

Assessing Voters' and Parents' Perspectives on Current Threats to Public Education

The 2022 PACE/USC Rossier Poll

Heather Hough
Julie Marsh
Jeimee Estrada-Miller
Morgan Polikoff
Jeannie Myung



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Executive Summary

The 2021–22 academic year was profoundly challenging for California schools. Eight critical issues emerged as serious threats to student learning, the operation of schools, and even the very institution of public education: (1) gun violence, (2) politicization of and support for public education, (3) controversy over what is taught in schools, (4) student learning and well-being, (5) declining enrollment, (6) teacher shortages, (7) college affordability, and (8) long-term funding inadequacy and instability. These issues also present a threat to equity because they disproportionately affect the most marginalized communities, exposing long-standing systemic inequities in education and creating new gaps in opportunity and access. It is against this backdrop that PACE and the University of Southern California (USC) Rossier School of Education fielded our annual poll of California voters in July 2022 on their opinions of and priorities for public education. Our top findings related to major threats facing public schools included the following:

1. Gun Violence in Schools

For the fourth consecutive year, “reducing gun violence in schools” was the top-rated education issue for California’s voters. When presented with an array of policy proposals that schools might pursue to address the risks of gun violence, voters expressed the most support for policies that would require more reporting about potential threats as well as a wide range of “school hardening” policies (e.g., “installing metal detectors” (77 percent), “hiring additional armed security” (70 percent), and “limiting the number of [school] doors and entryways” (69 percent)). They were also strongly in favor of nonschool gun policies, such as expanding public support for mental health.

2. Politicization of and Support for Public Education

During the past school year, public education has become an area of well-publicized political debate and discord. Indeed, more than 68 percent of voters reported that “public education is under attack in the United States.” Yet support for public education remains strong: 85 percent of voters agreed that “we cannot have an effective democracy without good public education.” And most voters, especially parents, expressed support for locally elected school boards as well as a desire to “be involved in decisions about education in their community.” At the same time, more than half of voters (53 percent), and even more parents (69 percent) agreed that “the public education system should do a better job reflecting parents’ preferences.”

3. Controversy Over What Is Taught in Schools

The issue of parental preference in schools centered on curriculum in the 2021–22 academic year, with major conflicts arising in California and nationwide around such topics as mathematics, the role of race and racism in US history, and sex education. Here in California, 64 percent of respondents stated that schools should spend more time teaching grade-appropriate lessons

about the causes and consequences of racism and inequality. Sixty-five percent of respondents supported California's recent ethnic studies requirement, though Republicans were less supportive than Democrats, and White voters were less supportive than voters of color. However, the majority of respondents agreed that "parents should be able to opt their children out of books assigned by teachers if they think the content is inappropriate," with Republicans 72 percent in agreement and Democrats 43 percent in agreement. At the same time, voters largely disagreed that "books containing content that some parents find inappropriate should be removed from school libraries."

4. Student Learning and Well-Being

Negative impacts on student learning and declines in student wellness have been top concerns of policymakers at the federal and state level during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is why billions of public dollars have been directed to public schools to address these issues. Indeed, California's voters reported strong concerns over the pandemic's impact on students' emotional and mental health, about students falling behind academically, and about the unequal impact of the pandemic on students of different economic and racial/ethnic backgrounds. Further, most respondents agreed that California's school closures "caused social and emotional distress" and "caused children to fall far behind in reading and math." In contrast, the majority of parents stated that their own child's academic performance, behavioral health, and emotional well-being are better now than they were before the pandemic. Reflecting the inequitable impact of the pandemic, parents of color, low-income parents, and parents in families speaking a home language other than English reported the most negative impact of the pandemic on their student's academic performance and well-being.

5. Declining Enrollment

California public schools saw a record drop in enrollment between 2020 and 2022. This poll sheds light on why California parents moved their children to different schools during the past 2 years. Among parents surveyed, more than one quarter reported having switched their child's school during the pandemic. The main reason parents cited for switching schools is wanting a different educational experience for their children (38 percent). This was followed by dissatisfaction with the COVID-19-related safety measures at their child's school (31 percent). Parent responses indicate that among families that switched schools, most switched from traditional public schools to public charter schools. This finding is consistent with an 8 percentage point increase in general support for public charter schools among voters from 2020 to 2022, and an increase of 16 percentage points among parents. Our results indicate that enrollment may continue to decline: an additional 28 percent of parents are considering a school change in the near future.

6. Teacher Shortages

While teacher shortages have been a concern in California for many years, the issue has become more acute because of COVID-19's increased pressures on educators. Forty-three percent of voters rated the teacher shortage at the top of their educational concerns—an increase from last year, when only 35 percent of voters rated the shortage as a top concern. Voters in households earning less than \$35,000 were the most likely to report this as a top priority (54 percent), versus voters in the top income bracket (27 percent). Voters and parents continued to support teachers unions' impact on K–12 education in the state throughout the pandemic, with 50 percent of voters overall and 69 percent of parents reporting that “California teachers unions have a positive impact on the quality of education in K–12 schools in California.” Most notable is the significant increase in support for teachers unions among parents between 2018 and 2022 (+11 percentage points).

7. College Affordability

The average cost of college has been rising for decades, but concerns about college affordability have become especially troubling for families in 2022 as rising college costs, inflation, and student loan debt has made paying for college an larger and larger burden for many families. California voters ranked college affordability as the second most important educational issue facing the state, after reducing gun violence in schools. Fifty-seven percent of parents are worried about having enough money to pay for their child's college education. Black parents were the most worried, with 75 percent indicating they were at least somewhat worried, compared to 63 percent of Latinx parents, 52 percent of Asian American parents, and 51 percent of White parents. Despite the overall level of concern about college affordability, an overwhelming 92 percent of parents still considered college to be a good investment in their child's future; this support holds across groups.

8. Long-term Funding Inadequacy and Instability

Californians were concerned about education funding despite recent federal and state investments. “Improving school funding” was among the top concerns for voters overall, with 40 percent of voters (and 50 percent of parents) reporting it as a top concern, a 5 percentage point increase from last year's 35 percent. Voters largely “trust[ed] [their] local school district to spend their pandemic recovery money responsibly to address student needs”; overall, 55 percent of voters and 68 percent of parents agreed. However, only 37 percent of voters and 53 percent of parents reported that their “local school district has communicated well about how they are using their pandemic recovery money to address student needs.” And communication is uneven, with the lowest income parents reporting the lowest levels of communication: Only 47 percent of parents with annual household incomes of less than \$35,000 reported good communication versus 68 percent of parents with annual household incomes of more than \$150,000.

Conclusion

California's public school systems have weathered the COVID-19 pandemic, but not unscathed. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated what have long been vulnerabilities and fissures in the state's public education system. At the same time, California voters and parents remain committed to public education and are supportive of schools and educators. Thus, as students return to school this fall, California's leaders must redouble the state's commitment to a "restorative restart"—to work toward a vision of thriving public schools across the state in which all students have the support and opportunities they need to achieve their full potential. With the support of the majority of Californians, the work of COVID-19 recovery for public schools will be the work of stewarding resources to implement programs and practices that enable all students to thrive, particularly low income students, students of color, and students learning English—those who have been disproportionately impacted both by the pandemic and by related education disruptions. California's leaders must also commit to strengthening systems to ensure quality in all schools, in every district, and for every student.

Introduction

The 2021–22 academic year was the third year of schooling to be disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic for California’s students. Unlike the prior 2 years, instruction during 2021–22 was largely conducted in person; nevertheless, educators, students, and families experienced the challenges associated with sustaining public education during an ongoing pandemic. These challenges included spikes in student absences and staffing shortages due to illness as well as the associated formidable administrative challenges of testing, contact tracing, and covering classes.

Most students returned to school after a year and a half of online learning, missed milestones, and fewer opportunities for social engagement and development. Some students—disproportionately low-income students of color (Fortuna et al., 2020)—were grappling with the toll that illness and death in their families and communities had taken on them. And despite district efforts to close the digital divide, student access to resources and support for learning remotely was uneven, with gaps persisting by income and ethnicity (Gao et al., 2021). Many students, particularly low-income students and those learning English, started this school year academically and socially behind where they would have been during more typical periods (Hamilton & Gross, 2021; Pier et al., 2021). And those were the students who did return to school. Far fewer students than expected enrolled in public schools for the 2021–22 school year, sparking concerns about declining enrollment statewide (Fensterwald & Willis, 2022).

Teachers took on more responsibilities to meet heightened student need under greater stress without additional support or compensation. This mismatch between responsibilities and support for educators appears to be contributing to large numbers of teachers exiting the profession and a critical teacher shortage disproportionately affecting schools serving students with the highest level of need (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Hong, 2022; Inverness, 2022).

Adding to the challenges of educating students during a pandemic, public schools became political battlefields in the 2021–22 school year. New levels of intimidation, violence, and death threats began to mark school board meetings across the state and country (Borter et al., 2022; Feuer, 2021). Interest in public education issues surged with school-closure discussions and continued with contention about vaccines and masking. Heated conflicts over what content is taught in classrooms also arose around topics including mathematics (Fensterwald, 2022), the role of race and racism in American history (EdSource, 2022b), and sex education (Blume & Gomez, 2022).

Some of the challenges of the 2021–22 school year were unique, but others were mainstay challenges that have been vexing school systems for many years, such as gun violence. As the 2021–22 school year was ending, a deadly mass school shooting on May 24 in Uvalde, Texas, resulted in the deaths of 19 students and two teachers, catapulting gun violence back into public awareness.

Policy leaders at the state and federal levels have responded to the growing burdens on schools during the pandemic with record-breaking levels of relief funding (California Department of Education, 2022a). These funds were especially important in California, where schools began the pandemic already chronically underfunded and underequipped to meet the day-to-day challenges of educating students (Hahnel, 2020; Imazeki et al., 2018). However, districts have faced many obstacles when it comes to spending these funds, including supply-chain issues, challenges associated with funding programs with one-time monies, and staffing shortages (Anderson & Briggs, 2022). Concerns are beginning to grow about how these public funds are being expended and whether they are making an impact on student learning and well-being (Lewis & Hong, 2022) as well as how schools will fare when relief funding dries up (Perez & Korte, 2022).

All of these issues taken together represent serious threats to student learning, the operation of schools, and the very institution of public education. These issues also present a threat to equity: The continued effects of the pandemic have disproportionately affected the most marginalized communities, exposing long-standing systemic inequities in education and creating new gaps in opportunity and access.

It is against this tumultuous backdrop that PACE and the University of Southern California (USC) Rossier School of Education fielded our annual poll of California voters in July 2022 on their opinions of and priorities for public education issues. To inform California public schools' transition into a postpandemic future, we analyze Californians' perspectives on eight critical issues: gun violence, politicization of and support for public education, controversy over what is taught in schools, student learning and well-being, declining enrollment, teacher shortages, college affordability, and long-term funding inadequacy and instability.

Because the views of parents are so critical at this juncture, we conducted focus groups of parents in English and Spanish with support from Families In Schools to guide item development and polled a disproportionate number of parents. In each analysis featured in this report, we highlight parent views where appropriate as well as differences across racial and ethnic groups, income levels, regions, and more. The margins of error for these analyses, along with our methodology, are described in the Appendix, and full results, including top lines and crosstabs, for this and prior years can be found on the PACE website at edpolicyinca.org/initiatives/pace-usc-rossier-annual-voter-poll/poll-archive.

