

Complexity and Quality

Survey finds low-quality instructional materials are used to address complex topics in the classroom



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is not always easy to teach students about topics like LGBTQ issues, politics and race. Subjects like these can be complicated and divisive even as they lead to critically important results like polishing students' critical thinking skills or preparing young people to make informed decisions at the polls. In order to address these complicated topics, teachers need the support of top-notch instructional materials that are standards-aligned, accurate, and fair. Yet it is unclear whether teachers are actually addressing subjects like race, much less whether or not they have the instructional resources that they need to do so. In the summer of 2019, the Education Week Research Center, in partnership with Newsela, set out to explore these questions with a nationally-representative online survey of more than 1,000 teachers, principals, and district leaders. The survey found that complex topics are common in American classrooms. Educators overwhelmingly believe that learning about subjects like politics and race is important for a variety of reasons including preparing students to participate in a democratic society, improving critical thinking, and addressing misconceptions, anxieties, and fears. Yet most say teachers are simply not well-prepared to address complex topics. The majority also agree that

better instructional materials would help teachers do a better job. Yet educators assign mediocre ratings to the resources they use to teach students about complex subject matter. A majority say their materials are outdated, inaccurate, unfair, and insufficiently differentiated to meet students' individual needs. In addition, these resources are time-consuming to find-the average educator reports spending three hours per week seeking them out. Recommendations for improving instruction related to complex topics include selecting and making available a consistent set of high-quality instructional materials that truly meet student and teacher needs.

INTRODUCTION

National politics. LGBTQ-related issues. Race.

These are just a few of the complex topics that teachers today find themselves addressing in the classroom. Sometimes such topics are relevant to the curriculum. Sometimes they are relevant to students. And sometimes they are required by the district or the state.

However, it's not necessarily clear how often such topics are taught in classrooms or whether educators are well-prepared to do so. Nor is it apparent whether educators and parents believe

In the summer of 2019, the Education Week Research Center, in partnership with Newsela, set out to explore to these questions and others related to teaching nine complex topics.

- Reproductive rights
- Climate change
- Immigration
- LGBTQ issues
- Media literacy/fake news
- National politics
- Race/ethnicity
- School safety
- Social-emotional learning

The methodology was a nationally-representative online survey of 1,123 educators including 452 teachers in grades 4-12, 483 principals, and 188 district leaders. This report summarizes the results of that survey, followed by recommendations for improving how teachers address complex topics in the classroom.

such topics should be addressed, much less when they should be introduced and why.

If provocative topics are to be addressed in the classroom, it is critical that educators use top-notch instructional resources to inform students about them in a fair, balanced, accurate, rigorous, and standards-aligned manner that takes into account students' individual needs.

To what extent are such resources available and in use?

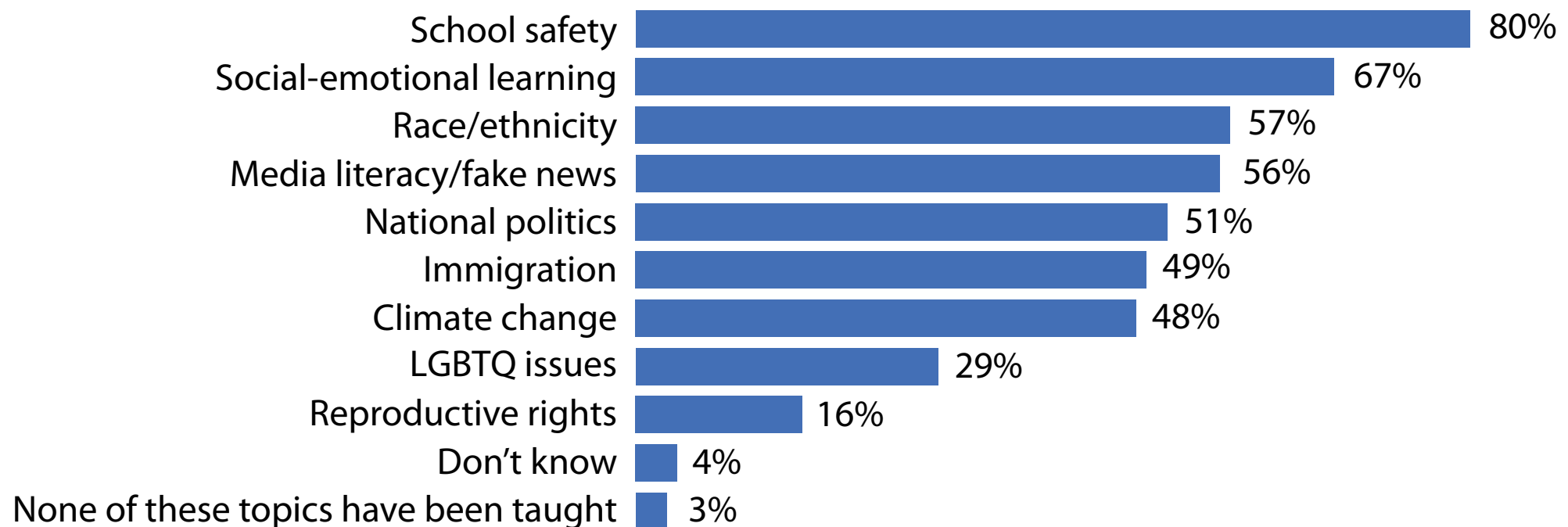
Again, it is not clear.

