

Impact of COVID-19 on Theatre Education, 2021



SUMMARY

The pandemic has reshaped our daily lives in more ways than can be counted. The impact on education has been particularly profound, as millions of educators and their students were forced to adapt quickly to a virtual teaching and learning environment. In spring 2020, theatre education programs — so reliant on box-office revenue to sustain opportunities for students — were suddenly unable to produce in-person shows with live audiences. The economic losses were devastating, though many adapted to a virtual model to keep students engaged and learning.

In the 2020-21 school year, theatre teachers continued to demonstrate their resilience, producing innovative theatre in online spaces, and using a variety of instructional strategies for the new normal of the virtual classroom.

This second of two surveys conducted in the last year by the Educational Theatre Association affirms their commitment and professionalism. But the data also confirms that the pandemic continues to affect school theatre programs throughout the country in substantial ways, some of which may influence the status of the discipline in schools for years to come. Our analysis comparing the condition of programs in the spring of 2020 to the full school year of 2020-21 shows growing losses in revenue; declining district and community financial support; lower student participation; and an ongoing uncertainty about how teaching and learning will occur in the coming year.

The survey indicated stability among the theatre educators. Ninety-two percent did at least one in-person production and 68% did at least one virtual production. The majority (71%) said they taught the same number of classes as they had in past years and only 10% of funded programs expect budget cuts in 2021-22.

This mixed bag of data will likely demand another follow-up survey, given that it was conducted in May 2021, prior to the onset of new variants of COVID-19 and updated CDC guidance. It is now clear that the persistence of the pandemic and the need to re-engage students as they re-enter in-person classrooms will challenge all areas of education — theatre included — for many years to come.

METHODOLOGY

In August 2020, 2,400 middle and secondary theatre educators responded to an Educational Theatre Association survey about the status of their programs in the pandemic environment. This past May, EdTA issued a follow-up survey to its member teachers, re-asking questions included in the 2020 survey and along with additional queries regarding their programs as schools throughout the country were concluding the 2020-21 school year. More than 1,000 EdTA teachers completed the second survey.

The survey asked teachers how they completed the 2020-21 school year; the financial impact of canceled spring productions and program funding support; the tools and resources they used to deliver online instruction; student engagement; and expectations regarding 2021-22 teaching and play production.

