



The Mattering Gap Among K-12 Educators



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Table of Contents

2	Foreword
3	Introduction
4	Key Findings
5	Detailed Findings
18	Conclusion
20	Methodology



Foreword

Many of us can remember a teacher who saw something in us before we could see it in ourselves. Maybe they noticed a strength we didn't know we had or offered encouragement when we were tempted to give up. These seemingly small classroom moments send a message that every child deserves to hear: *You are valued and have something valuable to contribute. You matter.*

As schools confront burnout and work to retain talented educators, we need to ask a fundamental question: **Do the adults who invest so much in our children feel like they matter, too?**

That question is at the heart of the Gallup and Walton Family Foundation Educator Mattering Study, the first national study to examine whether America's K-12 educators feel valued, whether they know their contributions make a difference and in what way these experiences relate to their wellbeing and intention to remain in the profession. The data reveal a troubling gap between how much we depend on educators and how supported they feel; it's a gap that is closely tied to burnout. The study also highlights an important factor in educators' plans to stay in their role: feeling that their schools are invested in them.

Mattering is the universal human need to feel valued and to have opportunities to add value to the world around us.¹ Over time, these experiences become the story we tell ourselves about our place in the world: Am I valued for who I am as a person beyond my role? Are my contributions appreciated? Do I have people invested in my growth? Would I be missed if I weren't here? The answers to those questions can impact how we feel at work, in our relationships and, over time, how we see ourselves.²

A strong sense of mattering is linked with greater life satisfaction, a deeper sense of purpose and better psychological wellbeing.³ Yet only 35% of K-12 educators say they matter a great deal to their school communities.

The good news is that mattering offers both a diagnosis of the problem and points us toward a solution. Research highlights key ingredients to feeling like you matter.⁴ The SAID framework, developed by Jennifer B. Wallace, brings these ingredients together: feeling Significant, Appreciated, Invested In and Depended On.

Feeling **significant** is being known as a unique individual.

Feeling **appreciated** means knowing that what you do makes a difference.

Feeling **invested in** is seeing evidence that a school cares about your future.

Feeling **depended on** means knowing that your unique contribution is needed.

These four experiences provide school communities a shared language and a useful guide for turning the science of mattering into everyday practice.

The study also found a notable connection between creative making and mattering. Educators who incorporate making into their classrooms every week are nearly twice as likely to feel they matter as those who never do. Creating art or building something meaningful can offer visible evidence of the value educators add. It can also restore a sense of agency, something instructors can lose when schedules and demands leave little room for their professional judgment.

Developing a culture of mattering in schools doesn't require a systems overhaul. It can start by taking a new look at everyday practices, such as staff meetings, professional development, recognition, workloads, resources and compensation, through a mattering lens: *Do our decisions help educators feel significant, appreciated, invested in and depended on in sustainable ways?*

We are honored to collaborate with Gallup on this groundbreaking study and are deeply grateful to the educators who shared their experiences with us. Their candor provides both an opportunity and a responsibility to respond. The adults who spend their days helping young people know they matter deserve to know just how much they matter, too.

**Carrie Walton Penner, Jennifer B. Wallace,
Kelly Corrigan, Lauren Lavelle**

1 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31407358/>

2 <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/756179/mattering-by-jennifer-breheny-wallace/>

3 https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10902-024-00720-3?utm_source=chatgpt.com

4 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/book/monograph/9780128094150/the-psychology-of-mattering>

Introduction

Researchers have studied the concept of mattering since sociologist Morris Rosenberg first identified it in the 1980s,⁵ and subsequent work has found that the need to matter is a primary driver of human behavior. Mattering describes an experience that extends beyond simply feeling included or accepted. At its core, it reflects the sense that a person is valued and has meaningful opportunities to contribute to others.

A new survey from Gallup examines how K-12 educators experience mattering at work. Although they play an essential role in the lives of young people, many K-12 educators do not feel a strong sense that they matter within their school communities. In a school setting, mattering means educators not only feel seen and valued as individuals but also recognize that their perspectives, abilities and work make a meaningful difference to their school community.

The survey was developed in collaboration with the Walton Family Foundation and Jennifer B. Wallace, creator of the SAID framework and author of *Mattering: The Secret to a Life of Deep Connection and Purpose*. Additional collaborators included Lauren Lavelle,⁶ Executive Director of The Mattering Institute, and Kelly Corrigan,⁷ *New York Times* bestselling author and host of the podcast and NPR show *Kelly Corrigan Wonders*.

The research in this report draws on the SAID framework, developed by Wallace, which identifies four components of mattering: *Significance, Appreciation, Invested In* and *Depended On*. Gallup surveyed a national sample of 1,952 K-12 educators, including classroom teachers, teaching assistants, substitutes and paraprofessionals, July 28-Aug. 14, to explore these dimensions of mattering.

Educators with stronger scores across each of the four SAID dimensions are more likely to report that they matter a great deal, with Appreciation showing the strongest relationship.

The findings suggest that mattering is not simply a reflection of how educators feel about their jobs, nor is it built through a single program or gesture; rather, it is established by an ecosystem.

It accumulates through daily signals from colleagues, supervisors, students and parents, and it declines when those signals are absent over time. It is shaped by everyday experiences within schools such as how educators are recognized, whether others invest in their development, how they are relied upon and whether they have opportunities to engage in work that feels meaningful. These experiences give school leaders and policymakers a clearer picture of where educator mattering is strong, where it breaks down and what may help strengthen it.

