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Maine K-12 Educator and Administrator Experiences Managing Challenging Student Behavior in Schools

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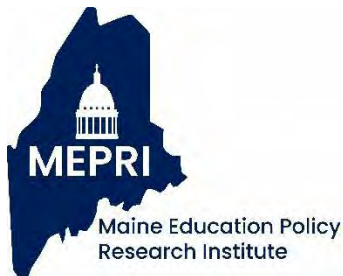
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Overview of the Study

Why was this study conducted?

Amid continued and growing concern about the frequency and severity of disruptive student behavior incidents in classrooms and schools, the Maine State Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs charged the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) to conduct a research study to learn more about this phenomenon in Maine schools. MEPRI researchers at the University of Maine collaborated with Dr. Sarah Wilkinson of the University of Southern Maine and Dr. Gretchen Scheibel of the University of Kansas who were already engaged in a large state-wide survey study of Maine educators on this topic. This report presents findings from that survey along with additional focus group interview data and a broader discussion of the research on challenging student behavior in schools.

What do you need to know to put this study into context?

While educators have always had to contend with managing student behavior in classrooms, reports of elevated frequency and severity of disruptive behavior increased during and immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators and school leaders continue to report challenges in managing student behaviors and express concern that time devoted to this effort is taking away from classroom learning time and other staff and administrator duties. Persistent rates of challenging student behavior in schools can have a negative outcome on teacher retention and recruitment efforts, student academic achievement, and post-secondary outcomes. Effectively addressing challenging behavior requires all educators to be able to promote and encourage positive behaviors, redirect challenging behavior to more adaptive behaviors, and manage low-intensity behaviors (e.g., disruption) to prevent more intense or dangerous forms of behavior (e.g., aggression, property destruction) from developing.

What did we learn from the study?

Maine educators across professional roles are spending a considerable amount of time managing student behavior. Special education staff spend the most amount of time managing behavior, much of which is spent managing behavioral incidents (i.e., behavioral episodes where the adult's response is focused directly on a single student with the intent to reengage the student in expected behavior). However, school administrators and general education staff also spend a comparable amount of time managing student behavior. Educators report ongoing management of student behavior has negative impacts on staff and students and many report injuries due to student behavior. Further, educators report limited confidence in the effectiveness of available behavior supports and have few opportunities for professional development related to addressing challenging behavior. Specific findings are outlined below, followed by a shorter summary of key findings.

How often is challenging behavior happening in schools and who manages it?

A significant portion of educators and administrators responding to the survey reported they are seeing frequent and sometimes severe student behavior problems in schools. In interviews, administrators confirmed the survey results, suggesting behavior problems are most common at the elementary grade level in their schools, and that challenging behaviors are occurring throughout the school building and on bus rides. They also noted this problem has expanded to include much younger children in recent years, and it has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic and school disruption.

Disruptive Behavior

- 96% of Maine educators reported having managed disruptive behavior during the 2023–2024 school year
- 77% managed disruptive behavior at least daily, 92% report weekly management
- Educators reported spending 10–12 minutes per disruptive behavior episode
- Over 80% of general educators, special educators, and behavior specialists reported managing disruptive behavior daily or multiple times a day

Behavior Incidents

- 86% of Maine educators reported having managed behavior incidents during the 2023–2024 school year
- 44% managed behavior incidents at least daily, 77% report weekly management
- Educators reported spending 22–40 minutes per behavior incident episode
- Administrators spend the most time managing behavior incidents ($M = 40$ minutes per episode daily)
- Most non-administrative educational staff reported spending approximately 30 minutes per behavior incident daily

Behavior Crises

- 52% of Maine educators reported having managed behavior crises during the 2023–2024 school year and 70% of them managed behavior crises at least monthly
- Daily management of behavior crises is common; 14% of general education teachers, 12% of behavior specialists, 12% of educational technicians, and 11% of special education teachers manage crises multiple times per day
- Educators reported spending 29–48 minutes per behavior crisis
- Special education staff spend the most time managing behavior crises (range = 36–43 minutes per episode weekly)

What is the time and salary cost of managing student behavior?

Using survey findings on the time educators spend on behavior challenges and salary data, our study estimated that educators across a variety of professional job roles are spending a considerable portion of their workday dealing with student behavior management in schools, representing a significant portion of their salary costs. Administrators we interviewed confirmed

that educators and administrators are spending a large portion of their workday focused on managing problematic behaviors.

- Management of student behavior costs between \$6,674 and \$15,366 depending on the professional role.
- Time spent managing student behavior makes up 11–12% of the annual salaries of school administrators, special education teachers, education technicians, and behavior specialists, and 20–22% of time during the school year.
- For general education teachers, interventionists, related service providers, and other educators, this time represents 6–8% of their annual salaries and 12–16% of the school year.

What impacts have been observed by Maine educators that they attribute to student disruptive behaviors, behavioral incidents, and behavioral crises in schools?

The educators we surveyed and administrators we interviewed confirmed a variety of negative impacts or harm due to problematic behaviors. This includes disruption to learning, more negative views about students who engage in problematic behaviors, physical injuries and emotional stress for professionals, students who engage in challenging behaviors, and student bystanders. Administrators also described a lack of time to engage in professional training, and less time for instructional leadership to support new teachers in academic areas.

Negative Impacts on Staff and Students

- Educators reported a moderate disruption to the learning environment caused by all three intensities of behavior.
- Administrators we interviewed said all their professional development time with staff is focused on student behavior management with little time for other important topics including instruction.
- Administrators said they are so busy helping with management of student behaviors that they have little time to provide instructional leadership.
- Challenging behavior causes some or inconsistent negative impact on relationships between staff and students who engage in challenging behavior.
- Educators reported an inconsistent to moderate negative impact on the relationship between students engaging in challenging behavior and their peers.
- Educators reported an inconsistent to moderate negative impact on staff frustration and/or reluctance to perform job duties due to challenging behavior.
- Educators reported an inconsistent negative impact on staff absences or vacancies due to challenging behavior.
- Administrators reported negative impacts on hiring and retention for educators and staff, staff absences, and burnout for educators and administrators due to challenging behavior.

Staff and Student Injuries Related to Challenging Behavior

- A substantial portion of educators reported that staff have experienced minor physical injuries ($M = 30\text{--}40\%$) and major physical injuries ($M = 16\text{--}23\%$) due to behavior incidents or crises. Also, 30% of educators reported experiencing

emotional stress after a behavior incident and over 40% reported experiencing emotional stress after a behavior crisis.

- 30% of educators reported the student engaging in the behavior incidents experienced minor physical injuries, 5% reported the student experienced major physical injuries, and 30% reported the student experienced emotional stress after the incident.
- 33% of educators reported student bystanders experienced minor physical injuries, 5% reported student bystanders experienced major physical injuries, and 34% reported student bystanders experienced emotional stress after a behavior incident.
- 37% of educators reported the student engaging in behavior crises experienced minor physical injuries, 6% reported the student experienced major physical injuries, and 38% reported the student experienced emotional stress after a behavior crisis.
- 33% of educators reported student bystanders experienced minor physical injuries, 5% reported student bystanders experienced major physical injuries, and 39% reported student bystanders experienced emotional stress after a behavior crisis.

What is the perceived effectiveness of the systems and supports available in schools for Maine educators when addressing student problem behaviors?

Although educators and administrators reported that many of the systems, strategies, and supports available in their schools had limited success in addressing the problem of student behavior, they felt some efforts were more effective than others.

Effectiveness of Behavior Supports

- Educators reported behavior supports intended to prevent challenging behavior from occurring were slightly to inconsistently effective.
- Educators reported behavior supports intended to manage challenging behavior in the moment were slightly to inconsistently effective.
- Educators reported behavior supports intended to discourage future occurrences of behavior were not effective to inconsistently effective.
- Educators reported available behavior supports were slightly to inconsistently effective at reducing disruptive behavior, behavior incidents, and behavior crises.
- Educators reported available behavior supports were slightly to inconsistently effective at keeping staff safe, and inconsistently to moderately effective at keeping the student engaging in the behavior and other students safe.

Professional Development Related to Student Behavior

- Less than a third of educators reported they had received professional development related to classroom management or positive behavior interventions and supports.
- Less than a quarter of respondents reported they had received professional development related to specific behavior interventions.

- 8% of educators reported they had never received professional development on any topics related to student behavior.

Administrators' Perspectives on Effective Behavior Supports

- Administrators said their districts had added additional staff, including culture coordinators and social workers, to assist educators and principals in working with students. They were engaging in professional training on ways to work effectively to reduce and manage problematic behavior. *It should be noted most educators reported they did not receive professional development in evidence-based behavior related professional development and feel the professional development and supports they have available to them are slightly to inconsistently effective.*
- Some districts had implemented frameworks with multi-tiered system of support, some used restorative justice approaches, and some increased time for students to interact socially to build social-emotional skills and a positive school culture. One district created a maker space area in their high school. One district is engaging bus drivers to help identify behavior issues. Several districts were creating district-wide committees to focus on the problem of student behavior and to assess district-wide discipline policies.

What school, home, and community factors do educators perceive as contributing to persistent challenging behavior in schools?

Educators and administrators identified a variety of factors related to students' home circumstances that contribute to problematic behaviors in school. Student poverty, mental health challenges, and lack of parental cooperation were viewed as contributing to students' behavior problems. Within schools, staffing shortages and lack of mental health providers were factors limiting available student support.

School Factors

- Limited access to school staff with behavior or mental health expertise was reported to have an inconsistent to moderate impact on persistent challenging behavior.
- Limited time to train educational technicians was reported to have an inconsistent to moderate impact on persistent challenging behavior.
- Ongoing school staff absences/vacancies were reported to have an inconsistent to moderate impact on persistent challenging behavior.
- State education policy changes were reported to have some to inconsistent impact on persistent challenging behavior.
- Administrators emphasized broad challenges including: the size and scope of the behavior problems in schools, increased workload for educators and principals, staffing shortages, high demand but limited availability across the state for day treatment programs, high demand and insufficient access to mental health services and facilities in Maine, and policies that limit how schools can respond to behavior episodes.

Home and Community Factors

- Limited collaboration between home and school was reported to have an inconsistent to moderate impact on persistent challenging behavior.
- Students experiencing significant stress at home was reported to have a moderate to strong impact on persistent challenging behavior.
- Limited student or family connection to the community was reported to have an inconsistent to moderate impact on persistent challenging behavior.
- Students and families experiencing housing or food insecurity was reported to have an inconsistent to moderate impact on persistent challenging behavior.
- Administrators cited a broad range of social, economic, and mental health challenges for students, as well as lack of parental cooperation, that all contribute to challenging student behaviors in schools and increased workload for educators and administrators.

What Resources or Supports Do Schools Need?

- Administrators identified funding through the EPS funding formula as key for helping to create sufficient staffing support in schools to manage student behaviors safely. They recommended two principals for larger elementary schools, given the prevalence of behavior issues at that level.
- Administrators called for attention to adequate funding to cover the costs of providing support to high needs students within the school. Currently, they are only able to seek reimbursement for out-of-district placements.
- Related to funding for high-needs students, administrators described a pressing need for expanded Tier 3 (individualized) supports for students with the most intensive behavioral needs.
- Administrators described a mental health system that is failing, and many families that are not able to access services or help for their children with mental health problems—even those in crisis. Administrators called for a review and revision of state policies that limit their ability to keep all staff and students safe, as well as policies that allow school staff to communicate with each other when they identify a student may be at risk.

Summary of Key Findings:

- Educators across professional roles in the state of Maine are managing extremely high rates of challenging student behavior. Persistent challenging student behavior can overburden administrative and education staff, lead to an increase in special education referrals, contribute to over-identification of students with behavioral disorders and be a critical factor in the ongoing teacher shortage (Brunsting et al., 2024).
- Management of student behavior consumes a considerable amount of time for administrative, general, and special education staff, limiting the time they have available to perform administrative duties to support educators and provide academic instruction, and/or federally mandated special education services (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).
- Challenging behavior is as prevalent in the general education population as it is in the special education population in Maine. If this level of behavior persists among general

education students, they are likely to receive a referral to special education (Lloyd et al., 2020). An increase in special education referrals would place further strain on the already overburdened special education system in Maine, where the special education identification rate is the second highest in the United States.

