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How state leaders can help districts prepare for uncertain staffing and budget challenges

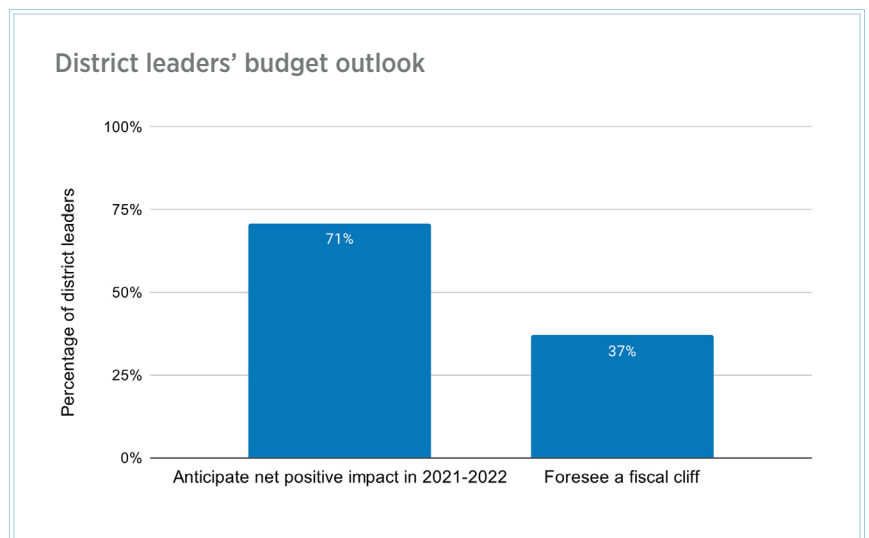
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THE ISSUE

Given higher than expected state revenues and historic federal investments in state and local education, school districts have unprecedented federal funds to respond to the growing mental health, academic, and safety needs of students and staff. However, districts continue to face staff shortages. And they should prepare to manage the fallout from a fiscal cliff when additional funds expire.

WHAT WE FOUND

In June 2021 the American School District Panel found that seven in ten districts reported higher funding levels than in pre-pandemic years, but nearly four in ten feared a “fiscal cliff” within three years (see chart). About one in ten superintendents said they planned to leave their jobs by spring 2022. With this infusion of funding and a surge of student needs in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, district leaders are seeking to hire more staff across many job categories, especially substitute and mental health staff.



WHAT POLICYMAKERS CAN DO

So far, staff do not appear to be leaving schools faster than they did before the pandemic. However, educators may yet “burn out” and the growing need for academic and mental health services may exacerbate staffing shortages.

- 1. Organize a reserve corps of instructional and mental health staff.** With districts everywhere competing against each other to fill new, short-term roles to support pandemic recovery, states should consider organizing a reserve corps of teachers, tutors, or staff by soliciting recent college graduates, retirees, professionals on loan from other industries, or even the National Guard.
- 2. Leverage remote collaborations to extend the reach of expert teachers.** Develop a team of mentor teachers who can collaborate online and support instruction in partner schools across the state. Mentor teachers can support teams of colleagues by subject or grade level to prepare lessons and provide virtual coaching. This can help teachers hone their craft, improve coordination, and increase student achievement.
- 3. Establish a new office for innovation or competitive funds to empower innovative staffing arrangements.** State and district leaders should develop systems or incentives so that school principals design staffing models based on students’ social-emotional and academic needs. For example, teachers can get to know students better in smaller learning pods where they teach multiple courses and can develop stronger relationships.