5 https://www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/bpl_images/content_store/sample_chapter/9781405162425/9781405162425_001.pdf

6 <https://www.jenniferwallace.com/mattering-institute>

7 <https://www.kellycorrigan.com/>

Key Findings

- 1** **Roughly one in three K-12 educators (35%) say they matter a great deal at their school.** Mattering varies slightly by school type and subject taught, but the differences are small. This suggests mattering is less demographically driven and more a function of the system in which educators teach.
- 2** **The activities that most often make educators feel that they matter involve working directly with students.** Eighty-five percent say helping a student through something difficult makes them feel they matter a great deal.
- 3** **Feeling appreciated has the strongest relationship with mattering,** as 72% of educators with high Appreciation scores say they matter a great deal, compared with 7% of those with low scores.
- 4** **Recognition from supervisors is particularly important to feeling like one matters,** yet only one in four educators receive it weekly or more often.
- 5** Among the SAID dimensions, **Invested In has the strongest independent relationship with educators' likelihood of leaving their jobs within the next year.** The share of educators who say they are likely to leave falls from 41% among those with lower Invested In scores to 12% among those with higher scores.
- 6** **Two-thirds of educators say they always or often give more to their school community than they get back.** Frequent burnout rises sharply with this imbalance, from 13% among educators who rarely or never feel they give more than they receive to 57% among those who always do.
- 7** **Creative practice offers another way to build mattering:** Educators who engage in creative production more frequently are also more likely to report a strong sense of mattering.

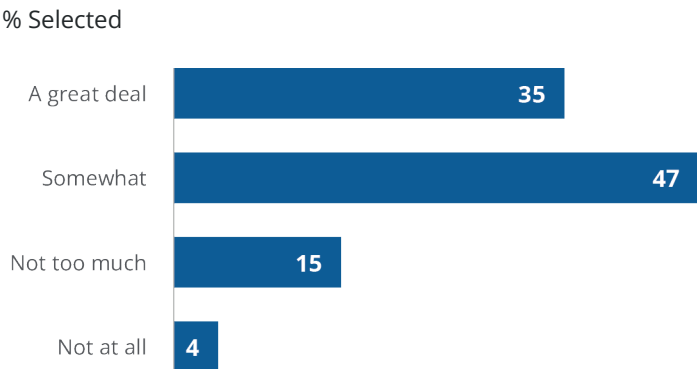
Detailed Findings

Strong Sense of Mattering Uncommon Among K-12 Educators

Only about one in three K-12 educators (35%) say they matter a great deal at their school. Another 47% say they matter somewhat, and 19% say they do not matter too much or at all.

FIGURE 1
K-12 Educators’ Perceptions of Mattering at School

To what extent do you feel like you matter at your school — a great deal, somewhat, not too much, not at all?

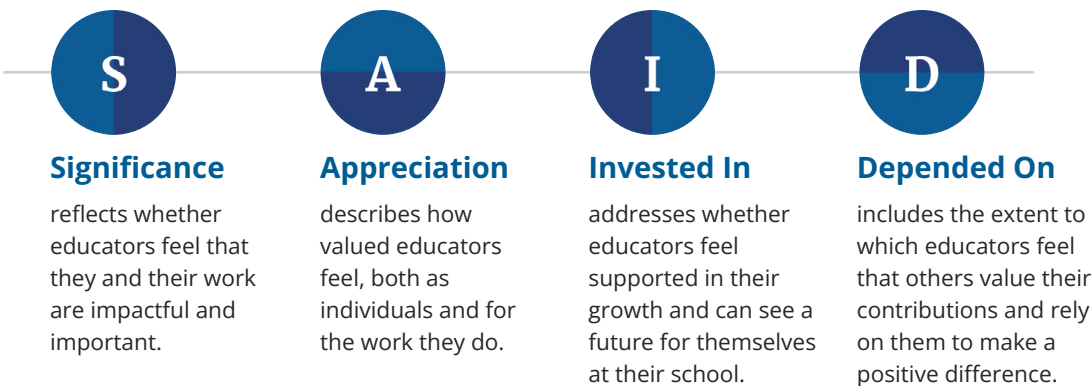


Click this [link](#) to view the full data set.

Low levels of mattering are consistent across the K-12 teaching workforce, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, level of education, years of experience or grade level taught. However, there are statistically significant differences in perceptions of mattering based on educators’ age. Those 60 and older are most likely to say they matter a great deal (47%), compared with 31% to 34% among all other age groups. Likewise, educators at private, independent or charter schools (44%) are more likely than those at public schools (32%) to say they feel they matter a great deal. Educators who teach special education (43%) are also more likely than those teaching other subjects to say the same.

