barriers to serving their students and communities well. Specifically, our respondents cited staff capacity and funding concerns as the greatest barriers to providing high-quality services to the young people in their communities. The graph below illustrates barriers that were rated as one of the top two most significant challenges for leaders serving special populations of youth. At the core of these concerns is the worry that due to COVID-19 and its economic consequences, child-serving systems will not have the resources or staff to provide students and their families with the individualized attention that they need.

Figure 2 > **Most Commonly Reported Barriers to Serving Special Populations of Youth**

N=55
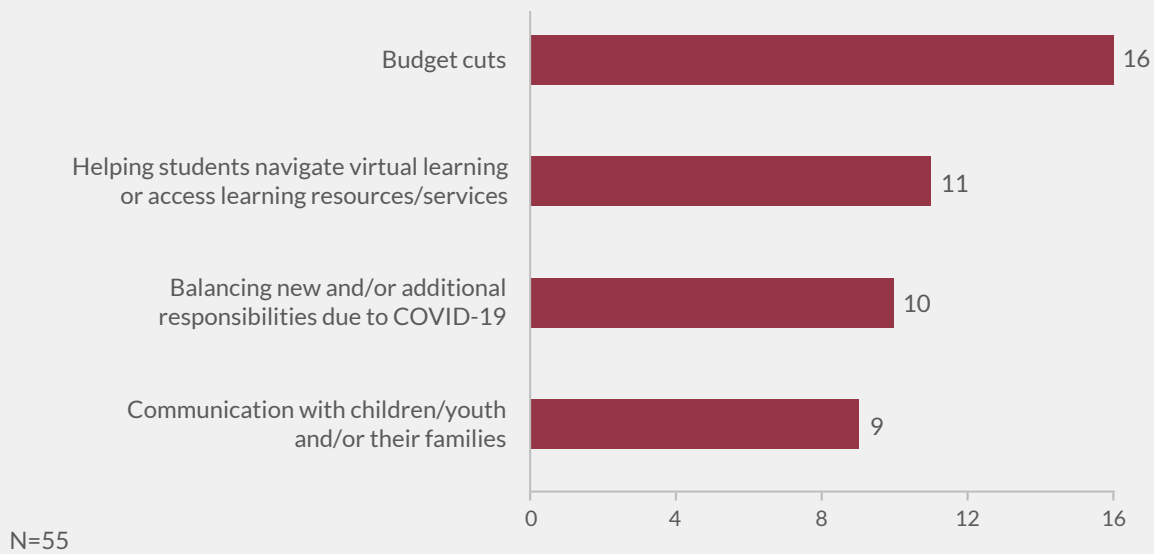
We also asked respondents to share what they are most proud of in their organization's response to COVID-19. Almost all respondents focused on their people — and not tangible goods like hot spots or meals — as the element that made the biggest difference in the lives of the young people and families they serve. The respondents emphasized how well their colleagues and staff rose to the challenge and responded with empathy, courage, and a focus on students' needs.

> *"I am infinitely proud of the courage, flexibility, and creativity of my staff stepping up to meet this challenge. They have shown grace to each other and their students."*
> – Superintendent

These responses underscore that when confronted with a disruptive crisis that threatens critical services and supports for students and families, it is people who can overcome those challenges. It's the professionals who compose systems of care who can make sure students and families get what they need and who do much more than just their jobs. They also serve as information clearinghouses, provide referrals, and make the connections necessary for a system of care to function. And facing a pandemic and significant budget shortfalls, we need to make sure these people can do their work.

> *"[I am most proud of] the attitude and effort of our staff, from our senior leaders to our classroom instructors — who have really risen to the occasion, tackled their fears and doubts head on, and tried to do their very best for students in a less-than-ideal situation."*
> – Nonprofit Leader

Two Approaches to Consider

One approach to managing the problem of providing high-quality services in a time of limited resources is to think first about the people most affected by the crisis, engage with them to better understand what will most help them, and then work with them to identify the key strategies to meet their needs. The idea is to start with a shared universal goal that we want for all young people and their families — e.g., high-quality education and social services — and then center the people and communities facing the greatest challenges, building systems and interventions targeted specifically to their needs, rather than targeting the "median" or most common experience when designing and delivering services. This approach, often called targeted universalism,[6] addresses the greatest needs and, as a result, creates systems that benefit all by solving problems that typical users also experience but might not identify or seek to address.