HOW COMMON ARE COMPLEX TOPICS IN THE CLASSROOM?

Complex topics are already being taught

The nine topics that were the focus of this survey are definitely complex. But most educators say most of these topics are currently being taught. High school history teachers are most likely to teach the topics—a majority had taught each of the nine topics in the past year with more than three quarters addressing national politics, immigration, race/ethnicity and/or media literacy/fake news.

Select all that apply: In the past year, I/our teachers have taught students about the following topics:



WHY TEACH COMPLEX TOPICS?

Mandates

In some cases, state or local mandates require educators to teach about complex topics. For example, 83 percent of educators say they are required to teach about school safety. And more than 1 in 3 are required to teach about ethnicity/race and national politics.

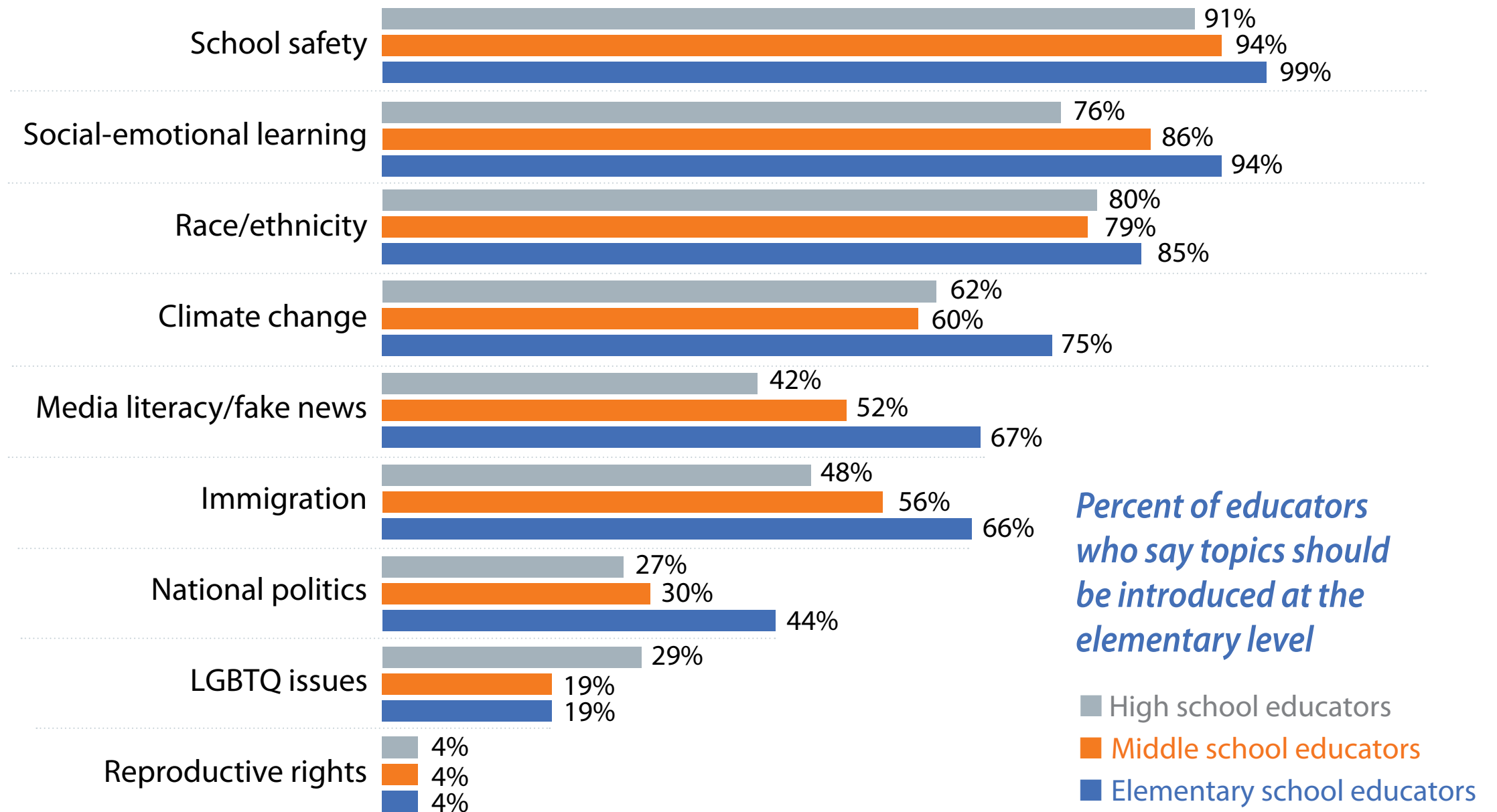
Educators support teaching complex topics. Here's why

