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LEARNING GROUP

Education in 2021 + Beyond:

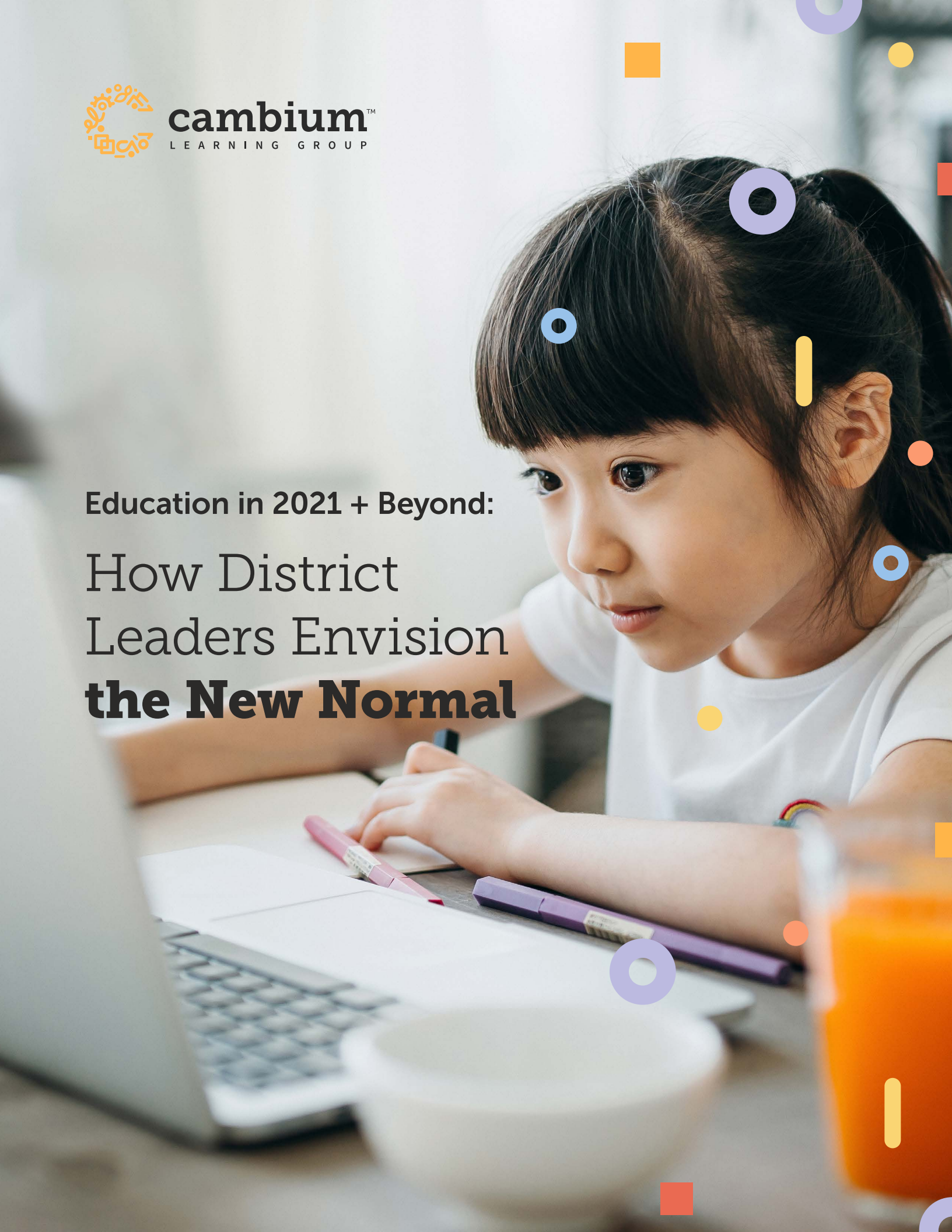# How District Leaders Envision **the New Normal**

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, as cases of the COVID-19 virus continued to rise across the U.S. forcing lockdowns and mandatory stay-at-home orders, the education industry was faced with a massive challenge: how to ensure learning continues when students couldn't physically be in the classroom. The timeline was murky — would students be at home for two weeks or months? Educators had to act swiftly to implement tools and resources to support remote learning, while under pressure to address equity gaps that have existed for years but were now exacerbated.