Targeted universalism shares some common language and methods with human-centered design,[7] an approach to creating solutions for problems and opportunities through a focus on the needs, contexts, behaviors, and emotions of the people that the solutions will serve. A human-centered design approach begins by defining a problem from the point of view of the person experiencing it and engages them throughout the process of identifying potential solutions, testing ideas, and reflecting on progress.

For example, when schools closed and millions of students lost access to food services they desperately needed, school districts across the country developed innovative strategies and infrastructure to distribute free breakfast and lunch. In many cases, they did this without any eligibility requirements. This approach was designed to meet the needs of children from low-income families. But as the economy collapsed and tens of millions of Americans filed for unemployment, there was a system in place to support those newly in need of basic food access.

In contrast, moving classes online, while required due to COVID-19, meets the educational needs of an imagined "typical" American public school student. But there are millions of American children who lack access to the necessary technology for online courses, or they simply lack internet access or broadband sufficient for online instruction. Unlike the example of districts designing new ways to get food to children and families, this approach overlooks millions and lacks the flexibility to meet students' evolving needs.

In this case, organizing budget decisions around the supports that meet the needs of special populations of students, such as students experiencing homelessness, in the foster care system, involved in the juvenile justice system, who are pregnant and parenting, or who face other challenges, will lead to greater overall investments in relationships with youth and families, creating an improved system better prepared to meet the needs of all students.

Conclusion

With shrinking K-12 education budgets, states and districts should resist the short-term fix to their financial problems. A shortsighted solution that balances the budget today risks incurring far greater costs down the road as needs go unmet and crises become catastrophic. In addition to the actual costs of later intervention, there are also the extraordinary real-time human costs of experiencing this sustained trauma and the opportunity costs of squandered potential.

It is critical that states and districts strategically allocate their finite resources to maintain, if not to improve, the quality of services they currently provide to students and their families, especially students who already face the most significant obstacles. The responses to this survey suggest that budget decisions ought to prioritize investing in well-trained people who are able to build and sustain meaningful relationships.

Appendix

Methodology and Sample

Bellwether conducted an online survey of leaders across systems of care, including educators and social workers as well as professionals serving in nonprofits, governmental agencies, and the juvenile justice system. We distributed the survey through Bellwether's network, targeted to professionals who work with students experiencing disruptions to their education pathway. This included young people in foster care, experiencing homelessness, involved in the juvenile justice system, pregnant and parenting, or facing other barriers to remaining engaged in school.

People we reached out to originally were encouraged to share the survey with their networks. Additionally, we shared the survey across Bellwether's social media networks. We originally received 134 responses to the survey. However, the final pool of viable responses — those with at least 25% of the survey completed — was 55. The analyses in this brief were based only on those respondents with at least 25% of the survey completed. Due to how we distributed and advertised this survey, there is no response rate.

Table A1
Respondents by State

State	Count	Percentage		State	Count	Percentage
Alabama	1	2%		Massachusetts	1	2%
Arkansas	2	4%		Missouri	4	7%
California	7	13%		New York	2	4%
Colorado	2	4%		Ohio	1	2%
Connecticut	1	2%		Pennsylvania	2	4%
Delaware	1	2%		South Carolina	1	2%
Florida	1	2%		Tennessee	8	15%
Georgia	3	5%		Texas	4	7%
Illinois	2	4%		Utah	2	4%
Indiana	2	4%		Washington	2	4%
Louisiana	1	2%		Unidentified	5	9%

Table A2
Responses by Field

Field	Count	Percentage
Nonprofits	4	7%
Agencies	9	16%
Justice System	5	9%
Schools	16	29%
No Response	20	36%
Funder	1	2%

