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SURVEY FINDINGS

K-12 Public School Employee Views on Finances, Employment Outlook, and Safety Concerns Due to COVID-19

About this report

This report was prepared by Rivka Liss-Levinson, Ph.D. (Center for State and Local Government Excellence at ICMA-RC) and describes results of a survey conducted with Greenwald Research. Thank you to Anne Phelan for copy editing this report and Rob Maguire Designs.

Executive Summary

This report presents the results for a subset of 494 K-12 public school employees who participated in an October 2020 national online survey of 1,205 state and local government employees. The survey was conducted by the Center for State and Local Government Excellence (SLGE) at ICMA-RC and Greenwald Research, and assessed public sector employee views on the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on their employment outlook, general concerns about COVID-19, perceptions of their finances, and general satisfaction with their employer and their benefits.

Where applicable, comparisons are made between these 494 survey respondents and the 711 other government employees who participated in the October 2020 survey. Further, when available, comparisons are made between the 494 K-12 employees surveyed in October and an earlier (March 2020) SLGE/Greenwald Research survey of 400 K-12 public school employees.

15 Key Survey Findings

- 1** In October 2020, **53 percent of respondents worked for schools holding** (or planning to hold) **classes via a hybrid of in-person and online/remote learning**, while about 1 in 3 worked for schools conducting classes fully online/through remote learning.
- 2** **41 percent of K-12 employees** reported that they **are working more hours** (either officially or unofficially) **in October than they were prior to the COVID-19 pandemic**. This is most often due to the extra work that online/remote work entails (78 percent), an increased number of parent or student meetings/communications (52 percent), and an increased number of work meetings/communications (50 percent).
- 3** In October, **55 percent of K-12 employees and 35 percent of other government employees reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the nature of their job**. While 46 percent of K-12 employees rated the adjustment as extremely or very difficult, fewer than half as many other government employees did (22 percent).
- 4** While **6 in 10 K-12 employees who are parents of children under the age of 18 have had to work from home while taking care of their kids** for a lengthy period of time, fewer than 4 in 10 other government employees have had to do so.
- 5** **K-12 employees were significantly more likely to perceive themselves to be at risk of exposure to COVID at work than other government employees**, with 60 percent of K-12 employees (vs. 38 percent of other government employees) feeling that they are at very or extremely high risk.
- 6** **K-12 employees most often reported feeling stressed (63 percent), burnt out/fatigued (54 percent), and/or anxious (47 percent) at work** due to the pandemic. Compared to other government employees, K-12 employees were significantly more likely to report feeling stressed and/or burnt out/fatigued.
- 7** **Regarding concerns about their job going forward**, K-12 employees are most likely to be concerned about keeping their family safe from contracting COVID-19, staying protected from contracting the virus at work, and/or having their employee benefits package reduced in some way. **K-12 employees were more likely than other government employees to be very or extremely concerned about most issues**, especially keeping their family safe from contracting the virus (61 percent vs. 48 percent), and staying protected from contracting the virus at work (61 percent vs. 43 percent).

15 Key Survey Findings CONT.

- 8** In October, **K-12 employees were significantly more likely than other government employees to feel that** the pandemic has made the public more aware of the importance of what they do (58 percent for K-12 vs. 35 percent for other government). However, they were also significantly more likely than other government employees to report that **the risks they are taking during the pandemic are not on par with their compensation (55 percent vs. 44 percent), and that working during the pandemic has made them consider changing jobs (38 percent vs. 25 percent).**
- 9** Among K-12 survey respondents, **6 in 10 reported that they and their family have been negatively impacted financially by the COVID-19 pandemic**, while half of other government employees did.
- 10** Prior to the pandemic, **only 29 percent of K-12 employees** and 30 percent of other government employees **had a fully funded emergency fund.**
- 11** K-12 employees were significantly more likely than other government employees (52 percent vs. 41 percent) to report that they **have reduced the amount they are spending** in comparison to what it would have been had the pandemic not occurred.
- 12** In October, K-12 employees were significantly more likely than other government employees to be **concerned about being able to save enough to be financially secure throughout retirement** (48 percent vs. 39 percent).
- 13** **K-12 employees' general satisfaction with their employer showed a sharp decline over time**, from 69 percent being very or extremely satisfied in March 2020 to 44 percent being very or extremely satisfied in October 2020.
- 14** In October, K-12 employees were **most satisfied with the quality of their colleagues/coworkers and the ability to serve their community (both 58 percent), their job security (57 percent), and the personal satisfaction they get from their job (56 percent).** They were least satisfied with their salary (27 percent), the potential for career advancement (25 percent), and nontraditional benefits (22 percent). **For all 13 job elements asked about, the percentage of employees reporting that they were very or extremely satisfied declined from March to October.** These decreases were most pronounced for ability to serve the community, job security, and work/life balance, which all dropped at least 20 percentage points.
- 15** In October, **45 percent of K-12 employees agreed that people who retire from jobs in K-12 education are able to live comfortably in retirement**, a decrease of 6 percentage points from March. Even fewer felt that their employer does a good job of preparing them for retirement (37 percent in March and 34 percent in October).

Introduction

February 2021 marks one year since detection of the first community transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the United States.ⁱ As of February 1, 2021, the United States has accounted for more than 26 million COVID-19 cases and 441,000 deaths, an outsized portion of the more than 103 million cases and 2.2 million COVID-related deaths that have been recorded around the world.ⁱⁱ Many areas continue to experience a surge in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths.

As the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines begins across the United States and several other countries, the nation continues to observe the crucial role that state and local government workers play in keeping the country running. From medical personnel and school educators to public safety and public works professionals, approximately 18.6 million individuals are employed by state and local government.

Jurisdictions across the nation continue to face significant public health and economic challenges, with surges in cases overwhelming many hospitals and continued restrictions on businesses hampering a quick economic recovery. To ensure that state and local governments have a resilient workforce that can respond to the current challenges and those that may lie ahead, it is imperative to understand how the public sector workforce perceives the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their jobs and finances, and their expectations of the short- and medium-term impacts of the pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis.

In May of 2020, SLGE and Greenwald Research conducted an online survey of 1,008 state and local government employees, assessing their views on the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on their finances, job, debt profile, and other related issues. The results of that survey were released in the June 2020 report, [Survey Results: Public Sector Employee Views on Finances and Employment Outlook Due to COVID-19](#). Key findings were also developed into three infographics: [Public Sector Employee Views on COVID-19](#), [K-12 Education Employee Views on COVID-19](#), and [African American State and Local Employee Views on COVID-19](#).

SLGE at ICMA-RC and Greenwald Research then conducted a follow-up online survey of 1,205 state and local government employees October 14 – November 2, 2020, which assessed state and local government employees' views on the COVID-19 pandemic's job impacts, general concerns about COVID-19, financial impacts, and satisfaction with their employer and benefits. Overall survey results are presented in the January 2021 report [Update on Public Sector Employee Views on](#)

[Finances and Employment Outlook Due to COVID-19: May vs. October 2020](#) and the accompanying infographic [Public Sector Employee Views on COVID-19: May 2020 vs. October 2020](#).

In addition to looking at the impact of COVID-19 on the public sector workforce overall, SLGE at ICMA-RC was interested in exploring how COVID-19 is affecting K-12 public school employees specifically. The education sector of the state and local government workforce is comprised of approximately 11.2 million individuals, more than half of the total state and local government workforce.ⁱⁱⁱ In June 2020, SLGE at ICMA-RC released the report [K-12 Public School Employee Views on Job and Benefits](#), assessing K-12 employees' job and benefit satisfaction, familiarity with mutual funds and annuities, sources of financial information, debt, and school diversity. However, much has changed for the K-12 education workforce since the release of that report.

Of the approximately 1.3 million state and local government workers who have lost their jobs between January 2020 and January 2021, nearly 1 million jobs have been from the education sector.^{iv} Many positions held by support personnel, such as school bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and teachers' aides, have been particularly hard-hit.

Given the pandemic and wave of furloughs and layoffs, the K-12 sector has had to make a myriad of adjustments—and make them quickly. While some of the impacts of COVID-19 are universal across the state and local government workforce, other elements are unique to the K-12 workforce and those they serve.

This report presents the results of a sub-sample of 494 K-12 public school employees who participated in the October 2020 SLGE/Greenwald survey on the impact of COVID-19. After reviewing the demographics of these K-12 employees, the report is divided into three main sections. The first section presents the responses of the 494 K-12 employees surveyed in October 2020 about a series of questions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and return to school. The second section describes the responses of these 494 K-12 employees to questions about the job and financial impact and general concerns about COVID-19, and compares them with the responses of the 711 other government employees who participated in the October 2020 survey. Finally, the third section compares responses of the 494 K-12 employees surveyed in October 2020 with 400 K-12 employees surveyed in March 2020 to assess changes in K-12 employee perceptions since the start of the pandemic.

Survey Results

Sample Demographics

The demographic characteristics of the 494 K-12 employee survey respondents are displayed in Table 1. Most survey respondents were female; white or Caucasian; working for state government;¹ married or living with a partner; had children/stepchildren; were well educated; and had a total annual personal income of less than \$75,000. Three in four respondents were in teaching roles, and nearly half (47 percent) worked at an elementary school. There was more variation in respondents' age, geographic region, total annual household income,

and number of years working for their employer.

The demographic characteristics of the K-12 employees sampled generally align with the overall workforce profile of the approximately 7.8 million state and local government employees who work in elementary or secondary education.^v As of 2017–2018, about 76 percent of public school teachers were female, about 79 percent were white, 58 percent had a post-baccalaureate degree, 23 percent had 10-20 years of teaching experience, and they had an average base salary of nearly \$58,000.^{vi}

Table 1. Sample Demographics

Gender	%	Race/Ethnicity	%	Type of School of Employer (n=484) ^v	%	Total Annual Personal Income	%
Male	23	White or Caucasian	74	Elementary school	47	Less than \$25,000	9
Female	77	Black or African American	12	Middle school	23	\$25,000 to \$49,999	38
Prefer to self-describe	0	Hispanic/Latino/Spanish descent	12	High school	35	\$50,000 to \$74,999	26
Age	%	Asian or Pacific Islander	3	Another type of school	3	\$75,000 to \$99,999	19
Under 40	38	Native American	1	Work in K-12 education but not at an actual school	6	\$100,000 to \$124,999	3
40-59	50	Other	<0.5	Region	%	\$125,000 to \$149,999	2
60 or older	13	Marital Status	%	South	42	\$150,000 or more	1
Education	%	Married	50	West	21	Don't know	<0.5
Less than a high school diploma	0	Single, never married	25	Midwest	20	Total Annual Household Income	%
Graduated high school	3	Divorced or separated	17	Northeast	16	Less than \$25,000	5
Some college (no degree)	9	Living with a partner	6	Children/Stepchildren	%	\$25,000 to \$49,999	27
Associate's degree or completion of technical or vocational school	10	Widowed	2	Yes, under 18	30	\$50,000 to \$74,999	24
Bachelor's degree	36	Prefer not to say	1	Yes, 18 or older	40	\$75,000 to \$99,999	23
Graduate/professional degree	42	Number of Years Working with Current Employer	%	No children/stepchildren	35	\$100,000 to \$124,999	10
Teaching Role (n=484)	%	1 to 5 years	32	Prefer not to answer	1	\$125,000 to \$149,999	6
Yes	75	6 to 10 years	19			\$150,000 or more	5
No	25	11 to 15 years	13			Don't know	1
Employer	%	16-20 years	13				
State government	56	21+ years	18				
Local government	44						

Note: n=494 unless otherwise specified; some figures may not total to 100% due to rounding or to "select all that apply" option for racial/ethnic identification, children/stepchildren status, and type of school employer.

