

Strengthening Trust Through a Better K-12 Customer Experience

Additional
Member-Only
Resources
Available on
nspra.org



Insights from the
2026 national survey

the leader in school communication
nspra + **qualtrics.**^{XM}

the leader in school communication



Our Mission:

NSPRA advances public education by building understanding and empowering professionals to communicate strategically, earn trust and cultivate relationships.

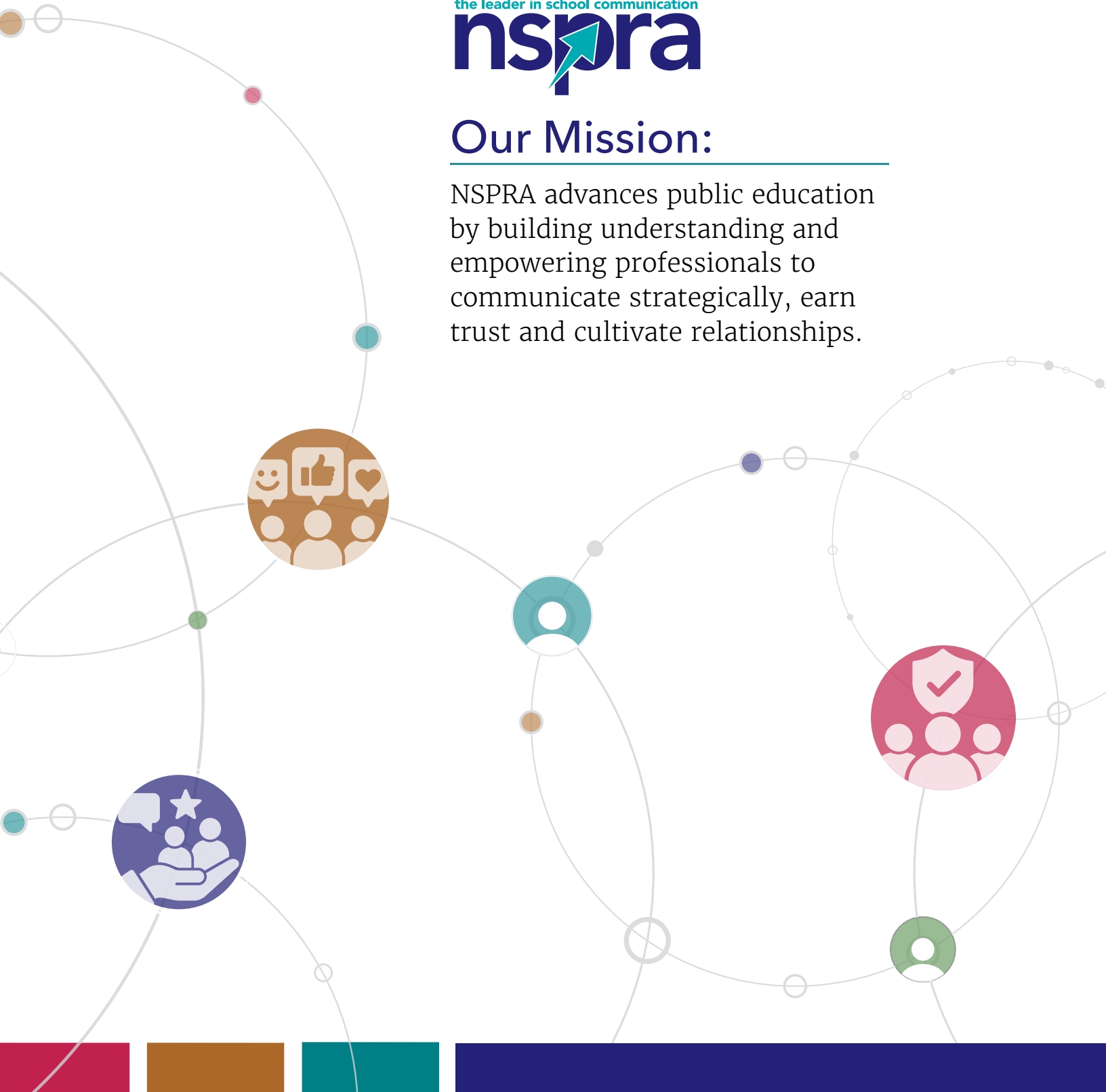


Table of Contents

A Message from the NSPRA Executive Director	4
A Message from the Qualtrics Vice President of K-12 Education Strategy	5
Executive Summary	6
Why Customer Experience Matters.	8
Survey Findings: What the Data Tells Us	10
The Strategic Role of Communications	17
Customer Experience as Trust Infrastructure	19
Turning Feedback Projects Into Experience Programs.	20
APPENDIX: Detailed Survey Results.	24
APPENDIX: Report Resources	39

A Message from the NSPRA Executive Director



Trust in public education is shaped not only by major decisions, public messages or moments of crisis. It is also shaped by the everyday experiences that families and community members have when they seek information, ask for help or try to resolve a concern.

When information is unclear, expectations vary or a process is difficult to navigate, the issue often surfaces as a communication challenge. As this report makes clear, however, the customer experience of families and community members extends beyond communication alone to encompass the systems, expectations, handoffs and follow-through that influence whether they feel valued, respected and supported.

NSPRA partnered with Qualtrics to bring together two complementary areas of expertise: NSPRA's deep knowledge of school communication and community trust, and Qualtrics' experience in helping organizations listen to feedback, identify patterns and use those insights to improve interactions across services, systems and key touchpoints. Together, we sought to better understand how school districts are approaching customer experience and where opportunities exist to strengthen consistency, clarity and trust.

This report is intended to help school communicators and district leaders begin that work in practical ways. It does not suggest that communications should own every process or solve every point of friction. Rather, it affirms the important role communicators can play in identifying patterns, clarifying language, supporting consistency and helping district teams better understand how interactions are experienced by others.

I encourage you to use the data, language and strategies in this report to improve the ongoing conversations about customer experience in your district.

Sincerely,

Barbara M. Hunter, APR, CAE, NSPRA Executive Director

A Message from the Qualtrics Vice President of K-12 Education Strategy



Relationships are at the core of what we do in education. Every interaction, no matter how small, can have a lasting impact on the people involved. When I think back to my days as a student, teacher, parent and educational leader, the moments that stand out the most are grounded in how the interactions made me feel, running the gamut from joy and gratitude to stress and frustration.

That is the nature of experience management: identifying key moments, measuring the impact of those moments and working to improve them. We can think of this process through two primary lenses: perception data, where we're actively collecting feedback, impressions and experiences through surveys, interviews, focus groups and everyday conversations; and behavior data, where the ways in which people interact with our schools provide insights into their experiences.

Starting points can differ by organization. Sometimes we need data in order to evaluate the current state, identify key friction points and take action. Other times, we already know both the friction points and the outcomes we are striving for, and we need data to see how we are doing.

For many districts, this work begins as an experience project: a survey, listening effort or targeted data collection process focused on understanding a specific moment, service or interaction. While those projects are valuable starting points, the larger opportunity is to connect them over time, using what we learn to better understand the full journey people have with our schools and to make improvements that are visible, responsive and sustained.

Data can tell us a lot about how we're showing up for people and can point the way toward a brighter, more connected future. Qualtrics is grateful for this opportunity to partner with NSPRA on this report. In the pages that follow, you'll find practical advice on how to strengthen your approach to experience management.

Remember, there is no such thing as too small a step. Every step forward is a positive one.

Respectfully,

Nicholas J Kohn

Nick Kohn, Ph.D., Qualtrics Vice President of K-12 Strategy

Executive Summary

Customer experience in K-12 education is shaped in everyday moments: when a family calls the front office, completes a registration form, asks a transportation question, navigates a website or portal, raises a concern, requests language access or tries to understand who owns the next step.

In this report, **customer experience, or CX**, refers to the quality, clarity and consistency of the everyday interactions people have across a district's schools, departments, staff, systems and communication channels.

Districts may use different language for this work such as customer service, community relations or family and community engagement. This report uses the phrase customer experience because it encompasses the full journey people take when seeking information, assistance or resolution from a district. Customer service is one part of that journey, but customer experience reflects the cumulative impact of every interaction, process and touchpoint along the way. It shapes whether people feel informed, respected, supported and confident that the district can meet their needs.

To better understand how school districts approach this work, NSPRA partnered with Qualtrics, a leading experience management company, to examine the current state of customer experience practices in K-12 public education. The research explored whether districts intentionally shape external audience interactions, how expectations are communicated and reinforced, what barriers districts face and how school communication professionals perceive the relationship between customer experience, trust and community engagement.

This research suggests that school districts are not dismissing the importance of these interactions. Among all survey participants, 63% said their district places a high or very high priority on intentionally shaping positive external audience experiences. Yet only 38% said their district is very or extremely effective at providing consistent, positive interactions.

That gap tells an important story: Districts may value customer experience conceptually, but many are still working to operationalize it through shared expectations, training, ownership, monitoring and consistent practices across schools and departments.

The findings point to three major takeaways:

- **Customer experience is a trust issue.** Most respondents said external audience experiences strengthen trust, and respondents from districts reporting more consistent, positive interactions were much more likely to see those interactions as trust-building. As one survey participant put it, "The experiences of our families and community shape their perception of us as an institution. Can they trust us? We have to show them they can trust us every day."

- **Consistency is the central challenge.**
Consistency is difficult to achieve across decentralized organizations like school districts. Respondents most frequently pointed to differences in how schools, departments and individual staff members handle interactions—often resulting in families and community members encountering very different levels of responsiveness, clarity and support depending on where they seek assistance.
- **The barriers are primarily operational.**
Respondents most often pointed to limited capacity or time, unclear responsibility for reinforcing expectations, school-level autonomy, lack of documented expectations and limited training or professional development. These challenges suggest that customer experience cannot be improved through communication alone; it also depends on clear expectations, defined responsibilities and processes that work consistently across the organization.

For district leaders, the implication is clear: Customer experience cannot sit with one person, school or department. Many customer experience challenges appear to be communication problems, but they often point to unclear steps, inconsistent handoffs, missing timelines or responsibilities that have not been clearly defined. Communication leaders can help identify patterns, clarify language and support consistency across interactions, but strong customer experience also requires leadership attention to the expectations, processes and day-to-day practices that shape those interactions in the first place.



ABOUT THE SURVEY



The data in this report is based on a national survey fielded through NSPRA and Qualtrics networks between March 31 and April 24, 2026. The survey focused on how school districts approach interactions with external audiences, including families, community members and other stakeholders outside the organization.

A total of **145 respondents** completed the survey. Based on NSPRA's current membership, that represents an approximate margin of error of **±7.9%**. Because participation was voluntary, results should be interpreted as directional rather than representative of all NSPRA members or all school districts.

