Emma White Research LLC

MEMO

To: MEA
From: Emma White Research
Re: Findings from MEA member survey on student behavior
Date: October 30, 2026

Our survey[1] of K-12 educators who are members of MEA finds continued challenges with student behavioral issues in Michigan schools. Almost all have experienced at least one student behavioral issue in the last year, and the shares of educators reporting concern about violence towards students and employees have risen. These educators support a number of solutions, especially smaller class sizes, improved support from administration, and improving special ed resources.

Key Findings

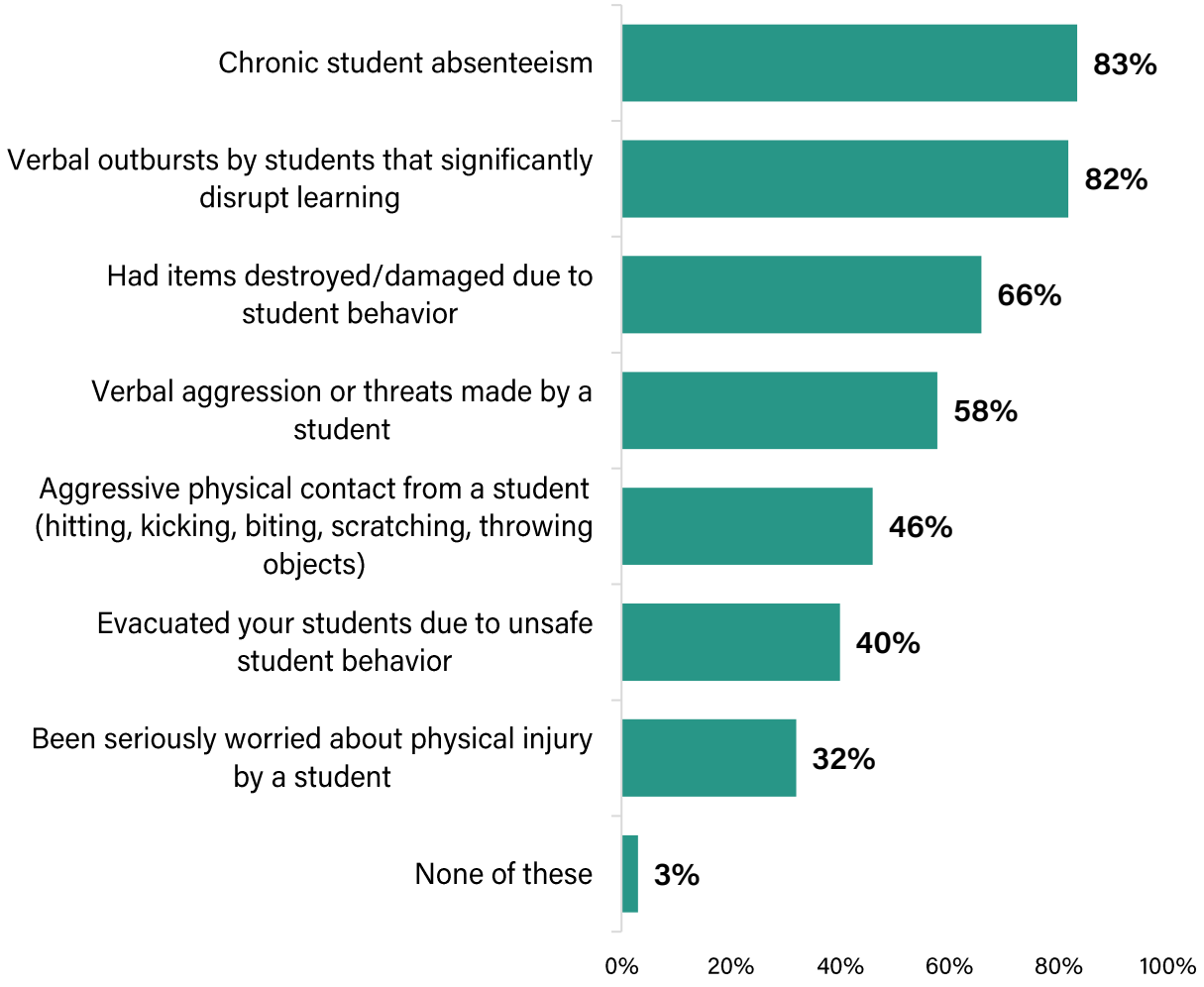
1. Nearly all PreK-12 members report having experienced student behavioral issues in the last school year, including almost half who have experienced aggressive physical contact.