Gun Violence in Schools

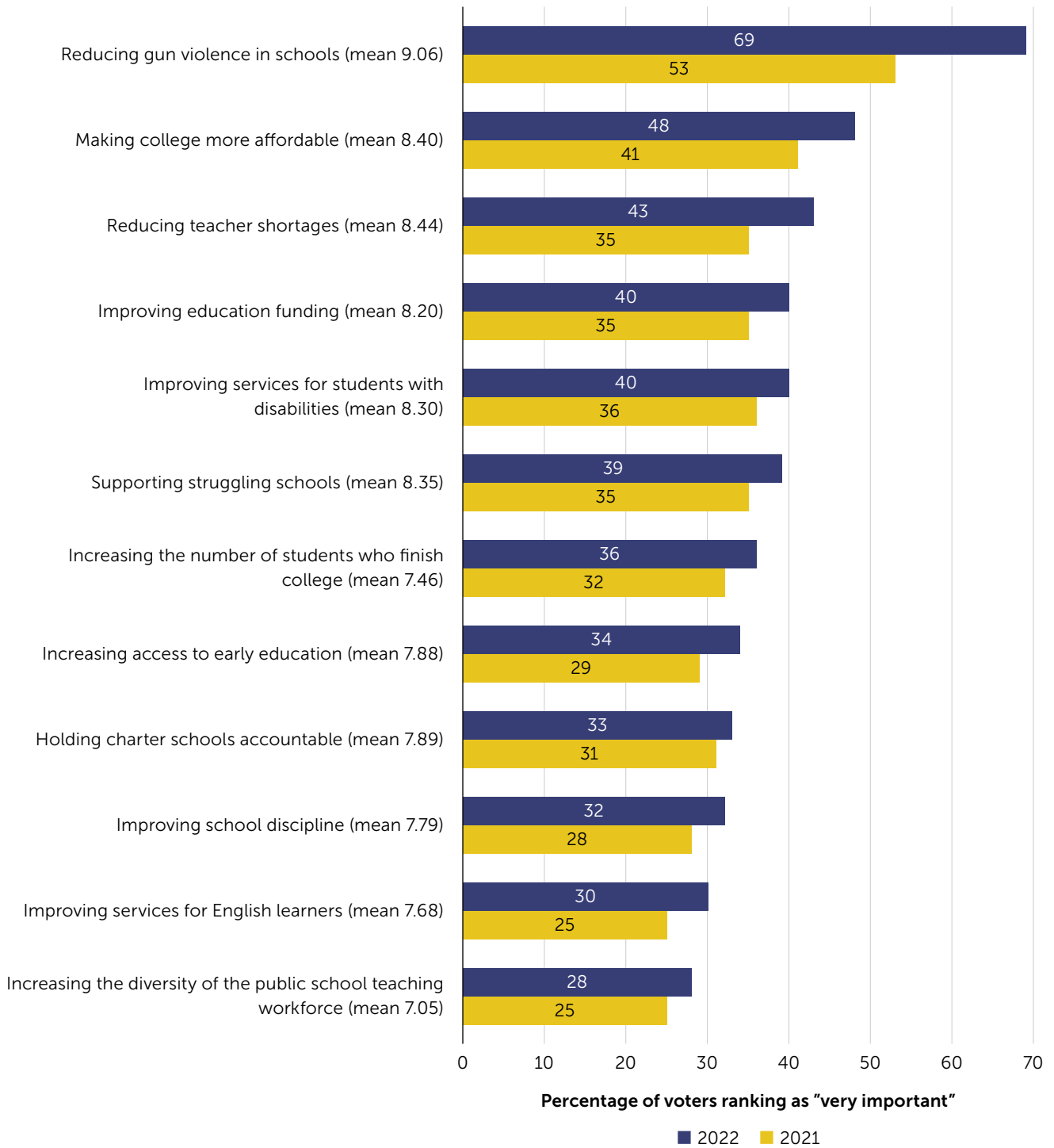
Gun violence is tragically an ongoing issue in America's schools, with no sign that the carnage is abating (Maxwell et al., 2022). The most recent mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas, catapulted the issue back into the public's consciousness (Stanford & Blad, 2022), with Congress even moving to pass some limited gun legislation (Cochrane, 2022). In our poll, we sought to understand how California voters and parents prioritize the issue of gun violence in schools and what kinds of policy proposals they most support.

Gun Violence in Schools Is the Most Important Educational Issue for Voters and Parents

In recent years of the PACE/USC Rossier Poll (2019, 2020, and 2021), we asked voters to rate the importance of an array of educational issues facing the state, and each year the top-rated issue was "reducing gun violence in schools." Voters were asked to rate items on a 1–10 scale, with 10 being very important and 1 being not at all important. During those 3 years, the average rating for the issue of reducing gun violence ranged from 8.47 to 8.63 and exceeded all other issues we asked about (e.g., making college more affordable and reducing teacher shortages, which were generally the second and third highest ranked issues).

Once again this year, "reducing gun violence in schools" was the top-rated issue for California's voters. However, the mean rating jumped to 9.06, an increase of more than half a point since last year and the largest mean increase for any of the items in that scale. More than two thirds of all respondents rated the issue a 10 on the scale in 2022 compared to just over half in 2021 (see Figure 1). Among the full set of priorities voters were asked to rank, "reducing gun violence in schools" was the most important issue for virtually all groups—all race/ethnicity categories, political affiliations, education levels, and income levels as well as for both parents and nonparents. Perhaps because of the recent salience of the Uvalde massacre, voters across the spectrum are extremely concerned about reducing gun violence in schools.

Figure 1. Most Important Educational Priorities, 2022 Versus 2021



We also asked several questions directly to gauge parents' and voters' concern about gun violence or gun safety in schools. When asked if "I trust California's public schools to keep children safe from gun violence," more voters disagreed (48 percent) than agreed (43 percent). And when asked, "Would you say you are extremely concerned, very concerned, somewhat concerned, or not too concerned about the threat of gun violence in schools in this country?" 76 percent of respondents said they were extremely (55 percent) concerned or very (21 percent) concerned.

Parents also reported a very high level of concern about the threat of gun violence *in their children's own schools*; 44 percent of parents reported feeling extremely concerned, and an additional 27 percent reported feeling very concerned. While parents indicated slightly less concern when asked about their children's schools (70 percent extremely or very concerned) than they did when asked about schools generally (79 percent extremely or very concerned), these reports show that fear of gun violence is hitting very close to home for California's parents. Parents reported similar levels of concern across demographic groups and regions.

Voters Strongly Support "Hardening" Schools

We asked voters about an array of different policy proposals that schools might pursue to address risks of gun violence, and voters strongly supported most of them. Voters expressed the most support for policies that would require more reporting about potential threats as well as a wide range of "school hardening" policies:

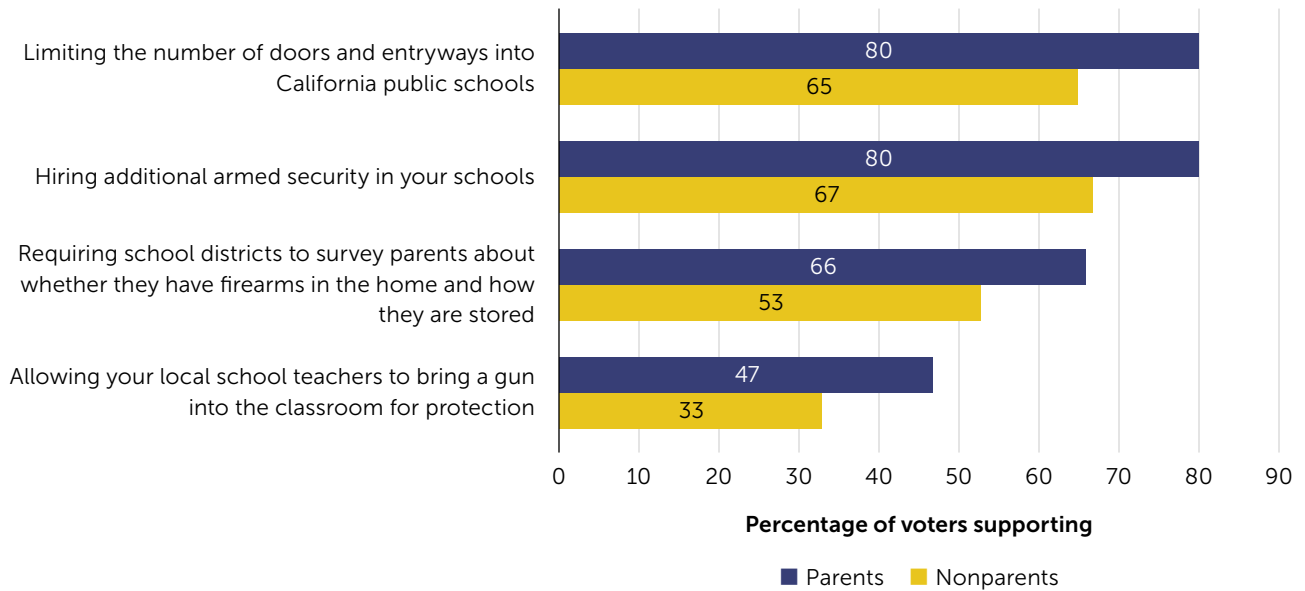
- 93 percent support (68 percent strongly) "requiring school officials to report any 'perceived threat' of a mass shooting event to law enforcement";
- 80 percent support (43 percent strongly) "practicing active shooter drills more often in your schools";
- 77 percent support (42 percent strongly) "installing metal detectors in your schools";
- 70 percent support (37 percent strongly) "hiring additional armed security in your schools"; and
- 69 percent support (38 percent strongly) "limiting the number of doors and entryways into California public schools."

Voters were least enthusiastic about two other policies:

- 56 percent support (30 percent strongly) "requiring school districts to survey parents about whether they have firearms in the home and how they are stored"; and
- just 36 percent support (15 percent strongly) "allowing your local school teachers to bring a gun into the classroom for protection."

For most of these items, parents' support was even greater than the support among voters (see Figure 2 for highlights).

Figure 2. Support for “School Hardening” Policies, Parents Versus Nonparents



Note. “Parents” refer to respondents with children aged 18 or younger living at home.

Overall, these results are consistent with the view that voters and parents support hardening schools, even through measures that could be disruptive or dangerous, such as installing metal detectors and hiring armed security. We asked voters which of two statements was closer to their view: “Increasing police presence and other security measures in schools makes them feel like prisons” or “Increasing police presence and other security measures in schools protects students.” Respondents overwhelmingly chose the latter, with 69 percent reporting that these approaches “protect students” compared to only 23 percent who reported that such actions “make schools feel like prisons.” Even though some scholars have criticized the role of police in schools and their contribution to racial violence (Federico, 2020), voters strongly believe police in schools are worth those risks.

Voters Even More Strongly Support Nonschool Gun Control Policies

We also asked voters about their support for California gun control policies. We had asked some of the same questions in prior years, and the results this year showed both overwhelming support for all gun control policies as well as some sharp upticks over prior years:¹

¹ Where cross-year comparisons are not made, we did not ask the question in prior years.

- 91 percent of voters (63 percent strongly) support “expanding public mental health options in your area.” It was 89 percent support in 2020 and 87 percent in 2019.
- 80 percent of voters (55 percent strongly) support “placing new restrictions and fines on companies that advertise firearms or ammunition to minors.”
- 77 percent of voters (59 percent strongly) support “banning and confiscating assault rifles or other high-capacity firearms.” It was 68 percent support in 2019.
- 71 percent of voters (51 percent strongly) support “banning the sale of firearms on state property, including county fairgrounds.”
- 68 percent of voters (45 percent strongly) support “similar to the anti-abortion law in Texas, allow private citizens to sue anyone who manufactures, transports, or sells illegal guns or gun components in California.”