The vast majority of educators say students should learn about each of the nine complex topics in school.

Percent of educators who say students should learn about this topic at school

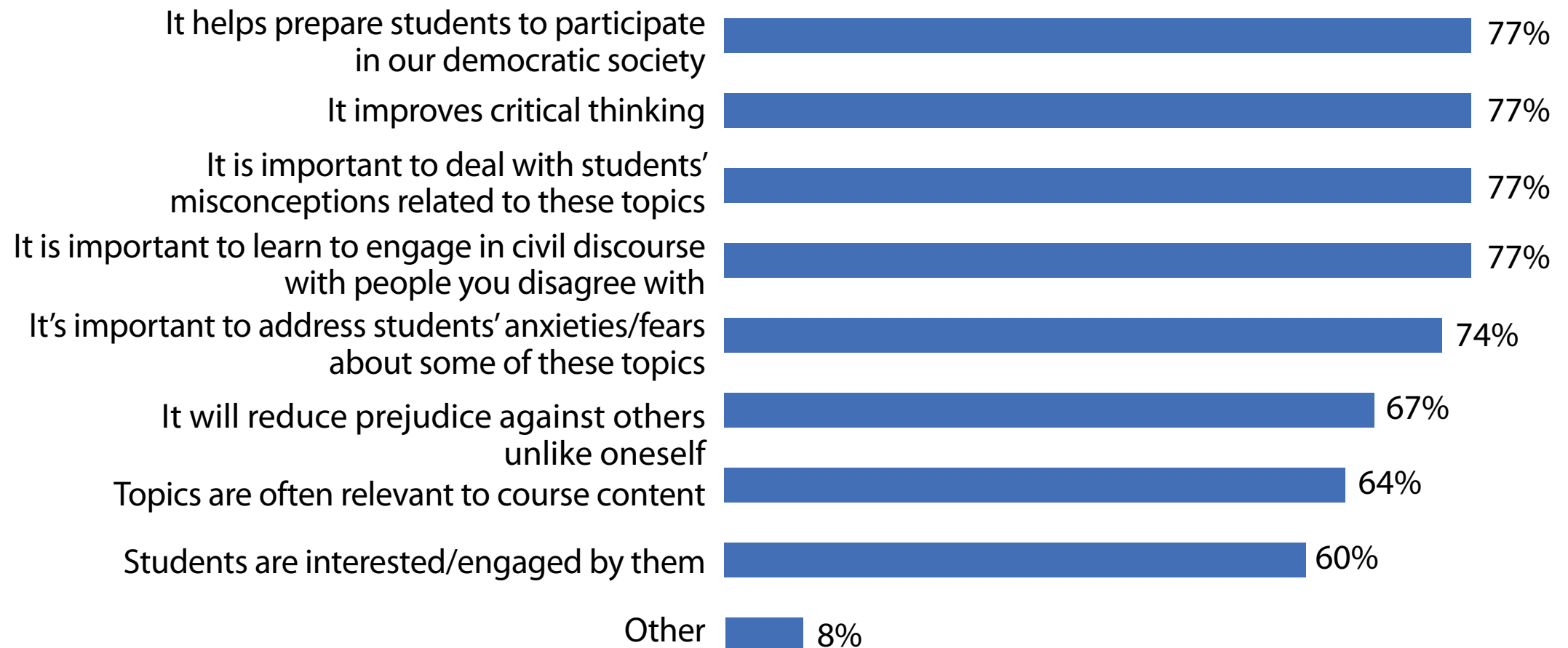


In fact, most educators say students should be introduced to most topics in elementary school, with elementary educators more likely than their secondary peers to support teaching most of the complex topics to students in grades K-5.



Why do educators support teaching students about complex topics? For one thing, most say that learning about subjects such as immigration and climate change help prepare students to participate in our democratic