Crisis Communication and Safety in Education

Concerns, Challenges and Planning for the 2021–2022 School Year

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Of all the ways the COVID-19 pandemic upended our daily lives, its disruption to learning was like nothing education professionals had experienced before. Students of all ages began learning from home through computer screens. Teachers and professors were forced to rethink what lesson plans looked like in a remote world. Administrators worked tirelessly to determine when and how students might be able to return to classrooms safely. All this happened while school officials communicated updates that seemed to change by the day.

COVID-19 added an entirely new set of concerns to school safety, from social distancing measures and contact tracing to ongoing communication with parents and students. As vaccination efforts increase and many schools, colleges and universities make plans for in-person learning, COVID-19 concerns remain top of mind for those tasked with planning what the next school year looks like in our "new normal."

To understand the concerns K–12 and higher education staff members have about school safety — and how they plan to address them — Rave Mobile Safety fielded a national survey of over 300 staff each in K–12 schools and higher education institutions in late March 2021. The survey's findings indicate that even with vaccination efforts ramping up, COVID-19 remains a major concern for educational institutions as they prepare for the 2021–2022 school year. However, school safety concerns that dominated conversations pre-COVID-19, such as student mental health and physical health, are still major priorities.

Key Findings

COVID-related safety measures are the top safety concern for the 2021–2022 school year for **K–12 respondents (71%)** and **higher education respondents (82%)** alike.

Student mental health is the second largest concern, with **60% of K–12 respondents** and **54% of higher education** respondents citing it as a **major safety issue**.

When it comes to **crisis communication challenges** experienced in the past 12 months, issues **reaching and notifying students and/or parents** were top of the list for both K–12 and higher education institutions (26% K–12 and 18% higher education).

Email remains the top communication channel used to reach school communities during a crisis (80% K–12 and 88% higher education), **followed by text messages** (62% K-12 and 71% higher education).

While **higher education institutions** are most likely to communicate with **first responders** during an emergency through **safety and security staff (70%), K–12 schools** do so through emergency communication channels like **9-1-1 (73%)**.

Looking ahead toward the 2021–2022 school year, roughly half of **K–12 respondents (42%)** and **higher education respondents (54%)** say their schools are planning a combination of **online and in-person learning**.

Read on to learn the challenges K–12 schools, colleges and universities faced in the past year, additional concerns for the 2021–2022 school year, and ways schools communicate during crises.
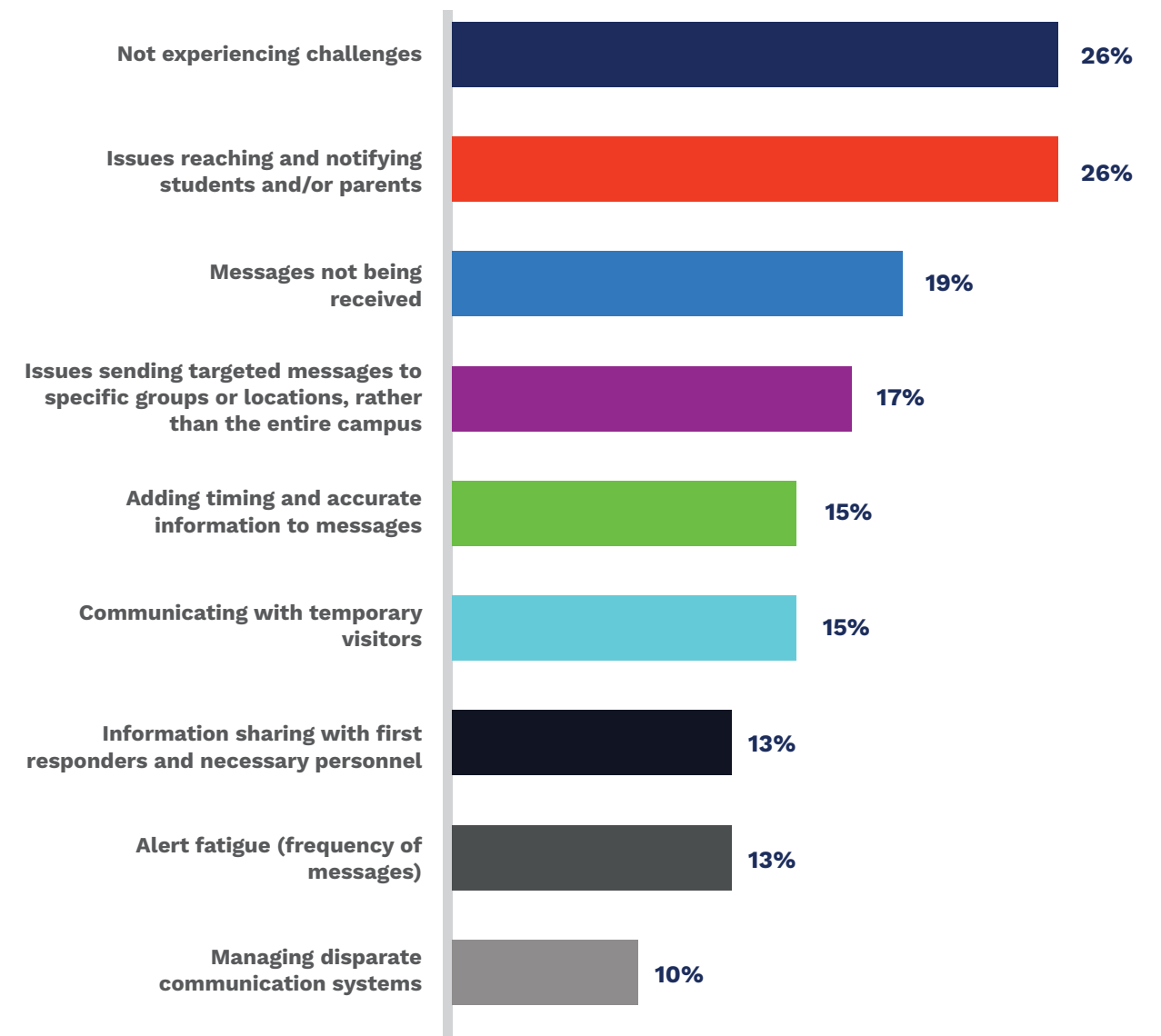
K-12 Schools

K–12 education was completely upended by the pandemic, with some of our youngest students adjusting to remote learning, mask-wearing and social distancing seemingly overnight. Schools were tasked with sharing ever-changing updates with parents, while maintaining a steady stream of communication not just about curriculum, but also about reopening plans with the entire school community.

Crisis Communication Challenges

The pandemic made this year unlike any other on the crisis communication front. While about a quarter of K–12 respondents said they had not experienced crisis communication challenges in the past 12 months — perhaps because remote learning eliminated a myriad of in-person emergencies — many experienced issues reaching and notifying parents and/or students and ensuring messages were received.

What crisis communication challenges have you experienced in the past 12 months?

Challenge	Percentage
Not experiencing challenges	26%
Issues reaching and notifying students and/or parents	26%
Messages not being received	19%
Issues sending targeted messages to specific groups or locations, rather than the entire campus	17%
Adding timing and accurate information to messages	15%
Communicating with temporary visitors	15%
Information sharing with first responders and necessary personnel	13%
Alert fatigue (frequency of messages)	13%
Managing disparate communication systems	10%

(Respondents selected all that applied.)

Schools are turning to many different options to help overcome these crisis communication challenges, with most reporting they'll be evaluating their current systems (42%).

How do you plan to overcome these crisis communication challenges?

Evaluating current system	42%
Adding more communication modes	33%
Expanding students and parents' engagement efforts	26%
Polling students and parents' communication preferences	26%
Increasing frequency of drills	26%
No plans to overcome	23%
Integrating disparate systems	14%

