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March 23, 2022

Congressional Committees

K-12 Education: An Estimated 1.1 Million Teachers Nationwide Had At Least One Student Who Never Showed Up for Class in the 2020-21 School Year

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to reverberate across the nation, for millions of students, educators, and families, the current school year is rife with challenges. The long-term impact of the disruptions of the last 2 years on student enrollment and attendance remains to be seen, particularly for students with whom schools have lost contact. As we previously reported, even though many schools provided students with computers and internet access to participate in virtual instruction, many students faced difficulties staying engaged in school or disappeared from school altogether.¹ While the issue of students not showing up at all during the pandemic is of grave significance, little is known about the obstacles these students face or the types of schools they come from.

The CARES Act includes a provision for GAO to report on its ongoing monitoring and oversight efforts related to the COVID-19 pandemic.² In this report, we provide information on (1) how widespread was the issue of K-12 public school students not showing up for class all year in school year 2020-21, (2) obstacles these students faced in showing up, and (3) the characteristics of the schools these students were registered to attend.

As part of our body of work to understand the impact of COVID-19 on public K-12 education, GAO contracted with Gallup to conduct a nationally representative survey of elementary and secondary public school teachers between June 18 and July 9, 2021. Our survey included general education teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.³ The survey asked teachers about their students who never showed up for class in the 2020-21 school year (whom we referred to as “unaccounted-for” students in the survey), whether there were more or fewer of them than in a typical school year, the obstacles their students faced in showing up, and the characteristics of students at their school.⁴ We analyzed survey responses for 2,862 teachers. These responses are generalizable to the population of all general education public

¹We previously reported on states’ efforts to locate students who did not enroll or who never showed up, and to get them back in school. GAO, *COVID-19: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Accountability and Program Effectiveness of Federal Response*, [GAO-22-105051](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 27, 2021).

²Pub. L. No. 116-136, § 19010, 134 Stat. 281, 579-81 (2020).

³The survey included teachers who work in a public school and taught a core subject. For the purpose of this survey, core subjects included: general education (such as elementary), math, science, computer science/information technology, English/language arts/reading/writing, social studies, and world/foreign languages or English language learning.

⁴Our survey asked teachers to distinguish (1) “unaccounted-for” students (those who did not show up for class during the 2020-21 school year) from (2) “disengaged” students (those who were still attending class but whose limited participation was affecting their learning and grades). This report presents teacher survey data on unaccounted-for students. We plan to discuss disengaged students in a future report.

school teachers in the U.S.⁵ See Enclosures I and II for more information on our survey methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2020 to March 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Nearly Half of Public School Teachers Had Students Who Never Showed Up for Class in the 2020-21 School Year