More than a year later, there are three FDA-approved COVID-19 vaccines available, and teachers in every state are eligible to be vaccinated, although the path to securing a shot is unclear in some areas. While there seems to be an end in sight, it's still far in the distance, as parents, teachers, education leaders and the government remain at odds about when all students and teachers can safely be back in classrooms. This is especially dependent on how various states and regions are handling reopening plans and the level of case numbers and hospitalizations at any given time.

Although this year has disrupted the education system and caused significant strain, most believe that the profession has been changed forever. Plans for hybrid learning that had been slowly inching along pre-pandemic, took shape practically overnight. What does this mean for the future, and what learnings — positive and negative — will the industry take forward?

To better understand how the pandemic has impacted education at the district level, Cambium Learning Group surveyed more than 100 district leaders from across the country on their perception of their district's COVID-19 response and their outlook on the education field going forward. Several key themes emerged, which we will explore in the following eBook, but there is also a universal truth: **there's cautious optimism for the future.**

[1] Robertson, C. (2021, March 16). Covid-19 News: All U.S. States Are Now Offering Vaccines to Teachers. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/03/08/world/covid-19-coronavirus/teachers-in-all-us-states-are-now-eligible-for-vaccination-though-there-is-confusion-in-some-states

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 **Beyond absenteeism, the main concern for district leaders throughout the pandemic is figuring out how to best use technology solutions (46%).** Managing various technology tools was a challenge for 33% of district leaders. This is understandable, as pivoting from in-person learning to virtual learning requires an entirely new way of teaching—no matter how effective and easy-to-use the technology is.

2 **When it comes to technology, issues of equity are at the forefront.** Student and teacher access to edtech were cited as the biggest challenges of a remote learning environment.

3 **District leaders were mostly pleased with their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.** Nearly two-thirds (61%) gave themselves a "B".

4 **Learning loss will be a huge obstacle coming out of the pandemic,** with 52% of district leaders stating it will take six months to a year to recover.

5 **Despite the challenges, educators believe there is hope ahead—** 75% believe that as a result of the pandemic, educators are in a better position to solve problems than ever before.

District leaders were thrown into the spotlight at the onset of the pandemic, working to balance the health and safety needs of students and educators while managing and following the guidelines set by local and state governments. The biggest negative impacts district leaders cited grappling with included high absenteeism (50 percent), concerns over student well-being (46 percent) and students and teachers adapting to the remote learning environments (46 percent).