Most respondents work in K-12 settings: **87%** work for a K-12 or PreK-12 school district, and **98%** represent districts or organizations with enrollment below 50,000 students. Nearly half, **47%**, identified their role as director of communications, public information, community relations or a similar title, while **17%** identified as communication specialists.

Why Customer Experience Matters

Every school district interaction leaves an impression.

A family trying to register a child. A caregiver calling about transportation. A community member searching the website for budget information. A parent raising a concern. A staff member responding to a difficult question.

Each moment shapes how people experience the district—and whether they see the people within the district as responsive, caring and trustworthy.

That is the heart of customer experience in K-12 education.

The term “customer experience” (CX) may sound more appropriate for business settings, and it can feel at odds with the values of public education. Public schools are mission-driven institutions, and while many district interactions involve practical transactions, the relationships among schools, students, families and communities are deeper than a simple customer exchange. Reacting to the phrase “customer service,” one survey participant asserted, “I wouldn’t consider any of our public’s a ‘customer’ because K-12 education isn’t transactional the way other organizations and industries are.”

Still, the underlying idea is highly relevant. The goal is not to import a business model into schools. It is to help districts make everyday interactions clearer, more consistent and easier to navigate for families, community members and staff.

“Even if the answer is no, the way people walk away from an interaction will shape the way they talk about your school district.”

– Survey Participant

A survey participant described it this way: “Thinking of parents, staff and community members as customers helps us think about that person’s point of view and experience, rather than dismissing them as ‘difficult’ because they ask lots of questions.”

Public-sector research reinforces why this matters. Studies from Deloitte and McKinsey & Company have suggested that people’s experiences with public institutions influence perceptions of competence, responsiveness, transparency and trust. [See details in the sidebar on the following page.] For school districts, those perceptions can shape family engagement, staff relationships, public support and organizational reputation.

At the same time, school districts operate in uniquely complex environments. Interactions with families and community members happen across multiple schools, departments, platforms and staff roles. Expectations may be informal rather than clearly defined, and responsibility for shaping the experience is often distributed across the organization rather than owned by a single office or department.

A Qualtrics article, “[What is customer experience? CX definition and how-to guide](#),” defines customer experience as people’s perceptions of their interactions across the full journey with an organization and notes that consistent delivery across that journey can be difficult when departments and operations are siloed. Although the article is written for a business audience, that broader journey-based frame is useful for K-12 schools because families and community members experience one continuous journey even when it involves touchpoints across schools, offices, platforms and departments.

As a result, many customer experience challenges sit at the intersection of communication and operations: A confusing process may need clearer language for families, but it may also require clearer expectations for school staff about who is responsible and what happens next.

This report presents findings from a national survey conducted by NSPRA and Qualtrics examining how school districts approach customer experience and external audience interactions. The findings suggest that many districts recognize the importance of positive interactions, but fewer have established systemic, organization-wide approaches for managing and evaluating those experiences consistently.

WHAT PUBLIC-SECTOR RESEARCH TELLS US ABOUT CX AND TRUST

Customer experience research in government and public-sector settings suggests that everyday interactions can shape how people judge an institution’s competence, responsiveness and trustworthiness. According to [research from Deloitte](#), a global professional services firm, each competent, human-centered and integrity-driven interaction contributes to increased trust. When interactions are clear, responsive and respectful, they can reinforce confidence in an institution’s intent and effectiveness. When they are inconsistent, confusing or frustrating, they can undermine that confidence.

[McKinsey’s global research on customer experience in government](#) points to a similar conclusion. In a study of more than 20,000 citizens across 140 government services in seven countries, McKinsey found that satisfied government customers were, on average, nine times more likely to trust the agency providing the service and nine times more likely to agree that the agency was delivering on its mission. They were also five times more likely to agree that a public service was a good investment of taxpayer money. Dissatisfied customers, meanwhile, were twice as likely to publicly express frustration through social media, letters, hotlines or calls to local officials.

For school districts, the connection is clear. Families and community members form opinions about district competence, responsiveness, transparency and care through ordinary moments: phone calls, forms, websites, office visits, handoffs, timelines and follow-up. Customer experience is not separate from public trust. In K-12, it is one of the ways trust is built—or weakened—through daily encounters.

Survey Findings: What the Data Tells Us

One clear throughline in the data is that many school districts are still moving from informal, individual efforts to more intentional, organization-wide approaches to customer experience.

58% More than half (58%) of districts lack formal, documented expectations for how staff members should approach interactions with external stakeholders.

19% Where documented expectations exist, just 19% of districts apply them consistently across all external audience groups.

44% Nearly half (44%) of districts say expectations are only slightly or not at all communicated clearly to staff.

The decentralized nature of school districts, along with the wide range of functions they perform, contributes to the challenge of implementing consistent practices districtwide. So it's not entirely surprising that nearly half (49%) believe customer experience is somewhat or very inconsistent across their district, with nearly two-thirds (64%) seeing the greatest variation in the quality of interactions across schools. And in districts where some expectations exist, 58% say they apply to all staff—meaning that more than one-third only hold certain staff members or roles accountable for how they interact with external audiences.

Yet customer experience is shaped by far more than the staff roles districts may traditionally associate with customer service or family and community engagement. From front office staff and teachers to principals, custodians and coaches—as well as the systems, platforms and processes stakeholders navigate daily—every interaction contributes to how stakeholders experience the district. It stands to reason, then, that a coordinated, collective effort across a district would be the best recipe for ensuring positive customer experiences at every touchpoint. But currently that is not the case; just 15% of respondents said the responsibility for customer experience is shared across their organization.

"I believe our central office places a very HIGH priority on this; I also believe that our schools think they do, but struggle to know what this actually means, as many employees have never worked outside a school setting."

– Survey Participant

The CX Gap: Recognition Without Operationalization

The issue is not lack of recognition. Conceptually, school districts value customer experience and want to provide positive interactions for families and community members. Just 10% of respondents said their district placed little to no priority on it, while 63% said it was a high or even very high priority.

Nor is the obstacle an ideological one. While the terminology may not be an exact fit, nearly two-thirds (61%) had a positive reaction to the phrase “customer service,” compared to 11% who viewed it negatively.

But knowing and doing are two different things, and the data shows that many districts aren’t operationalizing what they value and know to be important:

49% Nearly half (49%) of districts offer no formal training in customer service or experience.

20% One in five say their district has no process for assessing how interactions are going.

28% More than a quarter (28%) say there is no clear ownership for reinforcing expectations.

49% About half (49%) say school leaders are somewhat or very inconsistent in reinforcing expectations.

This pattern is not unique to public schools. Qualtrics’ [2026 Customer Experience Catalyst Report](#) found a similar gap between prioritization and maturity across various industry sectors. While 74% of organizations rated CX as a significant or critical priority,

56% of CX programs remained in the two earliest maturity stages. Although the Qualtrics report is not specific to education, it provides useful context. Organizations often recognize the importance of customer experience before they have the governance, infrastructure and shared practices needed to deliver it consistently.

Without training, evaluation and clear responsibility for reinforcing expectations, the quality of interactions is left up to chance, relying on informal practices and individual staff effort instead of intentional, districtwide approaches.

Some school leaders may think this early-stage approach sufficient. After all, 75% of respondents say their district makes it somewhat or very easy for external stakeholders to get the information or assistance they need (including through digital systems and required processes), and an even bigger 82% consider their district to be at least moderately effective at providing consistent, positive interactions to external stakeholders.

But is that really enough to foster and sustain the kind of public trust and confidence public schools depend on? While three-quarters of all respondents said external audiences’ experiences with their district tend to somewhat or significantly strengthen trust, that figure climbs to 94% among the 38% who consider their districts to be very or extremely effective at providing consistent, positive interactions. Meanwhile, 72% of those who say their district is slightly or not at all effective believe that their interactions with families and community members actually *weaken trust*.

WHAT DISTRICTS HAVE FORMALLY DOCUMENTED

Because school district staff interact with the public across many departments, schools and service functions, formal documentation related to customer experience can encompass many areas of school district operations. To identify where districts are focusing these efforts, NSPRA and Qualtrics asked respondents to identify the areas in which their district has created formal documentation related to external audience interactions.

A majority reported having formal documentation for complaint escalation and resolution procedures (**63%**) and accessibility-related expectations (**55%**), an area receiving increased attention as districts work to meet new digital accessibility requirements.

Roughly one-third of districts said they have documented:

- ✓ **Guidelines** for tone, professionalism or clarity in written/digital communications.
- ✓ **Expectations** related to user experience when selecting or purchasing technology or digital platforms.
- ✓ **Expectations** for professional conduct during in-person or virtual interactions.

Response-time standards for phone calls and emails are documented in only about a quarter of districts, while **17%** reported having none of the listed areas documented.

When it comes to the impact on organizational trust and reputation, these findings suggest there may be a meaningful difference between generally endorsing positive interactions and intentionally delivering consistently strong stakeholder experiences across an entire district.

What the Data Suggests About More Effective Customer Experience

To better understand how organizational practices can shape customer experience, NSPRA and Qualtrics compared responses from two groups: respondents who rated their districts as more effective at providing consistent, positive interactions with external audiences and those who rated their districts as less effective. For simplicity, this section refers to these groups as districts reporting more effective customer experience and districts reporting less effective customer experience.

The differences do not point to one single practice. More effective customer experience is not explained by documentation alone, communication alone or consistency in any one area.

Instead, the pattern appears to be cumulative. Districts reporting more effective customer experience are more likely to have several reinforcing conditions in place: clearer expectations, more consistent application across roles, staff training, leadership attention, monitoring and shared ownership.

These districts are not perfect. Even among respondents who rated their districts as more effective, challenges with capacity, consistency and ownership remain. But compared with districts reporting less effective customer experience, they appear more likely to treat customer experience as something that can be defined, supported, reinforced and improved.

That distinction matters because it shifts customer experience from an individual responsibility to an organizational practice.

Create clarity around expectations.

More effective customer experience begins with clarity: Staff need to know what good interactions look like, families need to receive consistent information and leaders need to reinforce expectations across schools and departments.

The data suggests that clarity of expectations is one of the strongest differences between districts reporting more effective and less effective customer experiences.

- 48%** Nearly half (48%) of districts reporting more effective customer experience have formal, documented expectations.
- 13%** Just 13% of districts reporting less effective customer experience have formally documented expectations.

Those expectations are also more clearly communicated. Among districts reporting more effective customer experience, 80% say expectations are communicated to staff at least moderately clearly, including 46% who say they are very or extremely clear. In

"Some departments do not see themselves as 'customer facing' and tend to be set in their systematic ways of operating, without thinking about the external person's experiences."

– Survey Participant

districts reporting less effective customer experience, just 4% say expectations are communicated very or extremely clearly, while 39% say expectations are not at all clear.

