



The Educator Voice Report

2025-2026 State of Educator Experience

What **9,122** Conversations Reveal About Strengths,
Barriers, and Leadership Support in K-12 Education

NATIONAL RESEARCH REPORT



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One district. Many vantage points.

Every district measures outcomes — academic performance, attendance, enrollment, employee engagement, staff retention, financial health, and more. While those measures help leaders understand what is happening, they don't explain why.

Every employee experiences the district differently. From classrooms to cafeterias, buses to boardrooms, each role provides a unique perspective. Together, those perspectives reveal the story behind the data.



When leaders listen consistently, patterns emerge. Strengths become visible, barriers surface earlier, and better decisions follow.

Every district has data. Far fewer have the story behind it.

What 9,122 employee rounding conversations revealed about the employee experience across Studer Education partner districts.



Purpose Still Defines the Work

Nearly 39% of employees identified student growth, relationships, and success as the best part of their work.



Improvement Begins with Existing Strengths

27% of employees identified collaboration and teamwork as one of the strongest aspects of their work experience.



Time Is Education's Greatest Constraint

Time and workload emerged as the defining constraint across K-12 education, appearing more than twice as often as any other barrier.



Leadership Creates Capacity

Employees pointed to consistent leadership behaviors that create capacity as the most important driver of improvement.

While every district is unique, remarkably consistent themes emerged across Studer Education partner districts. Together, these four findings highlight both the strengths educators and other district employees demonstrate every day, while revealing leadership opportunities to build capacity, strengthen culture, and better support the people who serve students.

HOW WE CONDUCTED THE RESEARCH

How a consistent listening framework revealed the findings in this report.

BY THE NUMBERS

9,122 LEADERSHIP ROUNDING CONVERSATIONS	5,974 EMPLOYEES	587 LEADERS	2025-26 SCHOOL YEAR	99% RESPONSE RATE
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THE THREE LEADERSHIP ROUNDING QUESTIONS

1

What's going well?

Identifies strengths and recognizes what's working.

2

What's getting in the way?

Highlights areas for improvement and uncovers barriers.

3

How can I help?

Turns listening into meaningful action.

Leadership rounding is a structured leadership practice that creates consistent conversations between leaders and employees. By asking the same three questions across schools, departments, and roles, leaders gain a consistent framework for understanding the employee experience and identifying meaningful patterns.

The findings that follow reflect the common themes that emerged from 9,122 leadership rounding conversations conducted across Studer Education partner districts during the 2025-2026 school year. Together, they provide insight into the experiences of educators and other district employees — and the leadership opportunities those experiences reveal.

While every district is unique, remarkably consistent themes emerged about what helps educators and other district employees thrive — and what gets in the way.

Purpose still defines the work.

These findings emerged from one simple question: "What's going well?"



Student Success Defines Purpose.

39% of employees identified student growth, learning, relationships, and success as the most meaningful part of their work.



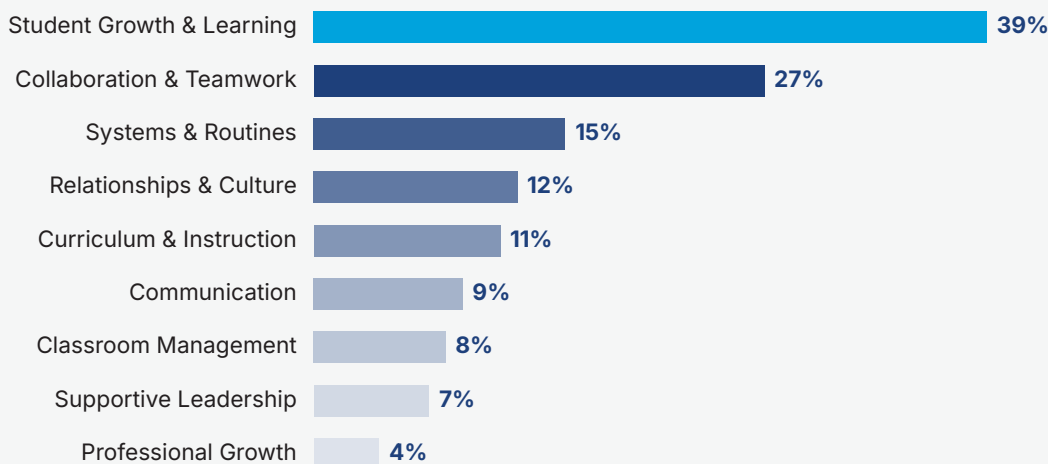
Collaboration Strengthens Purpose.