Ninety-seven percent (97%) of PreK-12 members say they have experienced at least one of the listed student behavioral issues within the last school year. The most common occurrences include chronic absenteeism (83% have experienced), verbal outbursts by students (82%), destruction/damage of items by students (66%), and verbal aggression or threats by students (58%). Almost half (46%) report aggressive physical contact from a student, another 40% report having evacuated students due to unsafe behavior, and 32% report being worried about physical injury from a student (Figure 1).

[1] N=4,040 PreK-12 MEA members, conducted online August 12-21, 2026

Figure 1

In the last school year, have you experienced any of the following at your job? Please select all that apply.



Support staff report several of the behaviors at higher rates: 7 in 10 (70%) say they have experienced aggressive physical contact from a student, 54% have evacuated their students because of unsafe behavior, and 44% have been seriously worried about physical injury by a student.

There is also variation by grade level. Educators who work with PreK students are more likely to report having experienced:

- Aggressive physical contact (86%)
- Items destroyed/damaged (76%)
- Evacuating students due to unsafe behavior (53%)
- Being seriously worried about physical injury (50%)

Educators who work with kindergarten/elementary students are more likely to report having experienced:

- Verbal outbursts (89%)
- Items destroyed/damaged (78%)
- Aggressive physical contact (68%)
- Verbal aggression or threats (67%)
- Evacuating students due to unsafe behavior (59%)
- Being seriously worried about physical injury (43%)

Educators who work with middle school students are more likely to report having experienced:

- Absenteeism (88%)
- Verbal outbursts (85%)
- Verbal aggression or threats (63%)

Those who work with high school students are more likely to report absenteeism (91%), and less likely to report all other issues listed.

Serious problems occur regardless of urbanicity; over 4 in 10 educators in big cities, small cities, suburbs, and small towns/rural areas each report having experienced aggressive physical contact by a student.

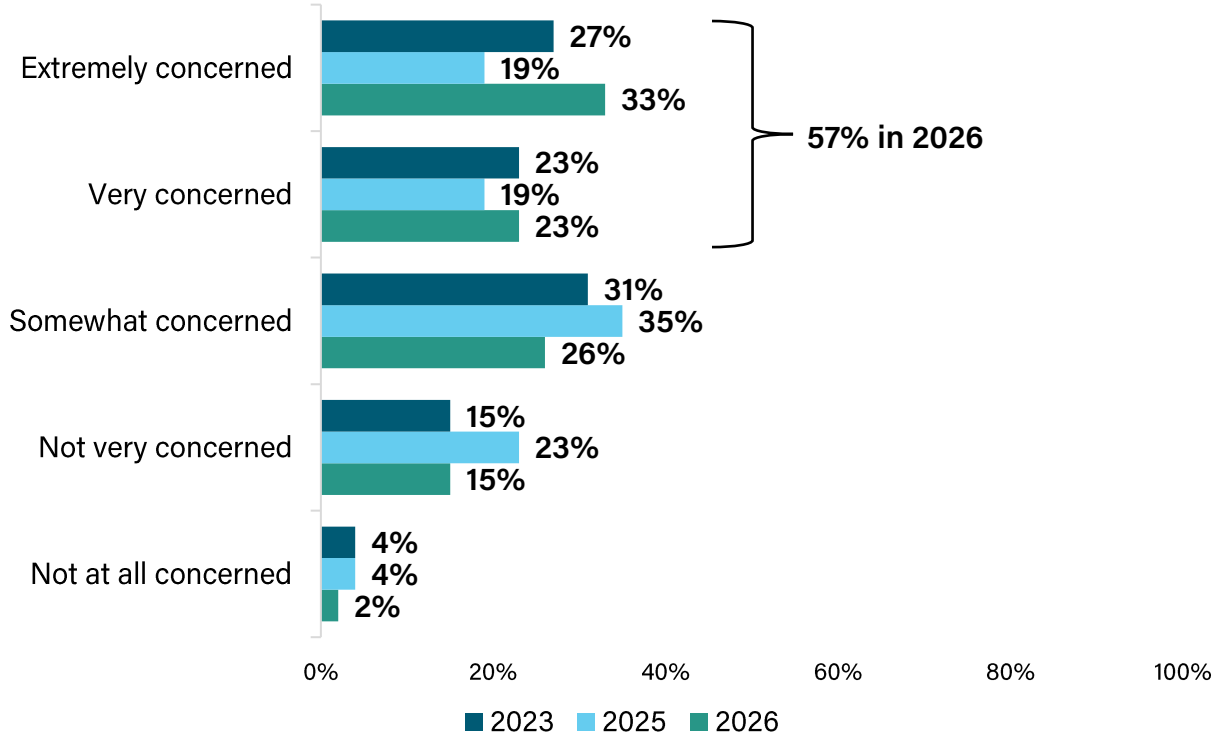
2. Concern about violent behavior from students against employees and other students is up from last year, and similar to 2023.