(Respondents selected all that applied.)
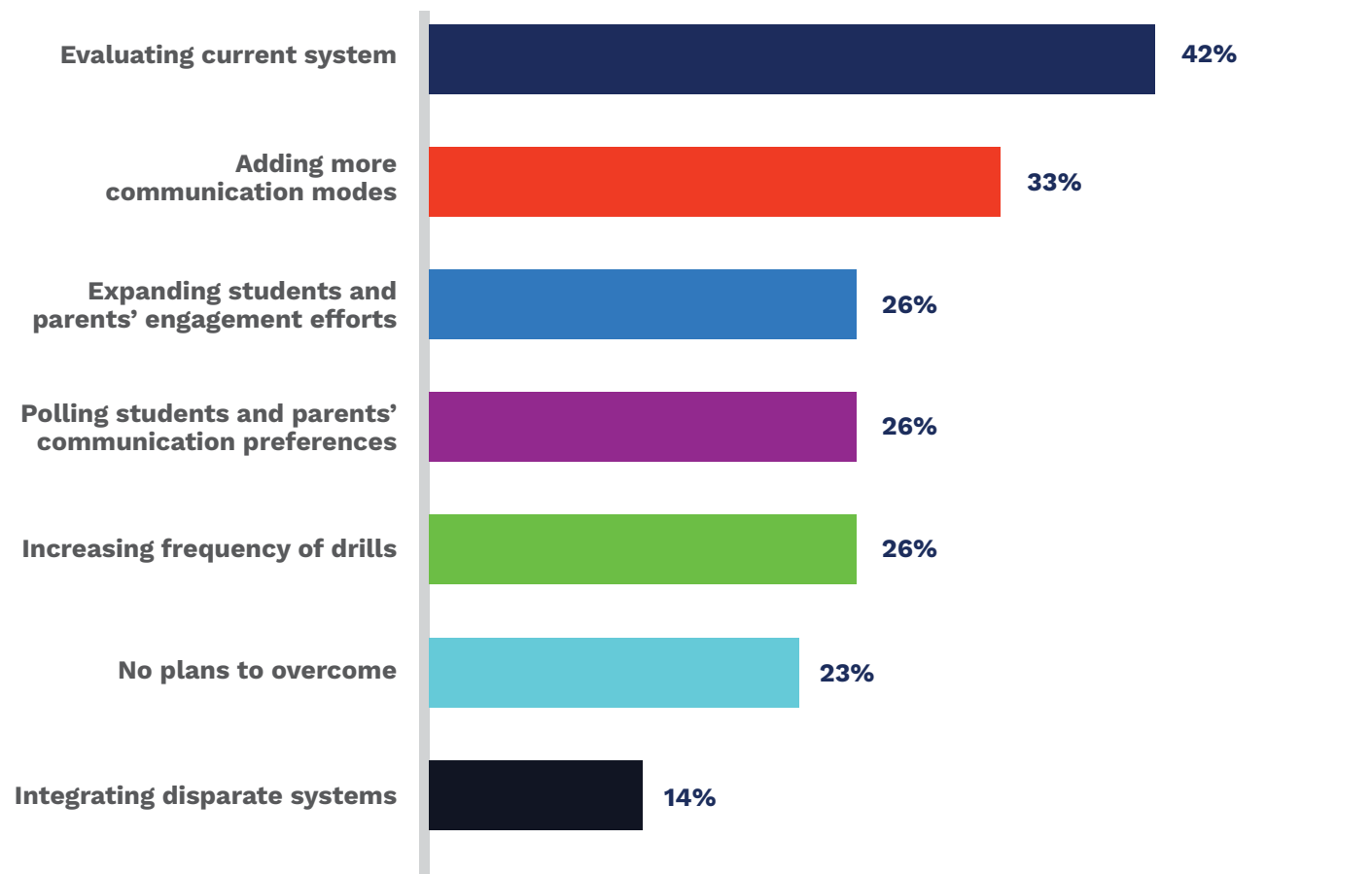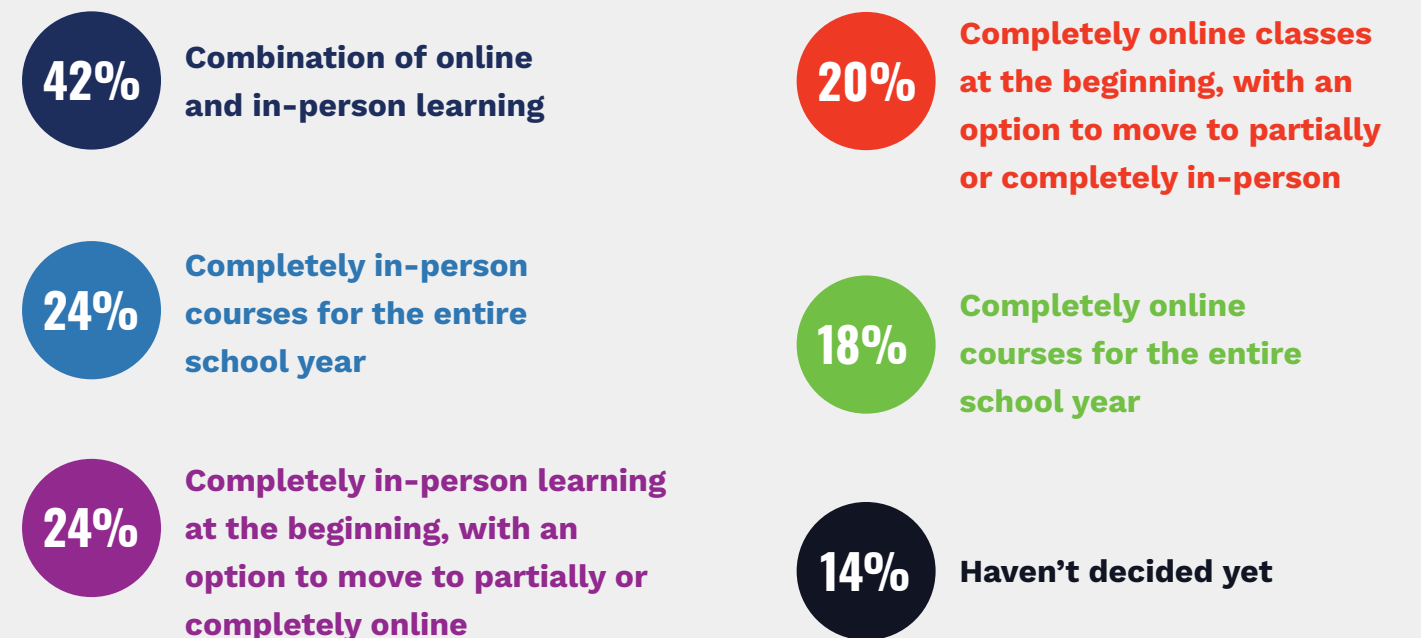
Multiple options selected by respondents indicate that different scenarios are still being considered for online and/or in-person learning for the next school year.

Planning for the 2021–2022 School Year

As schools across the country work to prepare classrooms for the return of students, a hybrid model combining online and in-person learning could be here to stay for the foreseeable future. According to the survey, 42% of respondents reported their institution is planning for a combination starting this fall.

For the 2021–2022 school year, which of the following scenarios is your institution planning for?

42% Combination of online and in-person learning

20% Completely online classes at the beginning, with an option to move to partially or completely in-person

24% Completely in-person courses for the entire school year

18% Completely online courses for the entire school year

24% Completely in-person learning at the beginning, with an option to move to partially or completely online
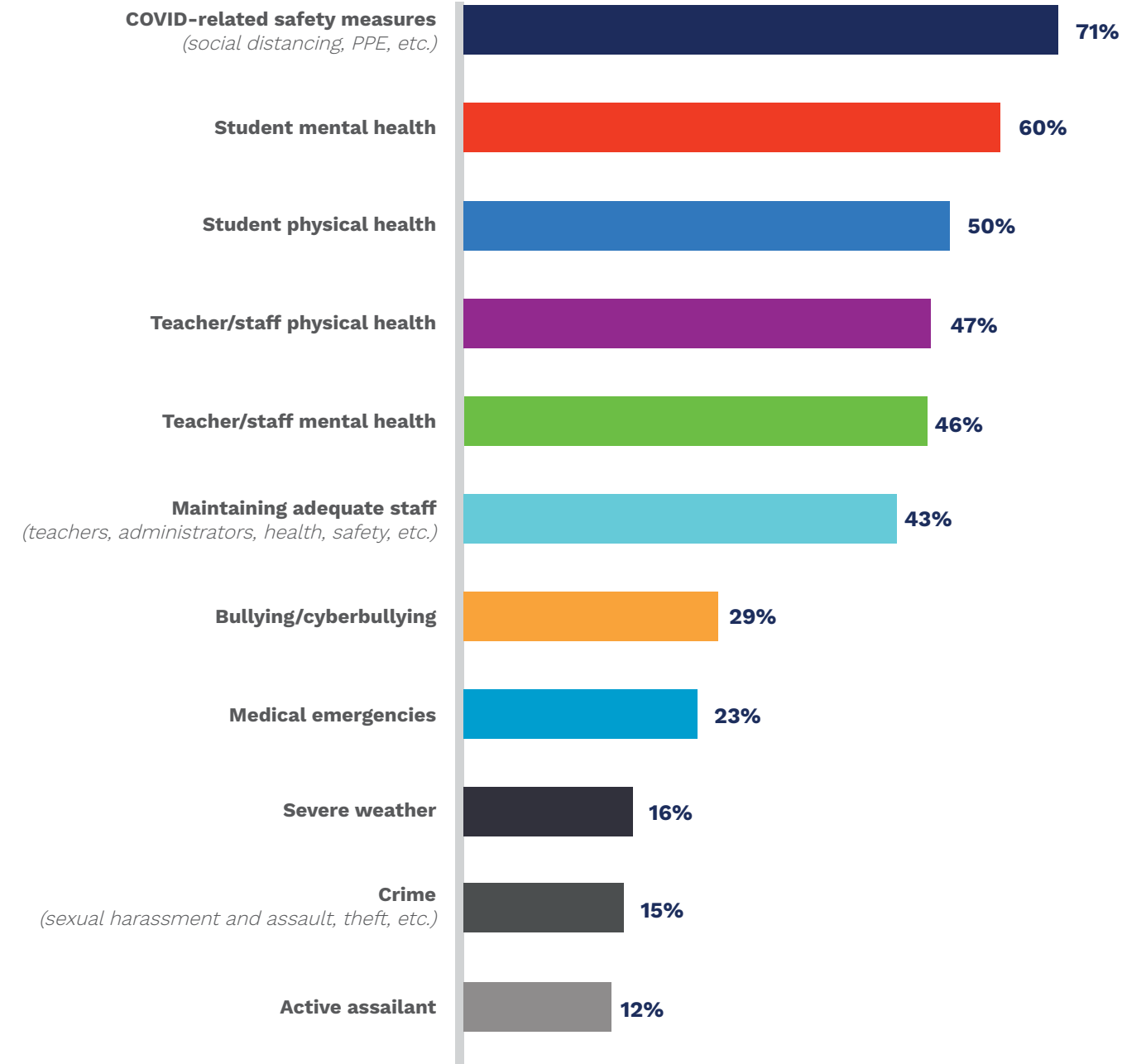
14% Haven't decided yet

(Respondents selected all that applied.)