27% of employees identified collaboration and teamwork as a key source of purpose in their work.

Across districts, employees consistently described purpose as the foundation of a positive employee experience. Regardless of role, helping students succeed and working alongside supportive colleagues remained the strongest sources of fulfillment.

FIGURE 1 | **What Employees Say is Going Well**

SHARE OF CONVERSATIONS MENTIONING EACH THEME. N = 8,699



THE TAKEAWAY

What's working is about people, not programs. Student growth (39%) and collaboration (27%) lead by a wide margin; systems, communication, and curriculum follow well behind.



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Leaders don't create purpose — they create the conditions that help purpose thrive.

When employees feel connected to students, supported by colleagues, and trusted to do meaningful work, purpose becomes one of the strongest drivers of engagement.



Time shapes the employee experience.

TIME IS THE #1 BARRIER TO SUCCESS

27%

OF EMPLOYEES IDENTIFIED
TIME & WORKLOAD AS
THEIR #1 BARRIER

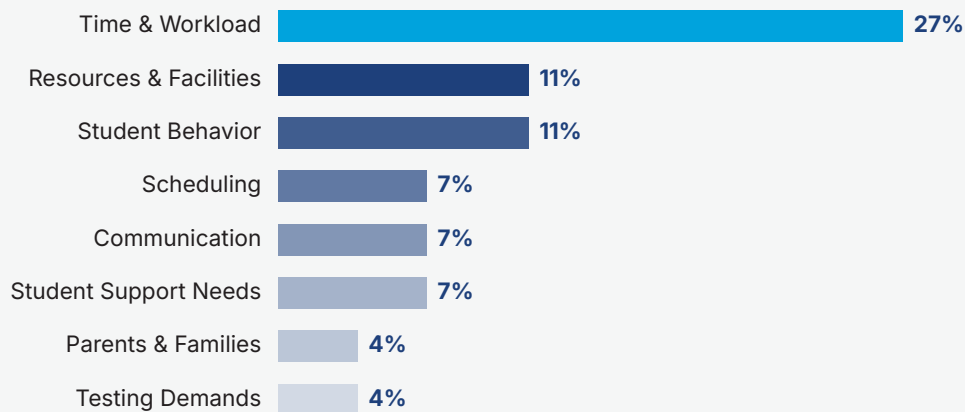
2X

MORE FREQUENTLY
THAN THE NEXT
BARRIER

12

CONSECUTIVE MONTHS
TIME RANKED AS THE
#1 BARRIER

FIGURE 2 | Time Was the #1 Barrier Across the Entire School Year



THE TAKEAWAY

Time and workload emerged as the defining constraint across K–12 education, appearing more than twice as often as any other barrier and ranking first throughout the school year.

The remaining barriers may be different, but many place additional demands on the same finite resource: employee capacity. Together, these findings point to an important leadership opportunity — not simply to solve individual problems, but to simplify work, align priorities, and protect more time for what matters most. The next question reveals what employees say leaders can do to help.

Leadership matters more than resources.



23% of employees named leadership check-ins and presence as the most requested form of support, ahead of any resource.