¹ While 56 percent of respondents in the current sample self-identify as working in state government, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports a total of approximately 4,971,000 individuals working in state government, and approximately 13,672,000 individuals working in local government as of January 2021 (See U.S. Census Bureau, "The Employment Situation – February 2021," available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t17.htm>). One likely explanation for the large discrepancy between the survey sample and general population distribution for state vs. local employer is that some respondents may have misclassified their employer based on having a statewide retirement plan (e.g., they work for a local school district within a state but are part of the state retirement system, and so categorize themselves as state employees). Relatedly, some in the education industry may not readily identify as "local government," but rather, as working for a school district. Without that answer available on the survey, they may have considered their employer as being rolled up into state government rather than local government.

The demographic characteristics of the entire sample of 1,205 (494 K-12 and 711 other government employees) surveyed are described in more detail in the January 2021 report, [Update on Public Sector Employee Views on Finances and Employment Outlook Due to COVID-19: May vs. October 2020](#). Compared with other government survey respondents, K-12 employees were significantly more likely to be female; white or Caucasian; have children/stepchildren; and have a graduate/professional degree.

Return to School

For the vast majority (95 percent) of K-12 employees who worked at a school, the school was back in session for the start of the new school year (whether classes were in-person or online). Among these employees, in October more than half (53 percent) of their schools were holding (or planning to hold) classes via a hybrid of in-person and online/remote learning, and about one in three were being held fully online/through remote learning (Figure 1).²

Respondents were somewhat split in the extent to which they approved of their school's decision/plan on how to hold classes, with 55 percent approving and 29 percent disapproving (Figure 2).

Six in 10 K-12 employees were solicited for their opinion on their school's plan for how to hold classes, whether by discussing it directly with their employer, by completing a survey, and/or by another method. In contrast, 40 percent of employees were not able to provide their opinion/feedback or chose not to do so (Figure 3).

K-12 employees working at a school with hybrid or in-person classes were also asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that their employer was taking certain steps to make it safe to return to in-person classes. As shown in Figure 4, respondents were most likely to agree that their employer was limiting non-essential activities and gatherings in the school (73 percent somewhat or strongly agreed), properly training

Figure 1. How School is Currently Holding Classes, Oct. 2020 (n=470)

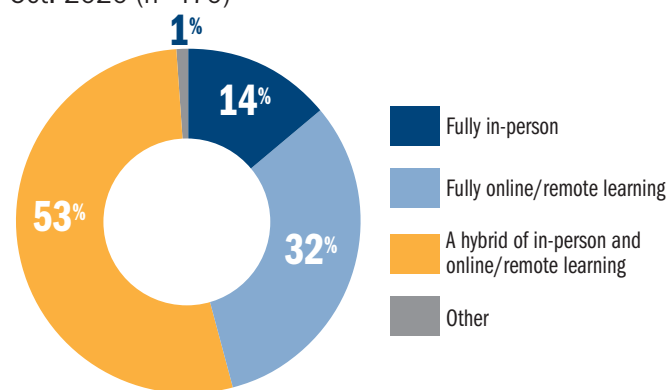


Figure 2. Approval of School's Decision/Plan on How to Hold Classes, Oct. 2020 (n=460)

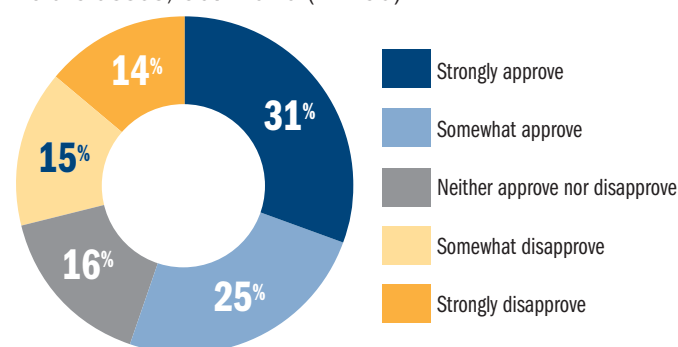
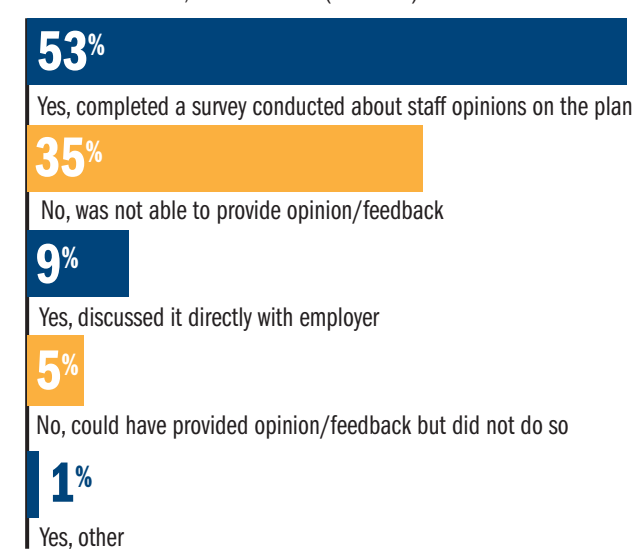
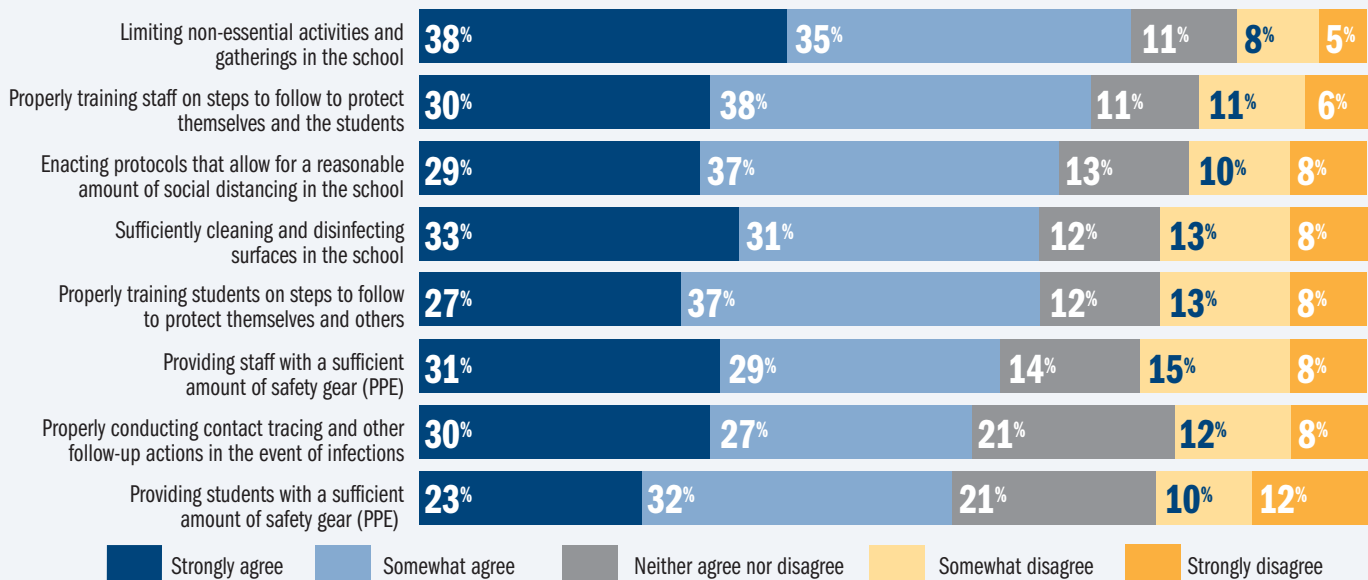


Figure 3. Employer Solicited Opinion on Plan for How to Hold Classes?, Oct. 2020 (n=460)



Note: Total combined percentage exceeds 100 due to ability to select more than one "yes" response or more than one "no" response.

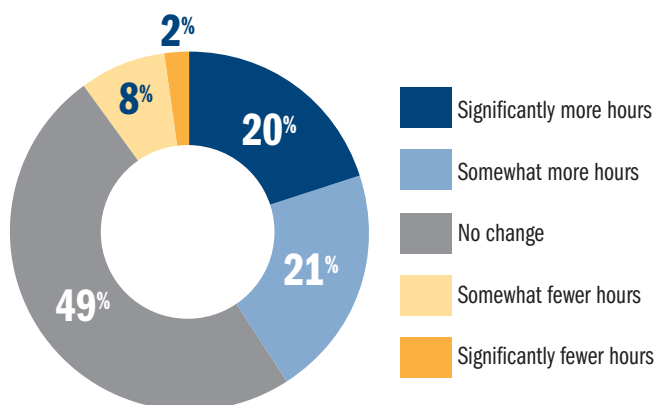
² While difficult to compare these percentages with the United States overall given the fast-changing nature of school openings and closures, up-to-date state and local-level information on school openings and closures can be found at <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/map-where-are-schools-closed/2020/07>.

Figure 4. What Employer is Doing to Ensure Safe In-Person Classes, Oct. 2020 (n=307)

staff on steps to protect themselves and the students (68 percent somewhat or strongly agreed), and enacting protocols allowing for a reasonable amount of social distancing in the school (66 percent somewhat or strongly agreed).

About four in 10 K-12 employees (41 percent) reported that they are working more hours (either officially or unofficially) than they were prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Only one in 10 reported working fewer hours (Figure 5).

When asked why they are working more hours (officially or unofficially), by far the most common

Figure 5. Working More or Fewer Hours than Prior to Pandemic?, Oct. 2020 (n=484)

response was the extra work that online/remote work entails (78 percent), followed by an increased number of parent or student meetings/communications (52 percent) and an increased number of work meetings/communications (50 percent); see Figure 6.

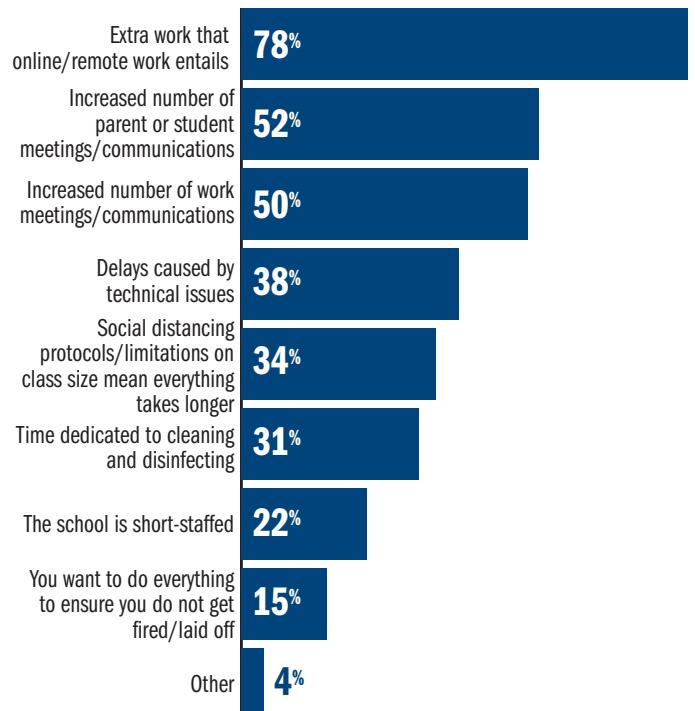
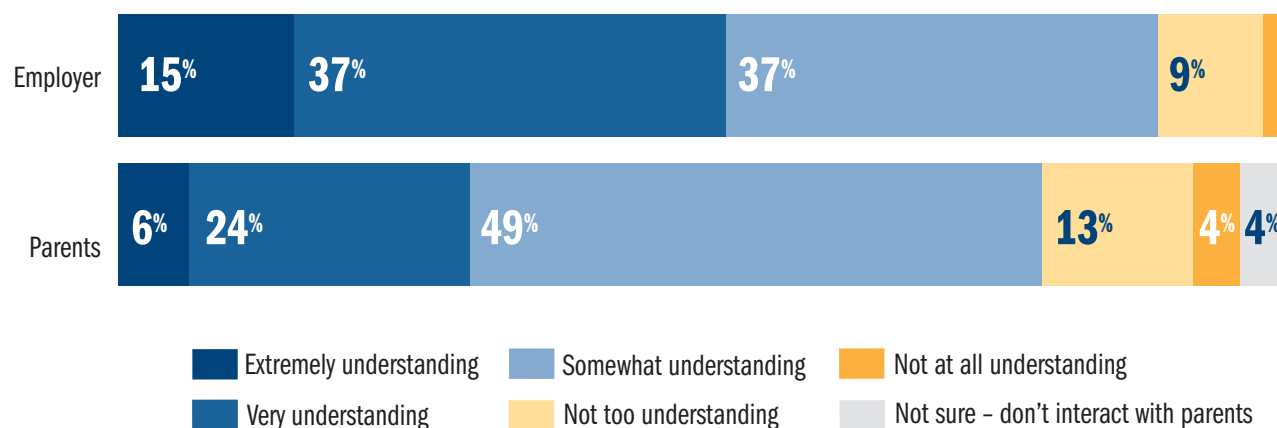
Figure 6. Why Working More Hours, Oct. 2020 (n=200)

