



Why Today's Staffing Model No Longer Fits Today's Schools

Signal Results

Center for the Study of Education Policy (CSEP)
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Signal Question and Vote Distribution

Signal question: “How strongly do you feel districts need to engage in systems-level transformation to meet the challenges facing schools today?” 81 education stakeholders responded.

Response	Count	Share
Strongly Agree – Transformation is urgent and necessary	58	72%
Agree – Change is needed, though not urgent	22	27%
Disagree – Current approaches are largely sufficient	1	1%

Respondents were also invited to leave an open-ended comment explaining their vote. Of the 81 respondents, 35 did so (23 of 58 Strongly Agree voters and 12 of 22 Agree voters). The single Disagree voter left no comment.

Summary of Open-Ended Responses

The written comments cluster into two distinct narratives that track the vote itself.

Strongly Agree (urgent) (n = 23 comments)

The dominant argument is that today's challenges are structural rather than episodic, so incremental fixes can't close the gap. Respondents pointed to a cluster of converging pressures: chronic staffing shortages, rising behavioral and mental health needs, fragmented policy environments, funding constraints, AI and school-choice disruptions, and a coming enrollment shift (“demographic cliff”). They argued that legacy structures built for a different era of schooling can't absorb all of this at once. Several respondents wrote from decades of front-line experience (“14 years,” “30 years”) and described watching the same problems recur despite repeated reform cycles. A few offered specific mechanisms: bringing HR/talent leaders into

transformation planning, redesigning staffing/role models for paraprofessionals and special education, and building coherent, evidence-based, cross-departmental plans rather than “stop-gap” school-by-school fixes.

Agree, not urgent (n = 12 comments)

These respondents don't dispute the need for change but push back hard on the word “urgent.” Their core concerns: (1) schools are community institutions, and change imposed too fast without stakeholder buy-in backfires; (2) “urgent” often becomes a euphemism for “rushed,” and rushed reform in education has a poor track record; (3) need and readiness vary enormously by district. A few described their own district as already well-resourced and mid-transformation, while flagging that poorer or rural districts face the pressures far more acutely; and several located the real leverage point above the district with state policy on certification, tenure, and evaluation, arguing that district-level effort alone can't fix a misaligned policy environment.

Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Structural mismatch between legacy systems and current needs

By far the most repeated theme among Strongly Agree respondents: the system “wasn't built for what today's classrooms actually require.” This shows up in discussions of behavioral intensity in classrooms, whole-child needs (hunger, mental health, social media effects), and staffing models designed for a different era.

“Transformation is urgent because the current model wasn't built for what today's classrooms actually require... our staffing models, role expectations, and support systems were designed for a different set of student needs than the ones we're facing now.”

— Strongly Agree

Theme 2: Workforce and pipeline strain as a forcing function

Shrinking educator pipelines, difficulty finding certified staff in high-need areas (EL, SPED, science/math), and reliance on paraprofessionals and contracted/virtual providers appear across both vote categories, cited by some as evidence of urgency and by others as a variable-by-district concern.

“As a small rural district, vacancies have forced us to rely more and more on expensive contracting agencies and virtual providers just to provide the services our students need... Our students need educators and service providers back in our buildings.”

— Strongly Agree

“The biggest area of need we've experienced has been in ELL, specifically in the content areas of math and science... we are just technically out of compliance because their PEL is not in math or science content areas.”

— Agree

Theme 3: Coherence vs. fragmentation

Multiple respondents explicitly framed the problem as fragmented, isolated efforts versus a coherent, systems-level plan, echoing a “the whole is more than the sum of stopgaps” logic, and naming interconnected forces (staffing, funding, demographics, AI, mental health) as one system needing one redesign, not five separate problems.

“Individual institutions are attempting to create stopgap measures and solve problems in front of them, but these efforts are often fragmented and would be much more impactful if states and districts engage in systems-level transformation through a coherent plan.”

— Strongly Agree

Theme 4: Speed and process as the real fault line, not the need for change itself

Almost no comment in either group argued that nothing needs to change. The disagreement is about pace, sequencing, and process: “urgent” reads to some as “rushed and disruptive,” while to others it reads as “the window to act intentionally is closing.”

“I worry about 'urgent' because that usually means rushed, and that never goes well.”

— Agree

“Educators in general do not adapt well to 'urgent' changes. Any change worth making needs to be thoughtfully vetted and evaluated within a given context.”

— Agree

Theme 5: Differentiation by district context and resource gaps

A recurring caution, mostly from Agree respondents, is that a single narrative of crisis erases real variation. Some districts (often better-resourced or smaller/rural-but-stable) are already managing well or already mid-transformation, while others (often lower-income, understaffed) face compounding pressure. This raises a resource gap: universal “urgency” framing may not fit every context, and support/policy solutions may need to be differentiated.

“For more affluent districts, I think the system is still working because (a) they often have stronger retention and (b) they can more easily pick up teachers from poorer districts. But is it working for all schools? No.”

— Agree

Theme 6: Locus of change: district vs. state/policy level

Several respondents, again concentrated in the Agree group, located key levers outside the district's control: certification rules, tenure and evaluation law, and federal-to-local alignment on what schools are even supposed to do. This suggests some skepticism that “district-level” transformation alone is the right unit of analysis.

“Districts are not the only sites, or even the predominant sites, where change needs to occur. The policy environment portion is under-addressed... We need to re-think tenure laws, evaluation laws, certification structures.”

— Agree

“We need to ensure we are on the same page in terms of expectations and alignment from federal down to the local level as to what the job of the school is expected to be in each community.”

— Agree

Theme 7: External, non-negotiable forces as urgency drivers

Strongly Agree comments specifically named AI, an “expanding education marketplace”/school choice, and demographic shifts as forces that “will force the system to shift” regardless of district's will. This is an argument that urgency is being imposed externally, not just felt internally.

“The transformation is urgent, and it will happen, but the critical idea here is that it is an intentional transformation. Factors such as climate change, an expanding education marketplace, and a demographic cliff for students will force the system to shift.”

— Strongly Agree

Subscriber Research and Resources

This section highlights research and resources subscribers send us related to the current issue's focus. Below is a submission that addresses the changing nature of schools and school leadership.

- **Voices of HR 2026: What Superintendents, Funders, and State Leaders Need to Know to Ensure Great Teaching for Every Student Daily (forthcoming):** K–12 HR and Talent leaders play a critical role in recruiting and retaining great teachers, but most are overwhelmed and lack the capacity, preparation, and support to work strategically. The report calls for greater investment in HR leadership, succession planning, workforce systems, and AI readiness to strengthen the educator workforce and improve students' access to great teaching. The report will be published on this [website](#).

Have a report, article, or resource that furthers our understanding of a topic in future Education Horizon issues? Send it to Lisa Hood at lhood@ilstu.edu for possible inclusion in a future Signal Check brief.