SAN FRANCISCO
EDUCATION FUND

Voices of our Schools

San Francisco's public school leaders share what's *really* happening in their schools

April 2025

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Executive Summary

San Francisco's public schools are at a critical juncture, facing compounding challenges that affect students, educators, and schools. As San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) navigates a severe budget crisis, schools continue to grapple with staffing shortages, inequitable academic outcomes, and increasing student needs. Despite these obstacles, resilient school leaders and educators remain deeply committed to their students and school communities.

The San Francisco Education Fund (SF Ed Fund) is uniquely positioned to assess the realities of San Francisco's highest-benefit* schools due to its deep, embedded relationships within school communities. To this end, we set out to gather and share insights and perspectives of a slice of SFUSD school personnel weathering the current complexities. While existing reports on the state of large urban public school districts often focus on broad statistical trends, this report prioritizes the lived experiences of educators and students in San Francisco's highest-benefit schools, providing a more nuanced understanding of the challenges they face.

Overall, we heard that there is an urgent need for immediate interventions in the midst of the budget crisis. This includes:

- Flexibility for individual schools to support student sense of belonging within their own communities
- Prioritizing solutions that strengthen academic outcomes
- Creative thinking around staffing to provide and retain essential personnel at each school

Our hope is that this information will illustrate the most pressing issues facing many SFUSD schools, shine light on bright spots, and give the broader community ideas to contribute to improved outcomes for our highest-benefit SFUSD students.

Context

The SF Ed Fund's programs reach every school in SFUSD, which serves approximately 49,000 students. Our primary focus is supporting 46 of the district's highest-benefit schools, which the SF Ed Fund refers to as its Priority Schools.* These schools serve students with the most urgent needs, making them particularly vulnerable as SFUSD faces a historic $113M budget deficit and will eliminate over 500 staff positions before the 2025-26 school year.

This report will use the terms highest-benefit schools and Priority Schools interchangeably. Highest-benefit schools are defined as having 50%+ low-income students and 50%+ students not yet meeting literacy standards. Students attending Priority Schools are referred to in this report as highest-benefit students.

Methodology

This report is based on survey data from 23 of the SF Ed Fund's 46 Priority Schools, as well as conversations with 22 school leaders (including principals, assistant principals, and community school coordinators) from 17 Priority Schools (elementary, middle and high schools). During these in-depth conversations, we asked school leaders three questions:

1) What is a success or highlight happening at your school right now?

2) What has been particularly challenging?

3) What are the top three initiatives most important for your school to fund?

In addition to qualitative and quantitative input from school leaders, this report draws from SFUSD data, SFUSD's Panorama Student Survey, and research from The New Teacher Project (TNTP), the Learning Policy Institute, and the National Student Support Accelerator (NSSA) to contextualize findings.

What We Learned

School Leaders Elevate Three Themes of a Thriving School Community

In every conversation, SFUSD school leaders elevated three themes as integral for their school communities to thrive: high rates of students' sense of belonging; high quality academic practices and effective academic programs; and the ability to hire and retain talent.

Theme 1:
Student Sense of Belonging

Theme 2:
Equitable Academic Outcomes

Theme 3:
The Need for Talent

Theme 1:
Student Sense of Belonging

Our school leaders recognize that students are not just at school to learn to write and solve math problems; they arrive each day with complex and individual needs. These schools foster environments where young people are seen as whole individuals, not just as learners or members of a group. "Belonging—the experience of being accepted and respected—is a prerequisite for learning," states The New Teacher Project (TNTP) in its *Opportunity Makers Report.* "When young people are confident that they belong in their learning environment, they can engage more fully in learning. In schools that foster a sense of belonging, educators

prioritize understanding every student as both a person and a learner. Young people are known as unique individuals rather than as members of groups."

Every school leader we spoke with mentioned the importance of sense of belonging in some capacity, but we learned that what "sense of belonging" looks like often varies widely from school to school. When asked to define sense of belonging, every response was unique—underscoring that belonging should not be a rigid, one-size-fits-all concept. Instead, it should reflect the needs, values, and culture of each school community. Some schools emphasized trusted relationships between students and adults, while others highlighted student engagement, positive behaviors, and participation in school activities. Responses included:
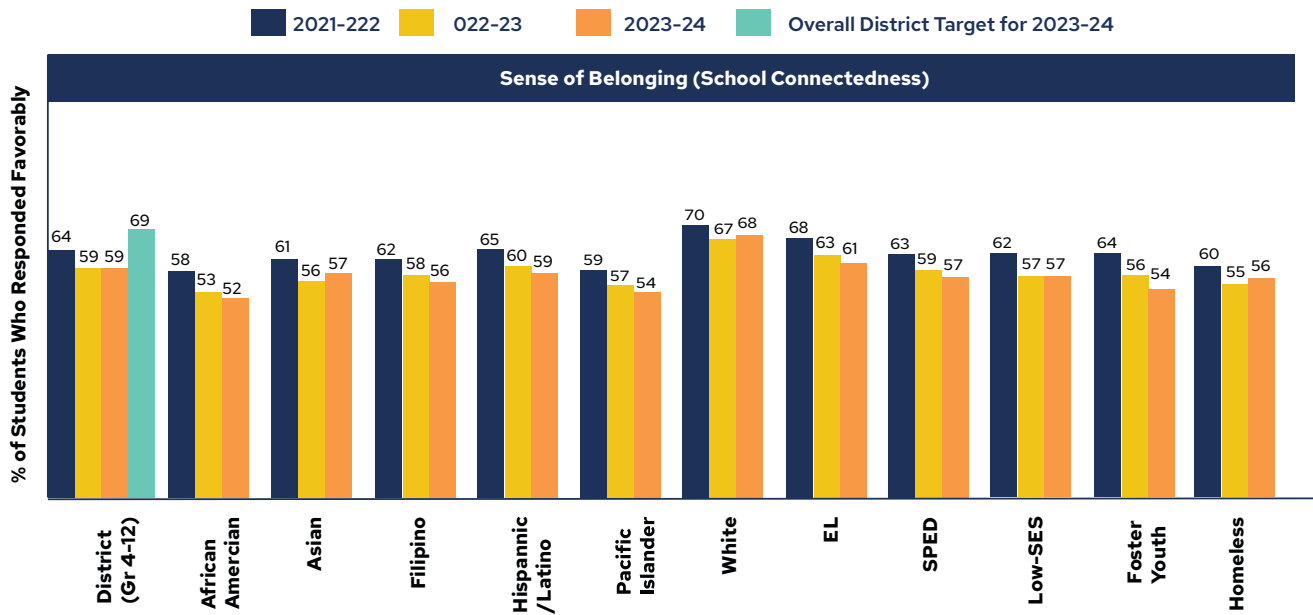
- "When students feel that they are welcome as their authentic selves, they express feeling safe and having trusted adults at school. They see that their caregivers and teachers are working together."

