

Fall 2022



VAI's Admin Guide

K-12 Top Concerns for
the 2022-23 School Year

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"Sometimes you have to take a break from being the kind of boss that's always trying to teach people things. Sometimes you just have to be the boss of dancing."

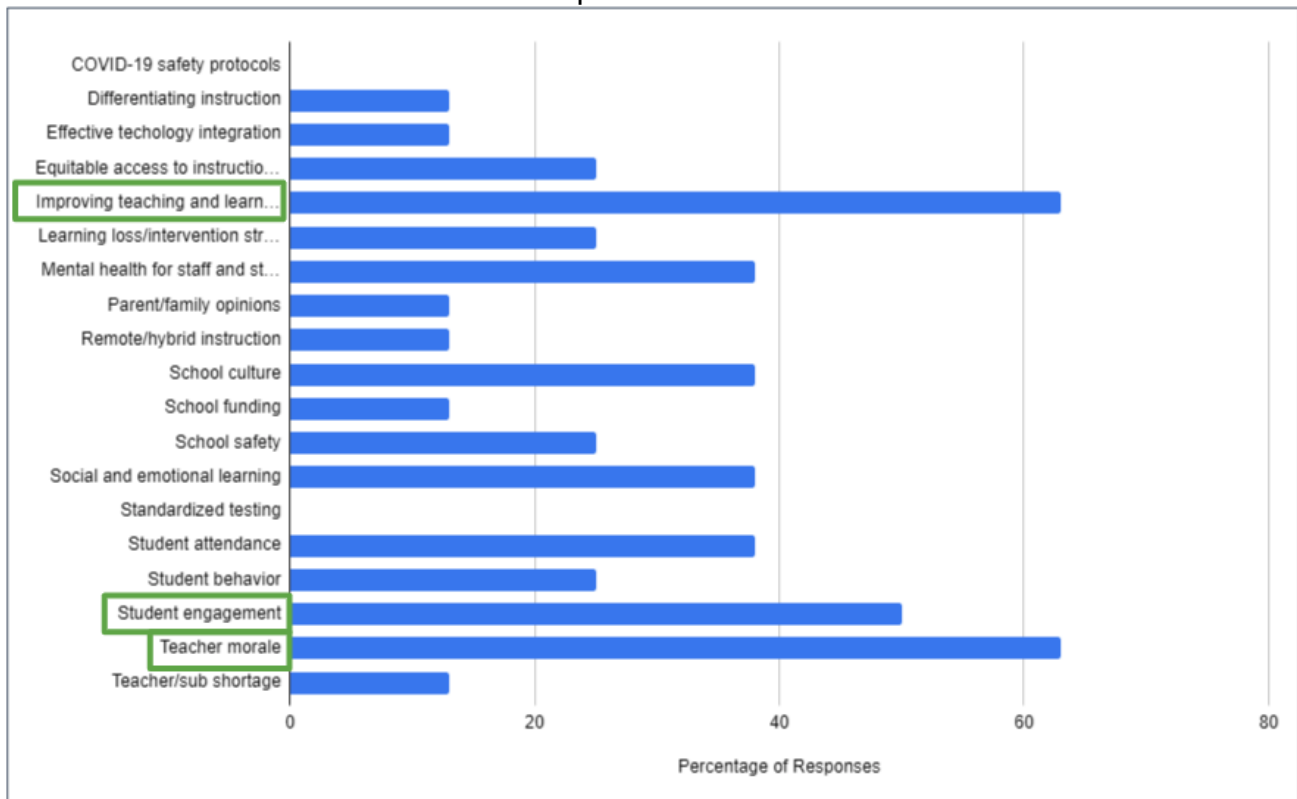
- Michael Scott, *The Office*

As the school doors opened for the 2022-23 school year, educators and students alike entered those doors with mixed emotions. On one hand, things were feeling as close to normal as they had since the pandemic began. Yet on the other hand, there remains real trauma associated with the last few years of pandemic teaching and a collective fear of what might be thrown at us next. That said, this is the first year since 2020 that the pandemic-induced distractions are taking a bit of a back seat to the more germane topics of teaching and learning.