We explicitly asked voters about the role of school versus California policies in addressing gun violence, and voters were fairly split. On that question, 52 percent of voters agreed that “schools shouldn’t be expected to solve America’s gun problem—the fixes to school-based gun violence require changes to gun and other social policies, not additional school protections” versus 43 percent who agreed that “guns are a part of American society and tradition and are not going to go away, so we need to enhance school protections to make them a harder target for shooters.” It seems that voters would like broader antigun policies but are willing to accept school gun violence policies as a “necessary evil” given the need to protect children amid the broader systemic issues at play.

Support for Gun Control Policies Is High Across Groups, Lowest Among Republicans

Given the very high overall levels of support for gun control policies, it is no surprise that support is also high among different demographic groups. For the school policies, there was majority support for all but “requiring school districts to survey parents about whether they have firearms in the home and how they are stored” and “allowing your local school teachers to bring a gun into the classroom for protection” among all political, racial/ethnic, and other demographic groups. On those two items, there were some sharper divides, with just 35 percent of Republicans supporting surveying parents (versus 71 percent of Democrats), for instance, and just 25 percent of Democrats supporting arming teachers (versus 55 percent of Republicans). Black (24 percent) and Asian American (21 percent) parents were also particularly unlikely to support arming teachers.

For the California gun control policies, the largest differences were predictably along partisan lines. This makes sense, as even though gun violence in schools was the top-rated issue among Republican voters, far fewer (55 percent) rated it at an importance level of 10 compared to Democrats (78 percent). Even so, substantial proportions of Republican voters support fairly restrictive gun control policies. For instance, 61 percent of Republicans (versus 93 percent of Democrats) support restrictions on gun advertising, 50 percent of Republicans (versus 92 percent

of Democrats) support banning and confiscating assault rifles, 47 percent of Republicans (versus 85 percent of Democrats) support banning the sale of guns on state property, and 48 percent of Republicans (versus 81 percent of Democrats) support allowing private citizens to sue gun manufacturers, transporters, or sellers.

Taken together, these results show that voters are very concerned about gun violence in schools and that they support even aggressive gun control measures—there is a clear mandate for the legislature to do whatever it takes to address gun violence issues.

Politicization of and Support for Public Education

During the past school year, public education has entered the center of well-publicized political debate and discord. Almost daily, the media has written about attacks on public schools, disruptive school board meetings, and waning public confidence in our schools and school systems (not to mention controversies over what is taught in school—a topic we return to in the next section). A *Washington Post* headline in January read: “Public education is facing a crisis of epic proportions: How politics and the pandemic put schools in the line of fire” (Meckler, 2022). This and other reports reflect—and may even fuel—widespread concerns about the state of public schooling and our democratic institutions. In fact, recent national polls have shown that voters are losing trust in education. The most recent Gallup poll indicates that national public confidence in K–12 schools is “approaching a record low,” particularly among Republicans (Mahnken, 2022).

California has not escaped these politics or the deluge of crisis news surrounding public education. In fall 2021, conflict in school board meetings statewide prompted the California School Boards Association to send a letter to Governor Gavin Newsom stating: “Board members have been accosted, verbally abused, physically assaulted, and subjected to death threats against themselves and their family members” (California School Boards Association, n.d.). Other reports indicate that superintendents also found themselves threatened and facing discontent and pressures (Marsh et al., 2022).

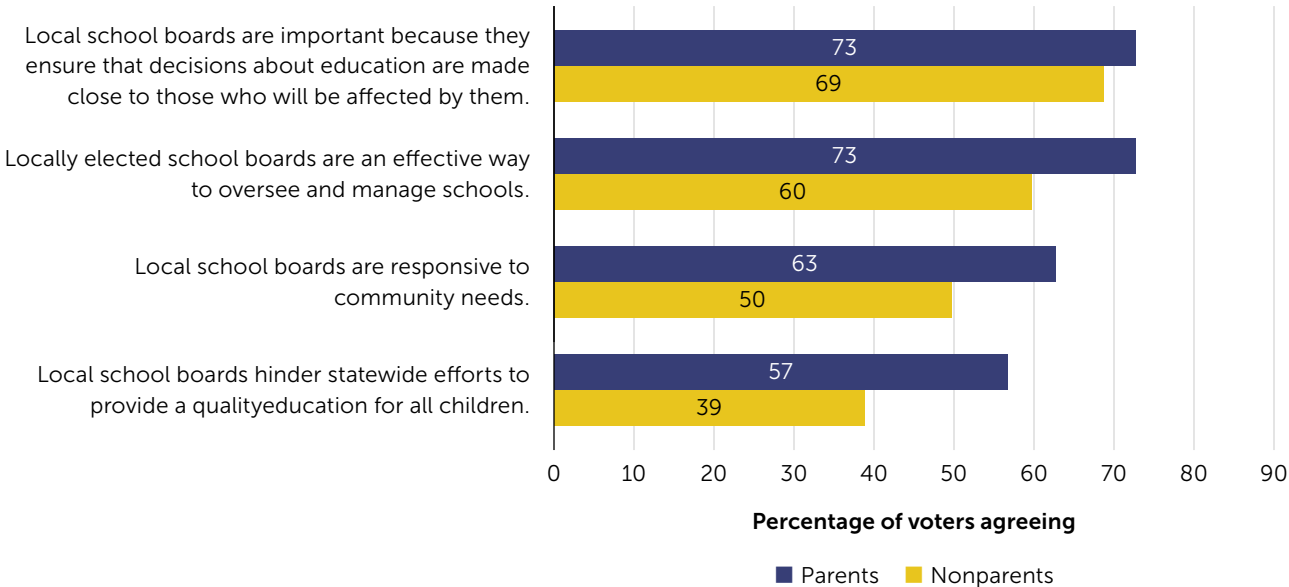
How have California voters and parents weathered this turbulent period in public education, and what are their current views of public schools, school boards, and leaders? Our poll sought to address this important question. Voters’ answers are particularly important for addressing threats highlighted elsewhere in this report, including declining enrollment and inadequate school funding, as public support matters greatly for advancing solutions.

Support for Public Education and Its Democratic Institutions Is Fairly Strong but Reflects Some Racial/Ethnic and Partisan Differences

The majority of voters (85 percent) agreed that “we cannot have an effective democracy without good public education” (see Figure 5 later in this section). This strong majority holds true for voters of all political parties, for both parents and nonparents, and across all racial/ethnic categories.

Most voters, but especially parents, also expressed support for locally elected school boards, the core democratic institution governing public education (see Figure 3). They believed that school boards ensure that decisions about education are made close to those affected by them, that boards are an effective way to oversee and manage schools, and that they are responsive to community needs. More than half of parents and just under half of nonparents, however, agreed that “local school boards hinder statewide efforts to provide a quality education for all children,” indicating some ambivalence about boards and their function. However, it is also important to note that when asked to report how much they know “about the roles and responsibilities of local school boards,” 53 percent of voters reported knowing only a little or nothing; parents reported knowing more, with 38 percent reporting knowing only a little or nothing compared to 60 percent who said they know a lot or some.

Figure 3. Percentage Agreeing With Statements About School Boards, Parents Versus Nonparents



Note. “Parents” refer to respondents with children aged 18 or younger living at home.

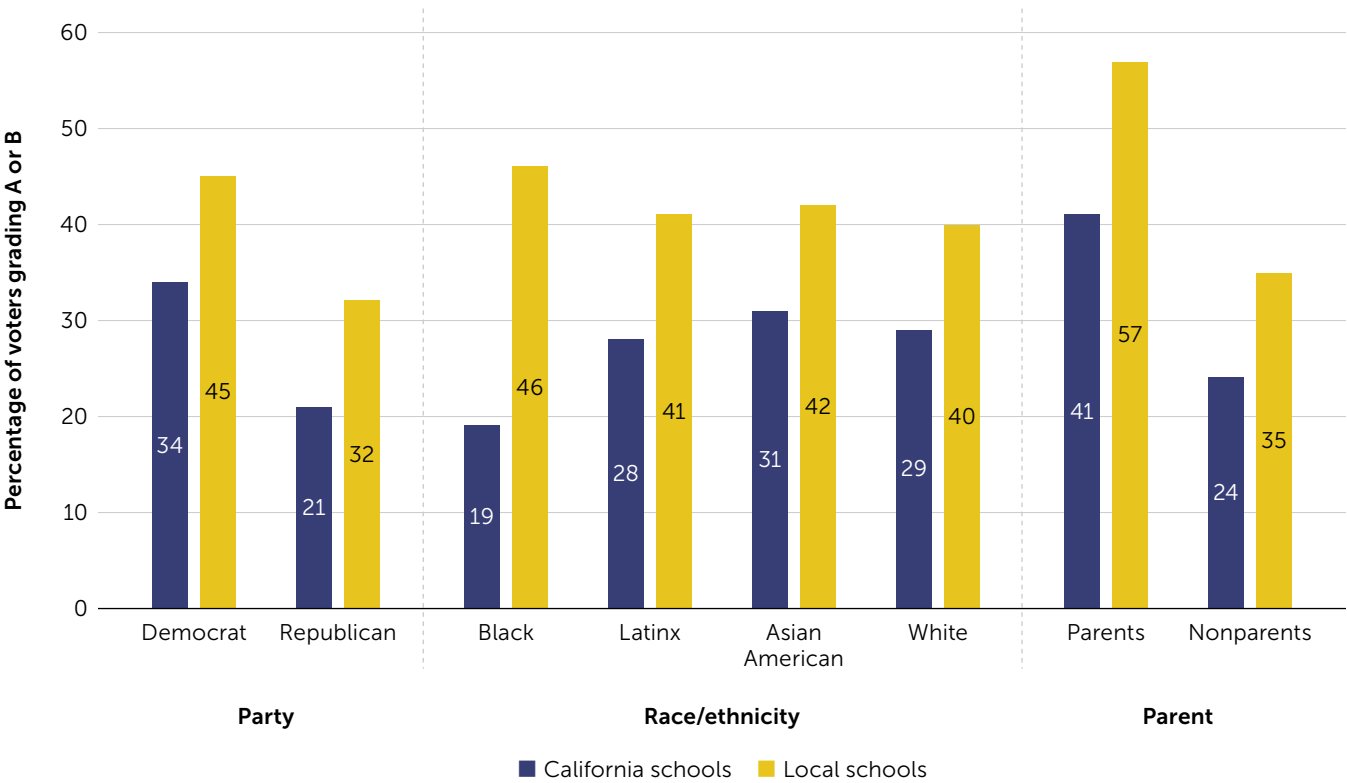
When asked directly, large proportions of voters reported a positive view of the role of school boards, with some variation across groups. Forty-six percent of voters and 63 percent of parents reported that school boards have a very or somewhat positive impact on the quality of education in K–12 schools in California. Here we see support falling along partisan lines, with 55 percent of Democrats versus 33 percent of Republicans reporting positive impact (72 percent of Democrat parents versus 53 percent of Republican parents). We also see substantial differences among parents in different groups, particularly by income; only 49 percent of parents in the lowest income group (less than \$35,000 per year) reported a positive view of school boards, compared to 73 percent of parents with annual incomes of more than \$150,000.²

Voter opinion varied even more with regard to the quality of public schools. Asked to rate their public schools using A–F grades, 28 percent of voters gave A or B grades to California public schools statewide, and 40 percent gave A or B grades to their local public schools. These numbers were considerably higher for parents: 41 percent of parents gave A or B grades to California public schools statewide, and 57 percent gave A or B grades to their local public schools (Figure 4).

However, analysis by political party reveals substantial partisan differences in these perceptions of school quality. Democrats showed substantially more support for California public schools, with 34 percent of Democrats giving A or B grades to California public schools statewide and 45 percent giving A or B grades to their local public schools. In contrast, only 21 percent of Republicans gave A or B grades to California public schools, and 32 percent gave A or B grades to their local public schools. In fact, 44 percent of Republican voters gave California public schools a D or F grade, compared to only 16 percent of Democrats and 18 percent of parents.