Table A3
Change to Work Due to COVID-19

Field	Work Repurposed	Percent	Expanded	Percent	No Change	Percent	No Response	Percent
Nonprofits (n=4)	2	50%	1	25%	0	0%	1	25%
Agencies (n=9)	3	33%	5	56%	0	0%	1	11%
Justice System (n=5)	1	20%	3	60%	1	20%	0	0%
Schools (n=16)	4	25%	11	69%	0	0%	1	6%
No Response (n=20)	1	5%	2	10%	1	5%	16	80%
Funder (n=1)	0	0%	1	100%	0	0%	0	0%

Table A4
Populations of Students Respondents Serve

Question: With which groups of children and/or youth do you most commonly work?	Count	Percent
I work with all types of children/youth	31	56%
Children/youth who are truant	9	16%
Children/youth who are experiencing homelessness	17	31%
Children/youth who are receiving special education or English language services	20	36%
Children/youth who are incarcerated or on probation/parole	12	22%
Children/youth who are in foster care	16	29%
Migrant or undocumented children/youth	15	27%
Children/youth who are in need of mental health/emotional support and intervention	22	40%
I don't work with children/youth at all	4	7%

Table A5
Time Spent Before COVID-19 by Activity Category

Field	Connecting with Youth and Families	Hours	Tech & School Supplies	Hours	Ensuring Quality Support	Hours	Life Outside of School	Hours	Organization Collaboration	Hours
Nonprofits (n=4)	61%	30.4	0%	0.0	14%	7.0	5%	2.4	20%	10.1
Agencies (n=9)	39%	19.6	12%	6.0	14%	6.9	13%	6.3	22%	11.2
Justice System (n=5)	15%	7.4	3%	1.5	16%	8.2	52%	25.8	14%	7.1
Schools (n=16)	27%	13.6	11%	5.7	21%	10.3	23%	11.4	18%	9.0
No Response (n=20)	21%	10.6	19%	9.6	19%	9.6	21%	10.6	19%	9.6
Funder (n=1)	62%	31.1	7%	3.6	9%	4.7	5%	2.7	16%	7.8
Weighted Average	33%	16.7	10%	4.9	17%	8.6	21%	10.4	19%	9.3

Note: Hours based on a 50-hour work week.

Table A6
Time Spent During COVID-19 by Activity Category

Field	Connecting with Youth and Families	Hours	Tech & School Supplies	Hours	Ensuring Quality Support	Hours	Life Outside of School	Hours	Organization Collaboration	Hours
Nonprofits (n=4)	46%	23.0	19%	9.4	8%	4.0	9%	4.6	18%	9.1
Agencies (n=9)	36%	17.9	12%	5.9	13%	6.3	13%	6.5	27%	13.5
Justice System (n=5)	11%	5.6	9%	4.7	15%	7.3	52%	25.8	13%	6.6
Schools (n=16)	27%	13.5	20%	9.9	15%	7.7	19%	9.5	19%	9.4
No Response (n=20)	31%	15.4	5%	2.3	3%	1.5	31%	15.4	31%	15.4
Funder (n=1)	48%	23.8	21%	10.4	8%	3.9	14%	7.2	10%	4.8
Weighted Average	30%	15.1	16%	8.2	13%	6.6	20%	10.1	20%	10.0

Note: Hours based on a 50-hour work week.