- Educators in Maine schools report widespread negative impacts due to challenging behavior. These impacts are likely to threaten school climate (Thapa et al., 2013), decrease student attendance and academic outcomes (Charlton et al., 2021), and contribute to a loss of educator personal accomplishment and increased feelings of burnout and stress. All of these are key factors that predict attrition from the education field (Bradshaw et al., 2024).
- Most educators report not having received professional development and/or not having confidence in behavior supports that would prepare them to manage student behaviors that occur daily in schools. Challenging behavior that is not effectively managed will increase in frequency and intensity over time and will have wide and long-lasting effects on students and educators (Sailor et al., 2009).
- Many educators report a lack of preparation or confidence in positive and preventative behavior supports which means educators are more likely to rely on ineffective, punitive, or restrictive practices (e.g., suspension, restraint, seclusion) that do not reduce challenging behavior and may exacerbate behavior (Fagan et al., 2019).
- General educators report spending a considerable amount time managing disruptive behavior, though most general educators reported not having received professional development in classroom management. This leaves them unprepared to implement evidence-based strategies to ensure students are engaged in academic instruction, maintain positive behavior, and prevent and respond to disruptive behaviors (Stevenson et al., 2020).
- Educators and administrators report various school, home, and community factors are impacting persistent challenging behavior in the classroom. This suggests there is a need for a robust and widespread response that provides targeted supports to all students and families in a school district.
- The strained infrastructure (i.e., programs, facilities, and trained professionals) for mental and behavioral health services in communities across Maine results in increased burden for schools to cope with high needs students.
- Administrators do not have adequate resources to increase capacity for effective behavior support in their districts and schools. Administrator perceptions of student behavior and available supports reflect how challenging the circumstances are, but they do not consistently advocate for evidence-based and systemic solutions.
- Responses to behavior described by administrators are reflective of a reactive, eclectic approach to managing behavior that may address specific behavior issues within a system in the short term but are unlikely to prevent challenging behavior and promote positive academic, behavior, and social emotional outcomes in the long term.

What did we conclude overall from the study?

Findings from the SBSS survey and administrator focus group interviews highlight that managing student behavior is a significant and widespread challenge for educators across Maine. High rates of challenging behavior from both general and special education K–12 students are being managed by educators from every county, a crisis that consumes substantial time across professional roles and negatively impacts staff and students in a variety of ways, including lost instructional time and physical and emotional harm. Further, very few educators across the state report having received adequate training to effectively reduce challenging behavior or encourage positive behaviors. Administrators reported higher levels of burnout or absences among staff, negative impacts for educator recruitment and retention, and less time for school principals to provide academic leadership and support to teachers.

This report calls for comprehensive state-level action to provide districts with resources to install and sustain an integrated multi-tiered system of support infrastructure, including enhanced professional development in classroom management and positive behavior supports, and adequate staffing to implement those systems, as well as initiatives to promote staff and student well-being, ensuring that educators are better prepared to manage student behavior effectively. More broadly, increased state-level attention is needed to address the crisis in access to mental and behavioral health services, with more programs, facilities, and trained professionals needed.

What are some implications or recommendations for policy and/ or practice?

We offer suggestions for specific actions through policy and practice to address the challenges related to student behavior. A more detailed list can be found at the end of this report.

Implications for Practice

1. Educator and administrator preparation programs in the state should review their current programs to include adequate training content in preventing and managing challenging student behaviors. Dual certification programs can help to prepare educators in general education to work effectively with students across a range of ability levels and behavioral challenges.
2. In-service educators and administrators also need professional training to effectively manage challenging student behaviors. The state, local school districts, higher education programs, and professional education organizations all have important roles to play in supporting the dissemination of evidence-based strategies, frameworks, and training for schools to manage student behaviors. There is a need for collaboration and coordination between these organizations to ensure high-quality, evidence-based practices and implementation support is being disseminated.
3. The Maine Department of Education (MDOE) could provide technical assistance and resources to support SAUs in objectively evaluating staff preparation and school capacity to address student behavior. Areas to evaluate include:
 - a. An audit of staffing levels to manage student behavior.

- b. A review of available behavior supports to determine if supports are adequate and effective.
4. Dedicated resources at the state level (MDOE) are needed to establish a state-wide Integrated Multi-Tiered System of Supports (I-MTSS) framework. A state-wide I-MTSS framework would provide an implementation structure to support school districts across the state to build and sustain effective implementation of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports.

Implications for Policy

1. Dedicated funding may be needed at the state and local levels to implement the strategies outlined for the recommended practices above (i.e., developing a coherent statewide approach or I-MTSS framework, assessing local needs and capacity, and providing technical assistance and training to educators and administrators).
2. Policy makers should review educator certification requirements across professional roles to ensure all educators are well-prepared and highly qualified to address student behavior.
 - a. At a minimum, all certification areas should require formal coursework in evidence-based universal classroom management strategies and de-escalation practices.
 - b. Funding should be allocated for educator preparation programs to develop courses in evidence-based behavioral interventions and supports across program areas.
3. School districts have different levels of capacity to support instructional and behavioral coaches in schools. The state's education funding formula (EPS) should be reviewed to ensure there is adequate funding for these roles and additional funds dedicated for equitable access to coaching supports in schools statewide.
4. State-level policy attention and funding are needed to address the state's capacity to provide access to mental and behavioral services in communities to meet the demonstrated high demand.

What methods were used to conduct this study?

This study used a combination of survey (quantitative) and interview (qualitative) research methods to explore the broad research questions listed here:

- How do Maine educators and school leaders describe their experiences with managing challenging student behavior in schools?
- What are the biggest challenges Maine school leaders face in managing challenging student behavior?
- How are student behavior incidents impacting educators and schools?
- What supports do educators and schools need to address student behavior challenges?

In spring 2024, the School Behavior Support Survey (SBSS) was distributed online to 28,000 individuals holding Maine educator certifications using staffing data from the Maine Department of Education. Between February and April 2024, a total of 3,408 educators with a

variety of professional roles, including school administrators, completed the survey. Using fixed-choice and Likert-scaled items, the survey questions explored the frequency of behavior incidents, time spent managing incidents, levels of behavior intensity, impacts on staff and students, professional development and school supports for managing student behavior, perceptions about the adequacy of those supports, and challenges or barriers that impact the management of student behavior problems. Data were analyzed to examine response frequencies and means by professional role.

In fall 2024, two focus groups were convened remotely through the Zoom platform, one with district administrators and one with school board members. The interviews were used to probe some of the survey topics in more depth and to provide administrator perspectives. A total of eight people participated (five district leaders, two school board members, and one ELL teacher) from six school districts that included both large urban and small rural districts from different regions of Maine. Each interview lasted one hour and was video and audio-recorded and transcribed. De-identified transcripts were coded and analyzed to identify salient themes across the two groups.

How robust are the findings?

Participants in the state-wide survey (3,408) were general and special educators, educational technicians, related service providers, specialists, other educational support staff, and administrators. The sample was demographically and geographically representative of Maine educators. It was clear by the immediate response to the survey and high rate of participation that many educators were interested in sharing their experiences related to challenging student behaviors in school. In addition to the survey, we conducted two focus groups with district administrators and school board members to explore questions in more depth. The feedback from those interviews confirmed the survey findings and themes.

Introduction

Amid continued and growing concern about the frequency and severity of disruptive student behavior incidents in classrooms and schools, the Maine State Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs charged the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) to conduct a research study to learn more about this phenomenon in Maine schools. MEPRI researchers at the University of Maine collaborated with Dr. Sarah Wilkinson of the University of Southern Maine and Dr. Gretchen Scheibel of the University of Kansas who were already engaged in a large state-wide survey study of Maine educators on this topic. This report presents findings from that survey along with additional focus group interview data and a broader discussion of research on challenging student behavior in schools.

Background

For years, educators have reported that addressing student behavior was one of the primary challenges they face in their work (Freeman et al., 2014). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, persistent challenging student behavior remains a serious and significant problem in over 80% of schools in the United States (National Center on Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). School leaders have reported increased student misconduct, rowdiness, disrespect, and technology misuse since students returned to school in person after the COVID-19 closures (NCES, 2022). Nationally, 87% percent of school leaders have reported that the pandemic negatively impacted students' social-emotional development and 84% reported it negatively impacted student behavior (NCES, 2022). More recently, administrators have shared increased concern about the mental health of students and adults in their buildings. Ninety-five percent of administrators have reported concerns about student mental health, 91% reported concerns about teacher mental health, and 69% reported concerns about their own mental health (NCES, 2024).

These concerns are also documented in news reports that describe what is believed to be a student behavior crisis in schools (Jimenez, 2023; Long, 2024; Silverman, 2023). This situation presents a major fiscal and policy concern for schools, as persistent challenging student behavior can overburden administrators, lead to an increase in special education referrals, contribute to over-identification of students with behavioral disorders, and fuel the ongoing educator shortage (Brunsting et al., 2024; Hurwitz et al., 2021; Lloyd et al., 2020). Additionally, persistent challenging behavior negatively impacts other critical educational outcomes, including school

climate (Thapa et al., 2013), academic achievement (Lassen et al., 2006), and educator well-being (Wang et al., 2015).

Impact on Students, Educators and Schools

School-based research has consistently reported the negative impact of challenging behavior on students, educators, and the education system. Students who exhibit persistent challenging behavior are at higher risk for poor social, academic, and post-secondary outcomes than their peers. For example, these students are more likely to experience academic failure, drop out of school, face discrimination, have negative relationships with their peers and education staff, be identified with a behavior disorder, be segregated from their peers, feel isolated or rejected by their peers, and face exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., Flannery et al., 2013; Galanaki et al., 2008; George et al., 2018; Janssens et al., 2015; Lane et al., 2008; Lassen et al., 2006; Lauer & Renk, 2013; Naser et al., 2018; Siperstein et al., 2011; Wagner & Newman, 2012). When there are students who engage in persistent challenging behavior, there are also risks for students who observe that behavior. Students who witness peers engaging in challenging behavior are more likely to experience fear, anxiety, and other negative emotions that can impact their own academic and behavioral outcomes (Janosz et al., 2008; Mori et al., 2021).

As students engage in increasing rates of challenging behavior, education staff spend more time and resources managing behavior. This can have a negative impact on an educator's work, including feelings of stress and frustration, lower self-efficacy, and frequent absences. Educators across professional roles routinely report that ongoing behavior management activities contribute to a diminished sense of self-efficacy, feelings of burnout, and intent to leave the field (Beymer et al., 2022; Brunsting et al., 2024). Another important factor for educators is the risk of experiencing injury when managing challenging behavior. News stories indicate troublesome and frequent reports of staff and student injuries in schools over the last few years (Silverman, 2023). Though physical and emotional injuries resulting from student behavior have received limited attention in behavioral research, they are likely to have a tremendous impact on the well-being of both staff and students (Aydin, 2021; Mori et al., 2021). As dissatisfaction among educators and students rises, school climate also suffers, resulting in students and teachers feeling less safe and supported and more disengaged and stressed (Charlton et al., 2021; Collie et al., 2012; LaSalle et al., 2021; La Salle et al., 2017). Further, negative school climate directly contributes to increases in low student achievement, behavior problems, and staff turnover, exacerbating the existing

problem (Charlton et al., 2021; Cohen et al., 2009; Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2015; Singla et al., 2021; Skiba et al., 2014; Thapa et al., 2013).

The Need for Effective Positive Behavior Supports

As challenging student behavior is an ongoing problem in education systems, it has led to significant and sustained behavior support efforts to address the problem using an organizational system-wide framework called a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). MTSS supports the implementation, use, and monitoring of student supports (Zhang et al., 2023). The system-wide framework, which was adopted by the field of education from the field of public health, organizes available prevention and response supports across tiers, where supports increase in intensity for portions of the population who have greater need. In this model, leaders expect about 80% of a population to be successful with only Tier 1 or universal supports; about 15% of a population is expected to need additional Tier 2 or targeted supports in addition to Tier 1; and about 5% of a population is expected to need additional Tier 3 or individualized supports in addition to Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports. This multi-tiered approach helps leaders to identify evidence-based supports that are aligned with the school system's needs, train educators to effectively implement supports, identify which students are in need of specific supports, and monitor the effectiveness of supports to improve student, educator, and school outcomes.

Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) was the first iteration of the public health system-wide framework model applied to schools in 1997. PBIS focuses on student social-emotional-behavioral well-being, and it provides a preventative framework in which there are universal behavioral expectations and supports for all students (i.e., Tier 1), targeted group interventions for students who are at risk for developing more serious behavioral concerns (i.e., Tier 2), and intensive and individualized supports for students who exhibit high rates of serious behaviors (i.e., Tier 3). Later, in 2001, response to intervention (RTI) was developed in parallel to PBIS, and it applied the same framework to supports for students with academic concerns. Although both PBIS and RTI demonstrated promising results in schools, they were separate systems in which the intersection of behavioral and academic needs often was not considered. This presented an implementation challenge as student behavior was often influenced by academic challenges, home factors, or social challenges that required targeted academic skill instruction or mental health supports to work together to address behavior.

As a result, the MTSS framework was ultimately developed as a more unified approach to combining PBIS and RTI to ensure behavioral and academic needs were considered together within the same framework. An integrated multi-tiered system of support (I-MTSS) is the most recent evolution in the field. In an I-MTSS, all student domains (i.e., academics, behavior, attendance, mental health) are incorporated into one overall framework intended to support the whole child, and interventions and supports blend practices that address intersecting student needs (e.g., reading intervention that includes behavioral supports by design). Further, I-MTSS encompasses existing evidence-based interventions to support all students in an educational setting, regardless of their areas of need or special education status.

Effective implementation of a system-wide framework to address behavior (e.g., I-MTSS, PBIS) has been associated with positive outcomes such as reduced rates of disruptive behavior, exclusionary discipline, and student referrals for special education services, as well as improved attendance, academic outcomes, and school climate (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023). However, installing and sustaining an effective system-wide framework requires education systems (i.e., school districts) to have time, financial resources, and administrative knowledge of evidence-based behavior and other supports. The lack of some of these elements is a frequently cited barrier for implementing effective system-wide frameworks. School systems routinely benefit from state or national-level implementation resources to provide district-level support and coaching (e.g., Michigan MTSS Technical Assistance Center, Northeast/Midwest/ Northwest Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Networks). These state and national implementation supports are critical to successful implementation, especially for under-resourced districts in which district leaders report limited time, financial resources, and educator knowledge, placing these districts at increased risk for higher rates of punitive and exclusionary discipline, disengagement, and students identified with behavior disorders (Lloyd et al., 2018).

To be effective, any behavior support system in schools also must positively address the range of challenging behaviors exhibited by students. Behavior is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by the intersection of student, family, classroom, school, and societal factors (Farmer et al., 2020). As such, educators must be prepared to deliver evidence-based behavioral interventions and supports and have the expertise to be able to individualize and adapt those practices according to each student's dynamic needs (Chen et al., 2020). These should have a positive focus, meaning effort should be made to instruct and encourage students to participate in

academic instruction, effectively communicate their needs, manage negative emotions, and remain engaged in academic and other school activities. Additionally, they should be implemented to prevent or redirect behavior in its early stages, or at the lowest “intensity,” before the behavior becomes severe or dangerous. A positive and systematic approach to behavior interventions and supports is critical because different intensities or types of behaviors require different responses from educators, and effective responses rely on educators having appropriate prerequisite knowledge and skills. This is a major concern, however, as few educators receive adequate training in evidence-based behavior management practices in teacher preparation programs or in-service professional development opportunities (Cooper & Scott, 2017; Freeman et al., 2014; National Center for Learning Disabilities [NCLD], 2019).

Both within and across behavior episodes, whether a behavior intensifies or defuses is dependent on staff engaging in the right responses at the right time. **Disruptive behavior** (e.g., short episodes of disruptive behavior when the student’s behavior interrupts the flow of instruction or activity, and the educator’s response to the behavior is short and focused on continuing with instruction or activity) is most effectively addressed by redirection and other universal classroom management practices. At a more intense level, **behavioral incidents** (e.g., episodes of challenging behavior when the student is not meeting behavioral expectations and the educator’s response is to stop instruction and work with the student one-on-one to get back on track and return to learning) are addressed by redirection and de-escalation strategies. When educators implement effective strategies with lower intensity behaviors, it prevents many challenging behaviors from escalating to a point where more restrictive responses (e.g., punitive or physical restraint/seclusion) are needed. Thus, it is important for schools to provide all staff with adequate training and support in universal classroom management and de-escalation strategies, as those can reduce the occurrences of more intense behaviors.

The most intense behaviors, **behavioral crises** (e.g., episodes of severe or dangerous behavior when the educator’s response is primarily focused on maintaining safety for the student, staff, and other students in the environment) are addressed with de-escalation strategies. The most severe cases, however, may require restrictive practices, such as restraint or seclusion. Though sometimes necessary, restrictive responses to student behavior should always be the last resort after less restrictive de-escalation strategies have been applied. The most critical factor when engaging in restrictive responses to behavior is that the staff who are making decisions in

the moment have the knowledge and skill to do so ethically and safely. Without this professional capacity, engaging in restrictive responses to behavior increases the risk of physical and emotional injury for both students and staff. Absent appropriate training for staff and high confidence in staff members' ability to make decisions regarding these practices, these restrictive practices (i.e., restraint, seclusion, suspension, expulsion) may ensure safety in the moment by removing the student from the school environment, but they do not address the root of the problem and do not improve student behavior in the long-term.

To understand how challenging student behavior impacts Maine educators and administrators and to determine the level of need for improved behavioral interventions and supports in Maine schools, this study investigated the experiences of educators and administrators in managing challenging student behavior across the state. The study's survey attempted to identify patterns in the rates of behavior management, negative impacts, and perceived effectiveness of behavior supports across schools. Focus group interviews with district administrators explored their experiences and efforts to manage student behaviors, perceived impacts for school staff and students, and views about what additional resources or supports they need to deal with the increased incidence and severity of challenging student behavior in schools. The data presented here can help inform future policies and initiatives at local and state levels.

Research Methods

This study included a review of the research literature on managing challenging student behaviors in K–12 schools, evidence-based strategies and frameworks for systems of student supports, and findings from prior research regarding the frequency, severity, and impacts of disruptive student behavior. The study also used a combination of survey (quantitative) and interview (qualitative) research methods to explore the broad research questions listed here:

- How do Maine educators and school leaders describe their experiences with challenging student behavior in schools and what are their biggest challenges?
- What is the cost of managing challenging student behavior in Maine schools?
- How is challenging student behavior negatively impacting educators, students, and school systems?
- What challenges to addressing student behavior are reported by school leaders?
- How effective are available behavior supports at addressing challenging student behavior?

- How are school, home, and community factors impacting persistent challenging behavior among students?

In spring 2024, the School Behavior Support Survey (SBSS) was developed and conducted online by Dr. Wilkinson and Dr. Scheibel. The survey was distributed online to 28,000 Maine educators using staffing data from the Maine Department of Education. Between February and April 2024, a total of 3,408 educators completed the survey. Participants included general and special educators, educational technicians, school administrators, and specialists across grade levels K–12. Using fixed-choice and Likert-scaled items, the survey questions explored the frequency of challenging behavior management, time spent managing challenging behavior, negative impacts of managing challenging behavior on staff and students, professional development and school supports for managing student behavior, perceptions about the effectiveness of those supports, and challenges or barriers that impact the management of student behavior problems.

Drs. Wilkinson and Scheibel analyzed the survey data to examine response frequencies and means by participants' professional roles. Monetary costs associated with behavior management were calculated using national average hourly salary estimates for professional roles. United States Bureau of Labor Statistics May 2023 National Industry-Specific Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates for the State of Maine (BLS, 2023) were used to estimate salaries for all roles except behavior specialist. The annual salary for behavior specialists was estimated using the average salary for board certified behavior analysts in the state of Maine found on ZipRecruiter (ZipRecruiter, 2025).

In fall 2024, two focus groups were convened remotely through the Zoom platform by members of this project team. The interviews were used to probe some of the survey topics in more depth and to provide a district-level perspective to the topic of managing student behavior. Participants were recruited during a presentation of educator survey findings at the Maine School Management Association's fall meeting in Augusta, Maine. A total of eight people participated (five district leaders, two school board members and one ELL teacher) in the focus groups. They represented six school districts that included both large urban and small rural districts from different regions of Maine. Each interview lasted one hour and was video and audio-recorded and transcribed. De-identified transcripts were coded and analyzed by the third and fourth co-authors to identify salient themes across the two groups.

Findings

This section presents integrated findings from both the state-wide educator survey and the two focus group interviews, organized by subtopic. In discussing the survey results, we use the general term “educators” to refer to the survey participants despite their different job roles. Findings from the administrator interviews and representative quotes are shared at the end of sections where relevant. We refer to the interview participants generally as “administrators.”

Survey Participant Demographics

The survey collected demographic information from participants including gender, race, professional role, age, and years of professional experience. We also asked what county participants worked in to ensure there was geographic representation in the survey sample. Overall, the survey sample reflects statewide demographic characteristics and diversity for educators across professional roles.

Gender and Race

Of the 3,408 educators who completed the survey, 81% identified as female and 97% identified as White. These percentages are slightly higher than those found in reports on the demographics of the Maine educator workforce, in which 76% of educators identify as female (Johnson et al., 2020) and 94% identify as White (Educate Maine, 2024).

Professional Roles

Educators across a variety of school-based roles were invited to complete the survey. Educators represented the following professional roles:

- Administrators—educators who provided administrative service across a program, school, or district (e.g., principals, assistant principals, special education directors).
- General Educators—educators who provide academic and allied arts instruction.
- Specialists/Interventionists—educators who provide targeted/specialized instruction to students (e.g., reading specialists).
- Special Education Teachers—educators who provide special education services to students with disabilities.
- Behavior Specialists—educators who provide behavior consultation and support to students exhibiting challenging behavior.
- Related Service Professionals—educators who provide related services to students with disabilities (e.g., speech language pathologists, occupational therapists).

- Educational Technicians—also known as paraeducators or paraprofessionals, these educators work under the supervision of other educators and provide instructional support and other services to students in general and special education settings.
- Other Educators—other education professionals, a category largely made up of school counselors and social workers who provided mental health support services to students.

Table 1

Professional Roles of Survey Participants

Professional Role	Percent of Respondents
Administration	4%
General Education Teacher	36%
Specialist/ Interventionist	4%
Special Education Teacher	8%
Education Technicians	33%
Behavior Specialist	2%
Related Service Provider	4%
Other	7%

Age and Years of Experience

The distribution of survey participants by age largely reflects the statewide demographics of Maine educators, which feature an older, more veteran workforce when compared to other states (Educate Maine, 2024). Previous research has shown the average age of educators in Maine is 46 years old, with fewer than 10% of educators under age 30 and most Maine educators (27%) in the age range 40–49 (Educate Maine, 2024; Johnson et al., 2020).

Table 2

Age Reported by Survey Participants

Age (in years)	Percent of Respondents
18–24	4%
25–34	17%
35–44	24%
45–54	30%
55–64	22%
65+	5%

As with age, the distribution of survey participants by years of experience largely reflects the state’s educator workforce and is consistent with previous reports. Maine educators have an average of 15 years of experience, which is comparable to the national average. Twenty-four

percent of Maine educators have less than 5 years of experience and 30% of Maine educators have more than 20 years of experience (Educate Maine, 2024; Johnson et al., 2020).

Table 3
Experience Reported by Survey Participants

Experience	Percent of Respondents
<5 years	18%
5–9 years	18%
10–19 years	28%
20–29 years	25%
30+ years	12%

Geography

Survey respondents were proportionately distributed across the state based on the counties in which they were employed. The three Maine counties with the largest number of educators are Cumberland, York, and Penobscot; the three Maine counties with the fewest number of educators are Piscataquis, Lincoln, and Franklin (Educate Maine, 2024; Johnson et al., 2020).

Table 4
County of Employment Reported by Survey Participants

County	Percent of Respondents
Cumberland	21%
York	15%
Penobscot	11%
Kennebec	9%
Androscoggin	8%
Oxford	6%
Hancock	5%
Aroostook	5%
Somerset	3%
Knox	3%
Sagadahoc	3%
Washington	3%
Franklin	3%
Lincoln	2%
Waldo	2%
Piscataquis	1%

Frequency, Duration and Level of Challenging Behavior

In this section, we present data and discuss broad findings from the survey and interviews related to the duration and frequency of challenging student behaviors in schools. Table 5 includes participants' estimates of how much time each behavior episode typically lasts and how often it occurs. We discuss these findings by level of behavior in more depth. Participants gave consistent estimates of the duration and frequency for the less severe category of disruptive behavior and gave more widely varying estimates for the more severe categories of behavior incidents and behavior crises. Special educators reported managing episodes of behavior crises weekly, while administrators, general educators, and interventionists estimated managing behavior crises less often.