Given that concerns about COVID-19 are driving hybrid learning models for the upcoming school year, it's no surprise that COVID-related safety measures (71%) were the top safety concern among K–12 respondents for the 2021–2022 school year.

Student mental health (60%) and student physical health (50%) were the next highest safety concerns among K–12 respondents. It's clear that balancing COVID precautions with traditional school safety concerns will be paramount once schools have social distancing measures and in-person learning plans solidified.

One respondent said their top safety concern is "**keeping students socially distanced, while also properly training for emergencies** like fire drills and lockdowns."

What are your top safety concerns for the 2021–2022 school year?

Concern	%
COVID-related safety measures *(social distancing, PPE, etc.)*	71%
Student mental health	60%
Student physical health	50%
Teacher/staff physical health	47%
Teacher/staff mental health	46%
Maintaining adequate staff *(teachers, administrators, health, safety, etc.)*	43%
Bullying/cyberbullying	29%
Medical emergencies	23%
Severe weather	16%
Crime *(sexual harassment and assault, theft, etc.)*	15%
Active assailant	12%

(Respondents selected all that applied.)

According to the survey, 56% of respondents expect their schools will increase their investment in COVID-related safety resources. They will also continue to do daily health and symptom checks for staff (56%) and daily health and symptom checks for students (52%).
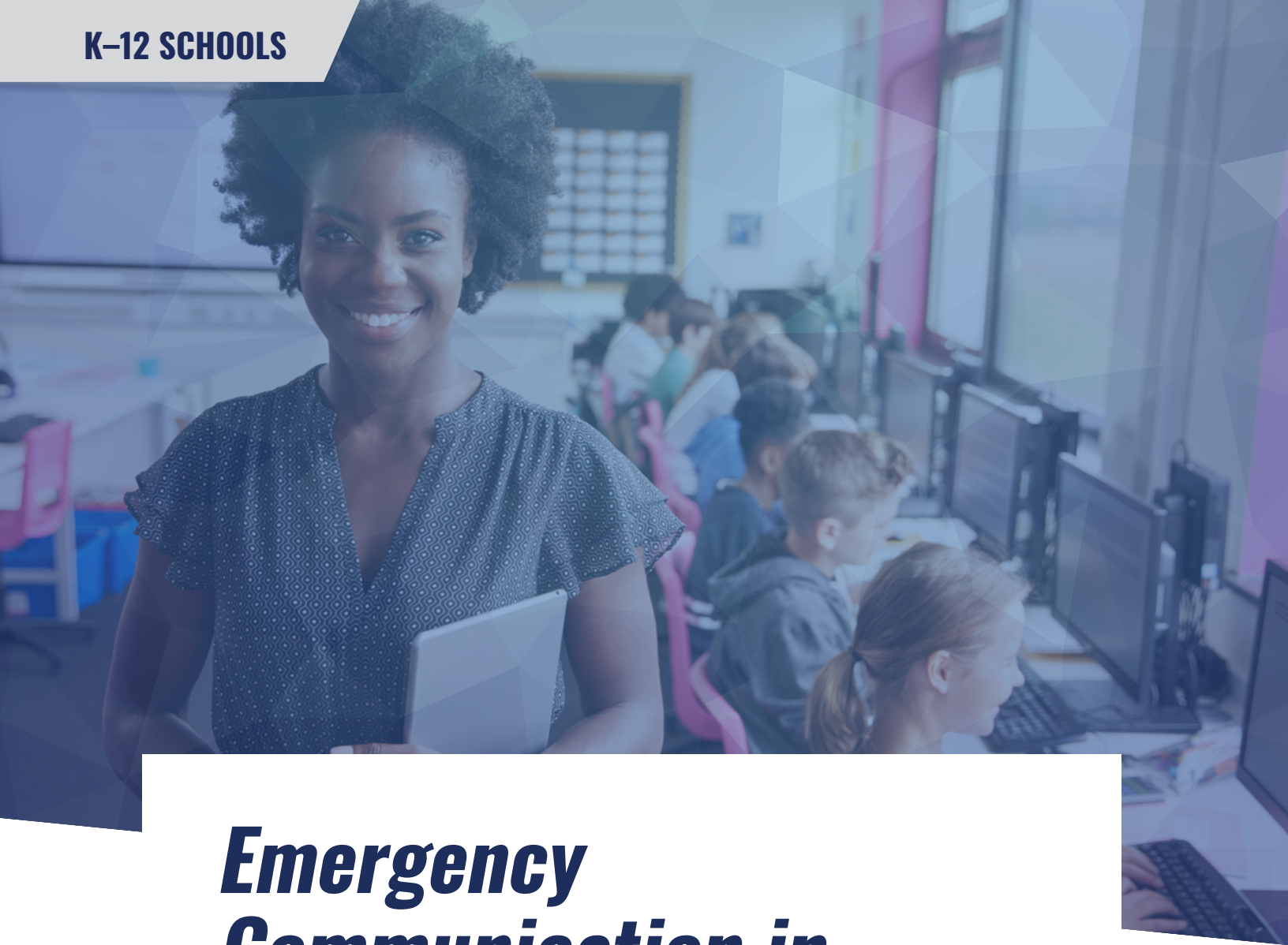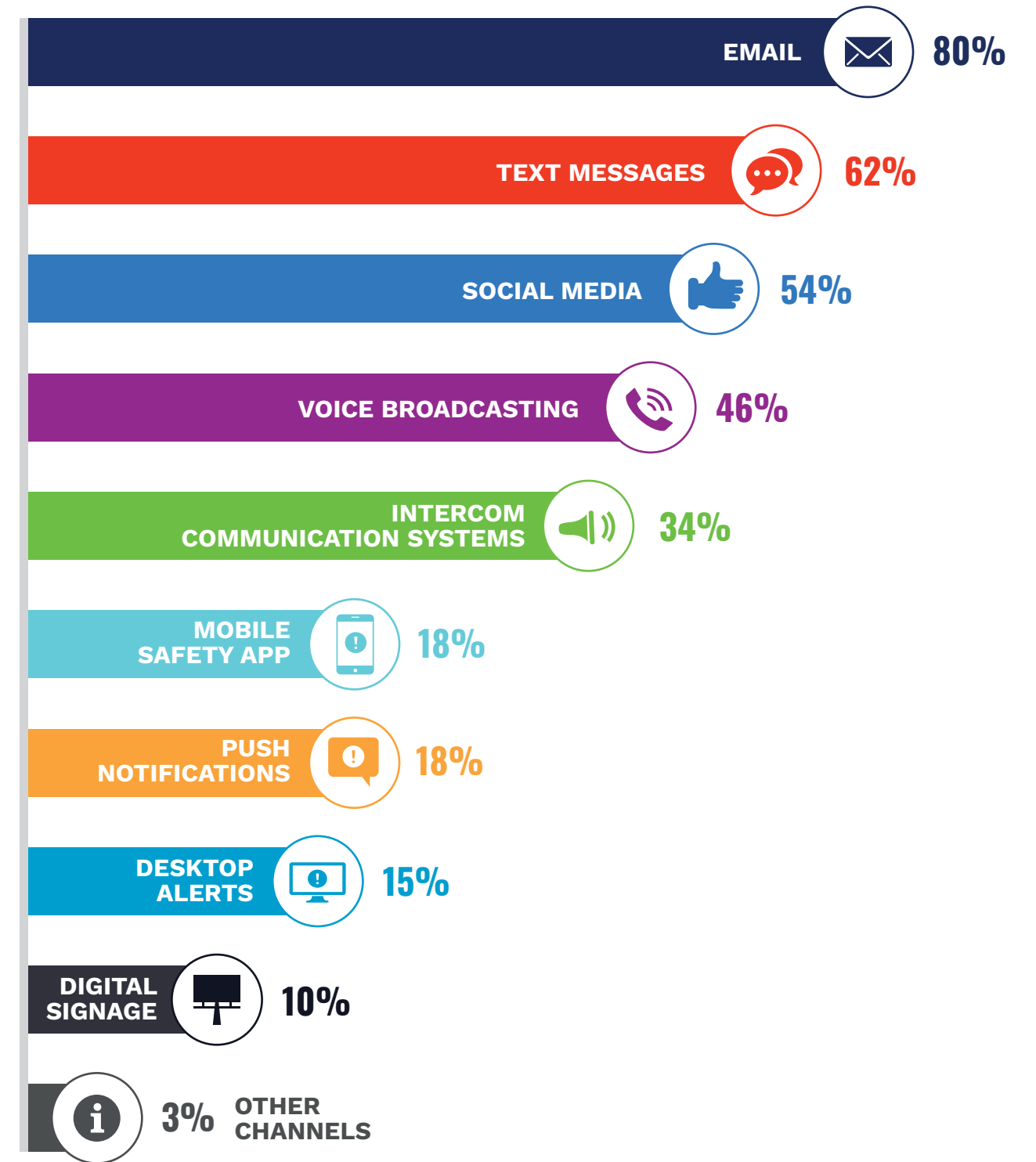
Emergency Communication in K–12 Schools