Figure 7. Understanding among Parents/Employer with School's Approach to Holding Classes, Oct. 2020 (n=460)

When asked how understanding their employer and students' parents have been regarding the staff's adjustment to the school's approach to holding classes and any limitations or inconveniences it may entail, 89 percent reported that their employer has been at least somewhat understanding, and 79 percent reported that the parents have been at least somewhat understanding (Figure 7). Far fewer indicated that the parents have been very or extremely understanding (30 percent) than indicated that their employer has been very or extremely understanding (52 percent).

Comparing Perceptions of K-12 and Other Government Employees

Job Impact

Most K-12 employees and other government employees (90 percent and 77 percent, respectively) report that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the nature of their job. For K-12 employees in particular, this impact has been significant (55 percent for K-12 employees vs. 35 percent for other government employees); see Figure 8.

K-12 employees were also more likely to report difficulty in adjusting to the changes to their job as a result of the pandemic. While 22 percent of other government employees rated the adjustment as extremely or very difficult, more than twice as many K-12 employees did (46 percent). In contrast, while 44 percent of other government workers rated the adjustment as not too difficult or not at all difficult, only 20 percent of K-12 employees did (Figure 9).

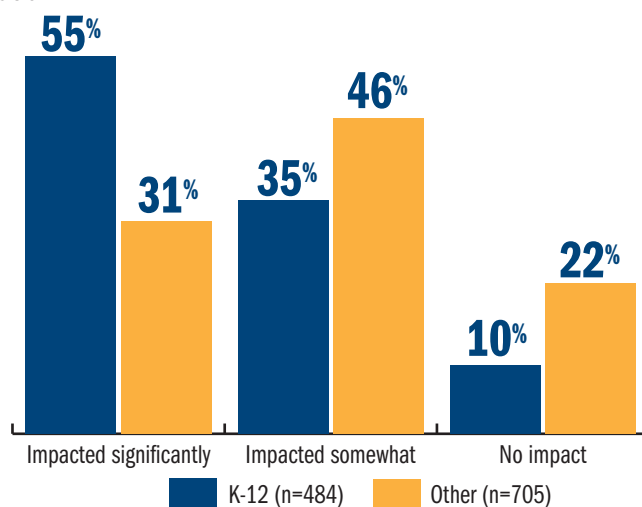
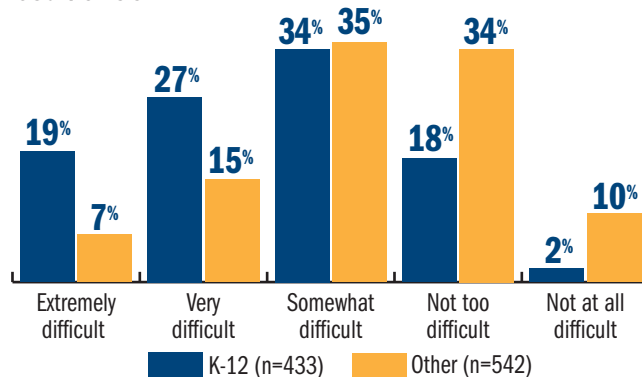
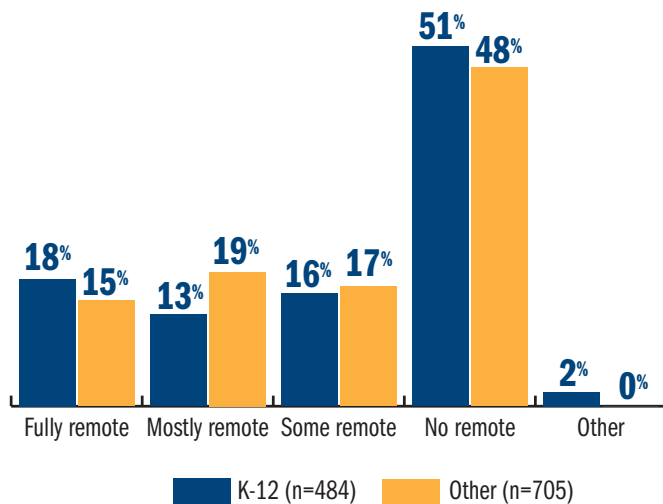
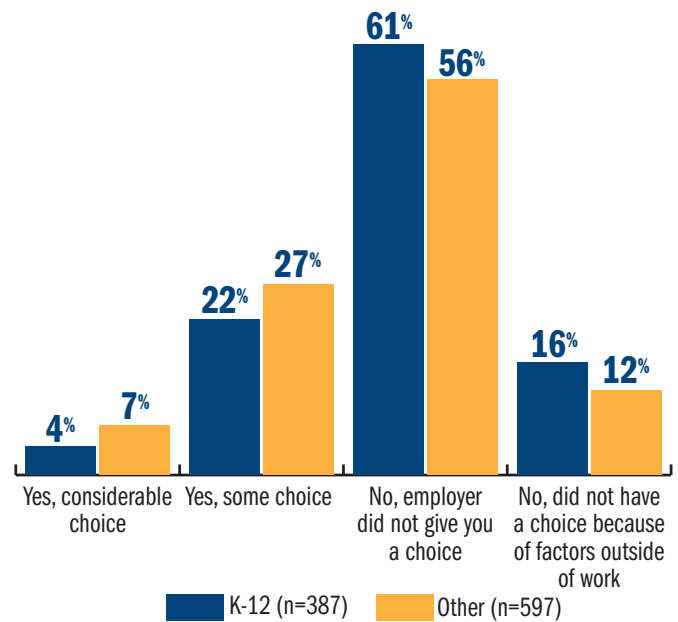
Figure 8. Extent to which COVID has Impacted Nature of Job**Figure 9.** Difficulty Adjusting to Changes to Job as a Result of COVID

Figure 10. Working Remotely?

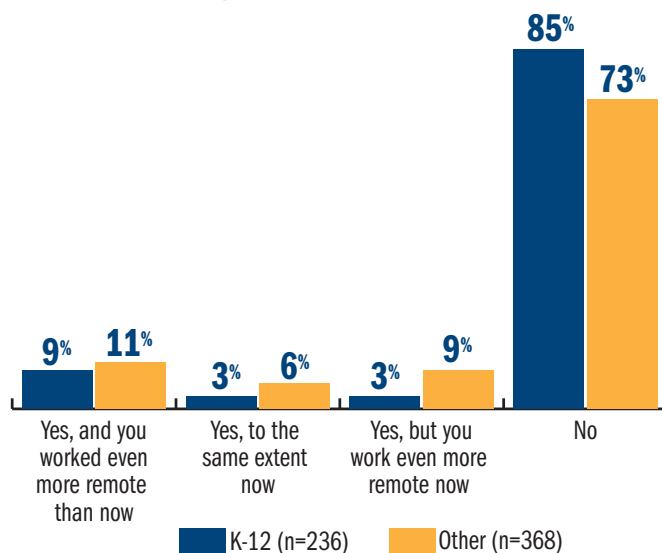
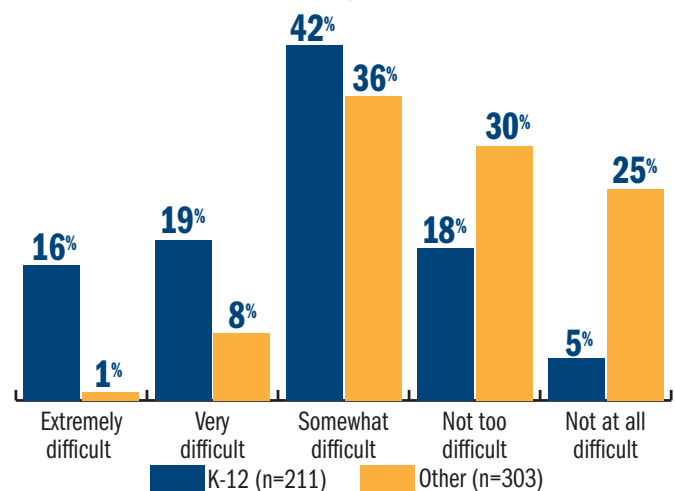
Differences in difficulty in adjusting are unlikely to be explained by disparities in prevalence of remote work. As shown in Figure 10, similar percentages of K-12 and other government employees were engaged in at least some remote work in October (47 percent of K-12 and 51 percent of other government employees). Of those engaged in any in-person work, 26 percent of K-12 employees had some or considerable choice in the matter, while about one-third (34 percent) of other government employees did (Figure 11).

Similarly, differences in ease of adjustment are not likely to be due to change in remote work status. The

Figure 11. Had Choice about In-Person Work?

majority of both K-12 employees and other government employees were not working remotely prior to the pandemic (Figure 12).

Despite similar numbers of K-12 and other government employees working remotely in October (and prior to the pandemic), K-12 employees were significantly more likely to report that the adjustment to remote work has been difficult. While only 9 percent

Figure 12. Working Remotely Prior to Pandemic?**Figure 13.** Difficulty Adjusting to Remote Work

of other government workers found it extremely or very difficult to adjust to remote work, 35 percent of K-12 employees did. In contrast, while 55 percent of other government employees reported that the adjustment has been not too difficult or not at all difficult, only 23 percent of K-12 employees agreed (Figure 13).

One potential explanation for the difficulty in adjusting to remote work is the difficulty that K-12 employees have had in balancing work and homelife demands since the start of the pandemic. As shown in Figure 14, 35 percent of K-12 employees have found it extremely or very difficult to balance these demands, while only 18 percent of other government workers have. In contrast, only 36 percent of K-12 employees (as compared with 51 percent of other government employees) have found the adjustment to be not too difficult or not at all difficult. Non-K-12 government employees may be more likely to have the ability to conduct project-focused work and take breaks as needed to deal with at-home interruptions, whereas teachers conducting synchronous instruction have more limited flexibility while their virtual classroom is in session.

A primary challenge for many K-12 employees has been working from home while also taking care of their children (whether during school or day care closures or when they have been participating in virtual schooling). Six in 10 K-12 employees who are parents of children under the age of 18 have had to work from home while taking care of their kids for a lengthy period of time. Another 28 percent have had to do so briefly (Figure 15). Meanwhile, fewer than four in 10 of other government employees have had to work from home while taking care of their kids during the pandemic for a lengthy period, with another 32 percent having to do so briefly.

