

Profile of a School Communicator



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Introduction

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has long conducted a membership survey in order to identify important and emerging trends and issues in the school public relations industry. In addition to providing relevant, high-value benchmarking data about school public relations professionals and the field, survey results also serve to inform association leaders of the professional goals and outlooks of school communicators.

Findings help to guide NSPRA's professional development and resource offerings for the coming years to best meet the increasing demands of the school communicator role in alignment with the four primary goals of the association's 2021-2024 strategic plan:

- Be known as the leader in school communications
- Grow and retain membership
- Ensure efficient, effective and up-to-date systems
- Deliver relevant, high-impact programs

This year's survey was expanded to include questions related to work stress and burnout, as well as common challenges and barriers school public relations professionals face when engaging their communities. In addition, a number of questions from previous years' surveys were either revised or eliminated from the 2024 survey as part of a meticulous review process to ensure meaningful data is collected and analyzed.

This report highlights metrics such as the job responsibilities of school communicators, average salary ranges, department size and budget and more, which practitioners can use to help inform their own annual communication plans and future endeavors.

METHODOLOGY

NSPRA administered the online Membership Profile Survey to all 2,828 members from Dec. 5, 2024 - Jan. 6, 2025. A total of 586 surveys were fully completed, with 98 surveys partially completed. The survey report represents responses from 24.2% of NSPRA's total membership. Results of the survey have a margin of error of +/- 3.3% with a 95% confidence level.



10+ Years of Insights

NSPRA has conducted member surveys for decades in an effort to better understand the roles and responsibilities of school communicators. Over the years, NSPRA has expanded the surveys to collect data designed to also identify emerging trends and issues in the industry. Highlights from the last 10+ years include:

Economy Stifles Growth

With the economic climate of the times stifling budgets, salary growth for school communicators was largely stagnant from the previous year.

Member Diversity

While 88% of respondents identified as white, the 2018 Member Profile Survey indicated a more diverse membership than ever before, which was topped by results of this year's survey.

In With the New

Ten percent of school communication professionals reported having one year or less of experience in the field, the highest reported percentage of this experience level since at least 2019, and double from the 5% reported in 2020.

2010

Salaries Increase

In 2009-10, school PR salaries ticked upward to an increase of 4% year-over-year, for a mean average of \$86,567.

2012

Years of Experience

In 2014, nearly three-quarters of school communicators had been in the field for more than 5 years, the highest percentage with that level of experience since at least 2009.

2014

2018

Pandemic Shifts Priorities

Increasing in priority by 10.5 percentage points from 2018, crisis management ranked as the top responsibility of school PR professionals in 2020, not unexpected given the pandemic-driven crises in public schools.

2020

2022

Challenging Times

Facing limited staffing and eroding community trust, 75% of school communicators say work-related stress has impacted their job satisfaction in the past year.

2024

Who Responded?

The 2024 survey was sent to all 2,828 NSPRA members; 586 surveys were fully completed with 98 surveys partially completed.

Geographically, respondents spanned all seven NSPRA regions. Two respondents indicated they were located outside of the United States or Canada.

NSPRA Regions

Mideast (DC, IN, KY, MD, MI, OH, VA, WV)

North Central (IL, IA, MN, NE, ND, SD, WI, Manitoba, Northwestern ON)

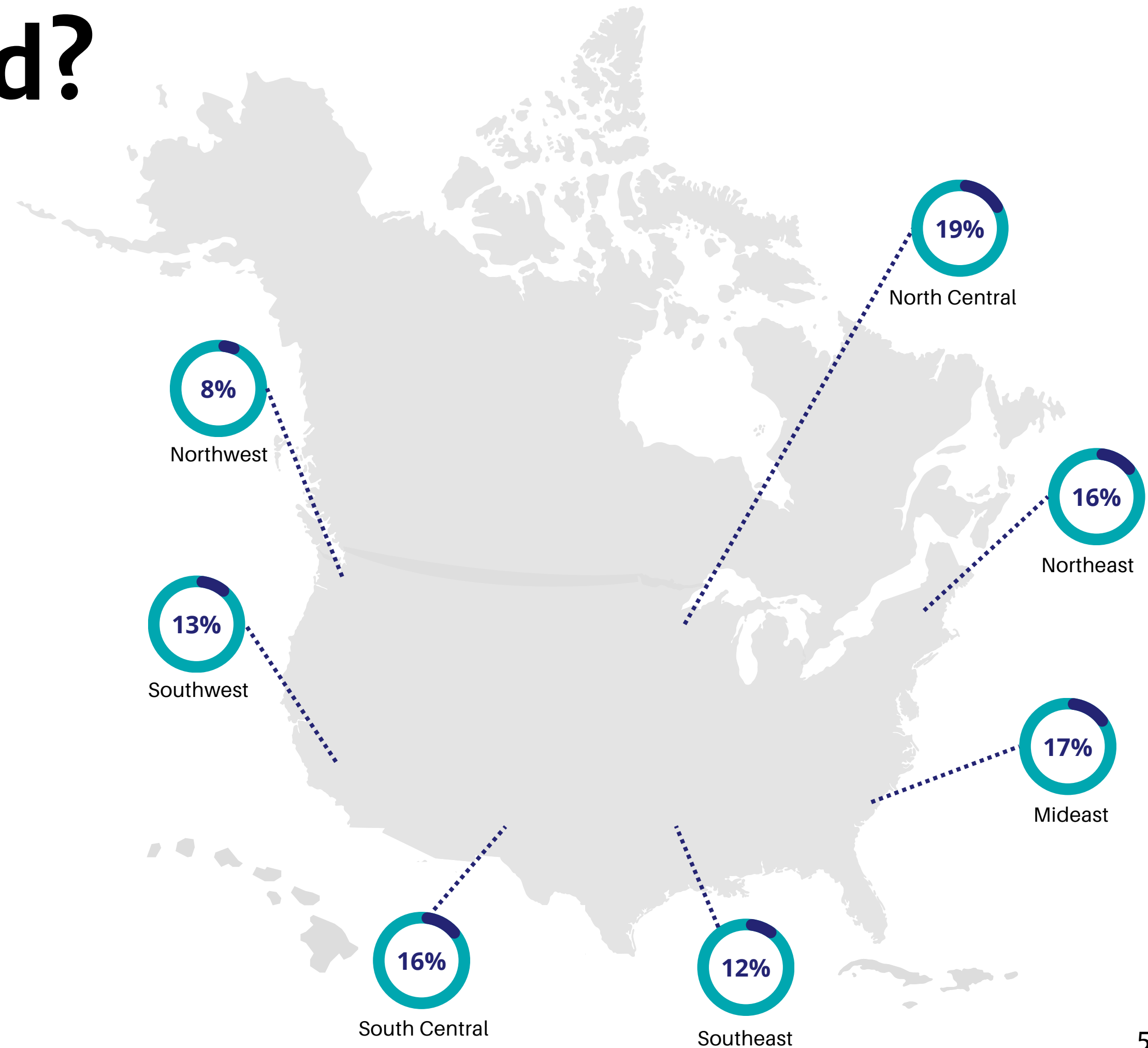
Northeast (CT, DE, ME, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Eastern ON, Prince Edward Island, Quebec)

Northwest (AK, ID, MT, OR, WA, Alberta, BC, Northwest Territories, Saskatchewan, Yukon)

South Central (AR, KS, LA, MO, OK, TX)

Southeast (AL, FL, GA, MS, NC, SC, TN, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands)

Southwest (AZ, CA, CO, HI, NV, NM, UT, WY)



Executive Summary

The school PR profession is evolving in response to shifting demographics, growing responsibilities, and increasing professionalization.

A younger workforce and rising salaries—especially among new entrants to the field—indicate a strong demand for qualified school communications professionals. The latest data shows that nearly two-thirds are under 50 years of age, the highest percentage in at least 15 years. School communicators are also newer to the profession. One-third have fewer than five years of experience in the field, and those saying that they have never worked in public relations outside of education hit an all-time high. Meanwhile, half of school communicators now report earning \$100,000 or more annually, an increase from 2022 and nearly double the percentage reporting the same salary level in 2018.