We surveyed administrators in the fall of 2021 and again in 2022 to discover the top concerns on K-12 administrators minds. In 2021, the top 3 concerns were learning loss, mental health for staff and students, and teacher morale. And in 2022, the top 3 concerns were student engagement, improving teaching and learning, and teacher morale. So administrators are still (and rightly) concerned with teacher retention and teacher morale, but they are now able to attend more to issues of student engagement and instructional effectiveness than even a year ago.

To help administrators tackle these pressing issues, we've compiled and curated the best ideas from our own experiences and from the administrators we work with across the country.

Administrator Top Priorities for 2022-2023



1

Student Engagement

The heart of student engagement lies in authentic learning, where students learn content with purpose. They realize that what they are learning makes a difference in the world around them and they are motivated to be successful. In order to maximize student engagement, support teachers in incorporating these characteristics of authentic learning into their instructional practices.

Sustained Inquiry: Scientists and researchers study problems for years, decades even. Yet so often we relegate our instruction to 1-hour increments. We need to provide students with opportunities to develop the academic perseverance required to tackle big problems that require sustained inquiry.

Iterative Thinking: We're always pressed for time, so we are often quick to move from one thing to the next without giving students critical time to reflect upon their learning, get feedback from others, and revise their work to a new level. The design thinking process is critical in today's workforce, and getting students comfortable with seeking and implementing feedback will serve them well in our classrooms and beyond.

Real-world Application: Too often students feel like the only purpose of an assignment is to get a grade. If they are applying what they have learned to real-world problems outside the classroom, not only are they more engaged, but the community places more value on schools and the role they play.

Authentic Audience: When students present their learning to the teacher alone, there's minimal engagement. But the moment you bring in someone outside the classroom, especially someone with expertise in the subject matter being studied or someone who is personally impacted by the subject, the level of engagement skyrockets.

Student Choice/Ownership: Employers value most those employees who are self-driven, who can figure out the path forward without having every detail laid out for them. So offering students opportunities for choice and ownership not only increases engagement, but it also develops their sense of self-direction, better preparing them for the future workplace, and saving you valuable time not having to direct every student's every move.

Cross-Curricular: A surprising number of concepts are taught across disciplines as if the concept was brand new each time. Consider comprehension strategies often taught in elementary reading: cause and effect, sequencing, making predictions, main idea and details, etc. These concepts are also found in Science, Social Studies, and Math, so instead of teaching them by discipline, we can save time by teaching them through a PBL unit and then applying them as needed in content-area learning.

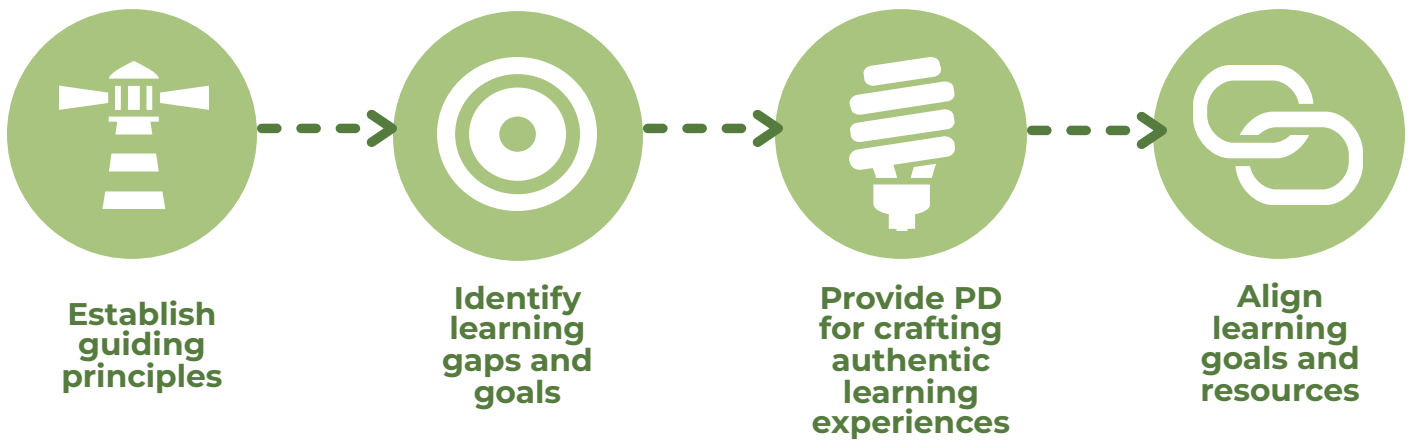
Collaboration: Most professions require workers to engage in at least some level of collaboration. STEM fields are particularly dependent on workers' ability to combine their focused efforts in one area with someone else's work to move ideas forward. We can provide meaningful, rich opportunities for students to make meaning together.

