

ISLA Research Report

SEPTEMBER 2021

COVID-19 & ISLAMIC SCHOOLS: 2020-2021 YEAR IN REVIEW

THE ISLAMIC SCHOOLS LEAGUE OF AMERICA

Research to Resources



SEPTEMBER 2021 | WWW.THEISLA.ORG | INFO@THEISLA.ORG



INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

The Islamic Schools League of America (ISLA) is dedicated to carrying out critical research on Islamic education and full-time Islamic schools. We hope that ISLA's research 1) informs data-based decision-making at the local and federal level, 2) contributes to the development of resources that help Islamic schools respond to emerging needs and opportunities, and 3) helps tell the story of U.S. Islamic schools to a wider audience.

Since April 2020, ISLA has been collecting data to gauge the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on U.S. full-time Islamic schools. A survey was administered between October-November 2020 to understand its initial impact on student enrollment, fundraising and instructional methods. You can read the report featuring findings from that survey [here](#).

This current report presents data from a recent survey administered between June-July 2021. This report helps us understand how the pandemic impacted Islamic schools over the entire course of the '20-'21 academic year. It also asks respondents to indicate their anticipated challenges for the upcoming school year ('21-'22).

SAMPLING PROCEDURES

ISLA used its Islamic school database to solicit participation from principals of U.S. full-time Islamic schools. In addition to directly emailing the survey to approximately 300 qualifying schools, the survey was also shared via two communication networks catering to the targeted population. In order to avoid oversampling, only one administrator per school was asked to respond to the survey.



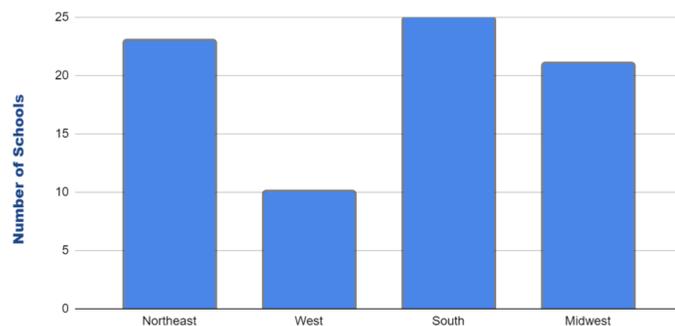
INTRODUCTION

TOTAL

The survey was limited to one principal or head of school of each full-time Islamic school in the United States. A total of **79** responses were received that met the criteria for this survey.

REGION

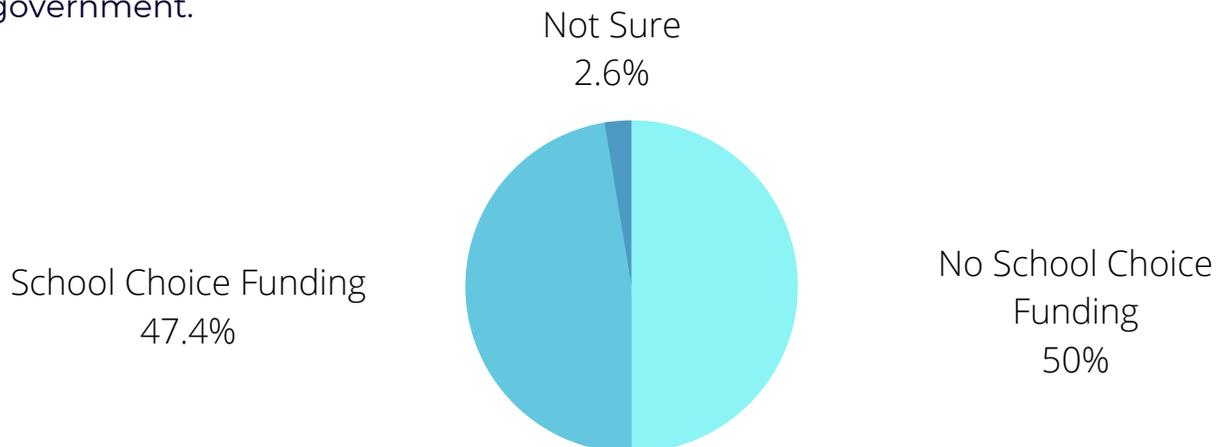
Respondents represented Islamic schools from across the United States.