Table 5

Behavior Management Episode Duration and Frequency Estimates by Professional Role

	Disruptive Behavior	Behavior Incidents	Behavior Crises
Administration	12 min/Daily	40 min/Daily	35 min/Occasionally
General Ed Teacher	10 min/Daily	28 min/Daily	26 min/Occasionally
Specialist/ Interventionist	11 min/Daily	29 min/Daily	44 min/Occasionally
Special Ed Teacher	10 min/Daily	30 min/Daily	41 min/Weekly
Education Technicians	11 min/Daily	30 min/Daily	36 min/Weekly
Behavior Specialist	10 min/Daily	33 min/Daily	43 min/Weekly
Related Service Provider	11 min/Daily	23 min/Weekly	40 min/Weekly
Other	11 min/Daily	29 min/Weekly	41min/Weekly

Disruptive Behavior

Disruptive behavior was defined as short episodes of disruptive behavior when the student's behavior interrupts the flow of instruction or activity, and the adult's response to the behavior is short and focused on continuing with the instruction or activity. Ninety-six percent of educators reported they had been managing disruptive behavior since the beginning of the school year. General educators, special educators, and behavior specialists managed the most disruptive behavior, as over 60% of respondents in these professional roles reported managing disruptive behavior multiple times a day and over 80% of respondents reported managing this behavior daily or multiple times a day. Related service professionals (e.g., occupational therapists, speech language pathologists) reported experiencing the least amount of disruptive behavior; only 36% of these educators reported managing disruptive behavior multiple times a day and 61% reported managing this behavior daily or multiple times a day. Each episode of disruptive behavior was

reported to last between 10–12 minutes. Administrators reported slightly more time spent managing disruptive behavior, and general educators and specialists reported spending slightly less time. See Table 1A in Appendix C for detailed reporting of behavior management frequency by professional roles.

Behavior Incidents

Behavior incidents were defined as episodes of challenging behavior when the student is not meeting behavioral expectations and the adult’s response to the behavior is to stop instruction and work one-on-one with the student to get back on track and return to learning. When asked about behavior incidents, 86% of educators reported having managed a behavior incident, and 44% of these respondents reporting managing this form of behavior multiple times a day or daily. Across professional roles, educators reported spending 22–40 minutes ($M = 29$ minutes) per behavior episode and most often reported they managed this type of behavior 1–2 times weekly. Administrators spent the most time managing behavior incidents ($M = 40$ minutes/episode, daily). Most respondents in general and special educational roles reported approximately 30 minutes/episode were spent managing behavior incidents at least daily, with the exception of related service providers and other educational staff who reported weekly management of these behaviors.

Behavior Crises

Behavior crises were defined as episodes of severe or dangerous behavior when the adult’s response is primarily focused on maintaining safety for the student, staff, and other students in the environment. Behavior crises were reported to be managed by 52% of survey respondents, indicating over half of the educators we surveyed have managed a behavior where safety was the main concern at least one time during the 2023–2024 school year. A majority (67%) of all educators reported managing this type of behavior at least occasionally. Daily management of behavior crises is common; 19% of administrators, 14% of general educators, 12% of behavior specialists, 12% of educational technicians, and 11% of special education teachers manage behavior crises multiple times a day. Special education support staff reported managing behavior crises most often with 60% of behavior specialists and 55% of related service providers managing a behavior crisis at least 3–5 times per week. Educational technicians and special educators reported managing behavioral crises multiple times a day and more often than

any other role. A substantial portion of special educators (20%) and educational technicians (32%) reported managing crises at least daily.

Like behavior incidents, episodes of behavior crises take up a considerable amount of time. Special education staff spend the most amount of time managing behavior crises, with behavior specialists, educational technicians, related service providers, and special education teachers spending approximately 40 minutes/episode weekly. Of note, a substantial number of school administrators (25%) reported spending an average of 59 minutes/episode weekly. General educators also spend a significant portion of time attending to behavior crises. Thirty-five percent of general education respondents reported managing this form of behavior at least weekly, and they reported spending between 28 and 40 minutes per episode.

Administrators' Perspectives on Frequency and Severity

In the two focus group interviews we conducted with district administrators and school board members, there was strong agreement that the frequency and severity of challenging student behavior had increased in recent years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions in education. Administrators said that the larger educator survey results validated what they have observed in their schools. One person commented, "It's very problematic and very intense." Another administrator said, "[It's not just] the number, but those behaviors are more abrupt, are more dangerous, more severe." A school board member shared, "I have two kids at the high school, and I see a huge, I've seen a huge uptick in behaviors in general, really, since Covid." That participant also noted, "We do see an increase in school suspensions."

Beyond classrooms and school hallways, administrators described challenges related to student behavior and safety on school buses, where there is often a lack of adult supervision beyond the bus driver.

I would add that the school buses are a really big problem ... we should consider funding, which is always hard, or even try to drum up some sort of a volunteer group of, you know, parents or grandparents, however, we meet our requirements and our due diligence on that. But we need extra adults on school buses.

Administrators also described how they are seeing more challenging behaviors in lower grades or with younger children than they had before. One participant shared, "It's like it's pushed down. The intensity is in the lower grades. It has become more and more in the lower grades." Another administrator said, "We have a number of kindergarten students that are taking

a lot of time and resources. And it's not the typical six weeks of school entry. This is going to be all year.”

Salary and Time Costs for Management of Student Behavior

We used national and state data on wages for professional educator roles to estimate costs in terms of time and salary spent on educators addressing challenging student behavior episodes. This calculation helps to illustrate the amount of paid personnel time lost and financial costs for schools related to managing student behaviors. Table 6 summarizes the estimated annual salary and time costs by educator roles. The data show that educators and administrators are spending between 12–20% of their time annually on managing student behaviors, representing roughly 6–11% of their annual salary—both significant portions of personnel time and salaries.

Table 6
Behavior Management Cost Estimates by Professional Role

Role	Total Annual Behavior Cost	Annual Salary %	Total Annual Time Cost Hour/Year	Annual Time %
Administration	\$ 15,365.51	11%	241	20%
Gen Ed Teacher	\$ 7,234.45	8%	177	15%
Specialist/ Interventionist	\$ 9,577.79	8%	188	16%
Special Ed Teacher	\$ 9,708.90	11%	243	20%
Education Technicians	\$ 6,673.98	11%	239	20%
Behavior Specialist	\$ 14,537.78	12%	257	22%
Related Service Provider	\$ 7,923.69	6%	142	12%
Other	\$ 7,823.26	7%	156	13%

Annual Salary Cost of Student Behavior Management

The total estimated annual salary cost associated with time spent on management of student behavior ranged from \$6,673.98 to \$15,365.51 per year. School administrator and behavior specialist salaries make up the largest monetary expenditure in student behavior, though these roles have significantly higher salaries than other roles that spend a substantial portion of time managing student behavior. Proportionally, a consistent amount of annual salary is spent on special education teachers and educational technicians managing student behavior.

Total Annual Time Cost of Student Behavior Management

The total estimated annual time cost of managing student behavior ranged from 142 to 257 hours per year (see Table 6 above). Special education teachers and behavior specialists spent the most amount of time managing behavior, followed closely by school administrators and

educational technicians. These professional roles spend roughly 20% of the school year managing student behavior, a finding that is again notable for the inclusion of school administrators in this group. Of further note, general education teachers and specialists/interventionists (e.g., reading teachers) spent approximately 15% of the school year managing some form of student behavior, a substantial time investment for professional roles dedicated to providing academic instruction.

Annual Time Cost Across Behavior Intensities and Professional Roles

Behavior incidents (i.e., episodes of challenging behavior that require direct and sustained focus on an individual student) make up the largest portion of time spent by educators. School administrators spent 31.5 more hours a year on these behaviors than behavior specialists. Special education teachers spent the most amount of time managing behavior of all intensities, including over 60 hours a year managing behavioral crises. General education teachers spent almost the same amount of time as special education teachers managing disruptive behaviors and behavior incidents, but they spent substantially less time managing behavior crises. Special education and other non-academic specialized staff (i.e., other educators) spent 40–50 hours more per year managing behavior crises than their administration and general education peers. See Table 2A in Appendix C for detailed annual time costs across professional role.

Administrators' Perspectives on Time Costs

Administrators in the focus group interviews said that dealing with problematic student behaviors is taking much more time for educators and for administrators. They described both educators and administrators feeling frustrated about the amount of time focused on this problem, leaving little or no time for other important work and responsibilities.

I don't think we're at a spot where people are struggling to a point where they're just overwhelmed and not able to manage a class ... [However] they're not doing what they thought they were going to do. And they're spending all their time responding and so helping them have strategies. But it's definitely a factor.”

District administrators agreed that the increased frequency and severity of challenging student behaviors has had a negative impact on principals' workload and time. One administrator explained, “Our principals are no longer being instructional leaders. They are literally sitting outside classrooms, sitting inside classrooms, sitting out within a safe space with a child all day long.” Another administrator commented, “It just falls on the principal's shoulder, and then you

also want the principal to be in charge of instruction, right?” And a third said, “We have two principals, they’re, all day long are managing student behaviors, not in the special education program...It is entirely general ed settings, and almost all kindergarten, first grade.”

Students Engaging in Challenging Behavior

On the survey, educators were asked to estimate the number of students they work with who exhibit challenging behavior. Educators reported managing different forms of behavior from multiple students, though they reported higher rates of students exhibiting disruptive behavior ($M = 15$ students) and behavior incidents ($M = 10$) than behavior crises ($M = 6$). Notably, educators across professional roles reported managing behavior from both general and special education students across all three levels of behavior. Table 7 shows some differences in behaviors between general education and special education student groups. At the lowest level of severity (i.e., disruptive behavior), educators estimated that a larger portion of general education students were engaging in disruptive behavior compared with special education students. At the highest level of severity (i.e., behavior crises), educators estimated that a higher portion of special education students were involved than were general education students.

Table 7

Proportion of General and Special Education Students Exhibiting Challenging Behavior

	Disruptive Behavior		Behavior Incidents		Behavior Crises	
	GES	SES	GES	SES	GES	SES
Administration	50%	50%	48%	52%	48%	52%
General Ed Teacher	64%	36%	59%	41%	53%	47%
Specialist/Interventionist	63%	37%	58%	42%	49%	51%
Special Ed Teacher	43%	57%	35%	65%	27%	73%
Education Technician I	49%	51%	43%	57%	39%	61%
Education Technician II	53%	47%	46%	54%	41%	59%
Education Technician III	53%	47%	46%	54%	38%	62%
Behavior Specialist	48%	52%	46%	54%	40%	60%
Related Service Provider	37%	63%	33%	67%	31%	69%
Other	54%	46%	50%	50%	43%	57%
Total	55%	45%	49%	51%	42%	58%

Note. GES = General Education Student, SES = Special Education Student.

Negative Impacts of Challenging Behavior

The survey asked educators to estimate the negative impacts of student behavior on factors likely to impact overall school climate. Negative impacts were measured on a 5-point

Likert scale (1 = No Impact, 2 = Some Impact, 3 = Inconsistent Impact, 4 = Moderate Impact, 5 = Strong Impact). Educators felt the area of most negative impact from disruptive behaviors was disruption to the learning environment. More severe behaviors were perceived to have stronger negative impacts than less severe behaviors. Another major negative impact of concern is the large percentage of educators who reported minor and major physical injuries or emotional stress endured due to student behavior. Similarly, a large portion of educators reported that students engaging in disruptive behaviors and student bystanders were also experiencing physical injuries, and that student bystanders often suffer emotional stress after witnessing behavior episodes.

Disruption to the Learning Environment

Behavior across levels of intensity was found to have the strongest negative impact on disruption to the learning environment. Educators rated the impact of challenging behavior on disruption to the learning environment to be moderate. Behavioral crises were noted to have a stronger impact than disruptive behavior or behavioral incidents.

A school board member, parent and former teacher shared,

If you're the only person in the room and you have someone that is not going to stop. Everybody else is losing out ... I was a teacher for 40 years and disruption is time consuming and hard on the other students.

Increased Staff Frustration and Reluctance to Perform Job Duties

Educators reported a moderate impact of challenging behavior on staff frustration and reluctance to perform their job duties. Behavioral crises were reported to have a stronger impact on these factors than disruptive behavior and behavior incidents.

