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# Strategies for Postsecondary Success

A survey of school leaders on practices that help  
students enroll and succeed in college

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JULY 2021

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**BACKGROUND**

For the past three years, GreatSchools has used its [College Success Award](#) (CSA) to celebrate public high schools that excel at ensuring their students enroll and persist in college. In 2021, we will launch the College Success Gold Award to highlight schools with a multi-year track record of success.

As part of this project, we surveyed school leaders in states that have provided postsecondary data for two or more years in order to learn more about what practices they believe contribute to their success. Analysis<sup>1</sup> of these findings should be useful to both educators and researchers, as it identifies the tangible activities that award-winning schools attribute to their success and accessible best practices that any high school can adopt.

**METHODOLOGY & NOTES ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS**

- We surveyed 820 school leaders across 24 states over the period of February 3 – March 8, 2021.
- We focused the survey on high school principals in states<sup>2</sup> that provided postsecondary data for two or more years, regardless of whether or not their schools were College Success Award winners.
- For this analysis, we disaggregated responses in two ways:
  1. High schools that *have* won a College Success Award (**CSA-winning schools**) and schools that *have not* yet won a College Success Award (**non-winning schools**).
  2. High schools with 40% or more of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (**lower-income schools**), and schools with fewer than 40% of these students (**higher-income schools**). These categories align with the eligibility criteria for the federal Title I program.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS <sup>3</sup>	CSA-winning schools	Non-winning schools
<b>Lower-income schools</b>	105 (33% of winners)	297 (62% of non-winners)
<b>Higher-income schools</b>	213 (67% of winners)	182 (38% of non-winners)

- The majority of school leaders surveyed (91%) indicated that their high schools do not have selective attendance criteria.
  - » This holds true for **CSA-winning schools** and **non-winning schools** (90% of CSA-winning schools and 91% of non-winning schools do not have selective attendance criteria).
  - » **Lower-income, CSA-winning schools** surveyed are over twice as likely to have selective attendance criteria in comparison to other schools. (19% of them admit students on the basis of GPA, test score, or an application vs. 8% of **higher-income, CSA-winning schools**).

<sup>1</sup>It is important to note that this is a qualitative study not designed to be analyzed statistically.  
<sup>2</sup>AR, CO, CT, FL, GA, HI, ID, IN, KY, LA, MA, MI, MN, MO, MS, MT, NC, ND, NE, NJ, OH, OK, TX, VT  
<sup>3</sup>We surveyed 820 school leaders; however, at the time of the analysis, 23 schools' Title I status was absent from our database. As a result, when results are disaggregated by Title I status, the base size is 797.

# 6 KEY SURVEY TAKEAWAYS

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## 1

CSA-winning schools tend to offer **MORE ADVANCED COURSES** than non-winning schools.

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## 2

**EQUITABLE AND EARLY ACCESS TO ADVANCED COURSES** could help students at lower-income schools have better college success outcomes.

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## 3

During the pandemic, the majority of school leaders pointed to a **SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT** and **STRONG RELATIONSHIPS** as key to getting students to and through college.

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## 4

Survey results suggest that **TEACHER SUPPORT** and **CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION WITH STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES** may be powerful levers for helping students who are not academically on track for college get the support they need.

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## 5

Higher-income and CSA-winning schools offered **MORE ACCESS TO ACADEMIC CLUBS AND ACTIVITIES** than non-winning schools.

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## 6

The majority of school leaders indicated that they will continue to integrate technology and digital learning into their school curriculum.

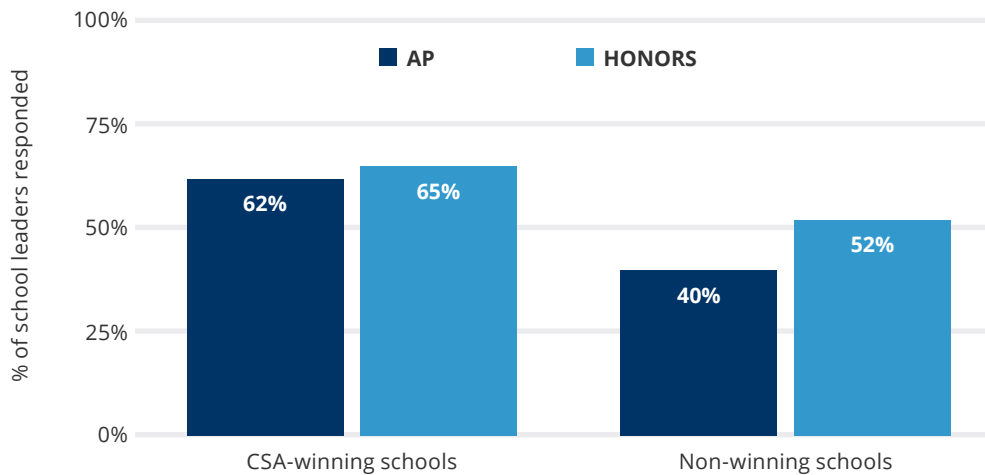
# 1

## CSA-winning schools tend to offer **MORE ADVANCED COURSES** than non-winning schools.

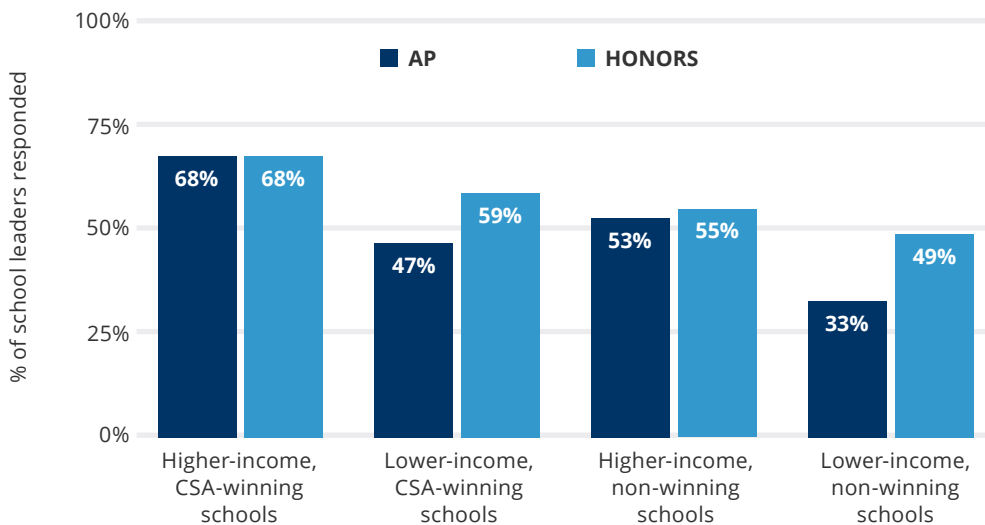
When asked about the quantity of advanced courses offered to students, **CSA-winning schools** more commonly reported that they offer more than 10 Advanced Placement (AP) (62%) and Honors courses (65%).