Mattering and the SAID Framework: Appreciation Is the Strongest Driver

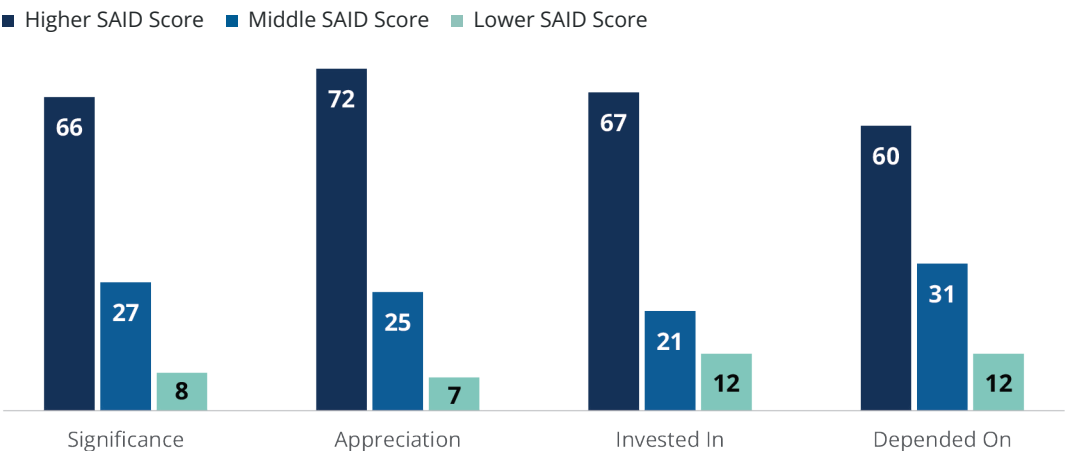
The SAID framework identifies four dimensions of mattering: Significance, Appreciation, Invested In and Depended On. These dimensions provide a framework for examining how educators experience mattering.



For this report, educators’ responses to three questions are combined into a higher, middle or lower score for that dimension. As scores on each dimension increase, so does the likelihood that educators say they matter a great deal at their school. However, Appreciation has the strongest relationship with self-reported mattering. Among educators with the highest Appreciation scores, 72% say they matter a great deal, compared with just 7% of those with the lowest scores.

FIGURE 2
Percentages of K-12 Educators Who Feel They Matter a Great Deal by SAID Score

% Who feel they matter “a great deal”



Click this [link](#) to view the full data set.

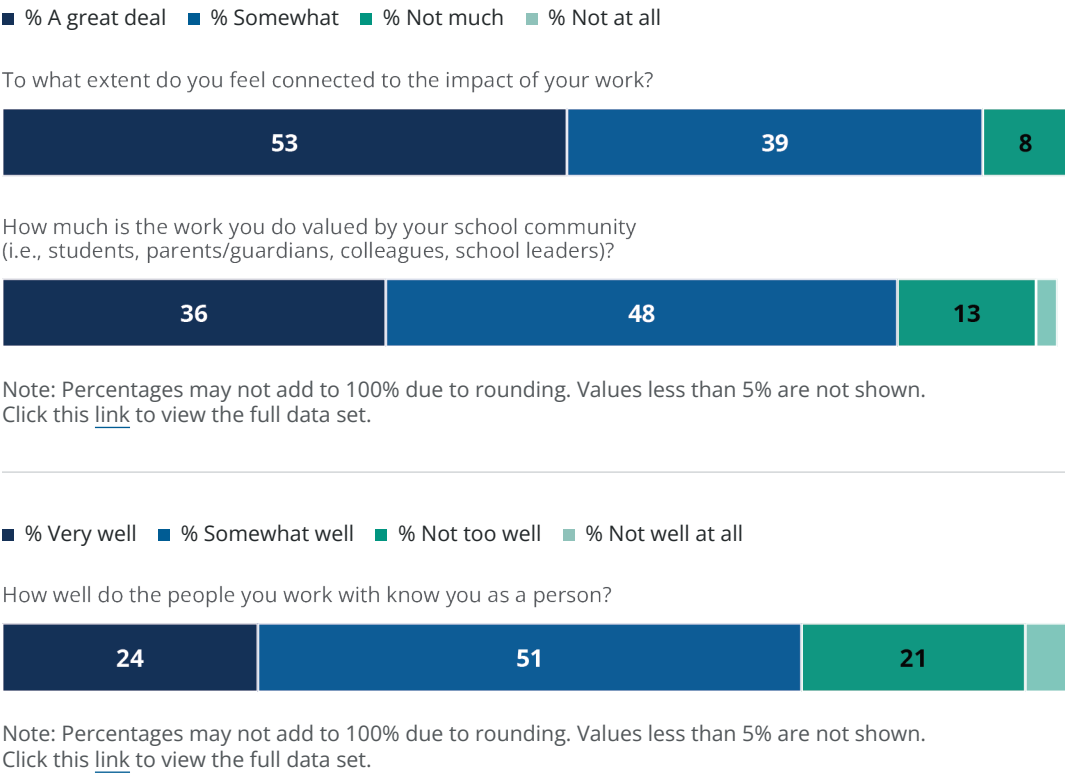


Significance:
Rooted in Working Directly With Students

K-12 educators’ sense of Significance is strongest when it comes to seeing the impact of their work.

More than half, 53%, say they feel connected to the impact of their work a great deal, the highest share among the three measures that make up this dimension. Thirty-six percent say the work they do is valued a great deal by their school community, while 24% say the people they work with know them very well as a person.

FIGURE 3
Elements of K-12 Educators’ Reported Significance



The importance of seeing one’s impact is also evident when educators identify the activities that make them feel they matter most.

The four activities most likely to make teachers feel they matter all involve working directly with students.

Eighty-five percent say helping a student through something difficult makes them feel they matter a great deal, and 74% say the same about seeing students perform well academically. Giving individual students feedback and leading creative, hands-on activities follow, at 57% and 50%, respectively.



FIGURE 4

How much does each of the following make you feel you matter as an educator?

% A great deal



Note: Those who said the question was not applicable to them are not included.
Click this [link](#) to view the full data set.