- "Students are able to name the adults they feel supported by, feel a sense of ownership and engagement in their learning, and can name the connection and purpose of their learning to their lives outside the school."

- "Students who feel proud to be part of the school show that pride and enthusiasm by caring for community members and responding favorably on surveys and in attendance."

When asked how to gauge a student's sense of belonging, one principal shared that they look for three key indicators: 1) student voice, or how students are contributing to conversations inside and outside the classroom, 2) stewardship and self-accountability, including social and personal responsibility for learning and maintaining a clean and safe school environment, and 3) students inviting, encouraging, and motivating each other, fostering curiosity and joy. In addition, metrics such as attendance rates and responses from a twice-a-year cultural survey also help schools assess belonging, with most teachers reporting that between 70-90% of students feel they belong at school.

As one elementary school principal reported, students who experience instability at home or struggle to have their basic needs met tend to have a lower sense—not just of belonging—but of security, confidence, and emotional well-being. These challenges can make it harder for them to fully engage in school, build strong relationships, and see themselves as valued members of the community. Ensuring equitable support, connection, and resources is key to strengthening their sense of belonging, and in turn, their ability to thrive academically and socially.

SFUSD's annual Panorama Student Survey provides insight into student experiences, offering schools valuable data to measure and inform decisions. Combined with their understanding of community needs, schools can use this information to intentionally create environments where students feel valued and supported. The 2023-24 Panorama Student Survey found that 59% of students responded favorably for sense of belonging, falling short of the district target of 69%. This marks the continuation of a three-year downward trend, affecting students across all demographics.

Sense of Belonging (Gr 4–12)

Legend: ■ 2021-222 ■ 022-23 ■ 2023-24 ■ Overall District Target for 2023-24

Sense of Belonging (School Connectedness)

Source: SFUSD's Panorama Student Survey, Spring 2024

Y-axis: % of Students Who Responded Favorably

Group	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	Target
District (Gr 4-12)	64	59	59	69
African American	58	53	52	
Asian	61	56	57	
Filipino	62	58	56	
Hispanic/Latino	65	60	59	
Pacific Islander	59	57	54	
White	70	67	68	
EL	68	63	61	
SPED	63	59	57	
Low-SES	62	57	57	
Foster Youth	64	56	54	
Homeless	60	55	56	

Student sense of belonging is especially urgent as students navigate mental health challenges, increasing post-pandemic and with pervasive access to smartphones. A middle school principal said,

> *"The youth of today are grappling with things that are harder and harder each year, and we're seeing a lot of mental health issues. The screen time and social media was here when I started nine years ago. But now the cell phone addictions feel heavier, and kids have a lot of issues. There's more mental health [challenges], there's more self-harm...I think we're seeing kids struggle in a different way."*

As students face these mounting pressures, creating opportunities for connection and engagement is more important than ever. Beyond the classroom, field trips and extracurricular activities provide essential outlets for students to explore new environments, build relationships, and potentially foster their sense of belonging. However, funding constraints often limit these opportunities. While these financial challenges persist, some teachers have demonstrated creativity in organizing field trips, ensuring that students are able to take full advantage of the unique opportunities available in San Francisco that many locals take for granted. Buena Vista Horace Mann K-8 students recently took a field trip to the Golden Gate Bridge—the first time many students saw the iconic site.

The Link Between Student Attendance & Sense of Belonging

Schools that cultivate a strong sense of belonging not only foster a more positive climate but also may see tangible improvements in student engagement, attendance, and even teacher retention, according to Panorama Education. When students feel connected to their school community, they are more likely to show up – and stay engaged. Solid student attendance, often viewed as an output and direct reflection of sense of belonging, serves as a key indicator of a positive school environment.

At Guadalupe Elementary School, a focus on structured activities—such as a school-wide soccer program launched in the 2023-24 school year—has yielded significant results, including improved

attendance and zero suspensions over the past year. Chronic absenteeism declined from nearly 50% in the 2021-2022 school year to 25% in 2023-24. By integrating soccer into the school day, students have an opportunity to engage in positive social interactions, develop leadership skills, and build a stronger connection to their school community.

Similarly, ER Taylor Elementary School has fostered a more peaceful and positive school environment through its values-based approach called Panda PRIDE—Proud, Responsible, Inclusive, Disciplined, and Empathetic—which reinforces positive behavior through student recognition programs. This shift moved the school away from a traditional Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model, which primarily focused on rules and expectations, toward an approach that encourages students to embody core values. A key element is the Panda Ticket system, where students earn tickets for demonstrating these values and redeem them at a weekly store, reinforcing positive behavior.

ER Taylor also invests in student leadership by sending students to a "four-night, five-day experience that unites three classes from schools that differ socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically" led by the Mosaic Project where students address "issues of difference while building self-esteem and community." Participating students often return with the urge to serve as peer leaders, helping mediate conflicts and lead social-emotional learning lessons. These intentional efforts have had a tangible impact: school staff report a noticeable decrease in behavioral incidents and disciplinary actions, and a general calmer feeling at the school overall. With students actively engaged in fostering a positive campus culture, ER Taylor has seen fewer playground conflicts and improved peer relationships, contributing to a healthier school environment. The school saw a nearly 60% decrease in major office referrals from August–January when comparing this year's data (29 referrals) to last year's data (72 referrals).

The Importance of One-on-One Relationships with Adults

Beyond school-wide programs, one-on-one relationships between students and caring adults are making a difference. Many schools are implementing targeted strategies to ensure students have consistent supports throughout the day. At Denman Middle School, the Beacon Program provides two student success advocates, each assigned to a caseload of 20 students. These advocates are building connections with students' families, supporting with after-school tutoring, and more. This continuity helps English Language Learner (ELL) students and disengaged students gain confidence and skills while fostering a deep sense of belonging. As Tricia Land, Denman's assistant principal, said, "It's been...a case study of what it would mean to just have more adults on a focal group. We're saying, this is your little group, we're here to move you through and build up skills so that you do feel like you belong and [are] successful in these places."