By contrast, just 40% of **non-winning schools** offer 10 or more AP classes and 52% offer more than 10 Honors classes. Overall, 64% of **CSA-winning schools** reported that they offer 10 or more advanced courses, compared to 46% of **non-winning schools**.

### SCHOOLS OFFERING 10 OR MORE ADVANCED COURSES



### SCHOOLS OFFERING 10 OR MORE ADVANCED COURSES



Q2 - Does your school offer any of the following advanced academic programs?  
Q2A - How many classes in the following programs does your school offer?

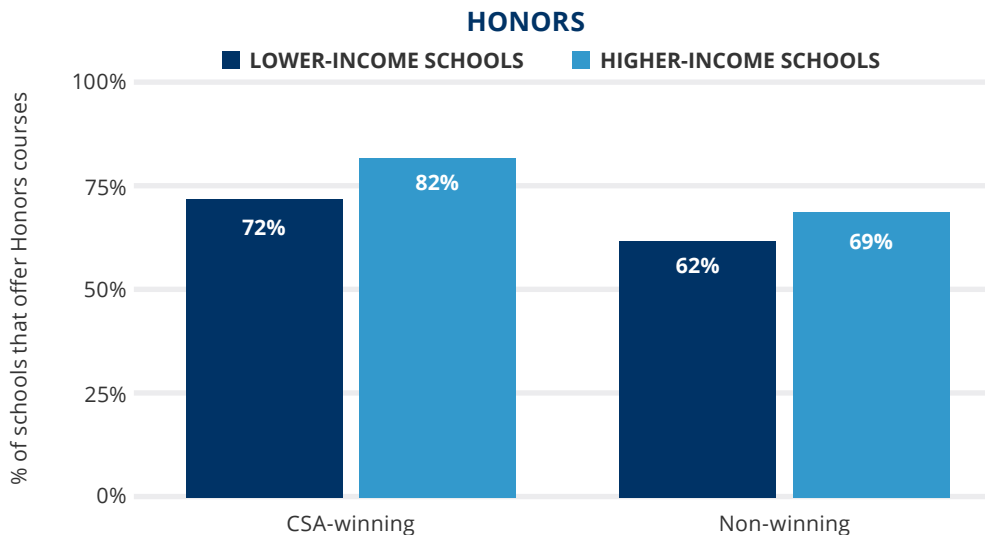
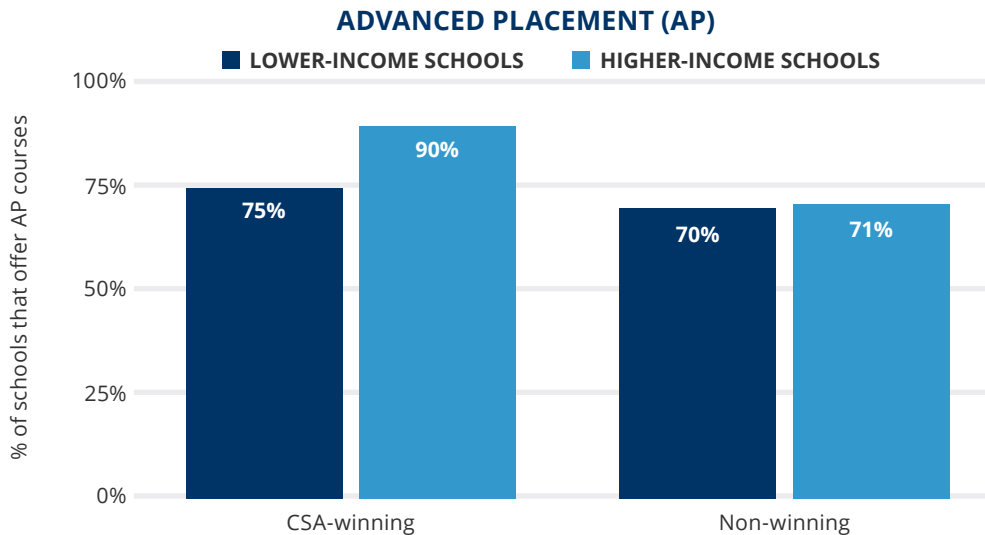
## 2

**EQUITABLE AND EARLY ACCESS TO ADVANCED COURSES** could help students at lower-income schools have better college success outcomes.

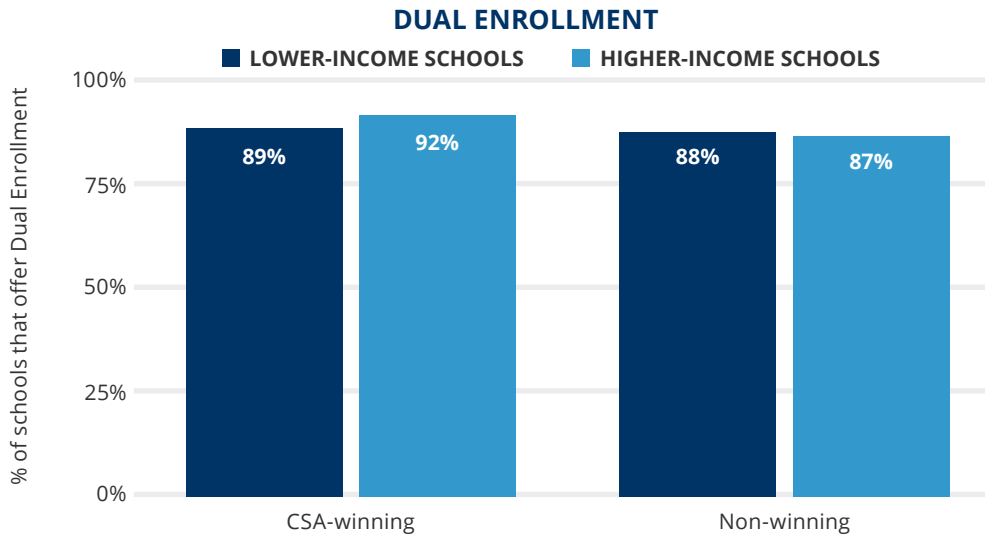
Robust [AP](#), Honors and/or [Dual Enrollment programs](#) improve college success for all students, but not all students can access this critical opportunity.