The slow but steady diversification of the profession reflects broader efforts toward inclusivity, though representation gaps remain. Our profession remains overwhelmingly populated by women and those who identify their race/ethnicity as white. At the same time, slow but steady advances in diversity are evident, with the percentage of school communicators who identify their race/ethnicity as other than white at the highest percentage reported in NSPRA history for the second year in a row.

The one-person communications office fell to its lowest percentage since at least 2011, while the percentage of departments with 8 or more staff members rose to its highest level across the same timeframe. As might be expected, districts with smaller annual operating budgets are once again more likely to have smaller communication department budgets and fewer department staff members. However, larger district budgets do not necessarily lead to more investment in communications, as evidenced by the fact that one-person shops and department budgets of less than \$50,000 are equally common among districts with budgets of less than \$20 million and more than \$150 million.

While larger district budgets do not always translate to greater investment in communications, the rising prevalence of directors and chief communicators points to the field gaining strategic importance within school leadership. A majority of survey respondents indicated that Director of Communications most closely reflects their job title. And, while most school communicators continue to report directly to their superintendent, the percentage who report to a director or chief of communications is growing.

Continued →

Executive Summary

Persistent staffing challenges and burnout suggest that many departments remain stretched thin, despite some growth in team sizes. Data from several new questions in 2024 reveals that limited staffing, eroding community trust and burnout are among the biggest challenges facing school communicators. Similar themes emerged regarding their biggest obstacles to engaging families.

Other significant data from the 2024 survey include:

- School communicators with their accreditation in public relations (APR) continue to significantly out-earn those without accreditation—76% with their APR reported earning a yearly salary of more than \$100,000, compared to only 47% of those without accreditation.
- Although the gender pay gap persists, the size of the disparity between men’s and women’s median earnings actually shrunk in 2024.
- For the most part, salary appears to increase as experience increases. However, the most-commonly reported salary by those in their first year of school public relations is actually higher than the most-common salary among those with 2-4 years of experience, perhaps indicating an unusually high demand for qualified candidates in the past two years.
- Most districts with enrollment under 5,000 report having a one-person communications department, and no districts of that size employ more than 4 communications staff members. Departments of 15+ are reported only in districts with at least 10,000 students.
- The top responsibilities of school communicators in 2024 look very similar to 2022, with social media, external communications and community relations/public engagement joining crisis communications at the top of the list. For the first time, website management broke into the top five responsibilities, nudging past media relations.

This report highlights these trends and other data that speaks to the strategic role that school communicators play within their communities. NSPRA thanks the association members who participated in this year’s survey. Their continued participation in this research is deeply appreciated and makes this report possible.

Earning accreditation
in public relations
(APR) pays off

76%

of school communicators with their APR reported an annual salary of more than \$100,000, compared to only 47% of their non-accredited peers.

Profile of a School Communicator

The profile of a school communicator indicates a workforce that is trending younger. Data from NSPRA's 2024 survey shows that nearly two-thirds of school PR practitioners are under 50 years of age, the highest percentage in at least 15 years. School communicators are also newer to the profession. One-third have fewer than five years of experience in the field, and those saying that they have never worked in public relations outside of education hit an all-time high of 28%.

School public relations remains a profession overwhelmingly populated by women and those who identify their race/ethnicity as white. At the same time, slow but steady advances in diversity are evident, with the percentage of school communicators who identify their race/ethnicity as other than white at the highest percentage reported in NSPRA history for the second year in a row.



Profile of a School Communicator

Time in School Public Relations

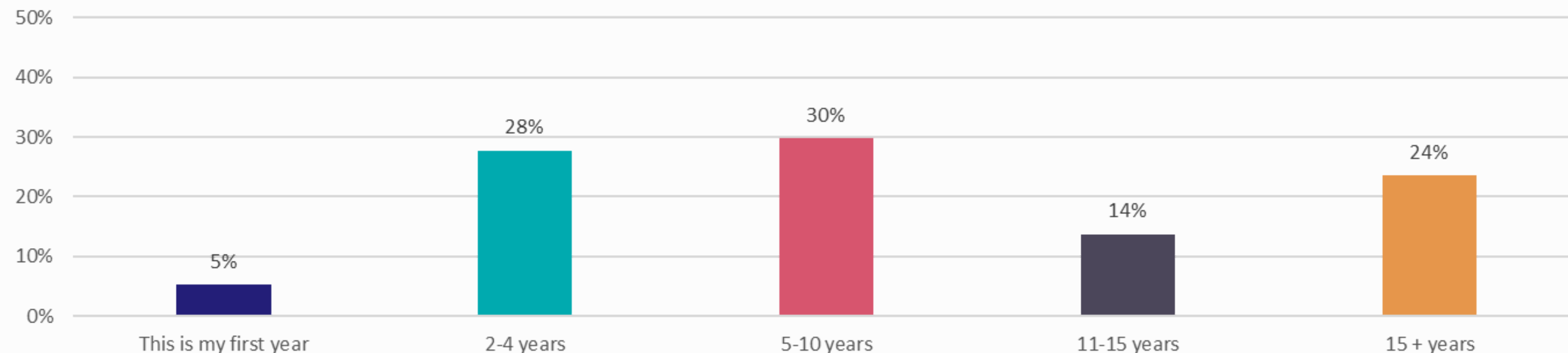
Percentage of Early-Career Professionals Is Highest in More Than a Decade

In 2024, 28% of school communication professionals reported having 2-4 years of experience in the field, up from 22% in both 2022 and 2020—and the highest percentage since 2009 (30%). Five percent reported being in their first year of school PR, a return to the 2020 level after doubling in 2022. After several years of slight but steady increases, the percentage of mid-career professionals (5-15 years of experience) dropped to 44% in 2024, from 45% in 2022. The steady decline of school communicators with 15 years or more of experience—a trend evident since 2016—reversed in 2024, ticking up one point to 24%.

Fewer School Communicators Start Their Careers Outside of Education

While a majority of members began their public relations careers in a field other than education, the percentage of those who have never worked outside school PR rose to an all-time high of 28% in 2024, up from 22% in 2022.

How many years have you worked in school PR?



Profile of a School Communicator

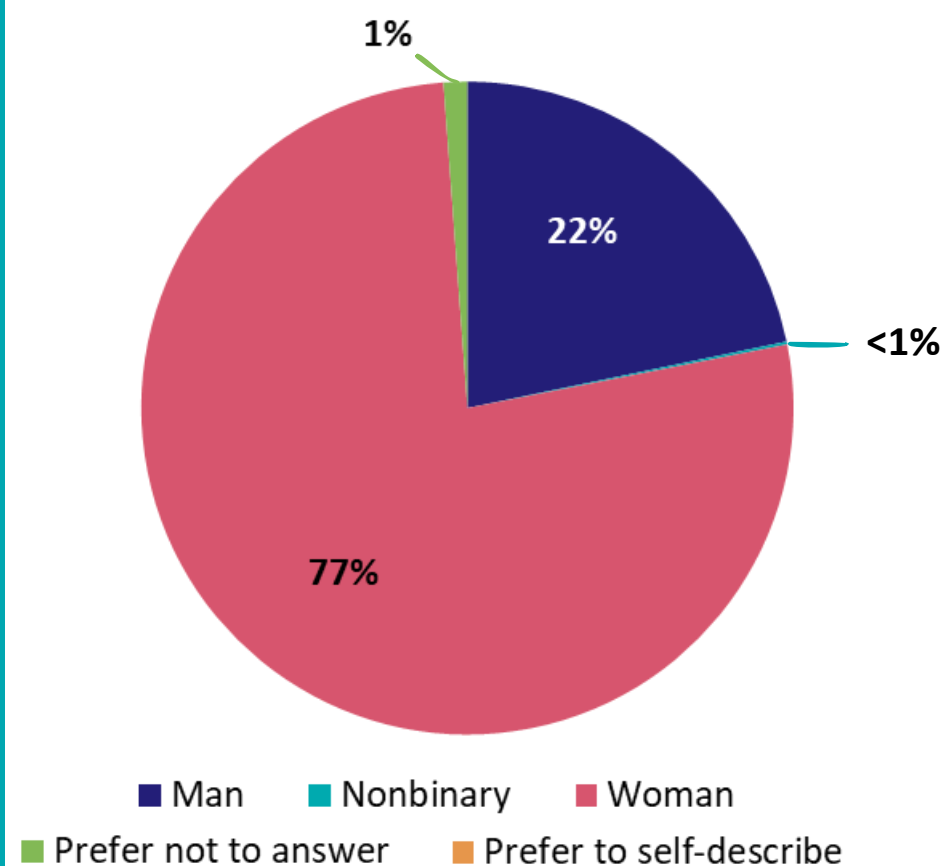
Gender, Race and Ethnicity, Age

As has been the case for decades, the majority of this year's respondents identified as women, with a slight decrease to 77% in 2024 from 78% in 2022. Since 2018, when NSPRA included additional answer options for this question, no more than one or two individuals each year have identified as nonbinary or have preferred to self-describe.