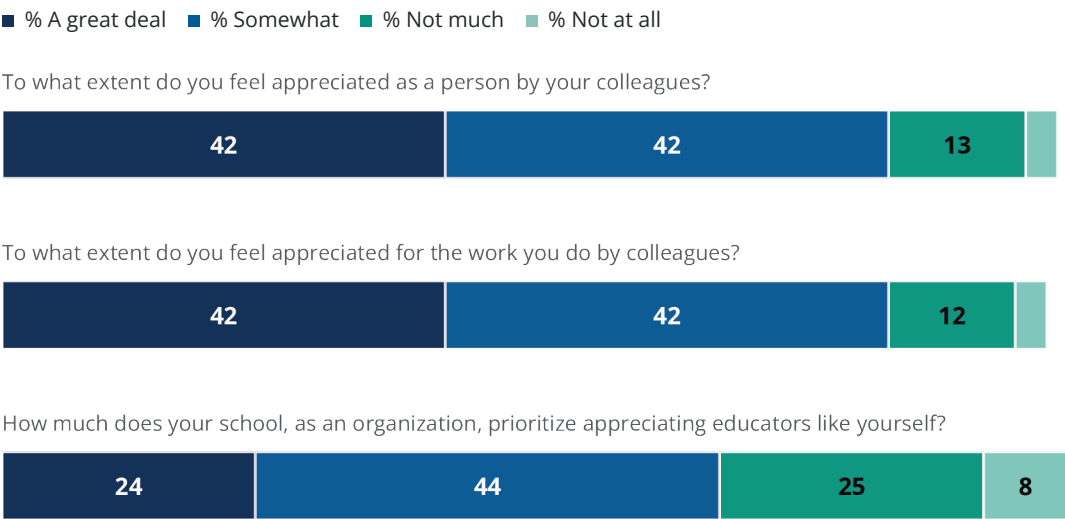


Appreciation:
Supervisor Recognition Is Rare but Powerful

Given how strongly Appreciation relates to mattering, how acknowledged and valued K-12 educators feel may be one of the most important levers for strengthening it.

While 42% of educators say colleagues appreciate them a great deal as a person and the same percentage say colleagues appreciate their work a great deal, only 24% say their school as an organization prioritizes educator appreciation to that extent, identifying clear opportunities for improvement at the school leadership level.

FIGURE 5
Elements of K-12 Educators’ Reported Appreciation



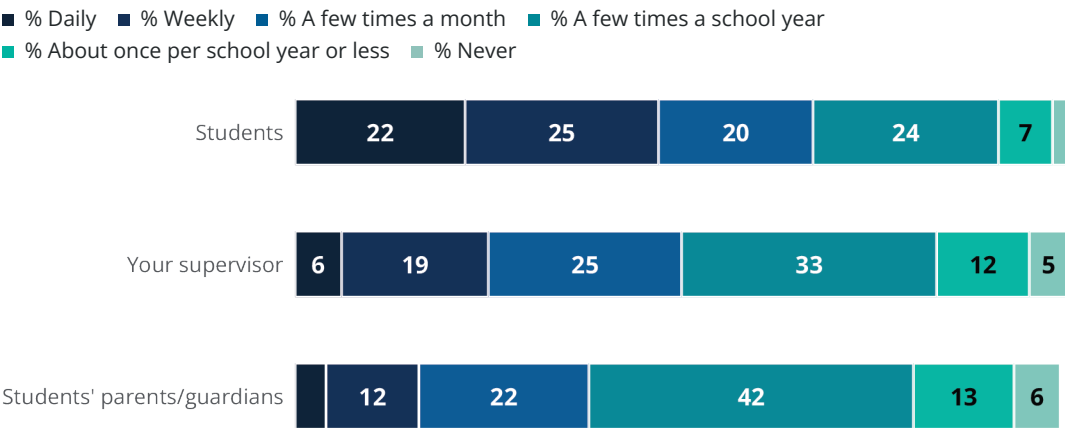
Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding. Values less than 5% are not shown.
Click this [link](#) to view the full data set.

Appreciation can come from various parts of an educator’s school community, but frequency of recognition from these sources varies considerably. Whereas 47% of K-12 educators say they receive recognition from students at least weekly, just 25% report receiving recognition from their supervisors and 16% from students’ parents with the same frequency.

FIGURE 6

How often do ____ express recognition, appreciation, thanks or gratitude to you?

All K-12 educators



Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding. Values less than 5% are not shown. Click this [link](#) to view the full data set.

Statistical analysis confirms that recognition from a supervisor has a stronger relationship with mattering than recognition from students or parents, which makes its relative infrequency particularly notable.

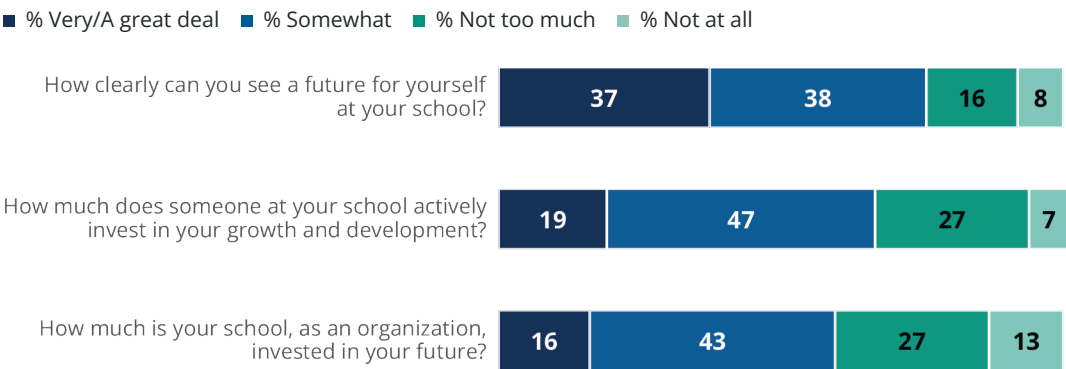




K-12 educators’ sense of feeling Invested In includes seeing a future for themselves at their school and feeling supported in their growth and development.