The majority of school leaders surveyed (97%) indicated that their school offers **at least one advanced academic program**. However, there were key differences among schools depending on their student population and whether they have won a CSA.

Honors courses were the most popular advanced academic program among all schools. However, **lower-income, CSA-winning schools** offer fewer AP courses (47%) than **higher-income, non-winning schools** (53%), which suggests that access to AP coursework could improve postsecondary outcomes at lower-income schools.



Q2 - Does your school offer any of the following advanced academic programs?  
Q2A - How many classes in the following programs does your school offer?



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 Q2A - How many classes in the following programs does your school offer?

#### ACCESS TO ADVANCED COURSEWORK<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the quantity of advanced classes, we found that **CSA-winning schools** had a higher proportion of their student body enrolled in at least one advanced course compared to **non-winning schools**.

HALF OR MORE OF THE STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN ADVANCED CLASSES

## 60%

of higher-income,  
CSA-winning schools

## 50%

of lower-income,  
CSA-winning schools

## 44%

of higher-income,  
non-winning schools

## 27%

of lower-income,  
non-winning schools

SURVEY RESPONDENTS	CSA-winning schools	Non-winning schools
<b>Lower-income schools</b>	52/103 (50% of winners)	76/279 (27% of non-winners)
<b>Higher-income schools</b>	127/211 (60% of winners)	75/171 (44% of non-winners)

<sup>4</sup>The widespread availability of dual enrollment classes in both winning and non-winning schools suggests that such programs do not impact student outcomes. Our qualitative research suggests that many less effective high schools offer “dual enrollment” by simply allowing students to take local junior college classes on their own or use online programs, but that highly effective dual enrollment entails deeper partnerships with local colleges or other systems that control the quality and enable all students to take advantage of the program.

We also found that **CSA-winning schools** tend to offer access to advanced courses in the 9th grade, while **non-winning schools** more commonly indicated that they wait until later grades to offer students access to advanced courses.

**OFFER STUDENTS ACCESS TO ADVANCED COURSES BEGINNING IN 9TH GRADE**

**76%** of CSA-winning schools      **67%** of non-winning schools

CSA-winning schools	Non-winning schools
238/314 (76% of winners)	183/450 (67% of non-winners)

**OFFER STUDENTS ACCESS TO ADVANCED COURSES BEGINNING IN 9TH GRADE**

**77%** of higher-income, CSA-winning schools      **73%** of lower-income, CSA-winning schools      **77%** of higher-income, non-winning schools      **66%** of lower-income, non-winning schools

SURVEY RESPONDENTS	CSA-winning schools	Non-winning schools
<b>Lower-income schools</b>	75/103 (73% of winners)	183/279 (66% of non-winners)
<b>Higher-income schools</b>	163/211 (77% of winners)	119/171 (77% of non-winners)

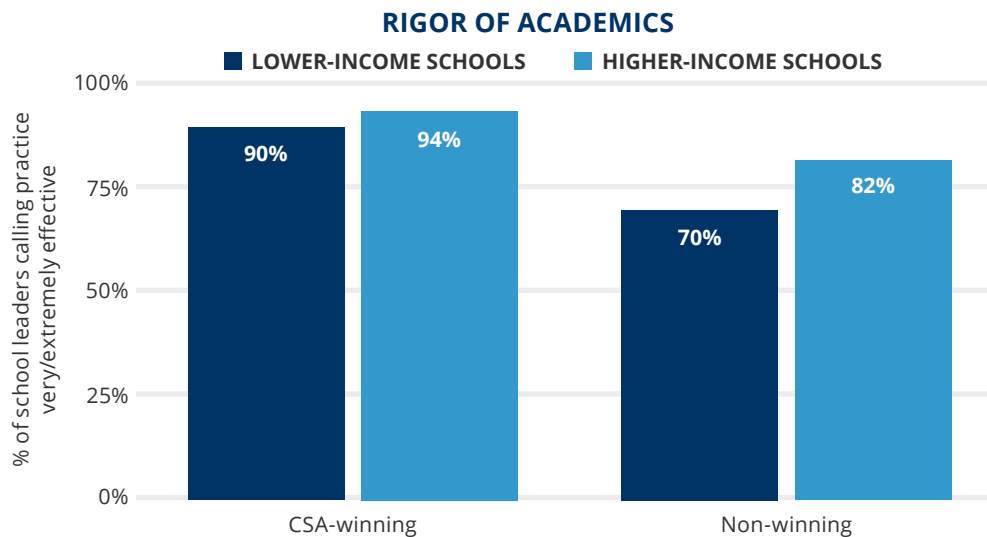
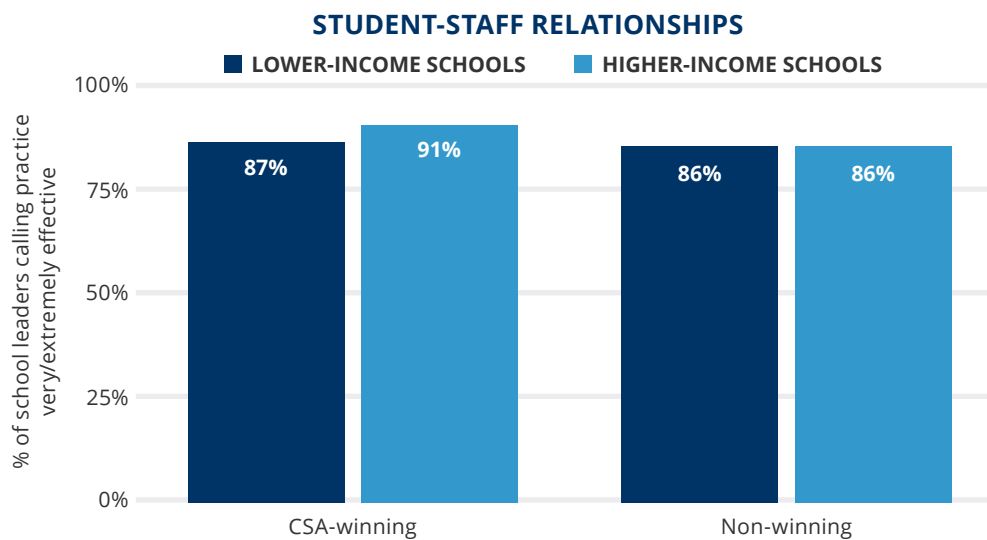
Interestingly, offering early access to advanced classes mattered primarily for **lower-income schools**. Early access to advanced classes appears to improve outcomes (73% for lower-income, winning schools vs. 66% for lower-income, non-winning schools), but was not different for higher-income winning vs. non-winning schools.