A majority of PreK-12 members (57%) are highly concerned about student violence against school employees in their school district, including a third (33%) who are extremely concerned, and an additional 23% who are very concerned (Figure 2). An additional 26% are somewhat concerned, and only 17% are not very (15%) or not at all (2%) concerned. Compared to prior surveys, the share who are extremely concerned is up 14 points from 19% in 2025[2] and up 6 points from 27% in 2023[3].

[2] N=999 active PreK-12 MEA members, conducted online, August 26-September 11, 2025
[3] N=4,366 active PreK-12 MEA members, conducted online, May 6-15, 2023

Figure 2

How concerned are you about student violence against school employees in your school district?

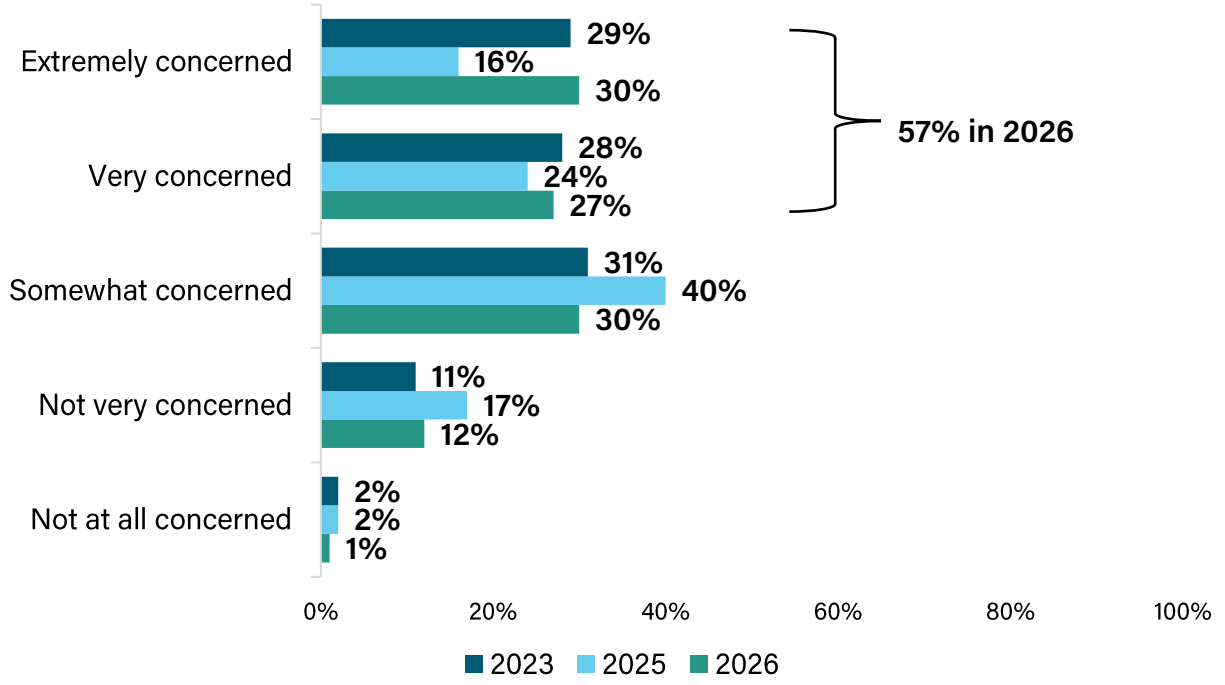


Support staff (66% extremely/very concerned), as well as among those who work with kindergarten/elementary students (74%) express higher levels of concern about student violence towards employees.