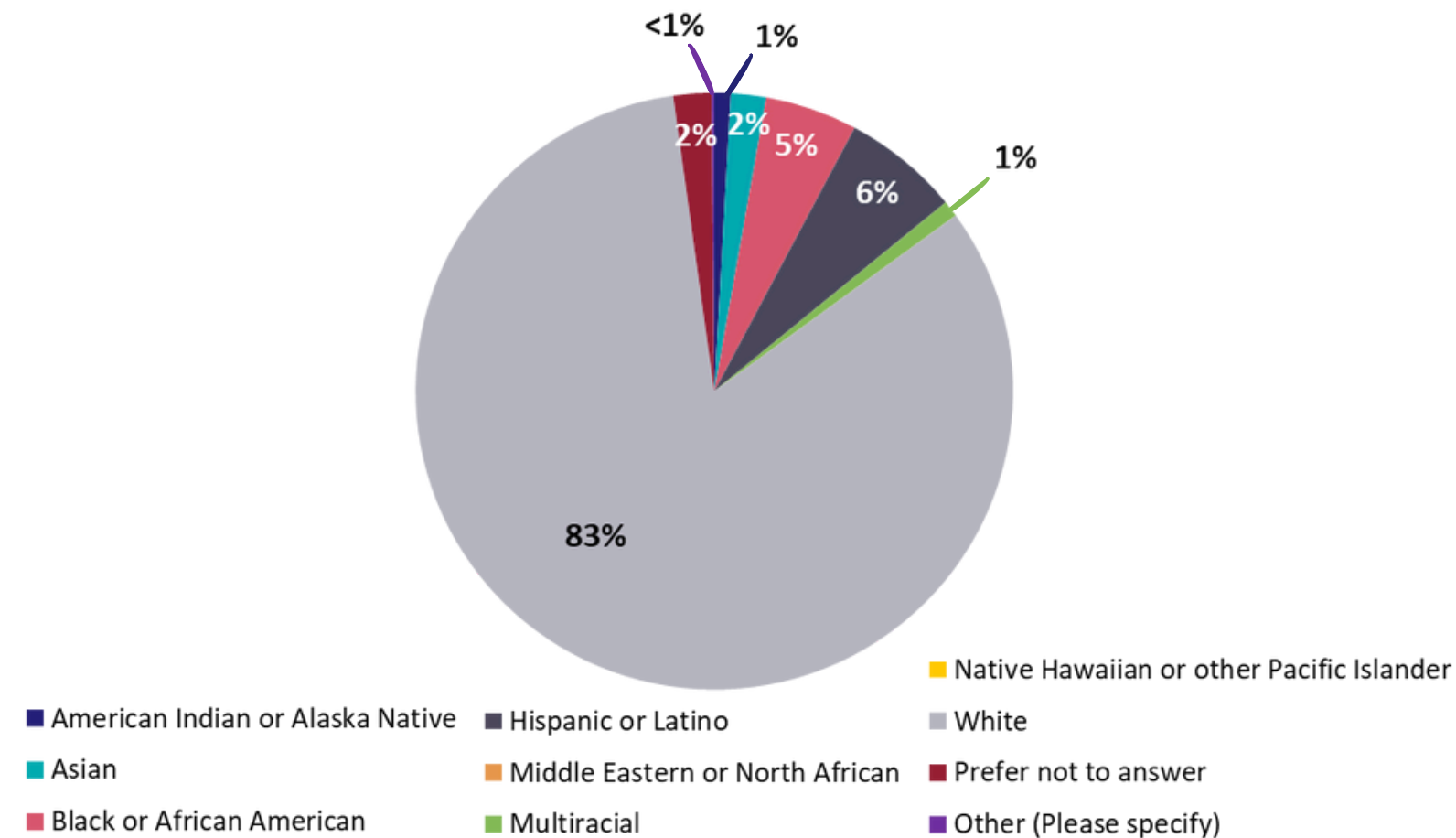
While the overwhelming majority of school communicators continue to identify their race/ethnicity as white, the percentage who identified as other than white in this year's survey (17%) is once again the highest percentage reported in NSPRA history, ticking up one point from 2022. Those identifying their race/ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino also hit an all-time high of 6% in 2024.

School communicators reporting an age range of 40-49 constituted the largest group (32%) in 2024, continuing a trend since 2018. Also notable is the percentage of respondents under age 50, which hit 64% in 2024, the highest since at least 2009.

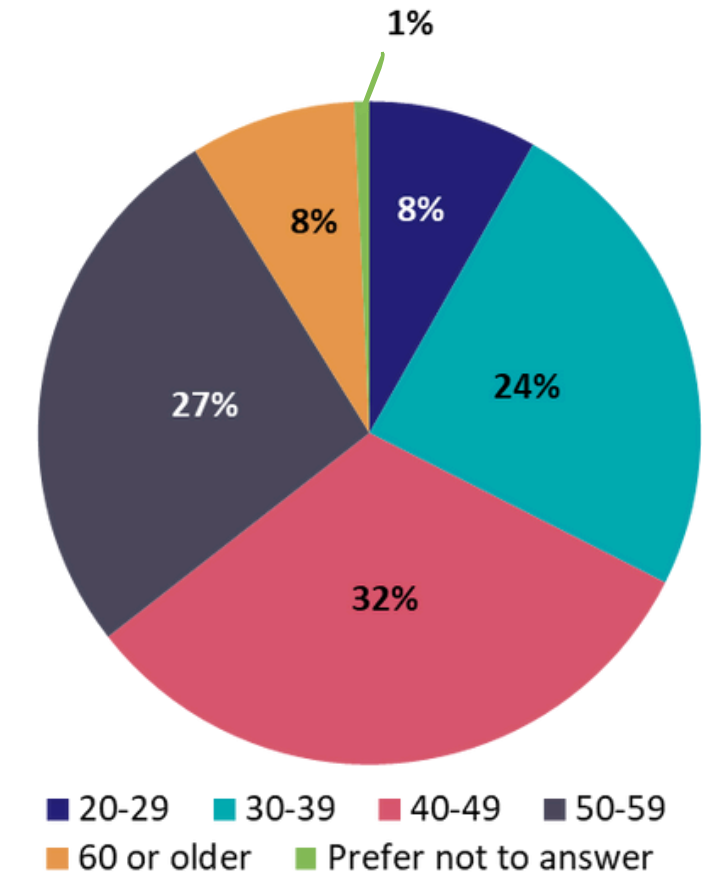
Gender: How do you identify?



Which race or ethnicity best describes you?



What is your age range?



District and Department Size and Structure

The one-person communications office fell to its lowest percentage since at least 2011, while the percentage of departments with 8 or more staff members rose to its highest level across the same timeframe.

As might be expected, districts with smaller annual operating budgets are once again more likely to have smaller communication department budgets and fewer department staff members. However, larger district budgets do not necessarily lead to more investment in communications, as evidenced by the fact that one-person shops and department budgets of less than \$50,000 are equally common among districts with budgets of less than \$20 million and more than \$150 million.