In the focus group interviews, some administrators described how educators sometimes feel stressed, frustrated, or burned out from the demanding experience of coping with challenging behaviors. In some cases, educators leave the school before the end of the school day. One administrator shared, "All day long we have teachers leaving partway through the day like, 'I can't do this anymore. I'm leaving.' Just like, getting to the point where they just walk away. We were like, 'who's gonna cover the room?'"

Negative Student Impression of the Student Engaging in Behavior

Educators gave inconsistent reports about the impact a student's challenging behavior may have on impressions other students might form about the student engaging in the behavior. Behavior incidents and behavioral crises were reported to have a stronger negative impact than

disruptive behavior on relationships between students and the impressions student bystanders develop about students who engage in challenging behavior.

Negative Staff Impression of the Student Engaging in Behavior

Educators also gave inconsistent reports about the impact that a student's challenging behavior may have on staff impressions toward the student engaging in the behavior. Behavior incidents and behavioral crises were reported to have a stronger impact than disruptive behavior on the negative impressions staff may form about students who engage in disruptive behavior.

Staff Absences or Vacancies

Educators reported that challenging behavior had an inconsistent impact on staff absences or vacancies. Behavioral crises were reported to have a slightly stronger impact than disruptive behavior and behavior incidents.

In the focus groups, administrators acknowledged that they were already struggling with staffing shortages and those shortages became worse during the recent pandemic. They also shared that growing public awareness about disruptive student behavior in classrooms has had a negative impact on their ability to attract and fill vacant positions in some schools.

Hiring and Retention Impacts

Administrators feel there is a direct link between the conditions of teaching within schools and the level of interest in pursuing teaching jobs and staying in those jobs. As student behavior becomes more of a problem and people hear about how much time educators must spend addressing these behaviors, the interruptions in instruction and learning during the day, and the injuries and stress educators experience while trying to help students, many people are discouraged from pursuing a career in PK–12 education. One administrator shared, “We're going to lose staff because our behaviors are so paramount. I mean, they're so acute.”

An administrator explained that if schools get a reputation for having a high incidence of disruptive behaviors, it discourages candidates from applying for jobs in that school. “Reputation is a big thing, I think, and misrepresentation. I mean the idea that things are horrible in a particular school makes the hiring [challenging].” An administrator described the negative impacts affecting their teacher retention: “We had a very high retention rate for staff here until the last couple of years. And we're losing ... staff within three to eight years of teaching are leaving, and they're leaving the profession entirely.” Another administrator felt there was a

bigger negative impact on turnover of educational technicians and principals. One administrator described how principals and some district administrators are feeling:

And I do feel that the elementary school is in that predicament because they're in crisis mode constantly. Yes, we're trying to be proactive, but we can't get there, because every day we're met with this new challenge. And then we spend, you know, trying to fix it all day, and then we come back the next day. We're exhausted.

Safety: Physical and Emotional Injuries Due to Challenging Behavior.

A significant portion of educators reported that they or another staff member in their school had received minor or major physical injuries because of dealing with a student behavior incident. Sixteen percent of educators reported a major physical injury, meaning a staff member sought medical care outside of school (e.g., urgent care or medical office) due to a behavior incident and 23% of respondents reported experiencing a major physical injury due to a behavior crisis. Over 30% of educators reported minor physical injuries, meaning medical care was provided in school (e.g., at the nurse's office), due to a behavior incident, and over 40% reported a minor physical injury due to a behavior crisis. Similarly, over 30% of educators reported emotional stress occurred after a behavior incident and over 40% reported experiencing emotional stress after a behavior crisis.

Though the reported student injury rate is lower than the educator injury rate, students have also endured injury due to challenging behavior. Thirty percent of educators reported that a student who engaged in a behavior incident in their school experienced minor physical injuries, 5% reported a student experienced major physical injuries, and 30% reported a student experienced emotional stress after engaging in a behavior incident. Similarly, 37% of respondents reported that a student in their school who engaged in a behavior crisis experienced minor physical injuries, 6% reported a student experienced major physical injuries, and 38% reported a student experienced emotional stress after experiencing a behavior crisis.

Student bystanders who are in proximity to behavior episodes were also likely to experience injury or emotional stress after witnessing a behavior episode. Thirty-three percent of respondents reported that student bystanders experienced minor physical injuries, 5% reported student bystanders experienced major physical injuries, and 34% reported student bystanders experienced emotional stress after witnessing a behavior incident.

In the administrator interviews, one participant described how educators had brought a class action grievance forward related to concerns about educators' safety in the classroom given the increased problem of challenging student behaviors. Another administrator said, "Staff should feel comfortable and safe coming to work, and they don't sometimes." Administrators primarily focused on the limitations of current policies to enable school staff to control some behaviors. We describe those views later in relation to policy changes they would like to see.

Other administrators described the harmful psychological effects that behavioral episodes can have on other students who are bystanders.

We're managing so many phone calls with other parents about the trauma their little five-year-olds and six-year-olds are experiencing because they have to leave a room while it gets destroyed, while we're trying to manage the student that's in the space and keep everyone's dignity in place.

Administrators' Perception of Challenges

In the focus group interviews, administrators cited several factors that have led to an increased focus on dealing with problematic student behaviors in schools, as well as other factors that make it harder for schools to cope with this challenge.

Administrators described a growing problem with behavior issues in schools, citing the increasing number of students engaging in challenging behaviors and the increasing severity of those behaviors. As one administrator put it, "There's a small number of students that are consuming a lot of time and resources, and that small number is much greater than it used to be." Another administrator noted the number of children in special education has increased overall.

What we're seeing is that there's a couple of factors that seem to be things that are making it more challenging within this area. One is a higher special education population and a [second factor is a] higher special education population that appears to have higher needs than has traditionally been served.

Another factor they cited was the ongoing staffing shortages schools have experienced, resulting in staffing ratios that may not be adequate to manage student behaviors. The lack of special education teachers in particular means more general education teachers are on their own to cope with behaviors in their classrooms. "And so, classroom teachers that would have typically had a student dealing with this type of behavior, not in their classroom, are finding it more likely to be in their classroom."

Administrators also described a lack of space in day programs where students with more severe behavior support needs have traditionally been placed. Those programs have higher demands and fewer spaces available, so teachers are increasingly called on to cope with these behaviors in the school. One administrator explained, “We have the Bangor regional program. And then we also have Stillwater Academy locally, and they both have wait lists that are very long.” In addition, the state’s transition to serving pre-kindergarten aged children within districts rather than by Child Development Services (CDS) has also placed more burden on schools to provide adequate services. One administrator said, “I’m also maintaining behaviors in district with no intent of sending to the day treatment program that I did not see five years ago.” Another administrator explained,

I don't know that it's fewer organizations or if they are feeling more demand on their seats than having the inability to take more seats. I'm not sure which factor it is. But we started this year with a decent number of kids that were slated for out-of-district placements and the out-of-district organization canceled them at the last minute. And these were kids that were coming out of like a CDS program and had early intervention. So they were, you know, on track for that. And they started instead at one of our neighborhood schools in kindergarten.

Another factor presenting serious challenges for schools is a lack of mental health services in communities that can provide appropriate and timely help to students. Administrators noted that families often have few options other than taking their child to the local emergency room only to have them discharged without any services or placement in a mental health treatment facility. Students with serious mental health problems or in a state of mental health crisis are then back in school without having had services to address their problems. One administrator said, “For me, challenge number one is that we have a lot of students whose parents have sought mental health support from the local hospitals and are denied.” They summed up the situation: “There's a failing mental health system that is then placing all the pressure on schools, and we are not allowed to tell children not to come to school.”

Finally, administrators described how state regulations on the use of restraint and seclusion for children in school can seriously limit how they are able to respond even in situations with severe behavioral crises.

We had nine dangerous student behavior reports on one day that were put on a principal's desk because you have conflicting rules [regarding the use of restraint and seclusion]. So you have all the rules around Pre-K to [grade] five. You know, almost no suspensions, no

sending kids home, no amended school days. On and on and on. No missing recess. We can keep going on. And no touching. Allow the room to be completely destroyed. Move the kids out [of the classroom].

Policies and regulations also require schools to complete paperwork to report incidents and responses, which can take considerable time. “We have staff being encouraged to complete their dangerous student behavior paperwork in order to get enough paperwork to start creating a chain of data that can go up to the state.”

Perceived Effectiveness of Behavior Supports

The survey defined “behavior supports” as frameworks, practices, supports, or professional development aimed at preventing, managing, or reducing challenging behavior. The survey measured the perceived effectiveness of different behavior supports within categories of their intended purpose (i.e., preventative, management, and reduction) using descriptions of common behavior supports (e.g., posted classroom expectations, individual reward systems). A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the effectiveness of each support (1 = Not Effective, 2 = Somewhat Effective, 3 = Inconsistently Effective, 4 = Moderately Effective, 5 = Effective). See Tables 3A, 4A, and 5A in Appendix C for detailed results across behavior supports. Overall, educators rated the supports of instruction on behavior expectations (class or individual level) and revising a student’s behavior plan, as the most effective support strategies for preventing, reducing, or managing challenging behavior in their schools. They rated school-wide reward systems, sending students home, and suspensions as the least effective support strategies.

Preventative Behavior Supports

Educators rated preventative behavior supports, strategies intended to prevent the occurrence of challenging behavior, as inconsistently effective. Class-wide and individual student instruction of behavioral expectations were rated as more effective than other preventative supports and school-wide reward systems were rated the least effective preventative support.

Behavior Management Supports

Behavior management supports are provided during behavioral episodes to address the behavior safely and efficiently. Educators rated these supports to be inconsistently effective. Having other adults available to respond and help manage the behavior was rated to be the most effective of these supports and sending the student home was rated to be the least effective.

Behavior Reduction Supports

Supports intended to reduce the frequency of future behavior episodes (i.e., behavior reduction supports) were rated to be the least effective of all behavior supports. Meeting with a team to revise a student's behavior plan was rated as the most effective of these supports, and out of school suspension was rated as the least effective.

Overall Effectiveness of Behavior Supports

Educators were asked to rate the overall effectiveness of available behavior supports to achieving behavior related outcomes. Respondents rated available behavior supports to be slightly to inconsistently effective at reducing disruption to the learning environment ($M = 2.75$), behavior incidents ($M = 2.70$), and behavioral crises ($M = 2.80$). Further, they rated available behavior supports to be slightly to inconsistently effective at keeping staff safe ($M = 3.23$), and inconsistently to moderately effective at keeping the student engaging in the behavior safe ($M = 3.49$) and keeping other students safe ($M = 3.43$).

Administrators' Views on School and District Strategies

Administrators described various strategies their schools and districts have implemented recently to prevent, reduce, and/or manage challenging student behaviors. Though they felt some of these efforts were having limited positive impacts, they agreed with the educator survey findings that many strategies are not working. They emphasized their districts were struggling given that behavior challenges occur multiple times per day in schools. One administrator put it this way: "We should be able to manage this and we can't. And we're trying every single thing we can possibly come up with to follow the law. We can't send them home."

One strategy administrators described implementing in their districts was adding additional staff to assist educators and principals. One administrator said, "We added [full-time] culture coordinators at each of the schools this year, that really owns sort of proactive [approach] and, when necessary, reactive culture pieces." A school board member added,

I've heard positive things from at least one elementary school in that term. It's an extra individual who is not in the teacher. But who can move around more, [reduce] the burden on the principal to move around and deal with that and the other kinds of things that principals have to deal with, particularly at the elementary level.

Administrators described how their systems added social workers to assist with students. "We have a social worker as well. We just hired one for last year, it was our first year, and she

can't believe what we're dealing with in the schools, and she's like, 'This should not be happening in schools.'" Another participant commented, "We are doing a lot of family engagement and a lot of training opportunities and learning opportunities for families."

Another administrator shared,

We have a social worker in every single building, full time, more than one in the middle school and the high school ... We are doing more home visits in order to try to access these families. We have our social workers going on doing home visits.

One district has a high school teacher with administrative certification and experience working in a special purpose private school who has been assigned to help part-time in the elementary school to support the principal with student behavior management. Some districts have also implemented school- or district-wide systems, including PBIS or MTSS, and partnering with initiatives offered through the Maine Department of Education (MDOE).