Remote learning, social distancing and changing plans constantly made the past year extremely challenging for reaching all stakeholders in the school community, from teachers and staff to parents and students.

Despite those hurdles, email remains the communication channel used most frequently to reach K–12 school communities in a crisis, followed by text messages and social media.

What communication channels are you currently using to reach your school community in a crisis?

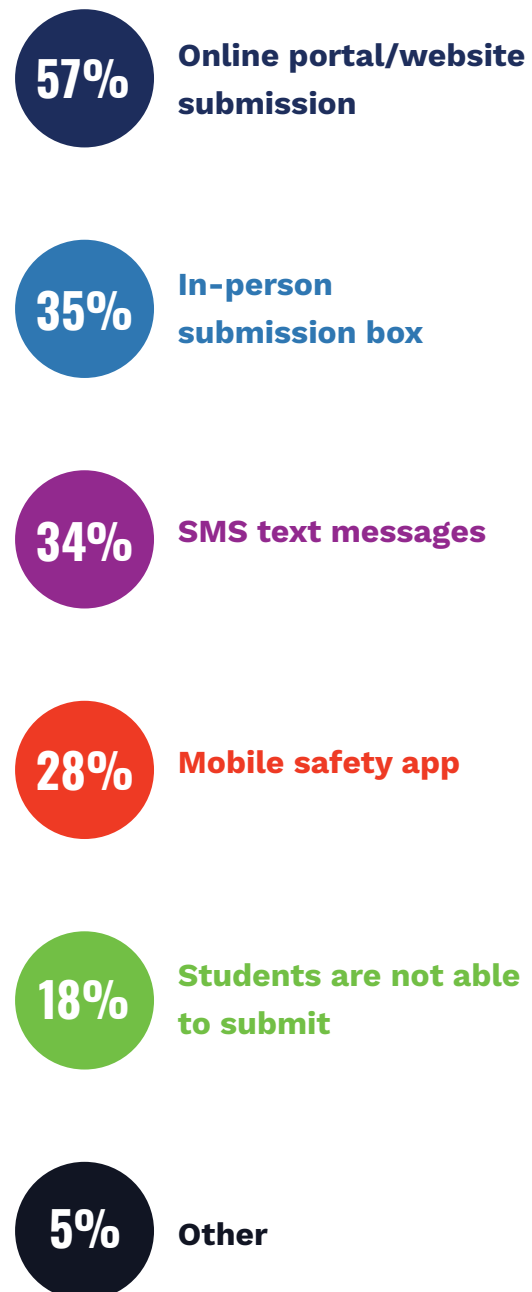| Channel	Percentage
EMAIL	80%
TEXT MESSAGES	62%
SOCIAL MEDIA	54%
VOICE BROADCASTING	46%
INTERCOM COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS	34%
MOBILE SAFETY APP	18%
PUSH NOTIFICATIONS	18%
DESKTOP ALERTS	15%
DIGITAL SIGNAGE	10%
OTHER CHANNELS	3%

(Respondents selected all that applied.)

Concerns about student mental health rank high among safety concerns for the 2021–2022 school year. It's critical that school officials provide ways for teachers, students and staff to submit anonymous tips. The goal is to address concerns before they result in an emergency or negatively impact the health and safety of the school community.
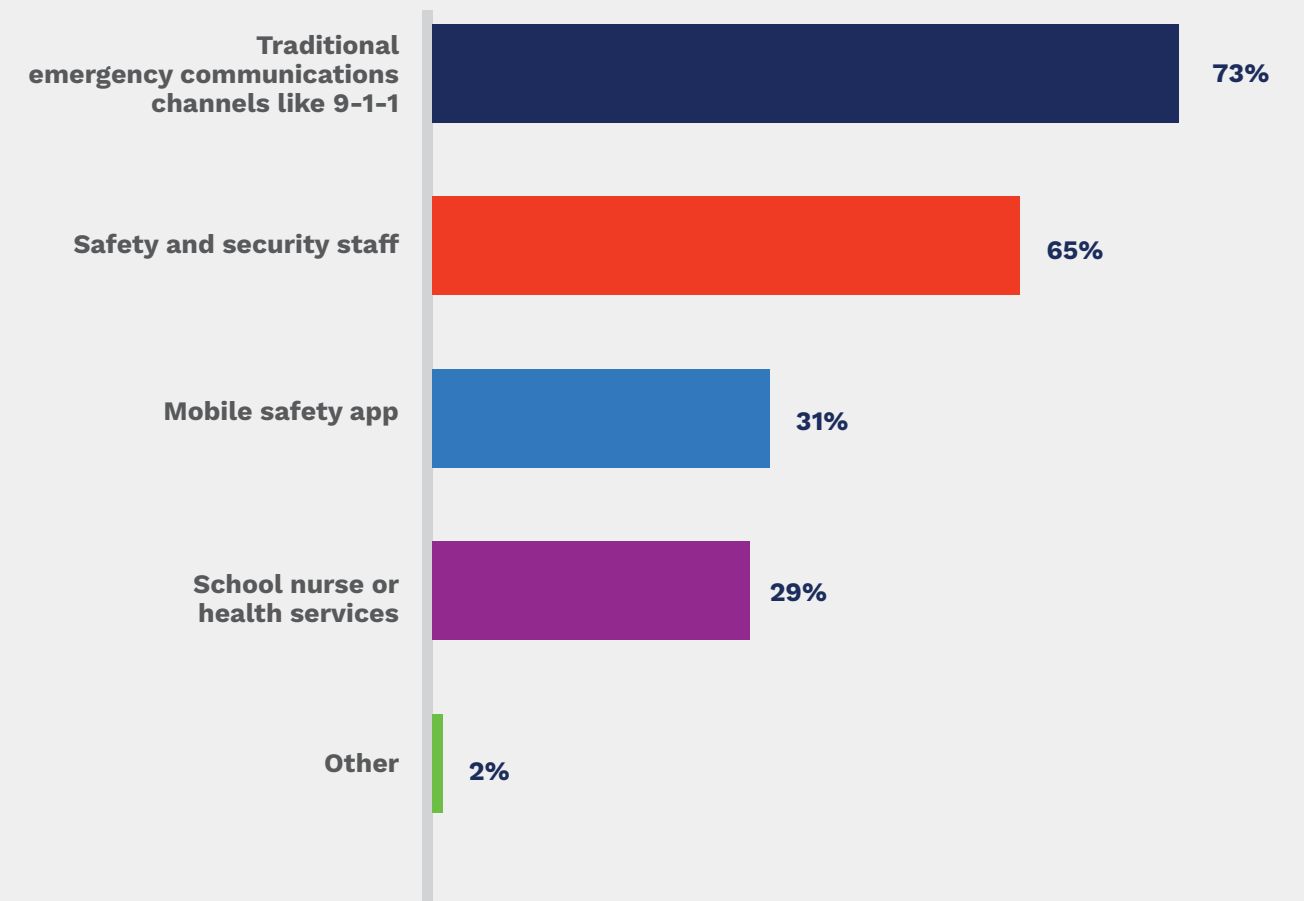
More than **80%** of K–12 respondents say their school has a way for students, faculty and staff to **submit anonymous tips impacting school safety**.

How, if at all, are students, faculty and staff able to submit anonymous tips impacting school safety?

57% Online portal/website submission

35% In-person submission box

34% SMS text messages

28% Mobile safety app

18% Students are not able to submit

5% Other

(Respondents selected all that applied.)

If an emergency occurs on campus, how does your school communicate with first responders?