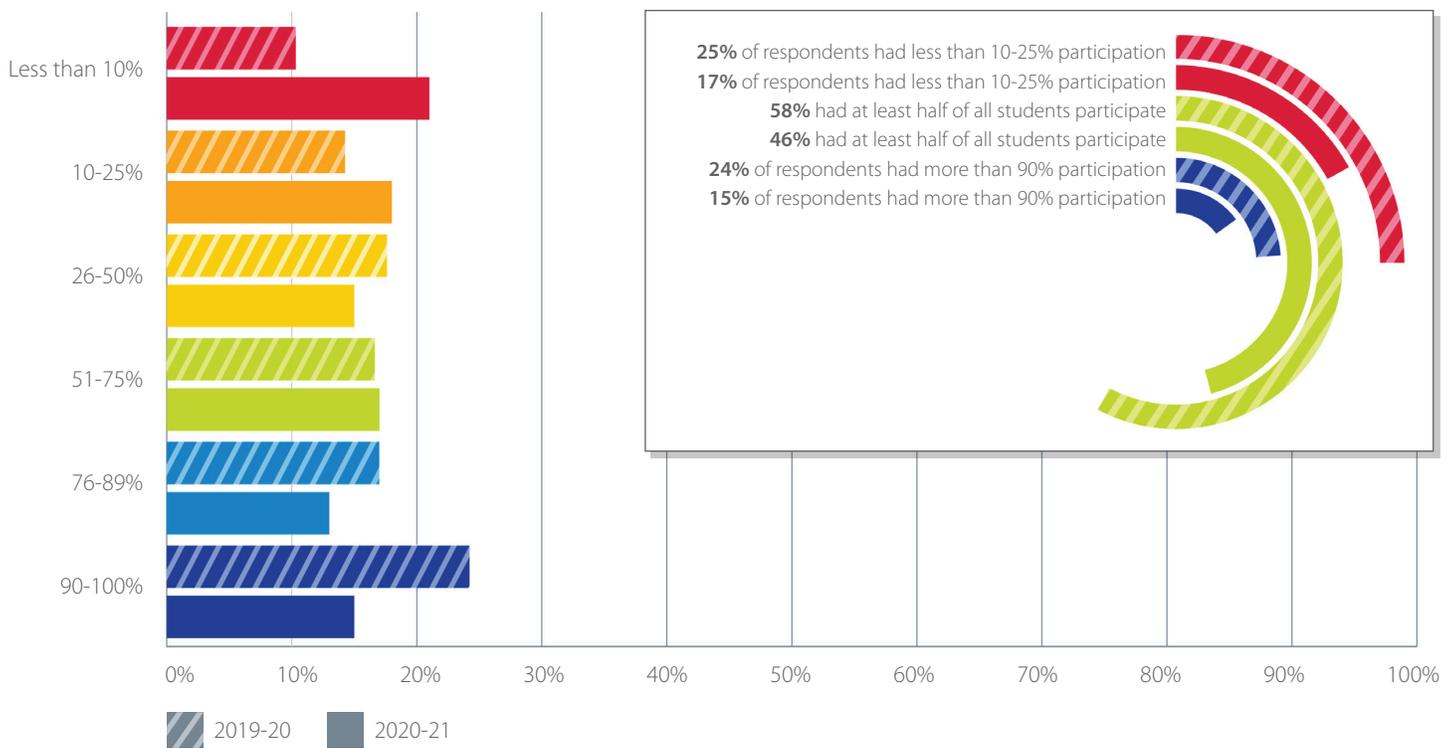
Respondents relatively proportionally represented urban (34%), suburban/urban (39%), and rural (25%) districts, with the majority (84%) leading co-curricular theatre programs. Seventy-two percent of respondents were employed in schools with populations of between 501 and 2,500 students.

2020-21 CLASSROOM AND PRODUCTION PARTICIPATION

A modest number (17%) of teachers began the year in the classroom; 47% began teaching virtually; and 36% in a hybrid mode. Asked how they were completing the spring 21 term, 44% said in-person; 55%, hybrid; and less than 1% said they were finishing the year virtually.

Teachers reported moderate levels of success regarding student engagement with virtual/hybrid instruction. In 2021-22, 46% of educators said at least half of their students participated online in the spring term, a decline from spring 2020 when 58% said that at least half of all students participated in virtual/hybrid classes. Fifteen percent of respondents reported more than 90% participation, a decline from 24% in spring 2020.

