

New Solutions for Frustrated Parents: How Education Leaders Can Help

JUNE • 2022

By Michelle Croft, Juliet Squire, Alex Spurrier,
and Andrew J. Rotherham

Introduction

Across the U.S., parents are worried about the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their children and what it might mean for a new normal in K-12 education. Recent polls show that about two-thirds of parents (65%) are concerned about their children’s academic progress, while over half of them (58%) are worried about their children’s mental health and emotional well-being.¹ Unfortunately, recent research confirms these fears are well founded.² Parents are looking to policymakers and education leaders for solutions.

Parents’ concerns have already prompted many to make a change to their children’s education. Shifts in public and private sector enrollment reflect a higher level of student mobility, much of which is due to parents changing their child’s school.³ Increased participation rates in options like home-schooling,⁴ learning pods,⁵ or tutoring⁶ also reflect a higher degree of parent agency in seeking alternative or supplemental learning opportunities for their children.

Those who have not made a change to their children’s education, however, find themselves returning to schools and classrooms that look much like they did before the pandemic. These families include two groups: first, the majority of parents who are generally satisfied with their children’s school,⁷ for whom the return to familiar educational experiences and routines may be a welcome respite from two years of disruption; and, second, those for whom the return to normal is a reminder of their frustrations with their children’s education but who are struggling to determine whether and how to make a change (Table 1).

Policymakers and education leaders must do more to support this last group of parents — those who are dissatisfied and have not (yet) made a change to their children’s schooling, but are looking for solutions.

TABLE 1. FOUR TYPES OF PARENTS, BASED ON SATISFACTION AND BEHAVIOR

	MOVING	STAYING
SATISFIED	Some parents have made a change in their children’s education that is unrelated to their satisfaction with their current school.	Most parents are satisfied and sticking with their children’s current education.
DISSATISFIED	Some parents are dissatisfied and have made a change in their children’s education.	Some parents are dissatisfied and have not (yet) made a change, but are looking for solutions.

Many Parents Are Dissatisfied, But for Different Reasons

Over the past two years, public opinion polling has provided some of the most timely and helpful insights into how education stakeholders have experienced the pandemic. Across polls and over time, between about 50% and 75% of parents report satisfaction with their children's education, leaving between 25% and 50% of parents who are ambivalent or dissatisfied.⁸

Combined with parents' stated concerns for their children and many parents' demonstrated willingness to change their children's school or seek out other supports, polling data begs for a deeper analysis of the nature of parents' dissatisfaction and what they want for their kids' education moving into the 2022-23 school year and beyond. There is more going on under the surface with how parents feel about K-12 education than can be teased out with polling and enrollment data.

With this in mind, the Benenson Strategy Group conducted a series of online parent journals in February 2022 with 35 parents to provide a more nuanced view into parents' thoughts about K-12 education.⁹ Only parents who reported at least some frustration or dissatisfaction with their children's school were included in the exercise. The number of participants and journals are insufficient to support definitive claims or broad generalizations about what frustrates parents or what they want. However, the journals elevate several themes, add nuance to parent perspectives, and suggest how policymakers and education leaders might respond.

The online journals surface frustrations such as how schools communicate with parents, how schools tailor support to meet students' individual needs, and the availability of extracurricular activities.

“Often, we are left in the dark about what [children] are learning or even what assignments are being given.”

—MOM FROM UTAH

“I often advocate for my child to get the attention she needs when I should not have to because she should already be getting it.”

—MOM FROM ILLINOIS

“I get frustrated when I look into certain activities and they are available at other districts but not mine.”

—MOM FROM WISCONSIN

“All children are not the same. There should be a way to customize your child's or the school's curriculum for each specific child.”

—MOM FROM NORTH CAROLINA



Despite Dissatisfaction, Many Parents Also Express Uncertainty About Whether They *Should* or *Could* Make a Change

Among parents who are dissatisfied with their children's education, some are on the fence about whether they should make a change. There are "switching costs" involved in any change: upending routines, starting new relationships with friends and teachers, and uncertainty about whether another option will, in fact, be better.