Jeri Dean, principal of Dr. William L. Cobb Elementary School, shared that what makes their small and diverse school community unique is the fact that every child is truly known and valued. According to Dean,

> "Unlike larger schools, we foster deep relationships—all of our adults know every student by name, and our students know and trust the adults around them. This creates a warm, family-like atmosphere where children feel safe, seen, and supported. We also take a whole-child approach, ensuring that academic, social-emotional, and basic needs are met so that every student can thrive. Our commitment to equity, inclusivity, and personalized attention makes Cobb not just a school, but a community that lifts every child up."
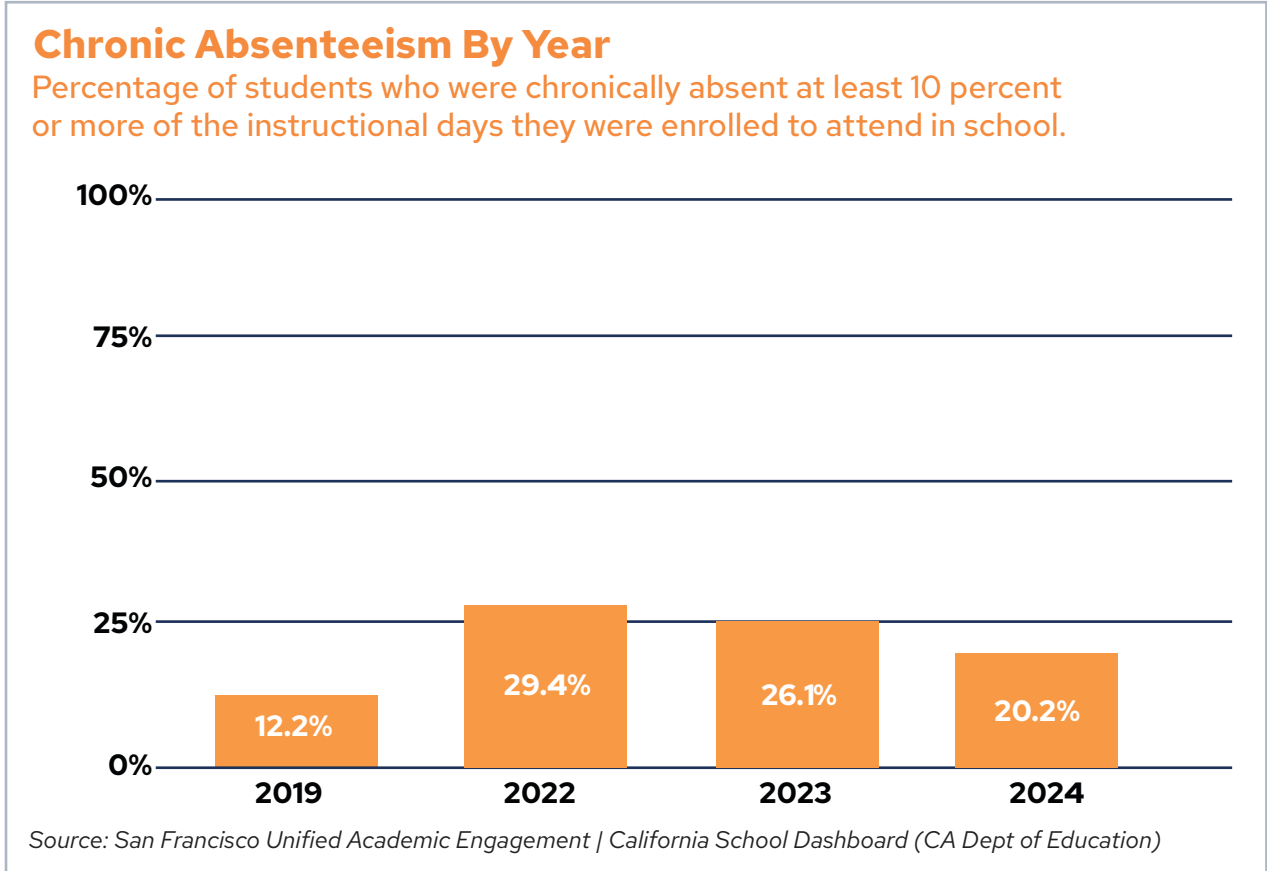
At Willie Brown Middle School, a smaller school environment enables staff to build meaningful relationships with students. The school has a strong wellness team, three counselors, and Beacon staff who are integrated into the school day, ensuring that students receive consistent support. Teachers also go beyond the classroom, sponsoring student-led clubs that create additional touchpoints for connection. "A kid just needs to come up with an idea and find an adult who agrees to provide a safe space to cultivate their interests," explained principal Malea Mouton-Fuentes. "We have a Dungeons & Dragons club, an anime club, a chess club, a fitness club—so many spaces where kids can feel connected to adults."

Similarly, Denman Middle School's Mastering Cultural Identity (MCI) program has been instrumental in fostering belonging for Black students. A dedicated MCI teacher leads three Black affinity grade-level classes, runs the Black Student Union (BSU), and is developing a Black Leadership Advisory class. These programs provide both academic and social-emotional support, helping students navigate school with confidence. However, there is growing concern about position cuts for roles like these—ones that don't fit traditional academic categories but play a vital role in student success.

Combatting Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of school days, remains a significant challenge across SFUSD. According to the SFUSD's 2024-25 Interim Goals and Guardrails, the district is aiming to reduce chronic absenteeism to 20% by June 2025. Among many other factors, schools serving highest-benefit students often experience a revolving door of enrollment, with new students transferring in throughout the year, making it difficult to establish consistency.

Chronic Absenteeism By Year
Percentage of students who were chronically absent at least 10 percent or more of the instructional days they were enrolled to attend in school.

Year	Percentage
2019	12.2%
2022	29.4%
2023	26.1%
2024	20.2%

Source: San Francisco Unified Academic Engagement | California School Dashboard (CA Dept of Education)

According to Malea Mouton-Fuentes, principal at Willie Brown Middle School,

> "Addressing truancy is a challenge for us as it is district-wide, and every year we identify attendance as being a major area we want to tackle. Unfortunately, we haven't been able to move the dial yet because students' individual needs range so much that it is hard to find strategies and interventions that work for all and we don't have staff solely dedicated to work on this critical issue."