Category	Percentage
Traditional emergency communications channels like 9-1-1	73%
Safety and security staff	65%
Mobile safety app	31%
School nurse or health services	29%
Other	2%

(Respondents selected all that applied.)

When an emergency does strike on campus, most K–12 respondents say their school communicates with first responders through traditional emergency communications channels like 9-1-1 or through safety and security staff. With teachers and students spread across school facilities, nearly one-third of respondents say their school uses a mobile safety app to communicate with first responders during an emergency on campus.
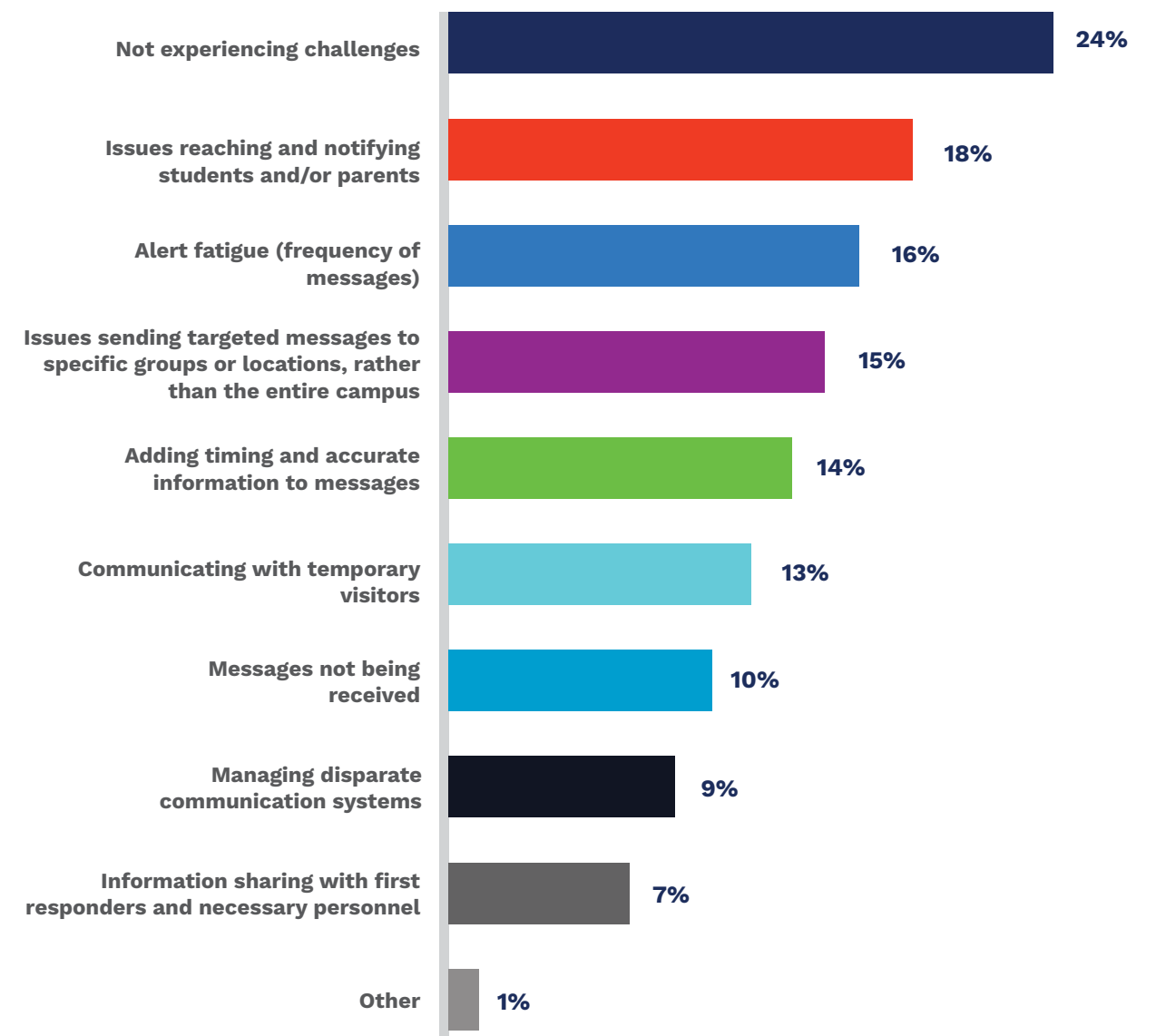
Higher Education

Like K–12 schools, higher education institutions were forced to dramatically shift their operations in the wake of COVID-19. While their students may be older, higher education institutions faced unique challenges transitioning students off — and sometimes, back on — campuses.

College and university communities are often spread out between different campus locations with an array of members, including students commuting or living in dorms, full-time professors and visiting lecturers. Providing clear communication via methods that reach the intended audiences are critical to overall campus safety — and not just during a pandemic.

Crisis Communication Challenges

Higher education respondents say their crisis communication challenges over the past 12 months consist of obstacles reaching and notifying students while also combating alert fatigue.
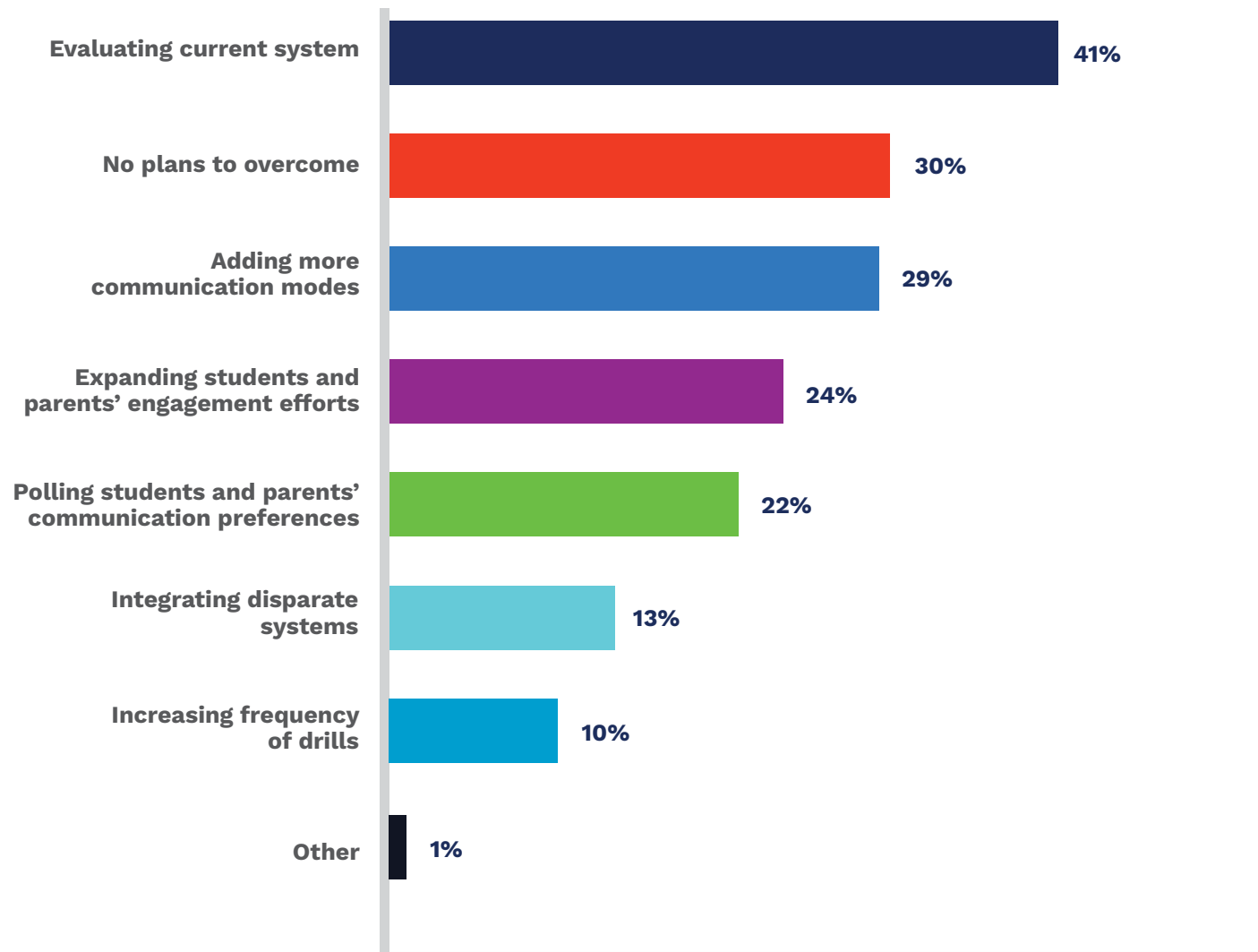
What crisis communication challenges have you experienced in the past 12 months?

Challenge	Percentage
Not experiencing challenges	24%
Issues reaching and notifying students and/or parents	18%
Alert fatigue (frequency of messages)	16%
Issues sending targeted messages to specific groups or locations, rather than the entire campus	15%
Adding timing and accurate information to messages	14%
Communicating with temporary visitors	13%
Messages not being received	10%
Managing disparate communication systems	9%
Information sharing with first responders and necessary personnel	7%
Other	1%

(Respondents selected all that applied.)