When schools were forced to shut down, one of the biggest questions to answer was how to rapidly implement remote learning programs to ensure learning could continue? And the question wasn't simply about what curriculum and digital learning solutions would be used, but instead was about equity — did the students have access to a computer, or a reliable internet connection?
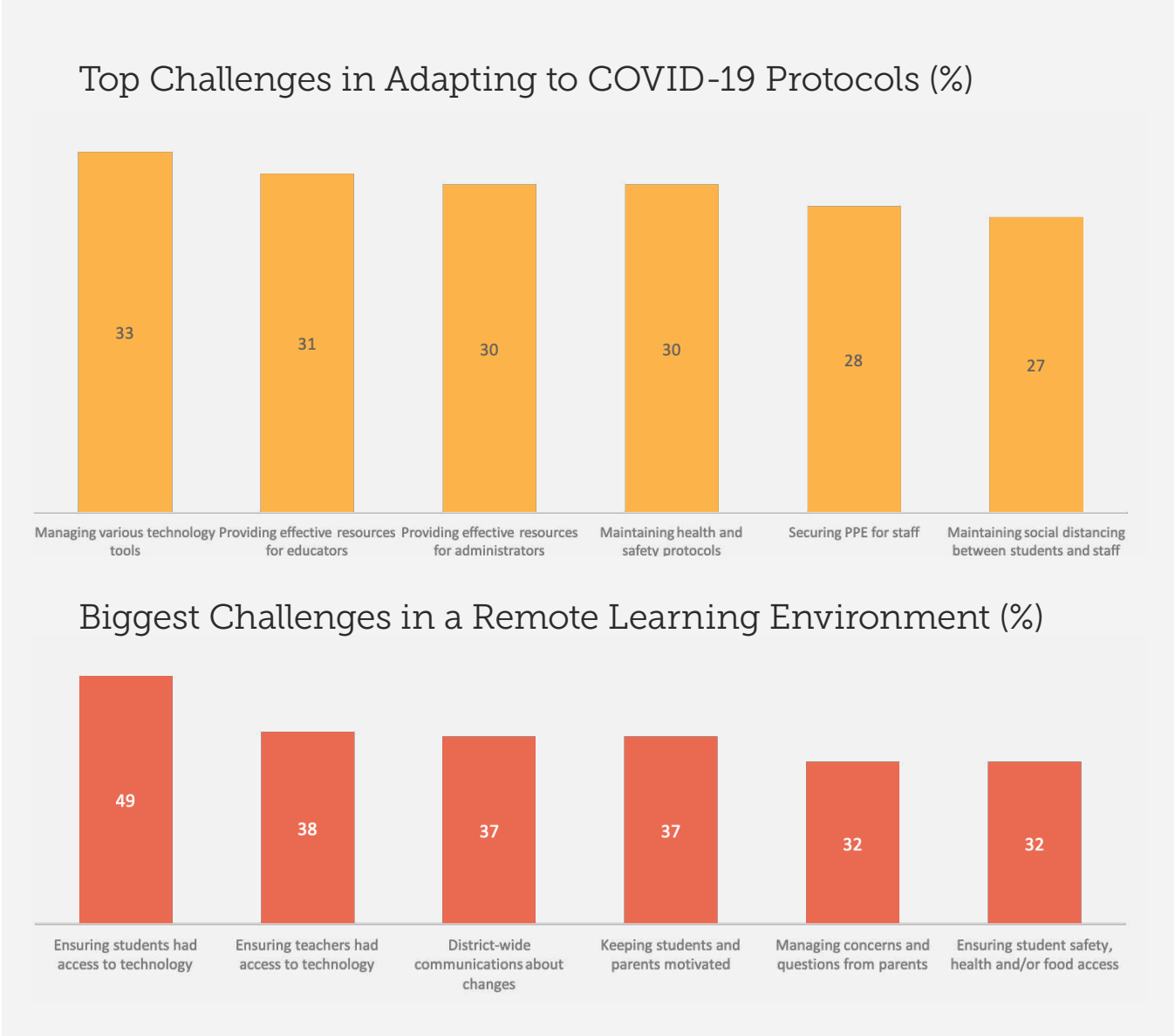
Although those first days of the pandemic are far gone, district leaders are still struggling with connectivity and technology challenges. According to a USA Today survey , as recently as December 2020, at least 11 of the largest 25 school districts in the United States were still in the process of distributing devices or internet to students, or were unclear about the extent of this issue.

Top concerns when selecting **new technology.**

- IT challenges (50%)
- Product's impact on student performance (30%)
- Finding a product that solves a specific problem (30%)

- Product efficacy (28%)
- Teacher confidence (28%)
- Budget and affordability (27%)

The survey results underscored the scale of this issue. A strong majority (91 percent) indicated they had moved to a fully remote learning environment as a result of the pandemic, with nearly half of respondents (49 percent) stating that ensuring students had access to technology was the biggest challenge. Managing various technology tools was a challenge for 33% of district leaders — surpassing other health and safety factors such as maintaining health and safety protocols, social distancing and securing personal protective equipment (PPE).

Top Challenges in Adapting to COVID-19 Protocols (%)

Managing various technology tools	Providing effective resources for educators	Providing effective resources for administrators	Maintaining health and safety protocols	Securing PPE for staff	Maintaining social distancing between students and staff
33	31	30	30	28	27

Biggest Challenges in a Remote Learning Environment (%)

Ensuring students had access to technology	Ensuring teachers had access to technology	District-wide communications about changes	Keeping students and parents motivated	Managing concerns and questions from parents	Ensuring student safety, health and/or food access
49	38	37	37	32	32

Only two percent of respondents indicated that their district was currently fully in-person, with a majority of respondents in hybrid learning environments (56 percent) and the remainder in a fully remote setting (42 percent). Given that many districts are still operating in remote or hybrid environments and have a reliance on technology, ensuring that these tools are simple to implement — and that students have equitable access — will be critical to supporting the education ecosystem as the school year continues and planning for the 2021-2022 school year begins.