Concern about student violence against other students is also high: a majority (57%) are either extremely (30%) or very (27%) concerned, 30% are somewhat concerned, and only 13% are not very (12%) or not at all (1%) concerned (Figure 3). Compared to past years, the share who are extremely concerned has risen 14 points from 16% in 2025 and is similar to 29% in 2023.

Figure 3

How concerned are you about student violence against other students in your school district?



Concern about student violence against other students is higher among those working with kindergarten/elementary students (70%).

3. Seven in ten say there has been an increase in aggressive or violent behavior from students within the last 5 years.

When asked about inappropriate student behavior that is physically aggressive or violent in nature, 71% of PreK-12 members say they have noticed an increase in incidents within the last 5 years. Twenty-six percent (26%) say there has been little change, and 3% say there has been a decrease in incidents.

Subgroups that are even more likely to report an increase in incidents include:

- Those who work with PreK students (85%), or kindergarten/elementary students (85%)
- Those who work in a big city (79%) or small city (75%)

4. Fewer than half report being aware of their school having a clear plan for addressing aggressive or violent behavior.

A little over 4 in 10 members (43%) say that their school has a clear plan in place for addressing physically aggressive/violent situations in the classroom. A third (34%) say their school does not have a plan, and 22% are unsure.

Subgroups more likely to report no plan for aggressive/violent behavior at their school include:

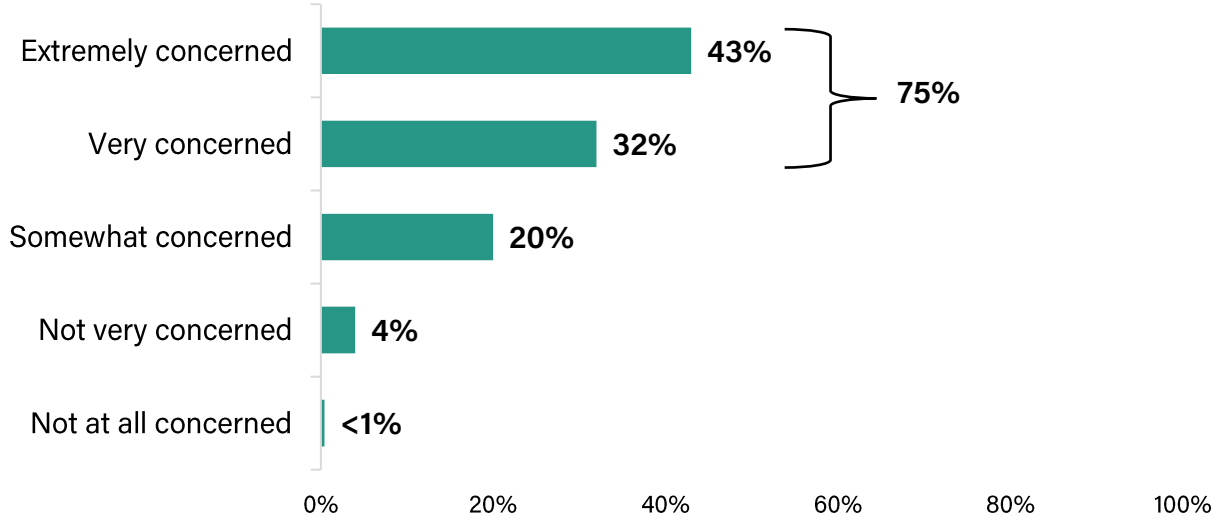
- Those who work with PreK students (44%) or kindergarten/elementary students (41%)
- Those who work in a big city (43%)
- Have been working in education more than 20 years (37%)

5. Three-quarters of PreK-12 members are highly concerned about non-violent disruptive student behavior.

Seventy-five percent (75%) of members say they are extremely (43%) or very (32%) concerned about disruptive student behavior that is not violent in nature (Figure 4). An additional 20% are somewhat concerned, and only 5% are not very/not at all concerned.

Figure 4

How concerned are you about disruptive student behavior that is not violent in nature?



