
School Leaders Survey Results



Summer 2023

**Browne
Jacobson**

Introduction

Welcome to this report on the findings from our termly School Leaders Survey.

Research for the survey, where we invite the leaders of the nation's schools and academies to share their views, was carried out for two weeks between 15 – 29 May 2023.

The survey was completed by 265 school leaders in England, of which 19% are CEOs and Deputy CEOs, 14% are COOs and CFOs, 16% are trustees and 14% are Headteachers, Deputy Headteachers and Assistant Heads. Responses for the remaining 37% included Business Managers/Partners, HR professionals, local governors and central team members.

Seven in ten (71%) respondents work or govern in a multi-academy trust, 18% in standalone academies and 11% in maintained schools.

All percentages quoted in this report have been rounded to whole numbers. Where the results total more than 100% this may be due to rounding.

We are grateful to all the school leaders who gave their time generously to party to participate in this survey.

July 2023

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Foreword

It is a real pleasure to be launching our termly School Leaders Survey. The survey is open to the leaders of the nation's schools and academies and looks to gather views on a range of key policy issues as well as challenges and priorities of the day.

Whilst the results are quite sober reading in places, I can't help thinking of the book *Radical Candor* by Kim Scott and the importance of sharing the views of school leaders who care deeply about the school system even if they directly challenge us all and, in particular, policy makers and their current priorities.

If you would like to discuss our findings, please get in touch.



Nick MacKenzie
Partner

Nick is an education lawyer, accredited executive coach and a member of Browne Jacobson's board. He helps lead Browne Jacobson's education practice.



Emerging Themes



Policy landscape

You can't help but wonder whether the government is doing enough to focus its attention on the policy levers that could really make a difference to the issues causing concern for school leaders.

SEND and SEND funding jumps out as an area where leaders are dissatisfied in large numbers. This will make tough reading for policy makers with the recent publication of a SEND and AP Improvement Plan.



Priorities

Looking at the year ahead, operational strategies focussed on financial sustainability, recruitment and retention of staff together with enhancing education provision top the list.

Five of the top ten are directly focussed on the workforce, reflecting the workforce challenges keenly felt in the sector.



Environmental & societal impact

We wanted to explore the sector's views on understanding how their organisation is managing the wider impact they are having on society.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, priorities tend to focus on staff wellbeing and equipping pupils and students for their future in the world. However, for organisations that educate children who are passionate about the environment, the fact that net zero falls much lower on the list of priorities is worth reflecting on.

Key Findings

48% of school leaders felt positive when asked about the educational prospects of their pupils, as a result of external factors. **22%** felt negative.

Nearly three quarters (**73%**) of leaders felt negative when asked about the financial prospects of their organisation compared to 12 months ago.

62% of school leaders are dissatisfied with government policy regarding Key Stage 2 assessment.

94% of school leaders are dissatisfied with government policy on SEND funding and **78%** are dissatisfied with SEND policy.

39% of school leaders felt positive about employee engagement compared to a year ago, while over a quarter (**29%**) feel it's worse now.

Operational strategies on financial sustainability is a top focus for **68%** of school leaders.

Five of the top ten strategies cited by school leaders for their focus over the next 12 months relate to people issues.

43% of respondents surveyed cited recruitment and retention as a top three operational strategy in the year ahead.