District leaders have been in the trenches dealing with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for more than a year at this point, with enough time behind them to reflect on the small victories achieved and the challenges they still face as they continue with recovery.

The sudden onset of remote learning in March 2020 presented challenges, as outlined in section one, district leaders largely felt supported, with 83 percent indicating that their state-level government leaders were helpful in navigating school closures and the impact of the pandemic. A majority (89 percent) also agreed that they were able to provide teachers with the resources needed to successfully practice distance learning.

As districts needed to stand up new technology quickly, the long-term benefits seem to outweigh the upfront issues, with 70 percent of district leaders stating that hybrid/remote learning will improve student performance overall.

Looking at their personal contributions, district leaders provided an even scoring on their response to the pandemic. There was virtually no way to know or prepare for what was ahead of them, and the majority of district leaders (61 percent) gave themselves a "B" when it came to their COVID response.

How district leaders scored themselves when it comes to COVID-19 response.

- A
- B
- C
- D
- F

7%   1%   15%   17%   60%
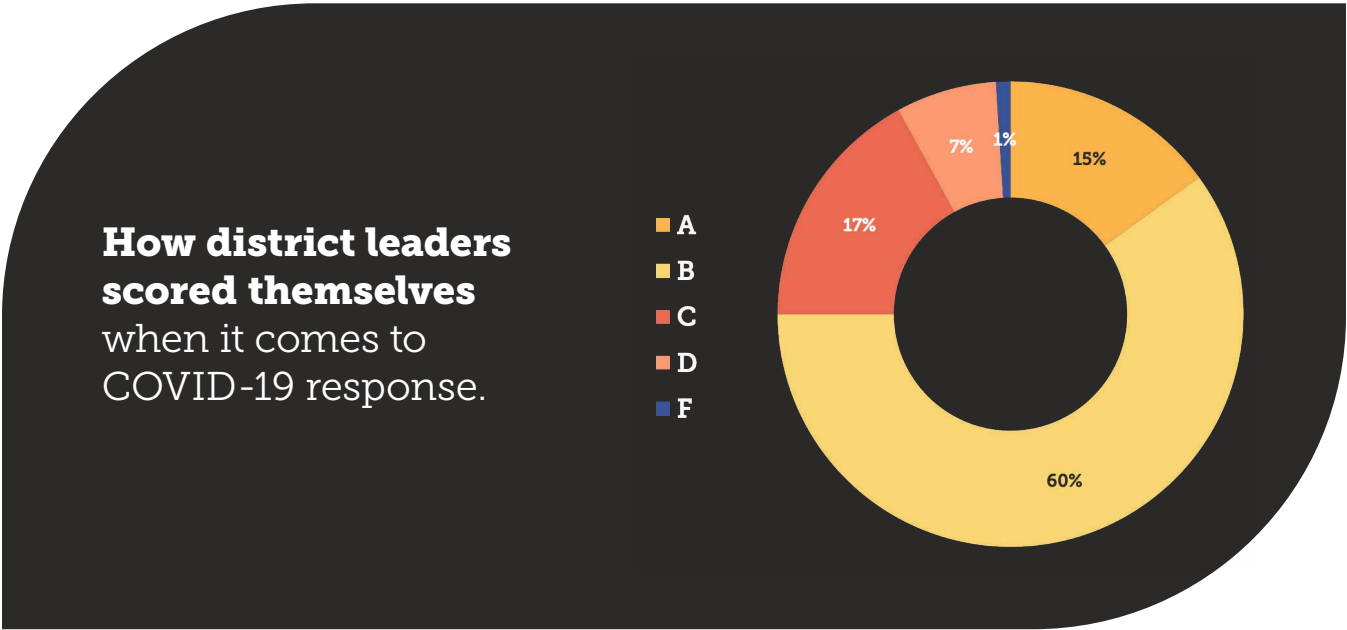
Despite these challenges there seems to be an underlying sense of optimism for what's ahead in education at the district leader level. Being able to support educators and equip students with the appropriate technology and resources and well as social and emotional guidance will be essential as district leaders continue to navigate the fall out from COVID-19.