Enrollment and Department Size

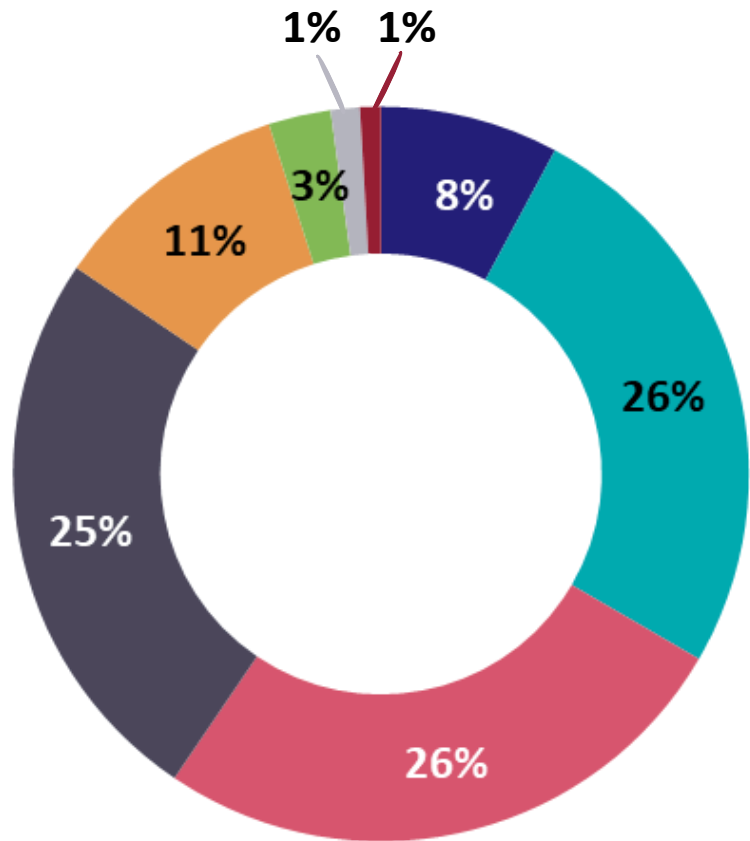
Of respondents employed by a school district, one-quarter (25%) reported their district's enrollment as 10,000-24,999, nearly the same as reported enrollments of 2,000-4,999 and 5,000-9,999 (26% each). These percentages are virtually unchanged since the 2022 survey. Only 2% of respondents reported their district enrollment as more than 75,000, the same as in 2022. The percentage of school communicators employed by a district with an enrollment of fewer than 2,000 fell to 8%, from 10% in the last survey.

Communication Department Sizes

The one-person communications office fell to its lowest percentage (35%) since at least 2011, while the percentage of departments with 8 or more staff members rose to its highest level (12%) across the same timeframe. Departments with 2-4 staff members (39%) remained the most-reported department size.

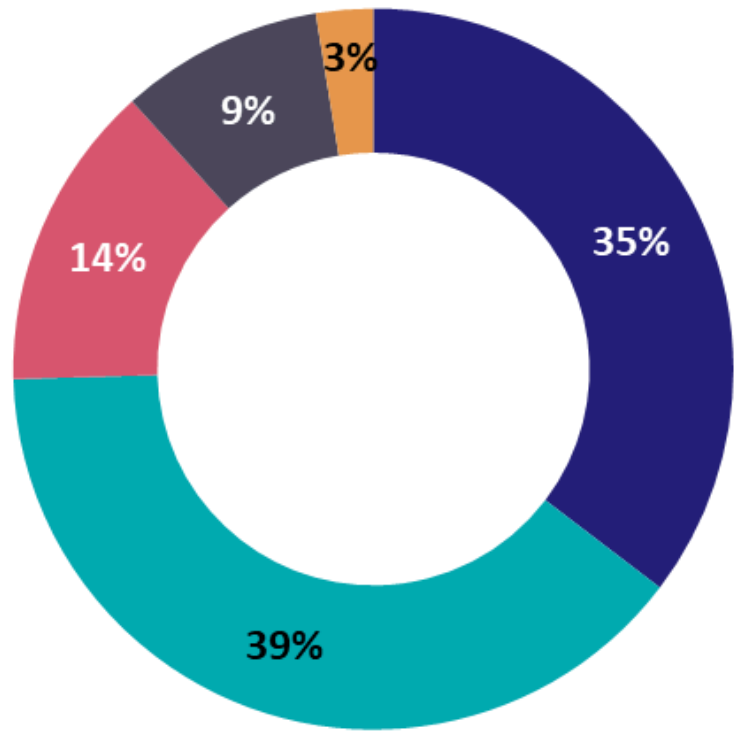
TIP: Need to make the case for more communication staff? Compare your district's enrollment and department size with this data.

What is your district's student enrollment?



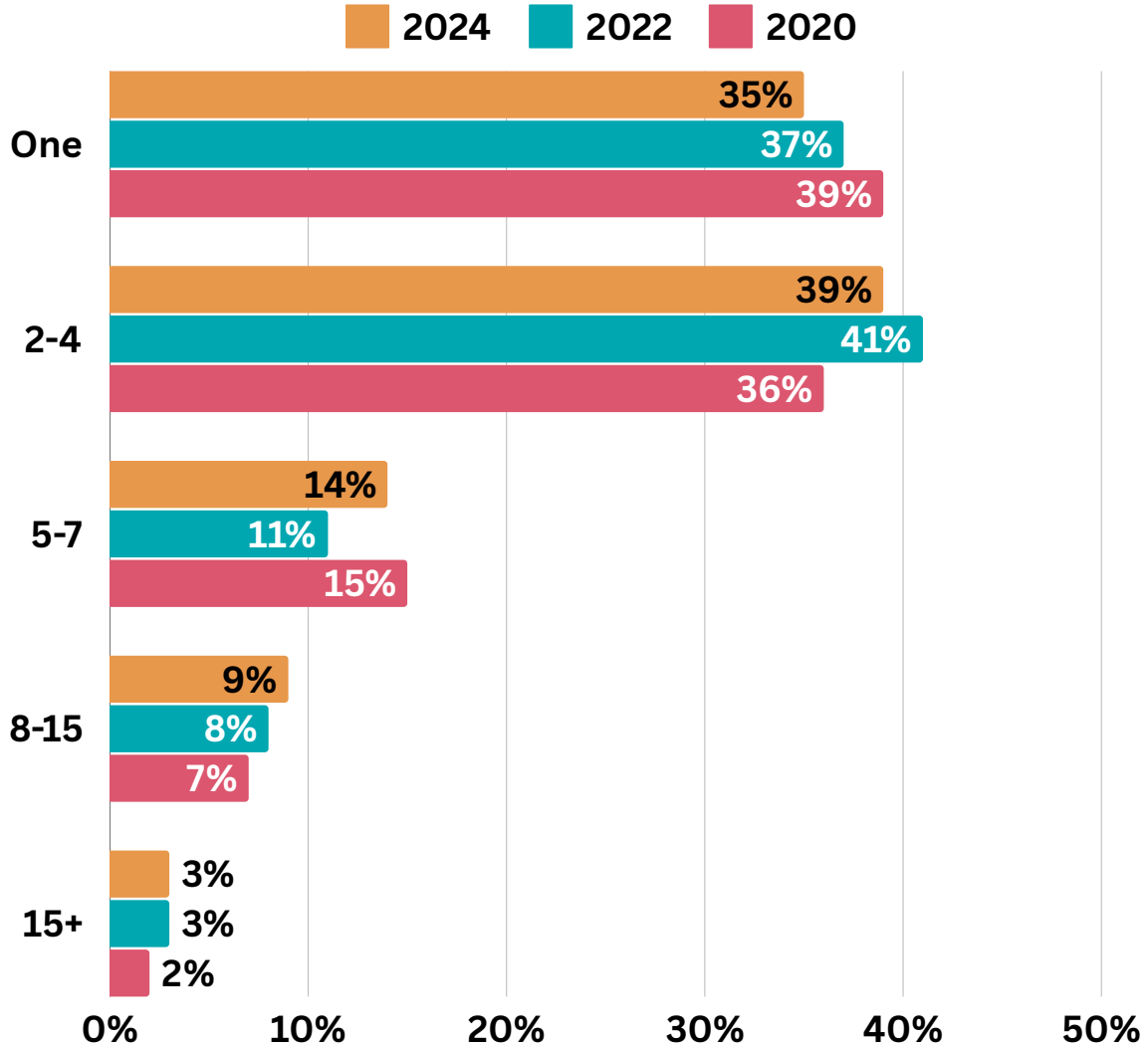
■ Fewer than 2,000
 ■ 2,000-4,999
 ■ 5,000-9,999
 ■ 10,000-24,999
 ■ 25,000-49,999
 ■ 50,000-75,000
 ■ 75,000-100,000
 ■ 100,000 - 125,000
 ■ More than 125,000

How many total staff members are in your communications office?