Genuine student engagement is the ultimate goal of any authentic learning experience. When students feel a connection to the content, when they feel like their work has purpose, they work harder and smarter. They retain learning because it was memorable, meaningful, and fun.

2

Improving Teaching and Learning

Administrators are using this time to re-evaluate their goals and prioritize their efforts in support of teaching and learning. The following 4-step plan can kickstart this effort for any school or district.



Establish guiding principles

Ask yourself what a successful learning program will look like. Your answer will provide a consistent vision for teachers and staff so you can ensure alignment across the team. It also helps everyone stay focused on what is most important when the inevitable day-to-day distractions emerge. Given the profound disruption to both academic as well as social/emotional development, consider outlining guiding principles for each of these areas. Craft the vision that makes the most sense for you and your school or district, but these might be a good place to start.

Academic	Social/Emotional
Students experience more challenging and more engaging school experiences.	Students engage with the broader community and demonstrate an increased sense of belonging.
All students receive grade-level content (with appropriate scaffolds).	All students have equitable access to the programming.
Instruction addresses identified learning gaps, but also serves as a springboard for future learning.	Students develop identities as competent, successful learners.




Identify learning gaps and goals

If you want to accelerate learning, you'll need to be focused. Teachers will need to understand exactly what skills and standards students need to learn. They'll also need to use their time wisely, focusing on the areas that are most critical for mastering on-grade-level work going forward.

- **Collect clear and actionable data.** Use state tests, diagnostic assessments, and formative assessments. These tools can offer a wealth of information, but you also want to check in with the source closest to the students – the teachers. Have teachers take this quick survey ([K-5](#) or [6-12](#)) to reflect on any instructional gaps or unfinished learning they have observed. Teachers know what content got short shrift and where students might be falling behind, so take advantage of that knowledge.
- **Focus on power standards.** Not all standards are created equal, so taking some time to determine your power standards will help teachers know what content matters most. When determining which standards are most critical, consider these categories:

Building Block:

How much future learning builds off this standard?



Multidisciplinary:

How applicable is this standard across content areas?




Level of Thinking:

How much cognitive demand is required, from simple recall to application to creation?



These [standards-scoring sheets](#) score all content standards (Grades K–8) according to these criteria, highlighting the highest scoring standards as power standards. But the best part is, this tool is completely editable, so feel free to change the scores if you have a different interpretation. Or change out one of the categories, perhaps using level of learning loss. Use this tool to identify your power standards and ensure instruction yields the greatest long-term benefit.



Provide PD for crafting authentic learning experiences

If there's one piece of advice we have to offer for reinventing teaching and learning, it's this. Instead of thinking: "I have to teach _____. How can I make _____ interesting?" Flip that script to: "What would my students find interesting? How can I connect _____[what I need to teach]_____ to that?" If you start with an authentic experience that will genuinely engage the students, you can almost always find a connection to the content you need to teach.

Sample PD Process for Creating Authentic Learning Experiences with Project-Based Learning