society. The vast majority also believe that it's important to teach about complex topics because such instruction improves critical thinking, addresses students' fears and misconceptions and helps young people learn to engage in civil discourse with people they do not necessarily agree with.

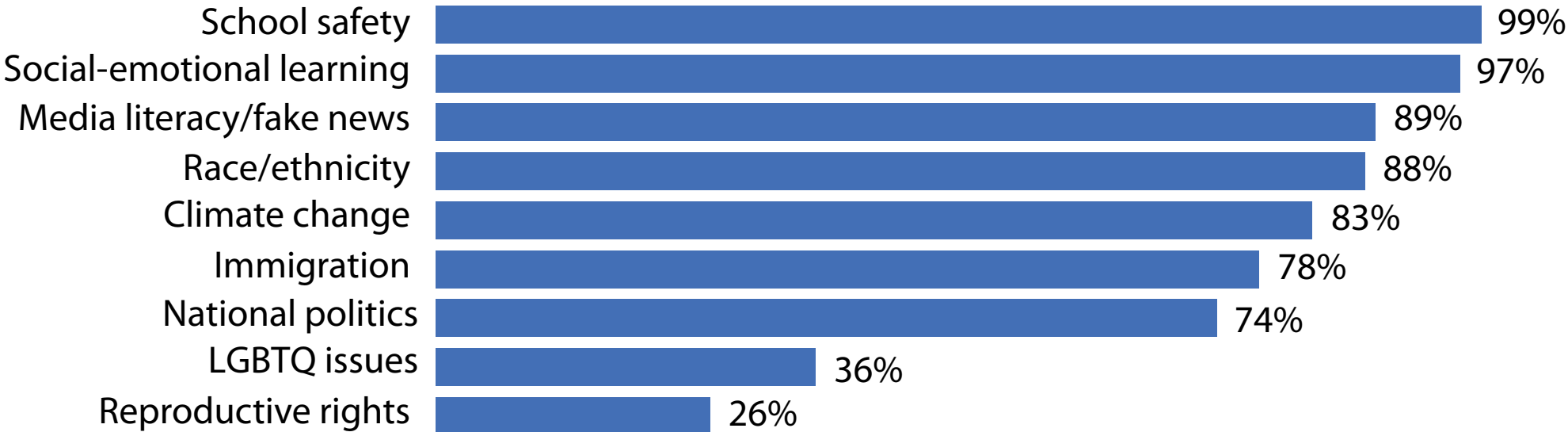
Reasons why educators believe students should learn about complex topics



Educators: Parents support teaching about complex topics

A final reason to teach complex topics is that parents support it. Most educators report that most parents say most of the complex topics belong in the classroom. LGBTQ issues and reproductive rights are the exceptions.