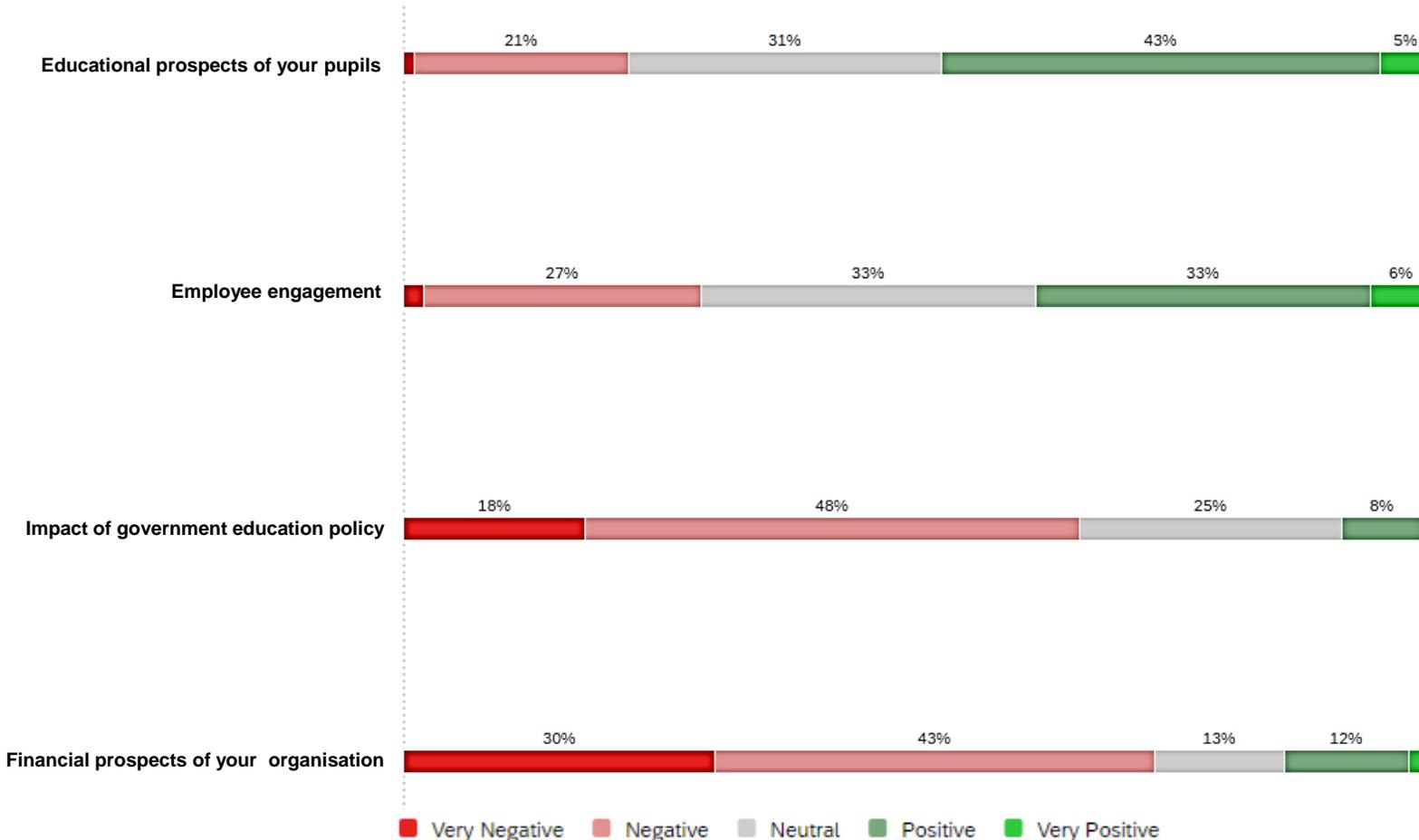
Seven in ten (**72%**) respondents agree that focusing on environmental and social governance makes for a better organisation.

One in five (**22%**) are interested in focusing more closely on environmental and societal issues, but do not know where to start.

01 Policy Landscape

The operating environment

Considering external factors, how do you judge the following compared to 12 months ago?