■ One
 ■ 2-4
 ■ 5-7
 ■ 8-15
 ■ 15+

Department Size Over Time



Enrollment and Department Size

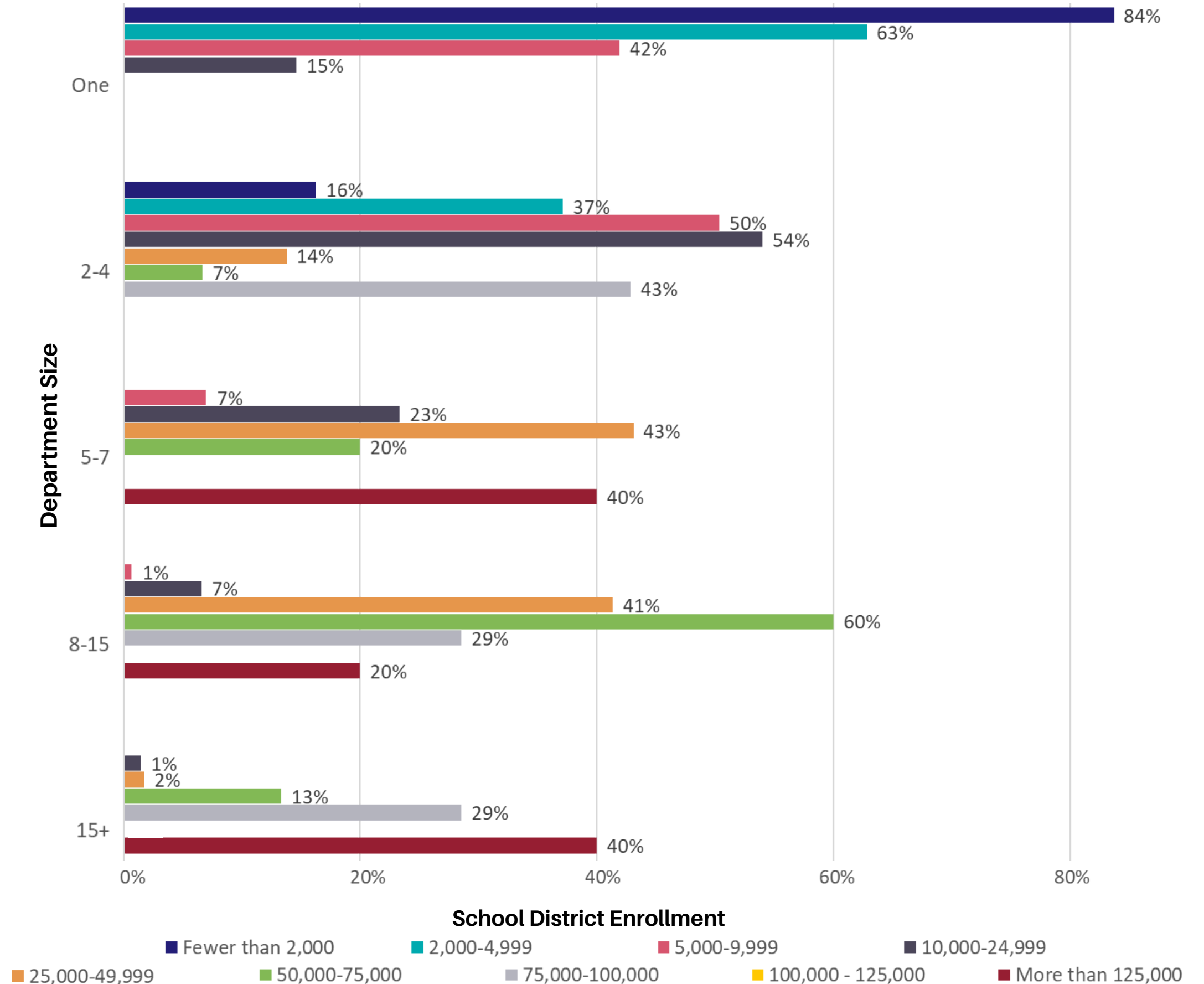
As might be expected, 84% of districts with fewer than 2,000 students report having a one-person communications department, and no districts of that size employ more than 4 communications staff members. Similarly, 63% of districts with enrollment between 2,000-4,999 employ just one school PR professional and none employ more than four.

No districts with enrollments of 25,000 or more have one-person communications departments, and 66% of those with enrollments of at least 50,000 have 8 or more staff members.

Notable among districts of other enrollment sizes:

- 92% of districts with 5,000-9,999 students have departments of 4 or fewer school communicators.
- 92% of districts with 10,000-24,999 students have departments of 7 or fewer school communicators.
- 84% of those with enrollment between 25,000-49,999 have departments of between 5-15 school communicators.

Enrollment by Department Size



Department Size by Enrollment

Looking at the data another way, one-person communication departments are not only found in the smallest districts. While 18% of all one-person shops exist in districts with fewer than 2,000 students, solo PR professionals are reported in districts with larger enrollments as well:

- 43% of one-person shops are in districts with 2,000-4,999 students;
- 29% are in districts with 5,000-9,999 students; and
- 10% are in districts with 10,000-24,000 students.

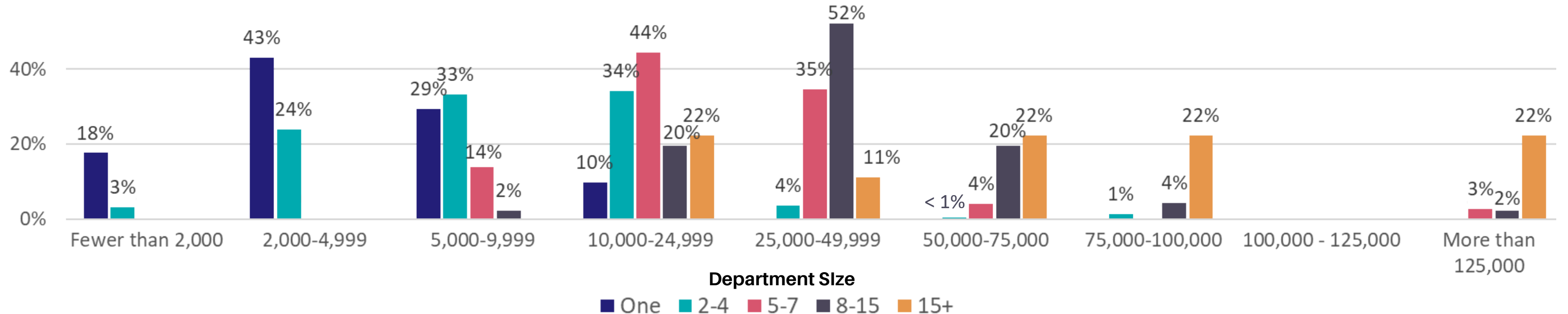
Departments of 15 or more school communicators are reported only in districts with at least 10,000 students.

Department Size by Enrollment

Other findings include:

- 94% of 2-4 person departments exist in districts with enrollment below 25,000.
- 93% of departments with 5-7 staff members are found in districts with enrollment between 5,000-49,999.
- 92% of departments with 8-15 staff members are found in districts with 10,000-75,000 students.