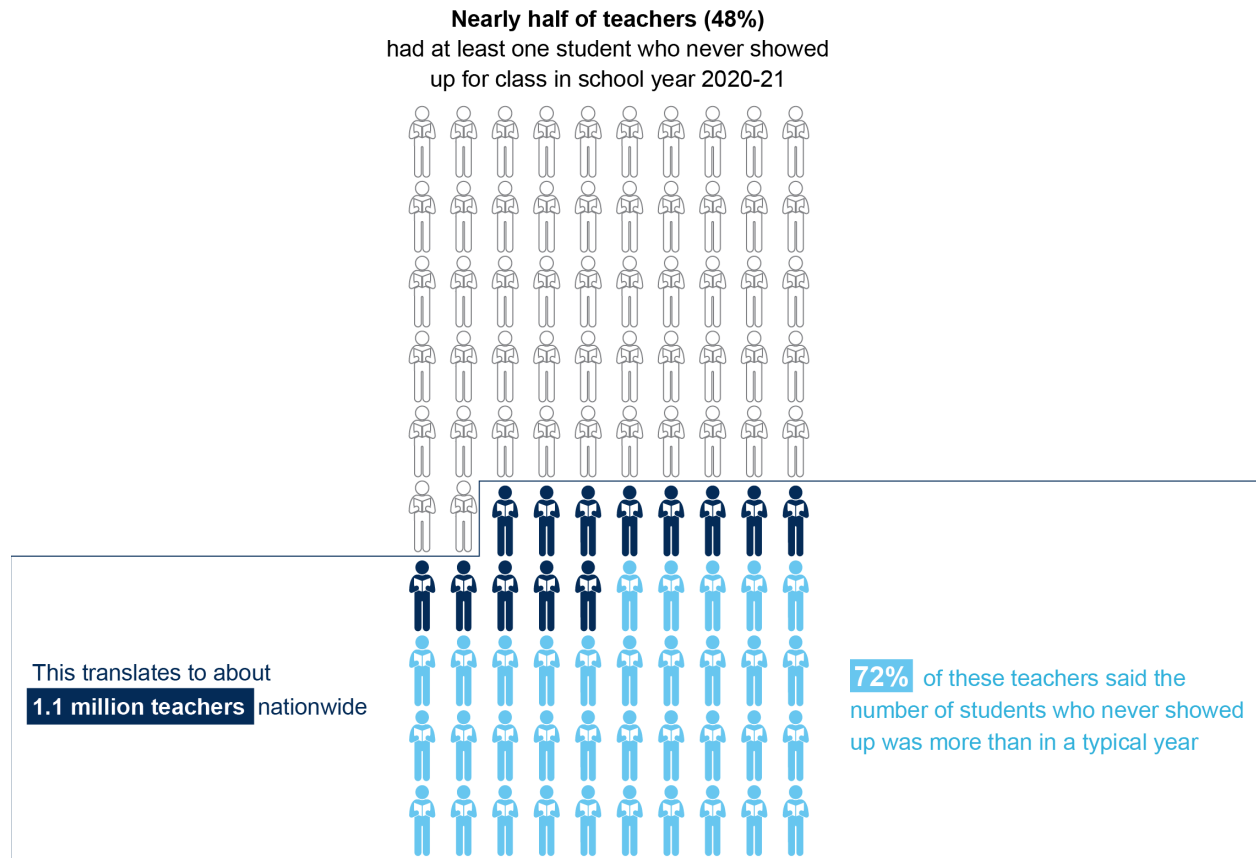
We estimate that nearly half (48 percent) of public elementary and secondary school teachers nationwide had at least one student who was registered but never showed up for class during the 2020-21 school year, according to our teacher survey. Of these teachers, nearly three-quarters (72 percent) said this was more than in a typical year (see fig. 1).⁶ Based on these data, we estimate that 1.1 million teachers had at least one unaccounted-for student in the 2020-21 school year. Although this number cannot be applied directly to students, our work in combination with external sources support 1.1 million as a conservative estimate of the number of unaccounted-for students.⁷

⁵Our survey results are based on the responses of 2,862 teachers who met our eligibility criteria—public school teachers of core subjects—selected from an initial sample of 45,792 teachers. The initial sample was selected from the Gallup Panel, a probability based panel of U.S. adults, and a national list of teachers. The overall response rate was 8.2 percent (estimates of eligibility rate of non-respondents based on American Association for Public Opinion Research's response rate 3). Gallup adjusted for lower response rates by weighting the responses to match the number and regional distribution of teachers and teacher demographics such as age, sex, and race. Weighting information came from the National Center for Education Statistics National Teacher and Principal Survey for 2017-2018. The margin of error for all percentage estimates was 9 percent or less for a 95 percent confidence interval, unless otherwise noted.

⁶When we referred to a typical school year in the survey, we asked teachers to consider their experiences during a recent school year prior to the pandemic.

⁷The 95 percent confidence interval for the estimate of 1.1 million teachers is 1.06 to 1.19 million. Our teacher survey does not allow for a direct estimation of the number of unaccounted-for students because we cannot control for the number of teachers, especially high school teachers, who might share students. However, given publicly available information about unaccounted-for students and public school enrollment, we feel that 1.1 million is a conservative approximation of the number of unaccounted-for students.