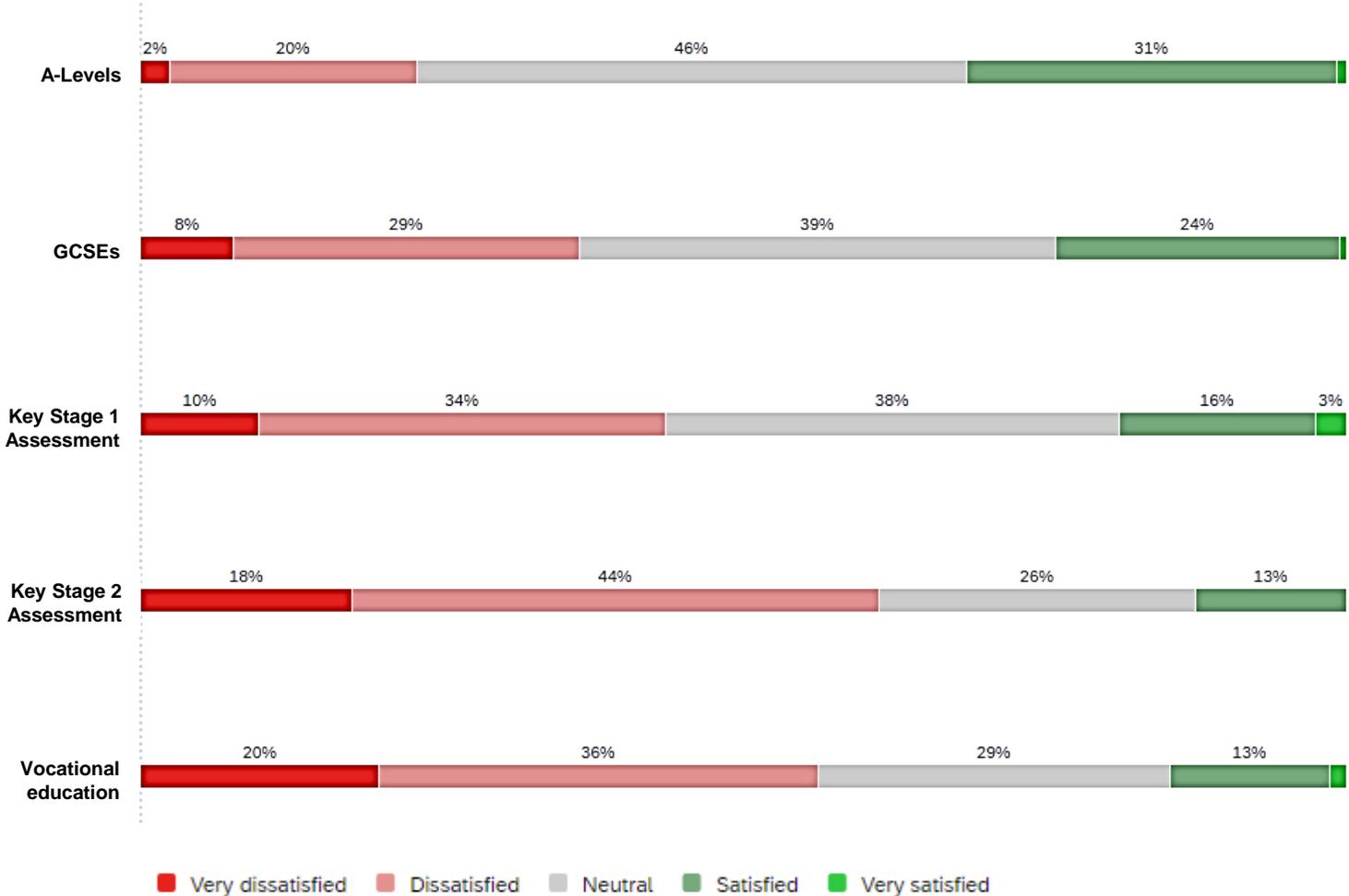
Perhaps unsurprisingly, the pressures created by the financial environment are being keenly felt by trusts, with 73% of respondents feeling negative about their financial prospects compared to a year ago.

There is clearly pause for thought for policy makers, with two thirds (66%) of school leaders feeling negative about the impact the government's education policy is having on their organisation compared to 12 months ago.

Despite the challenging operating environment trusts are facing and in the context of COVID recovery, on one hand it is encouraging to