According to the SF Ed Fund's survey to Priority Schools, 85% of school leaders indicated that they believe issues related to poverty are the main reason why students who are chronically absent are not attending school. Reasons include the need to care for siblings, lack of access to products such as laundry detergent, lack of transportation, and for older students–the pressure to work and contribute financially to their families. Other factors that school leaders believe are contributing to chronic absenteeism in their schools include issues related to systems like foster care of custody transitions (55%), students not feeling safe (25%), and mental health issues.

For chronically absent students, select all the reasons that you think your students are not attending school
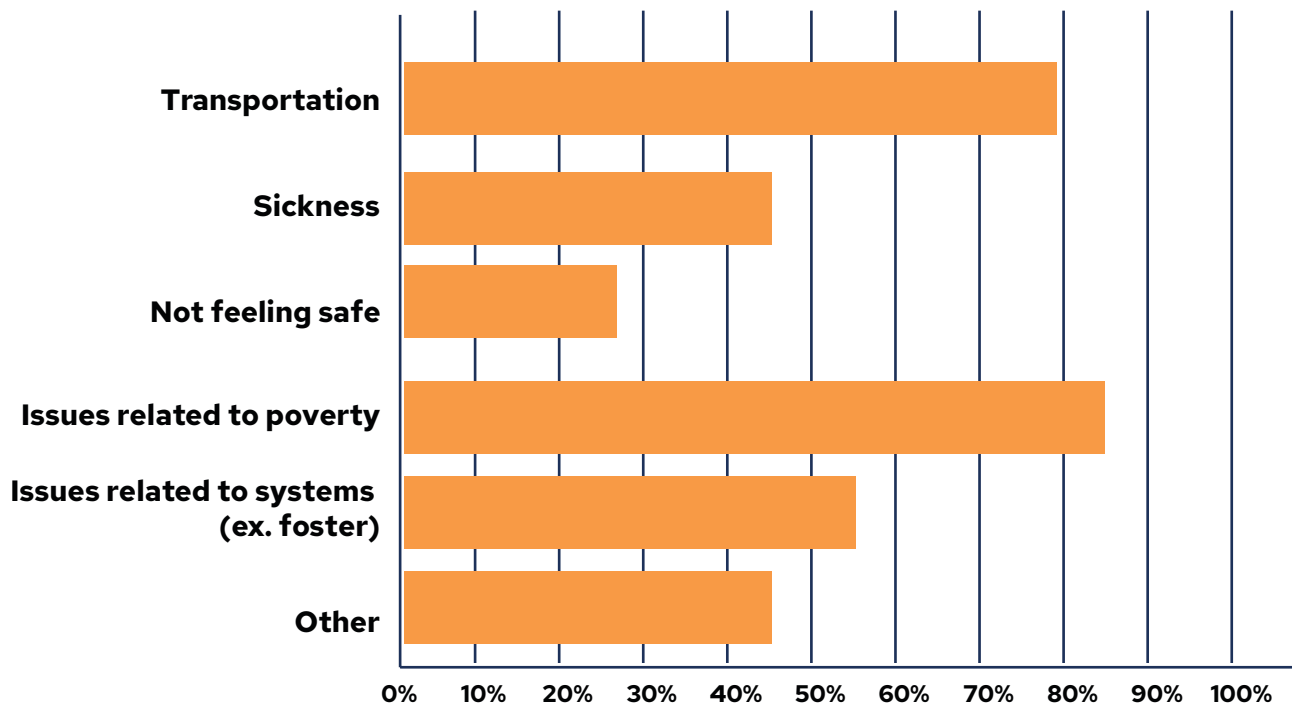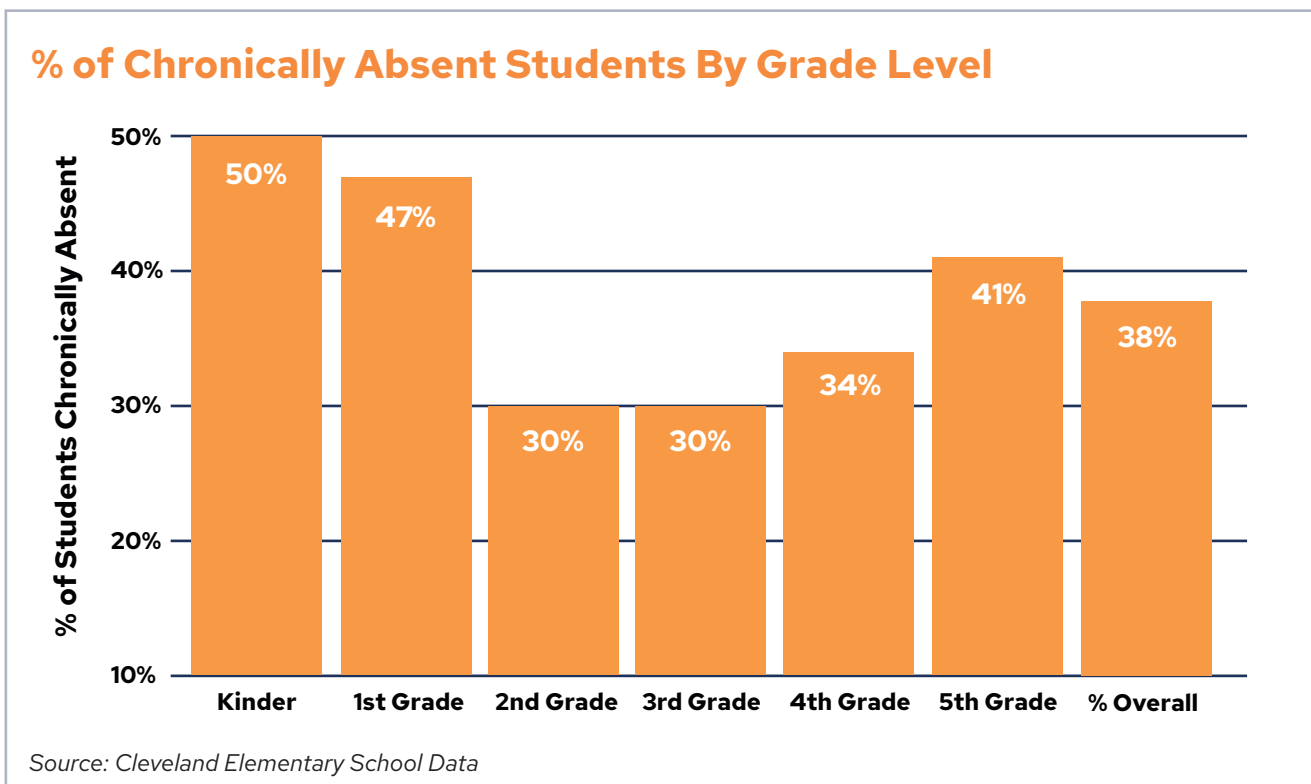

Source: SF Ed Fund Survey, January 2025

Food insecurity remains a persistent issue. "There are a lot of hungry bellies. We're in a food desert. There's just not a lot of choice for kids and families to access," noted Visitacion Valley Middle School Principal Maya Baker. "We buy lots of snacks out of our own pockets. It's challenging or impossible to get reimbursed for food."