When it comes to concern about risk of exposure to COVID at work, K-12 employees were significantly more likely to perceive themselves to be at high risk than were other government employees. While the majority of both K-12 and other government employees believed in-person

Figure 14. Difficulty Balancing Work and Homelife Demands since Start of Pandemic

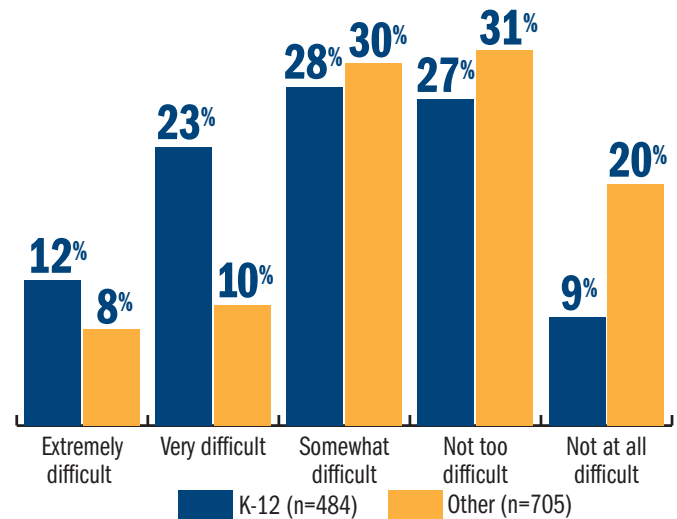


Figure 15. Work from Home while Taking Care of Kids?

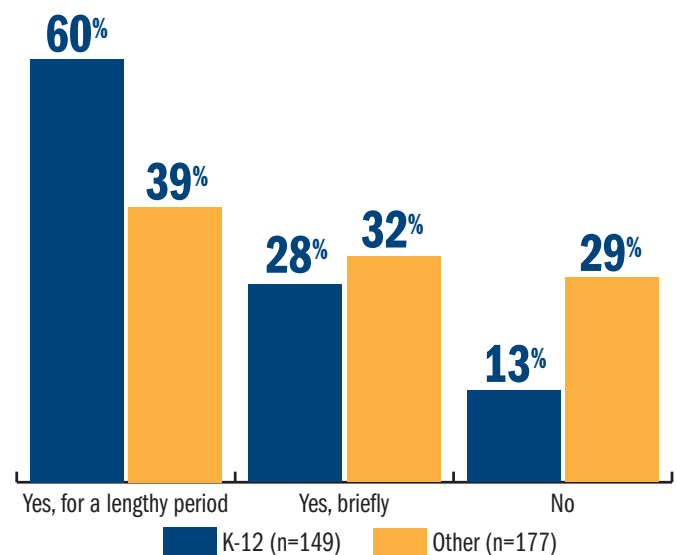
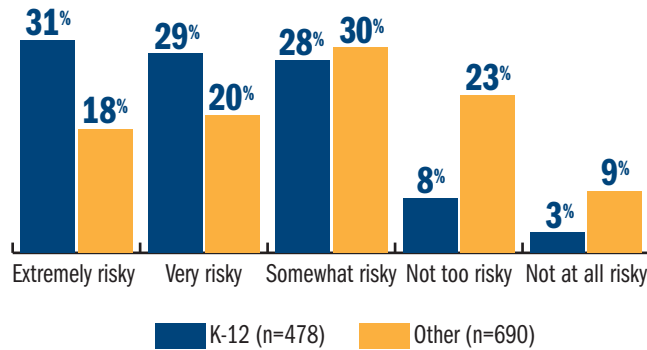
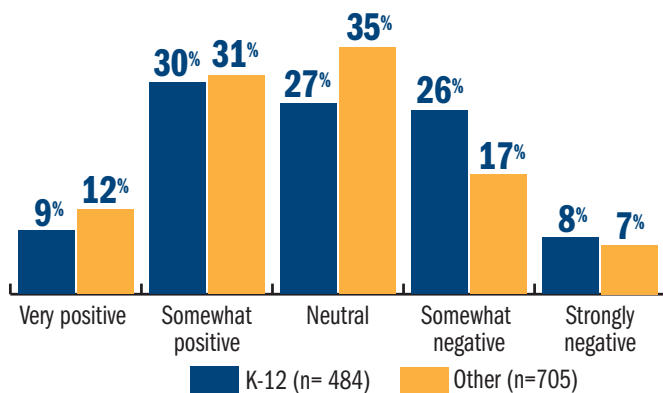
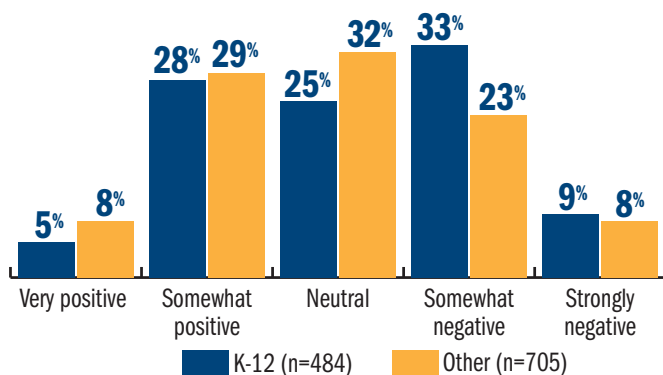


Figure 16. Perceived Risk of Exposure to COVID at Work**Figure 17.** Current Morale Regarding Work**Figure 18.** Current General Morale of Coworkers

work is at least somewhat risky (88 percent of K-12 and 68 percent of other government employees), 60 percent of K-12 employees felt that it is very or extremely risky, while 38 percent of other government employees did (Figure 16).

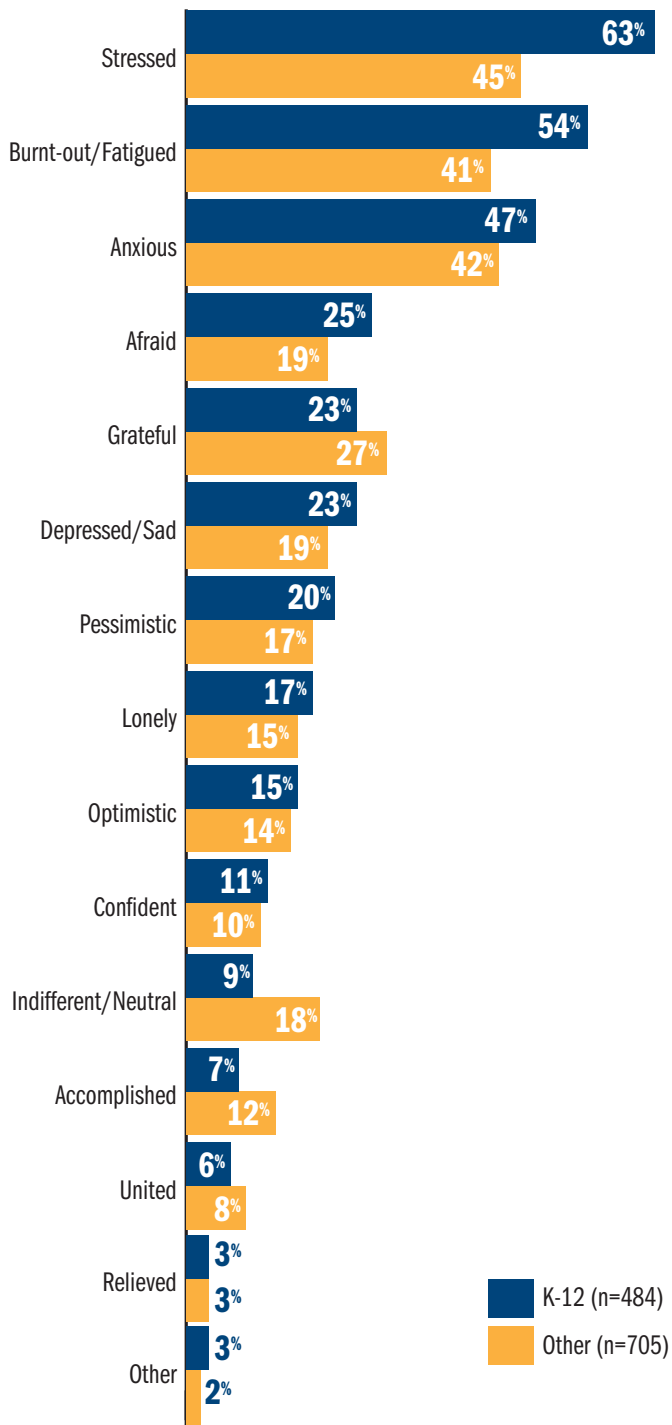
General COVID Concerns

Respondents were asked to assess both their current morale regarding work, and the general morale of their coworkers. As shown in Figure 17, 39 percent of K-12 employees rated their morale as somewhat or very positive, as compared with 42 percent of other government employees. Bigger differences between K-12 and other employees were observed for negative morale, with 34 percent of K-12 employees reporting somewhat or strongly negative morale, in contrast to 23 percent of other government employees.

Regarding the general morale of their coworkers, a slightly greater percentage of other government employees rated their coworkers' morale as positive than did K-12 employees (38 percent and 33 percent, respectively); see Figure 18. As with ratings for their own morale, K-12 employees were significantly more likely to rate their coworkers' morale as negative than were other government employees; 42 percent of K-12 employees reported somewhat or strongly negative coworker morale, in contrast with 30 percent of other government employees.

Respondents were also asked what emotions they are feeling about the COVID-19 pandemic while at work. Results are displayed in Figure 19, with K-12 employees most commonly reporting feeling stressed, burnt out/fatigued, and/or anxious. Compared to other government employees, K-12 employees were significantly more likely to report feeling stressed (63 percent K-12 vs. 45 percent other) and/or burnt out/fatigued (54 percent K-12 vs. 41 percent other). In contrast, K-12 employees were significantly less likely than other government employees to report feeling indifferent/neutral (9 percent vs. 18 percent), and/or accomplished (7 percent vs. 12 percent).

When it came to concerns about their job going forward, K-12 employees were most likely to be concerned about keeping their family safe from contracting COVID-19, staying protected from contracting the virus at work (or once they return to the workplace), and having their employee benefits package reduced in some way (Figure 20). Comparing these concerns to those of non-K-12 government employees, K-12 employees were more likely

Figure 19. Emotions Feeling While at Work about COVID-19 Pandemic

to be very or extremely concerned about most issues, particularly keeping their family safe from contracting the virus (61 percent for K-12 employees vs. 48 percent for other government employees), and staying protected from contracting the virus at work (61 percent for K-12 employees vs. 43 percent for other government employees).