Figure 1: Estimated Percentage and Number of K-12 Public School Teachers with at Least One Student Who Never Showed Up for Class in School Year 2020-21

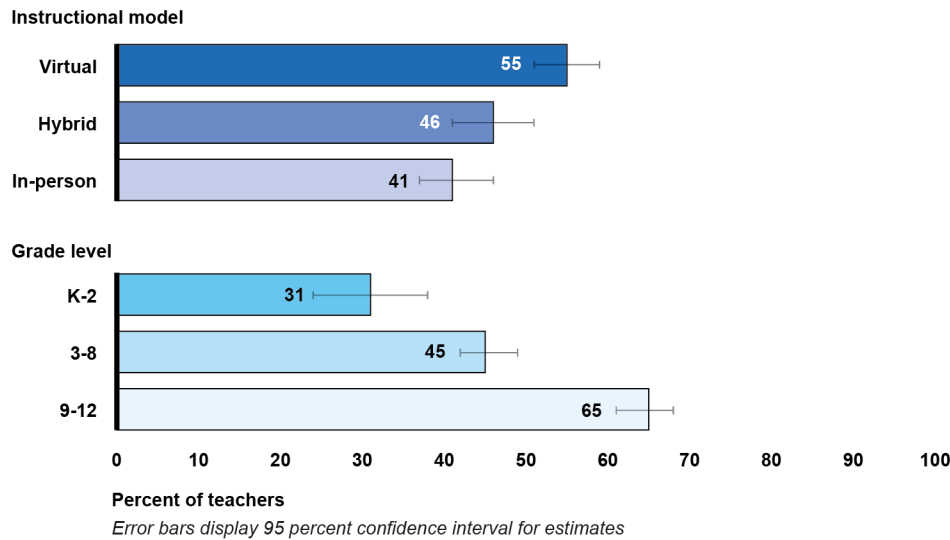


Source: GAO analysis of survey of K-12 public school teachers. | GAO-22-104581

Notes: GAO's nationally representative survey was administered from June to July 2021 and asked K-12 public school teachers to report on their experiences during the 2020-21 school year. The survey included teachers who taught general education subjects such as elementary school teachers, as well as teachers of subjects such as English/language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and world languages. When referring to a typical school year in the survey, GAO asked teachers to consider their experiences during a recent school year prior to the pandemic. All estimates have a margin of error of 4 percent or less for a 95 percent confidence interval. The estimate of 1.1 million has a relative error of 6 percent.

Teachers reported having students who never showed up for class regardless of the instructional model—that is, whether classes were conducted virtually, in-person, or using some combination of the two (hybrid)—although teachers who conducted class in the virtual environment for most of the school year more commonly reported having students who never showed up. High school teachers were the most affected, with almost an estimated two-thirds (65 percent) having at least one student who never showed up, compared to less than half of teachers in grades 3 to 8 (45 percent) or kindergarten to grade 2 (31 percent) (see fig. 2).

Figure 2: Estimated Percentage of K-12 Public School Teachers with at Least One Student Who Never Showed Up for Class in School Year 2020-21, by Instructional Model and Grade Level

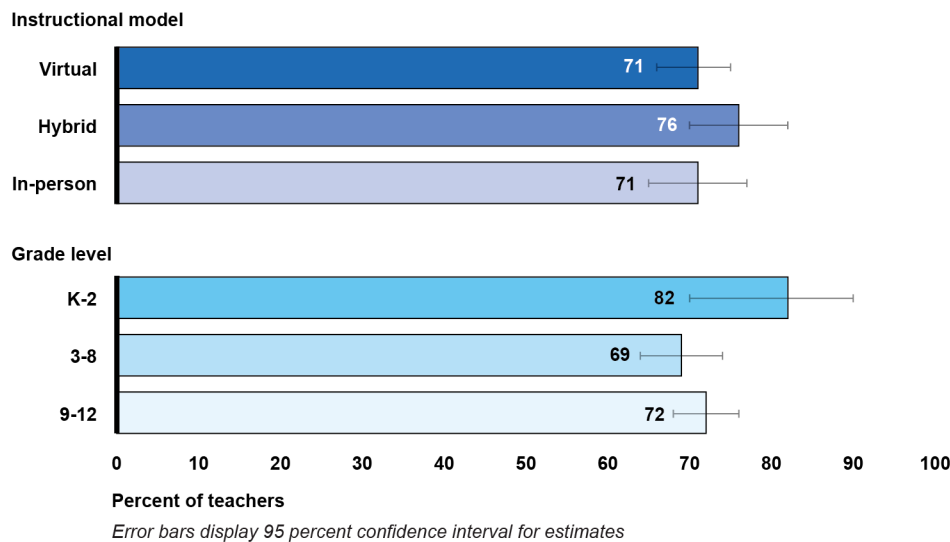


Source: GAO analysis of survey of K-12 public school teachers. | GAO-22-104581

Notes: GAO's nationally representative survey was administered from June to July 2021 and asked K-12 public school teachers to report on their experiences during the 2020-21 school year. The survey included teachers who taught general education subjects such as elementary school teachers, as well as teachers of subjects such as English/language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and world languages. Estimates have a margin of error of 7 percent or less for a 95 percent confidence interval.