Student Participation in 2019-20 and 2020-21 Virtual/Hybrid Classes

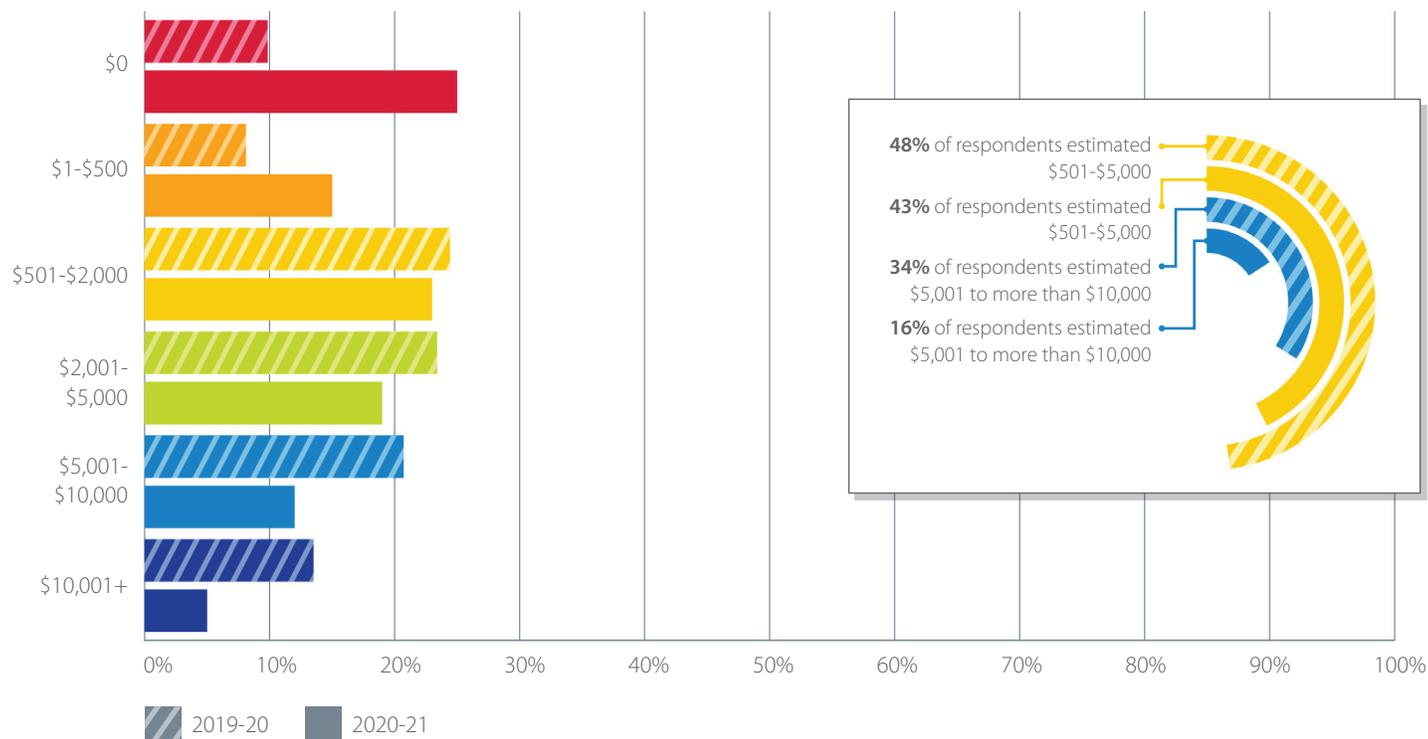


In the 2021-22 school environment where performance opportunities were limited, whether virtual or in-person, 52% of educators reported that participation in their productions declined by half or more during the year. While it is expected that most schools will be fully open for in-person instruction in the 2021-22 school year, there is no guarantee that students who were invested in theatre prior to the onset of the pandemic or those who are new to the school will be motivated to enroll in curricular courses or to become involved in production activities. Recruitment of these students may be key to sustaining programs.

REVENUE, EXPENDITURES AND FUNDING

Though the size of school theatre programs surveyed varied greatly, one commonality was clear: Most programs rely to a large degree on ticket sales from productions to fund their activities. The 2020 survey indicated a moderate amount of lost box-office revenue in the 2019-20 school year, given that most programs were able to produce public productions for audiences in fall 2019, prior to the onset of the pandemic. In the 2020-21 school year, some schools did indeed produce live shows with in-person audiences, but an equal number switched to entirely to free online presentations.