² Because of the smaller sample size for parents, we are not able to report on the income category >\$500,000 and instead report >\$150,000.

Figure 4. Percentage of Voters Grading Schools A or B by Group



Note. The party categories “Independent/no party preference” and “other party member” and the race/ethnicity category “other/mixed” are excluded here for ease of reporting. “Parent” refers to respondents with children aged 18 or younger living at home.

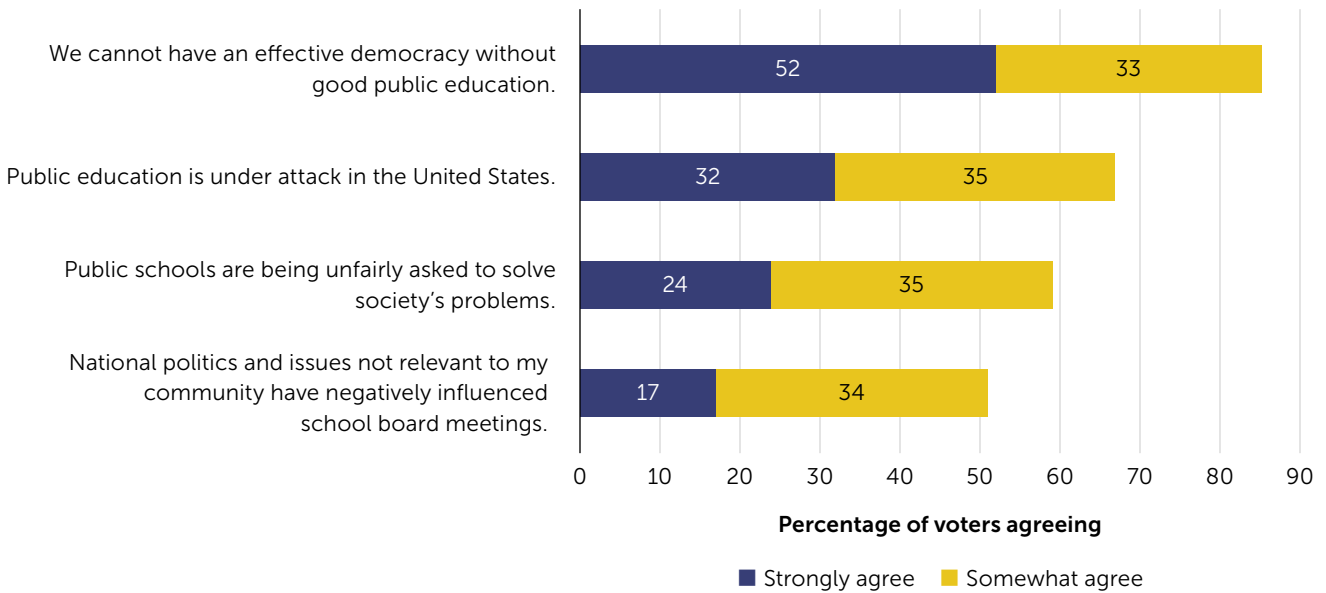
The Majority of Voters See External Threats to and Unfair Demands Placed on Local Public Education

Despite some fairly positive views about the importance of public education and the value of our educational institutions, many voters identified concerns about the state of public education in California. As Figure 5 illustrates, 68 percent³ of voters reported that “public education is under attack in the United States,” a sentiment shared equally among voters with and without children. Democratic voters (76 percent), however, were considerably more likely to express this view than Republican voters (60 percent).

³ Due to rounding, this number is slightly different than what is displayed in the figure.

Slightly fewer but still a majority of voters (51 percent), and even more so parents (60 percent), agreed that “national politics and issues not relevant to my community have negatively influenced school board meetings.” Here we see considerable differences among voters. Notably, men, Black voters, and higher income voters were substantially more likely to agree with this statement than their counterparts. Finally, 59 percent of voters agreed that “schools are unfairly asked to solve society’s problems.” Although there were some differences among voters, they were not as pronounced with as the previous item.

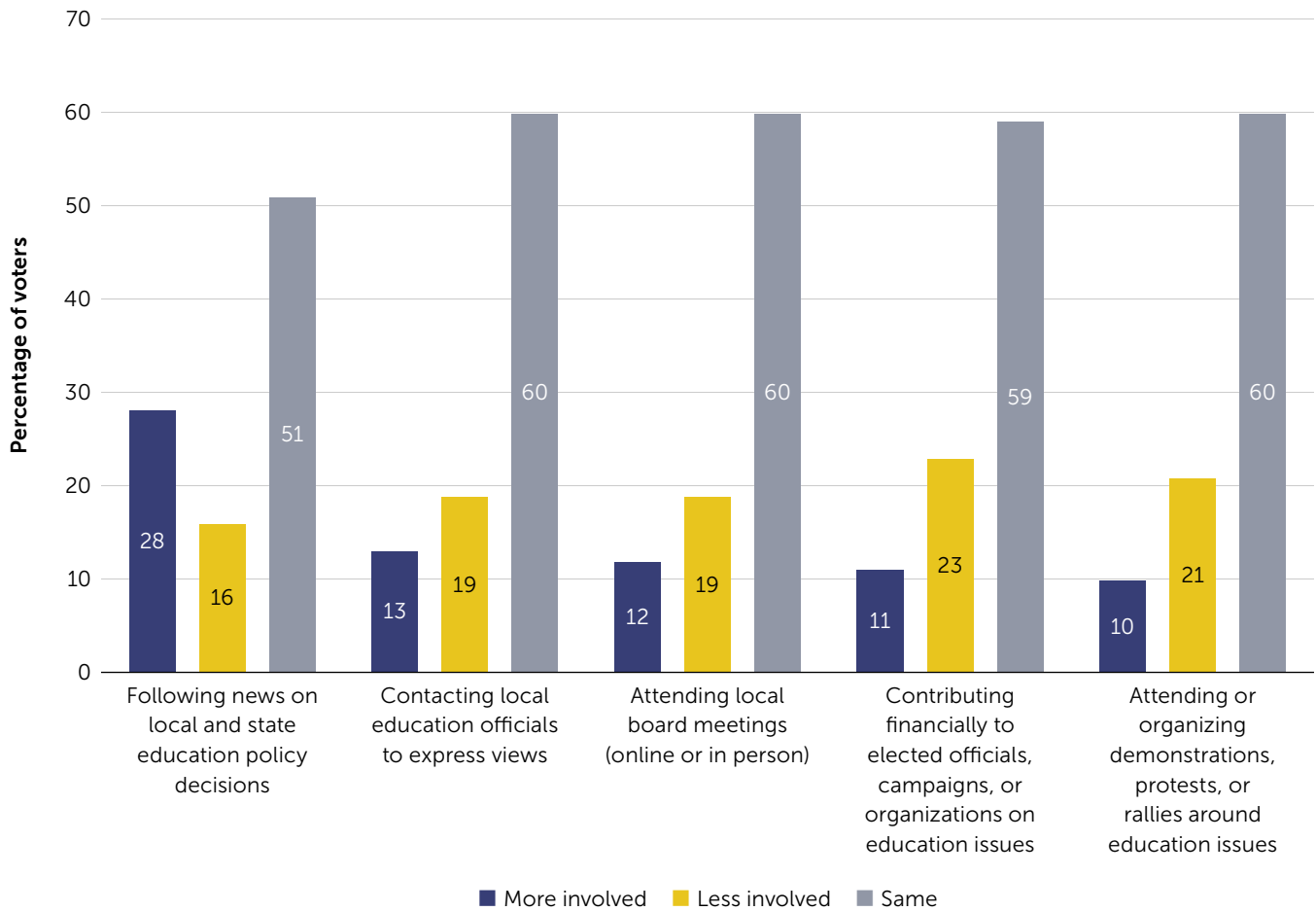
Figure 5. Voter Agreement With Statements About Public Education



The Majority of Voters Generally Report the Same Level of Involvement in Education This Year Compared to Last and Express an Interest in Being Involved in Educational Decisions

One indicator of public investment in public education is individual and group participation in public activities surrounding education and its governance. To understand how voters were interacting with their local public schools and whether we see signs of disengagement, we asked whether voters were more involved, less involved, or involved about the same amount of time in a set of activities as they were prior to the time last year. As Figure 6 illustrates, the majority of voters reported devoting the same level of time to public activities this year compared to last year. These reports are comparable to those reported on last year’s poll.

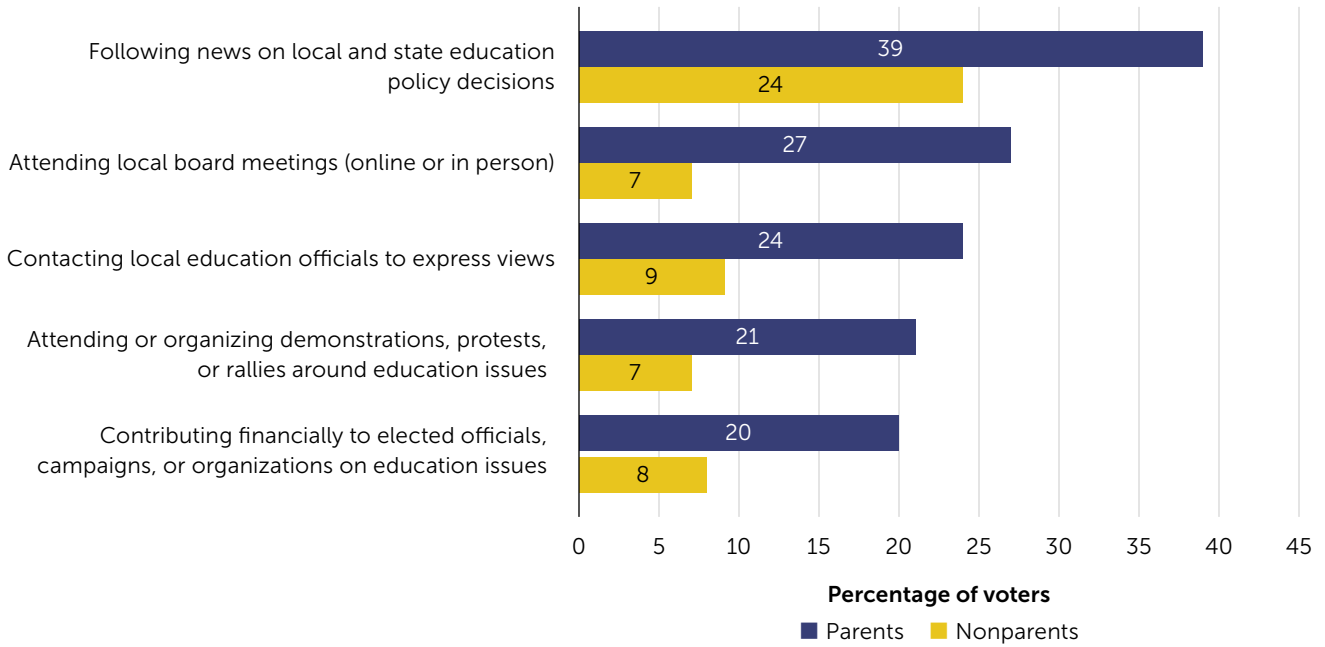
Figure 6. Voter Reports of Involvement in Public Activities This Year Compared to Last



Note. Respondents were also given an option of “don’t know.”

Not surprisingly, reported involvement among voters with children differed greatly from that among those without children. Although about half of parents reported the same level of involvement in these activities this year compared to last (with the exception of “following the news,” where only 37% reported the same level), parents were far more likely to report devoting *more* time to activities this year relative to nonparents, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Percentage of Voters Reporting More Involvement in Public Activities This Year Compared to Last



Note. "Parent" refers to respondents with children aged 18 or younger living at home.