“There are a lot of factors that would make it difficult [to move] my child to a new school. One, it's comfort for her, she knows her school, the people and teachers there. It's stressful to start anew. And then there's everything else — location could be a factor; costs could come into play. It's a lot to think about.”

—MOM FROM NEVADA

“I moved schools when I was younger and know how difficult it can be to start over with everything (new friends, new environment). I think having to put my child through this, especially when they have established themselves and have an established group of friends, would be difficult.”

—DAD FROM PENNSYLVANIA

“There is always the fear in a child going to a new school: the unknown, new friends, new building, etc.”

—DAD FROM NEW YORK

Other dissatisfied families may not have enough information about different options or aren't confident those options will be better than their children's current situation.

“Yes, I do [have the ability to make changes], but I need more support and guidance in figuring out what those things are or can be.”

—DAD FROM ILLINOIS

“I have not considered enrolling my child in another school. If I knew that my child could attend a better school and [that it] was affordable and much better, then I would consider it.”

—DAD FROM ILLINOIS

“I haven't really considered any other form of schooling other than public school. Really, it's all we know, and I know ... private costs money. I don't know about online learning, either.”

—MOM FROM NEVADA

Still other dissatisfied families may want to make a change and know what they want for their children but face significant barriers to accessing it.

“We've considered a private school, but that comes with a cost. We also have considered a parochial school. ... Either a private school or a parochial school offer much better benefits than a public school. It's just a matter of making it happen, which for us, is depending on a pending move [to a different state].”

—DAD FROM CALIFORNIA

“I can't really change anything unless I took her out of public school and into something else. But that costs money.”

—MOM FROM NEVADA

“If money wasn't an issue, I'd hire private tutors or put her in a private school.”

—DAD FROM NEW YORK



More Must Be Done to Help Parents Get Their Children What They Need

There is a significant opportunity to better serve families by taking time to listen and respond to what they want; policymakers and education leaders may be able to address parents' frustration and mitigate their desire to make a change at all. Policymakers and education leaders can also do more to increase access to schools of choice or supplemental learning opportunities that do not require students to change schools. Some parents may need more information and support to understand what options are available and feel confident that those options are worth the risks and costs. Still others need help overcoming the barriers to access, whether they be financial, logistical, or otherwise. Policymakers and education leaders must:

1. Work with parents to better understand their needs.

Policymakers and education leaders must step up their efforts to reach out and listen to what parents and families need. Part of this outreach includes making sure the information parents share is heard, valued, and put to use.

- **Elevating parent voices:** National Parents Union (NPU) is a network of parent organizations that elevates parent voices to influence policies and practices at the local, state, and national levels. Among other supports for parents, NPU provides guidance and resources for how parents can engage school administrators and elected officials to have their perspectives heard.¹⁰
- **Authentic engagement with families:** Learning Heroes provides examples of family engagement strategies that school and district leaders can use to build trust, enhance student learning and well-being, and have institutional support.¹¹
- **Listening tours:** Leadership for Educational Equity provides elected officials with a “how-to” guide for building relationships and dialogue with constituents, to better understand their needs and reflect them back to the community.¹²

2. Increase the number of educational options available to families.

The complexity and scale of educational challenges in a post-pandemic environment will require an abundance of options to help children and families. This includes providing families with educational options both during and beyond the regular school day. In addition to school choice, flexible learning options, such as after-school programs and summer activities, are likely to be in high demand in the coming years and can provide valuable benefits for parents and students. Policymakers can increase the number of educational options in several ways, including by supporting flexible funding mechanisms, such as microgrants; establishing or expanding supplemental supports; and enabling students to earn academic credit for out-of-school learning.¹³