In addition to these systemic barriers, our survey data highlights disparities in students' sense of belonging, which can directly impact attendance and engagement. Findings revealed that students in

the Spanish Biliteracy pathway reported a significantly lower sense of belonging than those in the English and Cantonese Biliteracy pathways. Similarly, Hispanic and Latinx students expressed a significantly lower sense of belonging compared to their Asian and multi-racial peers. These disparities underscore the need for culturally responsive strategies that not only address material needs but also create inclusive school environments where all students feel valued and connected.

However, some schools have successfully implemented proactive initiatives to combat absenteeism. Cleveland Elementary School, for instance, initially saw positive results with its targeted attendance campaign, recognizing students who showed up consistently and rewarding improvements with prizes and public recognition. At the start of the 2024-25 school year, the school was close to meeting its goal of chronic absenteeism to 27%. However, attendance began to decline after Winter Break, and despite continued efforts, the school faced a rise in absences in the second half of the year. To address this, Cleveland Elementary also introduced a Perfect Attendance Popcorn Party at the end of each trimester to further incentivize consistent attendance.

% of Chronically Absent Students By Grade Level

Bar chart titled "% of Chronically Absent Students By Grade Level". Y-axis labeled "% of Students Chronically Absent" ranging from 10% to 50%. Values by category: Kinder 50%, 1st Grade 47%, 2nd Grade 30%, 3rd Grade 30%, 4th Grade 34%, 5th Grade 41%, % Overall 38%.

Source: Cleveland Elementary School Data

Tenderloin Community School also reduced its chronic absenteeism rate from 68% to 38% through a combination of parent outreach, attendance raffles, and student incentive programs.

At the high school level, SFUSD's central office is leveraging its Early Warning Indicator (EWI) system to support schools with intention before absenteeism and other challenges escalate. By tracking key risk factors—such as attendance, behavior, and course performance—schools can identify students who need support earlier.

Thurgood Marshall High School (TMHS) exemplifies this proactive approach, embedding early intervention into its school culture. By conducting empathy interviews and early needs assessments to identify students facing challenges before they reach a crisis, staff can quickly connect students experiencing homelessness, housing instability, or mental health struggles to necessary services. In 2024, TMHS secured over $20,000 in private funding to provide emergency relief funds to families who are in urgent need. This approach shifts the focus from reactive crisis management to early intervention, ensuring students receive support when they need it most.

A strong student sense of belonging is not just a feel-good factor—it is foundational for student success. The insights shared by the school leaders we interviewed underscore that when students feel connected to their school community, they are more likely to attend, engage, and thrive. However, systemic barriers continue to challenge efforts to keep students present and engaged. Schools that have successfully fostered belonging have done so through intentional programs, relationship-building, and culturally responsive strategies. As SFUSD navigates an uncertain future, prioritizing investments that strengthen student belonging will be essential to creating a school environment where all students feel valued, supported, and ready to learn.

Theme 2:
Equitable Academic Outcomes

SFUSD continues to struggle with academic performance, particularly among students with the highest needs. Many students enter high school without mastering foundational skills, leaving them unprepared for rigorous coursework. Veronica Reilly, assistant principal at Buena Vista Horace Mann K–8 (BVHM), pointed out that many newcomer students "are coming in with low or no computer skills," making the district's increased reliance on online learning tools ineffective for these students. Educators also acknowledge that systemic issues have contributed to students being passed through grade levels without adequate intervention. According to one middle school principal,

> **"Some kids have really high needs, and we know we're not serving them. It's terrible because they're just passing, and then by the time they get to high school the stakes are really high. They just got pushed along. There's a lack of resources for the kids [who] are really struggling."**

Amanda Chui, principal of June Jordan School for Equity (JJSE), further underscored this district-wide issue. "Many of our kids [at JJSE] are coming in with impacted academic skills often times lower than grade level. For example, a number of our students have interrupted education, meaning that for whatever reason, they may have not gone to school for eighth grade, but were able to matriculate and move on into high school."

San Francisco also faces a profound literacy crisis that needs immediate and continued attention. Nearly half of K-12 students across SFUSD are not yet meeting literacy standards. According to the 2023-24 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), 49% of San Francisco public school third graders are not reading at grade level. The gap widens even further for third graders who are Black, Latinx, and English Language Learners (ELLs), with just 8% of Latinx students, 19% of Black students, and 11% of ELL students meeting standards. The California Reading Coalition's annual findings, the CA Reading Report Card, showed that SFUSD falls in the bottom 7% of districts for students meeting or exceeding reading standards by third grade.

To address these challenges, SFUSD has set ambitious academic targets aligned with its Vision, Values, Goals, and Guardrails (VVGGs), a framework designed to ensure that all students receive equitable access to high-quality education. Among these targets are:

- Improving third-grade literacy to 70% by 2027, up from roughly 52% in October 2022, with a particular focus on historically underserved student groups
- Increasing eighth-grade math proficiency to 65% in 2027, a significant leap from the October 2022 statistic of 42%, to better prepare students for high school and beyond
- Ensuring more students graduate college- and career-ready to 70% by 2027, as defined by the California Department of Education, from 57.5% in June 2020

Meeting these targets requires more than just ambitious goal-setting; it demands consistency and coherence across schools, which has historically been a challenge. For years, SFUSD has struggled with a fragmented approach to curriculum and instruction, where schools had autonomy to select their own teaching methods and materials. While this flexibility allowed educators to tailor instruction and school culture to their students, it also resulted in inconsistencies in how foundational skills like literacy and math were taught, particularly for English Language Learners (ELLs) and other historically underserved students.