see nearly half of leaders (48%) positive about the educational prospects of their pupils compared to 12 months ago. However, one in five leaders (21%) felt that the educational prospects of their pupils were worse now than they were 12 months ago.

Assessment

How satisfied are you with current government policy regarding assessment?



It is clear that when it comes to assessment, SATs and vocational education are causes for real concern.

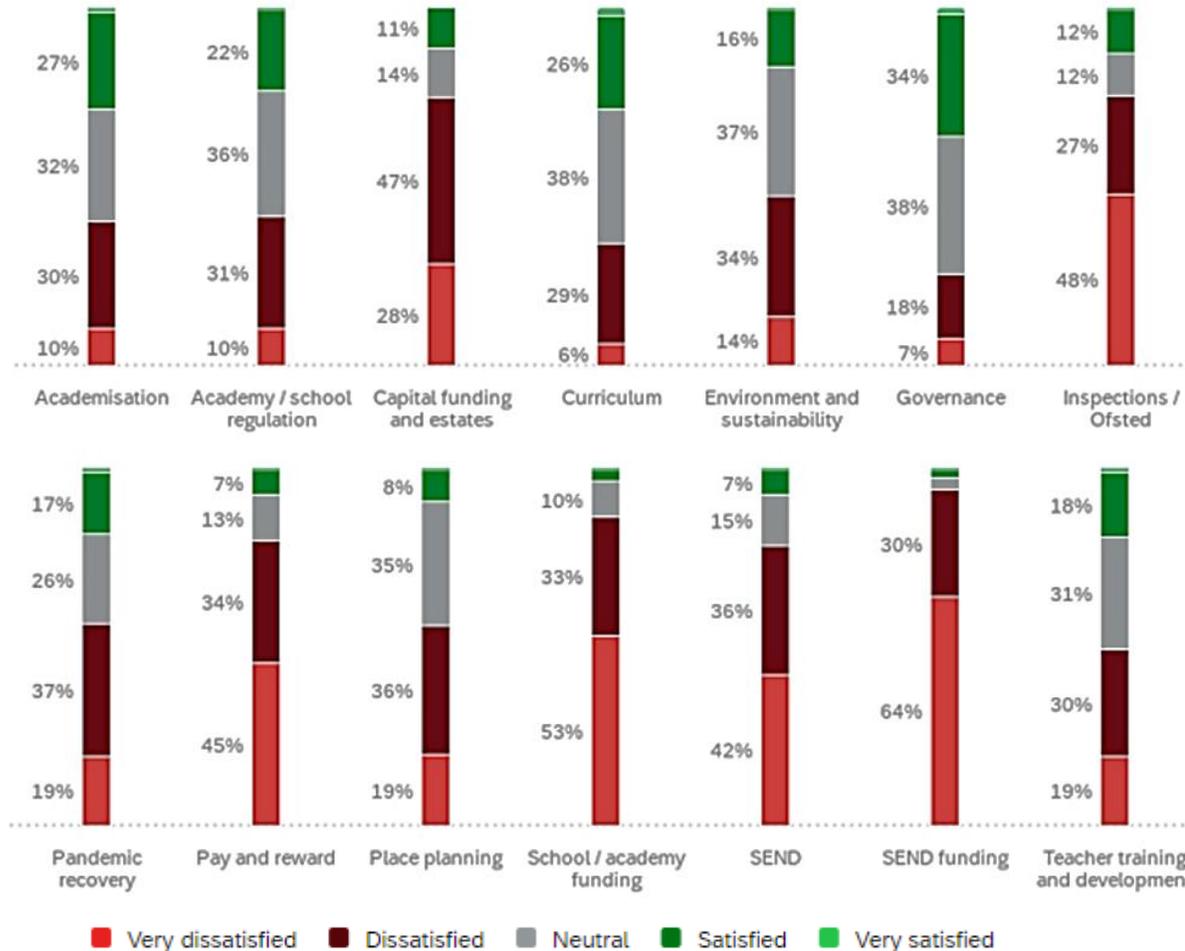
Six in ten (62%) leaders are dissatisfied with Key Stage 2 Assessment, with nearly one in five (18%) very dissatisfied.