One larger district using these system-wide frameworks has also implemented a restorative justice approach at the elementary grade level and feels it is working well. An administrator described this approach, "So students can have and receive a consequence for misbehavior and there can be a restorative justice process and a community healing process that takes place." Another administrator in the district shared, "We're working on it, using restorative justice in circles and of that sort actively, having in the elementary school, something that seemed to work very well."

That same district also supports students' social-emotional learning and development through the practice of morning meeting discussions in elementary grade classrooms, through the program Second Step in middle grades, and through a student advisory system in high school to foster school-wide connections and community.

We have SEL programs like morning meeting or Second Step at the elementary level as a way to have community building early on at our middle schools ... We have a crew or an advisory structure at all of them, and at the high school level ... community building and team building on that.

Another district described pairing elementary school students with high school buddies to promote similar connections and a positive classroom culture. "We're trying lots of things at the elementary schools, including working with our high school buddies and things like that."

However, the same administrator admitted their district is struggling to find strategies that really reduce behavior problems, saying, “We can't find anything with traction.”

An administrator described scheduling time for fun activities for middle- and secondary-level students to interact socially and has seen benefits from this strategy.

A lot of recreating, a lot of in person, community, school community things where, you know, they have to interact with each other. It's fun. It's often a pause from typical academics, unfortunately, but it is reconnecting students and helping them with their social skills. We added the fish philosophy for staff two years ago, and now the fish philosophy for students in the middle school, which is a great age-appropriate thing, and they're just eating it up. And it's bringing pride, it's bringing skills in social interaction.

One administrator described an effort at the high school level to reduce truancy and behavior problems. “At our high school, we've created a maker space where students can go in, and it's very tech oriented, that's helped with truancy and some students with behavior.”

Some districts are creating district-wide committees with broad stakeholder membership to look at the student behavior problem and assess needs and strategies. This work also involves increasing the level of awareness, information, and training to district personnel.

We just convened a Student and Staff Safety Committee particularly focused on responding to student behavior concerns. It's supposed to be both proactive and reactive. So, analyzing what we've already put in place, what we're currently putting in place and what else we can do while also educating our staff. It has board members and staff members of different roles working with administration to educate them about the laws. So that we can be sure that in those conversations we're on the same page. There's a lot of misconceptions that we had to work through.

A larger district was using technology to allow bus drivers to provide feedback on how students were behaving on the school bus and extending their professional development to bus drivers.

For elementary school [students], it does seem to be having a bit of a positive impact where they have similar language. Kids know the expectations. We did a better job of rolling it out, but just having that common language has helped quite a bit.

Administrators agreed that there is a need to examine policies and practices related to managing behaviors across schools in their districts. One school board member who has children attending the district described that her motivation for getting involved on the school board was to seek some answers regarding evidence of the behavior problems in some of the district's

schools. Another administrator from that district said there is a need to develop more consistent expectations for student behavior across the district. An administrator in a different district concluded, “We really need better discipline I think as a whole, across our schools, because kids are kids and it’s developmentally appropriate for them to push the bounds. And where they don't find a boundary, they're going to keep pushing.”

Though administrators did not describe many changes in their student discipline codes or other policies related to managing disruptive behaviors, one larger district did explain they are making more efforts to collect and analyze discipline data within district to examine practices and areas where they might need to modify policies. They were finding the use of system-wide data very helpful.

There have been various responses to discipline in different ways. And one thing we do have is, I believe, tomorrow's board meeting, saying the number of [students with high] absenteeism, the number of suspensions, that kind of data is being maintained monthly, so that we can now see a trend one way or the other, because that's been an issue. If we've totally relied on anecdotal information, and also by being able to understand it by school grade level, I mean, that's a huge difference. So it's a lot more data.

Professional Development Related to Addressing Challenging Behavior

In the survey, educators were asked if they had received professional development in the last three years on a range of topics related to behavior supports. Less than a third of respondents indicated they had received professional development related to classroom management. Less than a quarter of respondents indicated they have received professional development related to specific behavior interventions. The most popular topic reported by educators was PBIS (36%) and trauma informed care (31%). Eight percent of respondents reported never having received professional development on any of the topics listed. Educational technicians reported lower rates of professional development than other educators, despite managing higher rates of behavior across more severe intensities than most other educators. See Tables 6A and 7A in Appendix C for detailed findings on professional development across professional roles.

Administrators’ Perspectives on Professional Development

In the focus group interviews, administrators described the tension between needing to provide adequate professional training to staff to more effectively and equitably handle student behavioral problems, and the need to also find time to provide training and instructional leadership in academic areas.

Participants described areas of professional development their districts are providing to staff to support behavior management, and also report that this topic has pushed aside nearly all other types of training educators need for effective instruction. “All of our professional development is focusing on behavior management, restorative practices, etc., etc. Counseling in the school. We are not focusing on good teaching. We are not focusing on academics.” Another administrator described holding evening sessions for educators to work with a board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA) to identify what support systems they need to implement and get trained on. “They're coming. I'm feeding them. I'm paying them. And they're coming from 3 to 7 pm. It's the only time we can do it, because we can't take them out of the classroom.”

One negative consequence of the intensive focus on student behavior is that newer teachers feel less supported professionally and are less able to keep other students focused on learning while they deal with behavior episodes in the classroom.

We have a lot of new teachers but they're not engaged anymore, because we're not teaching teachers how to teach academics anymore, we're teaching them how to manage behaviors. So, then these students, who are not engaged anymore, we're finding are acting out because the teachers are busy dealing with behaviors.

An administrator listed the many areas of training related to behavior management that one district offers educators: “We have safety care training. We have therapeutic crisis intervention and support training ... We have school-wide expectations and behaviors and regulated classroom [training].”

One administrator from a larger district felt that implicit bias may be a factor that affects how educators view students and respond to behavior episodes in different ways, sometimes looking at a behavior as acceptable for certain groups of students and unacceptable for other groups. That administrator said the district has examined their discipline data and found that a disproportionate number of students of color may have received more serious disciplinary actions than their White peers for similar behaviors. The administrator described the district's efforts to engage in efforts to promote equity through both professional development and examination of student discipline data.

The implicit bias factor plays into it. And it becomes about a student being challenging. And we hear that. And we see that. And we see that when we look at our suspension data, for example, and we look at our discipline data, and it's disproportionate in terms of who's receiving those consequences.

Administrators voiced frustration that nearly all their professional development time is devoted solely to behavioral topics rather than to academics. They also reported that administrators' meetings and professional time is also more narrowly focused on managing behavior problems in schools. "I'm a superintendent in our admin meetings. We do not talk about academics. We talk about behavior, and that's very alarming."

Perceived Impact of School and Home/Community Factors on Challenging Behavior

In the survey, educators were asked to rate the overall impact of school and home/community factors (e.g., lack of staff, stress at home) that may be contributing to the increase in the frequency and persistence of challenging behavior in schools. Impacts were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = No Impact, 2 = Some Impact, 3 = Inconsistent Impact, 4 = Moderate Impact, 5 = Strong Impact).

Educators reported an inconsistent to moderate impact on persistent behavior from most of the measured school factors, including limited access to school staff with behavior ($M = 3.43$) or mental health ($M = 3.41$) expertise, limited time to train educational technicians ($M = 3.48$) and ongoing school staff absences and vacancies ($M = 3.48$). State education policy changes related to manifestation determination and restraint and seclusion were reported to have some to inconsistent impact on persistent behavior ($M = 2.88$).

Educators reported home and community factors had slightly stronger impacts on student behavior. They reported students experiencing significant stress at home to have a moderate to strong impact ($M = 4.41$) and limited collaboration between home and school as to have an inconsistent to moderate impact ($M = 3.82$) on persistent challenging behavior. Educators also reported that students and families experiencing limited connection to their community ($M = 3.50$), housing insecurity ($M = 3.48$), and food insecurity ($M = 3.57$) also had moderate impacts on student behavior.

Administrators' Perspectives on Home Factors

Administrators described several factors related to a student's home circumstances or background experiences that may contribute to behavior problems. One administrator said, "Right now, schools need resources and help. But that's not going to fix the problem. The families need help right now." Two administrators explained,

I don't think we're adequately addressing the root cause. So, kids act out for a reason. Nobody goes to school and says, "You know what? I'm going to really try not to learn today." No third grader says that, and yet that's what happens. So, there's an underlying

reason for a student struggling academically. And this is their way of coping with frustration. A student having, you know, outside challenges in their life, and they go to school, but they're not able to access it because of all of the other challenges that they're dealing with, and they need counseling and support.

It's different things that are creating challenges. But there are probably patterns that we are seeing across school systems that could help. And I know one of the patterns is reducing screen time. I know one of the patterns is helping parents understand boundaries, consequences for behavior that are appropriate for age. Routines. And then, of course, healthy food and healthy environments. In our region we have a little bit of an issue with cannabis being widely used in the home near children and in cars with children. So that's impacting brain development that we don't have a lot of research on that yet, but we're pretty sure we're seeing evidence of it in schools.

Administrators acknowledged that some students have basic needs that are not being met, and schools are increasingly stepping into the void to provide social services, food, transportation, clothing and other supports. This puts a time and financial burden on schools. Another administrator explained, “We have our social workers going and doing home visits. We are changing times. We are providing transportation. We're providing food. We are providing childcare. We are going in different locations all over the place.” Administrators emphasized that expectations for schools have grown so broad that a recalibration is needed.

Putting more and more kids in schools at earlier and earlier ages is not going to solve the problem. We have to, somehow, in our communities get back to community, and getting back to community means helping us understand what our role is. We think about how to create services and resources to enable that we're working with our towns and our town offices to try to come up with creative strategies.

Administrators explained how parents' reliance on technology to manage their children's behavior at home has limited the opportunities for young children to learn how to manage or self-regulate their emotions and behavior prior to entering public school. This means that educators must start with basic training to help build skills that used to be in place for most students entering kindergarten. One administrator shared,

Some of our kindergarten students are coming in and things that would normally work. We can't even co-regulate with them because they haven't even experienced that. So usually, if a student has some experience, you can like co-regulate, then build some strategies for them to apply regulation independently or with prompts. And they are not. It's like the only thing they've ever done is look at a screen to regulate and we're being told [by the parents] “Just give them an iPad and they'll settle down.” . . . That's not a

strategy a public school can use. We need to help them build strategies. They never learned from [age] zero to five.

This administrator had a suggestion for parents: “Pay attention to your child, regulate with your child, interact with your child.”

An area of frustration for some administrators and districts was the lack of parental cooperation and support in helping students learn appropriate behaviors or meeting their special needs. Efforts to contact parents or ask for their help has little impact. In some cases, for example where parents refuse to teach their children toileting skills, the lack of parental action can reach the point of child neglect and place a huge burden on schools. One administrator asked, “How do we get these parents to teach their children to use the restroom?” Others shared,

The amount of demands being placed on anybody in the school. One example that I can think of is toileting issues. I mean, we are Pre-K. Students are coming in and they are in diapers, and we can't say, “No. Sorry. You have to be potty trained in order to come to school.”

We had a young child. We're having a hard time on the bus. It was a Pre-K child, and we provide transportation. And we tried the seatbelt. We tried the five-point harness. We tried sitting the adult, a big adult next to the child. Nothing works. Screaming, crying, undoing everything, jumping up and down. I mean, like out of control. I've never seen anything like it from a four-year-old. And the conversation at home was, “Oh, that's how it is all the time in our car. Why don't you just duct tape him?” And I'm like, “Yeah, no, we can't do that. So what do you do when he's like this in your car?” [parent replies] “Oh, we just don't buckle him.”

An administrator summed up the shift of parental responsibilities to schools in recent years: “We've taken every responsibility from parents away, and we're doing them at the schools.”

Students may also come from other cultures that have different attitudes about appropriate behavior for children. One school board member said, “You've got students who don't know what to do because they've had no training, or they've been in a different culture situation, or they're upset because of where they are and what's going on in their life.”

Administrators’ Perspectives on Resources or Supports Needed

In the focus group interviews, administrators consistently emphasized the need for resources and policy change to equip schools to cope with the current and growing problem of challenging student behaviors in an effective, safe, and equitable manner. The primary need they voiced was for adequate funding to increase staffing ratios and student support staff to work with students who engage in these behaviors. Given the prevalence of staffing shortages in schools,

this is an even more pressing problem to address. Tackling the staffing problem will require more funding at both the local and state level through the state's Essential Programs and Services (EPS) funding formula. One administrator commented, "It's a staffing situation. It's a financial situation." Another participant said that schools need funding for at least two administrators per school to handle the student support workload. "I'm looking at our elementary school. Administrators and schools themselves are drowning . . . they need at least two administrators in them." Regarding the adequacy of the state's education funding formula, administrators from two different districts shared these comments:

I suspect that they would need more bodies, more adult hands . . . particularly at the elementary level in terms of wrangling kids . . . just really more boots on the ground, if you will . . . Yeah, always more staff you know. And that gets back to the budget, and that gets back to EPS, doesn't it?