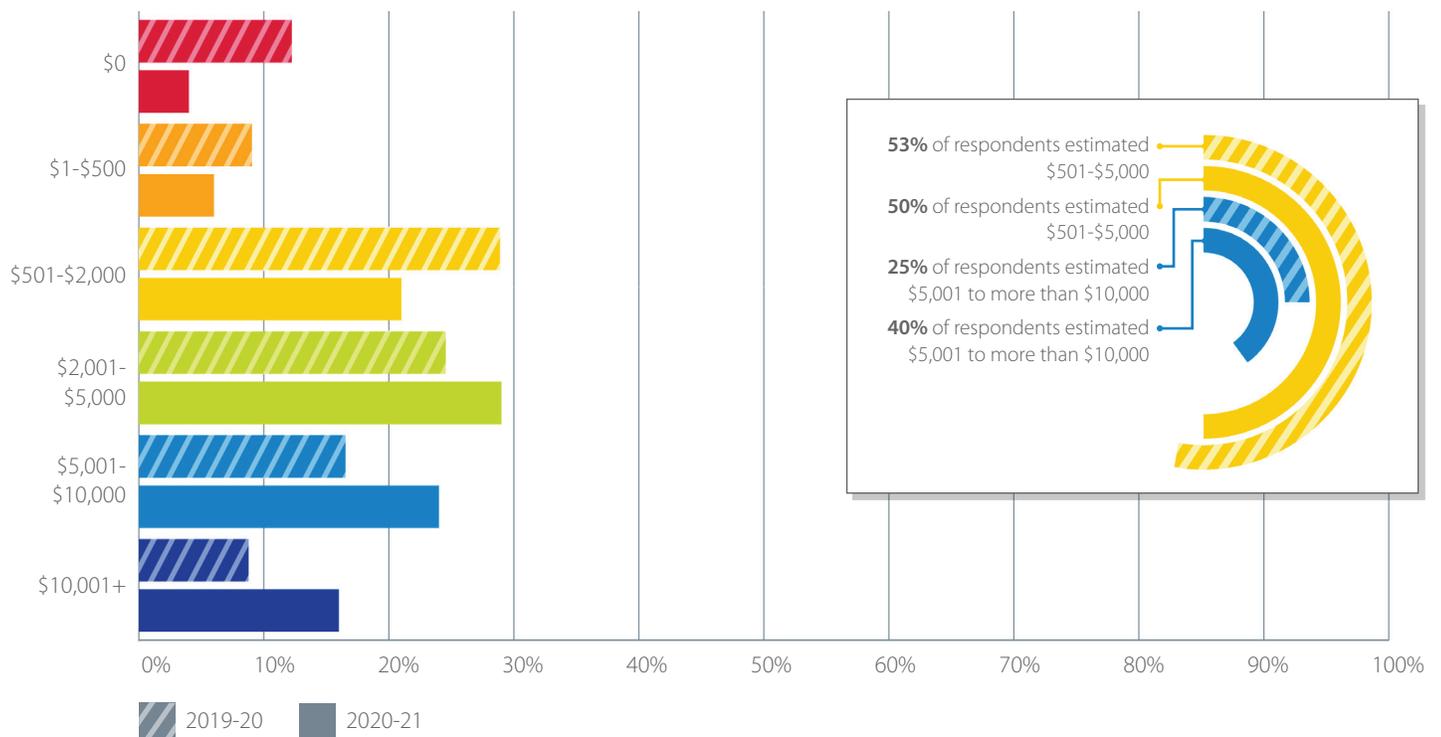
Estimated 2019-20 and 2020-21 Box Office Revenue



In spring 2020, 48% of respondents said their school programs had box-office revenue between \$501-5000; that number remained relatively stable in 2020-21, with 43% stating revenue of that same amount.

There was a significant decline in those schools reporting box office revenue of \$5,001 to more than \$10,000; 34% of respondents said they earned that amount in 2019-20, but only 16% for 2020-21.

Estimated 2019-20 and 2020-21 Lost Revenue Due to Performance Cancellations



While 55% of respondents said they did not have to cancel productions in the 2020-21 school year, 45% did cancel shows. That figure aligns closely to the stated estimates of declining production revenue, with 50% of educators reporting \$501-\$5,000 in losses, an amount nearly the same as in spring 2020.