According to our survey, teachers across all grade levels had more students who never showed up for class in 2020-21 than in a typical year (see fig. 3). These teachers also taught across instructional models.

Figure 3: Estimated Percentage of K-12 Public School Teachers with More Students Who Never Showed Up for Class in School Year 2020-21 Compared to a Typical School Year, of Those Reporting At Least One Student in 2020-21, by Instructional Model and Grade Level



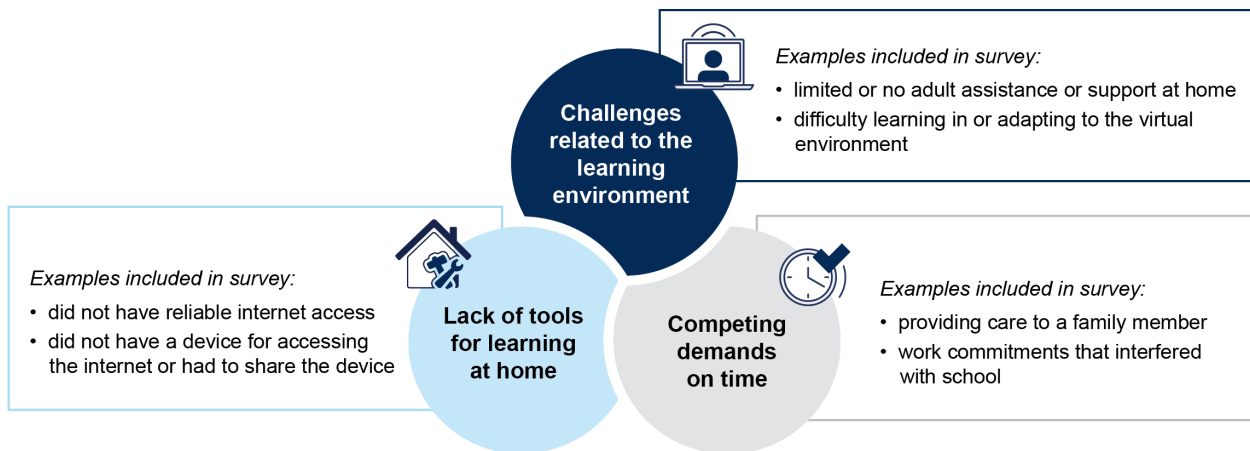
Source: GAO analysis of survey of K-12 public school teachers. | GAO-22-104581

Notes: GAO’s nationally representative survey was administered from June to July 2021 and asked K-12 public school teachers to report on their experiences during the 2020-21 school year. The survey included teachers who taught general education subjects such as elementary school teachers, as well as teachers of subjects such as English/language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and world languages. When referring to a typical school year in the survey, GAO asked teachers to consider their experiences during a recent school year prior to the pandemic. Estimates have a margin of error of 12 percent or less for a 95 percent confidence interval.

A Variety of Obstacles Kept Students from Showing Up for Class in the 2020-21 School Year

Teachers reported a range of obstacles that interfered with their students’ attendance (see fig. 4). Challenges related to a student’s learning environment—limited or no adult assistance or support at home and difficulty learning in or adapting to the virtual environment—were by far the most common obstacles cited (74 and 60 percent, respectively), while lack of access to devices was the least common (17 percent) (see fig. 5).⁸ To a varying extent, some teachers did not know whether specific obstacles interfered with their students attending class.