- **Microgrants:** In Idaho, the Empowering Parents Grants program provides up to \$3,000 per family for certain educational purchases, including technology and tutoring services.¹⁴
- **Supplemental tutoring:** In Texas, students who do not score proficient or above on state assessments are eligible for accelerated instruction strategies, which may include 30 hours or more of tutoring; state statute requires that tutoring be in addition to regular grade-level instruction and take place in groups of no more than three students.¹⁵
- **Out-of-school learning:** In New Hampshire, students may receive course credit toward graduation for participation in approved alternative programs where learning takes place outside of school, such as participating in a performing arts program.¹⁶

3. Inform families about educational options that could meet their children's needs.

Before families can make a change in their children's education, they need to be aware of the options that are not only available for their children but could also serve their needs well. Policymakers and advocates must increase their efforts to provide families with clear and reliable information to better inform their educational decision-making.

- **Coaching and support:** A nonprofit called RESCHOOL Colorado connects families with learner advocates who help match learning goals and interests with educational resources and opportunities.¹⁷ Similarly, EdNavigator partners with schools and employers to help parents find the schools that will best support their children's success.¹⁸
- **Transparent information:** To facilitate open enrollment, Tennessee law requires districts to identify schools with available space at the grade, class, and program level, and make that information public at least two weeks before the start of the open enrollment period.¹⁹ Websites that aggregate and list school options, like GreatSchools, also help parents learn about educational opportunities in their area.²⁰
- **Support to access funding:** The Indiana Education Scholarship Account Program is developing a portal for parents and providers that not only aggregates information about available options but also helps families access and manage individualized spending accounts.²¹

4. Reduce barriers to access.

Even when families know of educational options that could serve their children well and are ready to make a change, barriers beyond financial resources can stand in their way. These can range from complex application processes to limited transportation²² and access to high-speed internet.²³ Policymakers should work with parents to identify the most significant barriers to educational opportunities in their communities and tailor solutions to mitigate or eliminate them.

- **Grants for innovation in transportation:** A for Arizona is administering Arizona's Transportation Modernization Grant Program to identify solutions to transportation problems at the local level, such as assisting families with transportation costs, high-efficiency vehicles, using technology to create more efficient routes, and micro-transit initiatives.²⁴
- **Flexibility in transportation:** Georgia is expanding transportation options by permitting local school boards to use vehicles other than buses for transporting students.²⁵
- **Improving broadband access:** EducationSuperHighway works to bridge the broadband access and affordability gap, including facilitating partnerships with internet service providers to identify students who lack broadband in their homes.²⁶

KEY TAKEAWAY

Policymakers and school and system leaders should support parents along all four fronts: understanding parent needs and preferences, fostering a greater supply of options, providing better information, and reducing barriers to access. These efforts could look different in different states and communities based on the needs of families and political realities, but the focus must be on ensuring that parents who are concerned about their children and frustrated by their children's education are able to find solutions that work for them.

Endnotes

¹ Echelon Insights and National Parents Union, National Parents Union Survey, March 18-21, 2022, <https://nationalparentsunion.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/NPU-Topline-March-2022.pdf>.

² Megan Kuhfeld, Jim Soland, Karyn Lewis, and Emily Morton, "The Pandemic Has Had Devastating Impacts on Learning. What Will It Take to Help Students Catch Up?" Brown Center Chalkboard, March 3, 2022, <https://brook.gs/3HBFY7T>; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey," 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/abes.htm>.