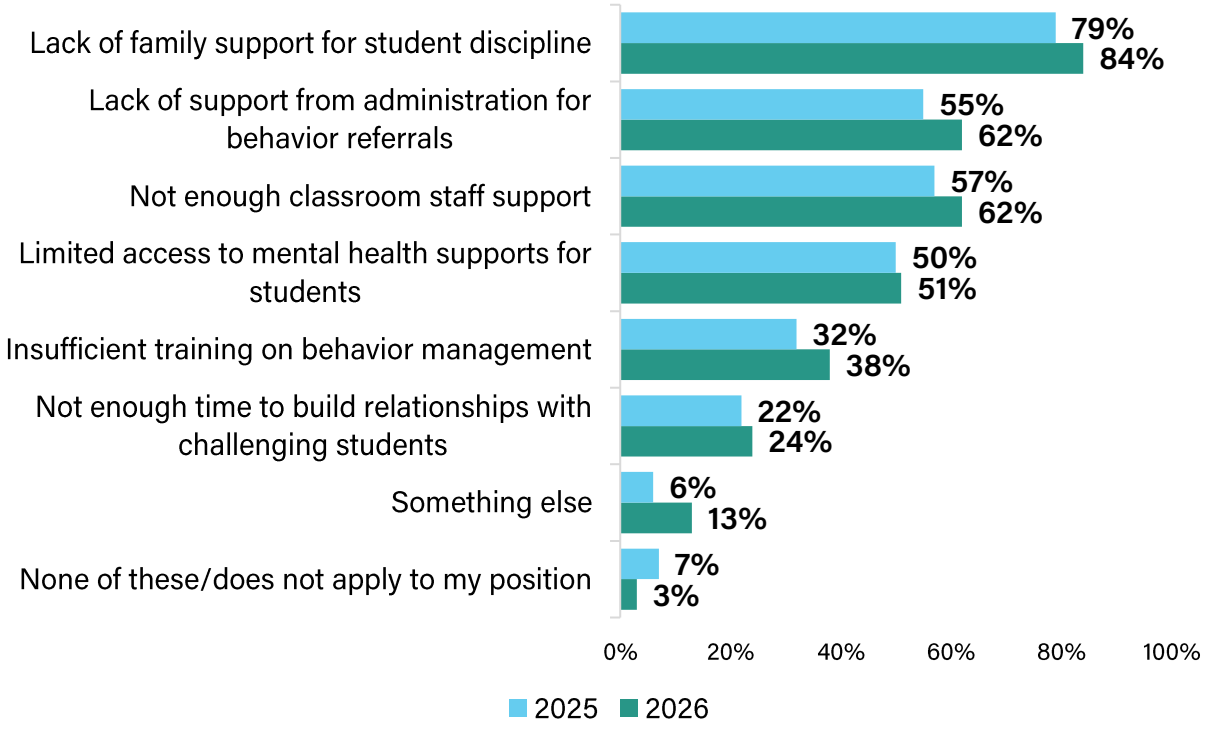
Concern about non-violent disruptive student behavior is higher among those working with kindergarten/elementary students (84%).

6. Educators say the top barriers in managing student behaviors are a lack of family support for discipline, lack of support from administration, and not enough classroom staff support.

When asked about the barriers they have faced in the last three years when managing student behavior, over 8 in 10 members (84%) say they've experienced a lack of family support for discipline. Majorities also have experienced a lack of support from administration (62%), not enough classroom staff support (62%), or limited access to mental health supports for students (51%). Fewer say they've experienced barriers like insufficient training on behavior management (38%) or not having enough time to build relationships with students (24%). Thirteen percent (13%) say they have experienced barriers not mentioned in this list, and 3% say they haven't experienced any barriers or it does not apply to their position. The share reporting each barrier has increased slightly since 2025 (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Over the last three years, what barriers have you faced when managing student behavior? Select all that apply.