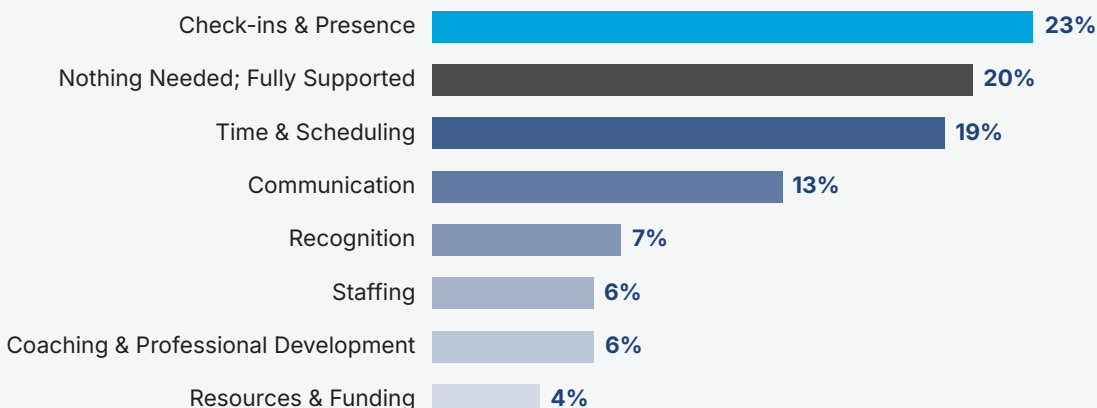
When asked how leaders could best support them, employees rarely pointed first to additional resources or new initiatives. Instead, across all responses, they consistently described leadership behaviors — leaders who listened, communicated, removed barriers, and followed through.

Employees value leaders who are present.

The most common responses center on leadership presence. Employees consistently describe leaders who are visible, approachable, and engaged in the daily work of their schools. They value leaders who understand the realities of their work, communicate regularly, and make time for meaningful conversations.

FIGURE 3 | How Employees Say Leaders Can Help

SHARE OF CONVERSATIONS MENTIONING EACH THEME

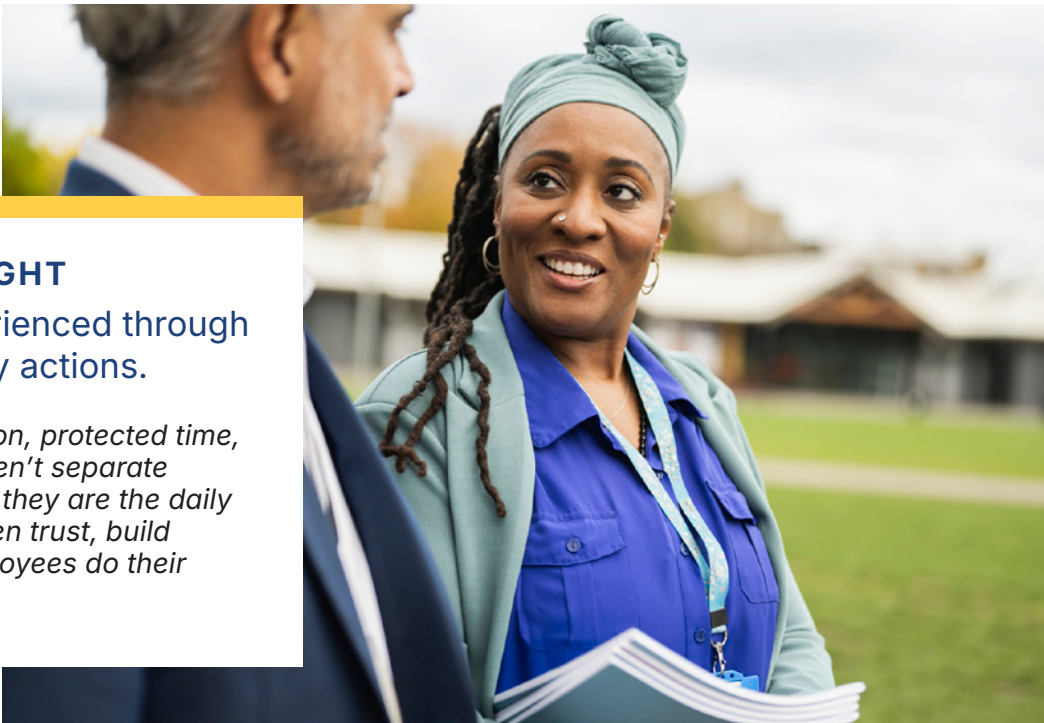


Employees rarely ask leaders for more programs or initiatives. Instead, they most often describe leadership behaviors — being present, communicating clearly, removing barriers, and following through — as the support that matters most. Notably, one in five employees reported needing nothing further, suggesting that consistent leadership practices are already making a meaningful difference in many organizations.