To address these challenges, 41% of respondents say they are evaluating their current communication systems. However, nearly one-third of respondents say they have no plans to overcome these crisis communication challenges.

How do you plan to overcome these crisis communication challenges?

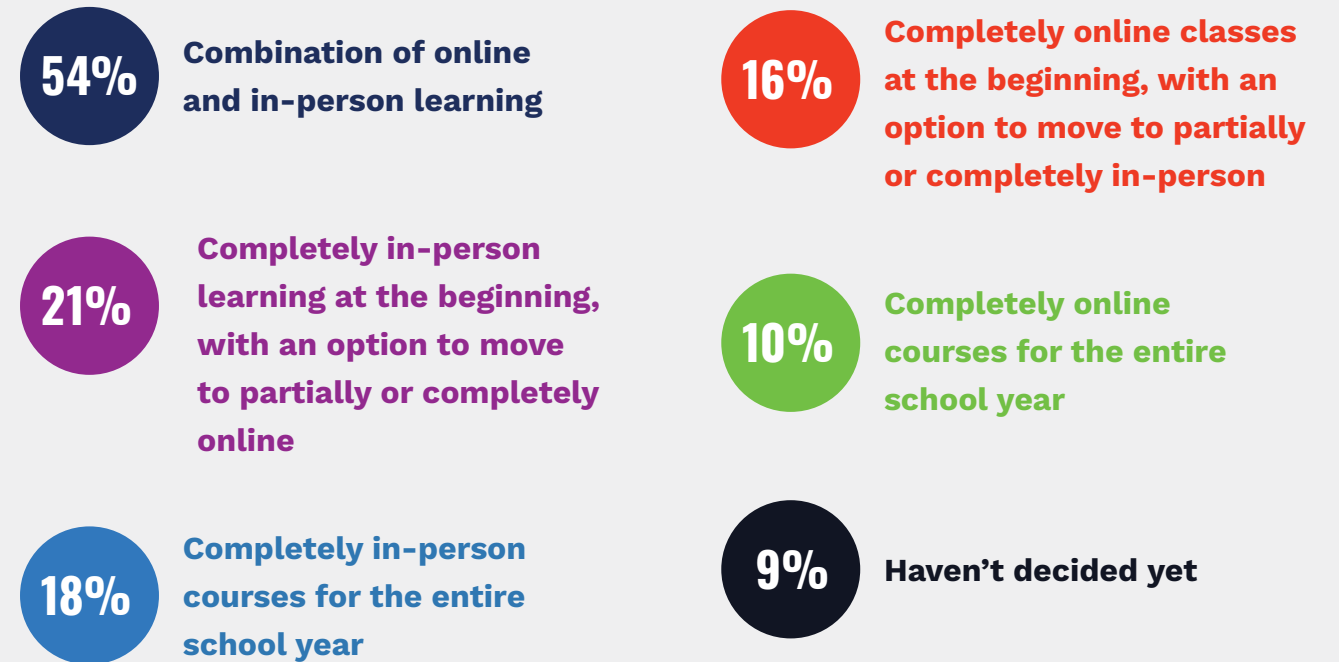| Category	%
Evaluating current system	41%
No plans to overcome	30%
Adding more communication modes	29%
Expanding students and parents' engagement efforts	24%
Polling students and parents' communication preferences	22%
Integrating disparate systems	13%
Increasing frequency of drills	10%
Other	1%

(Respondents selected all that applied.)

Planning for the Fall and Spring Semesters

Only 10% of respondents say their institutions are planning for **no in-person learning** for the entire 2021–2022 school year.

Amid news that several colleges and universities will require that students be vaccinated in order to return to campus this fall, more than half of the higher education respondents say their institution is planning for a combination of online and in-person learning.

For the 2021–2022 school year, which of the following scenarios is your institution planning for?

54% Combination of online and in-person learning

16% Completely online classes at the beginning, with an option to move to partially or completely in-person

21% Completely in-person learning at the beginning, with an option to move to partially or completely online

10% Completely online courses for the entire school year

18% Completely in-person courses for the entire school year

9% Haven't decided yet
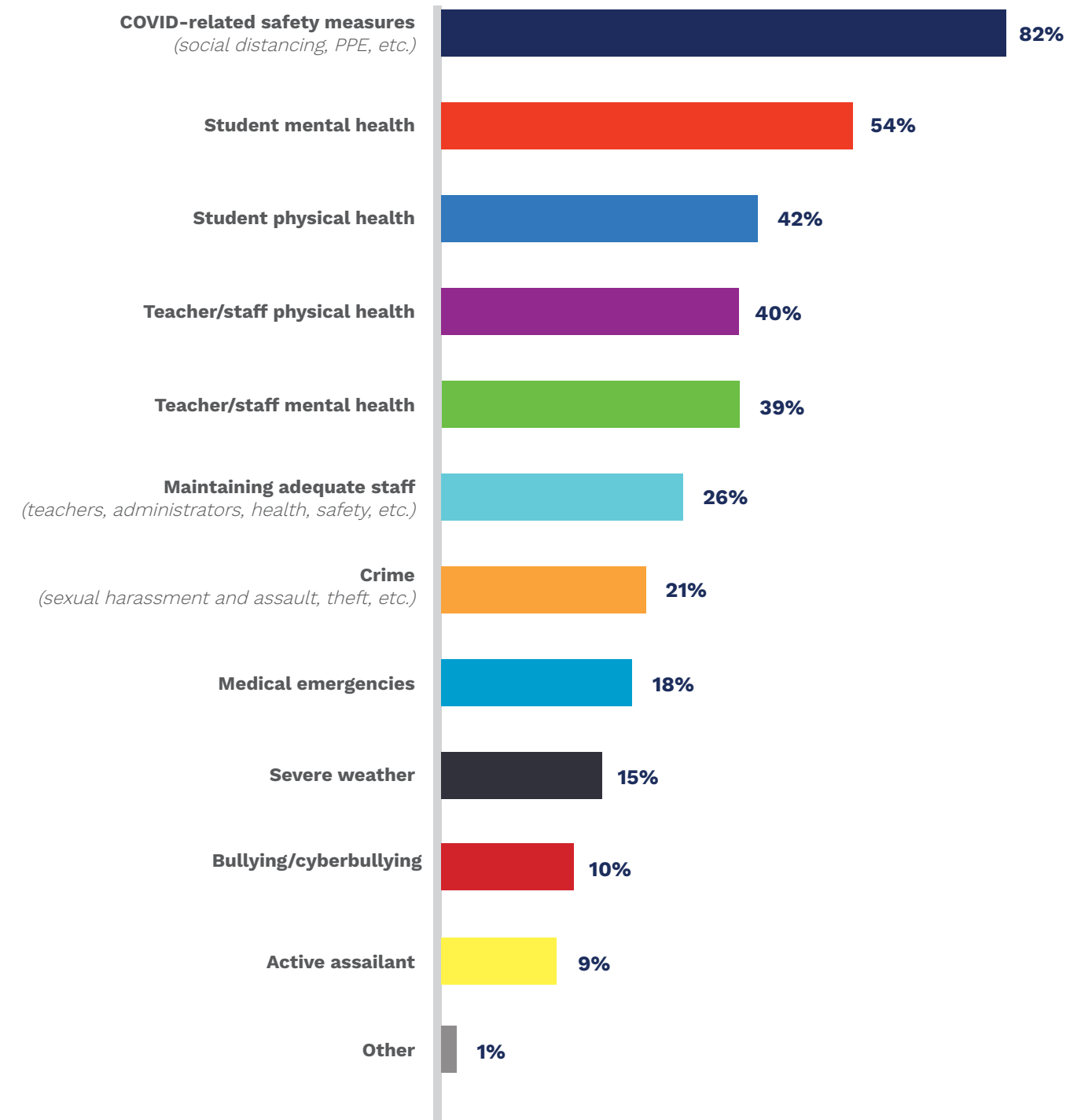
(Respondents selected all that applied.)

Respondents in higher education were aligned with their K–12 counterparts on the top safety concerns for the upcoming school year with COVID-related safety measures as the prime issue.