ISLAMIC SCHOOLS IN STATES WITH SCHOOL CHOICE FUNDING

Education funding is largely decentralized in the United States. Some states support school choice options for parents by providing vouchers, tax credits or scholarships for qualifying students that may be used towards or reimburse expenses for private school tuition.

The responses to this survey indicated a near-even split of Islamic schools located in states that provide vouchers, tax credits or scholarships, with 47.4% indicating that such financial assistance is available from their respective state government.





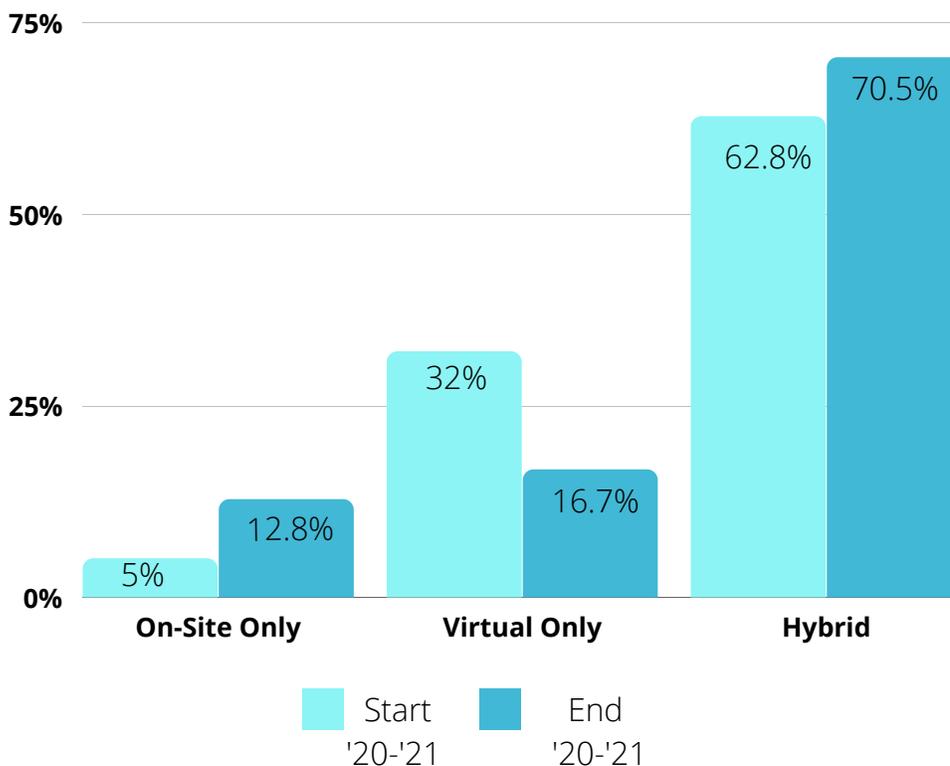
INSTRUCTIONAL IMPACT

INSTRUCTIONAL IMPACT

Respondents were asked to identify what form of instruction their school was offering at the beginning and end of the school year: on-site only, virtual-only, or hybrid (a combination of online and on-site learning).

SHIFTING INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS

The majority of Islamic schools began the academic year with hybrid instruction (62.8%). The next most common method was exclusively offering virtual instruction (32.1%). By the end of the school year, school offering only on-site instruction more than doubled (5.1% vs. 12.8%). Still, the majority offered a hybrid model (70.5%). The percentage of schools offering exclusively virtual instruction was reduced by nearly half from the beginning of the academic year to the end (32.1% vs. 16.7%).