You could tell those people in Augusta . . . look at your EPS stuff a little bit closer . . . so that you're thinking about the situations that students are finding themselves in now . . . where they need more help . . . and that having additional staff per student, the ratios, counselor, ratios, and things of that sort, you know, and districts can't afford that.

I wonder if our EPS formula actually provides for schools and provides for students at a level that it makes sure that kids are able to step into a classroom ready to access. So they don't have these challenges and if you look at the EPS formula and what they assume in terms of ratios for support services, it is simply woefully inadequate relative to what people end up providing.

Related to the adequacy of funding, district administrators also described the challenges around supporting the cost of in-district student services (locally funded) versus out-of-district programs (reimbursed). "Just an example of this is right now, we get reimbursed for out-of-district special education placements. But you don't get reimbursed for your high-need in-district placements."

A second key area where administrators say they need help is to increase the availability of spaces in day programs for students who cannot be served in their own schools or regular education classrooms because of the severity of their needs or behaviors. Many districts in the state collaborate to pool resources to create shared day programs. With the increase in the number of students engaging in problematic behaviors in schools, however, there is more demand for these programs and often no space available. There are few options for schools when day programs cannot accept students. Increasing capacity for day programs and expanding their

availability will require both funding and available personnel who have specialized training to work in behavioral services. One administrator said, “There's not enough people working in education that have an interest in supporting these needs.”

Related to the problem of insufficient access to day programs and behavioral specialists, administrators are increasingly frustrated with the lack of appropriate mental health care and services for students, particularly students with more severe problems or in crisis situations. That is a statewide problem needing both funding and available personnel with appropriate training and expertise. Hospital systems are not equipped to cope with the demand for services for the adult population in the state, but even less so for age-appropriate services for children and youth. One administrator explained, “For me, challenge number one is that we have a lot of students whose parents have sought mental health support from the local hospitals and are denied.”

Finally, policy can present an obstacle for educators and schools to respond to disruptive student behaviors. Administrators described how their districts are having to revise local policies to protect staff and students while balancing the need for fairness and access to education for the students engaging in these behaviors. One challenge with policy is the limitation on how school personnel can share information about a student with other school personnel to protect the student's privacy. This can prevent personnel from being aware of a student's behavior challenges and coordinating on how to address them.

Privacy issues protect individuals in terms of, well, not being able to discuss behavioral matters ... So, I guess what I'm getting at is some of the policy to protect identities and, you know, rightfully so, can sometimes get in the way of everybody making sure that they know that everybody's safe and consequences are being handled equitably.

If you have a student who has, for whatever reason, strong special ed behavioral things, which you cannot talk about because of the law, you know, might have a different consequence than a kid who does not have that. And that that's a real gap which frustrates everyone.

Administrators also talked about the need for rethinking state policies that have increasingly limited how schools can respond to disruptive behaviors. One administrator said, “Five years ago I would have written those same policies. But I mean, I wasn't seeing all this stuff. I want to protect our little people ... you know, that's paramount. But I need to protect everyone.” Other administrators shared similar views:

... there's a disconnect. I think it's because we oftentimes create policies that sound good at a high level. But when you get to the practical of what does it mean in the classroom, it

becomes really, really hard ... [It's about] really asking classroom teachers what they need.

Summary of Findings

We summarize the key findings across the survey and interview data here:

- Educators across professional roles in the state of Maine are managing extremely high rates of challenging student behavior. Persistent challenging student behavior can overburden administrative and education staff, lead to an increase in special education referrals, contribute to over-identification of students with behavioral disorders and be a critical factor in the ongoing teacher shortage (Brunsting et al., 2024).
- Management of student behavior consumes a considerable amount of time for administrative, general and special education staff, limiting the time they have available to perform administrative duties to support educators, provide academic instruction and/or federally mandated special education services (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).
- Challenging behavior is as prevalent in the general education population as it is in the special education population in Maine. If this level of behavior persists among general education students, they are likely to receive a referral to special education (Lloyd et al., 2020). An increase in special education referrals would place further strain on the already overburdened special education system in Maine, where the special education identification rate is the second highest in the United States.
- Educators in Maine schools report widespread negative impacts due to challenging behavior. These impacts are likely to threaten school climate (Thapa et al., 2013), decrease student attendance and academic outcomes (Charlton et al., 2021), and contribute to a loss of educator personal accomplishment and increased feelings of burnout and stress. All of these are key factors that predict attrition from the education field (Bradshaw et al., 2024).
- Most educators report not having received professional development and/or not having confidence in behavior supports that would prepare them to manage student behaviors that occur daily in schools. Challenging behavior that is not effectively managed will increase in frequency and intensity over time and will have wide and long-lasting effects on students and educators (Sailor et al., 2009).

- Many educators report a lack of preparation or confidence in positive and preventative behavior supports which means educators are more likely to rely on ineffective, punitive, or restrictive practices (e.g., suspension, restraint, seclusion) that do not reduce challenging behavior and may exacerbate behavior (Fagan et al., 2019).
- General educators report spending a considerable amount time managing disruptive behavior, though most general educators reported not having received professional development in classroom management. This leaves them unprepared to implement evidence-based strategies to ensure students are engaged in academic instruction, maintain positive behavior, and prevent and respond to disruptive behaviors (Stevenson et al., 2020).
- Educators and administrators report various that school, home, and community factors are impacting persistent challenging behavior in the classroom. This suggests there is a need for a robust and widespread response that provides targeted supports to all students and families in a school district.
- The strained infrastructure (i.e., programs, facilities, and trained professionals) for mental and behavioral health services in communities across Maine results in increased burden for schools to cope with high needs students.
- Administrators do not have adequate resources to increase capacity for effective behavior support in their districts and schools. Administrator perceptions of student behavior and available supports reflect how challenging the circumstances are, but they do not consistently advocate for evidence-based and systemic solutions.
- Responses to behavior described by administrators are reflective of a reactive, eclectic approach to managing behavior that may address specific behavior issues within a system in the short term but are unlikely to prevent challenging behavior and promote positive academic, behavior, and social emotional outcomes in the long term.

Conclusion

Findings from the SBSS survey and administrator focus group interviews highlight that managing student behavior is a significant and widespread challenge for educators across Maine. High rates of challenging behavior from both general and special education K–12 students are being managed by educators from every county, a crisis that consumes substantial time across

professional roles and negatively impacts staff and students in a variety of ways, including lost instructional time and physical and emotional harm. Further, very few educators across the state report having received adequate training to effectively reduce challenging behavior or encourage positive behaviors. Administrators reported higher levels of burnout or absences among staff, negative impacts for educator recruitment and retention, and less time for school principals to provide academic leadership and support to teachers.

These findings present a significant challenge for the state. Decades of behavior research indicates that when students engage in high rates of challenging behavior, education staff spend more time and resources managing behavior and as a result experience more negative impacts in their work, including stress, frustration, lower self-efficacy, and frequent absences (Bradshaw et al., 2024). As dissatisfaction rises, school climate becomes more negative, resulting in students and teachers feeling less safe, engaged, and supported and more stressed (Charlton et al., 2021; LaSalle et al., 2021). Negative school climate directly contributes to increases in low student achievement, more behavior problems, and increased staff turnover, further exacerbating the presence of persistent challenging behavior and fueling the cycle (Charlton et al., 2021; Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2015). Results from the SBSS survey confirm the anecdotal reports of administrators and other educators that indicate schools across the state are greatly at risk of experiencing the negative outcomes outlined above.

These findings cause further concern for the state of Maine, as the prevalence of challenging behavior among general education students, lack of professional development related to behavior supports, and limited confidence in preventative supports, coupled with the high special education identification rate in the state, suggest that many districts do not have the current resources to install or sustain effective implementation of a preventative infrastructure (i.e. integrated multi-tiered systems of support; I-MTSS).

I-MTSS provides an implementation infrastructure to assist districts to evaluate their student and educator needs, train educators to effectively implement supports and interventions that are aligned with district needs, monitor students for support needs, provide effective and targeted academic, behavioral, social/communication, and attendance supports for all students in a school district, and establish clear protocols for how to respond positively to behavior. A robust I-MTSS effort in a district provides the strongest response to persistent challenging behavior in schools and has been shown to improve academic achievement and student and educator well-

being, and to reduce the need for special education services (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023). Implementation of an I-MTSS infrastructure is a complex effort where a district's success is often dependent upon access to state-level (e.g. Michigan I-MTSS Technical Assistance <https://miMTSStac.org>) or regional-level (e.g., Washington ESD 112 MTSS <https://www.esd112.org/mtss/>) technical assistance that can provide administrators and schools teams with training, coaching, and support to monitor the effectiveness of these systems. Access to technical assistance provides overburdened educators with the support they need to design effective and sustainable infrastructure that can support all students. Absent of state and/or regional resources and technical assistance, school districts in Maine are likely to consume precious resources to “recreate the wheel” and devise their own systems, trainings, and evaluative needs with unknown effectiveness, all while attempting to respond to the ongoing behavior crisis and special education rates continue to rise in the state. There is evidence for this in the solutions suggested by administrators during focus group interviews, presenting an even stronger case for a cohesive state-wide effort.

This report calls for comprehensive state-level action to provide districts with resources to install and sustain I-MTSS infrastructure, including enhanced professional development in classroom management and positive behavior supports, and adequate staffing to implement those systems, as well as initiatives to promote staff and student well-being, ensuring that educators are better prepared to manage student behavior effectively. More broadly, increased state-level attention is needed to address the crisis in access to mental and behavioral health services, with more programs, facilities, and trained professionals needed. We offer suggestions for specific actions through policy and practice to address the challenges related to student behavior:

Implications for Practice

1. To ensure new classroom educators and administrators have adequate knowledge and skills in how to prevent, reduce, and manage challenging student behavior using effective strategies, educator and administrator preparation programs in the state should review their current programs to include adequate training content in this area. Dual certification programs can help to prepare educators in general education to work effectively with students across a range of ability levels and behavioral challenges. Increasingly, more administrators are on the frontline directly assisting educators in managing student

behavior and their training programs may have even less content on this topic than teacher programs.

2. In-service educators and administrators also need professional training to effectively manage challenging student behaviors as their preparation programs may not have devoted sufficient attention to this area. The state, local school districts, higher education programs, and professional education organizations all have important roles to play in supporting the dissemination of evidence-based strategies, frameworks, and training for schools to manage student behaviors.
3. The Maine Department of Education (MDOE) could provide technical assistance and resources to support SAUs in objectively evaluating staff preparation and school capacity to address student behavior. Areas to evaluate include:
 - a. An audit of staffing levels to manage student behavior.
 - b. A review of available behavior supports to determine if supports are adequate and effective.
4. Dedicated resources at the state level (MDOE) are needed to establish a state-wide Integrated Multi-Tiered System of Supports (I-MTSS) framework. A state-wide I-MTSS framework would provide an implementation structure to support school districts across the state to build and sustain effective implementation of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports.
 - a. A state-wide I-MTSS framework should be guided by a team of professionals with expertise in academic, behavior, and social/emotional learning, education systems, tiered systems, and home-school collaboration and include stakeholders.
 - b. A state-wide I-MTSS framework would bring together current state-level initiatives (e.g., PBIS, BARR Model, RTI/MTSS, Inclusion) to ensure cohesive alignment across initiatives and support effective implementation across the state.
 - c. A state-wide I-MTSS implementation framework would equitably support SAUs across the state to:
 - i. Evaluate the need for supports across schools.
 - ii. Evaluate and select evidence-based programs that align with local districts' unique needs.

- iii. Develop systems to implement programs and interventions and monitor effectiveness of these efforts.
- d. A state-wide I-MTSS framework would provide equitable access to high-quality professional development resources across the state to support SAUs to deliver:
 - i. Evidence-based professional development and ongoing coaching on universal classroom management.
 - ii. Evidence-based professional development on positive behavior strategies.
- e. A state-wide I-MTSS framework would provide a structure to promote collaboration across school, home, and community stakeholders to address all factors that may influence student behavior.