### 3

During the pandemic, the majority of school leaders pointed to a **SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT** and **STRONG RELATIONSHIPS** as key to getting students to and through college.

Regardless of income level, school leaders from **CSA-winning schools** attribute their success to their rigorous coursework more often (93%) than **non-winning schools** (75%).

**Lower-income, CSA-winning schools** indicated a stronger focus on college affordability<sup>5</sup> (86% vs. 76% at lower-income, non-winning schools), which suggests that this strategic focus has a positive impact on student outcomes. When asked how students are encouraged to enroll in these classes, **lower-income, CSA-winning schools** (26%) indicated that they automatically enroll every student in at least one advanced class.

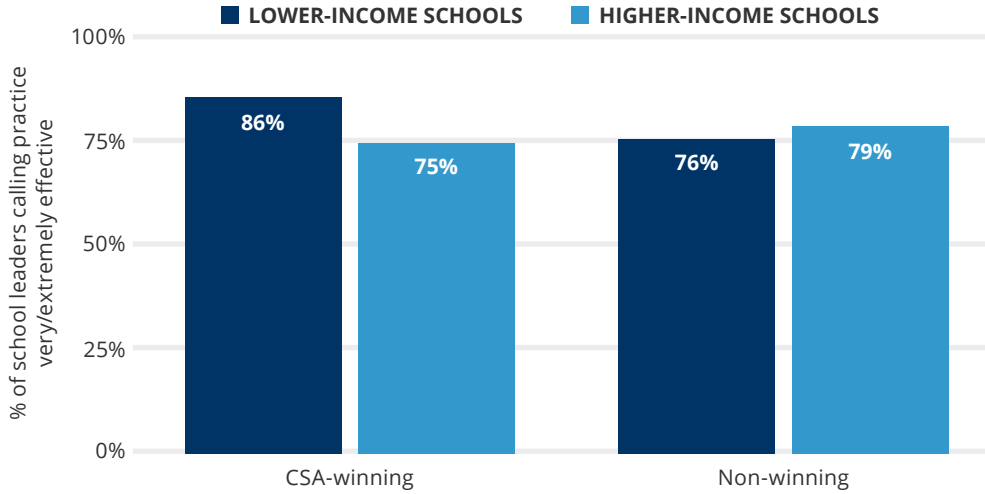


Q16 - How effective have the following been in your success in supporting students in getting to college and succeeding there?

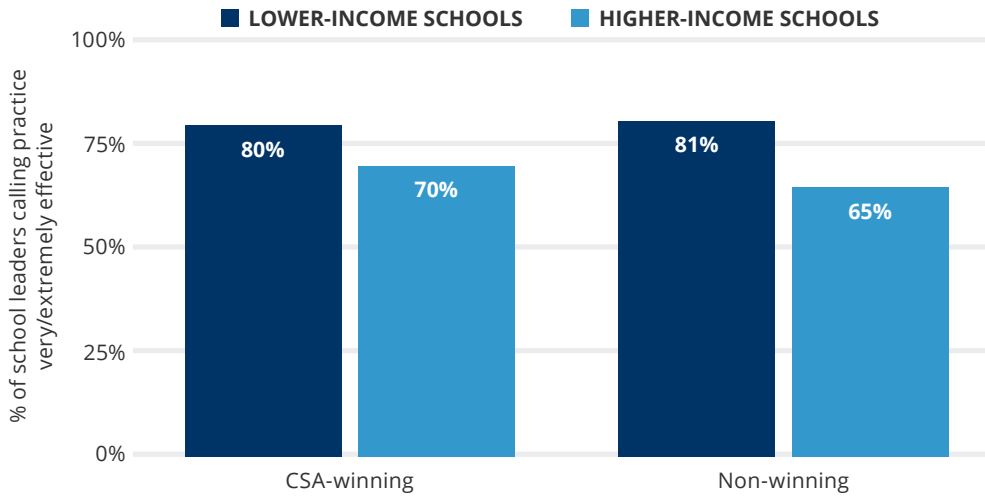
<sup>5</sup>e.g., Identifying scholarships and encouraging students to participate in advanced coursework in order to reduce the cost of college



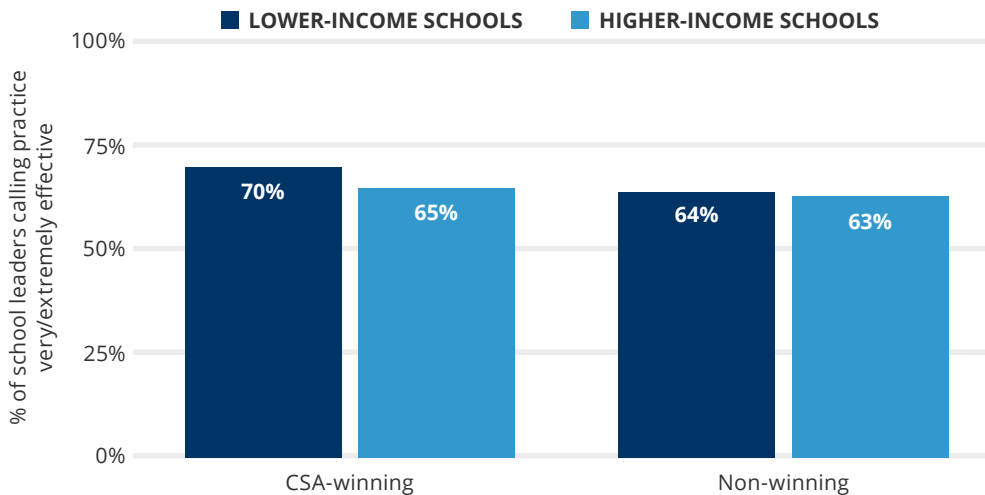
### FOCUS ON COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY



### 1-1 SUPPORT THROUGHOUT COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS

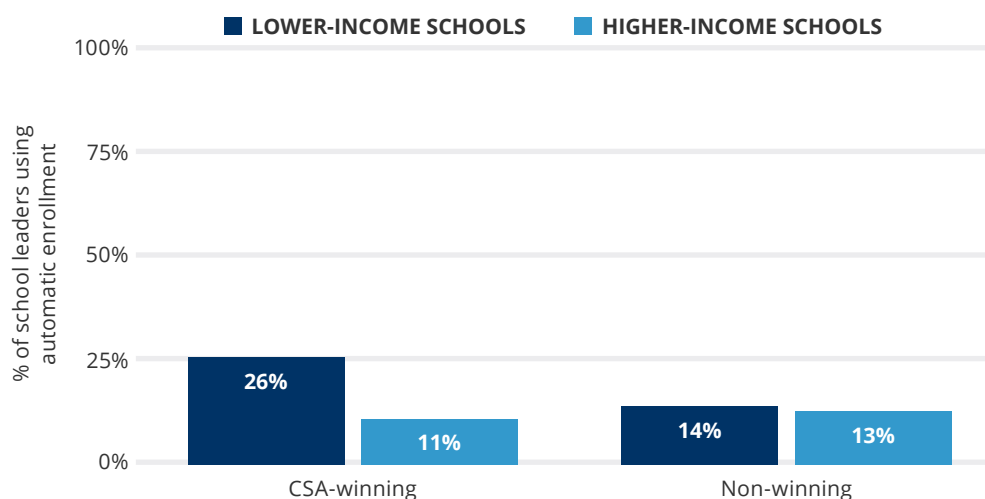


### EARLY AND ROBUST INTERVENTION FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE NOT ON TRACK TO GRADUATE



Q16 - How effective have the following been in your success in supporting students in getting to college and succeeding there?

## AUTOMATIC ENROLLMENT IN ADVANCED CLASSES



Q2 - Does your school offer any of the following advanced academic programs?

Q2E - What practices do you have to encourage students to participate in advanced courses?

### PROVEN PRACTICES FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

Research suggests that there are numerous benefits for students when taking advanced coursework — and that participation in advanced courses is especially important for narrowing the [opportunity gap](#). However, as a [2020 EdTrust report](#) reveals, not all students can access this opportunity. As a result of this survey, we posit three strategies high schools should consider to promote equitable access to advanced courses:

1. In order to increase students' likelihood of enrolling and persisting in college, high schools — especially those serving a high population of families experiencing financial hardship — should offer more advanced coursework.
2. It's not enough to merely offer advanced classes. Schools should also adopt tactics to ensure that their students enroll in advanced courses. The majority of school leaders (89%) indicated that they reach out to parents and students to encourage students to enroll in advanced courses. School leaders at **lower-income, CSA winning schools** (52%) point to partnerships between middle and high school as another method to encourage students to enroll in these courses; **higher-income, CSA-winning schools** were more likely (69%) to report using this strategy.
3. Automatically enrolling students in at least one advanced course is another practice that shows promise. Among **lower-income, CSA-winning schools**, 26% of school leaders indicated that they automatically enroll students in at least one advanced course to encourage participation in advanced classes. By contrast, just 11% of **higher-income, CSA winning schools** engage in this practice<sup>6</sup>.

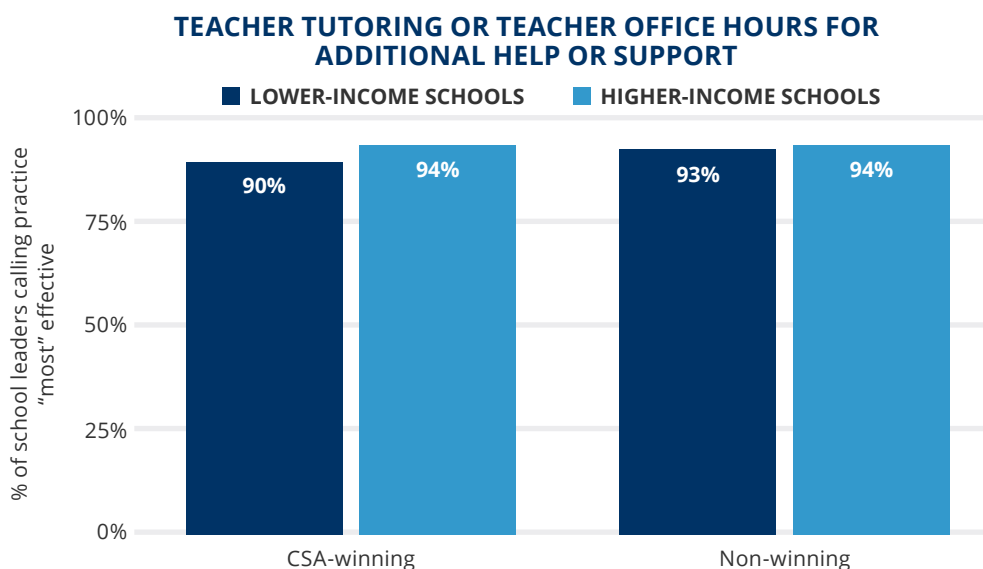
<sup>6</sup>School leaders should take precautions to ensure that automatic enrollment policies are truly equitable; they should regularly engage with families in order to build their awareness of the features and benefits of these advanced courses, avoid funneling certain student groups into specific courses, and make certain that families experiencing poverty are not responsible for the costs of end of course tests.

## 4

Survey results suggest that **TEACHER SUPPORT** and **CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION WITH STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES** may be powerful levers for helping students who are not academically on track for college get the support they need.

The majority of school leaders (94%) indicated that out-of-classroom support from teachers, such as tutoring or teacher office hours, is the most effective lever for helping students who are not academically on track get the support they need. However, survey results suggest that the widespread use of teacher tutoring or support does not consistently bear positive results. Further research is needed to understand how **CSA-winning schools** effectively use teachers' out-of-classroom time to help promote postsecondary success.

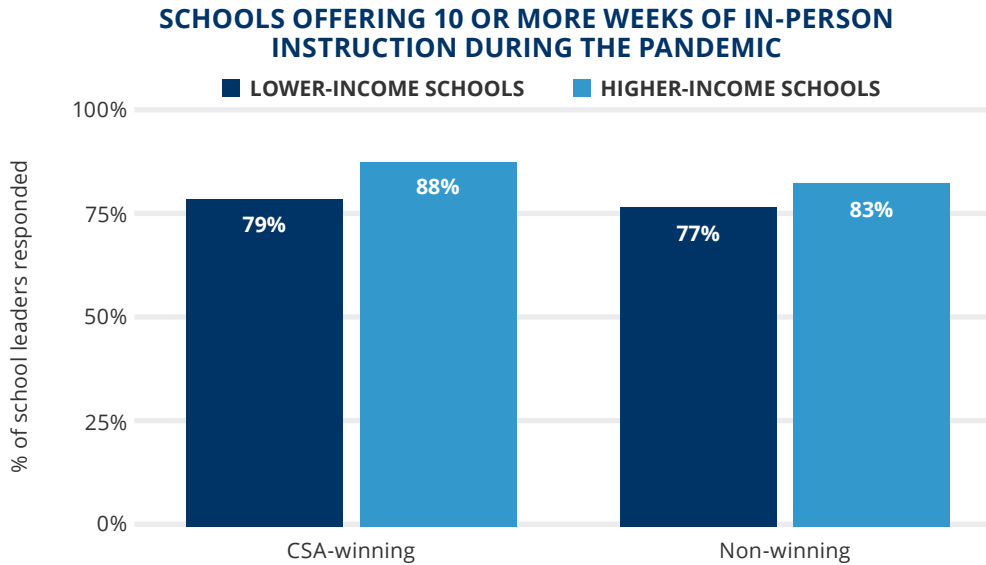
In addition to teacher office hours, **higher-income, CSA-winning schools** (69%) also indicated that peer tutoring or mentorship is an effective strategy for student support. This was a less utilized strategy among **lower-income schools** (57%).<sup>7</sup>



Q11 - What are the most effective strategies your school uses to support struggling students?