Research from TNTP highlights that students in districts with clear, structured, and aligned instructional strategies consistently outperform those in less coordinated systems. To address this, SFUSD has introduced a district-wide science-of-reading-backed literacy curriculum called HMH—currently in its first year of deployment—marking a shift toward standardization in early literacy instruction.

However, this shift has also surfaced tensions between what district leadership believes is necessary based on research and what schools say they need based on daily realities. Some school leaders worry that a one-size-fits-all approach may not account for the unique challenges of their student populations, particularly for those facing housing instability or other barriers to learning. According to Maya Baker, principal of VVMS,

> "When making decisions, SFUSD–along with California Department of Education oversite–is looking at helicopter data. They're looking at test scores; they're not looking at street data. We work with a lot of children who are dealing with housing and food insecurity, and violence, too. We have a responsibility to put basic needs front and center when we're having to fight for what our kids need to learn. Our kids are incredible. They do so much with what they have, and it's not enough. The system is not equitable."

Most school leaders we spoke with view this change positively, noting that a structured, research-backed approach has provided greater clarity and support for both teachers and students. For example, the emphasis on cohesion has played a critical role in supporting ELLs and improving literacy rates at schools like Cleveland Elementary. Assistant principal Lenar Ruiz reflected on the impact of increased alignment. "One of the things we've been focusing on in the last three or four years is cohesion and fidelity to sticking to the curriculum." said Ruiz. "Prior to the adoption of the other curriculum, teachers were more kind of doing their own thing. Some grade levels were together; others weren't. But once we piloted [HMH], it provided structure—everyone had the curriculum." Ruiz emphasized that before this shift, previous curricula led to fragmented implementation across classrooms. The transition to HMH, supported by instructional coaching, has helped ensure that all students, particularly ELLs, receive consistent, high-quality instruction. "We always remind teachers that it's hard to make changes when you don't know something really well yet," Ruiz explained. "You just have to go through it."

One solution that is yielding exceptional results is high-impact tutoring. NSSA defines high-impact literacy tutoring as three or more sessions per week with a trained, consistent instructor using high-quality, science-of-reading backed materials. According to NSSA research, high-impact tutoring drives more gains than other interventions:

Source: National Student Support Accelerator, Stanford University, 2025
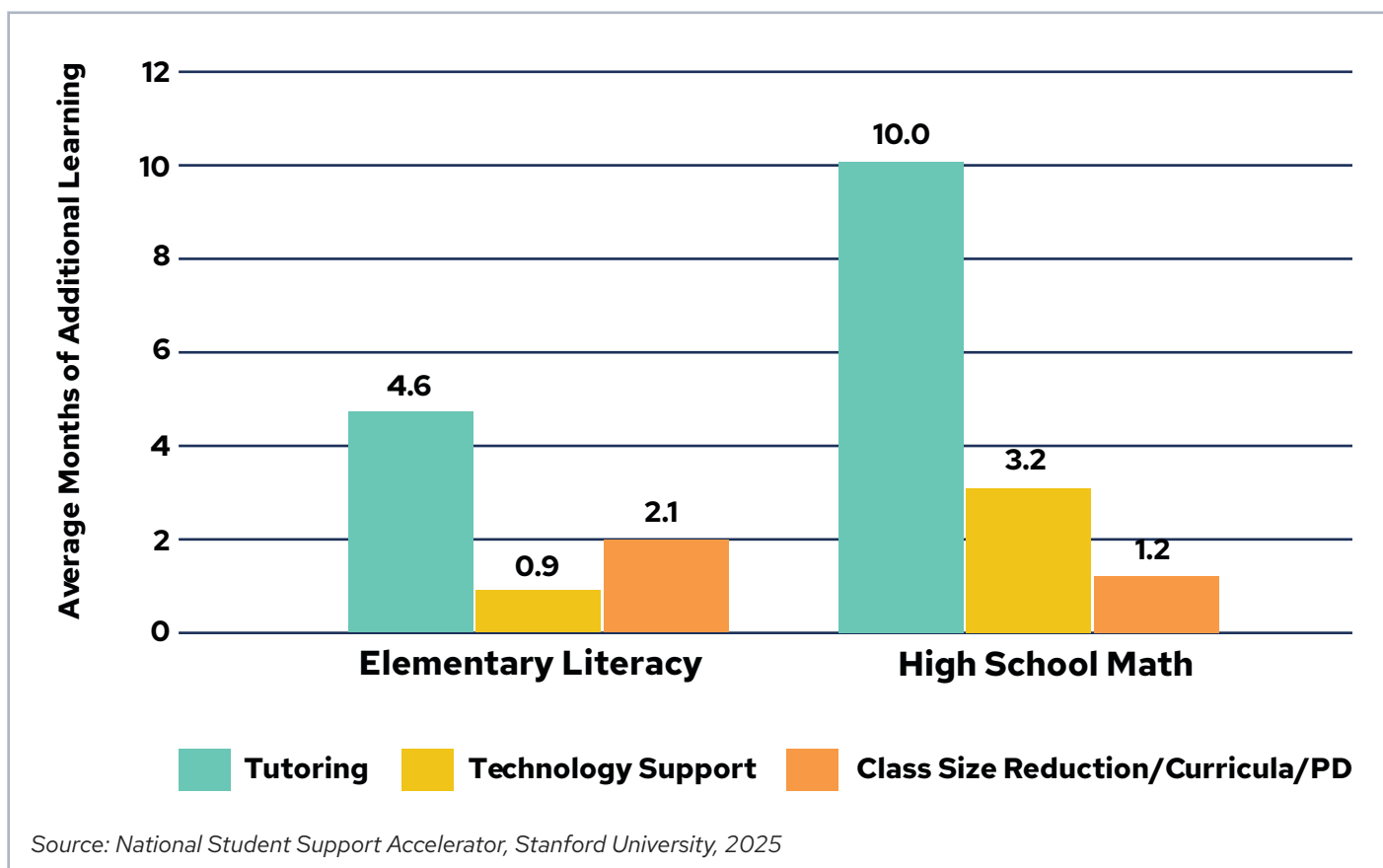
According to Annie Roach, instructional coach at Bret Harte Elementary School, "We love [our tutoring program]. It's like having an additional full-time employee whose sole job is to reinforce foundational skills in K-2. [Our school's tutor] is fantastic; she is multilingual, has a great rapport with the kids, and is independent but also collaborative. She asks a lot of good questions, but also figures things out on her own."