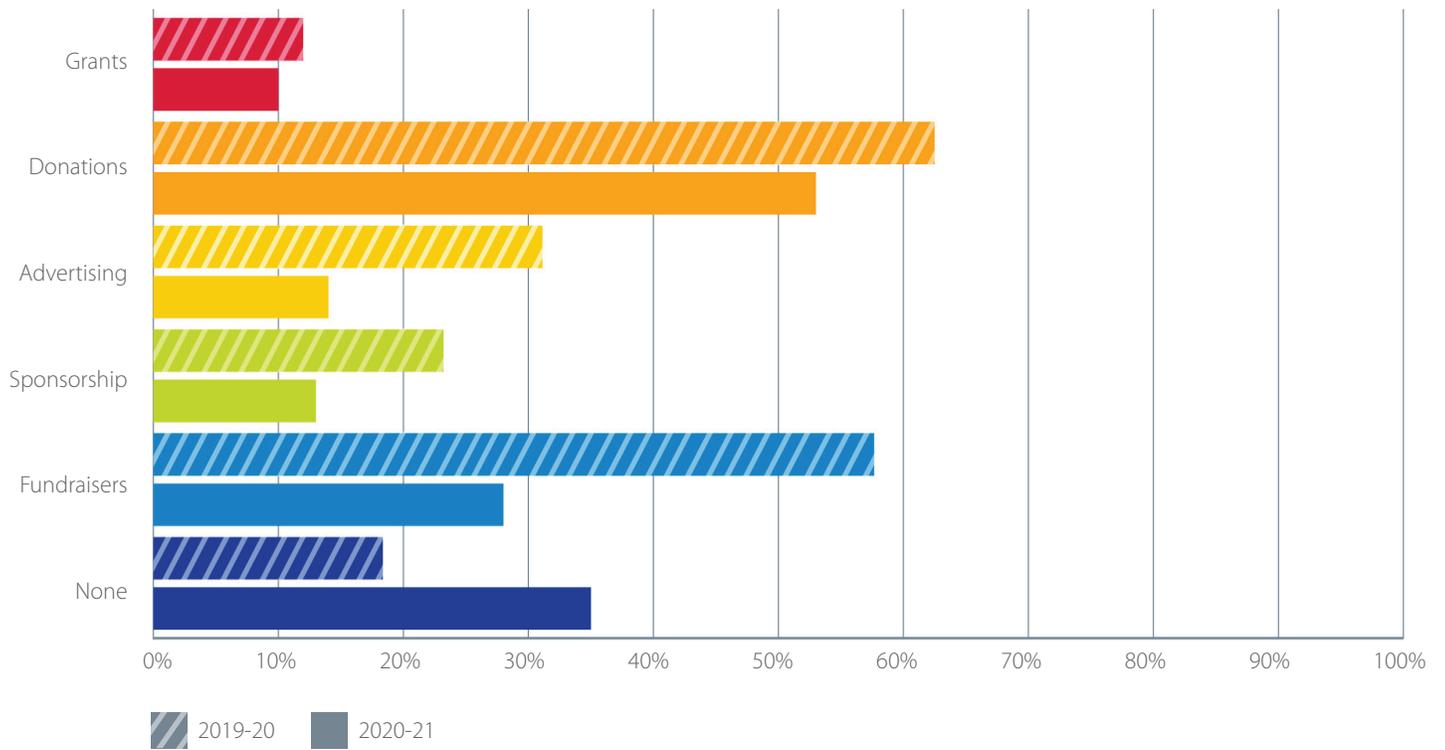
Forty percent of educators said they estimated losses of more than \$5,000 in 2020-21, an increase from 25% in spring 2020.

As there were limited live school performances, not surprisingly, 57% of respondents said production expenditures were significantly less in 2020-21 in comparison to previous years.