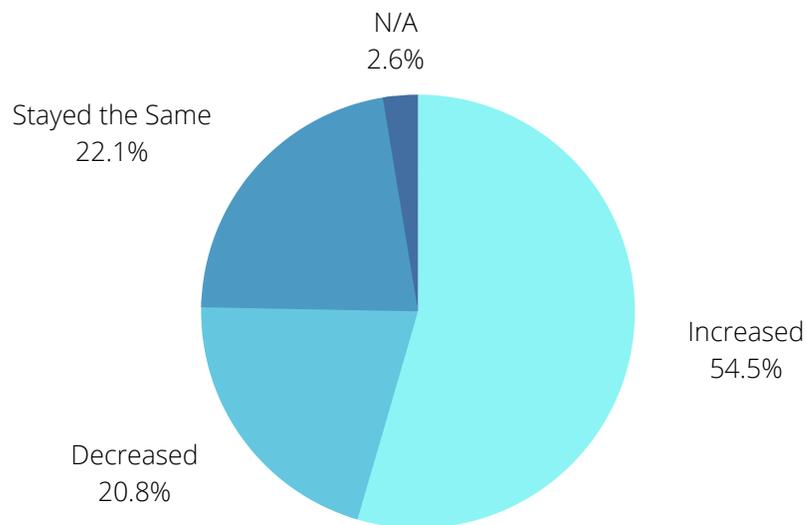




INSTRUCTIONAL IMPACT

ON-SITE ATTENDANCE

Amongst schools offering an in-person learning option, the percentage of students attending on-site also gradually increased over the year. Specifically, nearly 55% percent of respondents indicated that as the school year progressed, their on-site attendance gradually increased.





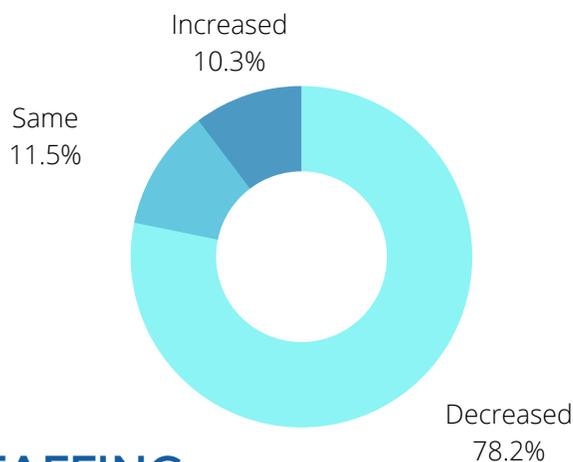
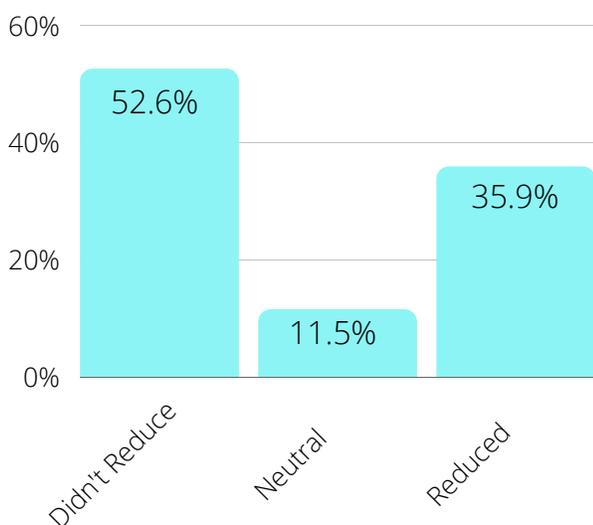
FINANCIAL IMPACT

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A number of survey items requested respondents to report on aspects that provide insight into the overall financial health of the Islamic school. Enrollment trends, staffing cuts, receipt of federal financial aid and fundraising goals were all included in this portion of the survey. Some of the survey items in this section included Likert scale responses to gauge the financial impact on Islamic schools. In response to specific statements, respondents had to select between the following options: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.

ENROLLMENT

According to participants' responses, the majority of Islamic schools experienced a drop in enrollment in the '20-21 school year. The data from this survey indicates that 78% of Islamic schools experienced enrollment declines.



STAFFING

Respondents were asked to respond to the following statement:

In 2020-2021, our school had to reduce staff to meet budget constraints.

Responses indicated that almost 53% of Islamic schools did not have to reduce their staff due to budget cuts. Approximately 36% indicated that they did have to reduce staff due to their budget.