Both K-12 and other government employees anticipated a number of changes to their work and workplace over the course of the next year due to the pandemic, especially social distancing (72 percent of K-12 and 70 percent of others); an increase in health precautions, such as wearing masks and gloves (67 percent for K-12 and 69 percent for others); and health checks (e.g., checking for a fever) before going to work

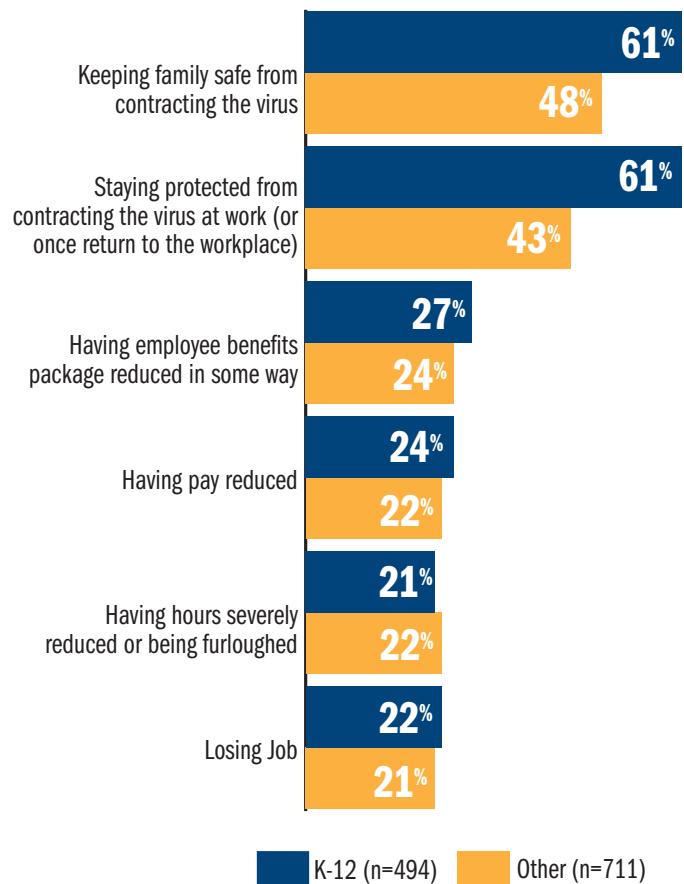
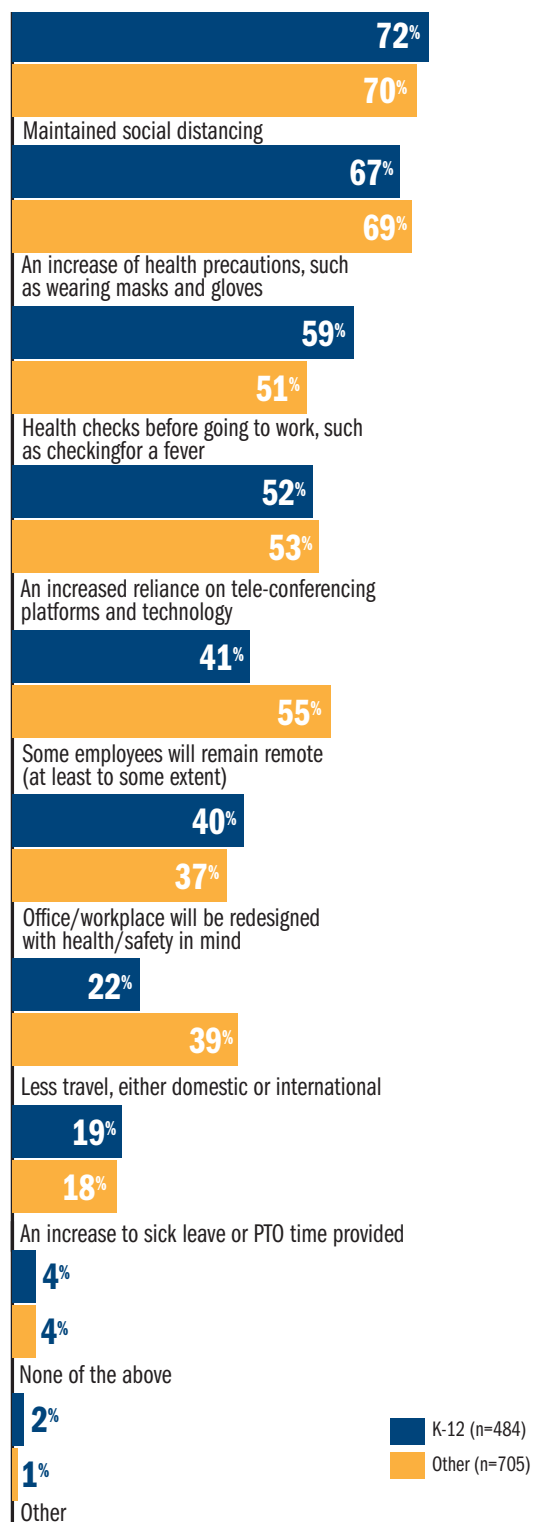
Figure 20. Concerns about Job Going Forward (% Very/Extremely Concerned)

Figure 21. Perceptions of How Work and Workplace Will Change Over the Course of the Next Year



(59 percent for K-12 and 51 percent for others); see Figure 21.

Given the nature of the work that teachers are engaged in, it is not surprising that K-12 employees surveyed (75 percent of whom are in teaching roles) were significantly more likely than other government employees to expect health checks before going to work, and significantly less likely to expect that some employees will remain working remotely and to expect a decrease in international or domestic travel.

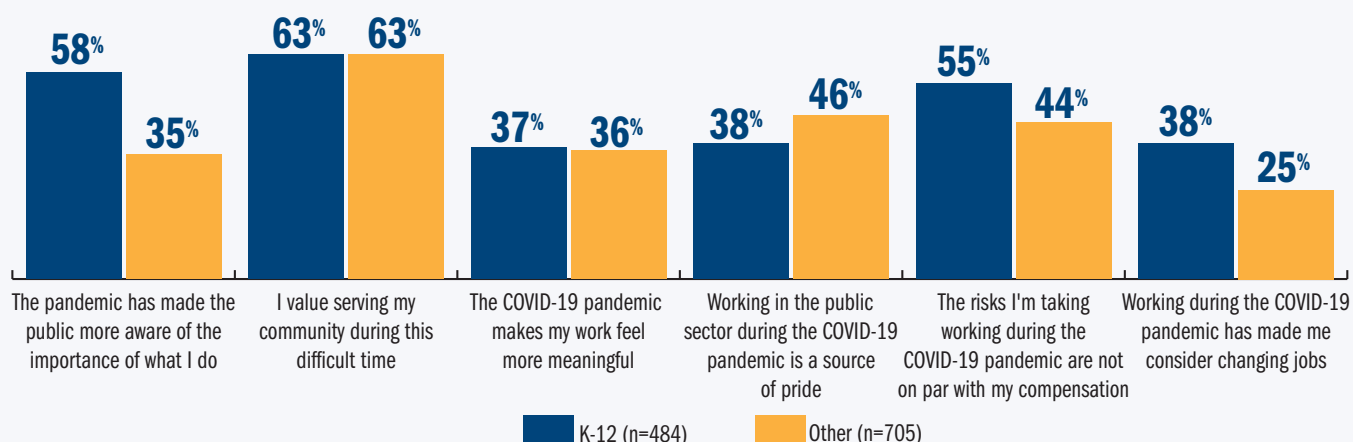
Regarding employee views on working in the public sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly two in three (63 percent) K-12 and other government employees reported that they value serving their community during this difficult time, while about one in three (37 percent of K-12 and 36 percent of other government employees) indicated that the pandemic has made their work feel more meaningful (Figure 22). K-12 employees were significantly more likely than other government employees to feel that the pandemic has made the public more aware of the importance of what they do (58 percent for K-12 vs. 35 percent for other government). However, K-12 employees were also significantly more likely than other government employees to report that the risks they are taking during the pandemic are not on par with their compensation (55 percent vs. 44 percent), and that working during the pandemic has made them consider changing jobs (38 percent vs. 25 percent).

Both K-12 and other government employees expressed moderate levels of trust in state and local government leaders to make appropriate decisions regarding employee safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, with about half of respondents reporting a fair amount or great deal of trust (Figure 23). Levels of trust in federal government leaders were substantively lower, with 29 percent of both K-12 and other government employees indicating they had a fair amount or great deal of trust in federal government leaders to make appropriate decisions regarding employee safety during the pandemic.

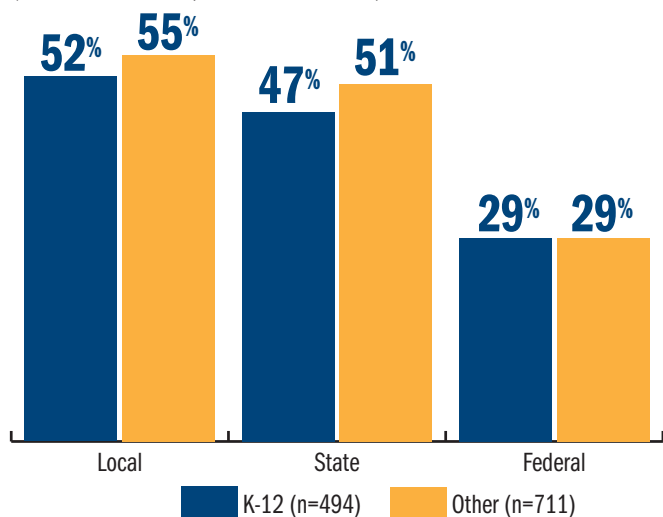
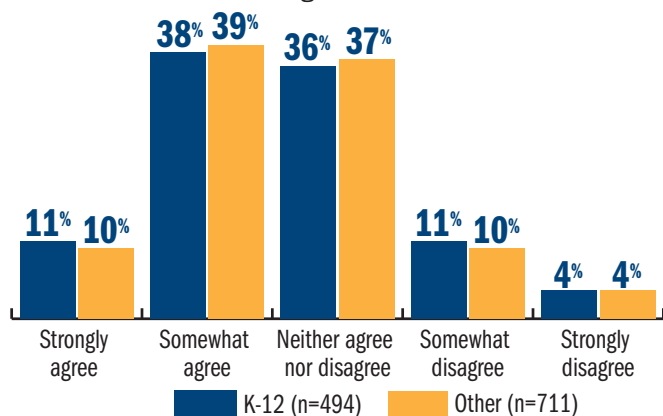
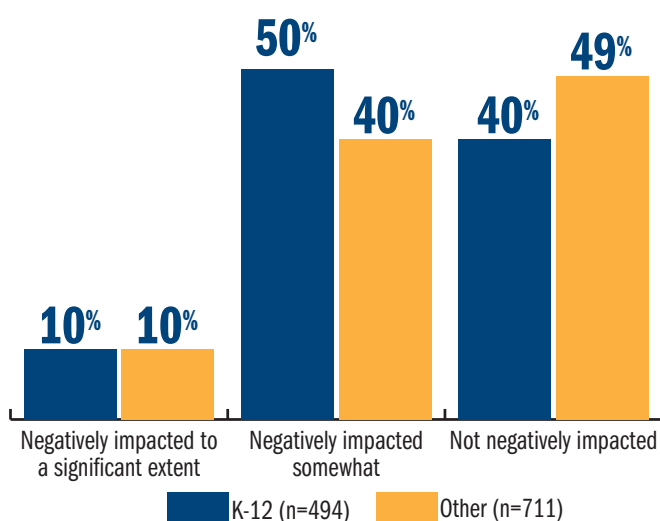
Just under half (49 percent) of K-12 employees and other government employees agreed that they have been able to get the help, information, and resources they needed to make smart financial decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic crisis (Figure 24).

Figure 22. Employee Views on Working in the Public Sector During COVID

(% Somewhat/Strongly Agree)

**Figure 23.** Trust in Government Leaders

(% with Fair Amount/Great Deal of Trust)

**Figure 24.** Can Get Help Needed to Make Smart Financial Decisions during COVID Pandemic**Figure 25.** Financial Impact of COVID

Financial Impact

Among K-12 survey respondents, six in 10 reported that they and their family have been negatively impacted financially by the COVID-19 pandemic. Fewer other government employees (50 percent) reported a negative financial impact (Figure 25).

A similar percentage of K-12 employees and other government employees (37 percent and 36 percent, respectively) expected the financial impact to be

somewhat or significantly worse over the course of the next year (Figure 26).

For 66 percent of K-12 employees and 57 percent of other government workers, debt was a problem. As shown in Figure 27, K-12 employees were significantly more likely to report that debt was a major problem currently.

Since the start of the pandemic, about one in three respondents (33 percent of K-12 employees and 29

percent of other government employees) have had to take on more debt (Figure 28)

One reason for this may be the lack of a fully funded emergency fund. Prior to the pandemic, only 29 percent of K-12 employees and 30 percent of other government employees had a fully funded emergency fund. Another 40 percent of K-12 employees and 43 percent of other government employees had one that they were in the process of building up (Figure 29).