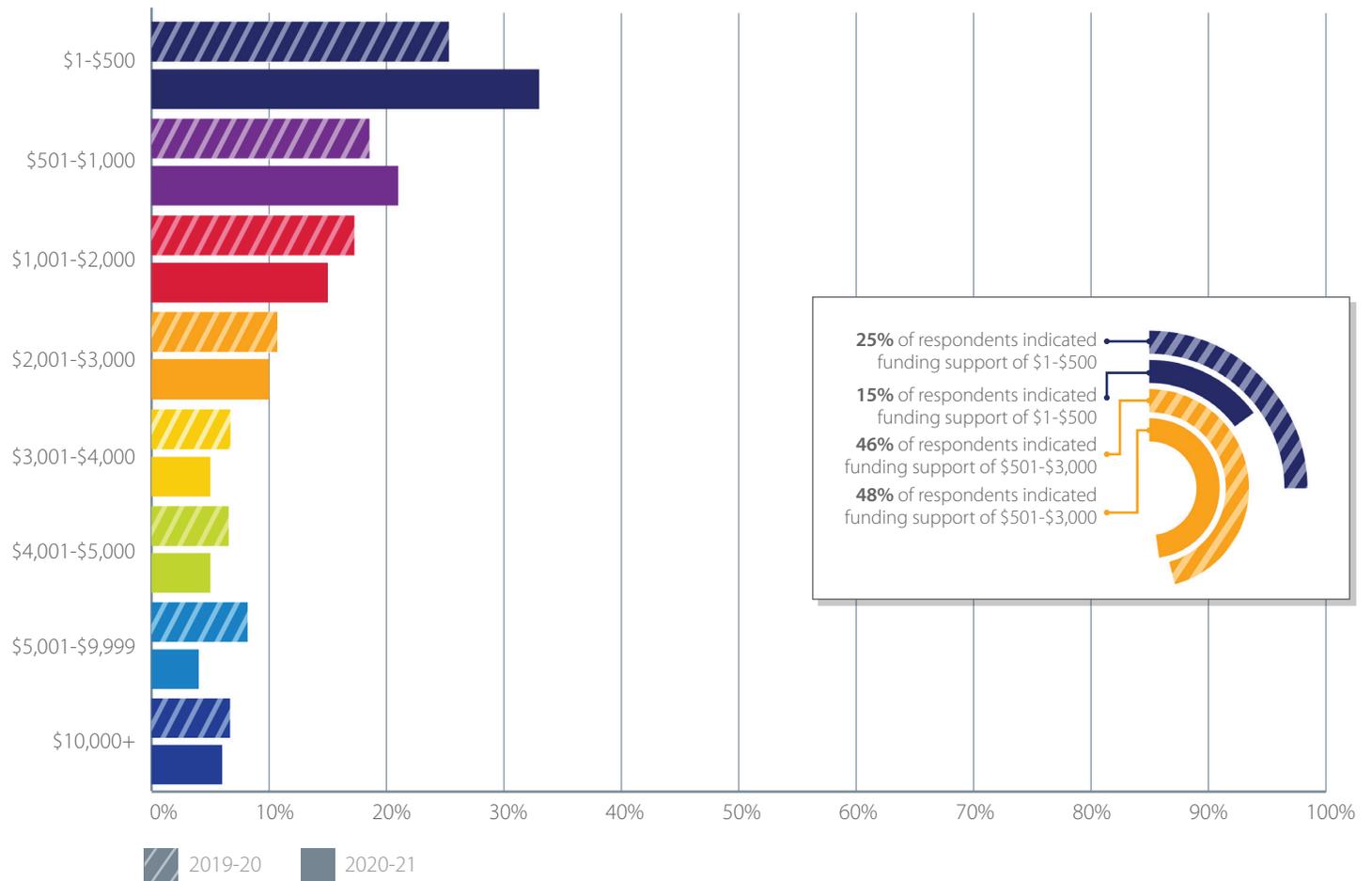
There were new areas of expense prompted by the pandemic. Most notably, 65% of educators said personal protective equipment was a primary expenditure, 50% reported investments in streaming platforms, and 41% purchased video equipment.

Of the 2020-21 surveyed schools, 50% receive no portion of their theatre budget from their school district, an increase of 6% from spring 2020. Along with ticket sales as the primary source of program revenue, theatre programs continued to rely on other funding sources in 2020-21, donations (53%) declined moderately but two other major sources of funding, fundraisers (28%) and advertising (14%), received only about half the amount of funds in 2020-21 that they had in spring 2020.