Percent of parents who educators say support teaching about:

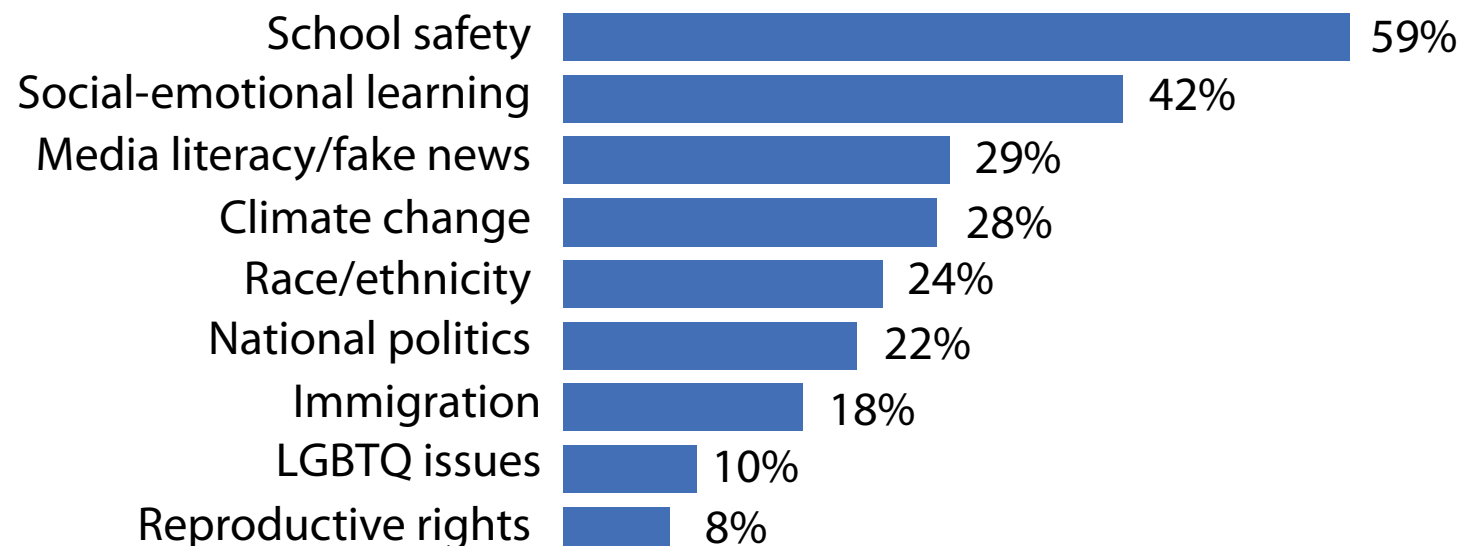


MAJOR CHALLENGES

Are teachers prepared to teach complex topics?

Teachers are addressing complex topics because they believe it benefits students. Parents want their children to learn about complex subjects in the classroom. Yet most educators say that the teachers in their district or school are not well-prepared to address eight of the nine topics included on the survey. For example, just 8 percent say local teachers are well-prepared to address reproductive rights. Ten percent perceive that teachers are well-prepared to explain LGBTQ issues. And 18 percent believe their colleagues are well-prepared to teach students about immigration.