- 1. Select an Idea:** There are no shortages of PBL ideas on the internet, but it helps to look at lists that include about a paragraph of information. That's just enough to get a good idea of whether your students will like it or not, but not so much that it takes hours of reading just to understand the project. Check out these [Blue Apple Project Ideas](#) and select one that you think will resonate with your students (or come up with your own).
- 2. Answer These Three Questions:** To begin fleshing out your project, use these three questions to ensure it engages students' hearts, hands, and heads.
 - How will this idea engage students emotionally?
 - What will students do or make (big picture)?
 - What will students learn (big picture)?
- 3. Complete Storyboard:** Fill out the front side of the [storyboard](#) to flesh out the project outline. In this step, you focus on what real-world connections you can make, what content standards you want to address, and what opportunities there might be for collaboration.
 - **Real-World Connection:** First think about ways you can bring the world to your students. What industry experts might be able to share their knowledge with your class? Then think about how you can bring your students to the world. Where can you display their work so that it can be viewed well beyond the classroom, ideally by an audience authentic to the topic?
 - **Content Standards:** When you have an engaging project to start with, you can usually connect it to a large number of content standards. You don't have to hit all content areas, but the more you do, the better the context will be for learning, and the more instructional bang you can get for the time spent on the project.
 - **Collaboration:** Look beyond simple cooperation to complete a task. Explore opportunities for students to make meaning together. How can one group within the class support the understanding of another? How might student understanding be improved if they worked with another group outside their classroom, perhaps in another part of the country?
- 4. Build Lesson Plans:** Use the back side of the [storyboard](#) to develop lesson plans and identify resources that complete the project path:
 - **Start with Why:** Motivate students with a compelling question and engaging hook.
 - **Think it Through:** Guide students in exploration and discovery.
 - **Work it Out:** Support collaborative teams as they apply critical and creative thinking to real-world problems.
 - **Fix it Up:** Encourage iterative thinking with purposeful feedback and revision.
 - **Share your Awesome:** Give work relevance and meaning by presenting it to authentic audiences.

Share these [Authentic Learning Strategies](#) to kick start the process and help your teachers connect their students to each other, their content, and the world!

3

Teacher Morale

We expected 2020-21 to be difficult. Coming back from an abrupt shutdown the spring before, with the pandemic still coursing through the nation and no vaccines available for a few months, that would certainly be the worst it could get, right? We entered 2021-22 with a false sense of optimism, almost willing it to be a normal school year. It didn't take long to realize it wasn't. In fact, by the end of the 2020-21 school year, stress levels were at an all-time high, bringing both teachers and administrators to the brink. 2022-23 has brought a renewed spirit back into the profession, but we're all acutely aware of how much stress is on our teachers, how important it is to recruit and retain good teachers, and just how quickly things can go south. Teachers are your most precious resource, so we must remain vigilant; we must do what we can to support and protect them.

There's no magic bullet for this one. Many of the things stressing our teachers (and ourselves) out are beyond our control. But there are things you can do to help. As we gleaned ideas from administrators across the country, we found they essentially all fell into these four categories:



Value Time

The number one thing teachers want



Provide Support

The things your role allows you to uniquely do



Show Respect

The number two thing teachers want




Express Gratitude


The things all humans need



Value Time


- Prioritize and protect planning time. Above all else, this is the most important thing you can do for your teachers. Treat both teaching and planning time as sacred. Make sure they have time to plan individually as well as collaboratively with colleagues.
 - Take over a class. You're busy too, but whenever you can, as often as you can, step in and teach a class for a teacher. This gift of time will mean the world to them.
 - Have fewer, shorter meetings. Scrutinize the value of your own meetings. 'Because it's on the calendar' is a terrible reason for a meeting. Ask yourself: Can the content be covered in an email? Do we need a full hour for this?
 - Make meetings virtual or asynchronous. Whenever possible, allow flexibility in when and how teachers access a meeting, especially if it's before or after school hours.
 - Hire high school students. Hold a job fair and allow high school students to apply for vacancies in your cafeteria, custodial, or other departments.
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Show Respect