The same pattern appears in how expectations are applied. Districts reporting more effective customer experience were more likely than those less effective to say expectations apply to all staff (58% versus 30%) and are applied consistently across external audience groups (28% versus 0%). **They were also more likely to report consistency across the organization:**

- 64%** Nearly two-thirds (64%) of more effective districts said interactions are somewhat or very consistent across schools and departments.
- 22%** In contrast, less than a quarter (22%) of those in districts reporting less effective customer experience said interactions are at least somewhat consistent.

Taken together, the findings suggest that stronger customer experience begins with clarity. Staff cannot consistently meet expectations they do not know, and families are more likely to experience inconsistency when expectations vary by school, department or staff member.

Reinforce expectations through leadership, training and monitoring.

If clarity establishes expectations, leadership is what helps turn those expectations into practice. The priorities leaders emphasize tend to shape where districts focus their attention, effort and resources—important ingredients in any recipe for change.

Respondents from districts reporting more effective customer experience were more than twice as likely to say customer experience is a high or very high district priority (88%), compared with 35% of respondents from districts reporting less effective customer experience.

That prioritization also appears to translate into greater support and reinforcement.

Among districts reporting more effective customer experience:

- 94%** take steps to assess how interactions with external audiences are going.
- 70%** offer at least some staff training in customer service or external audience interactions, including nearly one-third that provide training districtwide.
- 58%** say district and school leaders are somewhat or very consistent in reinforcing shared expectations for interactions.
- 54%** include leadership discussions about interaction trends as part of that assessment.
- 18%** actively monitor audience interactions and continuously improve related systems and processes.

"The public makes no distinction between departments when there is an error, and we would be well served to consider that viewpoint when we are communicating with our stakeholders."

– Survey Participant

In contrast, districts reporting less effective customer experience are far less likely to reinforce expectations through training, evaluation or leadership involvement. Nearly two-thirds (61%) offer no staff training, 30% conduct no formal assessment of interactions and just 4% actively monitor interactions and pursue continuous improvement. **Leadership involvement is also notably lower:**

- 9%** Only 9% report leadership discussions about interaction trends.
- 14%** Just 14% say district and school leaders are somewhat or very consistent in reinforcing expectations.
- 73%** Meanwhile, 73% describe that reinforcement as somewhat or very inconsistent.

The findings also suggest that reinforcement is closely tied to ownership. Without clear responsibility for sustaining this work, efforts to improve customer experience may struggle to gain traction. Almost half (48%)

of districts reporting less effective customer experience say no individual or group has clear ownership, compared with just 4% that describe it as a shared responsibility. Among districts reporting more effective customer experience, only 20% cite a lack of clear ownership.

Together, these findings suggest that when customer experience becomes an organizational priority, districts are more likely to create the structures, accountability and leadership support needed to sustain it.

Reduce friction in everyday interactions.

Creating and sustaining high-quality customer experience requires significant effort. If the result were simply more pleasant interactions with families and community members, some may question whether the investment is worthwhile. But the data suggests the impact does not stop there.

Districts reporting more effective customer experience were much more likely to say external audiences can easily obtain information and assistance. Nearly all respondents in this group, 94%, said information and assistance are somewhat or very easy to obtain, compared with 52% of respondents from districts reporting less effective customer experience.

They were also less likely to report obstacles when external audiences seek help. No respondents from districts reporting more effective customer experience said external audiences face obstacles obtaining information or assistance, compared with 30% of respondents from districts reporting less effective customer experience.

That responsiveness and ease of access—getting a problem solved, a task accomplished, a question answered or a concern heard—are hallmarks of a positive customer experience.

As noted earlier on pages 8–9, public-sector research reinforces the connection between everyday interactions and trust. Deloitte has found that people do not view interactions with government agencies in a vacuum; they compare them with all other customer experiences. Those experiences can reinforce or undermine people's belief in the competence and intent of government.

[Qualtrics' CX Catalyst Report](#) emphasizes the importance of resolution. It found that resolving an issue was a bigger driver of satisfaction than how people contacted the organization. People who were unsure whether their issue had been resolved rated the experience nearly as poorly as those who said it had not been resolved.

For school districts, these findings underscore why customer experience deserves attention as a strategic priority. People form impressions of the district through every interaction, but what happens next is just as important. They want to know what will happen, who owns the next step and whether their question, concern or process has been resolved. Districts cannot control every factor that shapes public trust and support, but they can influence how people experience their schools, services and communications.

COMMON CX OBSTACLES AND IMPROVEMENT PRIORITIES

Survey responses point to several common places where customer experience can break down in school districts. Respondents were asked to identify up to three areas where inconsistencies or challenges most affect external audience interactions. **The most frequently cited were:**

- ✓ Differences in how schools handle interactions **(51%)**
- ✓ Clarity and tone of communication from school staff **(38%)**
- ✓ District processes and requirements, such as forms, approvals and procedures **(33%)**
- ✓ Main office or front desk interactions **(29%)**

Respondents were also asked to identify barriers that make it difficult to create consistent, high-quality interactions across their districts. **The most common challenges were:**

- ✓ Limited staff capacity or time **(43%)**
- ✓ Unclear ownership for reinforcing expectations **(42%)**
- ✓ School-level autonomy that limits districtwide consistency in interactions **(33%)**
- ✓ Lack of clearly documented expectations **(28%)**

Notably, these barriers were among those cited most often by both districts reporting more effective customer experience and those reporting less effective customer experience. However, barriers related to leadership involvement and organizational alignment—including unclear ownership, school-level autonomy and inconsistent expectations from leaders—were reported more frequently by respondents who rated their districts as less effective.

The pattern mirrors a broader theme throughout the findings: Respondents who rated their districts as more effective were more likely to report the conditions that help consistency take hold, including clear expectations, leadership support and systems for reinforcement.

For districts unsure where to begin, these findings point to a practical starting place. Look for the moments where families encounter inconsistent answers, unclear processes or uncertain ownership.

The Strategic Role of Communications

School communicators are often among the first to see where families, staff or community members are confused, frustrated or receiving inconsistent information. A transportation question, registration process, website issue or complaint may surface as a communications concern because people do not know whom to contact, receive conflicting answers or are unsure what happens next.



That is why strong customer experience requires both clear communication and clear responsibility for what happens next.

The NSPRA and Qualtrics survey results reinforce the importance of communications being involved in this work:

12% | Among all respondents, 12% reported that the communications office plays a primary leadership role in shaping expectations for interactions with external audiences.

41% | Another 41% said communications serves as a strategic partner.

Among respondents from districts reporting more effective customer experience, communications involvement was even greater:

16% | said communications plays a primary leadership role.

48% | said communications serves as a strategic partner.

Districts reporting more effective customer experience were also less likely to report that communications has a limited or no formal role in shaping external audience interactions (8% versus 22%).

Respondents from districts where communicators play a meaningful role in shaping external audience interactions consistently reported stronger practices across a range of measures, including clearer expectations, more training, stronger assessment practices, greater consistency and more positive perceptions of trust.

This relationship is not surprising. Communication professionals are often among the few district leaders whose primary responsibility is to view the organization through the eyes of its audiences. Taken together, the findings point to several ways communications leaders can help strengthen customer experience—not by owning every interaction, but by helping the organization see and address the friction points that affect trust, while also shaping the conditions that help positive experiences happen consistently.

Communications can identify patterns.

School communicators often see the questions, concerns and points of confusion that repeat across schools, departments and audiences. They may notice the same issues appearing in inboxes, comments, website searches, call logs or community feedback.

A single complaint may be isolated, but repeated confusion about the same form,

process or contact point may signal a systemic issue. In those moments, communications can help move the conversation from anecdote to pattern.

In its [CX Definition and How-To Guide](#), Qualtrics recommends looking beyond formal surveys to the conversations people are already having with an organization, such as support calls, emails, chats and other feedback channels. For school districts, similar signals may appear in call logs, inboxes, website searches, social media posts, repeated questions, complaint themes, incomplete forms or issues escalated to school and district leaders. Just as important, patterns may emerge from what is not happening—families who do not complete a process, attend an event or respond to a survey may be encountering friction that the district is not otherwise hearing about.

Communicators can support consistency.

Communicators can help translate internal processes into clear, family-facing language and create shared tools that make interactions more consistent across schools and departments. That may include rewriting webpage content, simplifying instructions,

developing shared FAQs, creating message templates, building routing guides or drafting common language for high-volume topics such as enrollment, transportation, attendance, complaint resolution, athletics, student services and website navigation.

Communicators can lead without owning every process.

Communicators can clarify, coordinate and advise, but strong customer experience also depends on process owners: the people, teams or cross-functional groups responsible for the policies, procedures and services behind everyday interactions. These may include enrollment, transportation, technology, school office staff or others with authority over how a service is delivered.

Process owners confirm the workflow, establish timelines, clarify who is responsible for each step and ensure follow-through. The role distinction shown below can help district teams move from confusion to shared ownership by separating where communications can support the experience from where process owners must lead.

When the issue is...	Communicators can...	Process owner must...
A confusing process	Clarify language and family-facing steps	Confirm the process, requirements and decision points
Inconsistent answers	Create shared talking points or FAQs	Reinforce expectations with staff
Repeated complaints or questions	Identify patterns and themes	Address root causes
Unclear handoffs	Draft routing language or escalation guidance	Assign the owner, timeline and next step
A broken workflow	Explain the impact on trust and clarity	Redesign or adjust the workflow

Customer Experience as Trust Infrastructure

Every form, phone call, main office visit, email, portal login and concern-resolution process communicates something about a district's values.

When those experiences are clear, responsive and consistent, they can strengthen trust. When they are confusing, uneven or dependent on individual staff members, they can weaken it.

Customer experience is not merely transactional. It is organizational. It is part of the district's trust infrastructure—the everyday systems, expectations and interactions that help families and community members experience the district as clear, responsive, reliable and caring.

Like infrastructure, customer experience is often most noticeable when it breaks down: when a handoff fails, a process is unclear, a timeline is missing or families receive different answers depending on where they begin.

"Every interaction we have—whether it's with a parent, taxpayer, elected official, or other community member—is a window into our schools. If that one moment is all anyone ever does with our district, how do they remember us?"

– Survey Participant

The findings from NSPRA and Qualtrics' survey suggest that districts are not dismissing customer experience; rather, they are still working to define it, support it and make it consistent across everyday interactions.

That work does not have to begin by fixing everything. It can begin by unsticking one thing—one recurring source of confusion, one unclear handoff, one inconsistent answer or one process that is difficult to navigate.

Turning Feedback Projects Into Experience Programs

Qualtrics has had the privilege of partnering with hundreds of school districts across the country as they evolve from one-time feedback projects into more coordinated experience programs. Through those engagements, it became increasingly clear that while regional differences remain, many districts face similar systemwide constraints: scattered ownership, decentralized technology, competing platforms and limited time. Often, this leads to well-intended but disconnected improvement efforts when it comes to the experiences of the families, students and staff they serve. These efforts may solve individual problems, but without a shared process for listening, analyzing, acting and following up, they rarely add up to a coherent experience strategy.