Figure 26. Expected Financial Impact of COVID in Next Year

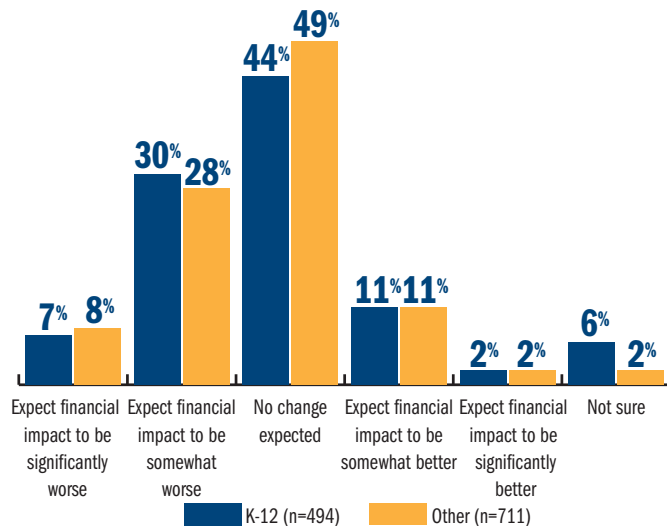


Figure 27. Extent to which Debt is Currently a Problem

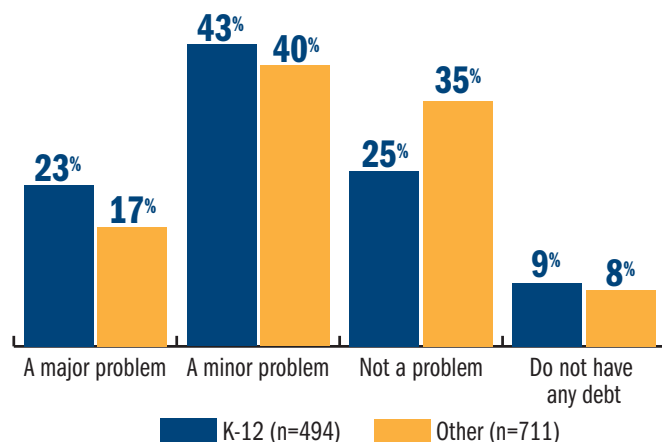


Figure 28. Had to Take On More Debt?

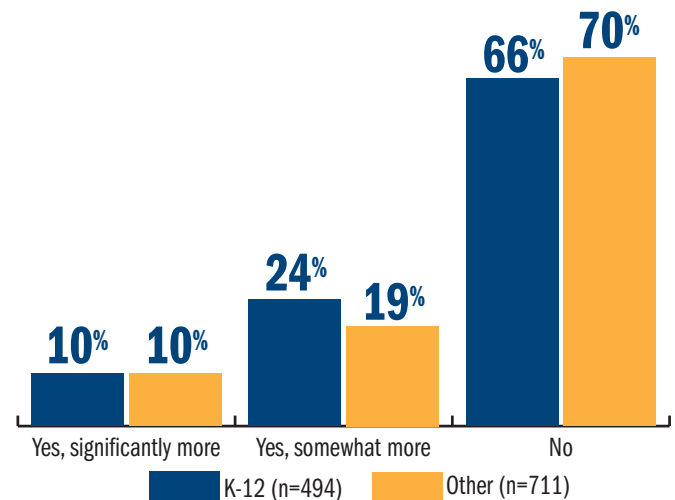
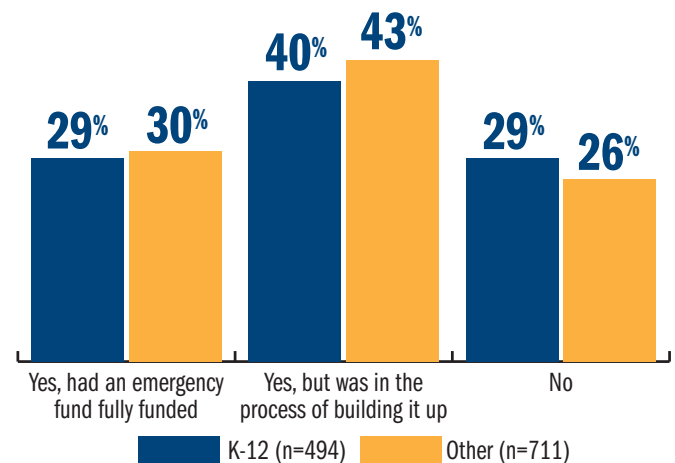


Figure 29. Emergency Fund Prior to Pandemic?



Among those K-12 employees with an emergency fund, 44 percent have had to spend down some or all of the fund. Slightly fewer (37 percent) other government employees have had to spend down at least some portion of the fund. Meanwhile, another 19 percent of K-12 and other government employees reported that they expect to spend at least some of their fund in the near future (Figure 30).

While the majority of respondents have not made changes in the amount they are saving for retirement, about one in four (26 percent of K-12 employees and 26 percent of other government employees) reported that they have somewhat or significantly reduced the amount they are saving for retirement. In contrast, only 10 percent of K-12 employees and 7 percent of other government employees reported that they have increased the amount they are saving for retirement (Figure 31).

In terms of changes in the amount they are saving in general or for things other than retirement, both K-12 and other government employees were more

likely to have reduced than increased their savings. As displayed in Figure 32, 42 percent of K-12 employees and 39 percent of other government employees have reduced the amount they are saving in general or for things other than retirement since the start of the pandemic. In contrast, less than one in five (17 percent of K-12 employees and 20 percent of other government employees) have increased this amount. In addition to

Figure 30. Had to Spend Money from Emergency Fund?

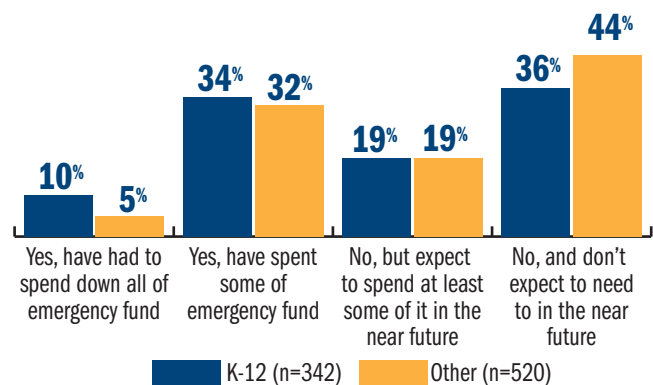


Figure 31. Change in Amount Saving for Retirement?

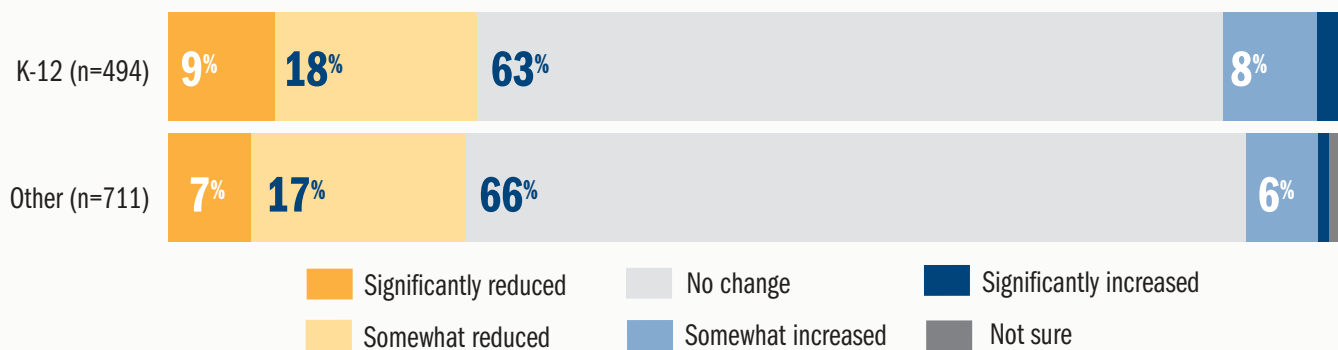
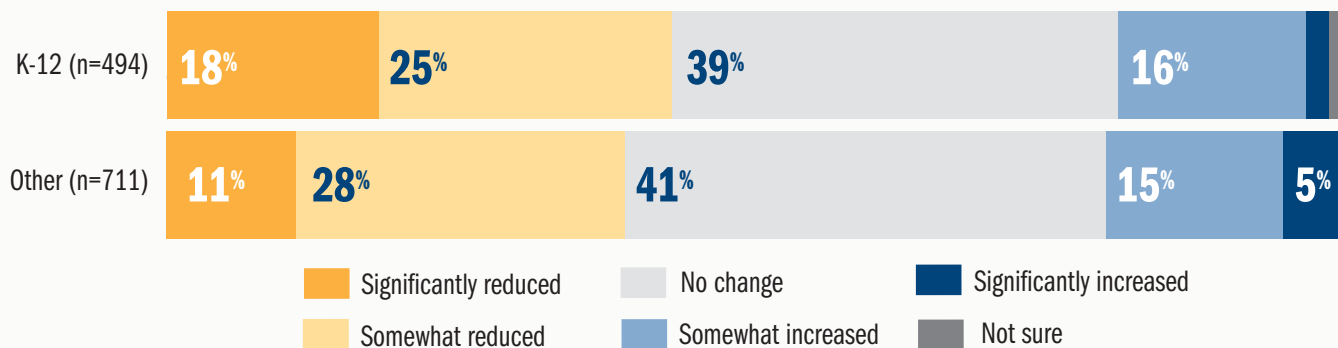


Figure 32. Change in Amount Saving in General?



reductions in savings, many state and local government employees have also reduced their spending. K-12 employees were significantly more likely than other government employees (52 percent vs. 41 percent) to report that they have reduced the amount they are spending (on either essential or non-essential expenses) in comparison to what it would have been had the pandemic not occurred (Figure 33). Accordingly, K-12 employees were also significantly less likely to have spent more than they would have normally (21 percent vs. 30 percent).

Finally, respondents were asked how concerned they are that the COVID-19 pandemic and the related economic crisis will impact their ability to retire when they want, and their ability to save enough to be financially secure throughout retirement. Results are displayed in Figures 34 and 35. Slightly fewer than half of K-12 employees (44 percent) were very or extremely concerned about being able to retire when they want, as compared with 37 percent of other

government employees. Meanwhile, K-12 employees were significantly more likely than other government employees to be very or extremely concerned about being able to save enough to be financially secure throughout retirement (48 percent vs. 39 percent).

Figure 33. Change in Spending?