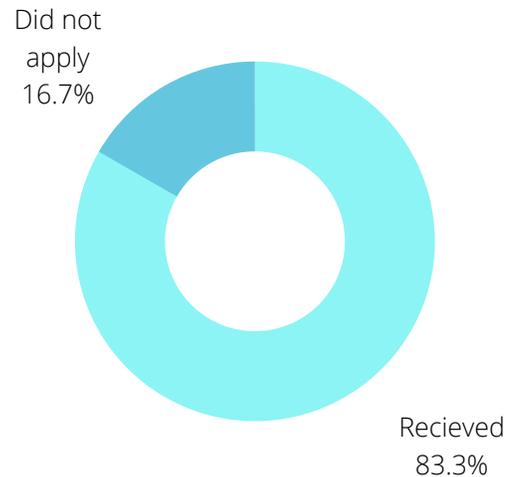


FINANCIAL IMPACT

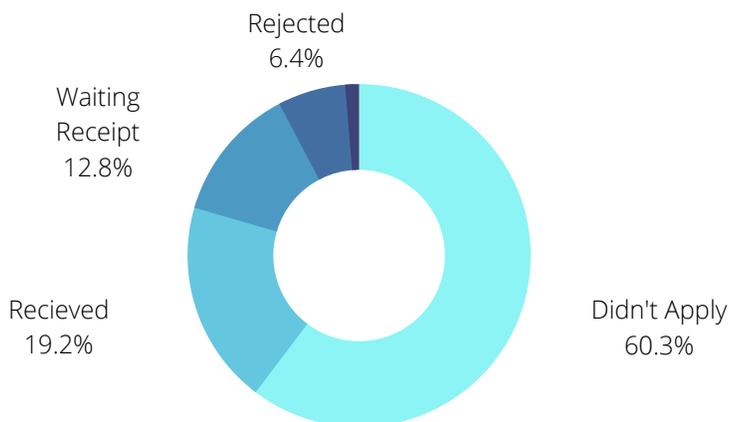
PPP FUNDING

The Payment Protection Program (PPP) is a federal program designed to support small businesses that suffered revenue/income loss to help pay employee wages, rent/mortgage and/or eligible utilities. While the PPP funds are loans, the borrowed amount can be forgiven if applied towards eligible costs. The majority of Islamic schools (83.3%) applied for and received PPP loans, while the remainder did not apply for this funding.

PPP Funding



EANS Funding



EANS FUNDING

Another federal relief program initiated to mitigate the financial impact of COVID-19 is Emergency Assistance to Non-Public Schools (EANS). Per federal regulations, businesses could not receive both PPP and EANS. According to this survey, approximately 19% of Islamic schools received EANS funds.



FINANCIAL IMPACT

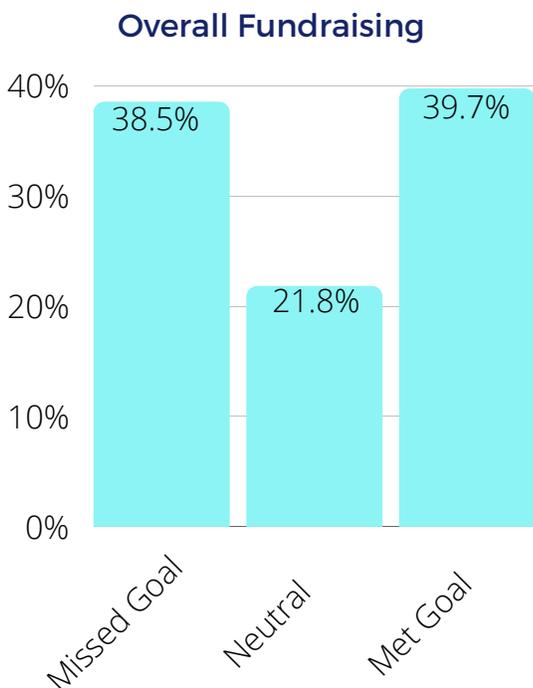
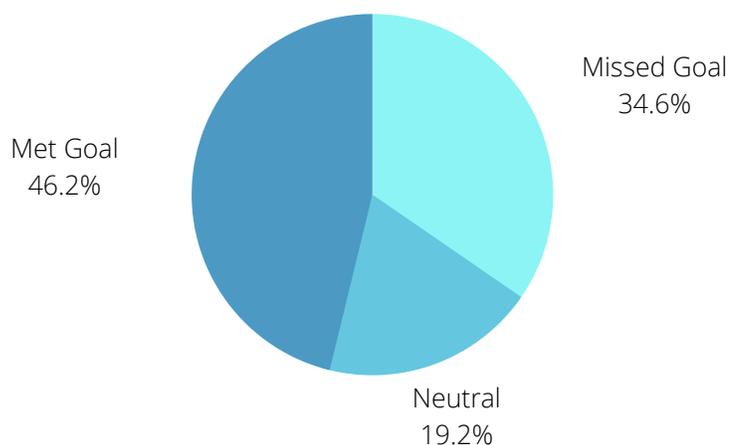
RAMADAN FUNDRAISING

Administrators were asked to respond to the following statement:

In 2020-2021, our school was able to meet our Ramadan fundraising goals.