High-impact tutoring is effective, but can be difficult to implement given limited capacity at schools. "[High-impact literacy tutoring] is something that we would have never had the capacity to vet," said Stefanie Eldred, community schools coordinator at ER Taylor Elementary School, reflecting on the SF Ed Fund's role in vetting and supporting their high-impact tutoring provider. "With [SF Ed Fund's selection] you can tell the high quality and the fact that we're going to have people here working with the kids. That type of fundraising and program, we just wouldn't be able to do on our own." According to Paul Lister, principal of Tenderloin Community School,

> **"Tutoring is filling the gaps with individual students. It gives the parents hope that there is someone doing something."**

As SFUSD works toward its 2027 goals, bridging this gap—ensuring that consistency does not come at the cost of responsiveness to individual school needs—will be critical to success. High-impact tutoring and structured, research-backed curriculum reforms have already shown promise in improving outcomes, particularly for early literacy. However, sustained investment in both academic interventions and wraparound supports will be necessary to ensure that all students, regardless of background, receive the resources they need to thrive.

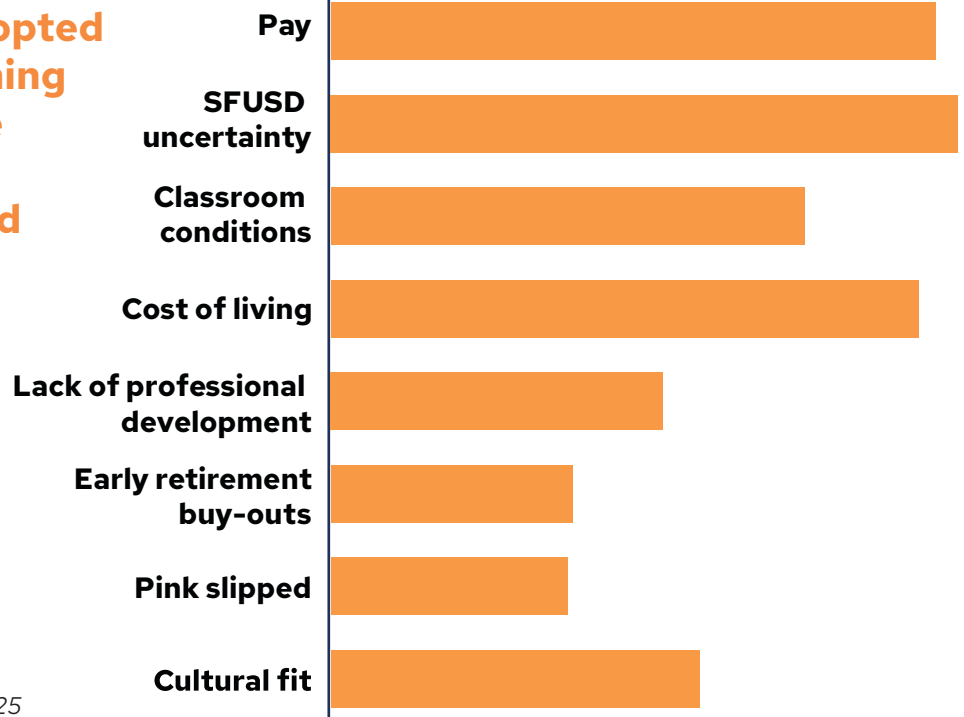### Theme 3:
The Need for Talent

School leaders consistently emphasized the struggles they face in attracting, training, supporting, and retaining talent. Persistent staff shortages require existing personnel to take on additional responsibilities, leading to burnout. As Stefanie Eldred from ER Taylor said, "…Not having subs, especially for para professionals in our SDC [Special Day] classes, [is a challenge]. People are out, and so we spend a lot of our time doing things that are definitely our [part of our] job, but not our primary job."

Teacher retention remains a critical issue at the national, state, and local levels with persistent shortages. Nationally, the shortage is driven by multiple factors, including an underinvestment in the teaching profession, resulting in low wages, large class sizes, complex workloads, and a lack of resources just to name a few. According to the Learning Policy Institute, an estimated one in eight teaching positions across the country are either unfilled or occupied by educators not fully certified for their assignments.

Locally, San Francisco faces unique challenges in teacher recruitment and retention due to historic pay inequities, high living costs, and instability within SFUSD. These were the top three contributing factors that school leaders have surmised to have led educators to leaving their schools.

Of the teachers who opted to not return to teaching at your school, please rank the reasons that you believe influenced their decisions?

Reason	
Pay	████████████
SFUSD uncertainty	█████████████
Classroom conditions	██████████
Cost of living	████████████
Lack of professional development	███████
Early retirement buy-outs	█████
Pink slipped	█████
Cultural fit	██████

Source: SF Ed Fund Survey, January 2025

Recent, highly publicized issues within the district like teachers reporting delayed or no salary payments have further exacerbated the issue, making it difficult to attract and retain educators. While SFUSD approved $9,000 salary increases for educators in the 2023-24 school year and an additional 5% raise for the 2024-25 school year, wages still fall short for many educators in one of the country's most expensive cities. Many teachers are forced to leave the district—or the profession altogether—due to the financial strain of living in San Francisco. The complex needs of students and school communities compound the struggles teachers face and in San Francisco. Without a comprehensive strategy to address low compensation and resourcing educators who are working with the most complex cases, SFUSD will struggle to maintain a stable workforce.

Massive budget cuts are further undermining efforts to stabilize school staffing. At the time of this report's publication (April 2025), the district was moving forward with hundreds of layoffs and has frozen hiring for new or unfilled positions, despite already understaffed schools. These cuts are part of a broader plan to reduce nearly 10% of SFUSD's $1.3 billion budget by the 2025-26 school year. Schools are forced to combine classes and increase class sizes and build their staffing plans without a clear path to hiring or compensating essential roles such as counselors, librarians, assistant principals, and nurses. These positions are crucial for student support, school climate, and overall academic success, yet they are often the first to be cut in times of financial strain.