What effective leadership looks like.

Employee responses consistently reinforce one central finding: effective leadership is experienced through everyday actions, not additional resources. Across thousands of responses, employees describe the leadership practices that matter most — being present, communicating clearly, protecting time, and providing consistent support. Together, these themes illustrate what effective leadership looks like in practice.

Leadership Presence Employees ask for check-ins, visibility, and ongoing support more than any other form of help. Consistent leadership presence is the most requested support employees identify.	Protect Time Even when workload is the primary barrier, employees continue to ask leaders to help protect time and reduce competing demands rather than simply add resources.
Communication Clarity Clear, consistent communication is one of the most requested forms of leadership support and remains one of the highest-leverage actions available to leaders.	Consistent Support One in five employees report needing no additional support, demonstrating that consistent leadership practices are already creating positive employee experiences in many organizations.

A photograph of a woman with a light blue headwrap and a blue button-down shirt under a light green jacket, smiling and looking towards a man whose back is partially to the camera. They appear to be in an outdoor setting with a building and greenery in the background.



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

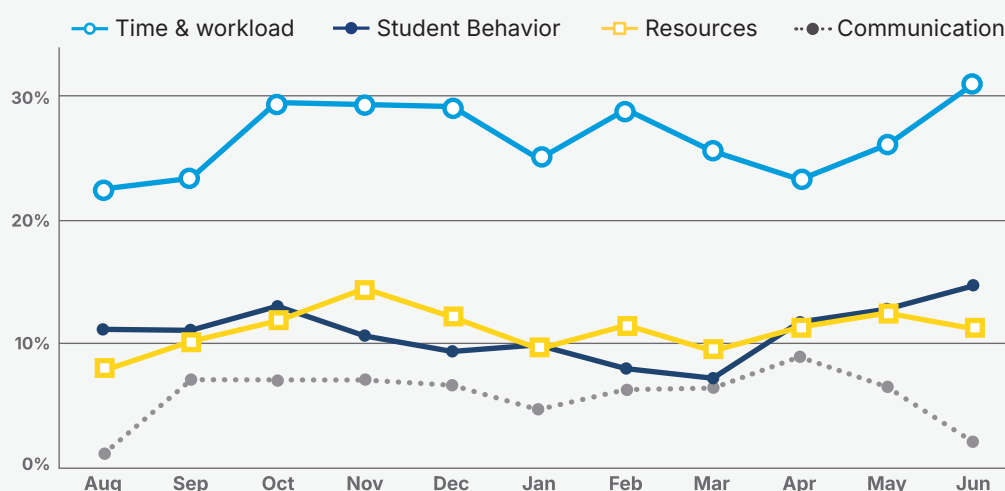
Leadership is experienced through consistent everyday actions.

Presence, communication, protected time, and ongoing support aren't separate leadership strategies — they are the daily behaviors that strengthen trust, build capacity, and help employees do their best work.

Employee experiences evolve throughout the school year, giving leaders the opportunity to anticipate needs — not simply respond to them.

FIGURE 4 | **Employee Needs Throughout the School Year**

SHARE OF CONVERSATIONS RAISING EACH BARRIER, BY MONTH



Leadership rounding reveals more than a snapshot of the employee experience — it reveals how needs change throughout the school year. While time and workload remain the most consistent challenge, other barriers follow predictable seasonal patterns, giving leaders the opportunity to anticipate needs before they become larger organizational challenges.