FINDING HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

For decades, the education field has faced monumental issues that have sparked ongoing debate from literacy to equity and assessments. Academics, policymakers and practitioners have worked to address these issues, but few new models have had widespread success. When it comes to any aspect of education, the conventional wisdom is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

The COVID-19 pandemic drove a nationwide experiment in education. Schools had implemented education technology and tested hybrid and remote learning models, but mandated lockdowns required districts to accelerate these initiatives.

There weren't many opportunities to opt-out, and to support the students to make sure that learning continued, teachers and administrators had to rally around remote learning and technology, if there was hope to not lose the effort put in already during the school year.
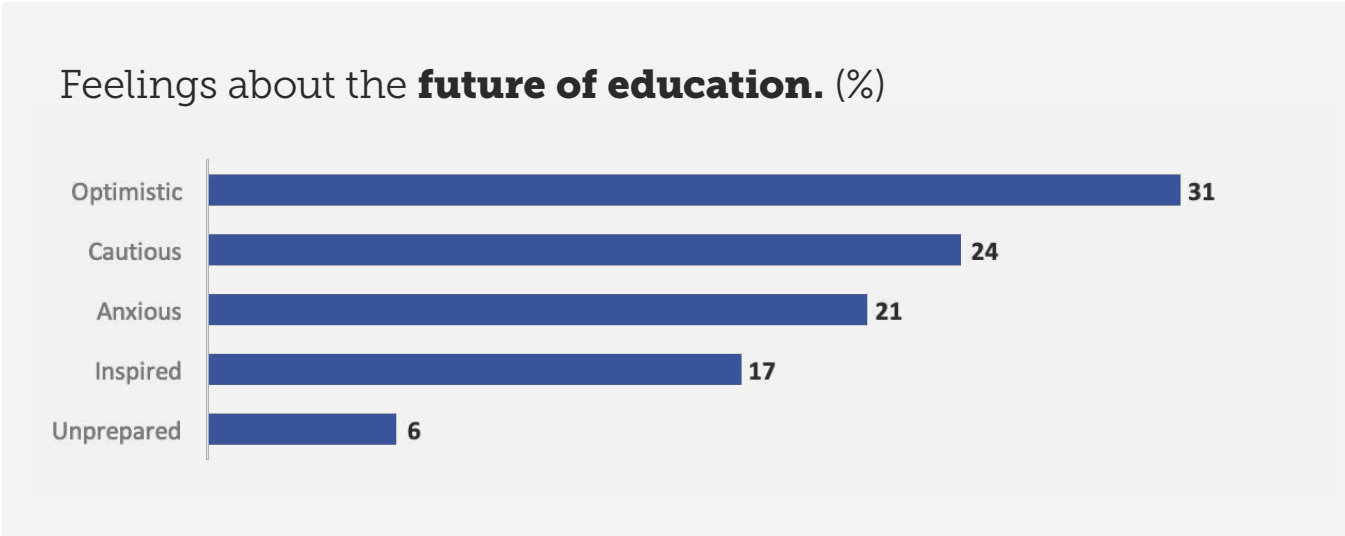
75%+ of district leaders believe that as a result of the pandemic, educators are in a better position to solve problems than ever before.

Although many district leaders (71 percent) believe that teaching will eventually revert back to pre-pandemic methods, more than three-quarters (75 percent) believe that as a result of the pandemic, educators are in a better position to solve problems than ever before. What's more, there's agreement among a majority of respondents (71 percent) that the education field is in a better place than it was five years ago.

Along with these perceived benefits and positive outcomes, significant challenges remain for educators, especially as they address issues related to equity and supporting students who may require additional resources. More than half of district leaders (52 percent) stated they believe it will take six months to a year to recover from the learning loss due to disruptions from the pandemic. This belief is in line with research done on the topic, which has also uncovered disproportionate effects on students of color. An analysis from McKinsey & Company estimates that the average student could fall seven months behind academically, while Black and Hispanic students could experience greater losses — an equivalent of 10 months for Black students and nine months for Latinos.