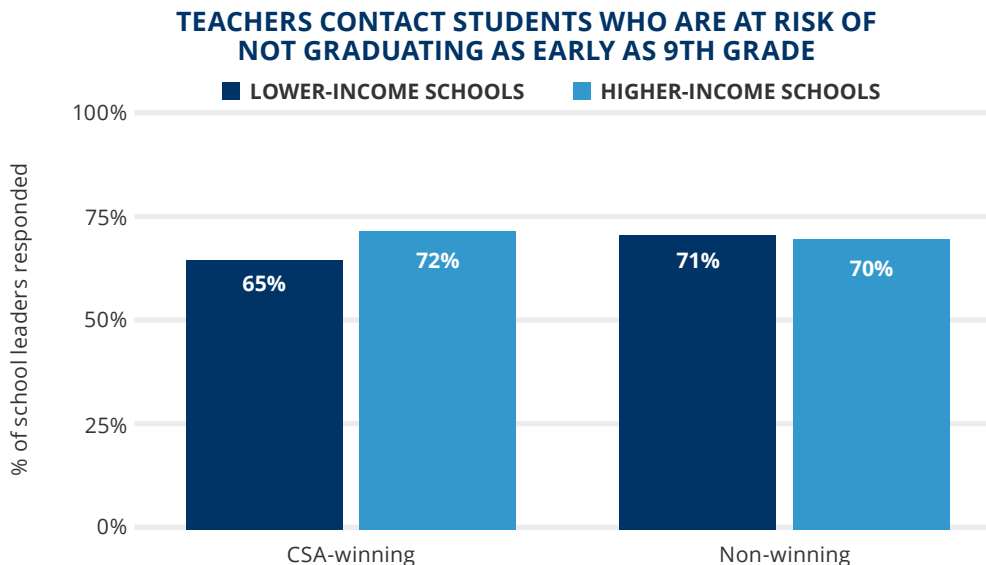
<sup>7</sup>Research shows staff-led tutoring is more effective than volunteer or peer tutoring.

Teachers were forced to adapt their support strategies when school buildings were shuttered as a result of the pandemic; however, we found that in-person learning was more accessible for **higher-income** and **CSA-winning schools**. The majority of schools (81%) were able to offer more than 10 weeks of in person instruction during the pandemic; however, **lower-income schools** were less able to offer students time in the building — and as a result, perhaps less access to supports that school leaders say help students get academically back on track.



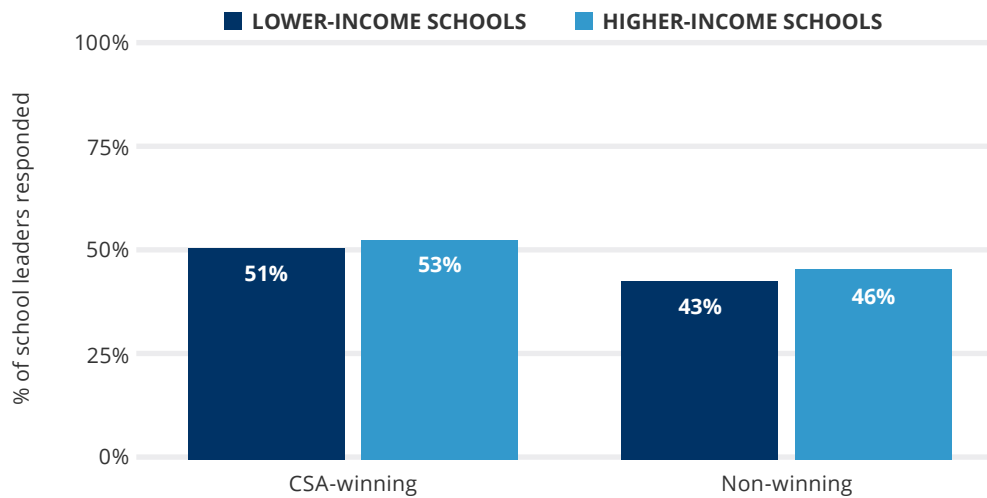
Q7 - How much in-person instruction have you been able to provide during COVID?

The majority of school leaders (69%) indicated that they identify and contact students who are at risk of not graduating or meeting college entrance requirements in 9th grade. However, **CSA-winning schools** also contact these students in 10th grade more often (53%) than **non-winning schools** (43%).



Q10 - When are students who are at risk of not graduating or meeting college entrance requirements identified and contacted?

## TEACHERS ALSO CONTACT 10TH GRADERS WHO ARE AT RISK OF NOT GRADUATING



Q10 - When are students who are at risk of not graduating or meeting college entrance requirements identified and contacted?