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

The most effective leaders don't respond to employee needs — they anticipate them.

Consistent listening creates the opportunity to provide support before challenges become barriers.

Each season presents different challenges – and different opportunities for leadership.

LATE SUMMER → FALL

Strong starts meet operational realities.

The school year begins with optimism, purpose, and collaboration. As routines become established, operational concerns such as resources, scheduling, and communication become more prominent.



WINTER

A natural opportunity to reconnect.

The beginning of the calendar year produced the highest percentage of employees who report needing nothing more from their leaders. The return from winter break creates a natural opportunity to reinforce priorities, reconnect with employees, and strengthen relationships before spring demands increase.



SPRING

Student needs increase as capacity declines.

Student behavior concerns rise steadily throughout the spring while employee capacity becomes increasingly strained. This period offers leaders an opportunity to remain visible, remove barriers, and protect employee time before fatigue compounds.



YEAR'S END

Presence matters most.

As the school year draws to a close, workload increases while perceived support declines. Leadership presence, recognition, communication, and follow-through have their greatest opportunity to strengthen culture during this stretch.



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

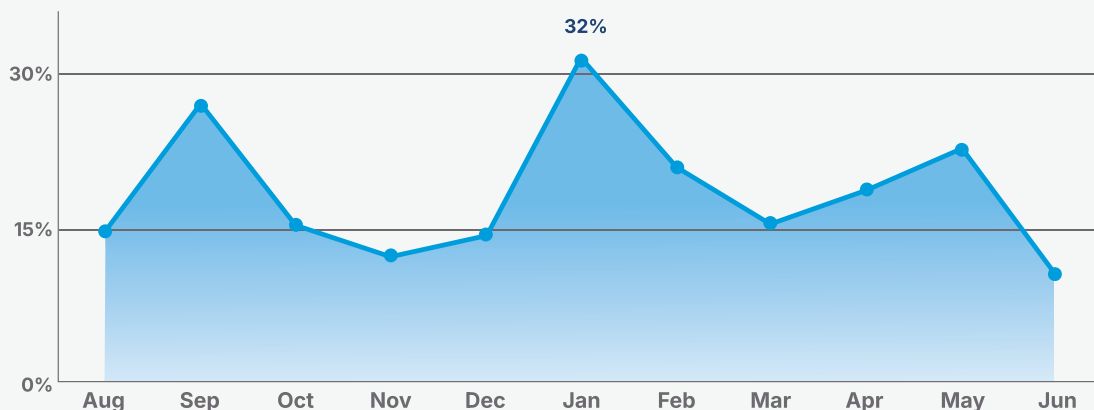
The rhythm of the school year creates predictable opportunities for leadership.

Leaders who understand these patterns can anticipate needs, adjust priorities, and provide the right support at the right time.

Effective leadership isn't just about how you support employees — it's about knowing when your support matters most.

FIGURE 5 | “I’m well supported” — Perceived Support Throughout the Year

SHARE OF “HOW CAN I HELP” RESPONSES INDICATING EMPLOYEES FEEL WELL SUPPORTED



THE TAKEAWAY

Employee perceptions of support fluctuate throughout the school year. Support is strongest at the beginning of each semester and declines during the busiest periods, highlighting opportunities for leaders to increase their visibility and communication when employees need it most.

The most effective leaders don't provide the same support throughout the school year. They recognize when employee needs are changing and respond with greater visibility, communication, and intentional support. Consistent listening makes that possible.

LEADERSHIP ACTIONS

- Increase leadership visibility during periods of higher workload and lower perceived support.
- Strengthen communication and follow-through as employee needs change throughout the year.
- Use consistent listening to anticipate challenges and adjust leadership support proactively.



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Leadership presence matters most when employees feel it least.

Consistent listening helps leaders recognize those moments and respond with greater visibility, communication, and support.

Five leadership practices grounded in the data.

Listening creates understanding. Leadership turns that understanding into action. These five practices emerged directly from more than 9,100 conversations and represent the highest-leverage opportunities leaders can strengthen today.