To build a well-defined, effective experience program, organizations need to move beyond isolated “point-in-time” support to a broader, journey-based view that looks at the full sequence of interactions a person has with the district over time, rather than evaluating each interaction in isolation. While feedback projects that capture individual moments in time can help surface friction points districts were not otherwise

aware of, they often fail to establish connections across experiences that can build up over time to shape perception more holistically.

Consider a family with school-age children who are new to the community. Their perception of the district will be shaped by dozens of touchpoints, many of which happen before they ever form a relationship with a teacher or administrator. In the first year alone, the family will need to:

- ✓ Enroll school-age children
- ✓ Understand school-based policies on snacks, absences, assessments, health forms and other expectations
- ✓ Access needed support services
- ✓ Arrange transportation
- ✓ Find before- and after-school care
- ✓ Register for sports and activities
- ✓ Volunteer



- ✓ Navigate meal accounts, free and reduced-price meal forms or lunch procedures
- ✓ Complete permission forms and approve field trips
- ✓ Interact with front office staff, teachers, school counselors, nurses and administrators
- ✓ Access grades, progress reports and other student information systems
- ✓ Attend back-to-school nights, parent-teacher conferences, athletic events, performances, scheduling meetings and other school activities

These touchpoints often require families to navigate district and school websites, main office visits, classroom interactions, emails, newsletters and multiple education technology portals.

Together, these interactions shape whether families see the district as accessible, responsive, organized and trustworthy.

The key question becomes:

How do we provide responsive service in individual moments while also understanding the complete journey?

Those concepts can be broadly applied to students and employees as well. While families experience the district in unique

Avoid these CX traps

⚠ Do not start with a slogan. A “customer service commitment” is not a substitute for clear expectations, training and accountability.

⚠ Do not create standards without clear responsibility for reinforcing them. If no one reinforces the expectation, it becomes just another document.

⚠ Do not ask for feedback unless someone is ready to act on it. Feedback without follow-up can damage trust.

⚠ Do not make the communications team the owner of broken processes. Communicators can clarify, coordinate and advise, but process owners still need to fix what is not working.

⚠ Do not try to solve the whole district at once. Pick one high-friction interaction and improve it.

ways, students and employees are on their own journeys with the district, including vital touchpoints and experiences that shape how they show up each day.

Build with empathy

No matter where your district is on the continuum—from just starting out to having a fully developed experience program—step back and put yourself in the shoes of the family, student or staff member.

What do they care about most? What do they expect? What is it like to navigate district processes from their perspective?

Go to the website and try to complete a task as if you had no prior knowledge of where to start. Walk into the front office of a school. Try to schedule an appointment with a counselor. Attempt to find transportation information, complete a form or access a commonly used portal.

By taking the perspective of those they serve, districts can better identify gaps, reduce friction and cultivate stronger relationships.

Where should districts start?

A practical place to begin is with an annual fall experience survey to establish a baseline. This gives districts a clear starting point for understanding how families, students and staff currently experience key interactions across the system. Administering the survey in the fall also gives district teams the rest of the school year to analyze results, share findings transparently and take visible action.

The survey should include the key metrics that matter to the district, such as CSAT and NPS, while also leaving room for open-ended feedback that explains the “why”

behind the scores. CSAT, or Customer Satisfaction Score, measures satisfaction with a specific interaction, service or experience. NPS, or Net Promoter Score, is commonly used to understand overall trust, confidence or advocacy by asking how likely someone is to recommend the school, district or service to others.

In education, NPS should be interpreted carefully. Because families may not always choose their school district in the same way they choose a business, the score is most useful as a signal of confidence, trust and willingness to speak positively about the district. These metrics become more valuable when paired with comments, themes and follow-up questions that help leaders understand what is working, what is creating frustration and where improvement is most needed.

The goal is not to collect more data for its own sake. The goal is to ask the right questions at the right moments and use the results to make meaningful improvements. From that initial baseline, districts can add smaller listening points throughout the year to better understand the full journey.

Examples include:

- ✓ Short, three- to four-question pulse surveys after key interactions. For example, a QR code in the front office could ask, “Were you greeted today?” and “Was your concern or need resolved?”
- ✓ QR codes at athletic events, performances or other school activities asking about the visitor experience.

- ✓ Digital behavior analytics that identify signs of frustration, such as repeated clicks, rage clicks or users abandoning a webpage or application before completing a task. These insights can help districts understand where users are getting stuck and why.
- ✓ Analysis of themes or concern spikes across social media posts, calls, chats, emails and text messages.
- ✓ A post-appointment questionnaire after a school counseling meeting, sent by text to a parent or guardian, asking questions such as, "How easy was it to schedule an appointment?" "How satisfied were you with the assistance you received?" "Was your question or concern addressed?" and "Do you need someone to follow up with you?"

Districts should also be clear about privacy, data governance and appropriate use of any feedback or behavior data collected. An effective experience program depends not only on listening, but on building trust in how the information will be used.

This points to the next key component of an experience program: the ability to take both short- and long-term action. Each listening point can inform better experiences, but feedback only matters if the district has a process to act on it. Automated alerts, tickets and tracking dashboards can route concerns to the right person quickly, support timely follow-up and help teams monitor whether issues are resolved.

Closing the loop means acknowledging the concern, routing it appropriately, following up when possible and using what was learned to improve the system. Over time, this is what moves a district from a one-time feedback project to a more coordinated, responsive experience program.

qualtrics[®] XM

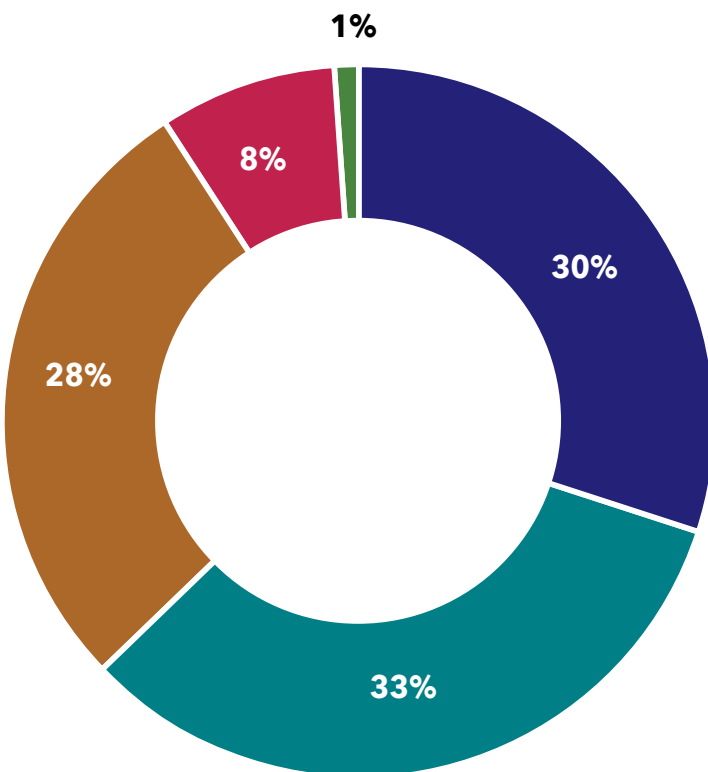
APPENDIX: Detailed Survey Results

Note: Some survey questions were displayed only to a subset of respondents based on their answers to previous questions. As a result, not all respondents received every question, and percentages for follow-up questions reflect only those respondents who were eligible to answer that question.



? In practice, how high of a priority does your district place on intentionally shaping positive external audience experiences when interacting with the district across its schools and departments?

33%	High priority
30%	Very high priority
28%	Moderate priority
8%	Low priority
1%	Not a priority
0%	Not sure



? Please explain why you selected that level of priority.

Open-ended question. Responses were reviewed and analyzed for themes but are not included in this appendix.

? Which statement best describes your district's approach to interactions with external stakeholders?

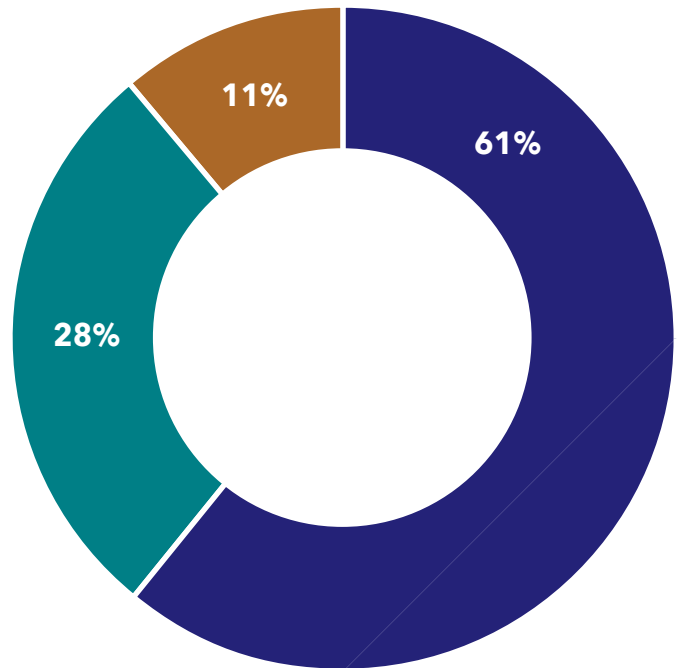
- 42%** Some expectations for interactions exist, but they are informal or inconsistently applied.
- 21%** Formal expectations are documented, but implementation varies across schools or departments.
- 16%** Interactions depend primarily on individual staff members and vary widely.
- 9%** Formal expectations are documented and reinforced through training or leadership guidance.
- 9%** The district actively monitors audience interactions and continuously improves systems and processes.
- 3%** Not sure

? When you hear the phrase “customer service” in a K-12 context, what is your reaction?

61% Positive

28% Neutral

11% Negative



? What makes you react that way?

Open-ended question. Responses were reviewed and analyzed for themes but are not included in this appendix.

? Which of the following are formally documented for employees in your district? (*Select all that apply.*)

63% Procedures for escalating or resolving complaints or concerns

55% Expectations related to accessibility (language access, disability access, etc.)

34% Expectations related to user experience when selecting or purchasing technology or digital platforms

34% Guidelines for tone, professionalism or clarity in written or digital communications (e.g., email, website content, social media)

31% Expectations for professional conduct during in-person or virtual interactions

26% Response-time standards for phone calls and email

17% None of the above

12% Not sure

? To what extent are documented expectations for interactions applied consistently across external audience groups in your district?