The data indicate that 46% of Islamic schools achieved their Ramadan fundraising targets. In contrast, 35% of the schools did not reach their fundraising goals during Ramadan.

Ramadan Fundraising



OVERALL SCHOOL FUNDRAISING GOALS

Respondents were asked to respond to the following statement:

In 2020-2021, our school was able to meet our overall fundraising goals.

The survey found that nearly 40% of Islamic schools achieved their overall fundraising targets. In contrast, almost an equal amount, about 39%, did not reach their fundraising goals during the school year 2020-2021.



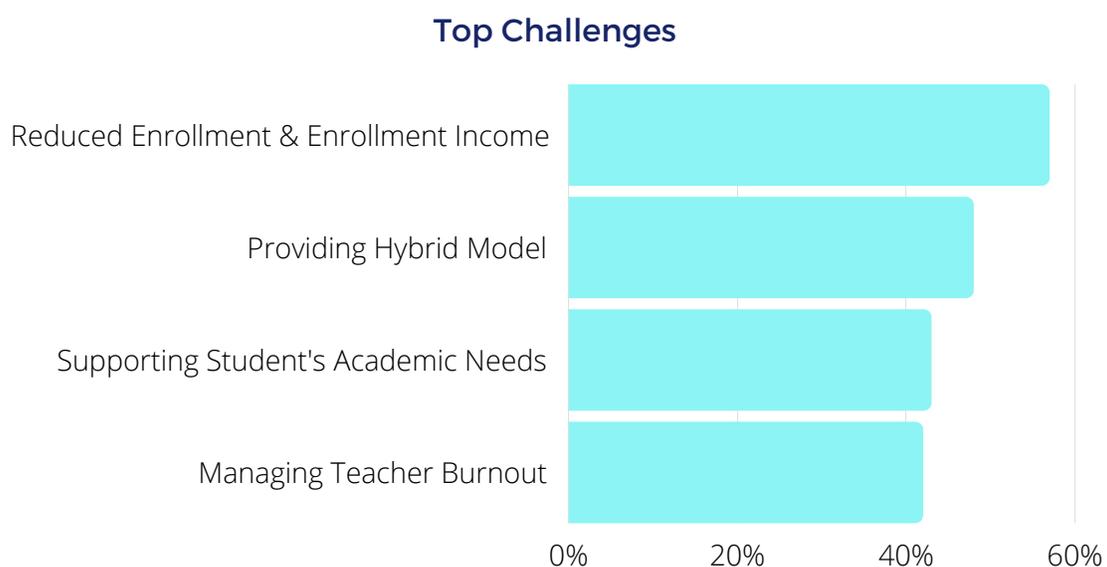
CHALLENGES

CHALLENGES

ISLA wanted to understand the leading challenges that Islamic schools faced during the 2020-2021 academic year as understood by the Islamic school leader. In addition, ISLA sought to understand the top challenges that respondents anticipated facing in the upcoming academic year 2021-2022, both for staff and as administrators.

TOP CHALLENGES: 2020-2021

School leaders were asked to list the top three challenges faced by their schools during the 2020-2021 school year. Reduced enrollment and enrollment income were the most frequently selected options, selected by 57% of the respondents, followed by offering a high-quality hybrid model (48%), and adequately supporting student's academic needs (43%), closely followed by managing teacher burnout (42%).





CHALLENGES

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES: 2021-2022

School leaders were asked to name their top three priorities for professional development for the upcoming year for their staff. The most frequently selected option was addressing learning loss, selected by 53% of the participants. The second most selected was identifying ways to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners (51%), along with ways to improve students' motivation and engagement in the classroom (51%). The next top need was integrating social emotional learning (SEL) into the curriculum (34%).