01

Protect Employee Capacity

Time and workload are the defining constraint of the employee experience. Leaders create capacity by removing unnecessary work, aligning priorities, simplifying processes, and protecting time for what matters most: serving students.

ANCHORED IN: Time and workload appear 2× more often than any other barrier.

02

Lead Through Presence

Visible, approachable leadership is one of the greatest forms of support employees describe. Presence builds trust, strengthens relationships, and helps leaders identify barriers early, before challenges grow.

ANCHORED IN: Leadership presence and check-ins are the most requested form of support (23%).

03

Communicate With Clarity

Clear communication reduces uncertainty, aligns expectations, and helps employees focus on the work that matters most. Leaders strengthen trust by communicating early, explaining decisions, and reinforcing priorities consistently.

ANCHORED IN: Clearer communication features in 13% of conversations.



04

Reinforce **What Is Working**

Purpose, collaboration, and supportive organizational conditions are the strongest contributors to a positive employee experience. Leaders strengthen culture by recognizing and reinforcing what already works.

ANCHORED IN: Student success (39%) and collaboration (27%) emerged as the two strongest themes in response to “What’s going well?”

05

Make **Listening a Leadership System**

One conversation builds understanding. A system of continuous conversations creates ongoing organizational learning, helping leaders identify strengths, remove barriers, and respond before small challenges become larger barriers.

ANCHORED IN: 9,122 leadership conversations conducted across one school year.

From conversation to continuous improvement.

The greatest value of listening is not the conversation itself. It is what leaders learn, how they respond, and how those actions create a cycle of continuous improvement.

Every district is unique, yet the consistency of the findings tells a compelling story. Across **9,122 leadership conversations**, employees described many of the same sources of purpose, the same barriers to success, and the same leadership behaviors that help people do their best work. While every district has its own context, the leadership opportunities are remarkably consistent.

Employees experience the organization in ways no survey, dashboard, or performance metric can fully capture. Their voices reveal where communication is working, where systems create friction, and where leadership can have the greatest impact.

Together, these findings tell a clear leadership story.

- Employees come to education because of purpose.
- Employees need the capacity to fulfill that purpose.
- Leadership creates that capacity through presence, trust, and consistent action.

That progression is the foundation of continuous improvement.

The research points to a simple conclusion: listening creates understanding, and leadership turns that understanding into continuous improvement. Districts that make listening a consistent leadership practice are better positioned to strengthen culture, support employees, and improve organizational performance.



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Continuous improvement begins with listening.

Listening creates understanding. Trust is built through action. Follow-through sustains improvement.

Studer Education helps district leaders turn insights into action.

Every district has unique challenges, priorities, and goals. Our role is to help district leaders turn those priorities into meaningful action — and measurable results. Studer Education partners with school districts to strengthen leadership, improve organizational culture, and develop the systems that help employees and students thrive.

Through coaching, strategic planning, leadership development, and continuous improvement, we help leaders create lasting impact.

Leadership rounding is one of the proven practices we use to strengthen trust, uncover barriers, recognize success, and transform employee voice into organizational improvement. K12 Rounding® supports that work by helping leaders capture insights, identify trends, and turn conversations into action.

Every district has its own story.

This report reflects what educators and other district employees shared across Studer Education partner districts nationwide. The next question is one only your district can answer.

How does your district compare?



How does your district compare?

You've seen what educators and other district employees across Studer Education partner districts revealed about their experiences. Now compare those findings with how you believe educators and other district employees are experiencing your own district.

District Benchmark Assessment

[Click here to take the complimentary 2-minute District Benchmark Assessment.](#)

Receive your **Personalized District Comparison Summary** comparing your responses with findings from 9,122 employee rounding conversations conducted across **Studer Education K-12 partner districts**.