While 37% of educators say they can very clearly see a future for themselves at their school, just 19% say someone at their school invests a great deal in their growth and development, and 16% say their school as an organization prioritizes their future to the same degree.

FIGURE 7
Elements of K-12 Educators’ Reported Feeling Invested In



Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.
Click this [link](#) to view the full data set.

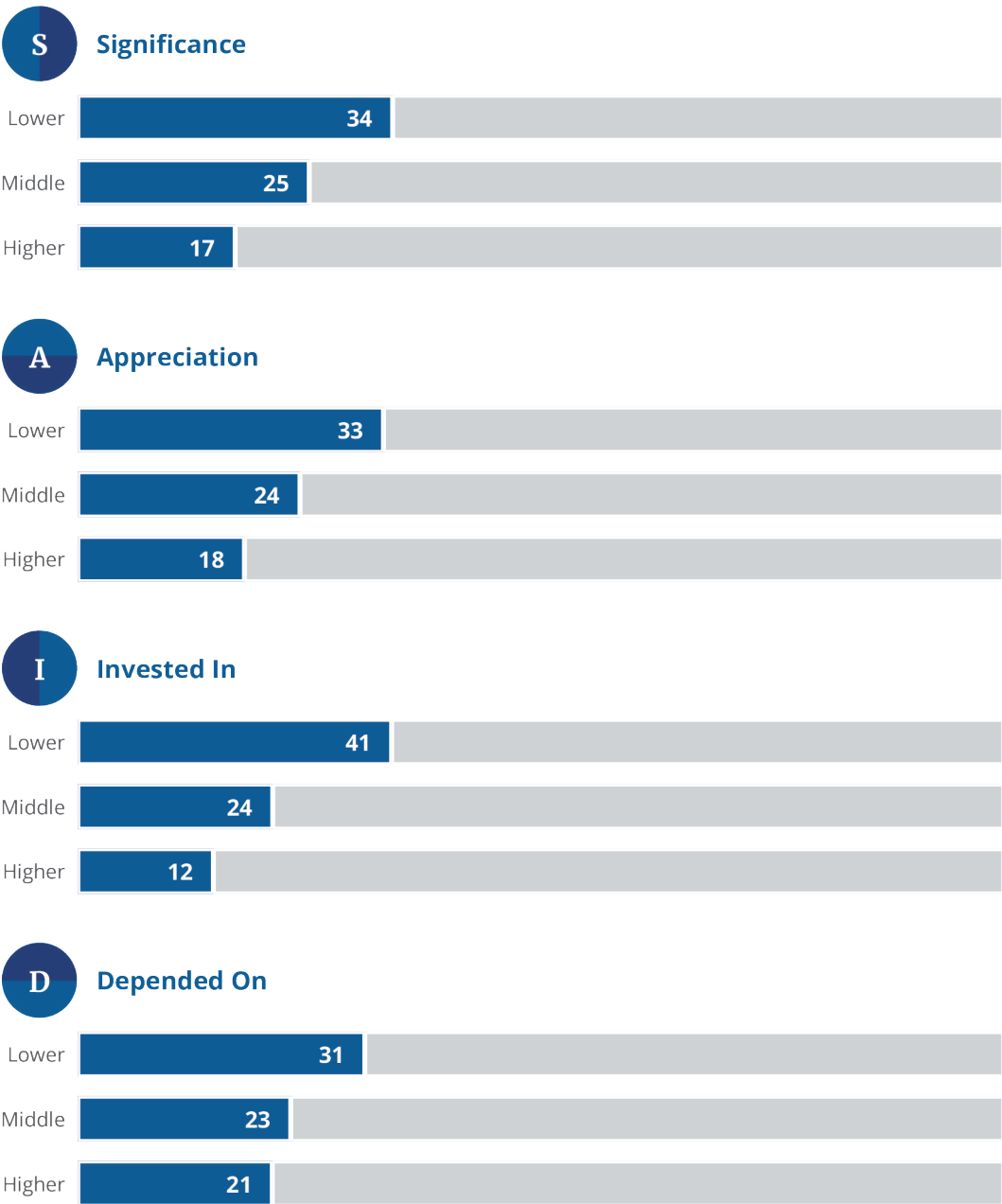
These findings are particularly relevant when considered along with educators’ plans to stay in their jobs. One in four educators say they are very (12%) or somewhat (13%) likely to leave their current job within the next year. Longer term, 52% say they plan to remain classroom teachers for the rest of their careers, while 12% expect to remain in K-12 education in another role, 12% do not plan to stay in the profession and 24% are unsure.

Among the four SAID dimensions, a statistical analysis finds Invested In has the strongest independent relationship with educators’ likelihood of leaving their job within the next year. Forty-one percent of educators with low Invested In scores say they are likely to leave, compared with 24% of those with moderate scores and just 12% of those with high scores.

FIGURE 8

How likely is it that you will leave your educator job within the next 12 months?

% Very likely or somewhat likely



Click this [link](#) to view the full data set.