Table A7
How COVID-19 Affected How Time Is Spent

Field	Connecting with Youth and Families	Hours	Tech & School Supplies	Hours	Ensuring Quality Support	Hours	Life Outside of School	Hours	Organization Collaboration	Hours
Nonprofits (n=4)	-15%	-7.5	19%	9.4	-6%	-3.0	4%	2.1	-2%	-1.0
Agencies (n=9)	-3%	-1.7	0%	-0.1	-1%	-0.7	0%	0.2	5%	2.3
Justice System (n=5)	-4%	-1.9	6%	3.2	-2%	-0.9	0%	0.1	-1%	-0.5
Schools (n=16)	0%	-0.1	8%	4.2	-5%	-2.6	-4%	-1.9	1%	0.4
No Response (n=20)	10%	4.8	-15%	-7.3	-16%	-8.1	10%	4.8	12%	5.8
Funder (n=1)	-15%	-7.4	13%	6.7	-2%	-0.8	9%	4.4	-6%	-3.0
Weighted Average	-3%	-1.6	6%	3.2	-4%	-2.0	-1%	-0.3	1%	0.6

Note: Hours based on a 50-hour work week.

Table A8
Detailed Table: Connecting with Youth and Families

Field	Accessing School Data		Contacting School Staff		Contacting Youth and Families		Contacting Others		Other	
	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19
Nonprofits (n=4)	18%	11%	33%	22%	4%	4%	5%	9%	0%	0%
Agencies (n=9)	6%	4%	9%	5%	8%	11%	8%	8%	7%	8%
Justice System (n=5)	2%	1%	3%	2%	5%	6%	3%	2%	0%	1%
Schools (n=16)	9%	9%	6%	8%	3%	2%	3%	3%	4%	6%
No Response (n=20)	0%	2%	2%	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%	19%	22%
Funder (n=1)	-10%	5%	3%	0%	10%	9%	15%	14%	20%	24%
Weighted Average	8%	7%	8%	7%	5%	5%	5%	5%	7%	6%

Table A9
Detailed Table: Providing Access to Technology and Other School Supplies

Field	Technology		School Supplies		Other	
	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19
Nonprofits (n=4)	0%	12%	0%	7%	0%	0%
Agencies (n=9)	3%	5%	2%	3%	6%	4%
Justice System (n=5)	0%	5%	3%	1%	0%	3%
Schools (n=16)	3%	12%	3%	4%	6%	4%
No Response (n=20)	0%	2%	2%	3%	17%	0%
Funder (n=1)	1%	15%	6%	6%	0%	0%
Weighted Average	**2%**	**10%**	**3%**	**4%**	**5%**	**3%**

Table A10
Detailed Table: Ensuring Quality Support

Field	Supportive Caregiver		Academic Support		Instruction		Other	
	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19
Nonprofits (n=4)	0%	1%	7%	3%	7%	4%	0%	0%
Agencies (n=9)	5%	5%	5%	4%	3%	3%	1%	0%
Justice System (n=5)	7%	6%	4%	3%	0%	1%	5%	5%
Schools (n=16)	3%	2%	7%	5%	8%	5%	3%	3%
No Response (n=20)	0%	0%	2%	3%	0%	0%	17%	0%
Funder (n=1)	2%	2%	4%	2%	4%	4%	0%	0%
Weighted Average	**3%**	**3%**	**6%**	**4%**	**5%**	**4%**	**3%**	**2%**

Table A11
Detailed Table: Life Outside of School

Field	Safety		Mental Health		Health Care Access		Food Access		Financial Support	
	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19
Nonprofits (n=4)	0%	0%	5%	9%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Agencies (n=9)	6%	5%	1%	0%	0%	0%	3%	4%	1%	2%
Justice System (n=5)	40%	38%	5%	5%	1%	1%	3%	4%	0%	0%
Schools (n=16)	6%	3%	4%	3%	1%	1%	3%	5%	0%	1%
No Response (n=20)	1%	3%	1%	3%	0%	0%	1%	3%	1%	0%
Funder (n=1)	2%	2%	2%	2%	0%	1%	0%	3%	0%	2%
Weighted Average	**9%**	**6%**	**3%**	**3%**	**1%**	**0%**	**2%**	**4%**	**0%**	**1%**