36% Expectations are not formally defined

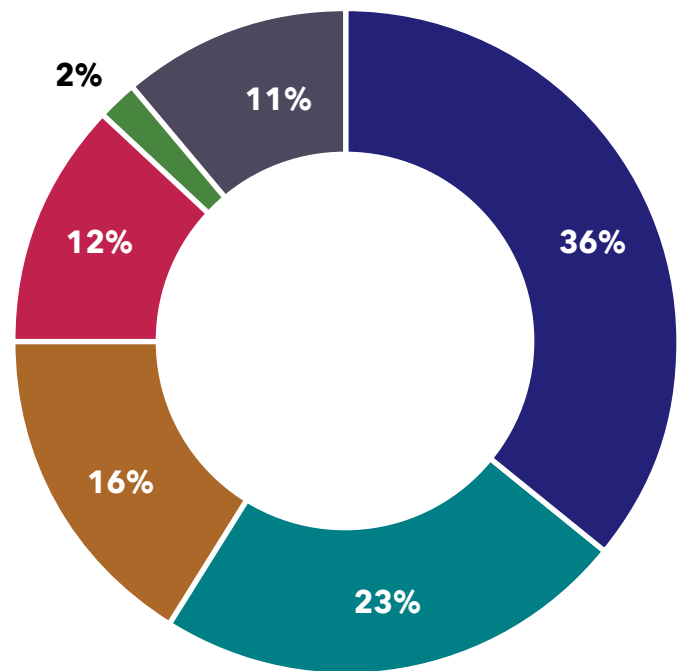
23% Applied to most groups, with some differences

16% Applied primarily to families/guardians of enrolled students

12% Applied consistently across all external audience groups

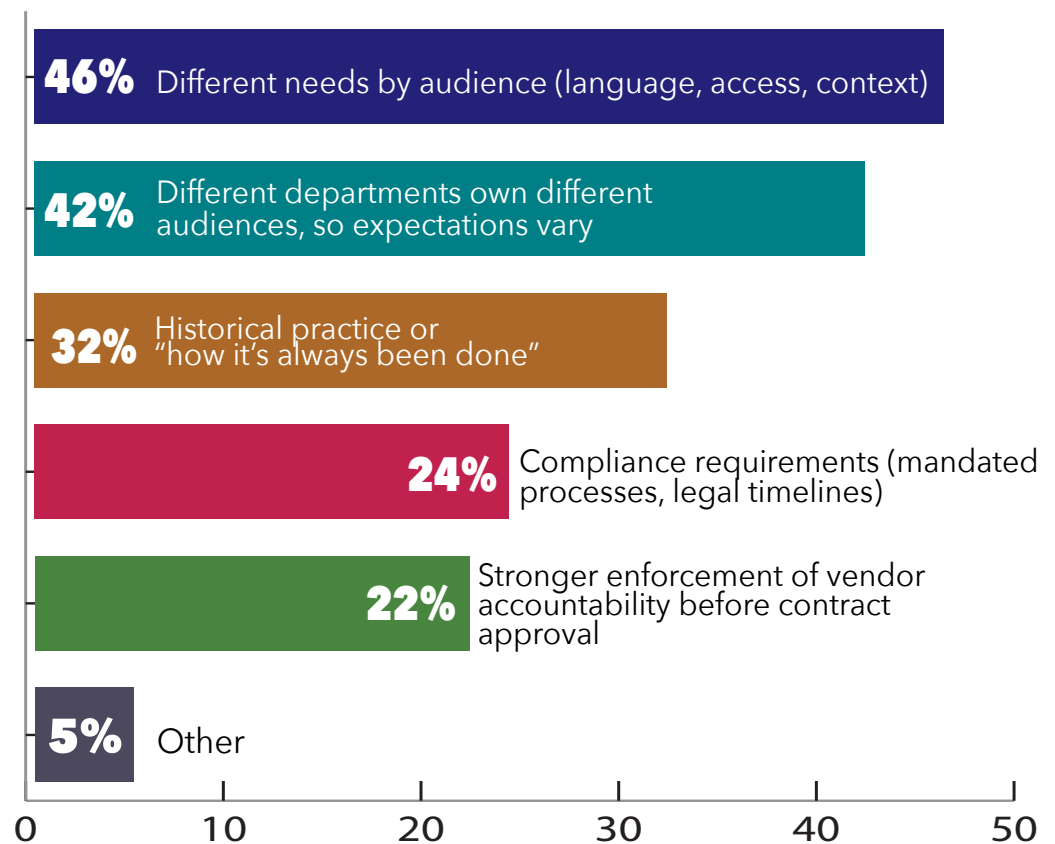
2% Applied primarily to certain audience groups

11% Not sure



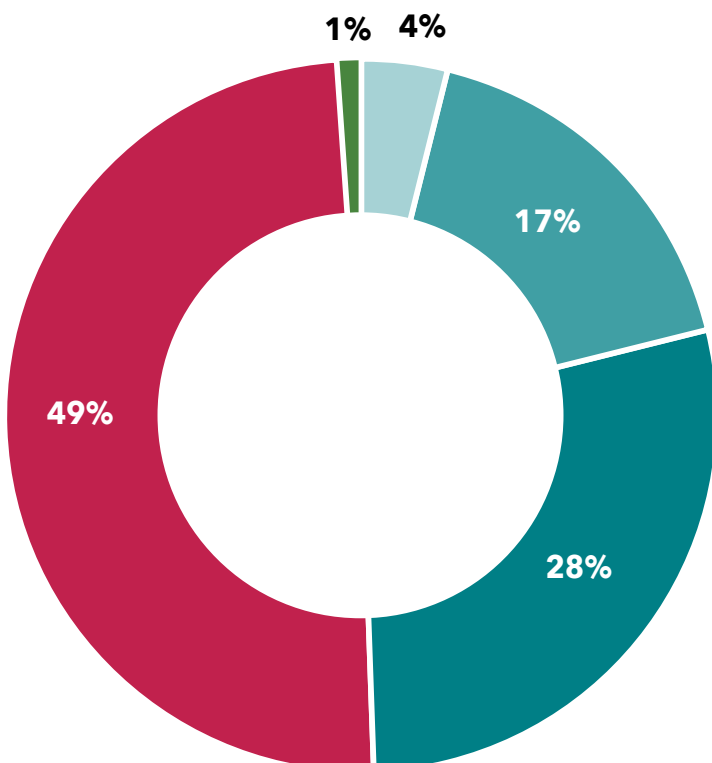
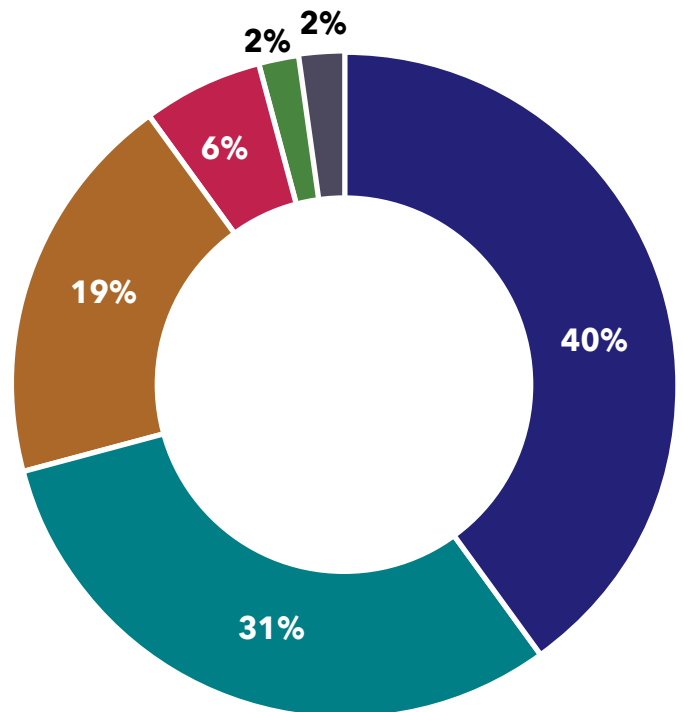
? What primarily drives those differences?
(Select up to two.)

[Asked only of respondents who indicated that expectations for interactions are not applied consistently across external audience groups.]



? In your district, expectations for interactions with external audiences apply to:

- 40%** All staff roles districtwide
- 31%** Expectations are not formally defined
- 19%** Primarily staff who regularly interact with families or the public
- 6%** Most staff roles, but some positions are excluded
- 2%** Only certain departments or roles
- 2%** Not sure



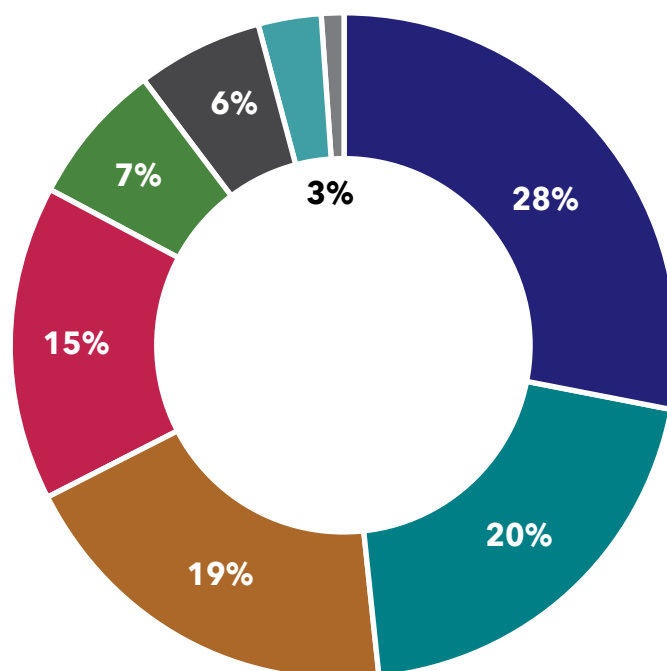
? Does your district provide training or structured guidance related to interactions with external audiences?

- ✖ We do not provide formal training | **49%**
- ✓ Yes, but only for certain roles | **28%**
- ✓ Yes, occasionally and districtwide | **17%**
- ✓ Yes, regularly and districtwide | **4%**
- ? Not sure | **1%**

? What types of training are provided?
(Select all that apply.)

[Asked only of respondents who indicated that their district provides training or structured guidance related to interactions with external audiences.]

- 75%** Digital communication expectations (email, social media, messaging platforms)
- 61%** De-escalation or conflict resolution
- 61%** Cultural responsiveness in family interactions
- 60%** Responding to difficult or emotionally charged conversations
- 58%** Accessibility standards (language access, disability access, etc.)
- 53%** Communicating with families in crisis
- 47%** Handling complaints or concerns constructively
- 4%** Other



? Which role in your district has primary ownership for reinforcing expectations for how staff members interact with external audiences?