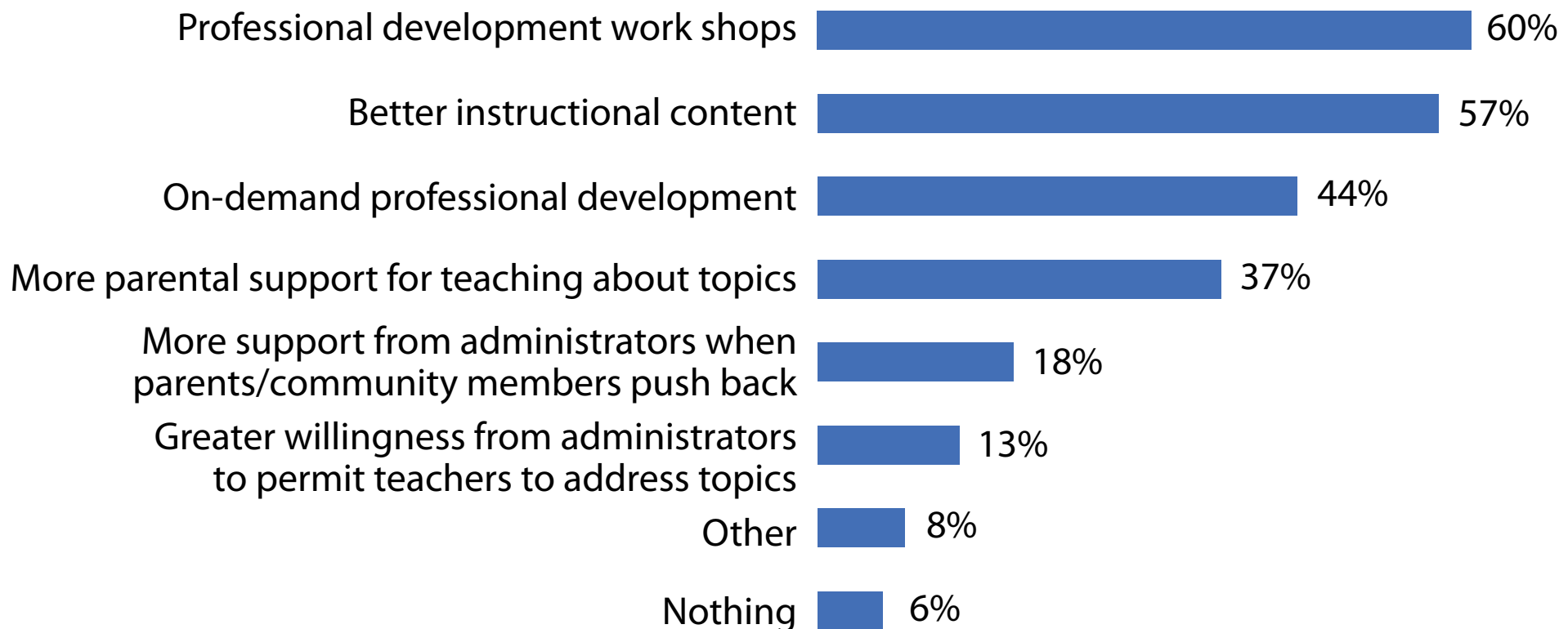
Teachers in my district/school are well-prepared to teach about the following topics:



Would better instructional resources improve instruction?

What, then, might improve instruction? Professional development, for one thing. But more than half of educators have a need that is very basic: They say that better instructional content would help teachers do a better job teaching complex subjects. The need is especially acute at the elementary level.

Percent of educators who say these factors would help them do a better job teaching complex topics



PROBLEMS WITH INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

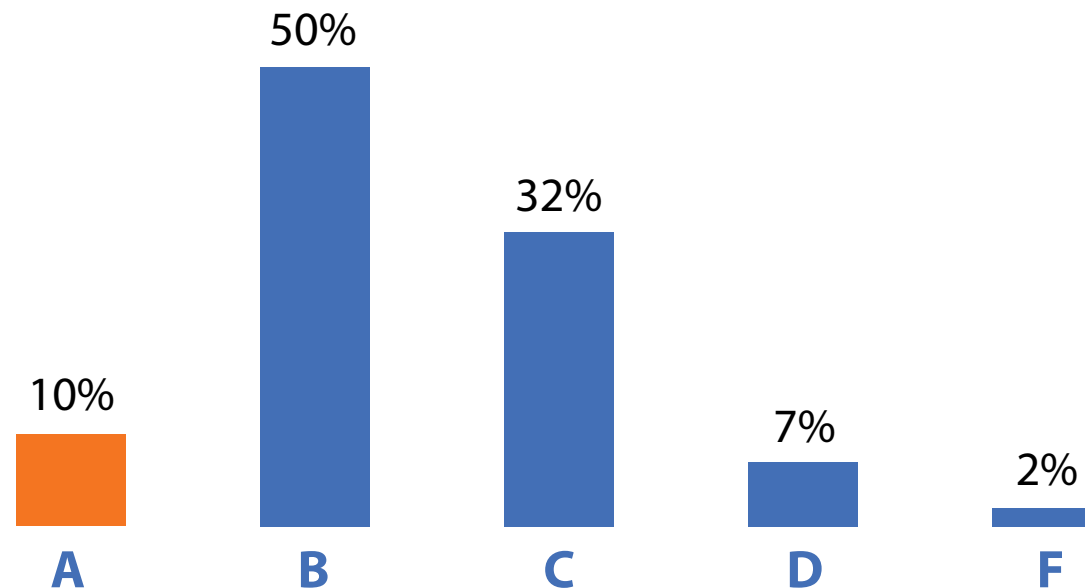
Current instructional materials receive mediocre ratings