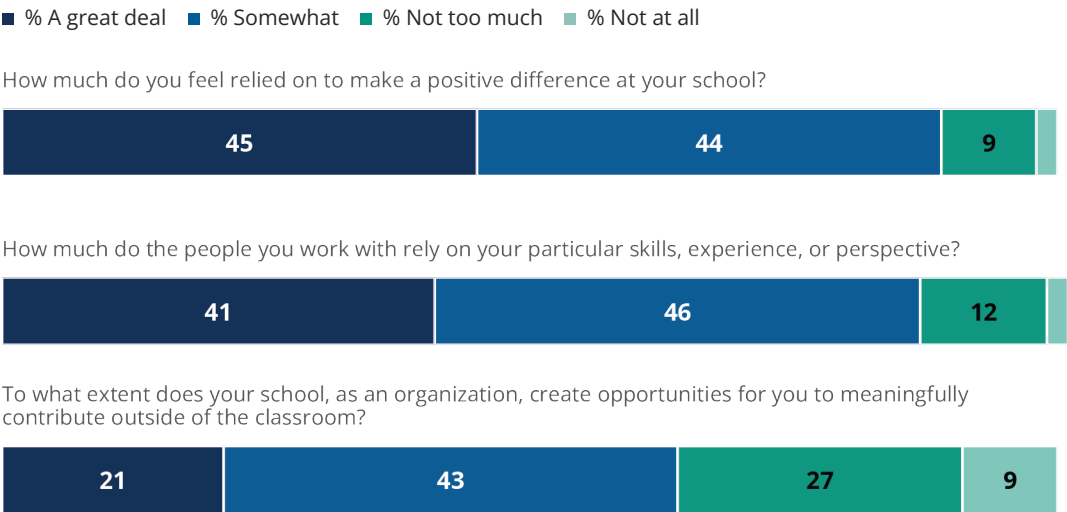


Depended On:
Healthy Reliance Is Key to Preventing Burnout

Depended On reflects whether K-12 educators feel that others rely on their skills, experience and contributions to their school.

Nearly half of educators (45%) say they are relied on a great deal to make a positive difference at their school, while 41% say the people they work with rely a great deal on their particular skills, experience or perspective. By comparison, 21% say their school creates a great deal of opportunity for them to meaningfully contribute outside the classroom.

FIGURE 9
Elements of K-12 Educators’ Reported Feeling Depended On



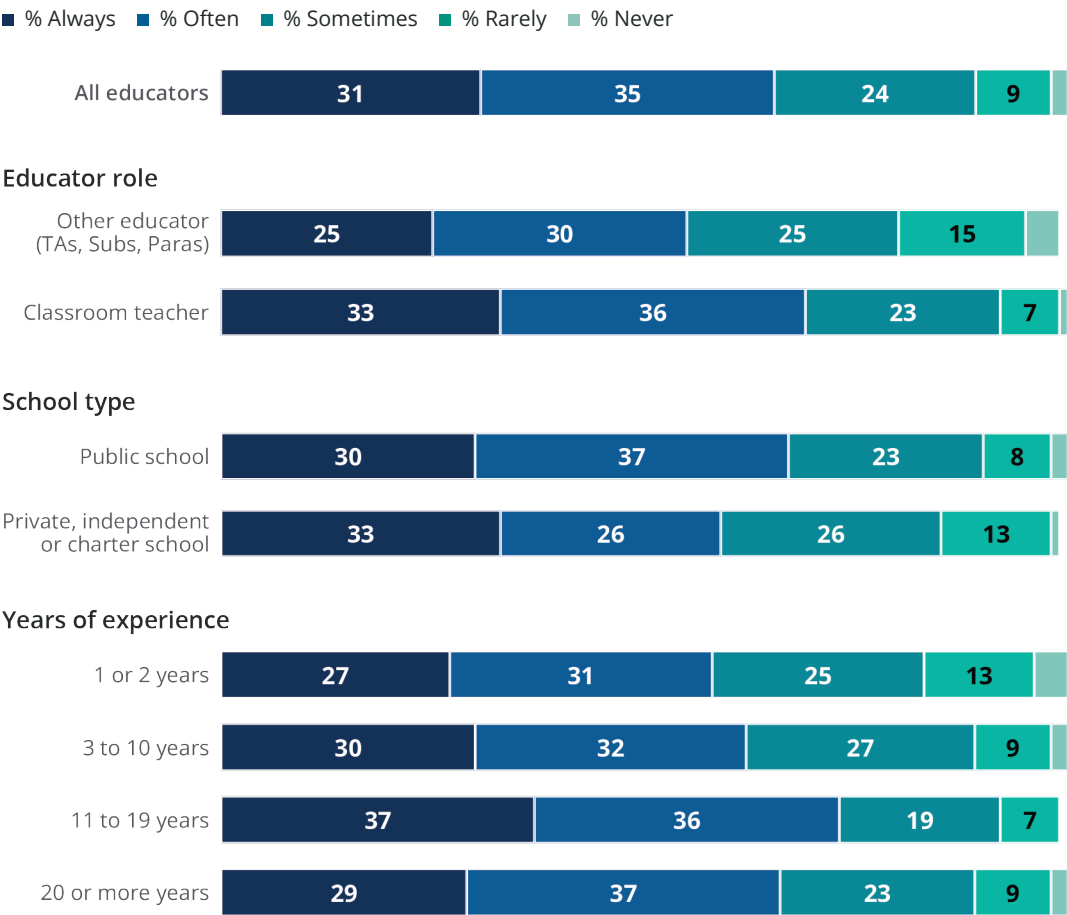
Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding. Values less than 5% are not shown.
Click this [link](#) to view the full data set.