Field	Housing		Transportation		Family Visitation		Family Illness		Other	
	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19
Nonprofits (n=4)	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Agencies (n=9)	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%
Justice System (n=5)	0%	0%	2%	1%	0%	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%
Schools (n=16)	2%	0%	1%	1%	0%	1%	0%	1%	5%	4%
No Response (n=20)	1%	0%	2%	3%	2%	2%	2%	2%	11%	15%
Funder (n=1)	0%	0%	2%	2%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%
Weighted Average	**1%**	**0%**	**1%**	**1%**	**0%**	**1%**	**0%**	**1%**	**3%**	**3%**

Table A12
Detailed Table: Organization Collaboration

Field	Working Together		Checking in on Youth Needs		Obtaining Referrals		Other	
	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19
Nonprofits (n=4)	20%	18%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Agencies (n=9)	15%	16%	6%	9%	2%	1%	0%	1%
Justice System (n=5)	4%	4%	7%	6%	3%	2%	0%	0%
Schools (n=16)	8%	10%	5%	5%	2%	2%	3%	2%
No Response (n=20)	10%	17%	5%	9%	2%	3%	3%	2%
Funder (n=1)	4%	4%	12%	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Weighted Average	**10%**	**11%**	**5%**	**6%**	**2%**	**2%**	**2%**	**1%**

Table A13
Barriers to Serving Youth Well

Respondents were asked to rank the following 1 to 5, with 1 being the most significant barrier. This table represents the average response by field.

Field	Budget cuts	Communication with my colleagues	Communication with other agencies	Communication with children/youth and/or their families	Lack of staff capacity to meet needs	Accessing information related to individual children/youth
Nonprofits (n=4)	1.5	.	.	4.0	3.0	4.0
Agencies (n=9)	2.3	5.0	2.5	3.5	3.0	3.3
Justice System (n=5)	.	.	2.0	2.5	5.0	.
Schools (n=16)	2.3	3.8	3.5	3.2	3.1	4.0
No Response (n=20)	1.8	2.7	3.0	1.0	3.0	3.0
Weighted Average	**2.1**	**3.5**	**2.8**	**2.8**	**3.2**	**3.3**

Field	Accessing information related to resources or guidance	Lack of flexibility to meet the child's/youth's greatest needs right now	Balancing new and/or additional responsibilities due to COVID-19	My personal shift to working from home	Helping students navigate virtual learning or access learning resources/services	Other
Nonprofits (n=4)	3.0	.	3.0	5.0	3.0	1.0
Agencies (n=9)	2.0	2.5	3.0	5.0	2.0	5.0
Justice System (n=5)	5.0	1.0	2.0	4.0	2.5	.
Schools (n=16)	3.5	3.4	2.8	3.3	2.0	1.8
No Response (n=20)	5.0	2.8	2.7	4.0	2.8	3.7
Weighted Average	**3.8**	**2.9**	**2.8**	**4.0**	**2.4**	**2.7**

Endnotes

1   Marguerite Roza, "What the Financial Turmoil Means for Public Education: Part 3," webinar, Edunomics Lab, Georgetown University, May 2020, https://edunomicslab.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Fin.-Turmoi-Part-3-FINAL.pdf.

2   "Special populations" commonly refers to the aggregated subgroups of students in out-of-home care, experiencing homelessness, learning English as an additional language, pregnant or parenting, or with a disability. It is not a universally defined term because in some states or districts, additional subgroups may also be included.

3   See Appendix on page 7 for a description of the methodology and survey sample.

4   Roza, "What the Financial Turmoil Means for Public Education: Part 3," https://edunomicslab.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Fin.-Turmoi-Part-3-FINAL.pdf.

5   The n-size of this group is four respondents, meaning that it is subject to greater variation from changes for just one person.

6   john a. powell, Stephen Menendian, and Wendy Ake, "Targeted Universalism: Policy & Practice," Haas Institute, May 2019, https://belonging.berkeley.edu/targeteduniversalism.

7   Jason Weeby, "Creating More Effective, Efficient, and Equitable Education Policies with Human-Centered Design," Bellwether Education Partners, February 27, 2018, https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/creating-more-effective-efficient-and-equitable-education-policies-human-centered-design.

Acknowledgments

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About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice.

Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.