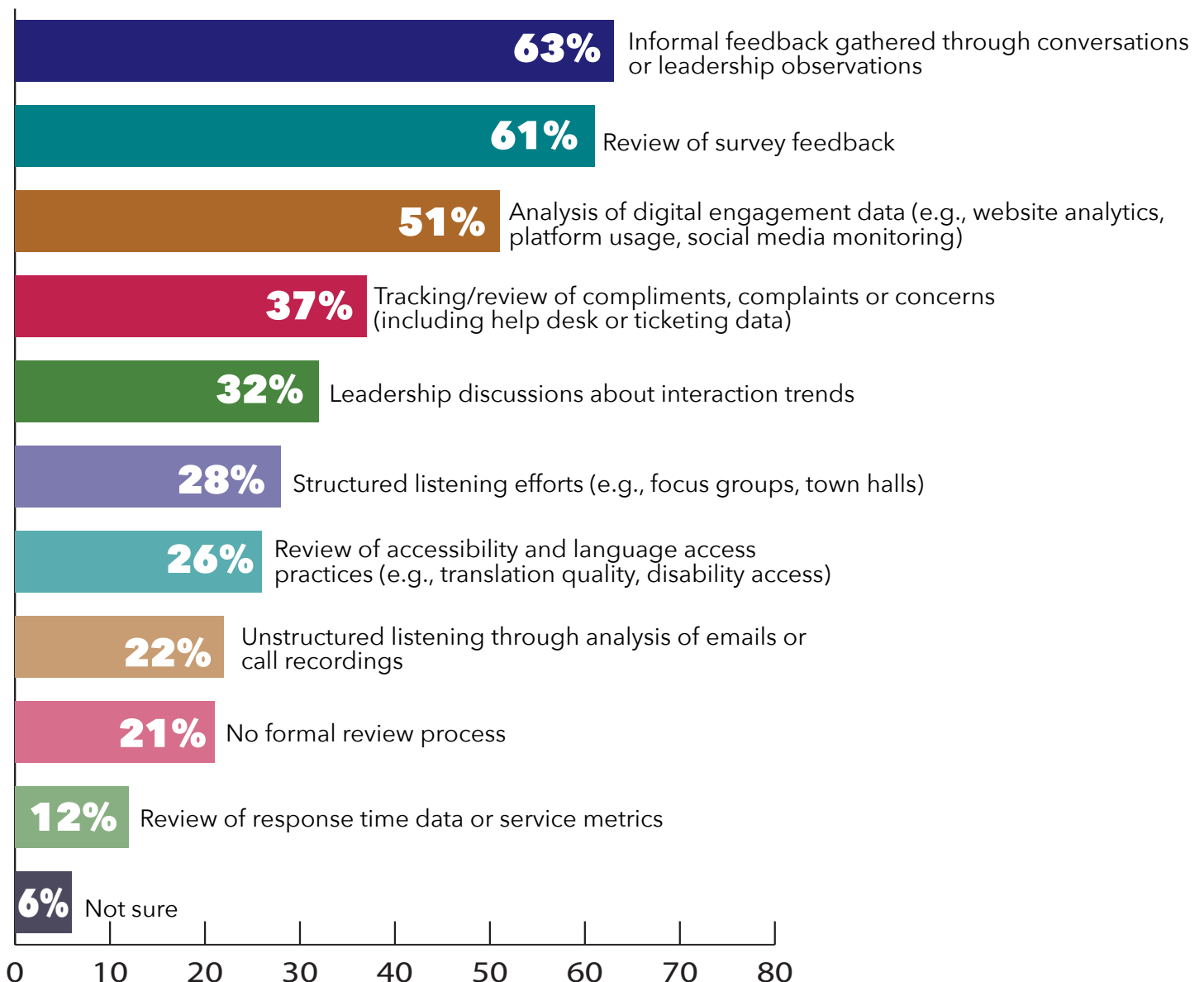
- 28%** No clear ownership
- 20%** Building leaders (principals, assistant principals, deans, etc.)
- 19%** District leaders (assistant superintendents, chiefs, directors, etc.)
- 15%** Shared responsibility
- 7%** Superintendent
- 6%** Communications Office
- 3%** Human Resources
- 1%** Not sure
- 0%** Family and Community Engagement Office
- 0%** Student Support Services

? Which roles share ownership?

[Asked only of respondents who indicated that primary ownership for reinforcing expectations for how staff members interact with external audiences is a shared responsibility.]

Open-ended question. Responses were reviewed and analyzed for themes but are not included in this appendix.

? How does your district assess how interactions with external audiences are going across its services, systems or communications? (Select all that apply.)



? When issues are identified (e.g., delays in response, recurring complaints), how likely is your district to adjust procedures or expectations?

[Asked only of respondents who indicated that their district assesses how interactions with external audiences are going.]

23% Extremely likely

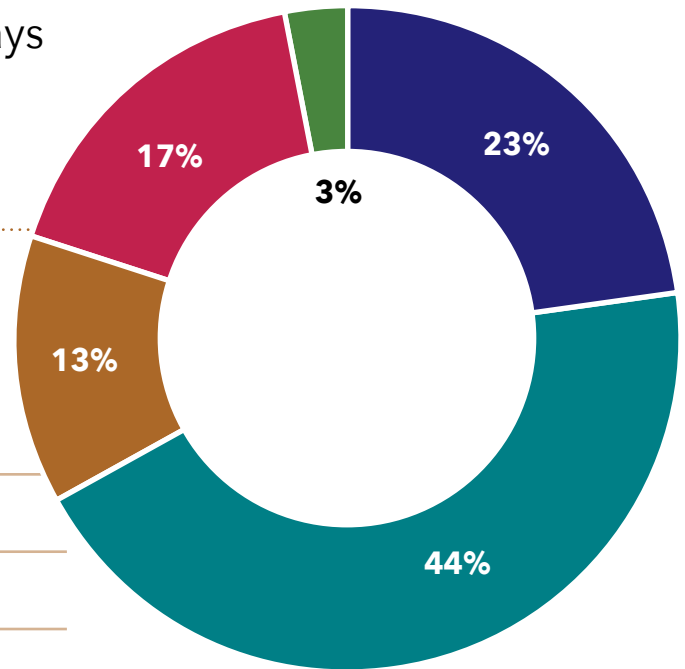
44% Somewhat likely

13% Neither likely nor unlikely

17% Somewhat unlikely

3% Extremely unlikely

0% Not sure



? Overall, how consistent are interactions with external audiences across different schools and departments in your district?

9% Very consistent

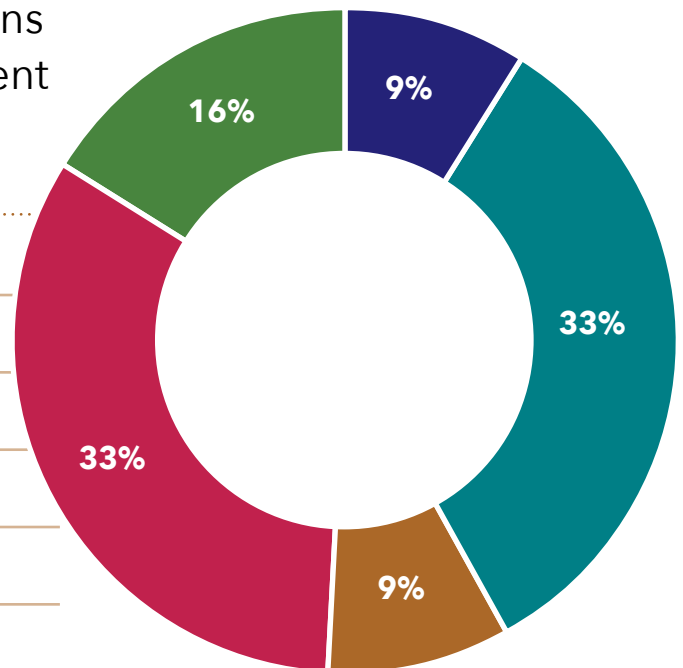
33% Somewhat consistent

9% Neither consistent nor inconsistent

33% Somewhat inconsistent

16% Very inconsistent

0% Not sure



? Where do you see the greatest variation in interactions across your district?

(Select all that apply.)

[Asked only of respondents who indicated that interactions with external audiences across different schools and departments in their district are very inconsistent.]

- 64%** Between schools
- 37%** Between individual staff members
- 31%** Between departments
- 27%** Between central office and schools
- 8%** Not sure

? In which areas do you believe the experiences of external audiences are in greatest need of improvement across your district? Select up to three areas where inconsistencies or challenges most affect audience experience.

- 51%** Differences in how schools handle interactions
- 38%** Clarity and tone of communication from school staff
- 33%** District processes and requirements (forms, approvals, procedures)
- 29%** Main office or front desk interactions
- 20%** Complaint or conflict resolution processes
- 15%** Enrollment and registration processes
- 14%** Email interactions
- 14%** Usability of online systems used to access district services (portals, etc.)
- 12%** Accessibility and language access
- 11%** Transportation
- 9%** Athletics and extracurriculars
- 9%** Phone interactions/automated system
- 8%** District website usability
- 4%** Student support services
- 3%** Building access and signage
- 1%** Food service
- 2%** Other

? How clearly are expectations for interacting with external audiences communicated to staff in your district?

3% Extremely clear

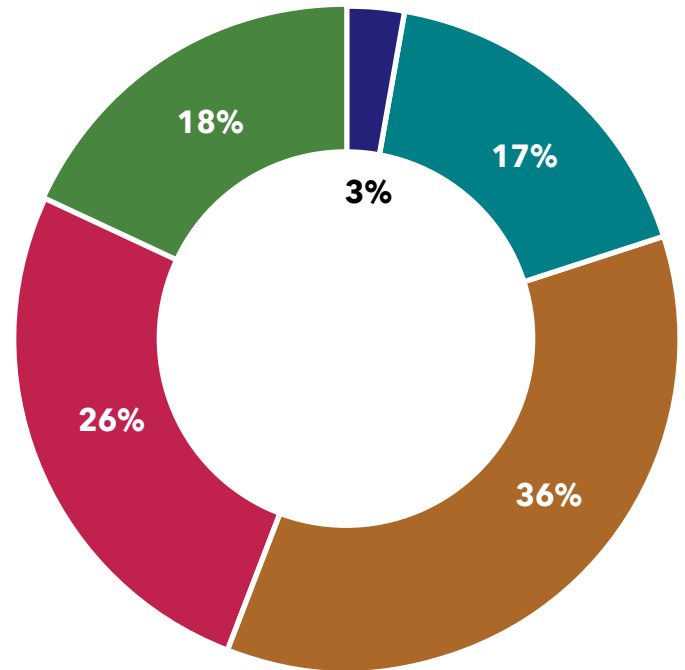
17% Very clear

36% Moderately clear

26% Slightly clear

18% Not at all clear

0% Not sure



? How consistently do district and school leaders reinforce shared expectations for interactions with external audiences?