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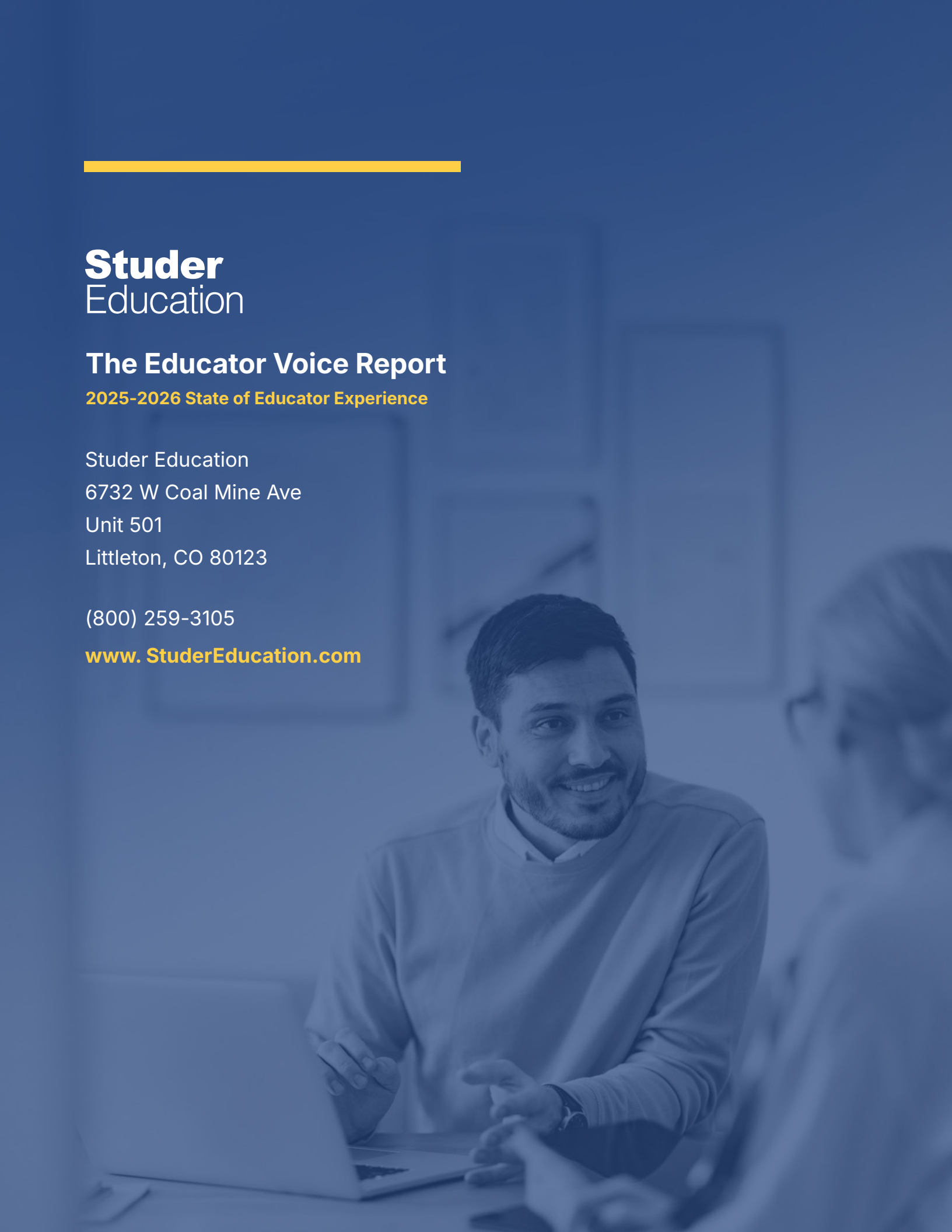
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Studer Education
6732 W Coal Mine Ave
Unit 501
Littleton, CO 80123

(800) 259-3105

[www. StuderEducation.com](http://www.StuderEducation.com)

A background image of a man and a woman in an office setting. The man is in the foreground, smiling and gesturing with his hands towards a laptop. The woman is in the background, looking towards the man. The image is overlaid with a blue tint.