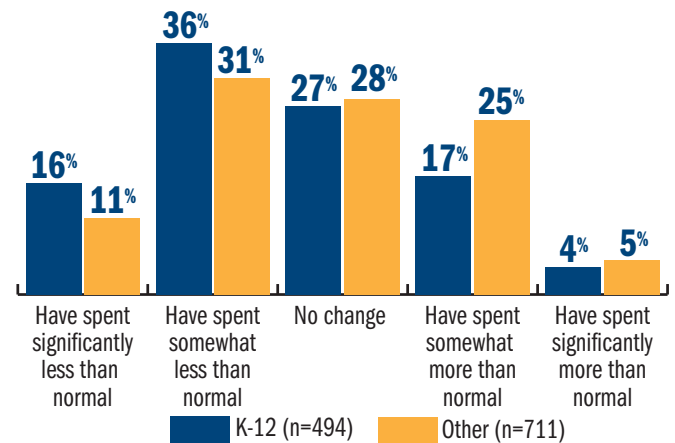


Figure 34. Concern about Being Able to Retire When Want

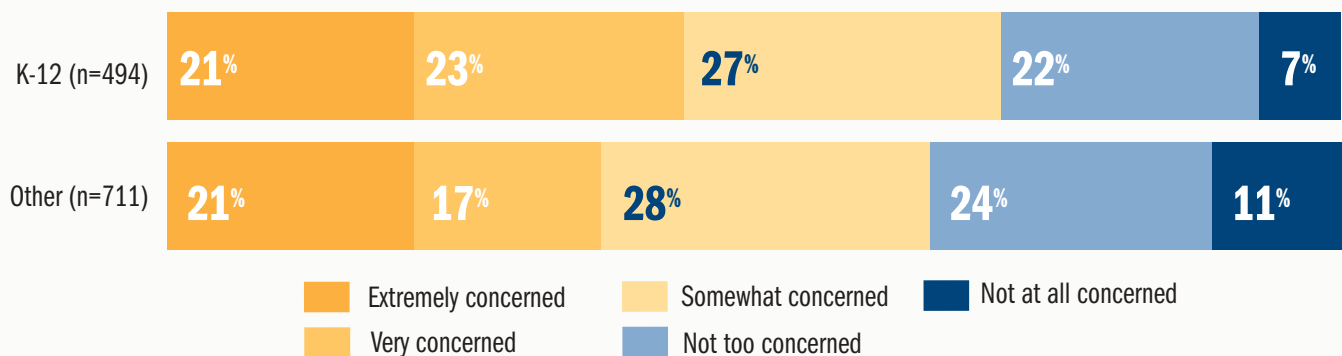


Figure 35. Concern about Being Able to Save Enough to be Financially Secure Throughout Retirement

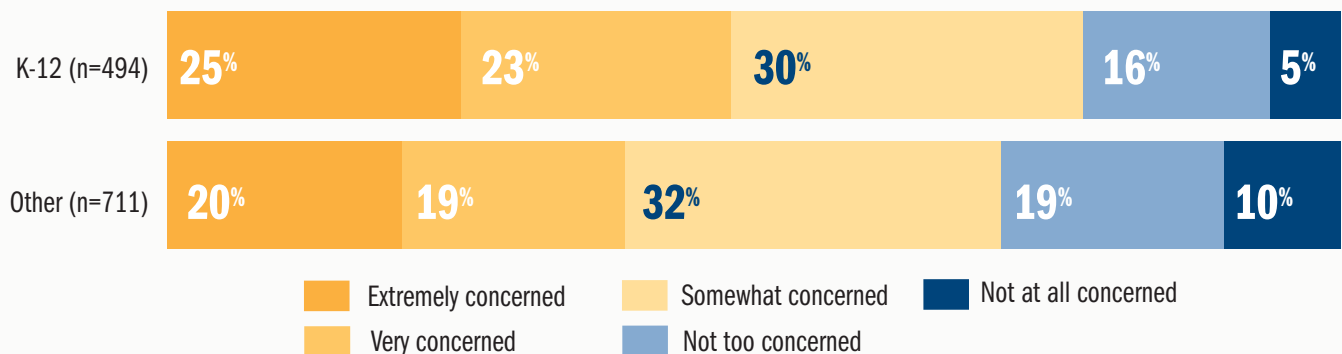
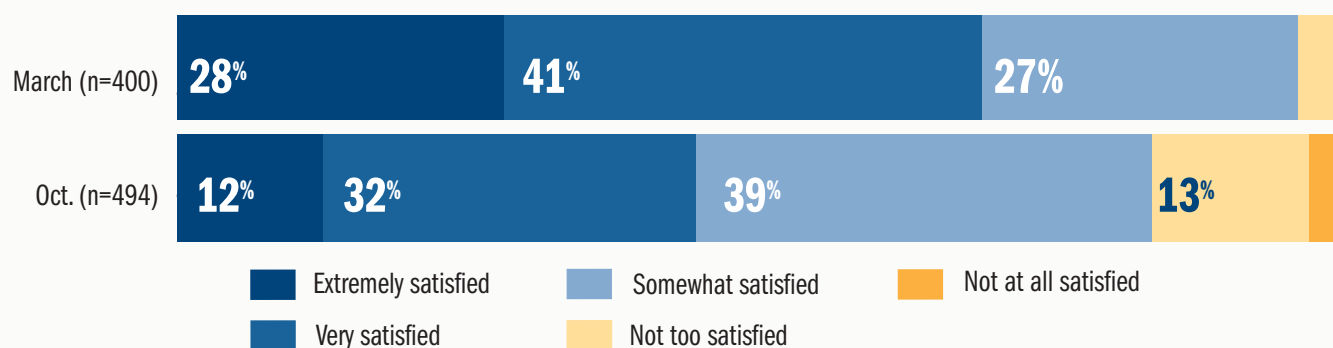


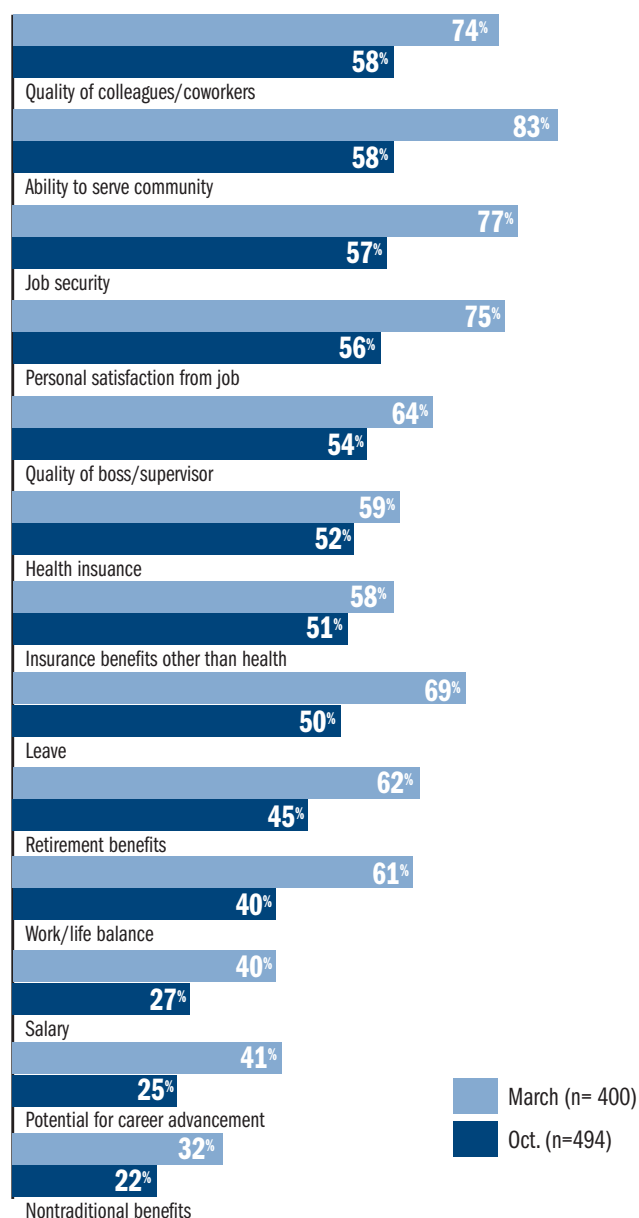
Figure 36. Change in K-12 Employee Satisfaction with Current Employer

Changes in K-12 Employee Perceptions from March to October

Several of the questions posed to K-12 employees in the October 2020 survey were also previously asked to a nationally representative survey of 400 K-12 employees in March 2020. The results that follow describe changes over time from March to October. Full results from the March 2020 survey are contained in the report [K-12 Public School Employee Views on Job and Benefits](#).

K-12 employees' general satisfaction with their employer showed a sharp decline over time, from 69 percent being very or extremely satisfied in March to 44 percent very or extremely satisfied in October (Figure 36).

The elements of their job that they reported being most satisfied with are displayed in Figure 37. In October, K-12 employees were most satisfied with the quality of their colleagues/coworkers and the ability to serve their community (both 58 percent), followed closely by job security (57 percent) and the personal satisfaction they get from their job (56 percent). In contrast, they were least satisfied with their salary (27 percent), the potential for career advancement (25 percent), and nontraditional benefits (22 percent). For all 13 job elements asked about, the percentage of employees reporting that they were very or extremely satisfied declined from March to October. These decreases were most pronounced for ability to serve their community, job security, and work/life balance, which all dropped at least 20 percentage points. Eight of the 13 job elements fell by at least 15 percentage points from March to October. Respondents were then asked what nontraditional benefits would be most

Figure 37. Change in K-12 Employee Satisfaction with Job Elements

appealing to them. As displayed in Figure 38, flexible work scheduling was cited most frequently (58 percent), followed by physical wellness programs (44 percent), continuing education or training programs (42 percent), and employee assistance programs (41 percent). While the appeal of many nontraditional benefits remained fairly constant from March to October, a modest increase was observed for the appeal of physical wellness programs (from 36 percent in March to 44 percent in October). The appeal of continuing education or training programs decreased from March (53 percent) to October (42 percent).

Finally, respondents in both March and October were asked several questions about their readiness for retirement and the role of their employer. Results are displayed in Figure 39 (next page). In both March and October, nearly half (48 percent and 49 percent, respectively) of K-12 employees agreed that they are knowledgeable about the retirement options offered by their employer. Just under half of respondents (48 percent) also indicated that it is difficult for them to negotiate or raise concerns about their employee benefits; this represents an increase of 4 percentage points from March.

Slightly fewer (45 percent) agreed that people who retire from jobs in K-12 education are able to live comfortably in retirement, a decrease of 6 percentage points from March. Even fewer felt that their employer does a good job of preparing them for retirement (37 percent in March and 34 percent in October). Only about one in four respondents (27 percent) indicated in October that they feel overwhelmed by the retirement plan options available to them. This is a significant decrease from March, when 40 percent agreed with this statement.