What is your school district's student enrollment?



Department Structure

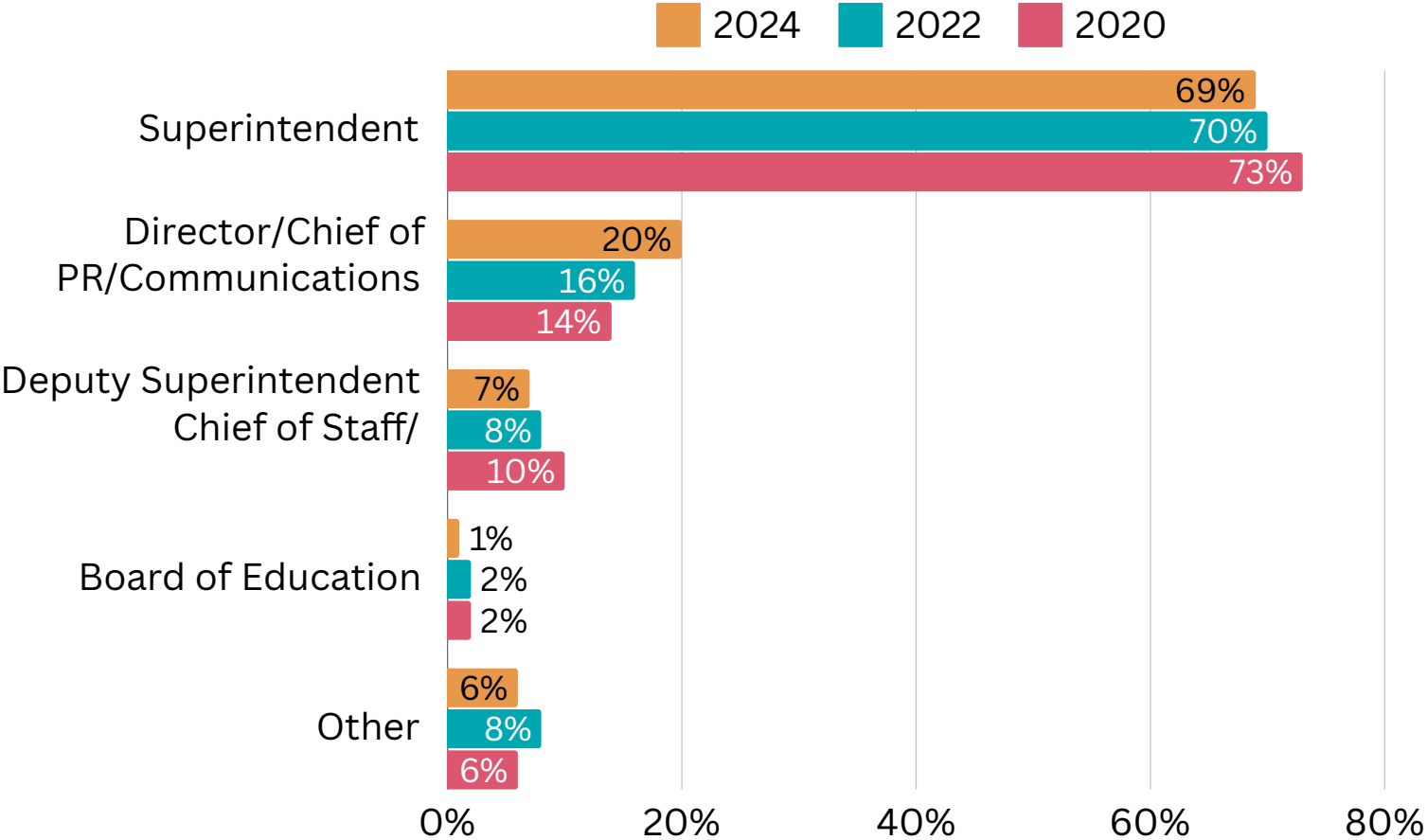
A majority of school communicators (69%) continue to report directly to their superintendent, although the percentage is down slightly compared to recent years. Meanwhile, more indicate that their direct supervisor is a director or chief of communications.

The percentage of school communicators who are considered a member of their district's cabinet and/or leadership team (64%) is down slightly from 2022 (67%), but higher than in 2020 (59%) and 2018 (58%), the first year the question was asked.

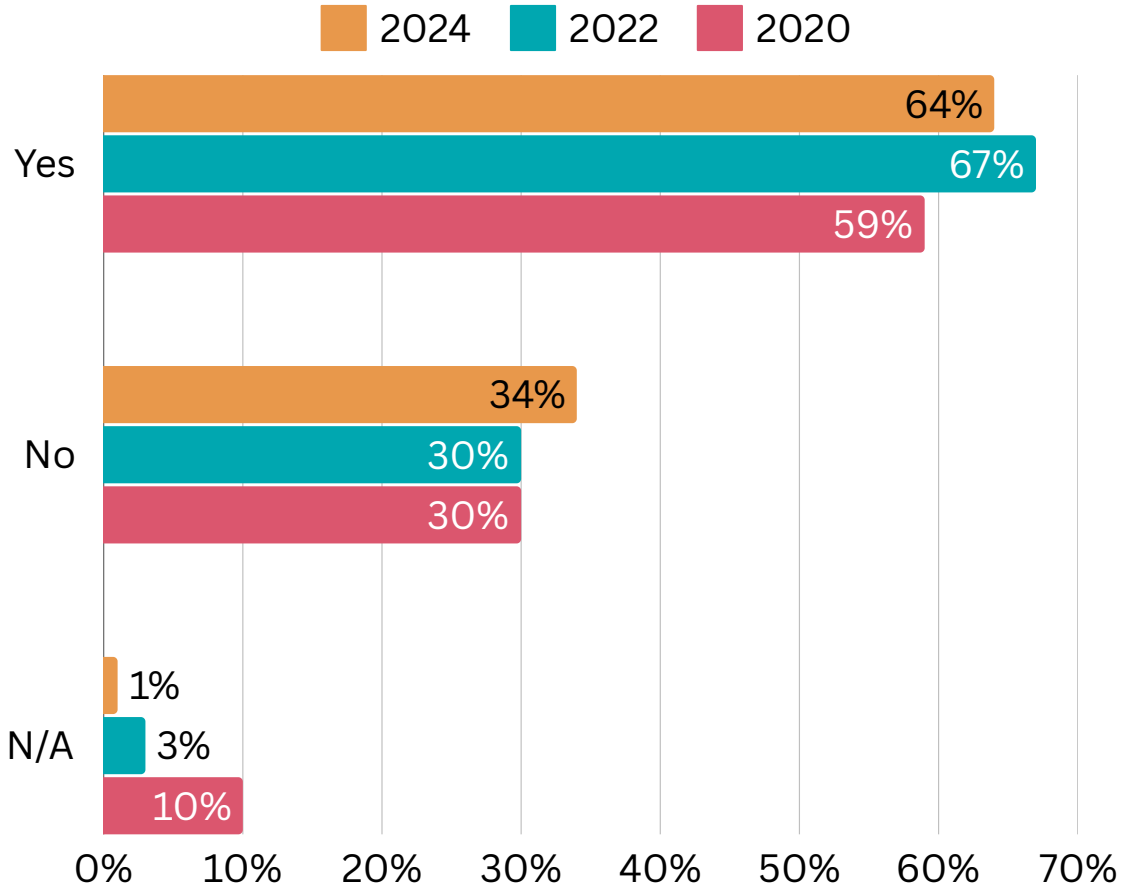
“From our years of conversations with comms workers, we know that having a seat at the table is a critical component of proactively orchestrating strategic communications.”

- From “A Seat at the Table: Research on the Relationship Between Superintendents and School Communicators,” a 2024 School CEO report in collaboration with NSPRA

To whom do you report?



Are you considered a member of your district's cabinet and/or leadership team?



Roles and Responsibilities

The top responsibilities of school communicators in 2024 look very similar to 2022, with social media, external communications and community relations/public engagement joining crisis communications at the top of the list. For the first time, website management broke into the top five responsibilities, nudging past media relations.