The picture is similar when it comes to vocational education, with over half of respondents (56%) dissatisfied and one in five (20%) very dissatisfied.

When it comes to assessment, it is also notable that for A Levels and GCSEs a large number of leaders (46% and 39% respectively) are neutral. This is in contrast to the school leaders survey we carried out in 2016 with ASCL, where 45% of respondents were dissatisfied with A-Level assessment and 68% with GCSEs.

Policy satisfaction

How satisfied are you with current government policy on each of the following?



The expression ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ seems apt here. There is widespread dissatisfaction with government policy across the board.

Whilst many of the areas of high levels of dissatisfaction, such as pay and Ofsted, may not come as a surprise, it is inescapable that SEND funding is an area of real concern for leaders with 94% of respondents dissatisfied with government policy in this area.

It is also notable that dissatisfaction with government policy on capital funding and the school estate is also high.

The government published a series of documents in March and April focussed on academies regulation and commissioning decisions. You can’t help wondering, looking at these results, whether the sector would have preferred the DfE to focus on other policy areas instead.

Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND)

In March, the government published its SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan following the publication of its much-delayed Green Paper in March 2022. The Improvement Plan focusses on a long-term strategy with the implementation of many of its proposals still years away.

It is clear that the sector are calling out for more immediate solutions to the significant challenges they are facing in supporting some of the most vulnerable in society.