- Spread the burden. Don't lean on the same "volunteers" all the time. It's tempting because there are teachers that you can always count on, that genuinely want to be helpful, but you need to protect them even more.
 - Ask for and act upon feedback. Survey teachers (anonymously or not) to ask them what they need. You might be surprised by how simple it is to meet their needs. But do ACT upon the information you receive. Even if it's to explain why something can't be done.
 - Don't punish the group for issues of a few. When issues of performance arise, take issue with the actual offenders. Don't lecture the whole staff or put in place policies that negatively impact the whole group.
 - Notice and acknowledge student progress. Teachers have been hard on themselves over the last two years. They are as frustrated as anyone that students aren't progressing at the rate they'd like. Help them see any and all progress; celebrate it with them; encourage them to take pride in any student progress.
 - Be clear about priorities. Respect teachers enough to share with them (or include them in deciding) the instructional priorities for the year. Use this [Standards Scoring Sheet](#) to identify your power standards.
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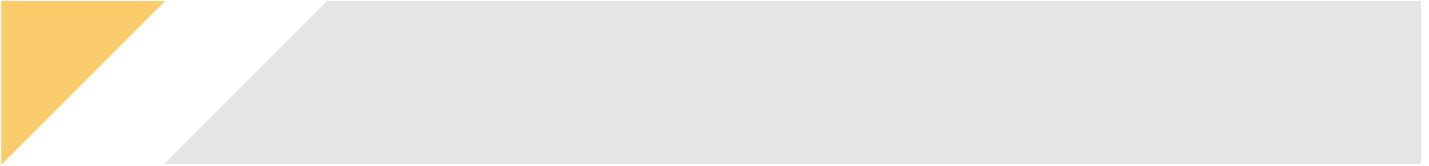
Provide Support

- Move out from behind the desk. When teachers come to talk, move from behind your desk to a table or set of chairs. Changing from your “normal” work environment signals to them that you are attentive and listening without distraction.
 - Give tools to support their emotional well-being. Encourage staff to track their moods with this [Mental Health Tracker](#), which offers a visual format that is quick to log and interpret. Or give them this [Avoiding Burnout Checklist and Reflection Form](#) to help them proactively look for signs of burnout while providing practical tips to prevent and/or recover.
 - Embed mental health into PD. If teachers engage in PD sessions, make sure the facilitator understands the unique challenges of the past two years and builds in exercises to promote teacher mental health and well-being alongside any pedagogical insights.
 - Remind them to take it slow. Let teachers know that you understand the last two years are not what we all expected, and encourage them to slow down. There’s a lot of school year left! Teachers put a lot of pressure on themselves. Sometimes they need to be given “permission” to let something go. Use this [Teacher Permission Slip](#) for a teacher who you see struggling with guilt.
 - Provide resources. Teachers shouldn’t need to create instructional resources from scratch or spend their own money on tools to improve instruction. With ESSER funding, you can give them resources to bridge the gaps of lost instructional time and accelerate learning for all. Use this [Funding Request Form](#) to see what your teachers need. The form allows them to share with you the resource they need, how much it costs, as well as how it aligns to any school goals or initiatives.
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Express Gratitude


Warning: Implementing anything from this list without implementing actions from the first 3 lists may backfire.

- Hand-written notes. Give a teacher a hand-written note; you know it will make their day.
 - Smile knowingly. Don’t walk through the halls with a pasted, fake grin. Instead, when you pass your colleagues in the halls, give them that genuine smile that says, “I know it’s hard; I see you; I appreciate you.” They can tell the difference.
 - Walk around and distribute popcorn. The smell of fresh popcorn wafting from the halls and then hand delivered to their room is sure to boost their spirits.
 - Bring in a food truck. How excited would your teachers be to see a coffee or dessert food truck outside the school? Making such a grand gesture is a great way to express gratitude.
 - Leverage your community. Your community wants to help. Ask local businesses (restaurants, spas, community centers, gyms, memberships, etc.) to offer teacher discounts or freebies. Teachers love a deal, so scoring just a few of these could make their day. Also, you can share this [Ultimate List of Stores](#) that lists national chain stores that offer teacher discounts.
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Administrators across the country are grappling with issues of student engagement, improved teaching and learning, as well as teacher morale, so know that you are not alone in facing these pressing issues. It's notable and worthy work, but it can be physically and emotionally draining. Be careful that you don't exhaust the emotional energy you need to support those who need you most. Get enough sleep. Talk to other administrators. Plan fun things that take your mind off work. And cut yourself some slack. You were trained to develop and maintain school budgets and schedules, as well as to be an instructional leader. But you were not trained to attend to the emotional demands of leading students and staff through the trauma of teaching and learning in a pandemic.

Hopefully the collected ideas in this paper will help tackle these issues with a collaborative spirit and put you on a path to meet and exceed the goals you have for your school or district.



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*"Thank you for supporting
our teachers. You have been a
wonderful asset and support
system as our teachers
navigate implementing PBL in
our schools."*

-Hillary Baker, Allegan Public Schools