³ Adam Newman, Tanya Rosbash, and Andrea Zurita, "School Disrupted, Part 2: The Durability and Persistence of COVID-19-Driven Shifts in the K-12 Ecosystem," Tyton Partners, July 2021; https://d1hzkn4d3dn6lg.cloudfront.net/production/uploads/2021/07/School-Disrupted_Phase-II_TytonPartners.pdf. Note: Some of the enrollment shifts have been driven by other factors such as declining immigration and birthrates as well as families moving, particularly away from urban centers. See Luke Rodgers, "U.S. Population Grew 0.1% in 2021, Slowest Rate Since Founding of the Nation," U.S. Census Bureau, December 21, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/12/us-population-grew-in-2021-slowest-rate-since-founding-of-the-nation.html>; U.S. Census Bureau, "Over Two-Thirds of the Nation's Counties Had Natural Decrease in 2021," March 24, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/population-estimates-counties-decrease.html>; Linda Jacobson, "Those Kids Did Not Come Back': Exclusive Enrollment Data Shows Students Continue to Flee Urban Districts as Boom Town Schools and Virtual Academies Thrive," The 74 Million, April 6, 2022, <https://www.the74million.org/article/covid-school-enrollment-students-move-away-from-urban-districts-virtual/>.

⁴ Casey Eggleston and Jason Fields, "Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey Shows Significant Increase in Homeschooling Rates in Fall 2020," U.S. Census Bureau, March 22, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/homeschooling-on-the-rise-during-covid-19-pandemic.html>; Carolyn Thompson, "Homeschooling Surge Continues Despite Schools Reopening," AP News, April 14, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/covid-business-health-buffalo-education-d37f4f1d12e57b72e5ddf67d4f897d9a>.

⁵ John Kristof, "Parents and Teachers Both Want More Learning Pods," EdChoice, April 19, 2021, <https://www.edchoice.org/engage/parents-and-teachers-both-want-more-learning-pods/>; Ashley Jochim and Jennifer Poon, "Crisis Breeds Innovation: Pandemic Pods and the Future of Education," Center for Reinventing Public Education, January 2022, https://crpe.org/wp-content/uploads/CRPE-Pandemic-Pods-Report_Pages_FINAL.pdf.

⁶ Morning Consult and EdChoice, "The Public, Parents, and K-12 Education," April 2022, <https://edchoice.morningconsultintelligence.com/assets/166687.pdf>.

⁷ Alex Spurrier, Michelle Croft, Juliet Squire, and Andrew J. Rotherham, "Parent Perception Barometer: Parent Rating of Child's School and Local Schools," Bellwether Education Partners, https://bellwethereducation.shinyapps.io/ed_data_dashboard/.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ All parent quotes are drawn from the Benenson Strategy Group online parent journals.

¹⁰ National Parents Union, <https://nationalparentsunion.org/>; National Parents Union, "Connecting With School Administrators and Elected Officials," 2020, <https://nationalparentsunion.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/HOW-TO-CONNECT-WITH-SCHOOL-ADMINISTRATORS-AND-ELECTED-OFFICIALS.pdf>.

¹¹ Eyal Bergman, "Unlocking the 'How': Designing Family Engagement Strategies That Lead to School Success," Learning Heroes, March 2022, <https://bealearninghero.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Unlocking-The-How-Report.pdf>.

¹² Erin Snow, "Starting Your First Term With a Listening Tour," Leadership for Educational Equity, <https://educationalequity.org/blog/starting-your-first-term-listening-tour>.

¹³ Alex Spurrier, Lynne Graziano, Brian Robinson, and Juliet Squire, "Expanding Educational Options: Emergent Policy Trends," Bellwether Education Partners, January 2022, <https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/expanding-educational-options-emergent-policy-trends>.

¹⁴ ExcelinEd, "Idaho Governor Little Signs Student-Centered Bill Creating Empowering Parents Grant Program," March 1, 2022, <https://excelinedinaction.org/2022/03/01/idaho-governor-little-signs-student-centered-bill-creating-empowering-parents-grant-program/>; Idaho SB1255 (2022), <https://legiscan.com/ID/bill/S1255/2022>.