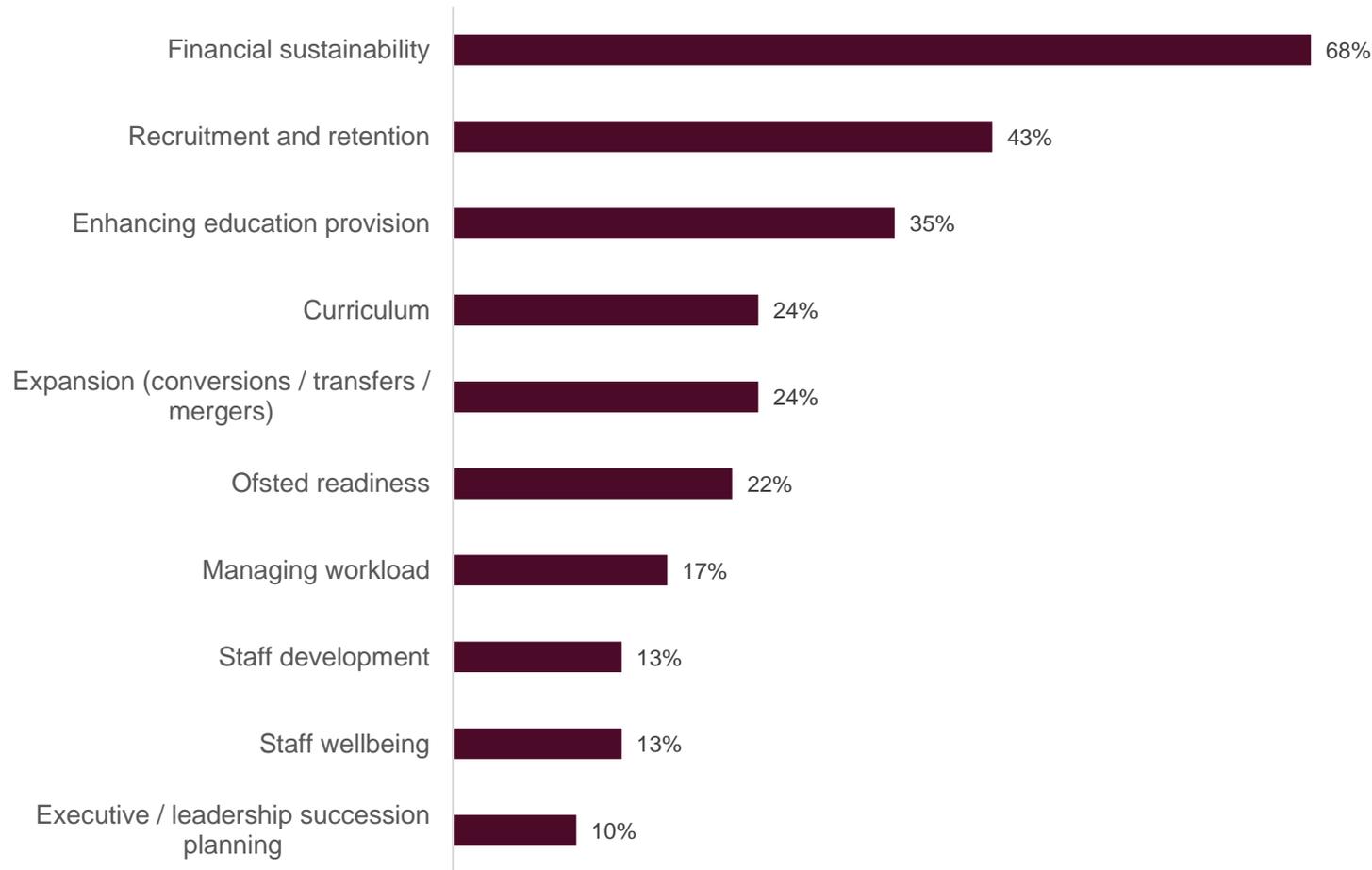
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A question of priority ...

Top operational strategies

The top operational strategies organisations will focus on in the next 12 months



This table shows the most selected priorities from the range of priorities available to school leaders.

It is striking that five of the top ten strategies are focussed directly on people - recruitment and retention, managing workload, staff wellbeing, staff development and succession planning.

Financial sustainability is clearly a significant concern for school leaders, with it standing out as the clear number one area for focus over the next 12 months.

As you would anticipate for education organisations, enhancing education provision and curriculum are also significant areas for focus.