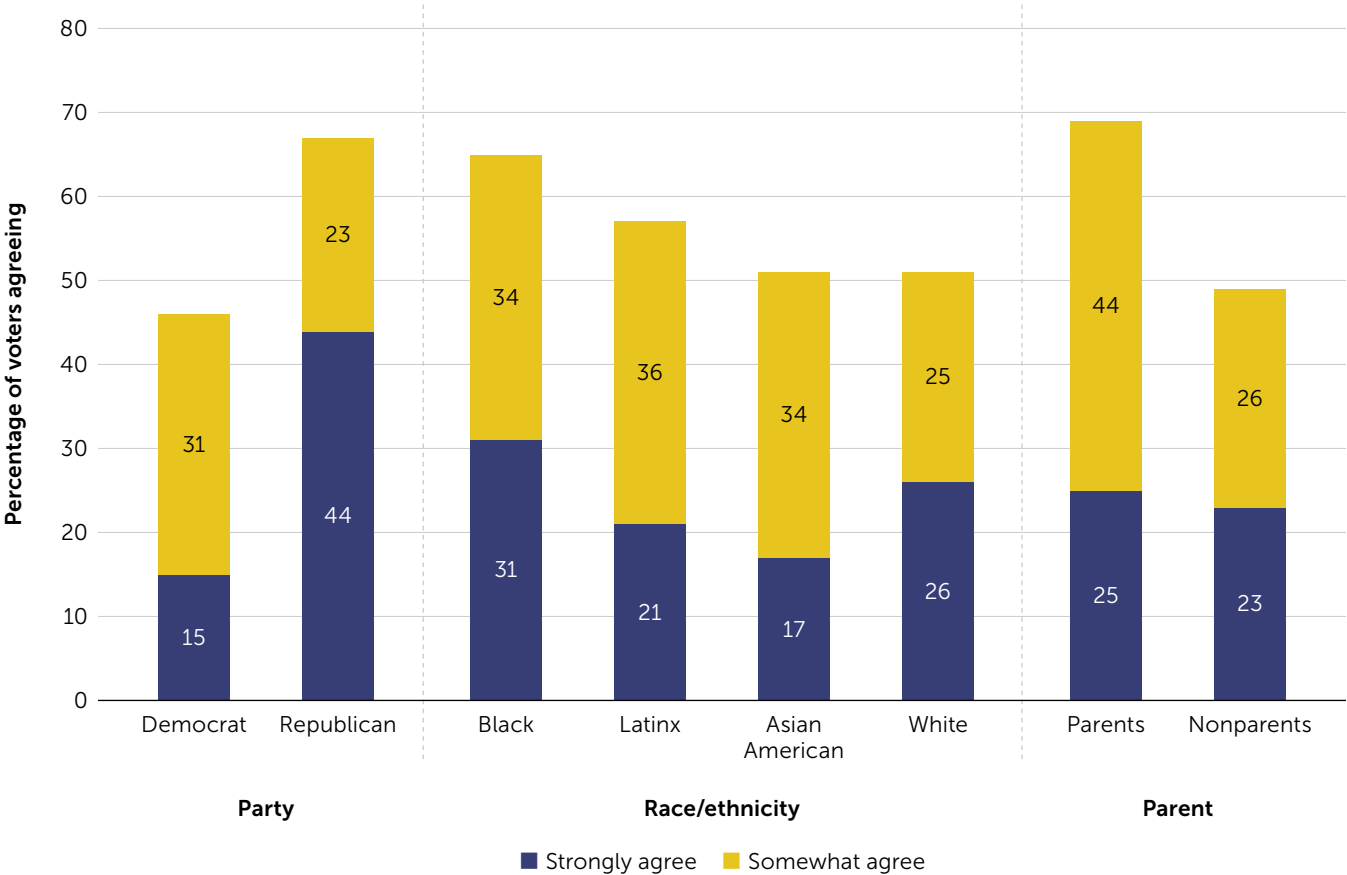
One final positive indicator of engagement in public education was the strong interest expressed by voters in being involved in their public schools. More than half of all voters (56 percent)—Democrats (56 percent) and Republicans (54 percent) alike—and more than three quarters of parents (82 percent) said they “would like to be involved in decisions about education in their community.” These figures represent slight increases from last year, when 52 percent of voters and 76 percent of parents expressed this interest. Although we cannot discern whether this interest is motivated by satisfaction or dissatisfaction or if it comes from a desire to oppose or support current decisions and priorities of education leaders, the interest in participating alone is a sign that voters have not given up on the system.

Nevertheless, true and healthy democratic engagement in education requires more than expressed interest. First, how individuals behave while engaging in decision-making matters greatly for the health of our democracy. Reports of uncivil interactions in board meetings (Marsh et al., 2022) and the aforementioned concerns from a majority of voters that outside issues have negatively affected board meetings suggest there is still much room for improvement in the nature of local engagement. Second, while the majority of voters reported the same level of involvement this year compared to last, these polling data do not indicate how much time or effort this amounts to in practice. In prior polls and research, California voters indicated a desire to be involved, but there was very limited actual participation, particularly when it came to invitations to participate in planning around educational goals and resource allocation (Koppich et al., 2018).

Many Voters—Especially Parents and Republicans—Want Public Schools to Reflect Their Preferences Better

One final trend stood out regarding public opinion on education: Many voters wanted schools to reflect their preferences better. Fifty-three percent of voters agreed that “the public education system should do a better job reflecting parents’ preferences,” with parents, Republicans, and Black voters reporting even more agreement (69 percent, 67 percent, and 65 percent, respectively; see Figure 8). These results, combined with others reported in the next section about the desire for greater parental control over content of instruction, are consistent with national polling data and media reports that such views (e.g., support for “parental rights”) are becoming more common, even among Democratic voters (Mahnken, 2022). The desire for greater parental control and the overall politicization of public education relate to questions around curriculum and teaching, a topic we turn to next.

Figure 8. Percentage of Voters Agreeing That the “Public Education System Should Do a Better Job Reflecting Parents’ Preferences” by Group



Note. The party categories “Independent/no party preference” and “other party member” and the race/ethnicity category “other/mixed” are excluded here for ease of reporting. “Parent” refers to respondents with children aged 18 or younger living at home.

Controversy Over What Is Taught in Schools

Issues related to the public school curriculum have been in the news of late. In California, there have been skirmishes over the content of the new mathematics curriculum framework (California Department of Education, 2022b), with proponents arguing that it will improve equitable outcomes and reduce long-standing disparities by instilling a love of mathematics in students (Boaler, 2022). Opponents question the research base behind the framework and counter that it will shunt students into courses that don't prepare them for success in college (Chayes & King Liu, 2022).

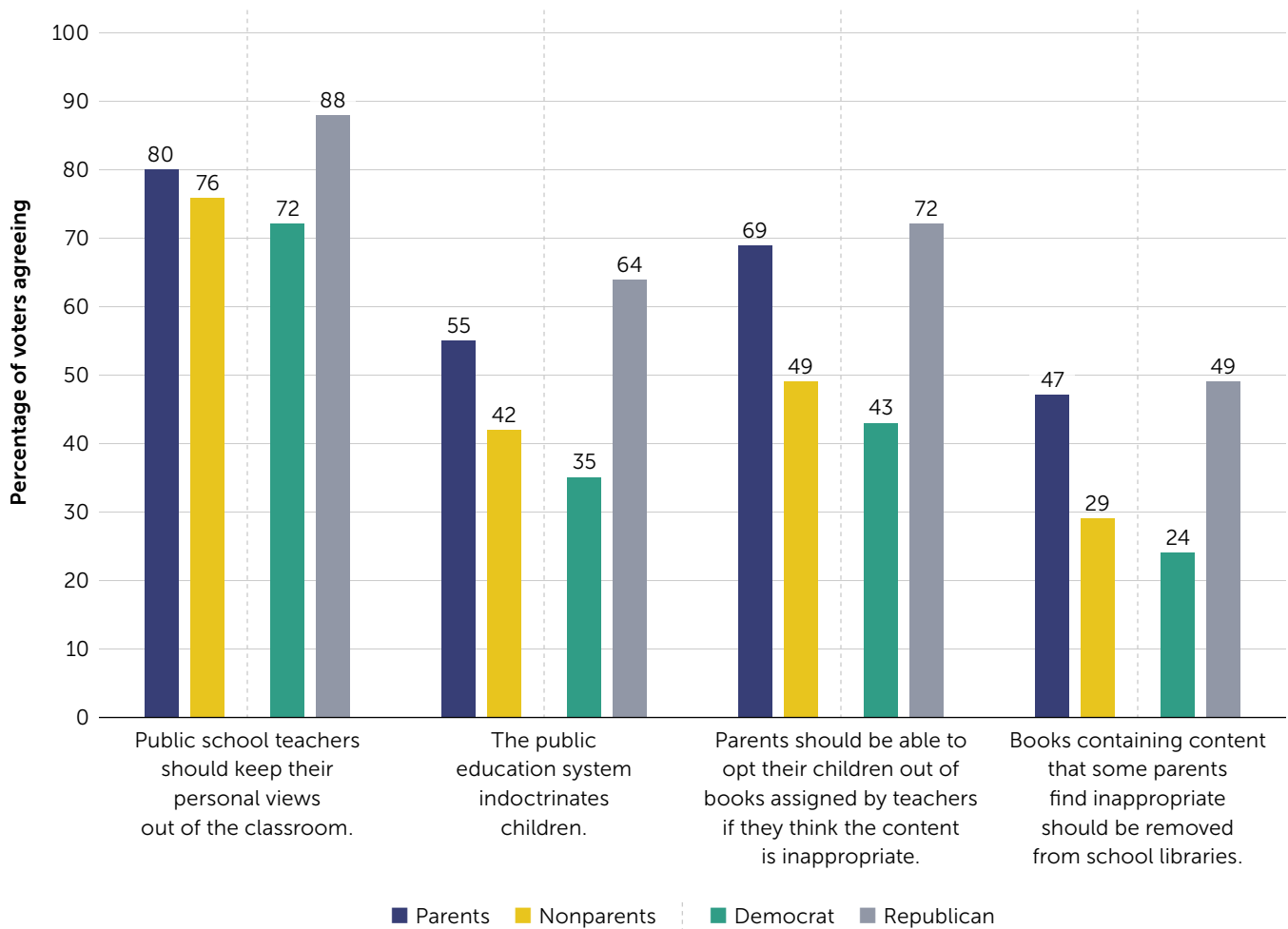
There have also been high-profile curriculum-related issues nationally, especially around topics related to parent control. Debates over who controls educational decisions were thought to play a role in Governor Glenn Youngkin's surprising victory in Virginia (Natanson, 2021). Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has pushed a range of "anti-woke" curriculum policies (DeSantis, 2022), including a highly publicized curriculum approval process that saw dozens of textbooks not approved during a state mathematics textbook adoption (Sawchuk, 2022).

Given this context, we asked voters and parents several questions about the roles of parents and teachers in controlling curriculum-related decisions. We also asked specific questions about teaching about race, racism, and ethnic studies to gauge how California's voters and parents fit into this larger national context.

Voters and Parents Have Concerns About Teachers' Personal Views in the Classroom

We asked voters and parents whether "public school teachers should keep their personal views out of the classroom," and both groups overwhelmingly agreed (see Figure 9). Fully 77 percent of voters agreed with this statement, 44 percent strongly. The responses were similar among parents, with 80 percent expressing agreement (44 percent strongly). Although large demographic or partisan differences on this question might have been expected, we instead found universal support. The highest level of agreement was by Republicans, 88 percent of whom expressed agreement, and even 72 percent of Democrats agreed. There was more than 65 percent agreement with this item for all racial/ethnic groups, all ages, and all education levels.