Data from several new questions on the 2024 survey revealed that limited staffing, eroding community trust and burnout are among the biggest challenges facing school PR professionals. Similar themes emerged regarding their biggest obstacles to engaging families.



Roles and Responsibilities

The top responsibilities of school communicators look very similar to 2022, with a majority reporting crisis communications (57%) as a priority, followed by social media (49%, up from 48% in 2022) and external communications (47%, down from 52% in 2022).

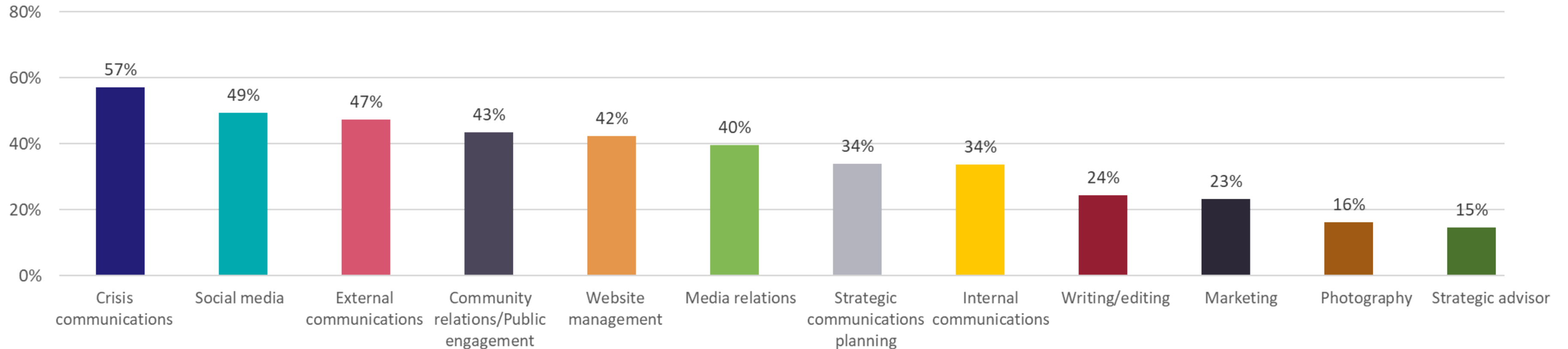
For the first time since NSPRA asked this question in 2016, website management broke into the top five responsibilities, nudging past media relations.



“School communications is unlike almost any other communications career. We are doing marketing, crisis communications, campaigns, reputation management, strategic planning and so much more. We have to understand complicated academic, operational, and financial topics and systems, and then make those accessible to the public. And all of this happens under intense public scrutiny.”

- Dirk Tedmon, APR, 2024 National School Communicator of the Year

What are the top five responsibilities in your current position?



Top Challenges

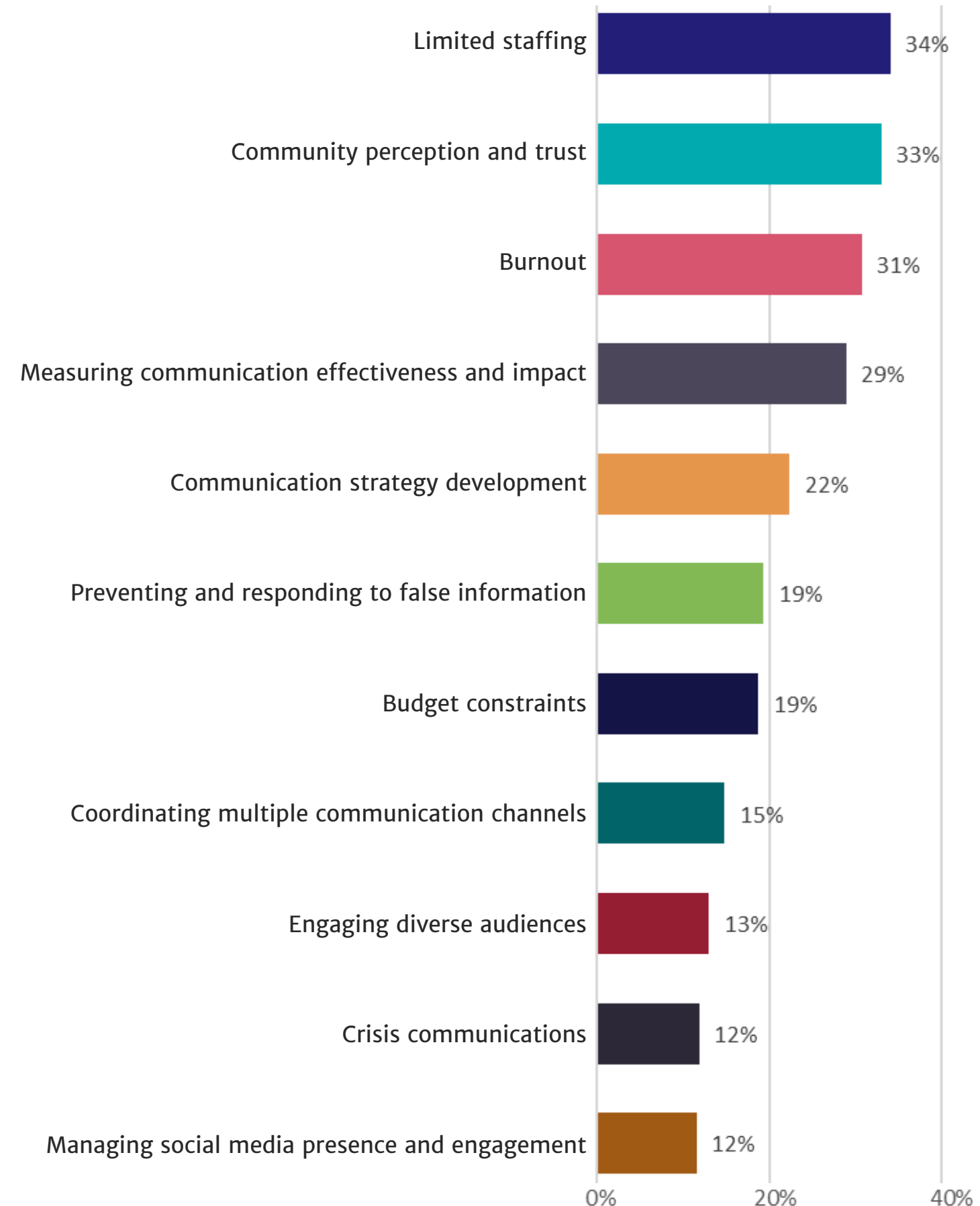
More than one-third of school communicators consider limited staffing to be among the top three challenges they face in their current role (34%), followed closely by community perception and trust (33%), burnout (31%) and measuring the effectiveness and impact of their professional efforts (29%).

Interestingly, school communicators' top two most often-cited responsibilities—crisis communications and social media management—are cited as top challenges by just 12% each.

“We always want to do so much, but our limited staffing numbers don't always allow us to do everything. The lack of trust and misinformation going around, especially on social media, is exhausting and challenging to tackle.”

- 2024 Member Profile Survey Respondent

What are the top three challenges you face in your current role?



Barriers to Engagement

When asked about the top three barriers to engaging students' families, school communicators overwhelmingly cite message overload as the biggest obstacle they face (83%), followed far behind by families' lack of interest (48%) and insufficient staffing capacity to do the work (36%).