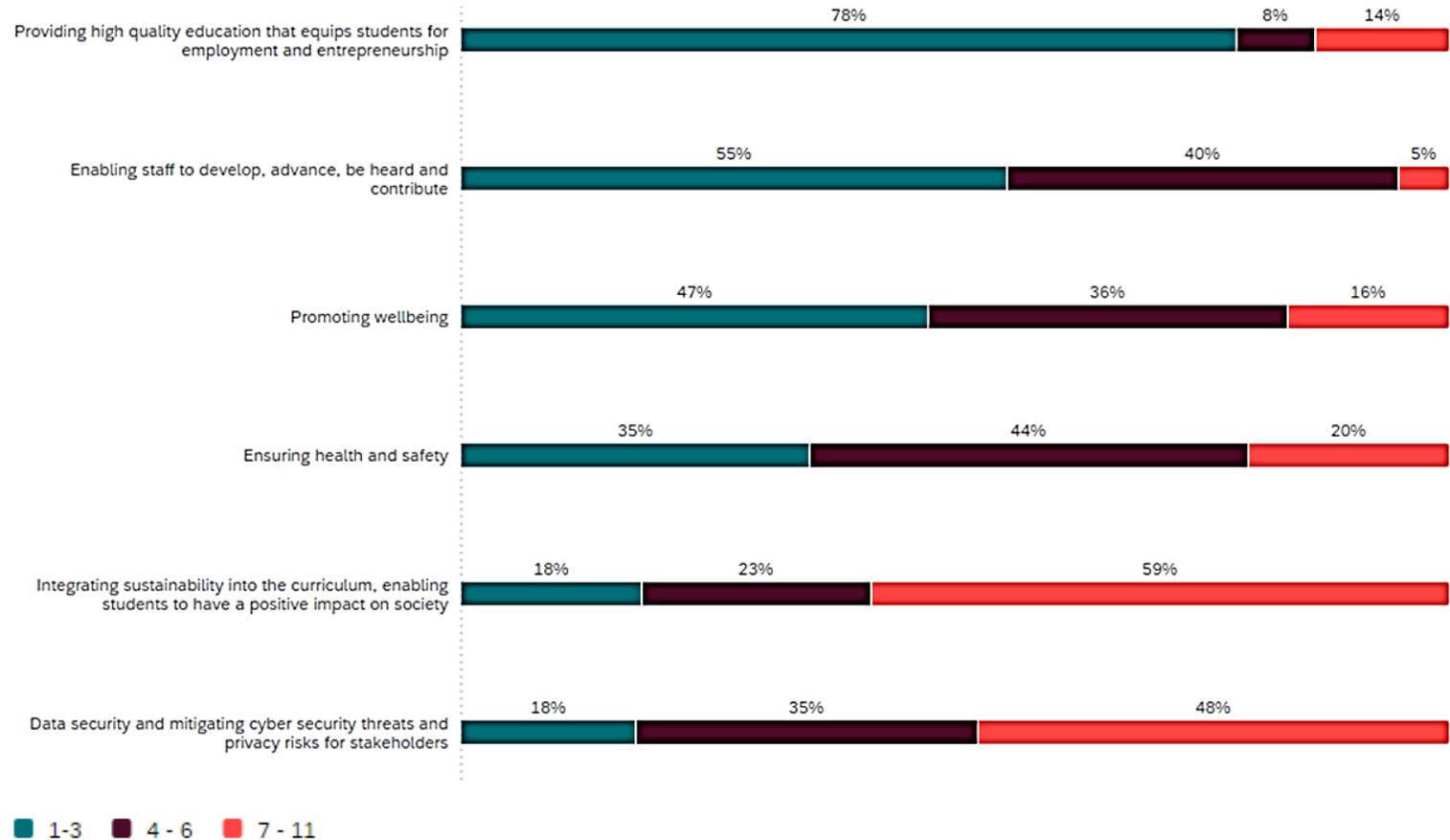
Behaviour and attendance was also commonly cited.

03

Societal impact

Managing wider impact on society

Ranked priorities based on organisations' situation and attitudes to wider societal impact



The results to this question are shown on this page and the next.

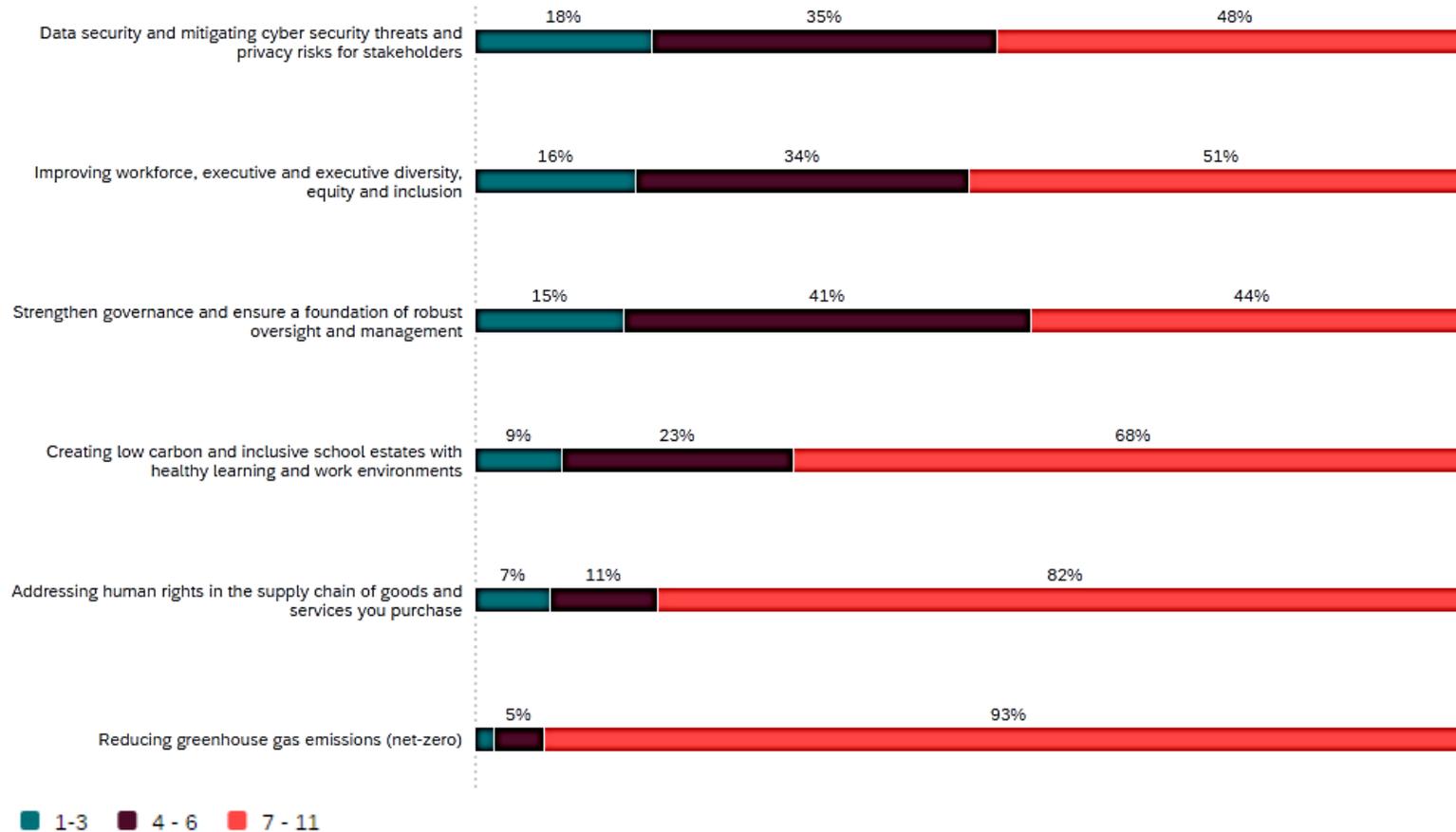
Of note is the fact that 45% of respondents did not rank 'enabling staff to develop, advance, be heard and contribute' as a top three priority, and that 'improving workforce, executive and executive diversity, equity and inclusion' was ranked as a 7th or lower priority for 51% of respondents.