The survey found that 64% of higher education respondents expect their institutions will increase their investment in COVID-related safety resources. They will also continue to do daily health and symptom checks for staff (51%) and daily health and symptom checks for students (48%).
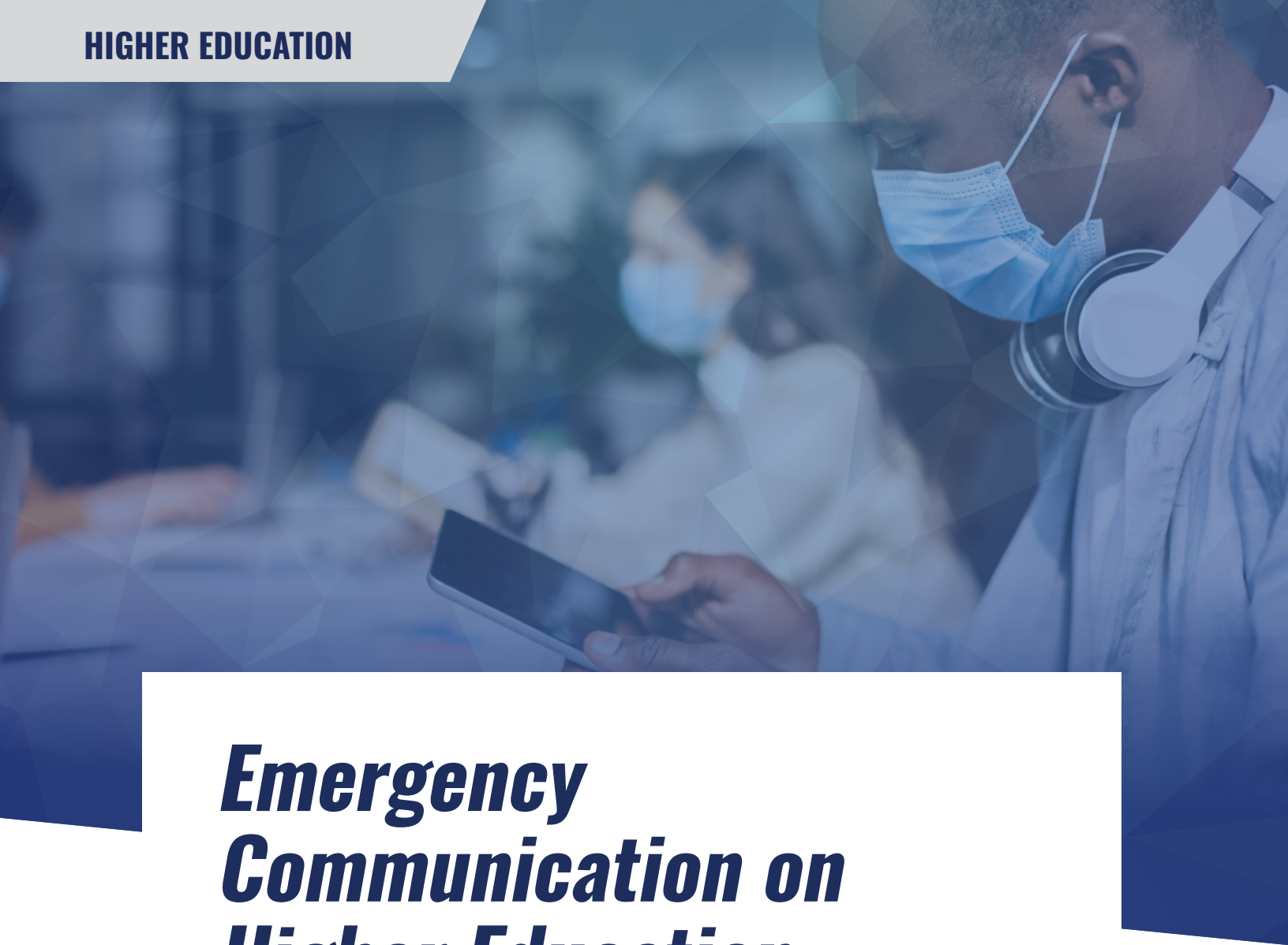
While COVID-19 appears to be the most immediate challenge, student mental health (54%) was the next priority. Other safety concerns, such as crime, severe weather and active assailtant, were also mentioned.

Offering accessible information and resources can help engage students in their own well-being and safety. Additionally, providing a secure and confidential channel can encourage students to report their concerns.

What are your top safety concerns for the 2021–2022 school year?

Concern	Percentage
COVID-related safety measures (social distancing, PPE, etc.)	82%
Student mental health	54%
Student physical health	42%
Teacher/staff physical health	40%
Teacher/staff mental health	39%
Maintaining adequate staff (teachers, administrators, health, safety, etc.)	26%
Crime (sexual harassment and assault, theft, etc.)	21%
Medical emergencies	18%
Severe weather	15%
Bullying/cyberbullying	10%
Active assailant	9%
Other	1%

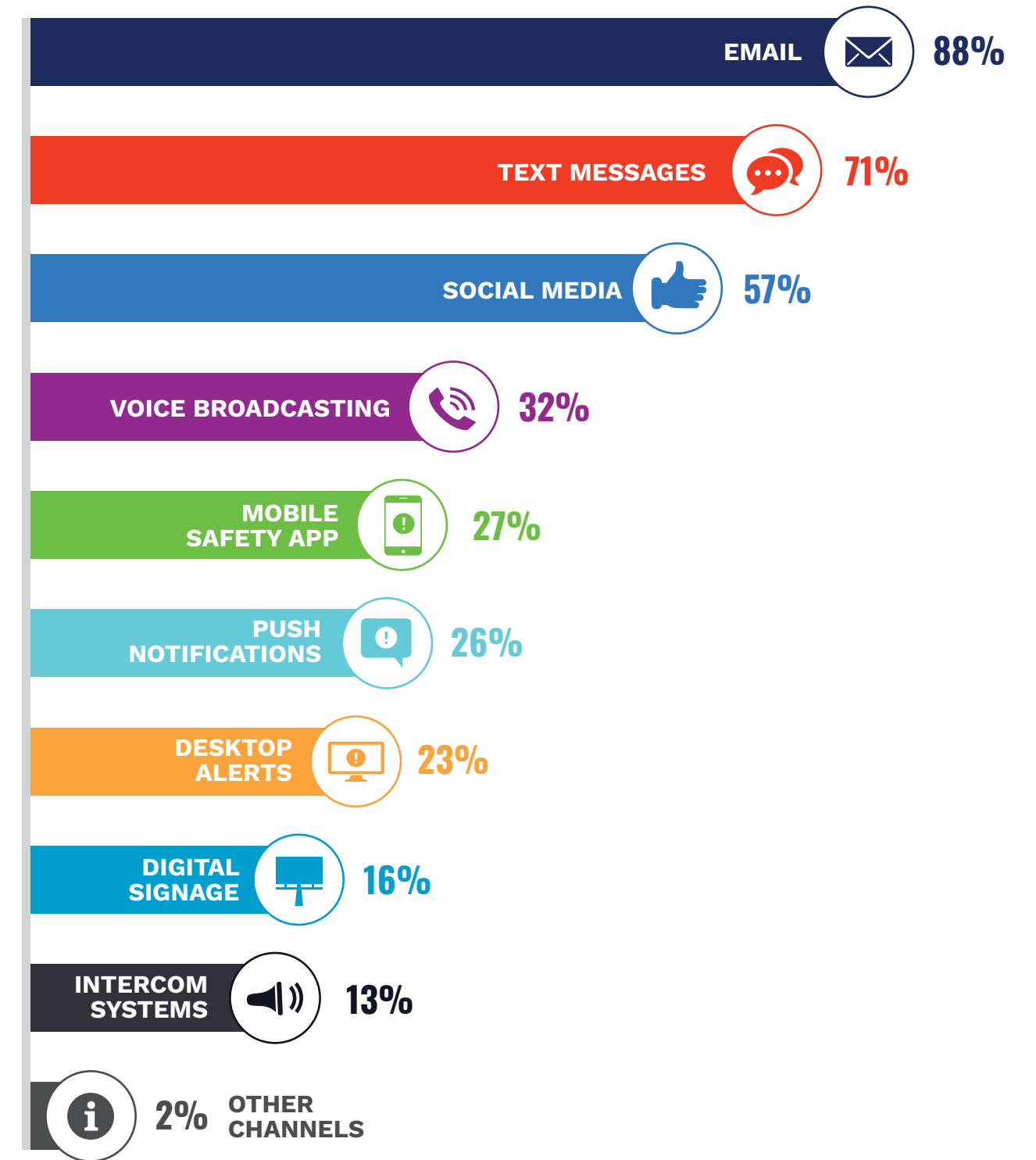*(Respondents selected all that applied.)*

Emergency Communication on Higher Education Campuses

Clear, targeted communication is needed to ensure all campus community members receive the information they need to know, whether it's related to COVID-19, campus safety activities or a specific threat.

According to higher education respondents, email and text messages are the two communication channels used most to reach a school's community during a crisis.

What communication channels are you currently using to reach your school community in a crisis?