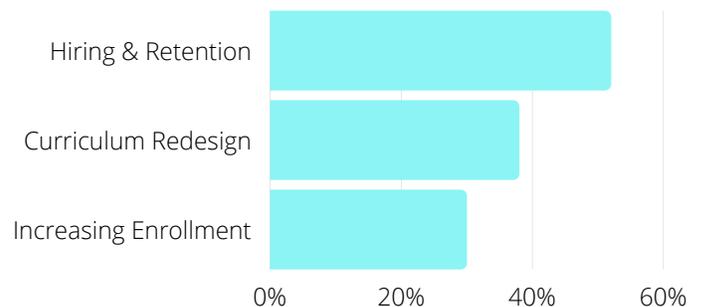
PD Priorities for Staff



PRINCIPALS' TOP NEEDS FOR NEXT ACADEMIC YEAR

School leaders selected their top three needs for the upcoming academic year. Among the most frequently selected options were hiring and retaining highly qualified staff, selected by 52% of the participants, followed by curriculum redesign (38%) and strategies to increase enrollment (30%).

PD Priorities for Principals





DISCUSSION

INSTRUCTIONAL PIVOTS: ISLAMIC SCHOOLS RESPOND TO COMMUNITY NEEDS

The results of this survey indicate that during COVID-19, Islamic schools have been responsive to their community's needs while adhering to their local health department guidelines and working within the limits of their school's resources. This is especially clear when examining the data on schools' instructional methods and the ways these shifted through the academic year.

When the '20-'21 school year began, COVID-19 vaccines were still not available and many schools were reluctant to take on the associated risks of in-person learning. As such, only 5% of respondents stated that their Islamic school offered "in-person only" instruction while nearly one-third offered instruction exclusively online and 62% offered a hybrid option. In comparison, 74% of the largest 100 public school districts in the country began the school year with remote-only instruction (read [more](#)). Therefore, while a limited number of Islamic schools offered exclusive in-person instruction at the start of the year, they were still more likely than large public school districts to have an in-person option available.

By the close of the '20-'21 academic year, 70% of Islamic schools responding to the survey offered hybrid instruction, an increase of nearly 8% over the academic year. The percentage of in-person only instruction more than doubled to almost 13%. In order to safely provide an in-person learning option, the cumulative 83% of Islamic schools that offered in-person instruction (whether exclusively in-person or hybrid) had to invest in sanitation equipment, masks and improved classroom and school ventilation. Furthermore, COVID-19 testing, communication and quarantine procedures had to be established and followed, in line with all local and federal health guidance. Islamic schools' notable efforts to offer an in-person option demonstrate their commitment to the social-emotional needs of their students, as the American Academy of Pediatrics and others have noted the importance of in-person learning on student well-being (read [more](#)).



DISCUSSION

NAVIGATING FINANCIAL CHALLENGES: FEDERAL RELIEF

Islamic schools, just like private schools across the country, rely on tuition from student enrollment as a major income stream. With at least 78% of Islamic schools having experienced a decline in enrollment in '20-'21, the financial impact of the pandemic on Islamic schools was wide-spread.

Yet, the data from this study shows that the majority of Islamic schools were able to tap into federal relief funds, especially the Paycheck Protection Program, with 85% stating they applied for the funding. A complementary percentage (19%) reported receiving EANS funding. The CATO Institute report on the impact of COVID-19 on private schools cites private schools' ability to tap into the PPP and other federal relief packages as one reason they were not as negatively impacted as many originally feared (read [more](#)).

Furthermore, fundraising during Ramadan was relatively successful for nearly half of the Islamic schools (46%). Slightly less reported that they were able to achieve their overall fundraising goals for the year (40%). Yet, without comparative data from previous years, it is difficult to pinpoint the extent to which the pandemic was a factor impacting schools' missed Ramadan and overall fundraising targets.

A SOLUTION AND A CHALLENGE: HYBRID INSTRUCTION

The second oft-cited challenge faced this school year, after decreased enrollment, was hybrid instruction. This mode of instruction was eventually offered by 70% of the Islamic schools responding to this survey. While hybrid instruction addressed a need to offer an in-person option, it also presented unique challenges, including finding appropriate software and hardware to enable simultaneous teaching of in-person and online students and adopting instructional methodologies that could work on both platforms. Maintaining engagement and ensuring fidelity on assessments were additional challenges administrators and teachers faced.