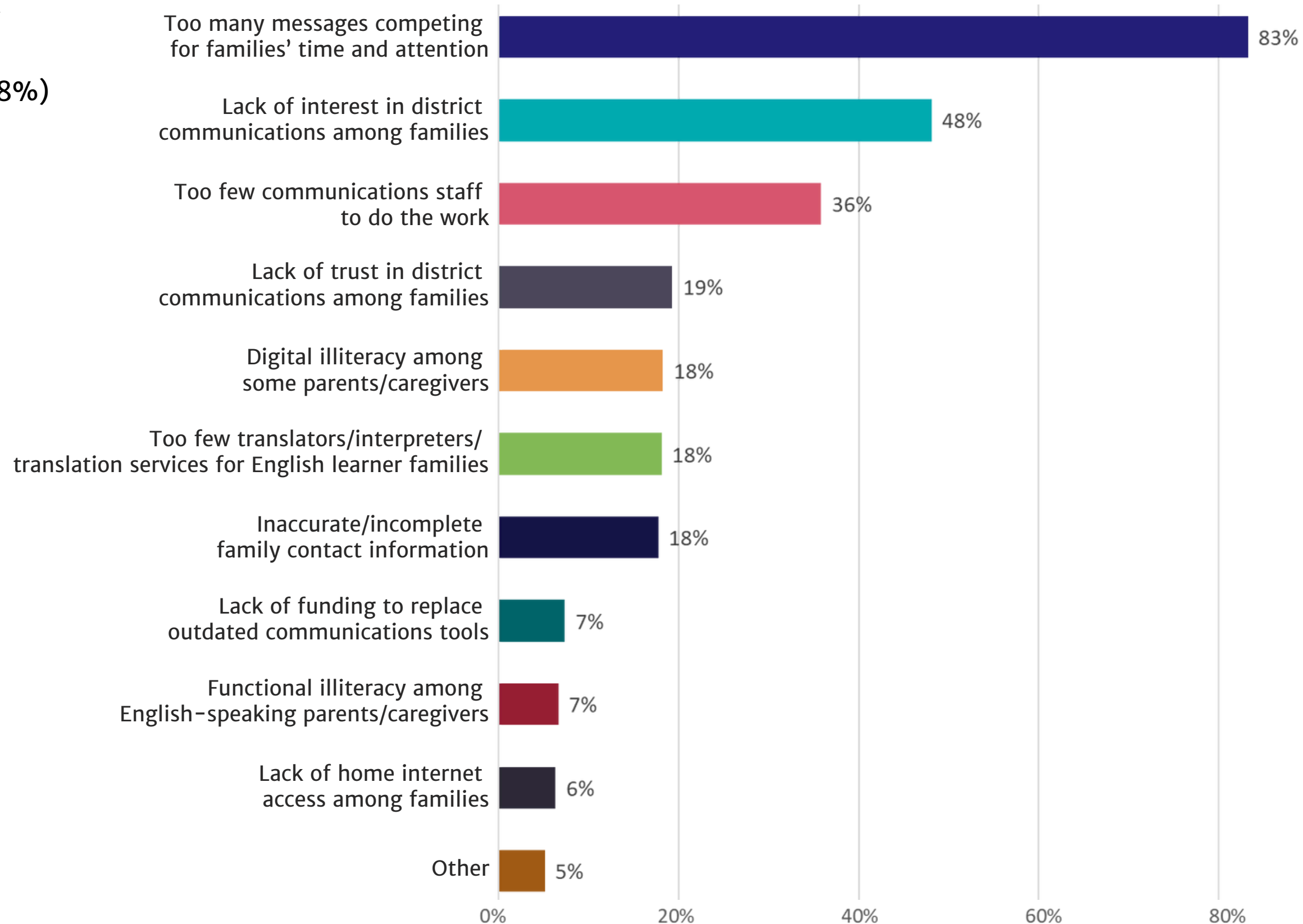
Also notable, nearly one in five school PR professionals believe that families' distrust of district communications is a barrier to engaging with them.



“Every family, regardless of their background, deserves to feel connected to their child’s education. When schools engage deeply with their communities, they create support systems that lead to greater success—not just for students but for the entire community. As I’ve seen firsthand, when families feel seen, heard, and supported, everything is possible.”

– Heidi Vega
NSPRA President, 2024-25

What do you believe are the top three barriers to engaging your students' families through communications?



Burnout and “Switching Off”

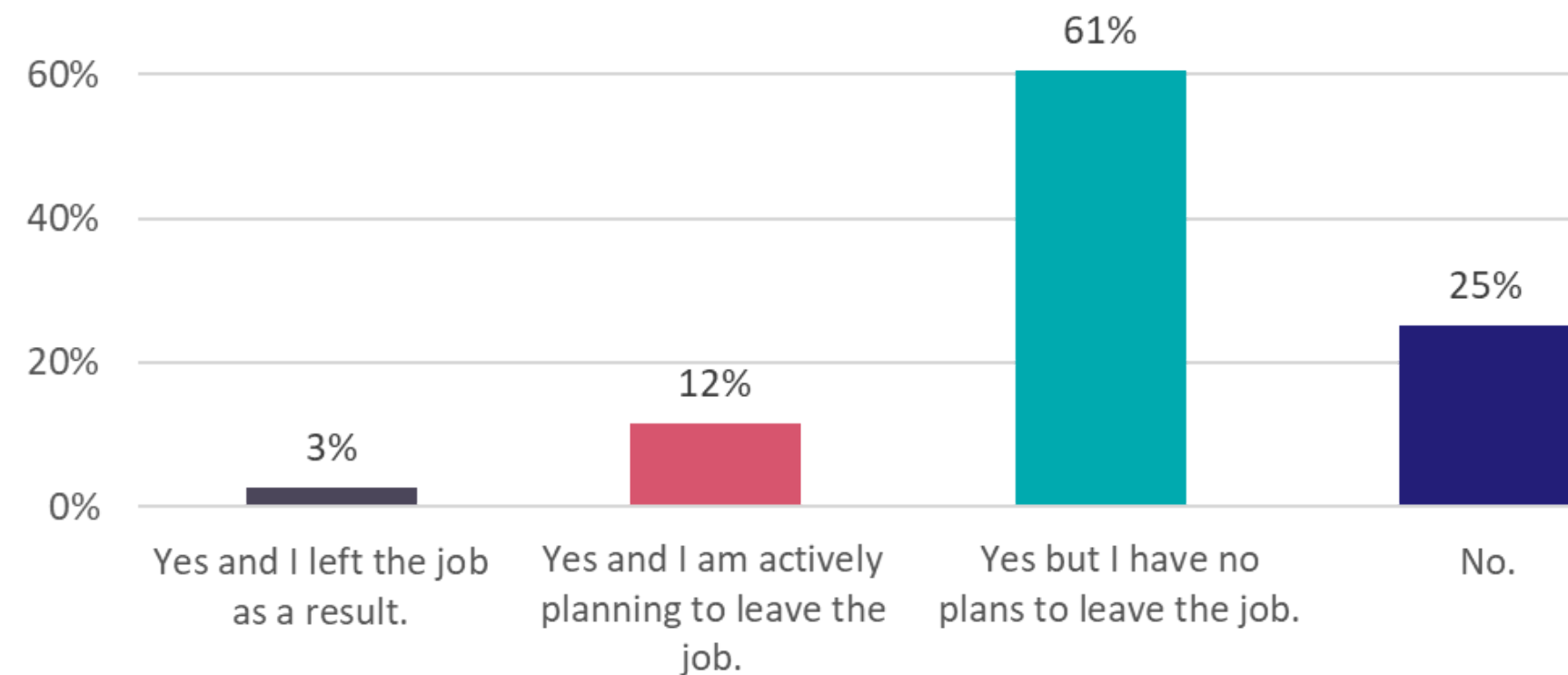
With burnout cited as among the biggest challenges facing school communicators, it’s no surprise that about 75% of them said that work-related stress has impacted their job satisfaction in the past year. However, among this majority who have been impacted by work-related stress, it is notable that more than 3 out of 4 of them, or 81%, have no plans to leave their current position.

Just 4% of respondents felt that they can “always” switch off after work, compared to 6% who felt they are never able to fully disengage. About two-thirds believe that they can at least “sometimes” or “very often” effectively switch off at the end of the day.

“If you are a person spinning two plates and struggling, you generally don’t get another plate. But if you are a person successfully spinning 12 plates, you are seen as competent and just keep getting new plates.”

– 2024 Member Profile Survey Respondent

In the last year, has work-related stress (aka, burnout) impacted your job satisfaction?



How often do you feel that you can “switch off” after work?