Implications for Policy

1. Dedicated funding may be needed at the state and local levels to implement the strategies outlined for the recommended practices above (i.e., developing a coherent statewide approach or I-MTSS framework, assessing local needs and capacity, and providing technical assistance and training to educators and administrators).
2. Policy makers should review educator certification requirements across professional roles to ensure all educators are well-prepared and highly qualified to address student behavior.
 - a. At a minimum, all certification areas should require formal coursework in evidence-based universal classroom management strategies and de-escalation practices.
 - b. Funding should be allocated for educator preparation programs to develop courses in evidence-based behavioral interventions and supports across program areas.
3. School districts have different levels of capacity to support instructional and behavioral coaches in schools. The state's education funding formula (EPS) should be reviewed to ensure there is adequate funding for these roles and additional funds dedicated for equitable access to coaching supports in schools statewide.
4. State-level policy attention and funding are needed to address the state's capacity to provide access to mental and behavioral services in communities to meet the demonstrated high demand.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Questions for School District Administrators

Appendix B: Focus Group Interview Questions for School Board Members

Appendix C: Additional Tables on Survey Data Results

Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol for School District Administrators

1. Recently, at a statewide meeting that some of you attended, we shared some broad findings from a large survey of Maine educators conducted this spring. That survey revealed that a large percentage of educators are managing student behavior of varying intensities daily, from multiple students, and that managing student behavior consumes a significant amount of educator time.

To what extent do these findings reflect what your district is experiencing, and how important is this problem currently in your district?

2. What are the biggest challenges or barriers your district has in managing student behaviors?

Follow up:

- a. What are some specific examples of resources your district is lacking that would help prevent and/or manage student behavior?
 - b. Is the student behavior problem contributing to challenges with teacher hiring or retention in your district?
3. Many of the educators surveyed reported that they didn't feel the school policies, practices or supports available in their schools were effective or sufficient to cope with the extent of the behavior problem. Are there things your district is doing through policy or practice that you feel are working to reduce behavior incidents?

Follow up:

- a. What other supports do you feel are needed to address this problem in your district?
 - b. How do you measure the effectiveness of your current behavior supports?
4. What do you feel is important for Maine education policymakers to know about this topic or problem?
 5. In addition to the topics covered by the School Behavior Support Survey, what other questions would you like the survey to help answer?

Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol for School Board Members

1. In your current role as a school board member, to what extent are you aware of the extent of disruptive student behavior in your schools?
2. Recently, at a statewide meeting that some of you attended, we shared some broad findings from a large survey of Maine educators conducted this spring. That survey revealed that a large percentage of educators are managing student behavior of varying intensities daily, from multiple students, coping with disruptive student behaviors that can be serious, and that managing student behavior consumes a significant amount of educator time.

To what extent do these findings reflect what your district is experiencing?

Follow up:

- a. How big of an issue is this currently in your district? Is your district considering policies or programs to address behavior problems?
3. What are the biggest challenges or barriers your district has in managing student behaviors?

Follow up:

- a. To your knowledge, is the student behavior problem contributing to challenges with teacher hiring or retention in your district?
4. Many of the educators surveyed reported that they didn't feel the policies, practices or supports available in their schools were effective or sufficient to cope with the extent of the behavior problem. What other supports do you feel are needed to address this problem in your district?
5. What do you feel is important for Maine education policymakers to know about this topic or problem?
6. In addition to the topics covered by the School Behavior Support Survey, what other questions would you like the survey to help answer?

Appendix C: Additional Tables on Survey Data Results

Table 1A

Frequency of Behavior Management by Professional Role

	Multiple Times/Day	Daily	1-2 Times/Week	3-5 Times/Week	Occasionally	Sporadically	Rarely
Disruptive Behaviors (96% of Survey Respondents)							
Administration	40.21%	23.71%	14.43%	11.34%	7.22%	1.03%	2.06%
Behavior Specialist	61.70%	25.53%	2.13%	4.26%	4.26%	0.00%	2.13%
Paraprofessionals	56.84%	20.65%	7.09%	6.84%	5.10%	2.86%	1.12%
General Ed Teacher	64.32%	15.74%	6.30%	5.35%	5.04%	0.73%	2.52%
Other	40.85%	18.29%	13.41%	13.41%	9.15%	3.05%	1.83%
Related Service Provider	35.80%	24.69%	17.28%	12.35%	6.17%	3.70%	0.00%
Special Ed Teacher	62.77%	18.61%	6.06%	7.79%	2.60%	1.73%	0.43%
Specialists	50.60%	20.48%	14.46%	4.82%	6.02%	1.20%	2.41%
Total	57.76%	18.74%	7.89%	7.03%	5.24%	1.63%	1.71%
Behavioral Incidents (86% of Survey Respondents)							
Administration	19.23%	28.21%	17.95%	12.82%	10.26%	6.41%	5.13%
Behavior Specialist	28.89%	24.44%	15.56%	28.89%	2.22%	0.00%	0.00%
Paraprofessionals	31.99%	18.94%	16.46%	9.94%	10.40%	6.83%	5.43%
General Ed Teacher	22.08%	17.72%	17.30%	10.69%	14.77%	7.31%	10.13%
Other	16.41%	19.53%	25.00%	11.72%	17.19%	4.69%	5.47%
Related Service Provider	10.61%	13.64%	34.85%	15.15%	12.12%	7.58%	6.06%
Special Ed Teacher	29.00%	22.00%	17.00%	12.00%	14.50%	3.00%	2.50%
Specialists	14.29%	19.64%	25.00%	7.14%	21.43%	5.36%	7.14%
Total	25.16%	19.19%	18.31%	11.20%	13.07%	6.28%	6.79%
Behavioral Crises (52% of Survey Respondents)							
Administration	6.15%	13.85%	15.38%	9.23%	30.77%	30.77%	15.38%
Behavior Specialist	6.98%	4.65%	27.91%	20.93%	23.26%	23.26%	6.98%
Paraprofessionals	11.72%	13.64%	16.51%	10.05%	18.18%	14.83%	15.07%
General Ed Teacher	6.33%	6.67%	17.00%	5.00%	23.00%	23.00%	25.67%
Other	5.62%	4.49%	16.85%	13.48%	21.35%	21.35%	19.10%
Related Service Provider	4.26%	6.38%	36.17%	8.51%	12.77%	12.77%	17.02%
Special Ed Teacher	10.95%	8.76%	24.82%	6.57%	20.44%	20.44%	15.33%
Specialists	0.00%	17.65%	17.65%	5.88%	29.41%	29.41%	11.76%
Total	8.69%	9.86%	18.91%	8.78%	20.89%	14.87%	18.01%

Note. General Ed = General Education Teacher, Special Ed = Special Educational Teacher.

Table 2A*Behavior Management Annual Time Estimates by Professional Role*

	Disruptive Behavior		Behavior Incidents		Behavior Crises	
	Time Cost Hour/Year	Annual Time %	Time Cost Hour/Year	Annual Time %	Time Cost Hour/Year	Annual Time %
Administration	52	4%	180	15%	8	1%
General Ed Teacher	45	4%	126	11%	6	1%
Specialist/Interventionist	47	4%	130.5	11%	10	1%
Special Ed Teacher	47	4%	135	11%	62	5%
Education Technicians	50	4%	135	11%	54	5%
Behavior Specialist	44	4%	148.5	12%	65	5%
Related Service Provider	48	4%	34.5	3%	59	5%
Other	51	4%	43.5	4%	62	5%

Table 3A*Perceived Effectiveness of Behavior Supports to Prevent Behavior by Professional Role*

	School-wide Instruction of Expectations	School-wide Reward System	Class-wide Instruction of Expectations	Class-wide Reward System	Individual. Student Instruction Expectation	Student Reward System	Paraprofessional Behavior Training	Removal from Class
Administration	3.7	3.1	3.9	3.3	3.7	3.5	3.7	3.2
Behavior Specialist	3.5	3.2	3.5	3.4	3.8	3.9	3.9	3.4
Paraprofessionals	2.8	2.6	3.1	3.1	3.2	3.4	3.4	3.3
Gen Ed Teacher	3.0	2.5	3.4	3.0	3.1	2.7	3.1	3.2
Other	3.3	3.0	3.4	3.0	3.5	3.2	3.2	3.2
Related Service Provider	3.2	3.1	3.4	3.4	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.0
Special Ed Teacher	3.2	2.6	3.5	3.4	3.7	3.7	3.5	3.0
Specialists	3.1	2.5	3.5	3.0	3.3	3.0	3.1	3.2
Total	3.1	2.7	3.3	3.1	3.3	3.2	3.3	3.2

Table 4A*Perceived Effectiveness of Behavior Supports to Manage Behavior by Professional Role*

	Additional Staff to Help with Incident	Access to Behavior Specialist/Consult	Call Parents	Send Student Home	Refer to Administration	Crisis Management Program	Staff Response Protocol/Crisis team
Administration	3.7	3.1	3.9	3.3	3.7	3.5	3.7
Behavior Specialist	3.5	3.2	3.5	3.4	3.8	3.9	3.9
Paraprofessionals	2.8	2.6	3.1	3.1	3.2	3.4	3.4
Gen Ed Teacher	3.0	2.5	3.4	3.0	3.1	2.7	3.1
Other	3.3	3.0	3.4	3.0	3.5	3.2	3.2
Related Service Provider	3.2	3.1	3.4	3.4	3.5	3.5	3.6
Special Ed Teacher	3.2	2.6	3.5	3.4	3.7	3.7	3.5
Specialists	3.1	2.5	3.5	3.0	3.3	3.0	3.1
Total	3.1	2.7	3.3	3.1	3.3	3.2	3.3

Table 5A*Perceived Effectiveness of Supports to Reduce Future Behavior by Professional Role*

	Meet with Parents	Refer to Support Team	Team Meet to Revise Behavior Plan	Demerit Warning System	In-school Suspension	Out of School Suspension
Administration	3.4	3.4	3.7	2.2	2.6	2.5
Behavior Specialist	3.1	3.5	3.9	2.4	2.3	2.0
Paraprofessionals	2.6	2.7	3.2	2.4	2.4	2.4
General Ed Teacher	2.8	2.6	2.8	2.6	2.5	2.0
Other	3.2	3.1	3.4	2.3	2.6	2.0
Related Service Provider	3.0	2.9	3.5	2.0	2.3	1.9
Special Ed Teacher	2.8	2.5	3.2	2.2	2.2	2.3
Specialists	2.8	3.0	3.1	2.3	2.1	2.4
Total	2.8	2.8	3.1	2.6	2.4	2.0

Note. General Ed = General Education Teacher, Special Ed = Special Educational Teacher. Effectiveness Scale: 1= Not Effective, 2=Somewhat Effective, 3= Inconsistently Effective, 4= Moderately Effective, 5= Effective; Not applicable/Not Available.

Table 6A*Professional Development Received in the last 3 years by Professional Role*

	Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports	Functional Behavior Assessment/Function-Based Intervention	Behavior Support Plans	Trauma Informed Care	Classroom Management	De-escalation/ Escalation Cycle	No Behavior Support Related Professional Development
Administration	38%	23%	31%	40%	41%	40%	2%
General Ed Teacher	35%	8%	19%	33%	30%	25%	11%
Specialist/Interventionist	30%	9%	15%	29%	26%	25%	6%
Special Ed Teacher	56%	39%	52%	47%	51%	56%	4%
Behavior Specialist	61%	48%	59%	52%	59%	64%	3%
Related Service Provider	35%	24%	29%	38%	28%	41%	3%
Other	41%	18%	28%	42%	33%	36%	6%
Total	39%	16%	26%	37%	34%	33%	8%

Table 7A*Professional Development Received in the last 3 years by Education Technicians*

	Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports	Functional Behavior Assessment/ Function-Based Intervention	Behavior Support Plans	Behavior Reduction Interventions	Skill Acquisition Interventions	Trauma Informed Care	Classroom Management	De-escalation/ Escalation Cycle	No Behavior Support Related Professional Development
Education Technician I	30%	17%	33%	30%	16%	22%	20%	41%	5%
Education Technician II	31%	14%	24%	27%	15%	22%	18%	34%	9%
Education Technician III	35%	17%	29%	33%	22%	25%	21%	38%	7%
Other	33%	22%	33%	33%	22%	11%	33%	22%	0%
Total	34%	17%	29%	31%	20%	24%	20%	38%	7%