8% Very consistently

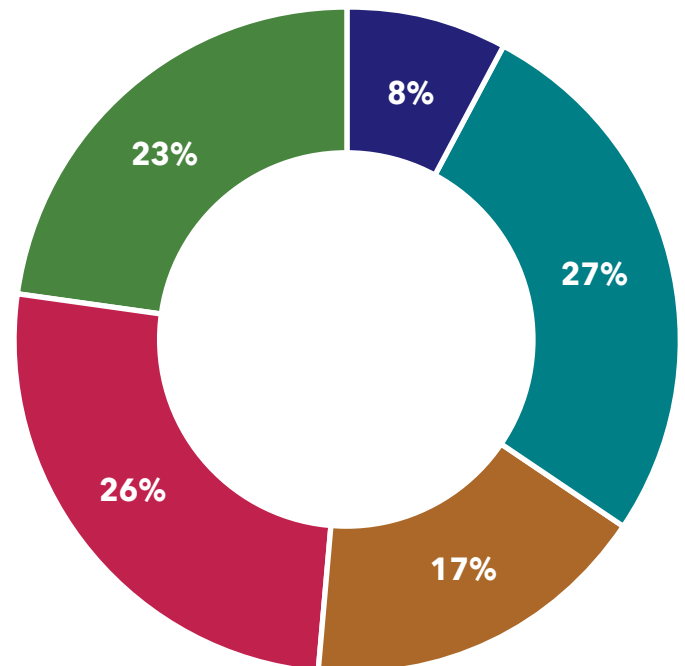
27% Somewhat consistently

17% Neither consistently nor inconsistently

26% Somewhat inconsistently

23% Very inconsistently

0% Not sure



? Overall, how easy does your district make it for external audiences to get the information or assistance they need, including through digital systems and required processes?

28% Extremely easy

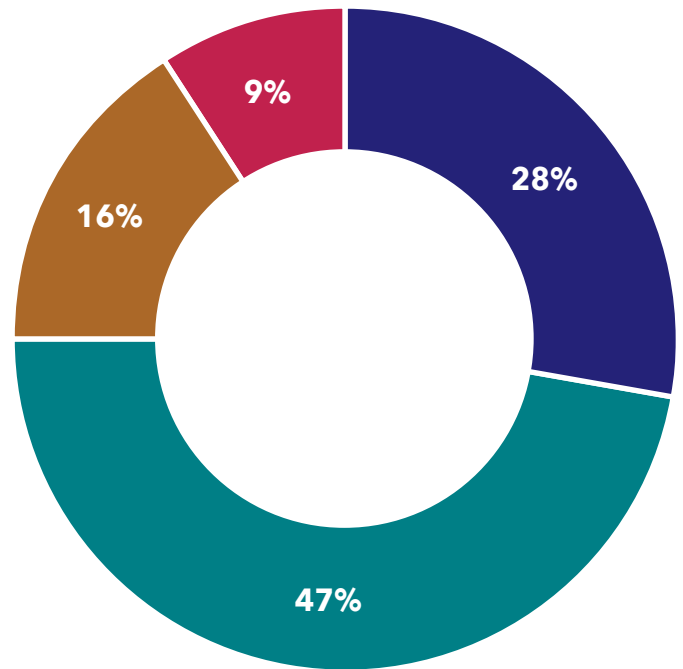
47% Somewhat easy

16% Neither easy nor difficult

9% Somewhat difficult

0% Extremely difficult

0% Not sure



? Overall, the experiences external audiences have when interacting with your district tend to:

19% Significantly strengthen trust

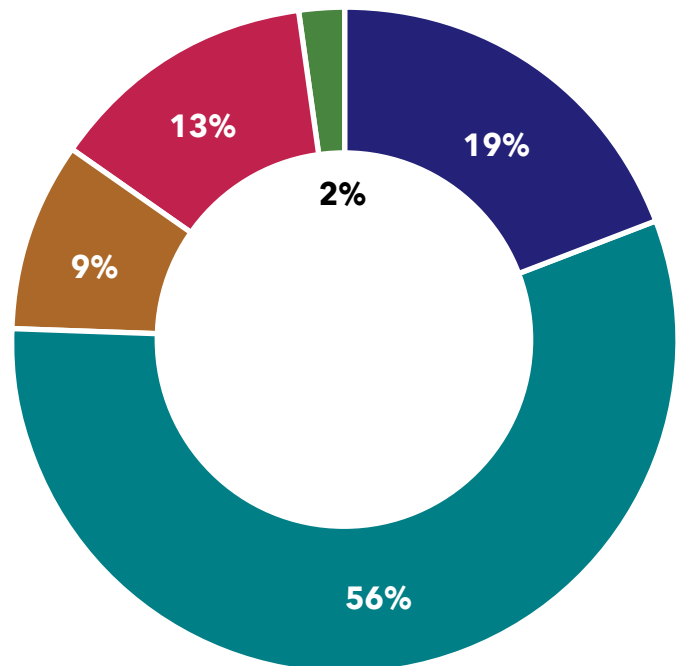
56% Somewhat strengthen trust

9% Have little to no impact on trust

13% Somewhat weaken trust

2% Significantly weaken trust

0% Not sure



? How effective is your district currently at providing consistent, positive interactions to external audiences?

9% Extremely effective

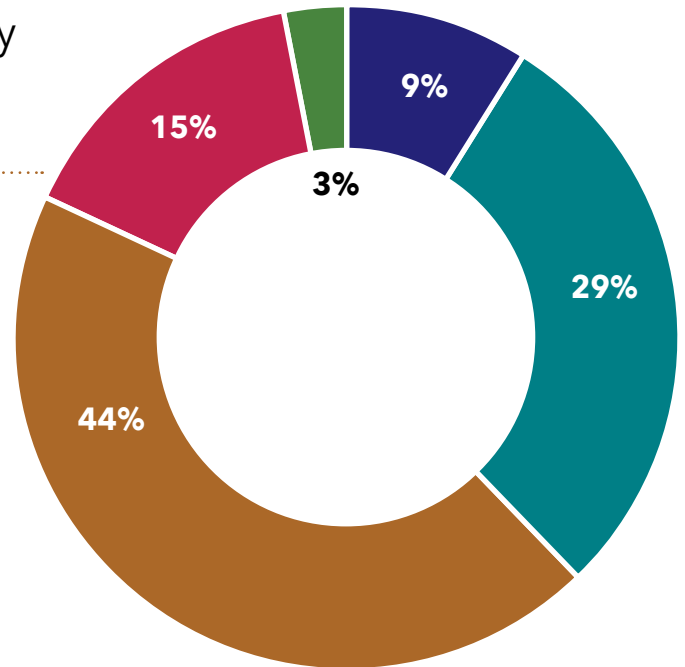
29% Very effective

44% Moderately effective

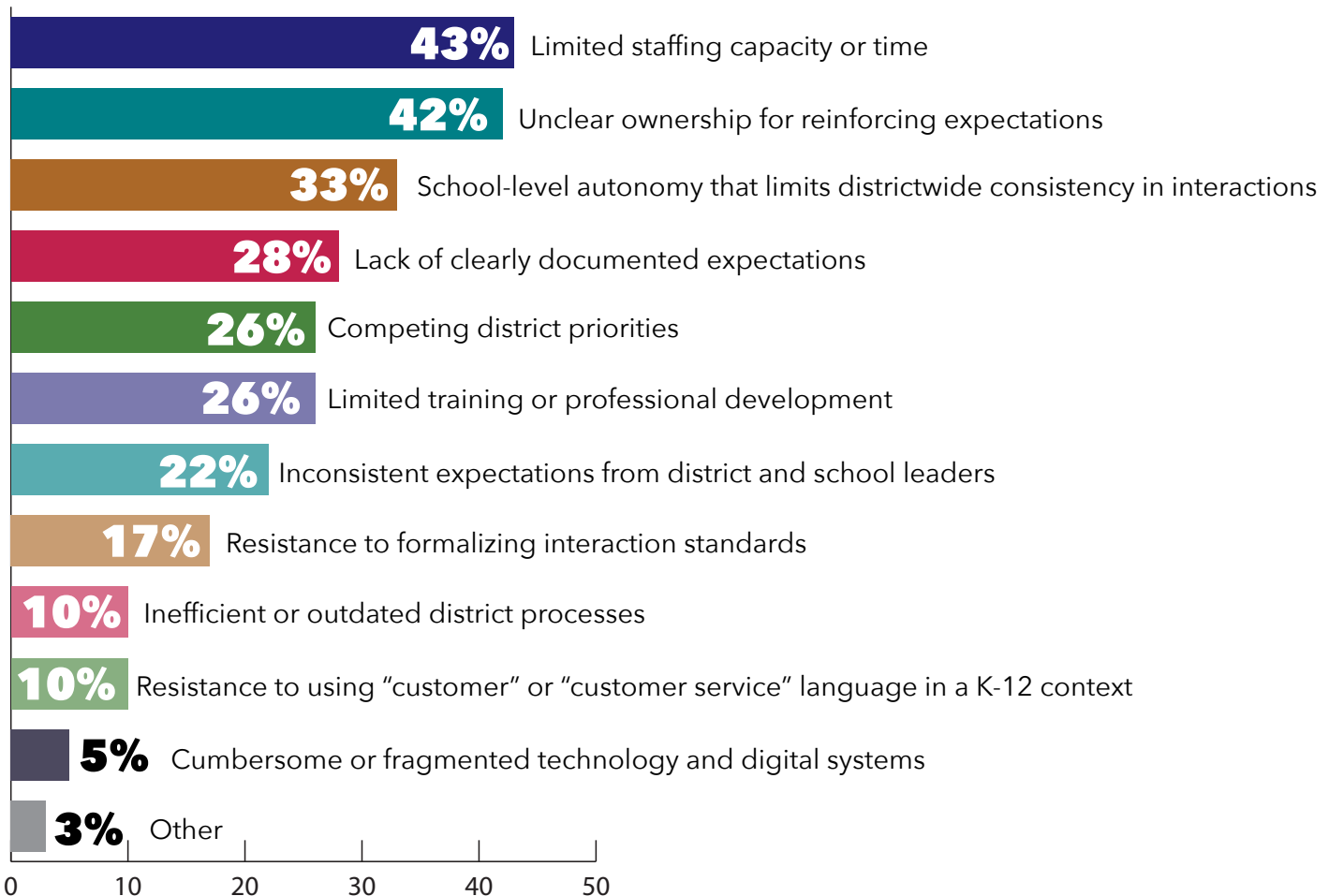
15% Slightly effective

3% Not effective at all

0% Not sure



? What are the greatest barriers to creating consistent, high-quality interactions with external audiences across your district? (*Select up to three.*)



? What role does the communications office play in shaping expectations for interactions with external audiences in your district?