Additionally, schools feel constrained by the current financial decisions and policies dictated by the California Department of Education to SFUSD that limit their ability to allocate resources based on their specific needs. Dr. Vidrale Franklin, principal of Dr. Charles R. Drew College Preparatory Academy, expressed frustration with the lack of flexibility:

> *"Our ability to use our funding the way that helps us as a school site has been cut. We're kind of forced into doing things like everyone else, and we're not like everyone else. Every school is unique and individual, and when you lump everyone together, it just creates this assembly line feel. And that's definitely lowered morale."*

This uncertainty around funding also makes long-term planning difficult, discouraging schools from investing time into securing grants or new initiatives. An assistant middle school principal captured the challenge, saying, "[A particular initiative might be] possible now, but might not be possible forever, so let's not get attached to it or build it in a way that we [could] lose it the year after. It's hard to think ahead and make plans that will stick because everything could change...or be decimated."

Even when schools secure funding to address critical staffing needs, state oversight sometimes prevents them from using resources as planned. This undermines efforts to build stability. Willie Brown Middle School, for instance, applied for and received grant funding to hire a counselor. Despite having applied for the grant to meet their own school needs, the district required the position be shared with Denman Middle School. This reflects a broader challenge in the district: schools are identifying their most urgent needs, working hard to secure resources in their already limited time, and then learning they cannot allocate those funds as planned. As Maya Baker, principal of Visitacion Valley Middle School, explained, "There is much that changes outside of the control of school sites, and in an untimely way. Last year, my school site council had allotted our Title One funds to cover a literacy coach and a counselor, and then the district cut coaches and counselors. We had spent a lot of energy investing in [this process] and determining what our school needed, then we were told we were not allowed to use it for people. We then had to fund contracts to try and meet these needs, but the approval process was such that services didn't start until December. I would say a theme right now is, how do we provide much needed services for our students, within the limits of district allowances?"

Cleveland Elementary School faced a similar issue, where even with funding in place, the school struggled to hire due to bureaucratic delays and a limited candidate pool. As Principal Marlon Escobar described, "Even if we had had the money, there wasn't any staff. We had quite a few staff members transition out, and it was very difficult to fill those positions. We have three openings right now, and our reading intervention is still in the classroom. We couldn't hire for our second reading interventionist, so we have no reading intervention happening right now. The district or the state really wasn't allowing hiring of non-classroom positions, and that delayed even simple things like opening up a position. It's been hard."

The constant need to adjust staffing plans has been challenging for Escobar and his team, but they take pride in their ability to maintain stability for students in a thoughtful and intentional way. "I think that's huge right now," explained Escobar. "Being able to maintain stability during these times has been really important."

Other schools are working hard to overcome similar challenges. Denman Middle School, for example, faced significant staffing instability during the 2023-24 school year, with vacancies and emergency credentialed hires forcing full-time teachers to step in as substitutes during their own prep periods. Assistant principal Tricia Land described the immense strain this took on the school community, saying, "The exhaustion level was pretty high early on last school year." Determined to stabilize the school, Denman's leadership team took an aggressive approach to hiring. The principal checked for new candidates daily and the hiring team conducted interviews from wherever they were—including while traveling abroad. Additionally, an incoming parent of a student with an IEP helped recruit for their child's classroom, ultimately sending in so many resumes that the school was able to hire two teachers and several paraprofessionals from that group. These efforts paid off and the school was able to build a more stable team. "There's still a little bit of tiredness once in a while," said Land, "but not full community exhaustion that existed last year for students, families and staff."

Charles R. Drew College Preparatory Academy maintained 100% of its staff members last year, a significant improvement from its typical 25-35% annual turnover. According to Principal Franklin, this achievement is likely attributed to Drew's comprehensive support for educators, including two dedicated coaches, paid professional development, and compensated planning time. The school also rebranded classified staff (staff who are not credentialed teachers but provide trained support in the classroom) as co-educators, offering them weekly training. This approach elevates and empowers the classified staff to take on more responsibilities, sharing more of the workload with credentialed teachers to enhance student skills.

Another critical staffing opportunity lies in increasing representation. Schools like Malcolm X welcome applicants who reflect their students' lived experiences while also providing additional training and resources to help them succeed. "We are excited to have a staff that is highly representative of our student demographics," says Malcolm X Principal Matt Fitzsimons.

Attracting and retaining talented educators in San Francisco schools remains a significant challenge, influenced by factors like low pay, high living costs, and staffing shortages. These challenges are further complicated by policies and delays that limit schools' flexibility in using resources to meet their specific needs. While some schools have found innovative ways to support and retain their staff, there is a clear need for SFUSD to address these systemic issues. Improving compensation, providing more support for teachers, and offering greater flexibility in resource allocation will be key for the district to maintain a stable and effective workforce. By tackling these barriers, SFUSD can better support its educators and ensure that all students have access to the quality education they deserve.

Conclusions

The findings from this needs assessment reaffirm the importance of student sense of belonging, access to quality academic programs that have support equitable outcomes for our highest benefit-students, and talent and staffing stability in school communities in SFUSD. School leaders and educators remain deeply committed to their communities, but they need immediate and sustained support to navigate these difficulties effectively.

Moving forward, SFUSD must balance district-wide coherence with the flexibility individual schools need to serve their unique student populations. As mentioned above—due to a number of factors—many educators noted that the district is not always fully attuned to the realities inside schools. Investing in proven strategies—such as high-impact tutoring, attendance incentives, and expanded high quality professional development—will be key to reversing negative outcomes and to driving meaningful improvements. As SFUSD moves toward more standardized approaches to staffing and curriculum, leaders fear that while these efforts may provide consistency, they could also overlook or disrupt the innovative and deeply rooted practices that make each school beautiful and unique.

The district's financial constraints make these efforts even more challenging, yet they also highlight the need for creative staffing solutions and resource allocation. Schools must be empowered to retain essential personnel and adapt their approaches to best support students. Addressing these issues with urgency and intentionality will be critical to ensuring that San Francisco's public schools remain places where students, educators, and leaders can thrive.

About the San Francisco Education Fund

The San Francisco Education Fund (SF Ed Fund) advances equitable education by providing quality learning programs, community support, and financial resources to students, educators and schools. The SF Ed Fund was founded in 1979 as a response to Proposition 13 decimating funding for public education in California, and since then we have consistently mobilized the San Francisco community to champion equitable access to quality education for all public school students. As the first third-party intermediary in the nation focused solely on uplifting local public school teachers, students, and their schools, the SF Ed Fund has spent 45 years building a powerful legacy of community engagement and quality learning.

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