- ¹⁵ Texas Education Agency, "House Bill 4545 Implementation Overview," June 25, 2021, <https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/news-and-multimedia/correspondence/taa-letters/house-bill-4545-implementation-overview>.
- ¹⁶ New Hampshire Department of Education, "Learn Everywhere," <https://www.education.nh.gov/partners/education-outside-the-classroom/learning-everywhere>.
- ¹⁷ RESCHOOL Colorado, <https://www.reschoolcolorado.org/>.
- ¹⁸ EdNavigator, <https://www.ednavigator.org/>.
- ¹⁹ Tennessee SB 788 and HB 1305 (2021), <https://legiscan.com/TN/text/SB0788/2021> and <https://legiscan.com/TN/text/HB1305/id/2402362>.
- ²⁰ GreatSchools, <https://www.greatschools.org/gk/ratings/>.
- ²¹ EdChoice, "What's Up With ESAs? With Jackie Guglielmo," Episode 317, April 28, 2022, <https://www.edchoice.org/podcasts/ep-317-whats-up-with-esas-with-jackie-guglielmo/>.
- ²² Bonnie O'Keefe, "Three Lessons From Our New Briefs on School Transportation and Safety, Choice, and the Environment," Ahead of the Heard, August 28, 2019, <https://aheadoftheheard.org/three-lessons-from-our-new-briefs-on-school-transportation-and-safety-choice-and-the-environment/>.
- ²³ Vikki Katz and Victoria Rideout, "Learning at Home While Under-Connected: Lower-Income Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic," New America, June 24, 2021, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/learning-at-home-while-underconnected/>.
- ²⁴ A for Arizona, "A for Arizona Announces Arizona Transportation Modernization Grant Awardees," Nov. 8, 2021, <https://aforarizona.org/2021/11/08/a-for-arizona-announces-arizona-transportation-modernization-grant-awardees>.
- ²⁵ Georgia SB 159 (2021), <https://legiscan.com/GA/bill/SB159/2021>.
- ²⁶ EducationSuperHighway, <https://www.educationsuperhighway.org/>.

About the Authors



Michelle Croft

Michelle Croft is a senior analyst at Bellwether Education Partners in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. She can be reached at michelle.croft@bellwethereducation.org.



Juliet Squire

Juliet Squire is a senior partner at Bellwether Education Partners in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. She can be reached at juliet.squire@bellwethereducation.org.



Alex Spurrier

Alex Spurrier is an associate partner at Bellwether Education Partners in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. He can be reached at alex.spurrier@bellwethereducation.org.



Andrew J. Rotherham

Andrew J. Rotherham is a co-founder and partner at Bellwether Education Partners in the Policy and Evaluation practice area and External Relations team. He can be reached at andy@bellwethereducation.org.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the many individuals who gave their time and shared their knowledge with us to inform our work on this project, including the Benenson Strategy Group for their work to conduct and analyze the online parent journals. We are particularly grateful to the Walton Family Foundation for its financial support of this work.

We would also like to thank our Bellwether colleagues Valentina Payne and Alexis Richardson for their support on the project. Public opinion expert Mark Blumenthal provided valuable insight and perspective. Thank you to Lerner Communications, Alyssa Schwenk, Abby Marco, Zoe Campbell, Julie Nguyen, and Amber Walker for shepherding and disseminating this work and Super Copy Editors.

The contributions of these individuals and entities significantly enhanced our work; however, any errors in fact or analysis remain the responsibility of the authors.



Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice. Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.



© 2022 Bellwether Education Partners

© This report carries a Creative Commons license, which permits noncommercial re-use of content when proper attribution is provided. This means you are free to copy, display and distribute this work, or include content from this report in derivative works, under the following conditions:

① **Attribution.** You must clearly attribute the work to Bellwether Education Partners, and provide a link back to the publication at <http://bellwethereducation.org/>.

⑧ **Noncommercial.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes without explicit prior permission from Bellwether Education Partners.

③ **Share Alike.** If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under a license identical to this one.

For the full legal code of this Creative Commons license, please visit www.creativecommons.org. If you have any questions about citing or reusing Bellwether Education Partners content, please contact us.