Being depended on can become a burden when that reliance is not balanced by adequate support. Two-thirds of educators say they always or often give more to their school community than they get back. Classroom teachers are more likely than other types of educators, such as teaching assistants, paraprofessionals and substitutes, to say they give more than they receive. Public school educators are also more likely than those who teach in private, independent or charter schools to report this imbalance. In addition, educators with 11 to 19 years of experience are more likely than those with less and more experience to feel they give more than they get from their school community.



FIGURE 10

How often do you feel you give more to your school community (i.e., students, parents/guardians, colleagues, school leaders) than you get back?



Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding. Values less than 5% are not shown. Click this [link](#) to view the full data set.

Burnout increases sharply as the imbalance between what educators give and receive grows.

Among educators who rarely or never say they give more to their school community than they get back, 13% report being burned out always or very often. That rises to 39% among those who often give more than they receive and 57% among those who always do.



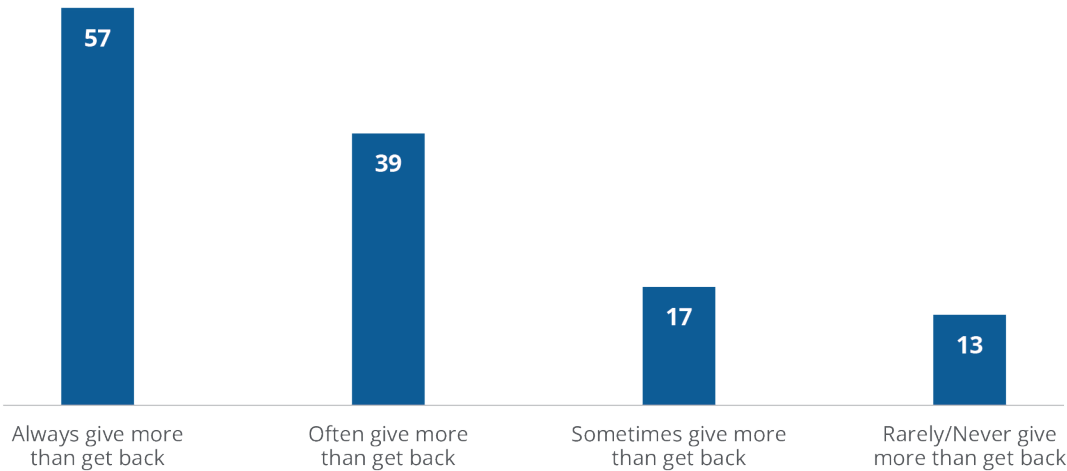
Overall, **36% of educators say they feel burned out** at work very often (28%) or always (8%) and another 41% report feeling this way sometimes.



FIGURE 11

K-12 Educators' Reported Burnout and Being Over-Relied On

% Always/Very often feel burned out at work



Click this [link](#) to view the full data set.

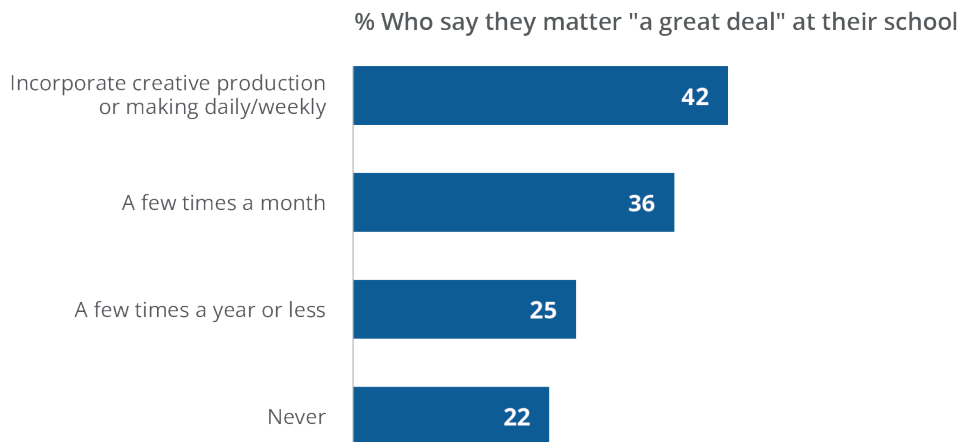
Creative Practice: “Making” as an Amplifier

Creative practice offers another lens for understanding educator mattering. Thirty-nine percent of K-12 educators report incorporating hands-on creative activities, or “making,” into their teaching or professional practice at least weekly. Two-thirds of educators (67%) say the process always or often helps them see students’ strengths more clearly.

The frequency of making is also associated with educators’ sense of mattering. Educators who incorporate making at least weekly are nearly twice as likely as those who never do to say they matter a great deal at their school.

FIGURE 12

K-12 Educators Who Incorporate Creative Production More Likely to Say They Matter at School



Click this [link](#) to view the full data set.

Student Preparedness: Educators Who Feel They Matter Are More Optimistic

Preparing students for what comes after high school is one of the clearest measures of an educator’s impact. Most high school educators say their students are at least somewhat prepared for life after graduation, but few describe them as very prepared. Among those with students who plan to attend college, 22% say those students are very prepared to succeed in college, while 54% say they are somewhat prepared. The picture is similar for students headed into the workforce: 13% say these students are very prepared to succeed on the job, and 61% say they are somewhat prepared.



FIGURE 13

High School Educators’ Views of Student Preparedness

■ % Very prepared ■ % Somewhat prepared ■ % Not very prepared ■ % Not at all prepared

Thinking about your current students who plan to go to college, how prepared are they to be successful in college?