Figure 4: Obstacles Students Faced Showing Up for Class in School Year 2020-21

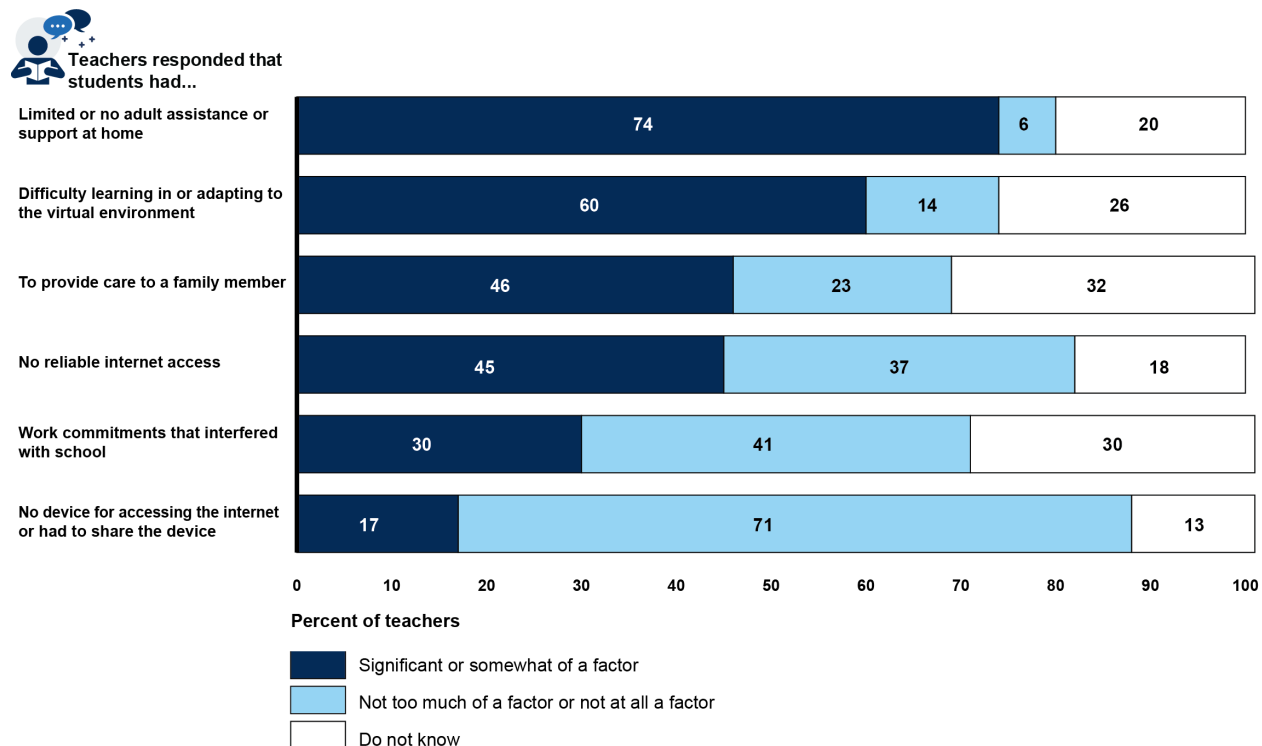


Source: GAO analysis of survey of K-12 public school teachers. | GAO-22-104581

Notes: GAO’s nationally representative survey was administered from June to July 2021 and asked K-12 public school teachers to report on their experiences during the 2020-21 school year. The survey included teachers who taught general education subjects such as elementary school teachers, as well as teachers of subjects such as English/language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and world languages. The survey asked teachers about the extent to which six potential obstacles affected their students who never showed up for class, which GAO then characterized into three types of obstacles: challenges related to the learning environment, competing demands on time, and a lack of tools for learning at home. The survey asked teachers about whether students who never showed up had limited or no adult assistance or support at home. Some students learning virtually did so in places other than their home, for example at learning hubs.

⁸Our survey asked teachers about whether students who never showed up for class had limited or no adult assistance or support at home. Some students learning virtually did so in places other than their home, for example at learning hubs.

Figure 5: Estimated Percentage of K-12 Public School Teachers with at Least One Student Who Never Showed Up for Class in School Year 2020-21, by Reported Obstacle Their Students Faced



Source: GAO analysis of survey of K-12 public school teachers. | GAO-22-104581

Notes: GAO’s nationally representative survey was administered from June to July 2021 and asked K-12 public school teachers to report on their experiences during the 2020-21 school year. The survey included teachers who taught general education subjects such as elementary school teachers, as well as teachers of subjects such as English/language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and world languages. The survey asked teachers about whether students who never showed up for class had limited or no adult assistance or support at home. Some students learning virtually did so in places other than their home, for example at learning hubs. Some percentages add up to more than 100 percent due to rounding. Estimates have a margin of error of 4 percent or less for a 95 percent confidence interval.