The findings reveal that overall, there is cautious optimism about the future of education. District leaders were asked to share one-word responses about the current state of the field — while "good" and "hopeful" represented the majority of responses, words like, "troubled," "nervous," and "worried," surrounded them.

Feelings about the **future of education.** (%)

Feeling	%
Optimistic	31
Cautious	24
Anxious	21
Inspired	17
Unprepared	6

Although district leaders pointed to reasons to be hopeful for the future, there are still challenges ahead and the impacts of the pandemic will be lasting. Clearly, based on these responses, teachers will be proceeding carefully, with an eye on what gaps remain.

[2] *Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020, December 14). COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime. McKinsey & Company. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime*
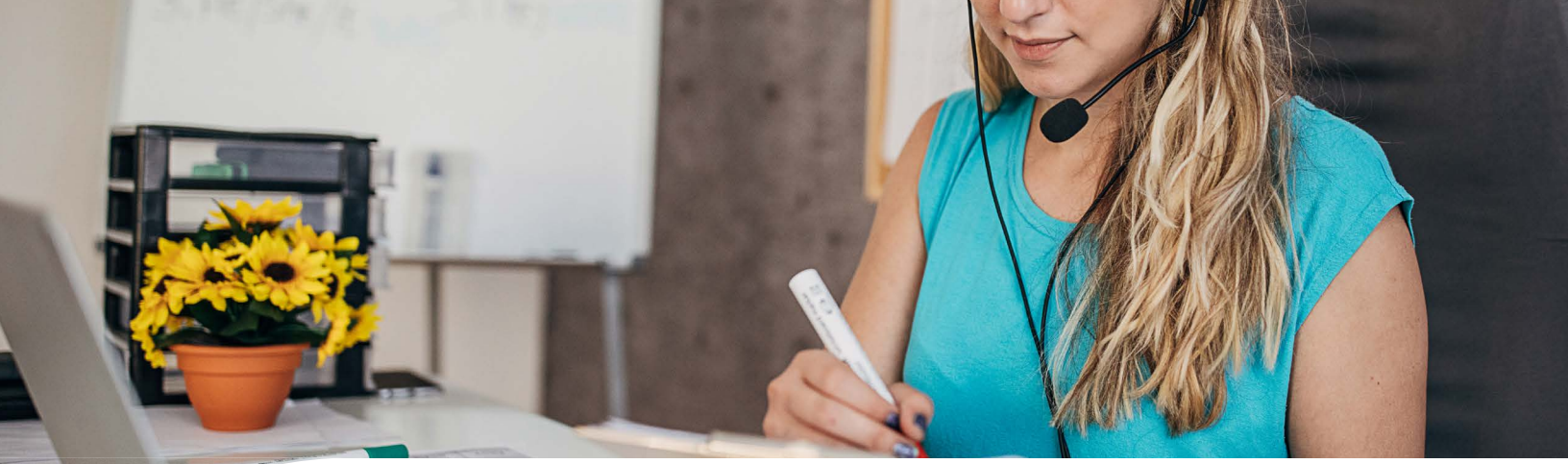
LOOKING AHEAD

There is hope on the horizon when it comes to the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is still a long road ahead for education leaders. President Biden recently signed the American Rescue Plan Act into law, which includes $128 billion in federal relief for K-12 schools, that will support districts through the continued recovery. State and district leaders will need to make decisions about how and where this money is allocated — whether it's for improvements to infrastructure to reduce the spread of the virus or for new education technology to support ongoing hybrid learning and learning recovery.

One of the key takeaways from the pandemic among the district leaders survey is that with the struggles came new opportunity and reasons to be hopeful for the future. One respondent shared, "I believe all the use of technology and distance learning that has been used will make us more effective at individualized instruction in the future."

For too long, the education system has been focused on a distant and intangible future. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us all to evaluate the most immediate, pressing challenges for teachers and students. Going forward, if district leaders prioritize simple, effective solutions that can drive real change in the moment, the industry will be better equipped to weather massive change, all while making sure students and teachers feel seen and supported.

METHODOLOGY

Cambium Learning Group's partner Hanover Research conducted a survey of 103 district leaders and superintendents in January 2021. All respondents were 18+ years old and reside in the United States.

ABOUT HANOVER RESEARCH

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