Thinking about your current students who do not plan to go to college, how prepared are they to be successful in the workplace?

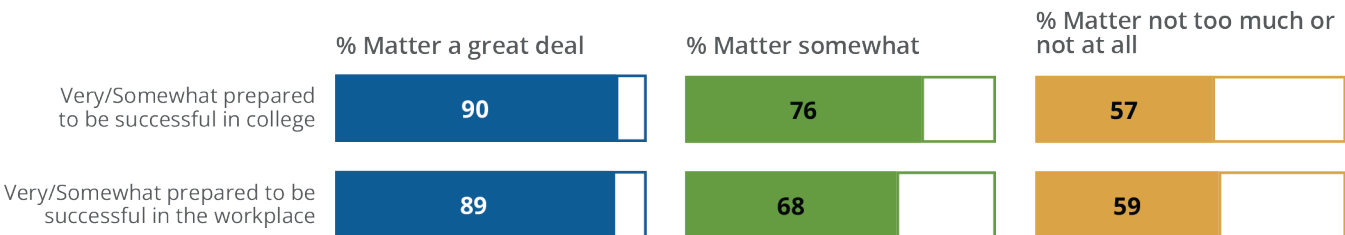


Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding. Values less than 5% are not shown.
Click this [link](#) to view the full data set.

High school educators’ sense of mattering is closely tied to how they view their students’ outcomes. About nine in 10 high school educators who feel they matter a great deal say their students are prepared for the future, compared with about six in 10 who feel they do not matter much or at all.

FIGURE 14

High School Educators’ Views of Student Preparedness by Own Mattering Level



Click this [link](#) to view the full data set.

Conclusion

Building an Ecosystem of Mattering

Mattering is not something schools can create through a single policy. It is an ecosystem that is built from the accumulation of everyday signals educators receive from colleagues, supervisors, students and parents, and it erodes when those signals are missing.

Right now, the ecosystem of mattering is weak for many K-12 educators. Only about one in three say they matter a great deal at their school, and the gap is not explained by who educators are or what they teach.

Educators across gender, race, ethnicity, education level, experience and grade level report similarly low levels of mattering, which suggests the issue is embedded in how schools function day to day rather than tied to any one group's experience.

The SAID framework helps explain where the ecosystem is breaking down. Appreciation has the strongest relationship with mattering overall, and just one in four educators say their school prioritizes appreciation to a great degree, well below the level they say they receive from colleagues. Recognition follows a similar pattern: Supervisor recognition has the strongest relationship with mattering, yet reaches only one in four educators weekly, far behind recognition from students.

Investment shows the same disconnect. While many educators can see a future for themselves at their school, far fewer feel that their school or the people in it are actively investing in that future, and this dimension carries the strongest independent relationship with educators' plans to leave their jobs.

Being depended on adds a further complication. Feeling relied upon is a meaningful part of mattering, but without support, that reliance becomes a burden. Separately, burnout data show that two-thirds of educators say they give more to their school community than they get back, and burnout climbs sharply as that imbalance grows.

Significance is strongest when educators see the impact of their work, and the activities most likely to make them feel they matter center on direct work with students.

These findings suggest that strengthening mattering requires attention across all four dimensions. Schools that want to build a stronger sense of mattering among educators might consider:

- **Making appreciation systemic, not incidental.** Formal practices that make recognition a routine part of school culture, rather than something that depends on individual colleagues, may close that gap.
- **Equipping supervisors to recognize educators regularly.** Because supervisor recognition has a particularly strong relationship with mattering, even though it happens least often, training and expectations that make this a consistent part of a supervisor's role could have meaningful effects.
- **Investing visibly in educators' growth and futures.** Since Invested In carries the strongest link to retention, schools may benefit from making career growth and development a clear, ongoing part of how they support educators, not something educators have to reach out for on their own.
- **Balancing what is asked of educators with what they receive.** Given how sharply burnout rises as the giving-versus-receiving imbalance grows, schools might look at whether educators who are asked to do more, such as classroom teachers, or those with a decade or more of experience, are also receiving support that matches those demands.
- **Creating room for creative practice.** With frequent "making" associated with a stronger sense of mattering, incorporating creative, hands-on activities into professional practice may offer schools a low-cost way to strengthen another part of that ecosystem.



Methodology

Results are based on a Gallup Panel[®] web survey conducted July 28-Aug. 14, 2026, with a sample of 1,952 U.S. educators working in K-12 schools living in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. For this survey, we defined K-12 educators as K-12 staff who identified as classroom teachers, teaching assistants, paraprofessionals, substitute teachers, or other K-12 staff that work directly with students in classrooms. The Gallup Panel is a probability-based panel of U.S. adults who are randomly selected using address-based sampling methodology. Gallup also recruits using random-digit-dial phone interviews that cover landlines and cellphones.

The final sample was weighted to represent K-12 school educators in the U.S., with teachers and other educators weighted separately to match population distributions by age, gender, education, region and race/Hispanic ethnicity. Population targets for these characteristics were derived from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2024 American Community Survey (ACS), restricted to adults age 18 or older working in the elementary and secondary schools industry and in eligible education-related occupations. Gallup Panel base weights were used as the initial weights, followed by separate demographic raking and weight trimming for teachers and other educators. A final calibration adjustment was then applied to align the weighted proportions of teachers and other educators with their corresponding population proportions.

For the total sample of 1,952 U.S. educators, the margin of sampling error is ± 2.7 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. All reported margins of sampling error include computed design effects for weighting. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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