This contrasts with respondents citing recruitment and retention as a top three operational strategy. Organisations may wish to reflect on whether increased focus in these areas may be part of an effective response to the high mobility of staff and the record number of teachers leaving the profession.

It's also interesting that, despite the continuing impact of the General Data Protection Regulations and the Data Protection Act together with the increasing prevalence of Edtech and AI, almost half of respondents cited data security as their 7th highest priority or lower.

Managing wider impact on society

Ranked priorities based on organisations' situation and attitudes to wider societal impact

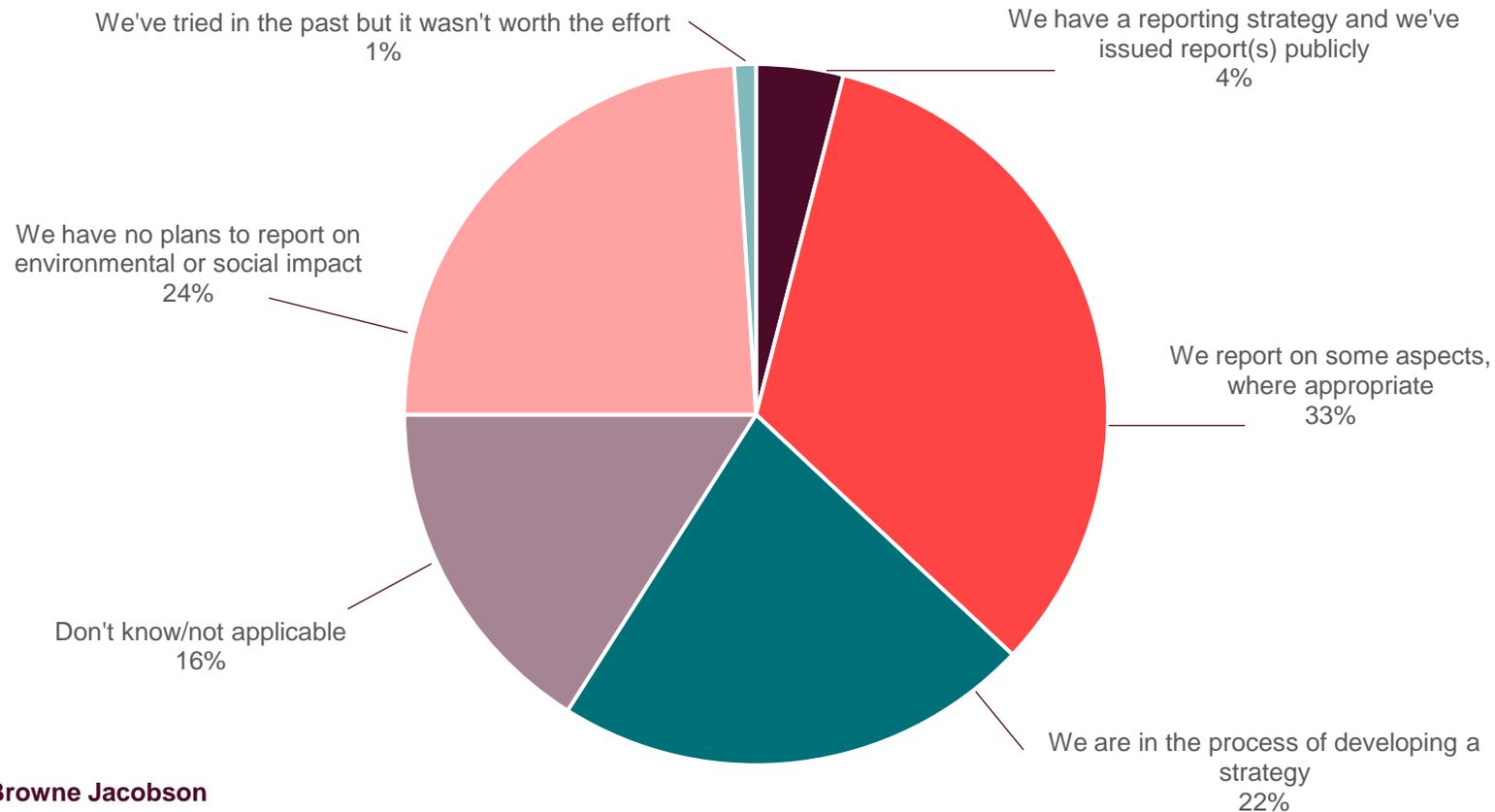
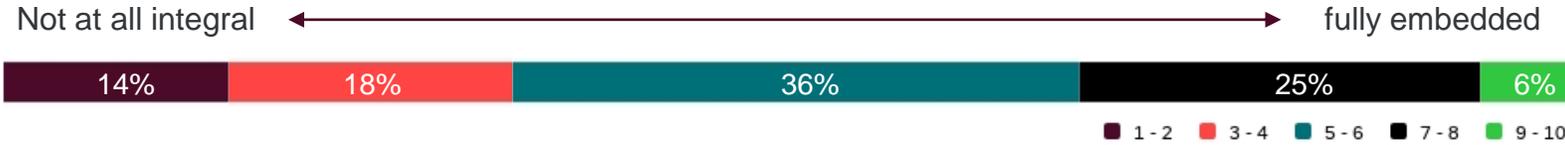


Equipping students for employment and entrepreneurship is a clear top priority for most schools, with 78% listing this in their top three priorities on wider societal impact. This may well reflect the societal shift towards viewing education more holistically/as a stepping stone to employment, rather than an end in itself and/or a step to higher education alone.

Despite the increased emphasis on teaching climate change in schools, increased student awareness of climate change being the issue of their time, and the UK's target to hit net-zero by 2050, 93% of respondents stated that reducing greenhouse gas emissions was their 7th highest priority or lower.

Environmental and social impact

How integral is environmental and social impact to your organisation's strategy and do you report on it?



When asked about the level of integration into their organisation's strategy, on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being fully embedded), 17% rated the level of integration of environmental and social impact into their organisational strategy at 8 or higher.

59% report or are planning to report on some aspects of environmental and social impact, while one in four (24%) have no plans to do this at all.

Looking at the challenges organisations face focusing more closely on environmental and societal issues, eight in ten (81%) cited cost of effective implementation, 76% identified lack of capacity and expertise, four in ten (43%) cited lack of strategy and one in five (22%) were interested, but did not know where to start.

Environmental and social impact

Seven in ten (72%) of respondents felt that focusing on environmental and social governance makes for a better organisation, but the costs, capacity and expertise are seen to be the main challenges to doing this.

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About Browne Jacobson

Browne Jacobson is the law firm for positive impact across business and society.

We champion fairness, make the complex simple and forge connections between clients to find creative solutions.

This is how our lawyers improve outcomes for every person, community, education institution and business we serve.

Leading education lawyers

Browne Jacobson's education practice is very well-established and is highly regarded. As one of the country's leading law firms operating in the sector, our multi-disciplinary practice delivers a comprehensive portfolio of legal and HR services from our office network to education sector organisations nationally.

The team is ambitious and forward-thinking. We seek to combine our legal expertise and deep sector understanding to provide advice that enables our clients to navigate the evolving education landscape.

The team is ranked Tier 1 in both Legal 500 and Chambers & Partners UK.

Media enquiries

If you'd like to feature any of the findings from this report or explore any of these themes in more detail, please get in touch.



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