Figure 9. Voter Agreement With Statements About Curriculum Control



Note. The party categories “Independent/no party preference” and “other party member” are excluded here for ease of reporting. “Parent” refers to respondents with children aged 18 or younger living at home.

Interestingly, there was more ambivalent support among voters and parents for the statement: “The public education system indoctrinates children.” Just 45 percent of voters agreed with this item, and 55 percent of parents. Here, there was a sharp partisan split, with 64 percent of Republicans agreeing versus 35 percent of Democrats. Given these results, it seems that most voters on average simply want educators to be politically “neutral,” while fewer voters (but still a plurality, and a bare majority for parents) have substantive concerns about indoctrination in schools.

Parents and Voters Support Parental Control of the Curriculum but Are Skeptical of Book Censorship

We asked two additional questions in line with recent policy proposals in other states that give parents more authority over their children’s curriculum (see Figure 9). First, we asked if “parents should be able to opt their children out of books assigned by teachers if they think the content is inappropriate.” On this question, we found some support, but not overwhelmingly. Overall, 54 percent of voters agreed with this item, but there were sharp partisan splits, with Republicans 72 percent in agreement and Democrats 43 percent in agreement. Parents were especially likely to endorse this item, with 69 percent agreeing versus 49 percent of nonparents. Majorities of all racial/ethnic groups also agreed with this item.

Voters were more tepid in their agreement with the item: “Books containing content that some parents find inappropriate should be removed from school libraries.” On this item, just 33 percent of voters agreed while 59 percent disagreed. Even among Republicans there was not majority support for this item (49 percent agreed versus 24 percent of Democrats). Parents were more supportive but not a majority (47 percent agreement versus 29 percent for nonparents). Again, all racial groups had net disagreement for this item, although Black voters were the most favorable (45 percent agreed, compared to only 31 percent, 33 percent, and 38 percent for White, Asian American, and Latinx voters, respectively). Combining evidence from the two items seems to show that voters think parents should have more say over the curriculum and be able to exclude their children from material they find inappropriate, but they also think that removing books from libraries may be a step too far. It is notable that parents were much more likely to endorse these items, implying parents really do feel curriculum-control issues more acutely.

Voters Support Increased Emphasis on Inequality and Racism in the Curriculum and California’s Ethnic Studies Requirements

Parents and voters also have views about specific curricular topics and their coverage. We asked whether they “believe schools should spend much more time, somewhat more time, somewhat less time, or much less time teaching grade-appropriate lessons about the causes and consequences of racism and inequality.” Here, voters largely agreed, with 64 percent saying schools should spend more time on this topic (28 percent much more) versus 28 percent who said less time (16 percent much less). These results were nearly identical when we asked the question in 2021 (64 percent more time, 26 percent less time), indicating not much movement on this issue. There were very large partisan splits on this item, with 83 percent of Democrats wanting more time on this topic versus just 30 percent of Republicans (41 percent of whom want the topic taught much less time and an additional 18 percent somewhat less time). Black voters (81 percent more time), Latinx voters (71 percent), Asian American voters (68 percent), and parents (74 percent) were all more likely than average to report a desire for more time on this topic.

Last, we asked voters about their support for California’s recent ethnic studies requirement. Sixty-five percent of respondents reported supporting the policy, and 27 percent reported opposing it. Republicans were far less supportive than Democrats (33 percent versus 83 percent), White voters less supportive (at 60 percent support) than all other racial/ethnic groups (especially Black voters, at 80 percent support), and parents more supportive than nonparents (74 percent versus 62 percent). We also asked the same question in 2020 when the law was proposed, and the results were almost identical (then, 63 percent supported and 27 percent opposed the proposal).⁴

Student Learning and Well-Being

Learning loss and declines in student wellness have been top concerns of policymakers at the federal and state level during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is why billions of public funds have been directed to public schools to address these issues. Indeed, the pandemic has affected all students; however, its impacts have been disproportionately detrimental for students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, and other marginalized children and youth.

Researchers found significantly slower rates of student learning in California during the 2020–21 school year when compared to typical years, in both English language arts (ELA) and math. Most students were found to be 5–25 percent behind where they would be predicted to be in a typical year. However, these averages mask significant differences among student groups: Students from low-income families learned substantially less than did students from higher income families, whose rates of learning actually increased during the pandemic in some cases. English learner (EL) students learned substantially less than non-EL students (Pier et al., 2021). Recent national research from the end of the 2021–22 school year shows some signs of learning rebounding, particularly among elementary school students, but student achievement remains lower overall than in a typical year. The data also show that Black, Latinx, and Native American students remain disproportionately affected, have more ground to make up, and are thus expected to recover at a slower rate without significant investment (Kuhfeld & Lewis, 2022).

The pandemic and the resulting disruptions to school and social lives also had impacts on the emotional and mental health of students. Nearly half of parents of teens surveyed nationwide in 2021 reported a new or worsening mental health condition for their child since the start of the pandemic, with one in three parents with teen girls and one in five parents with teen boys reporting new or worsening anxiety in their child (C. S. Mott Children’s Hospital, 2021). The devastating effects of the pandemic have been especially pronounced in communities of color. For example, the loss of a parent or caregiver is a known risk factor for poor mental health, and researchers found that risk of loss of a parent or caregiver was 1.1–4.5 times higher among racially and ethnically minoritized youth than among White children (Hillis et al., 2021).

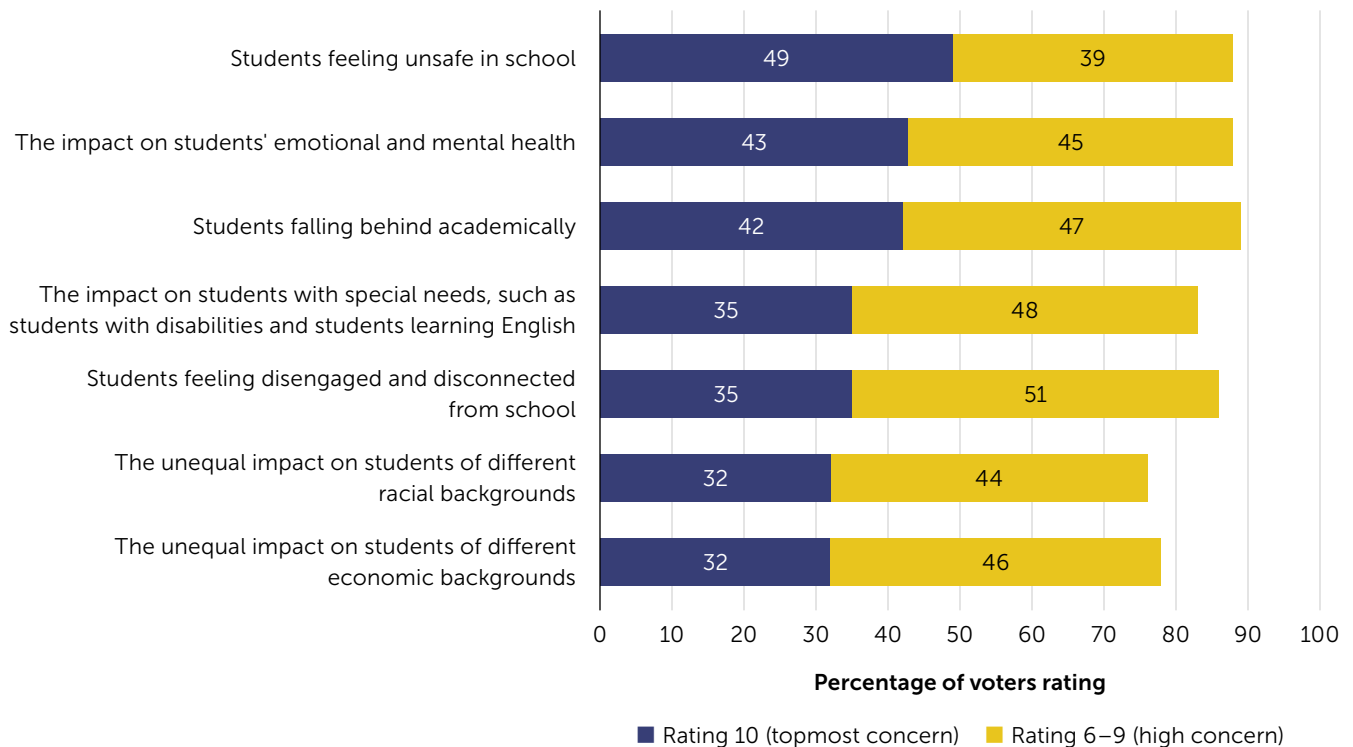
⁴ In both years, we asked this item as a split to ascertain whether the framing of the question changed voters’ responses. The responses were almost identical, so we report on only one split here.

We presented voters with a list of concerns some people have had regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath on students to understand better the extent to which they are concerned about the learning and well-being of their own children and of California’s students more broadly. Understanding voter perspectives here will give policymakers information about the importance of addressing negative consequences of the pandemic on students’ wellness and academic progress.

Voters Are Concerned About the Effect of the Pandemic on California’s Children

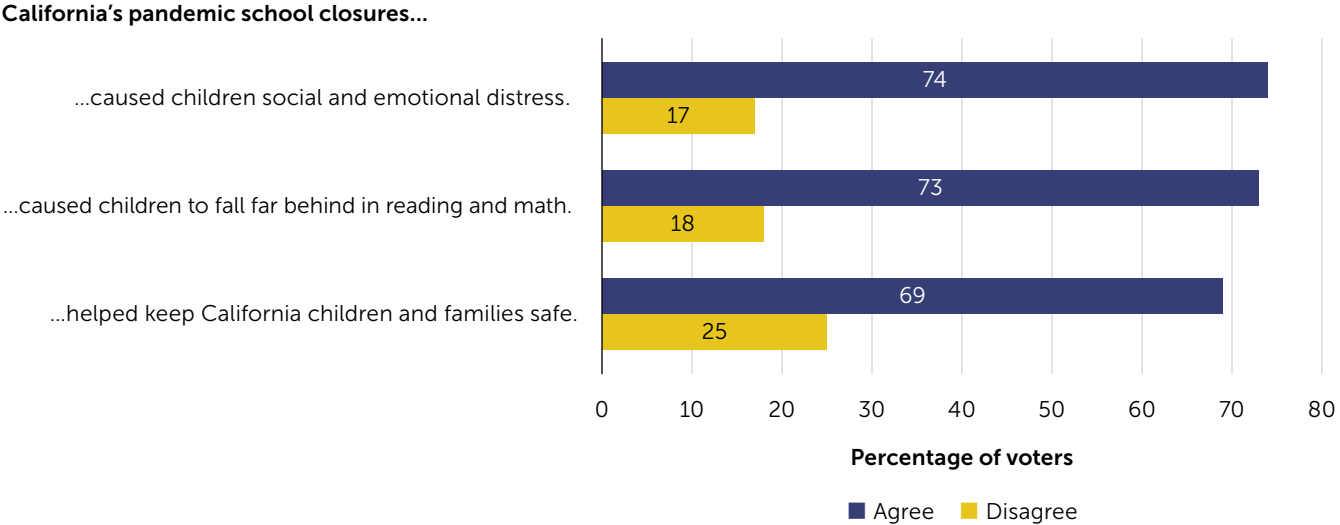
We asked voters to rank on a scale of 1–10 how serious a concern they consider the various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath on students (10 being a very serious concern and 1 not a concern at all). As shown in Figure 10, of greatest concern to voters is “students feeling unsafe in school,” which 49 percent of voters ranked as a very serious concern and an additional 39 percent rated 6–9. The pandemic’s “impact on student’s emotional and mental health” was a very serious concern for 43 percent of voters. And 42 percent of voters were very seriously concerned about students falling behind academically because of the pandemic. Although they rated it at a lower level, many California voters were also concerned about the unequal impact of the pandemic on students of different economic and racial/ethnic backgrounds (78 percent and 76 percent respectively ranking a 6–10 on importance). Parents’ concerns about the effect of the pandemic aligned with general voter rankings of concerns.