Figure 38. Change in Most Appealing Nontraditional Benefits to K-12 Employees

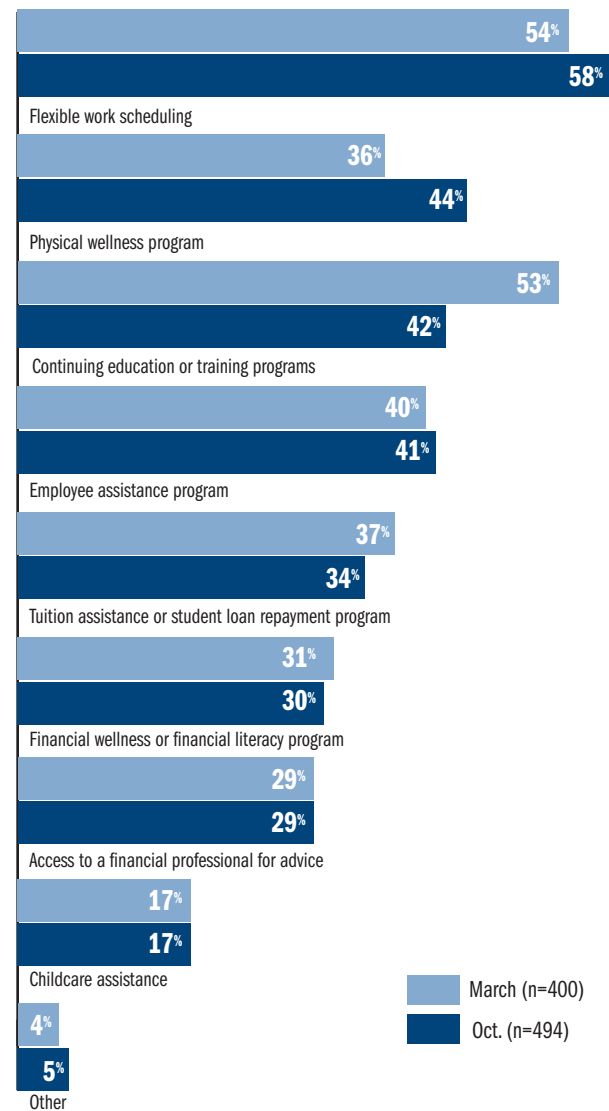
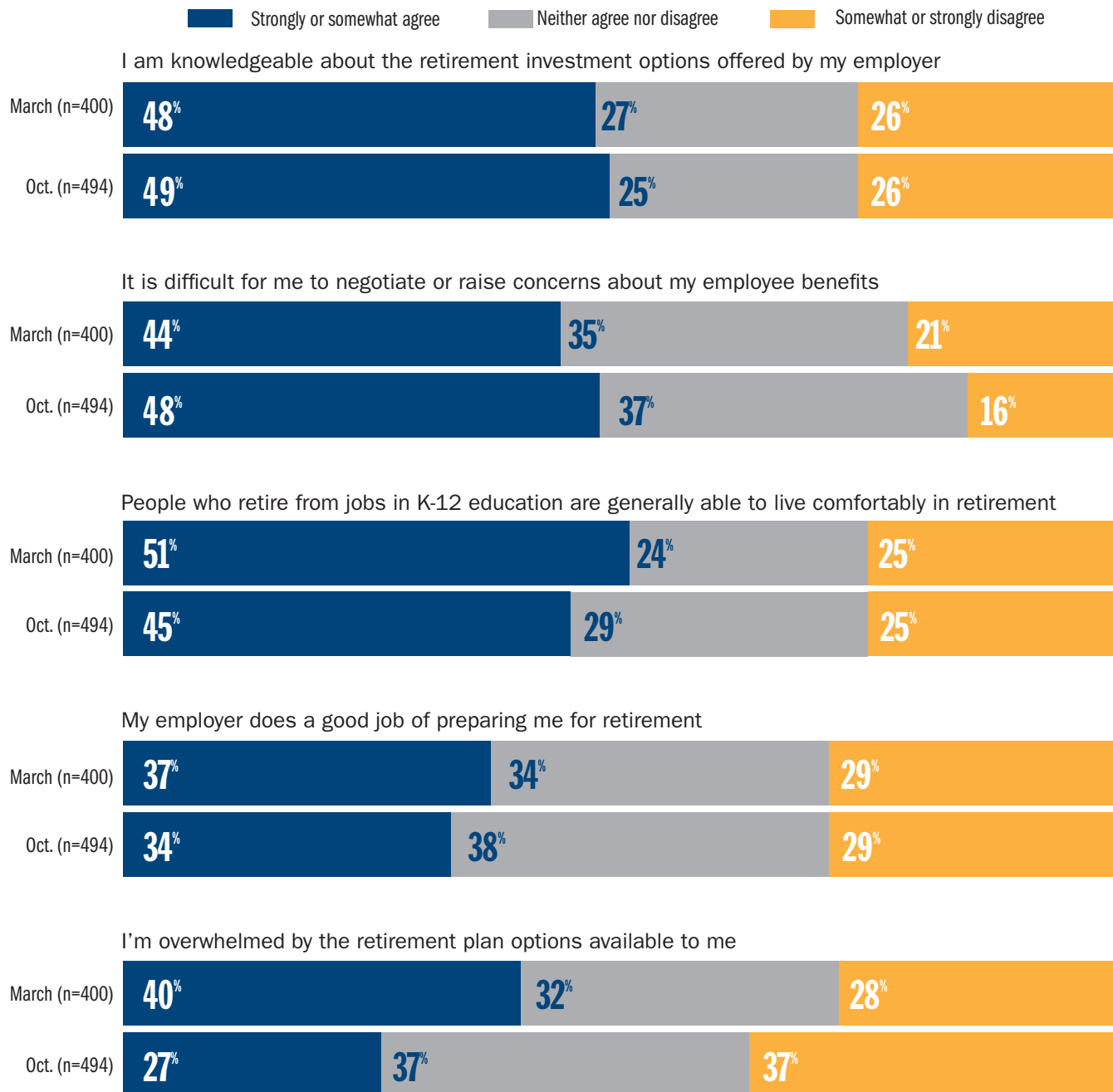


Figure 39. Change in K-12 Employee Readiness for Retirement and Role of Employer

Conclusion

This report describes the results for 494 K-12 public school employees who participated in an October 2020 online survey of state and local government employees assessing their views on the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on their employment and finances, general concerns about COVID-19, and satisfaction with their employer and their benefits. Where applicable, comparisons are made between K-12 employees and the 711 other government employees that responded to the survey, and between this survey and a March 2020 survey of 400 K-12 employees.

Results indicate that many K-12 public school employees have been negatively impacted financially by the pandemic, are experiencing low morale, and are having difficulty adjusting to the changes in the nature of their work. They are working longer hours, are concerned about the risk of exposure to COVID at work, and are worried about keeping their family safe from contracting the virus. More than half believed that the risks they are taking during the pandemic are not on par with their compensation, and nearly four in 10 reported that working during the pandemic has made them consider changing jobs.

These worries reflect many of the very real challenges that K-12 public school employees and their employers are facing. From the varied approaches that school districts are taking to remote vs. in-person and hybrid learning to inconsistent safety measures and guidance on student and staff safety, the K-12 workforce is experiencing extraordinary challenges.^{vii} Further, with about three in four K-12 employees being female, the effects of the disproportionate burden of child care on women during the pandemic may be especially challenging for this workforce and have long-term negative consequences.^{viii}

States and localities will need to think strategically to address these challenges. To help alleviate the safety, ahealth, job, and financial concerns of their employees, there are several areas that state and local governments can focus on. These include financial wellness, remote work, employee morale, and nontraditional benefits, and are discussed further in the sidebar to the right.

As states and localities continue to navigate a difficult road ahead for their governments and employees in 2021, SLGE at ICMA-RC will continue this survey series to further document the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the state and local government workforce overall, and on the K-12 workforce specifically. SLGE at ICMA-RC will also explore how employers plan to adapt to the challenges presented by a return to work after the pandemic, with the ultimate goal of helping states and localities attract and retain a talented, resilient, and diverse workforce that can continue to serve their communities.

Key Focus Areas

Financial wellness:

Given the financial strain that state and local government workers are facing (as exhibited by a decrease in spending/saving and use of emergency funds), a focus on the financial literacy and wellness of public sector employees will be key. Previous research has shown that despite few state and local governments offering financial wellness programs,^{ix} many public sector workers would participate in a program if offered one.^x Elected and appointed officials should review resources that provides tips for employers on where to start.^{xi}

Remote work:

While the shift to remote work has been a difficult adjustment for many workers, for others it has been a valuable tool for increasing productivity and reducing the cost and time associated with commuting. As states and localities contemplate whether—and to what degree—remote work will continue after the pandemic, it will be important for them to look at which elements of remote work have been successful, and which have been challenging. They will also need to consider how to implement equitable remote work policies given that not all state and local government positions are conducive to remote work.

Employee morale:

The low levels of morale experienced by state and local government workers and concerns about exposing themselves to COVID-19 while at work and/or passing on COVID to their family indicate that employers would benefit from taking a holistic approach to employee well-being. This includes recognizing how health and safety concerns are affecting employees' emotional wellness and working to find solutions that alleviate these worries to the extent possible so that workers can focus on their jobs. This will likely go beyond the traditional Employee Assistance Program and may require soliciting feedback to understand the unique needs of each jurisdiction's employees.

Nontraditional benefits:

Many individuals have had trouble trying to balance work and homelife demands. This has been particularly challenging for the many (predominantly women) employees that have had to take on child care responsibilities while working. Employers who find ways to provide nontraditional benefits such as flexible work scheduling and child care benefits are likely to have a competitive advantage in recruitment and retention.

Methods

Information for this report was collected from a 12-minute survey with 1,205 full-time state and local government employees. The online survey was fielded by Greenwald Research from October 14 through November 2, 2020. Where appropriate, data was compared with a 10-minute SLGE/Greenwald Research survey of 400 K-12 public school employees conducted from in March, 2020. The final data for both surveys were weighted by gender, age, income, and industry type to reflect the distribution of the state and local government workforce as found in the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey and the U.S. Census of Governments.

Additional Resources

Report

[K-12 Public School Employee Views on Job and Benefits](#) (June 2020)

[Public Sector Employee Views on Finances and Employment Outlook Due to COVID-19](#) (June 2020)

[Update on Public Sector Employee Views on Finances and Employment Outlook Due to COVID-19: May vs. October 2020](#) (January 2021)

Infographics

[K-12 Public Workforce Profile](#) (September 2019)

[Public Sector Employee Views on COVID-19](#) (June 2020)

[K-12 Education Employee Views on COVID-19](#) (August 2020)

[African American State and Local Employee Views on COVID-19](#) (September 2020)

[Public Sector Employee Views on COVID-19: May 2020 vs. October 2020](#) (December 2020)

[K-12 Education Employee Views on COVID-19: March 2020 vs. October 2020](#) (December 2020)

Endnotes

- i Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR), April 17, 2020, 69(15);465–471, available at <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6915e4.htm#:~:text=Community%20transmission%20of%20COVID%2D,of%20COVID%2D19>
- ii “Coronavirus Dashboard,” Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, available at <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>
- iii U.S. Census Bureau, “2019 Government Employment and Payroll Tables,” available at <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/2019/econ/apes/annual-apes.html>
- iv U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Employment, Hours, and Earnings from the Current Employment Statistics survey (National),” <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/dsrv?ce>
- v U.S. Census Bureau, “2019 Government Employment and Payroll Tables,” available at <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/2019/econ/apes/annual-apes.html>
- vi National Center for Education Statistics, “Characteristics of Public School Teachers,” May 2020, available at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_clr.asp
- vii Laura Ungar, “‘We’re Not Controlling It in Our Schools’: Covid Safety Lapses Abound Across U.S.,” Route 50, January 27, 2021, available at: <https://www.route-fifty.com/health-human-services/2021/01/were-not-controlling-it-our-schools-covid-safety-lapses-abound-across-us/171679/>
- viii Chabeli Carrazana, “America’s first female recession,” The 19th, August 2, 2020, available at <https://19thnews.org/2020/08/america-first-female-recession/>
- ix Rivka Liss-Levinson, Joshua Franzel, and Gerald Young, Financial Literacy Programs for Local Government Employees (Washington, DC: Center for State and Local Government Excellence, January 2019), available at <https://slge.org/assets/uploads/2020/05/financial-literacy.pdf>
- x Center for State and Local Government Excellence, A Focus on Public Sector Financial Wellness Programs: Employee Needs and Preferences (Washington, DC: Center for State and Local Government Excellence, April 2020), available at <https://slge.org/assets/uploads/2020/04/financial-wellness-report-2020.pdf>
- xi Center for State and Local Government Excellence, National Association of State Treasurers, and International Public Management Association for Human Resources, Financial Wellness Programs for State and Local Employees: A Quick Reference Guide, July 2020, available at <https://slge.org/assets/uploads/2020/07/financial-wellness-quick-reference-guide.pdf>

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The Center for State and Local Government Excellence (SLGE) was founded in 2007 by ICMA-RC, and in 2021 the two organizations formally joined forces to form The Center for State and Local Government Excellence at ICMA-RC. SLGE at ICMA-RC helps local and state governments become knowledgeable and competitive employers so they can attract and retain a talented and committed workforce. SLGE at ICMA-RC identifies leading practices and conducts research on public retirement plans, health and wellness benefits, workforce demographics and skill set needs, labor force development, as well as topics facing the not-for-profit industry and the education sectors. Additionally, SLGE at ICMA-RC brings state and local leaders together with respected researchers. For more information, access to all research and publications, and to sign up for the SLGE at ICMA-RC newsletter, visit slge.org and follow [@4GovtExcellence](https://twitter.com/4GovtExcellence) on Twitter.