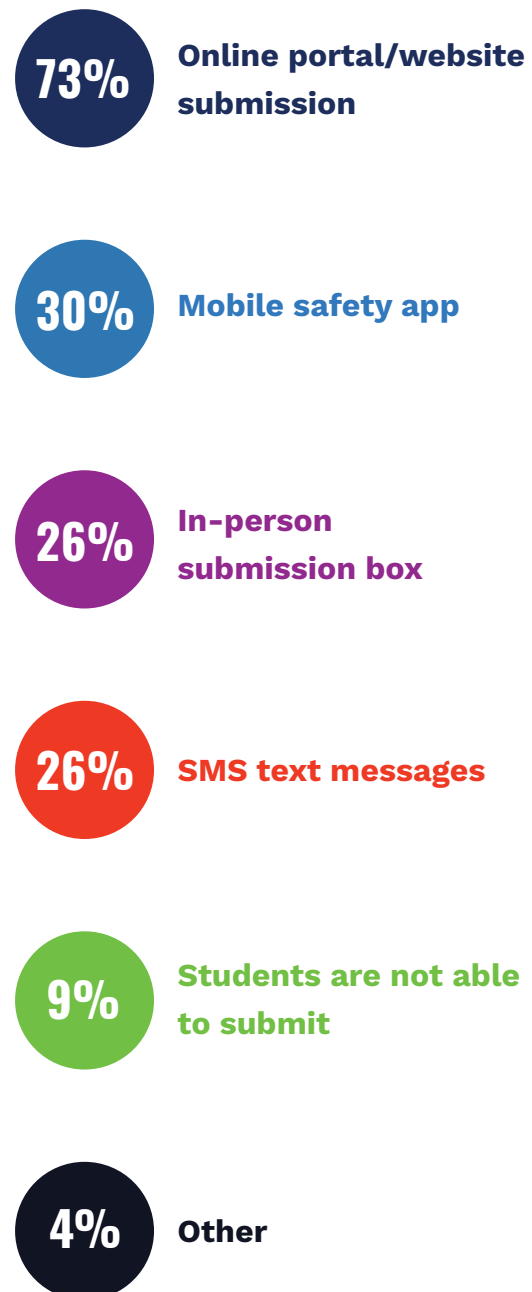| Channel	Percentage
EMAIL	88%
TEXT MESSAGES	71%
SOCIAL MEDIA	57%
VOICE BROADCASTING	32%
MOBILE SAFETY APP	27%
PUSH NOTIFICATIONS	26%
DESKTOP ALERTS	23%
DIGITAL SIGNAGE	16%
INTERCOM SYSTEMS	13%
OTHER CHANNELS	2%

(Respondents selected all that applied.)

In addition to having modes of communication that administrators and security personnel can use to quickly and easily reach the campus community, it's equally important that students, faculty and staff can share information. The overwhelming majority of higher education respondents say their institution uses an online portal or website submission for anonymous tips, with nearly one-third of respondents also utilizing mobile safety apps.
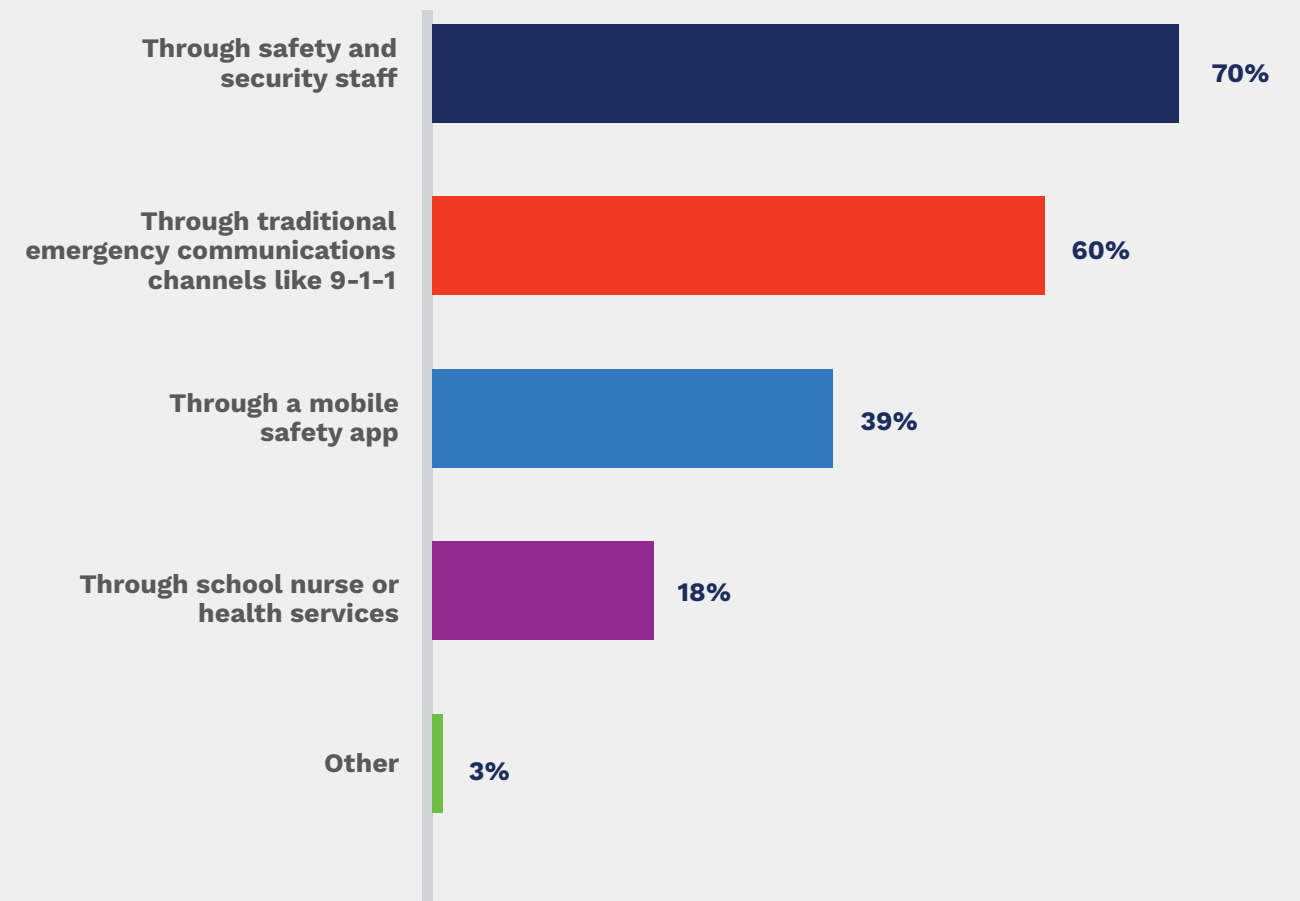
More than **90%** of higher education respondents say their school has a way for students, faculty and staff to **submit anonymous tips impacting school safety**.

How, if at all, are students, faculty and staff able to submit anonymous tips impacting school safety?

73% Online portal/website submission

30% Mobile safety app

26% In-person submission box

26% SMS text messages

9% Students are not able to submit

4% Other

(Respondents selected all that applied.)

If an emergency occurs on campus, how does your school communicate with first responders?

Through safety and security staff	70%
Through traditional emergency communications channels like 9-1-1	60%
Through a mobile safety app	39%
Through school nurse or health services	18%
Other	3%

(Respondents selected all that applied.)

While K–12 respondents communicate with first responders primarily through traditional emergency communications channels like 9-1-1, higher education respondents are most likely to communicate with first responders through their safety and security staff. Almost 40% of respondents also say their school uses a mobile safety app to communicate with students, faculty and staff during an emergency on campus.

Conclusion

COVID-19 dominated K–12 and higher education safety conversations over the past year. It's clear, according to the survey findings, that COVID-related safety concerns remain a top priority for K–12 and higher education personnel as they prepare for the 2021–2022 school year.

While this survey represents one snapshot in time, the threat of COVID-19 may not disappear entirely any time soon. As those tasked with communication and safety at K–12 schools, colleges and universities navigate safety and communication challenges old and new, they will have to reconcile how COVID-19 protocols like social distancing coexist with procedures like lockdowns.

Ultimately, school and campus safety concerns that were prioritized before the pandemic must be balanced with newer COVID-19 safety challenges and procedures that may become part of education operations for the long term.

Methodology

This survey was conducted by the independent research firm Researchscape. Respondents were 642 individuals working in the K–12 and higher education industries in administration, emergency management, facilities and operations, IT services, marketing and communications, safety and security, and student services. Responses were collected in late March 2021.

About Rave Mobile Safety

Rave Mobile Safety is the leading provider of critical communication and collaboration technology used to save lives, manage crisis incidents and increase resiliency. From major disasters and crisis events to everyday emergencies and operational incidents, the Rave platform enables critical data sharing, mass notification and emergency response coordination. Over 8,000 first responder, emergency management, 9-1-1, and federal, state and local agencies — as well as corporations, healthcare organizations, universities and schools — all rely on Rave to prepare better, respond faster, recover quicker and mitigate anticipated critical incidents. Founded in 2004, Rave's award-winning software solutions are backed by leading growth equity firm TCV. Let Rave enable you to do all you can today™ to keep everyone safe. For more information, visit https://www.ravemobilesafety.com, read our company blog, and follow us on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook.

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ravemobilesafety.com
888.605.7164
sales@ravemobilesafety.com