Figure 10. Voters’ Concerns About the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Students



We also found that most voters and parents agreed that California’s school closures “caused social and emotional distress” (74 percent overall and 81 percent of parents) and “caused children to fall far behind in reading and math” (73 percent overall and 75 percent of parents), as shown in Figure 11. However, most voters also agreed that pandemic school closures helped keep students and families safe (69 percent overall and 74 percent of parents). There were notable differences by party affiliation: Republicans more frequently agreed that California’s pandemic school closures caused children to fall far behind in reading and math than Democrats (79 percent versus 71 percent), and Republicans were far less likely than Democrats to believe that the pandemic school closures helped keep California’s children and families safe (44 percent versus 84 percent).

Figure 11. Agreement With Statements About California’s COVID-19 Pandemic School Closures



Note. Respondents could also report “don’t know.”

Parents Generally Think Their Own Children Are Doing Well, but Low-Income Children of Color Have Been Most Negatively Affected

Overall, the degree of alarm in policy and among the public for student wellness and academic performance does not appear to match parents' assessments of the status of their own children. However, we do see variation in the degree of parental concern when looking at different subgroups of families.

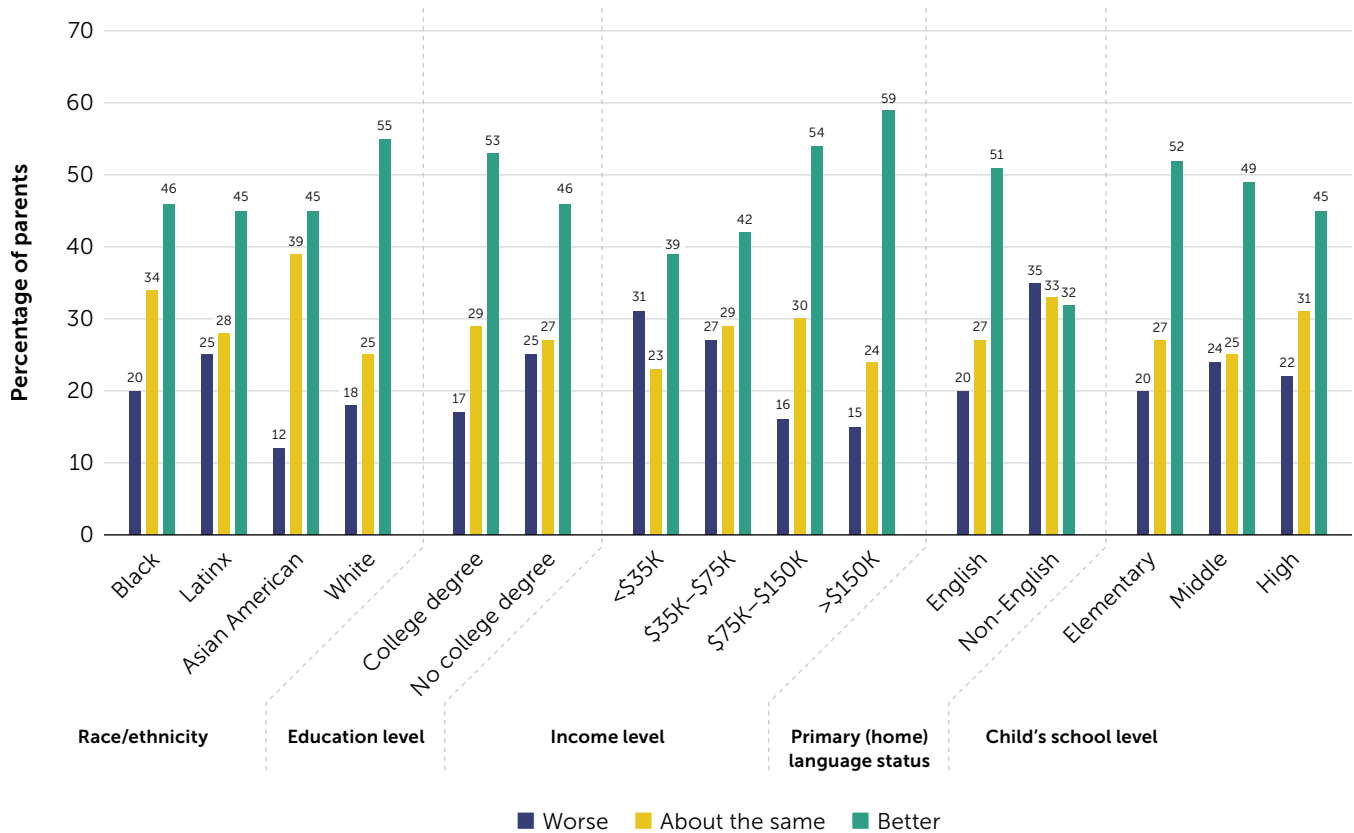
We asked parents: "Would you say your child's behavioral health and emotional well-being is much better, somewhat better, somewhat worse, or much worse now than it was before the pandemic, or is it about the same?"⁵ Fifty percent said that their child's well-being is *better* now than it was before the pandemic, with 21 percent reporting well-being that is much better and 29 percent reporting somewhat better.

As shown in Figure 12, in nearly all subgroups we see that parents are generally positive about their children's wellness, with greater proportions reporting better behavioral health and emotional well-being than worse. One exception, however, was families that primarily speak a language other than English at home. In this group, parents were more likely to say that their children's behavioral health and emotional well-being were worse compared to before the pandemic than better (35 percent versus 32 percent).

We also see quite a bit of variation between groups. For example, White parents more frequently reported that their children were doing better now than before the pandemic compared to Black, Latinx, or Asian American parents. Parents with college degrees were more likely to say their children's behavioral health and emotional well-being were better since the pandemic than those with a high school diploma or less. Among different income groups, the lowest income parents most frequently reported worse behavioral health and emotional well-being in their children while those with higher household incomes were more likely to report improvements. Finally, we see differences by student age, with parents of elementary school students reporting that their children's behavioral health and emotional well-being were better more frequently than parents of middle or high school students.

⁵ To get more accurate responses from parents, we asked them to report on only one child if they had multiple school-aged children. For more information, see the full 2022 instrument at <https://edpolicyinca.org/initiatives/pace-usc-rossier-annual-voter-poll/poll-archive>.

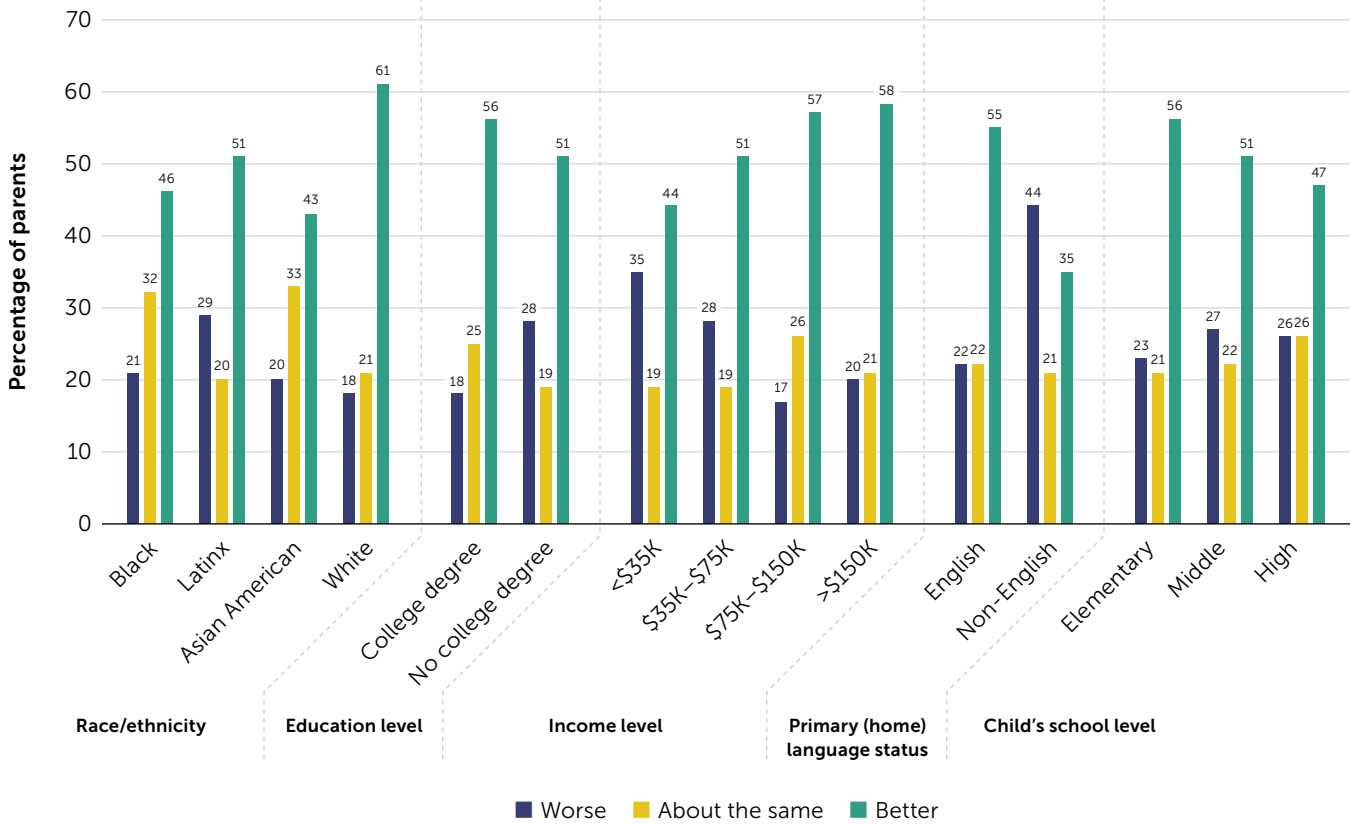
Figure 12. Parents’ Assessment of Their Children’s Behavioral Health and Emotional Well-Being Now Compared to Before the COVID-19 Pandemic by Group



Note. The race/ethnicity category “other/mixed” is excluded here for ease of reporting. “Parents” refer to respondents with children aged 18 or younger living at home. Because of the smaller sample size for parents, we are not able to report on the income category >\$500,000 and instead report >\$150,000.

We saw similar patterns among parents’ reports of their children’s academic performance; 54 percent reported that their child’s academic performance is *better* now than it was before the pandemic, 23 percent reported that it is worse, and 22 percent about the same. However, as shown in Figure 13, the frequency of reports of improved academic performance varies by parent subgroup. As with well-being, White, college-educated, higher income, and English-speaking parents were much more likely to report the improved academic performance of their children compared to their counterparts. For example, 35 percent of parents in the lowest income group (making less than \$35,000 per year) reported that their children’s academic performance is worse, compared to only 20 percent in the highest income category. Similarly, 44 percent of non-English speaking parents reported that their children’s academic learning is worse, compared to only 22 percent of English speakers.

Figure 13. Parents’ Assessment of Their Children’s Academic Performance Compared to Their Performance Prior to the Pandemic by Group



Note. The race/ethnicity category “other/mixed” is excluded here for ease of reporting. “Parents” refer to respondents with children aged 18 or younger living at home. Because of the smaller sample size for parents, we are not able to report on the income category >\$500,000 and instead report >\$150,000.