DISCUSSION

Relatedly, the two next biggest challenges faced by schools in '20-'21 academic year were addressing students' learning needs and managing teacher burnout. Existing student learning needs were negatively compounded by the barriers and distractions present in online or hybrid instruction, in addition to rising emotional challenges many students faced throughout the pandemic ([read more](#)). Low teacher morale was another widespread and growing concern experienced by educators nationwide as the pandemic dragged on. *Education Week*, for example, found that 85% of teachers reported low morale in late October 2020 ([read more](#)).

Overwhelmingly, school leaders predicted the top professional development needs for their teachers to include addressing learning loss (53%), providing differentiated instruction (51%) and increasing student engagement and motivation (51%). These topics all appear strongly related to one another and to the year and a half of disrupted schooling that occurred during the pandemic, resulting in stagnating interest, motivation and academic gains for many students.

CONCLUSION: THE PANDEMIC PERSISTS, AND SO DO ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

When Islamic school leaders responded to this survey in June-July 2021, many likely envisioned a full in-person return, especially as COVID-19 vaccinations were now widely available, including for individuals aged 12 and older. As the fall of 2021 neared, however, it became increasingly clear that pandemic would persist.

Yet, based on the data presented in this survey and our [previous survey](#), it is very likely that Islamic schools, too, will persist. While this upcoming academic year will likely remain impacted by the continued presence of COVID-19, Islamic school leaders and teachers are more experienced, adept and equipped to weather this storm in a manner that responds to the multifaceted needs of their staff, students and families.



ACTION ITEMS

WHAT NEXT? TAKING ACTION TO STRENGTHEN ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

- Islamic school **supporters need to actively advocate for federal and state level relief funding** for their students and schools.
 - For example, they can establish relationships with and write to their district representatives and state ombudsman, join their State CAPE, and/or become a member of ISLA which serves on the national CAPE board to communicate relevant data and trends to enable effective advocacy for Islamic schools.
- Islamic school leaders should **continue to participate in ISLA's surveys** so data is available to communicate to the legislature and government officials to demonstrate Islamic schools' need for funding and support.
- Islamic school boards must continue to creatively problem solve ways to close their budget through fundraising and **financial sustainability projects**.
 - For example, some Islamic schools are now marketing their educational services outside of their locality through hybrid or remote options for students who live beyond their locality.
- Islamic schools must ensure they provide a **unique learning experience** for their students to **demonstrate their value proposition** to current and prospective families.
 - They should maintain small class sizes, attend to students' social-emotional and spiritual needs, and create differentiated and individualized learning paths
 - Additionally, they should center Islamic values, character and ethos to help Islamic schools simultaneously deliver on their mission and stand out as a unique and worthy educational option for families.



ACTION ITEMS

- Islamic Schools should **adhere to as many risk mitigation procedures and policies** as possible during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the health and safety of students, staff and broader community, such as requiring vaccines for all eligible staff and students, and face masks for all students, staff and visitors age two and older.
 - ISLA's [joint statement](#) with the National Muslim COVID-19 Taskforce and National Black Muslim COVID Coalition on Safe School Reopenings has many practical recommendations.
- Islamic school leaders should **identify teachers' professional development needs by directly asking** them how they need to be supported and use applicable federal, state or school-related funds to implement the training.
- Islamic school leaders should strive to mitigate staff burnout by **cultivating a school culture that promotes work-life balance, providing planning periods and paid sick days and reducing non-instructional responsibilities**, such as bus or lunch duty, by tapping into vaccinated adult volunteers.

Finally, we recognize that the responsibilities shouldered by Islamic school leaders are heavy and the constraints within which the schools operate are numerous. As such, each Islamic school leader must also prioritize self-care as it relates to their own physical, spiritual and emotional needs.

The results of this survey illustrate a network of Islamic schools in the United States that continue to be agile and resourceful. ISLA is honored to partner with Islamic schools as they strive to fulfill their missions during these most challenging of circumstances and look forward to continuing this work into the future.

ISLA would like to give special thanks to Dr. Samar Al-Majaideh for her support with data analysis on this report.