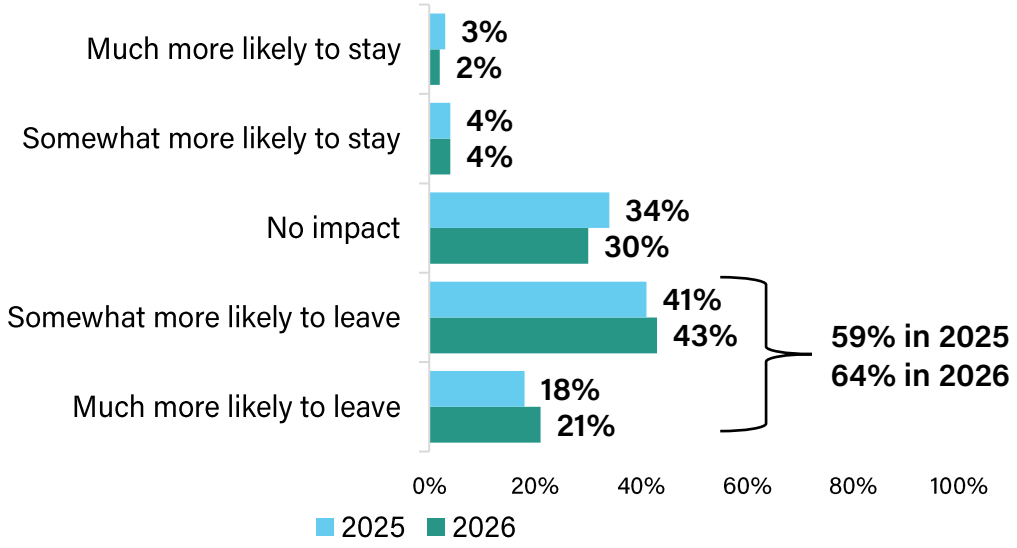


7. A majority of PreK-12 members say student behavioral challenges make them at least somewhat more likely to leave education.

There continues to be the risk of Michigan educators leaving the profession due to student behavioral challenges: 64% say these challenges make them more likely to leave (21% much more/43% somewhat more), while 30% say it has no impact, and 6% say it makes them more likely to stay (Figure 6). This represents a 5-point increase in those saying they are more likely to leave since 2025.

Figure 6

How, if at all, do student behavioral challenges impact your likelihood to continue working in education?



Those more likely to say they may leave education over these challenges include:

- Those who work with kindergarten/elementary students (70%)
- PreK-12 teachers (67%)
- Have been working in the field more than 20 years (67%)

8. We find wide support for addressing behavior through smaller class sizes, improved support from administration, and improving special ed resources.

At least half of PreK-12 members find the following solutions as very effective to address challenges regarding student behavior:

- Smaller class sizes to allow more time for teachers to develop strong relationships with students (73%)
- Improving support from administration in managing disciplinary situations[4] (66%)

[4] Split A, N=2,001

- Better support from administration in communicating behavioral expectations and consequences to families[5] (63%)
- Improving special education resources and placement options (57%)
- Stronger disciplinary or criminal penalties for in-school violence (51%)
- Freeing up the time of mental health professionals to provide direct and indirect services to students (50%)[5]

Other potential solutions that many members also find very effective include:

- Hiring more school-based mental health professionals[4] (47%)
- Implementing developmentally appropriate curriculum at all levels[5] (43%)
- Reducing reliance on classroom technology and reducing screen time[4] (43%)
- Hiring more paraeducators (42%)
- Increasing recess time and/or guided play time[4] (40%)
- Co-teaching requirements that take into account adequate support to address the needs of all students in each classroom[4] (40%)
- Expanding services such as parental counseling provided through the schools[5] (40%)

Support staff are more likely than PreK-12 members overall to rate the following solutions as very effective: hiring more paraeducators (61% very effective), stronger disciplinary penalties for violence (56%), and increasing training for educators about using restorative practices effectively (39%).

Across grade levels, members rate solutions similarly, with smaller class sizes as the top solution for all (at least 70% of members in each category saying very effective).
Improving special ed is also a top solution (65% very effective) for those working with kindergarten/elementary students.
The two solutions about recess/guided play and developmentally appropriate curriculum are rated as highly effective by those who work with PreK or elementary students:

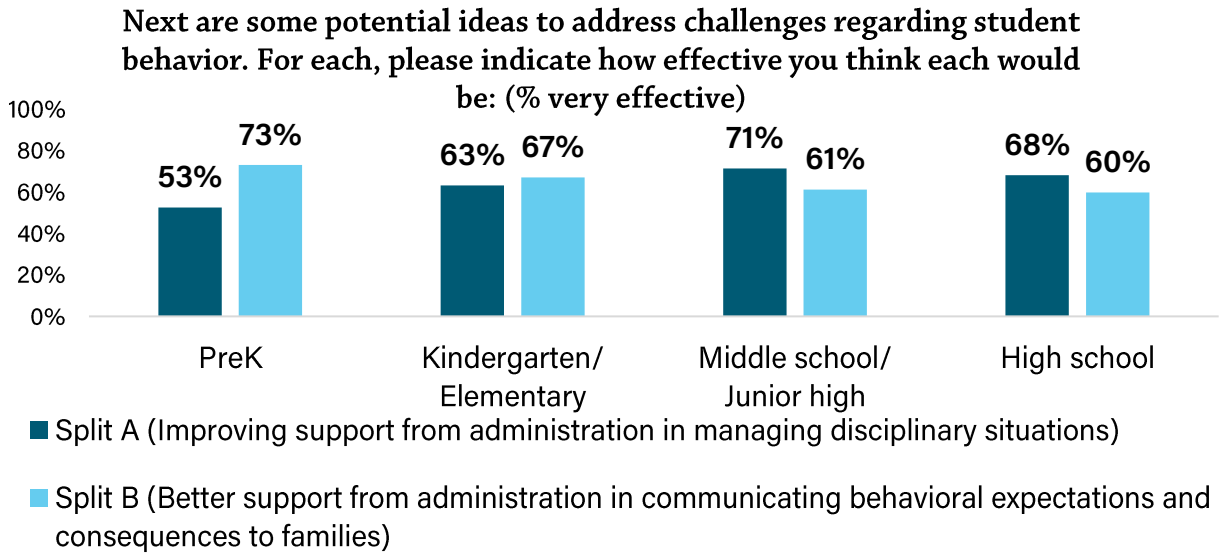
- Implementing developmentally appropriate curriculum at all levels (43% very effective overall)[5]
    - PreK (62%)
    - Kindergarten/elementary (50%)

- Increasing recess time and/or guided play time (40% very effective overall)[4]
    - PreK (46%)
    - Kindergarten/elementary (46%)

[5] Split B, N=2,039

Effectiveness of the two solutions related to administrative support also varies by grade level (Figure 7)[4,5]. Those who work with older students are more likely to rate support from admin in managing disciplinary situations as effective, while those who work with PreK or elementary students rate better support in communicating to families as more effective.

Figure 7



Among those who say they are much more likely to leave the field as a result of student behavioral issues, the top solutions are the same as members overall, with even more of this group rating them as effective: smaller class sizes (78% very effective), support from admin in managing disciplinary situations (77%)[4], and support from admin in communicating to families (74%)[5]. Other solutions that this group support at higher rates than PreK-12 members overall include stronger disciplinary penalties (70%), improving special ed (61%), and implementing developmentally appropriate curriculum (48%)[5].

Conclusions

1. Experience with many types of student behavioral issues continues to be widespread.

Nearly all members report having experienced student behavioral issues within the last year. The most common incidents are absenteeism, verbal outbursts, destruction or damage of items, and verbal aggression.

Almost half have experienced aggressive physical contact from a student. And, despite a slight decrease between 2023 and 2025, members' concern about violence (to both employees and students) has risen to the highest level yet.

Most members do not report being aware of a clear plan from their schools for handling violent student behavior. Educators who are most likely to say their school doesn't have a plan they are aware of include educators who work with PreK/elementary students, those in a big city, and more experienced educators.

2. Types of behaviors most commonly experienced vary by grade level.

Educators working with PreK/elementary students are the most likely to report aggressive/violent student behavior. Those working with middle schoolers are most likely to report absenteeism, verbal outbursts, and verbal aggression. Those working with high schoolers report absenteeism at higher rates.

3. Many report they are more likely to consider leaving the field due to these challenges.

Over half say challenges make them at least somewhat more likely to leave the profession, which has increased since 2025. The most likely to report considering leaving due to issues are those working with elementary students, and members who have been in the field >20 years.

4. Top solutions overall include smaller class sizes and improved special ed.

Across grade levels, there is strong support for:

- Smaller class sizes to allow more time for teachers to develop strong relationships with students
- Improving special education resources and placement options (especially among those working with elementary students)

5. Support for solutions about administrative support is also very strong, and varies by grade level.

Majorities across grade levels are supportive of both solutions about increasing administrative support, but there is slight preference between those who work with younger/older students:

- Improving support from administration in managing disciplinary situations (preferred by educators working with middle school/high school students)
- Better support from administration in communicating behavioral expectations and consequences to families (preferred by educators working with PreK/elementary school students)

6. PreK and elementary members are supportive of solutions about developmentally appropriate curriculum and recess.

Majorities of those who work with PreK or elementary students say implementing developmentally appropriate curriculum at all levels would be very effective. Nearly half of them also say increasing recess time and/or guided play time would be very effective.