### PROVEN PRACTICES FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

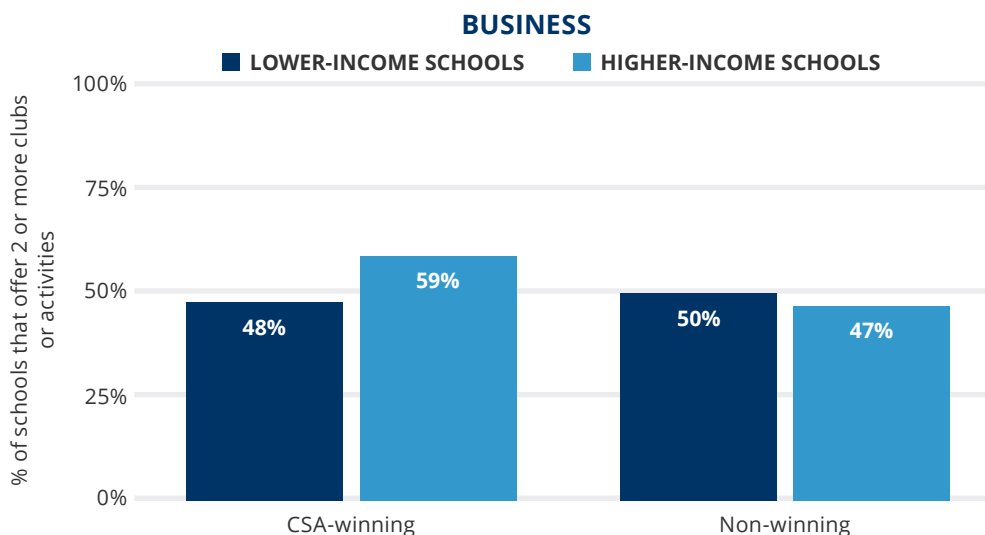
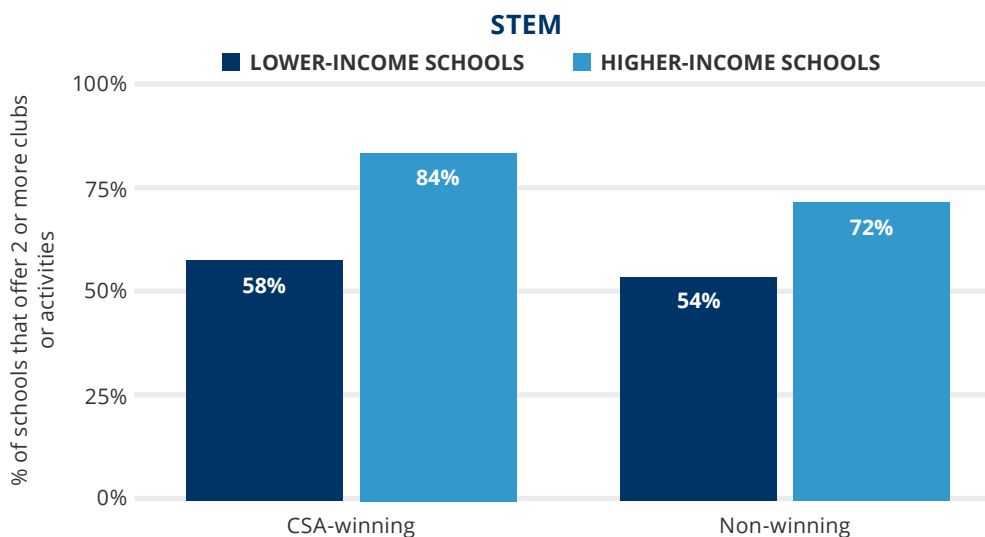
Two key strategies could help support students who are at risk of not graduating or meeting college entrance requirements.

1. Prioritizing effective use of teachers' out-of-classroom time and [high quality tutoring](#) will be especially important after a year of disrupted learning, when students may require varying levels of academic support. In fact, [Education Resource Strategies](#) has identified "Time and Attention" as a research-based power strategy that district leaders should consider allocating their [ESSER funds](#) toward for sustainable improvement. High schools — especially those serving a high population of families experiencing financial hardship — should consider expanding students' access to their teachers and time receiving targeted instruction and be vigilant about school-wide implementation.
2. Our findings suggest that schools should continually contact students and their families when students are at risk of not graduating or not meeting graduation requirements.

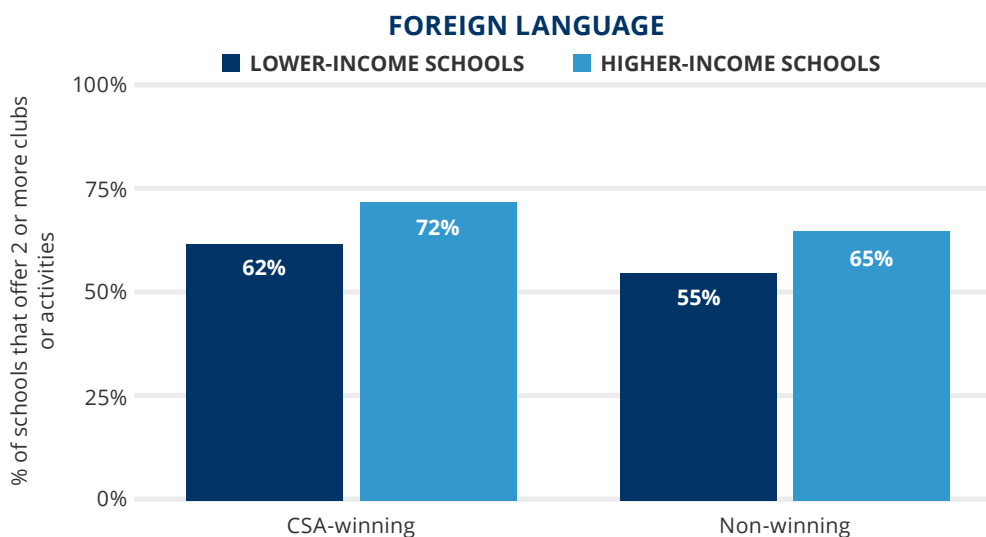
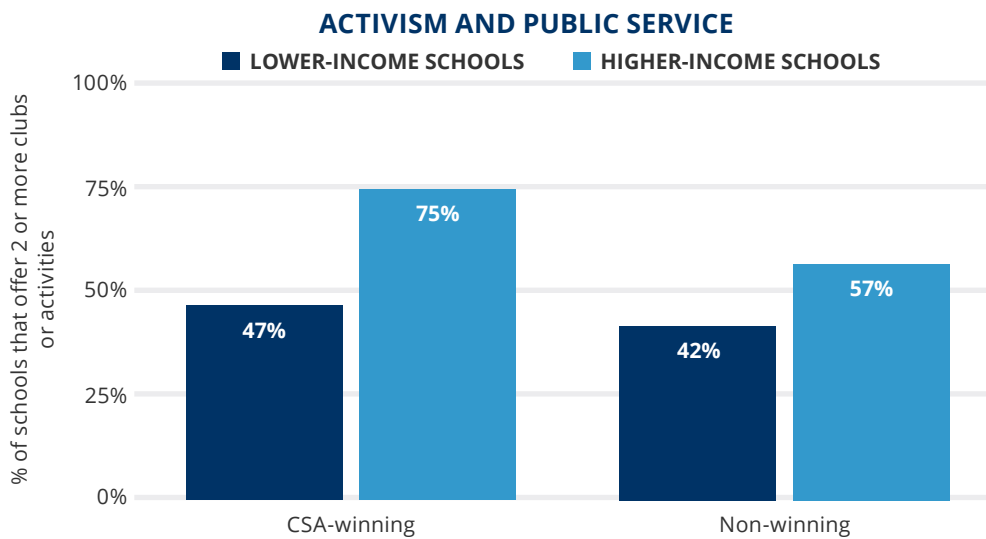
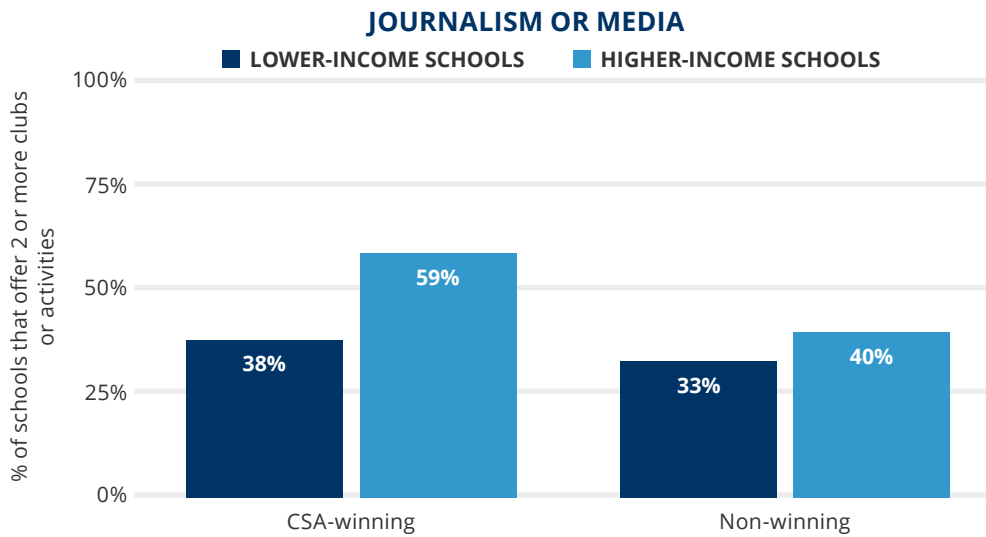
## 5