2019-20 and 2020-21 Theatre Program Other Funding Support



2019-20 and 2020-21 School Theatre Program Other Funding Totals



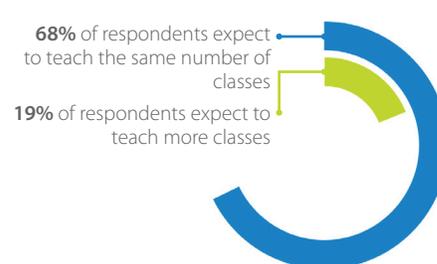
More positively, funding totals remained relatively stable from one school year to the next, with only modest declines. In 2021-22, 15% of teachers said schools received \$1-\$500; 48%, \$501-\$3,000; 11% \$3,001-\$5,000; and 10%, \$5,000-\$10,000 plus.

Teachers were asked whether their program had received any Elementary and Secondary School Education Relief Act (ESSER) funds. Seventy-eight percent of respondents said their programs had not received any federal support dollars; another 14% did not know.

LOOKING TOWARDS THE 2021-22 SCHOOL YEAR

While there are areas of concern—funding, student recruitment and morale, program capacity, and general pandemic-based uncertainty—this survey also indicated positive signs that theatre education will be revitalized and available in schools throughout the country in 2021-22.

2021-22 School Year Plans



Ninety-two percent of theatre educators indicated that they were returning to their positions; 68% expect to teach the same number of classes; and 19% expect to teach more classes. In a very positive sign, 96% of respondents said they planned to do in-person, live performances. It's also worth noting that virtual performances may be here to stay or are a cautionary choice as COVID-19 continues to challenge school's ability to keep everyone safe: 35% indicated that they plan to produce in-person onstage performances live for an online audience. One other important area of uncertainty: travel to theatre events or professional development programs.

One other important area of uncertainty: travel to theatre events or professional development programs. Forty-four percent of educators said they expected their district to allow travel outside the school building in 2021-22, while 49% were unsure. Seven percent said they did not expect to be allowed to travel.

Regarding budgets, 90% said they had not received any notice of budget cuts to their programs for 2021-22 school year, a significant decline from spring 2020, when 22% said their program budgets had been cut between 10% and 25%. Of the 10% of respondents who did indicate that they were alerted of budget cuts for the new school year, 49% expect reductions of at least 10%, and 21% expect cuts of at least 25%.

CONCLUSION

The concerns about the future of theatre education that were stated in the 2020 survey remain largely the same in 2021, perhaps with even more urgency as the new school year begins. That is:

- Recruitment of future students
- Reduced program capacity
- Smaller productions limiting student performance opportunities
- Marginalization of extracurricular programs
- Uncertainty and flux
- Morale

All this said, the creativity and adaptation demonstrated by theatre educators in the past year and a half may not be readily measurable, but it is visible in the shared presentations and stories of student success online and in-person — masked or not — and in the inventive curriculum that allowed teaching and learning to continue under the most trying and challenging circumstances of our lifetime.

Still, many theatre programs will face existential threats in the coming years. It is unclear what the long-term impact of the pandemic will be on education—academically, financially, and culturally. Many students “checked out” when learning moved online and the task ahead for all of education is to re-engage them in remedial and accelerated learning programs. Those strategies may or may not include theatre and other arts education in some schools—particularly in underserved communities where the need is the greatest—unless advocates step up and articulate their value to every student’s education.

A strong starting point for the 2021-22 school year might be to make the case for theatre as a key support component for students re-entering the in-school learning environment after a year-plus away, given the discipline ability to nurture social and emotional wellbeing and create spaces where traumatized students can express themselves in safe and positive ways.

Our path is clear, but for theatre education to maintain its place in schools, advocates will need broad-based community support and a well-defined rationale for why it should continue to be part of the well-rounded education of all students. This second survey of EdTA membership will likely be followed by successive check-ins with teaching professionals—they know the status of their classrooms, stages, and students better than anyone. We will need to pay attention to those voices if theatre education is to flourish in the future.