When it comes to addressing super-sensitive issues such as immigration or race, mediocre instructional material just doesn't make the cut. Teachers need topnotch materials, resources that go above and beyond by presenting a fair, accurate, up-to-date, rigorous, differentiated, and standards-aligned portrait. In short, they need A-plus resources.

Yet when asked to rate instructional materials they used to teach complex topics, just 10 percent of educators assigned an A. The most common grade was B. And nearly 1 in 3 educators assigned a C.

These mediocre ratings raise concerns, given the importance and sensitivity of subject matters such as LGBTQ issues, national politics, climate change, immigration and race.

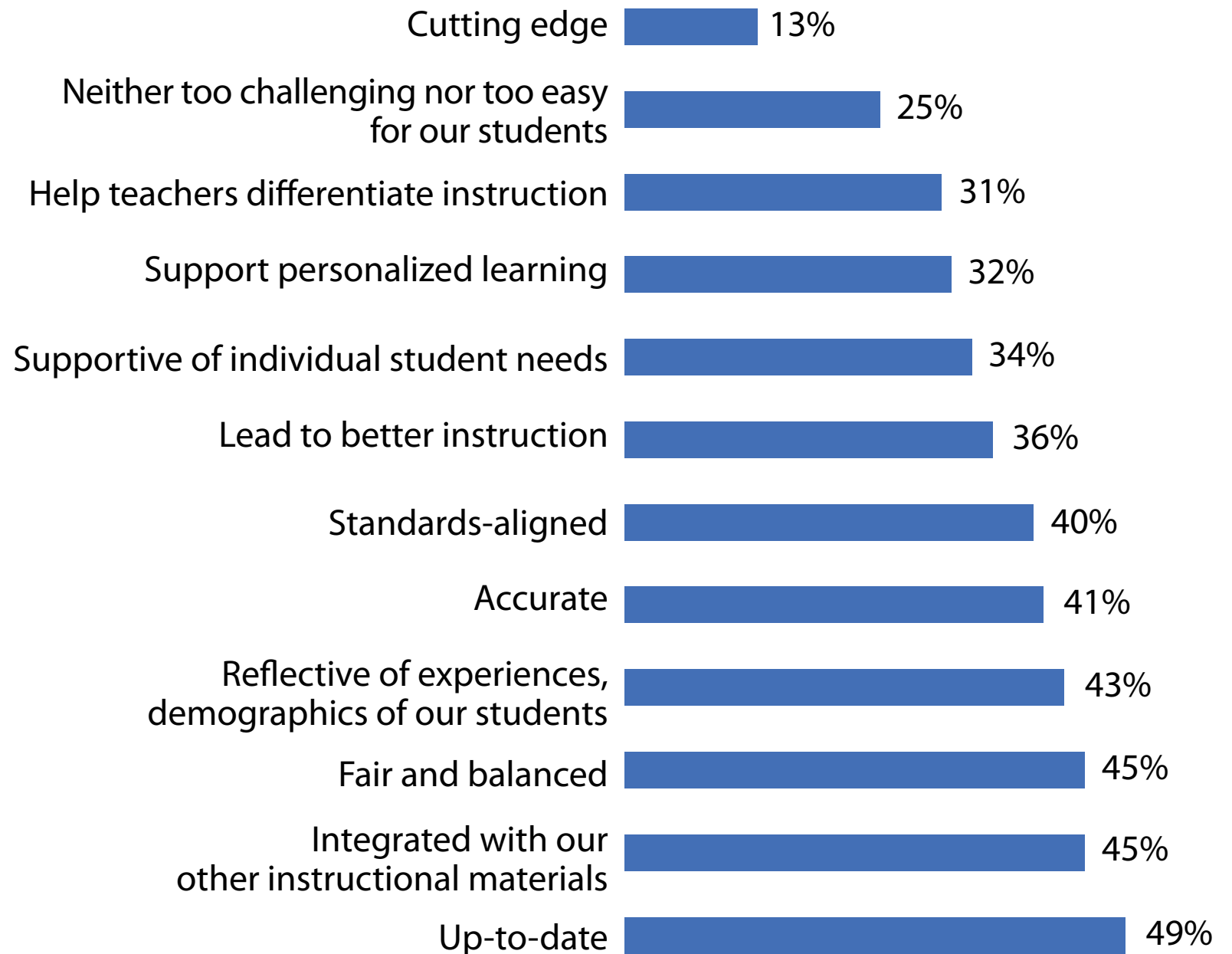
Percent of educators who would assign each letter grade to instructional materials used to teach complex topics