The obstacles to attending class for those who never showed up generally affected students similarly across all grade levels. However, competing demands on time—providing care to a family member or work commitments that interfered with school—more commonly affected students in higher grades:

- *Caring for a family member*: Nearly half of grade 3-8 teachers and grade 9-12 teachers said that providing care to a family member was somewhat or a significant factor for students (49 and 48 percent, respectively), compared to about one-quarter of K-2 teachers (24 percent).⁹
- *Work commitments*: Work commitments that interfered with school was the second most common factor reported by grade 9-12 teachers (57 percent), but the least common for grades 3-8 (17 percent).

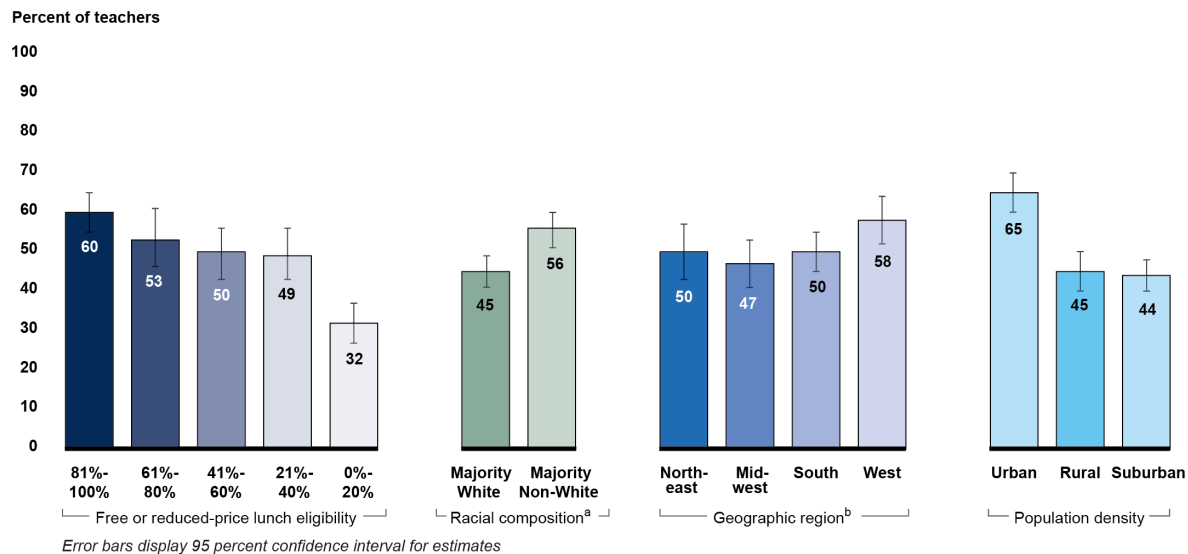
⁹The margin of error for a 95 percent confidence interval is 13 percent.

Nearly one-third of teachers said they did not know whether these two competing demands on time were an obstacle for their students (32 percent and 30 percent respectively).

Students Who Never Showed Up for Class in School Year 2020-21 Primarily Came from Majority Non-White and Urban Schools

As shown in figure 6, the extent to which teachers said students did not show up for class in 2020-21 varied across school characteristics. Teachers in majority non-White schools and urban schools more commonly reported having students who never showed up in 2020-21, compared to other teachers. Teachers in low-poverty schools (20 percent or fewer students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) less commonly reported having students who never showed up.¹⁰

Figure 6: Estimated Percentage of K-12 Public School Teachers with at Least One Student Who Never Showed Up for Class in School Year 2020-21, by School Characteristics



Source: GAO analysis of survey of K-12 public school teachers. | GAO-22-104581

Notes: GAO’s nationally representative survey was administered from June to July 2021 and asked K-12 public school teachers to report on their experiences during the 2020-21 school year. The survey included teachers who taught general education subjects such as elementary school teachers, as well as teachers of subjects such as English/language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and world languages. Estimates have a margin of error of 8 percent or less for a 95 percent confidence interval.

^aData from the Department of Education’s Common Core of Data.

^bState survey data sorted into Census Bureau regions.