### Higher-income and CSA-winning schools offered **MORE ACCESS TO ACADEMIC CLUBS AND ACTIVITIES** than non-winning schools.

Beyond academic coursework, we also found that **higher-income schools** offer students more access to academic clubs and activities outside of class than **lower-income schools**. This was true across a variety of categories including STEM, business, journalism/media, activism/public service, and foreign language.



Q6 - How many academic clubs and activities (not sports, recreation, and arts) does your school offer in each of the following categories?



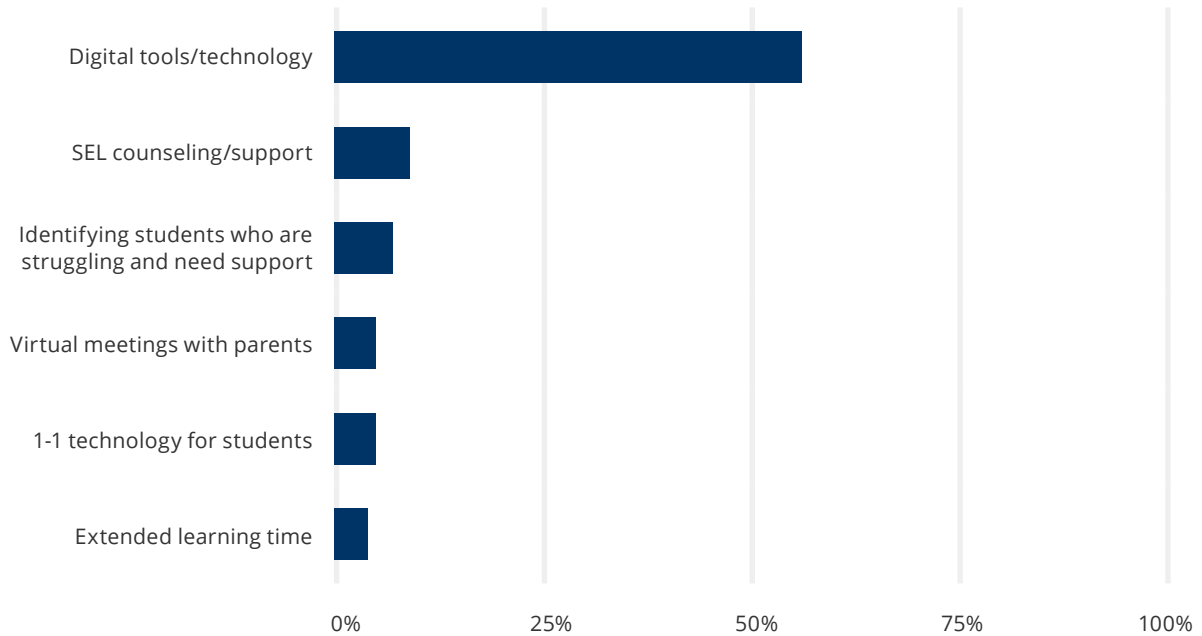
Q6 - How many academic clubs and activities (not sports, recreation, and arts) does your school offer in each of the following categories?

## 6

The majority of school leaders indicated that they will continue to integrate technology and digital learning into their school curriculum.

The vast majority of school leaders (56%) say they plan to continue to use digital tools, online learning platforms, and modes of virtual instruction to better serve students and families upon returning to a normal classroom setting.

### CRISIS INNOVATIONS THAT SCHOOL LEADERS INTEND TO CONTINUE



Q14 - What new policies/practices have you implemented during COVID that you intend to continue after the pandemic is over?

“Providing digital instruction to students who are unable to attend school is a strategy we will continue after the end of the pandemic. We instituted a breakfast/extended learning time in the morning. We will continue to have this time built into the schedule.”

“Wellness breaks; getting outside, stretching, getting in a walk to clear our heads, and breathe fresh air. Student Staffings; identifying students who are struggling before it is too late and collectively developing a plan for success.”



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## CONCLUSION

Insights from the school leaders featured in this report can offer valuable and effective strategies for any high school to adopt. By understanding what practices are implemented at schools with a sustained history of postsecondary success, we can uncover practices that are likely to make a difference for students — especially at schools serving a higher population of students experiencing poverty. These findings offer preliminary suggestions and ideas; though there are likely many additional practices that schools use to support their students in graduating from and succeeding after high school. Further research should be conducted to examine how specific practices that school leaders from CSA-winning schools rate as “effective” are implemented in their schools. We hope that providing these insights into what practices set CSA-winning schools apart will inspire school leaders to adopt new strategies and improve the lives of every student.