41% Strategic partner

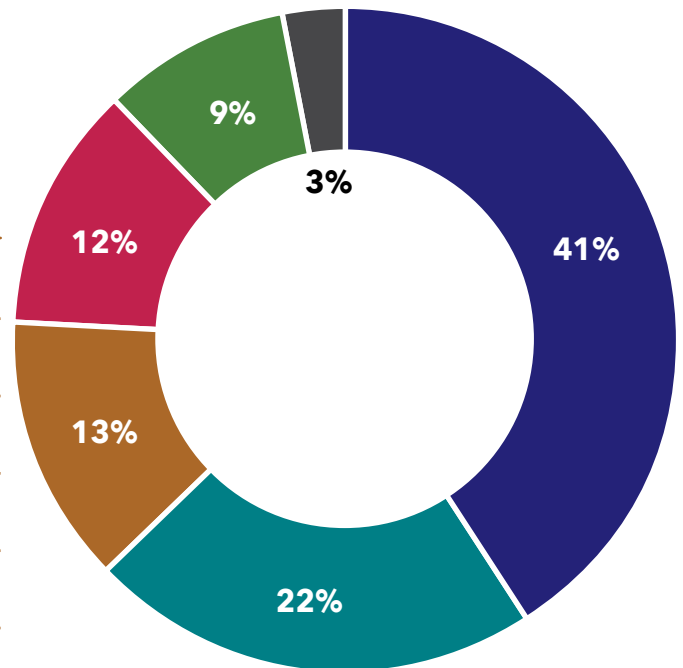
22% Support role

13% Limited involvement

12% Primary leadership role

9% No formal role

3% Not sure



? What resources would be most useful in helping you strengthen the quality and consistency of interactions with external audiences in your district? *(Select up to three.)*

61% Sample standards, policies or expectations districts can adopt or adapt

61% Training resources districts can use to support consistent, high-quality interactions across staff roles

52% Guidance for district leaders on reinforcing expectations for stakeholder interactions

25% Professional development for school communicators (e.g., webinars or workshops to build your own skills)

23% Tools for gathering feedback from stakeholders about their interactions with the district

23% Tools or frameworks for mapping and evaluating the experiences stakeholders have when navigating district systems or processes

19% Research on how stakeholder interactions influence trust and community relationships

18% Case studies or examples from other districts

3% Guidance for evaluating vendors or digital platforms based on usability or stakeholder experience

1% Other

? Is there anything else you would like to share about your district's approach to interactions with external audiences?

Open-ended question. Responses were reviewed and analyzed for themes but are not included in this appendix.

? Which of these is closest to your current job title?

47% Director of communications/
public information/community
relations

17% Communications specialist

12% Chief communications officer

10% Public information officer

1% Assistant superintendent

1% Digital media specialist

1% Marketing specialist

1% Social media manager

1% Superintendent

1% Webmaster

0% Chief of staff

0% Graphic designer

0% Photographer/Videographer

7% Other

? What category best describes your current employer?

87% K-12 or PreK-12 school
district

5% BOCES, county office of
education, intermediate
unit or regional education
agency

4% K-8 or PreK-8 school district

2% High school(s) district only

1% Charter school

1% Elementary school(s) district
only

0% Middle/Intermediate school(s)
district only

0% Private school

0% PR/Communications
agency

0% Education association or state
department

0% Self-employed

0% Vendor

? What is your district's/organization's student enrollment?

10% Fewer than 2,000

32% 2,000-4,999

22% 5,000-9,999

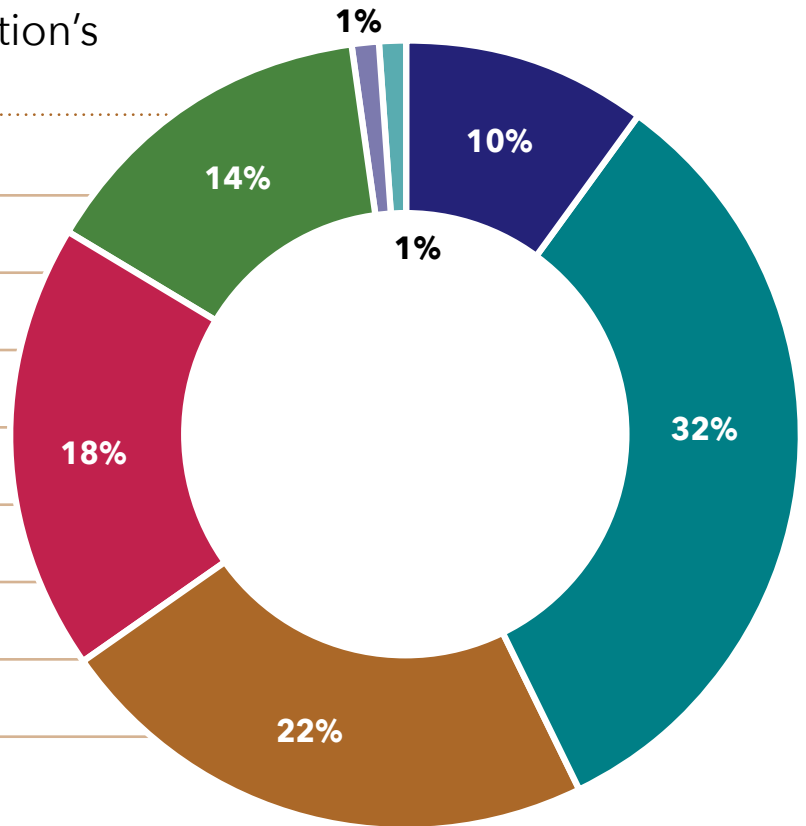
18% 10,000-24,999

14% 25,000-49,999

1% 50,000-75,000

1% 75,000-100,000

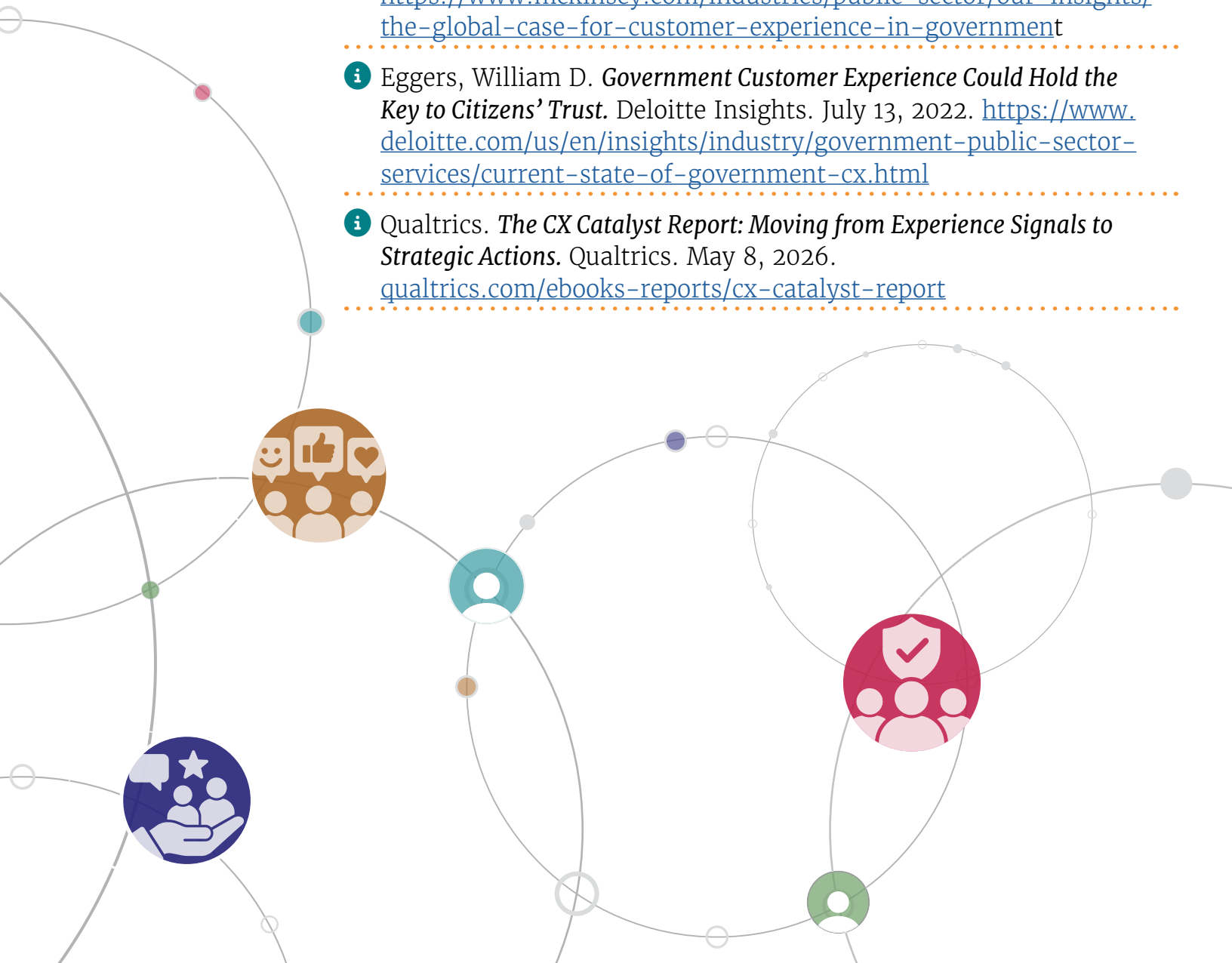
0% More than 100,000



APPENDIX:

Report Resources

-  Brown, Leonie. *What Is Customer Experience (CX)? Definition & How-to Guide*. Qualtrics. November 29, 2025.
qualtrics.com/articles/customer-experience/customer-experience
-  D'Emidio, Tony, Sarah Greenberg, Kevin Heidenreich, Julia Klier, Jonah Wagner and Thomas Weber. *The Global Case for Customer Experience in Government*. McKinsey & Company, September 10, 2019.
<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/the-global-case-for-customer-experience-in-government>
-  Eggers, William D. *Government Customer Experience Could Hold the Key to Citizens' Trust*. Deloitte Insights. July 13, 2022. <https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/government-public-sector-services/current-state-of-government-cx.html>
-  Qualtrics. *The CX Catalyst Report: Moving from Experience Signals to Strategic Actions*. Qualtrics. May 8, 2026.
qualtrics.com/ebooks-reports/cx-catalyst-report





P.O. Box 1493, Rockville, MD 20849

301-519-0496 | nspra.org



333 W. River Park Drive, Provo, UT 84604

800-339-8865 | qualtrics.com