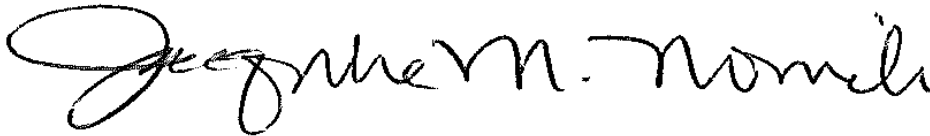
¹⁰We used eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch as a proxy for living in poverty. The National School Lunch Program, administered at the federal level by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, provides reduced-cost or free lunches to eligible children in schools. Students are eligible for free lunches if their household income is at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty guidelines or if they meet certain other eligibility criteria, such as eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Students are eligible for reduced-price lunch if their household income is between 130 percent and 185 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.

We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of Education and appropriate congressional committees. In addition, this report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgements

If you or your staff members have any questions concerning this report, please contact me at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jacqueline M. Nowicki". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J'.

Jacqueline M. Nowicki, Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

Enclosures – 2

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Enclosure I: Technical Description of GAO's Nationally Representative Survey of K-12 Public School Teachers

To understand the nature and extent of learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic, GAO contracted with Gallup to conduct a nationally representative survey of elementary and secondary public school teachers about their experience in the 2020-21 school year.

GAO developed the teacher survey of 41 questions on several topics related to the 2020-21 school year: instructional models, support and assistance provided to students, difficulties the teacher's students faced, their students' academic progress, strategies used to address learning loss, and students who were registered but never showed up for class (unaccounted for) or became disengaged.¹ We pretested the survey with 10 teachers to evaluate understanding of terms used and the intent of questions, ease and time required to complete the survey, and to receive additional feedback on topics to include. Gallup also conducted a pilot test prior to data collection and obtained 10 completed web interviews to evaluate respondent comprehension, item relevance to the sampled population, the extent to which it was feasible for respondents to answer a survey question and the steps required to select a response, and any possible issues with the visual design or survey navigation.

Gallup administered our survey to a statistically generalizable sample of K-12 public school teachers of a core subject in 2020-21: math, science, computer science/information technology, English/language arts/reading/writing, social studies, world/foreign languages or English language learning, and elementary school. The sample was drawn from two sources: the Gallup Panel, a probability-based panel that is representative of the U.S. adult population and includes teachers; and supplemented with teachers sampled from a listed sample, The Dun & Bradstreet listed frame of U.S. educators. The probability sample was designed to achieve precision targets for key subgroups by location, participation in free or reduced-price lunch programs, grade level, and percentage of English learners.

The web survey was fielded from June 18 to July 9, 2021. A total of 2,862 eligible teachers completed the survey from an initial sample of 45,792 teachers (see table 1). The survey achieved an overall weighted cumulative response rate of 8.2 percent when adjusted for estimated eligibility of 76.6 percent.² The Gallup Panel sample had a response rate of 49.6 percent and the listed sample had a 5.4 percent response rate. The responses were weighted to minimize bias independently for each source and for the sources combined (see table 2). Gallup used weighting, post-stratification, and non-response bias adjustments to correct for response and nonresponse bias and make the final sample reflect the population of public school teachers of core subjects the survey was intended to represent.³ The basis for adjustments differed by the source of the sample, and included sample selection, teacher demographics, location, and region.

¹Our survey defined unaccounted-for students as those who were registered for but did not show up for class all year (see Enclosure II for more information about the survey questions related to unaccounted-for students).

²The American Association for Public Opinion Research's response rate 3 (unknown eligibility) was used to calculate the estimated number of eligible respondents.

³Weighting information came from the National Center for Education Statistics National Teacher and Principal Survey for 2017-2018.

Table 1: Response Outcomes of Nationally Representative Survey of K-12 Public School Teachers Administered by Gallup

	Gallup panel	Listed sample	Total sample
1 Total sampled cases	2,886	42,938	45,792
2 Completed survey (weighted cases)	803	2,059	2,862
3 Ineligible	705	311	1016
4 Partial complete	96	376	472
5 Attempted survey (2+3+4)	1,604	2,746	4,350
6 Unknown (1-5)	1,282	40,192	41,442
7 Eligibility rate ((2+4)/5)	56%	89%	77%
8 Estimated eligible unknowns (6*7)	719	35,640	31,763
9 Total eligible sample (2+4+8)	1,618	38,075	35,097

Source: Gallup. | GAO-22-104581

Note: The American Association of Public Opinion Research's response rate 3 (unknown eligibility) was used to calculate the estimated number of eligible respondents.