Instructional materials aren't up-to-date, accurate, differentiated or standards-aligned

Educators identified multiple problems with the instructional materials they use to teach complex topics. Less than half say these materials are fair, balanced, accurate, standards-aligned or up-to-date. Materials also received poor ratings on measures of differentiation. For instance, just a quarter of educators say their

Percent of educators who describe their complex topics instructional materials as:



materials are neither too challenging nor too easy for their students. Just 31 percent say the materials help teachers differentiate instruction. And less than 1 in 3 report that their resources support personalized learning.

Perhaps more concerning, only a minority of teachers (36 percent) say their “complex topics” resources lead to better instruction.

Complex topics instructional materials are time-consuming to find

Not only do complex topics instructional materials receive mediocre ratings, they are also difficult to find. Just 28 percent of educators say these materials are readily available without spending a lot of time seeking them out. That’s likely because most educators aren’t getting these materials from textbooks. Instead, they say they are searching websites, combing through primary source documents and scrutinizing newspapers and magazines.

On average, educators who use or seek out complex topics instructional materials say they spend three hours per week searching for resources.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Complex topics are common in American classrooms. Educators want them there, and, for the most part, so do parents. Educators overwhelmingly believe that learning about complex topics prepares students to participate in a democratic society, improves critical thinking, reduces prejudice and enhances student engagement.

But teachers are just not well-prepared to address many sensitive topics such as LGBTQ issues, politics and race.

Educators perceive that better instructional materials would help them do a better job addressing these subjects. That's likely because current resources are mediocre at best. Educators say they are dated, inaccurate, unfair, un-differentiated and simply not standards aligned. Most educators say their materials do not lead to better instruction. Additionally, these deeply-flawed resources are time-consuming to find because they are not typically found in textbooks. The average educator is spending three hours a week combing through websites, primary source documents, newspapers and other sources. Not only does this take time away from instructional duties, it has the potential to create inequities since some educators are necessarily more experienced than others when it comes to identifying good resources. In addition, when each educator searches for her own materials, there's always the risk that some of the resources will be inappropriate for addressing very sensitive subjects.

How might educators improve instruction related to complex topics? Based on survey results, districts and schools could:

- Ensure teachers receive high-quality professional development on addressing complex topics.
- Make “complex topics” instructional materials available at the district level so that teachers and administrators do not need to spend time seeking them out.
- Acquire high-quality instructional materials that is:
 - Fair and accurate
 - Timely
 - Standards-aligned
 - Reflective of students’ experiences and demographics
 - Designed to help teachers meet individual students’ needs

The Education Week Research Center produces independent, objective, non-partisan research and analysis. For more information, contact us at RCinfo@epe.org.