Table 2: Margin of Error Calculation for Subpopulation Estimates from Nationally Representative Survey of K-12 Public School Teachers Administered by Gallup

	Sample size	Margin of error
Location		
Rural/Town	768	4.9%
Suburban	1,061	4.3%
Urban	990	4.5%
Percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunch		
Low (0-20% eligible)	558	5.8%
Mid-range (21-80% eligible)	1,305	3.9%
High (81-100% eligible)	757	4.9%
Grade level (teacher)		
K – 2	254	7.2%
3 – 8	1,536	3.5%
9 – 12	1,323	3.3%
Percent English learners (EL)		
Less than 25% EL	2,336	2.9%
25% or more EL	525	5.9%

Source: Gallup. | GAO-22-104581

Enclosure II: Data on Unaccounted-for Students, from GAO’s Nationally Representative Survey of K-12 Public School Teachers

This enclosure includes the survey questions related to unaccounted for students—those who were registered to be in the teacher’s class but did not attend all school year—from the larger teacher survey administered by Gallup (see enclosure I). The full survey instrument can be found in a forthcoming series of reports on pandemic learning loss, to be issued in Spring 2022.

Survey Questions

This section of the survey asks about students with whom your school had limited contact this school year. First, we’ll ask you about students who were unaccounted for and then we will ask you about students who were disengaged.

Q34 Thinking about the current school year, how many unaccounted-for students did you have?¹

(Students who were registered to be in your class(es) but who did not attend all year.)

Estimated number of teachers	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound
1,123,537	1,055,568	1,191,505

Q36 Still thinking about the current school year, how does the number of unaccounted-for students compare to a typical school year?

Response	Estimated percentage of teachers	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Substantially fewer	9	7	10
Somewhat fewer	2	2	3
About the same	46	43	49
Somewhat more	19	17	22
Substantially more	24	22	26

Note: The percentages in this table include data for all survey respondents, whereas in figure 1 we restricted our analysis of these data to focus on teachers who, in response to question 34, reported one or more unaccounted-for students.

¹Although our survey asked teachers for the total number of students taught and unaccounted for during the 2020-21 school year, the survey questions and sample were not designed, and do not enable us, to produce estimates of the size of either group, beyond the minimum of 1.1 million.

Q38 How much of a factor were each of the following reasons in explaining why these students were unaccounted for?

A. Student had difficulty learning in or adapting to the virtual environment

Response	Estimated percentage of teachers	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Not at all a factor	6	5	8
Not too much of a factor	8	6	10
Somewhat of a factor	22	19	25
Significant factor	38	35	41
Do not know	26	23	29

B. Student had limited or no adult assistance at home

Response	Estimated percentage of teachers	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Not at all a factor	3	2	5
Not too much of a factor	3	2	4
Somewhat of a factor	17	15	20
Significant factor	56	53	60
Do not know	20	18	23

C. Student was providing care to a family member

Response	Estimated percentage of teachers	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Not at all a factor	12	10	15
Not too much of a factor	11	9	13
Somewhat of a factor	25	22	29
Significant factor	20	18	23
Do not know	32	28	35

D. Student had work commitments that interfered with school

Response	Estimated percentage of teachers	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Not at all a factor	31	27	34
Not too much of a factor	10	8	12
Somewhat of a factor	15	13	17
Significant factor	15	13	17
Do not know	30	26	33

E. Student did not have reliable internet access

Response	Estimated percentage of teachers	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Not at all a factor	18	16	21
Not too much of a factor	18	16	21
Somewhat of a factor	27	24	31
Significant factor	18	15	21
Do not know	18	15	21

F. Student did not have a device for accessing the internet (e.g., personal computer, tablet) or had to share the device

Response	Estimated percentage of teachers	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Not at all a factor	56	52	59
Not too much of a factor	15	13	18
Somewhat of a factor	9	7	12
Significant factor	7	6	10
Do not know	13	10	15

(104581)

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