Taken together, these results show that in general, parents believe their own children have fared well throughout the pandemic. These beliefs run contrary to growing evidence that students are falling behind, such as recent research showing that student achievement at the end of the 2021–22 school year remains lower than in a typical year. Teacher reports also support the idea that students’ learning and well-being have been negatively affected by the pandemic (Kuhfeld & Lewis, 2022). In 2021, nearly two thirds of teachers (64 percent) believed that “a substantial number of my students are in danger of suffering long-term academic damage” to at least some extent, and about two thirds of teachers (69 percent) reported that “a substantial number of my students are in danger of suffering long-term mental health issues” (Inverness Institute, 2021).

However, our findings do support the idea that the pandemic has had differential effects on students. For both learning and well-being, students of the highest income, most educated parents appear to be doing much better than lower income students, students of color, and children of non-English speaking parents. These findings continue to highlight the inequitable impact of the pandemic and its lasting effects on traditionally marginalized communities.

Declining Enrollment

The pandemic and economic conditions in California have contributed to significant changes in enrollment in schools across the state. During the pandemic, enrollment dropped by a record 2.6 percent during 2020–21 and an additional almost 2 percent during 2021–22, resulting in losing 270,000 students statewide (Fensterwald & Willis, 2022). And this problem is projected to get worse: Demographic projections show that, statewide, schools could lose up to 9 percent of enrolled students with some counties potentially experiencing as much as 20 or 30 percent decline in enrollment by 2030 (EdSource, 2022a).

Changes in enrollment patterns and shifts in the number of school-aged children in a school or district can happen for several reasons: Cost-of-living increases can lead to an exodus of families from heavily affected areas; parents may opt to place their children in magnet, charter, or private schools outside traditional public school boundaries; or parents may choose to homeschool given the continued surges in COVID-19 outbreaks or for many other reasons.

Understanding exactly what contributed to the sharp decline in enrollment or within-state changes during the pandemic is complex. Our California poll gives us an opportunity to better understand *why* California parents moved their children to different schools during the past 2 years as well as to project whether more declines in enrollment are likely given parents' reports about actions they plan to take in the future.

More than One Quarter of Parents Reported Having Switched Their Child's School Since the Pandemic Started With Significant Differences by Income

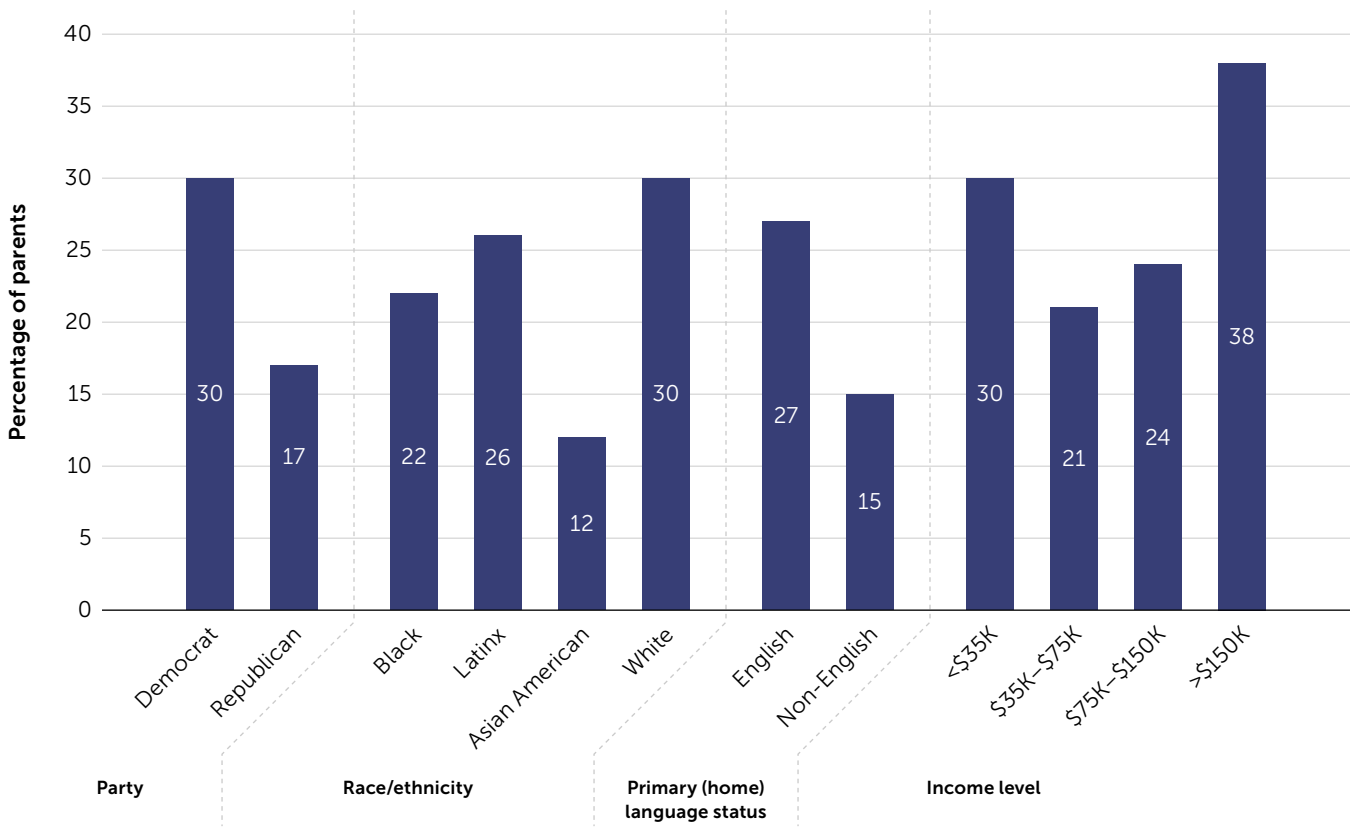
In our poll, we asked parents of school-aged children to report whether they had switched their child's school since the pandemic started;⁶ 27 percent of parents surveyed reported that they had switched their child's school with significant differences by group (see Figure 14).⁷

⁶ To get more accurate responses from parents, we asked them to report on only one child if they had multiple school-aged children. For more information, see the full 2022 instrument at <https://edpolicyinca.org/initiatives/pace-usc-rossier-annual-voter-poll/poll-archive>.

⁷ It should be noted that this is almost certainly an underestimate of total school moves because we did not survey people who have since left the state.

Of the parents who made changes, more Democrats (30 percent) reported changing schools than Republicans (17 percent), fewer families with English as a second language (15 percent) reported changing than those with English as a primary language (27 percent), White parents reported switching the most (30 percent), and Asian American parents reported switching the least (12 percent). The results differed notably at the highest income levels, with 38 percent of families in households earning more than \$150,000 per year saying they changed their child’s school during the past 2 years. Higher proportions of parents in Los Angeles County and the Sacramento/North Counties region (33 percent and 31 percent, respectively) reported switching schools compared to San Diego and the Central Valley (19 percent and 22 percent, respectively).

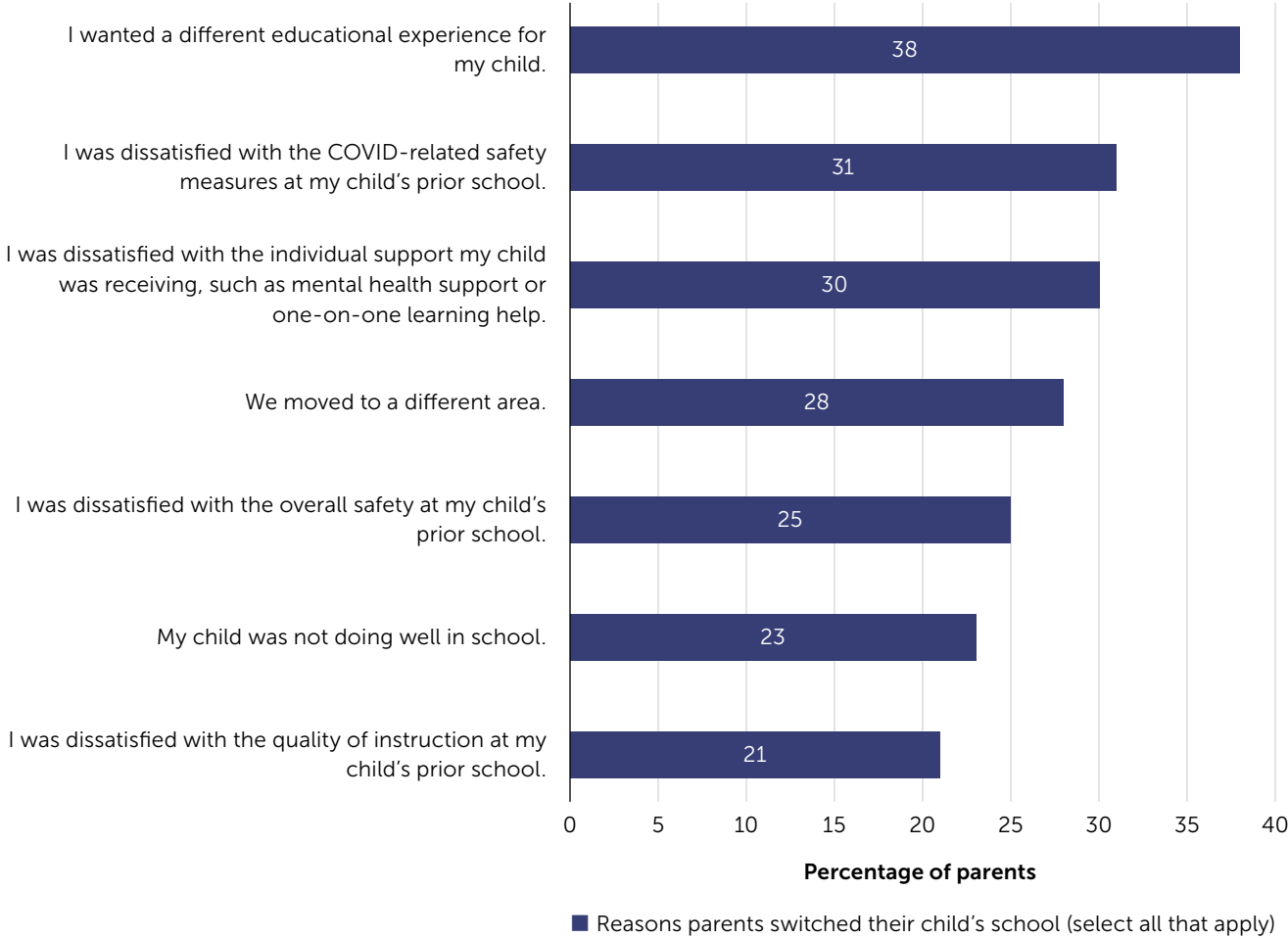
Figure 14. Percentage of Parents Who Changed Their Children’s Schools During the Pandemic by Group



Note. “Parents” refer to respondents with children aged 18 or younger living at home. The race/ethnicity category “other/mixed” is excluded here for ease of reporting. Because of the smaller sample size for parents, we are not able to report on the income category >\$500,000 and instead report >\$150,000.

The main reason parents cited for switching schools is wanting a different educational experience for their children (38 percent, as shown in Figure 15). This was followed by dissatisfaction with the COVID-19-related safety measures at their child’s school (31 percent). Higher income families and those in Los Angeles County, which were among the highest percentage of families reporting a school change, cited dissatisfaction with COVID-19-related measures as their top reason for switching schools, at 47 percent and 39 percent, respectively. This finding aligns with other pandemic-related questions in the poll: A majority of parents (59 percent) and near-majority of voters (46 percent) believed that California public schools were kept closed for in-person learning for too long during the pandemic. Fifty-seven percent of parents also believed that the safety of teachers was prioritized over the needs of children—at the same time that many agreed that school closures were necessary to keep the community safe (74 percent).

Figure 15. Reported Reasons Why Parents Moved Schools

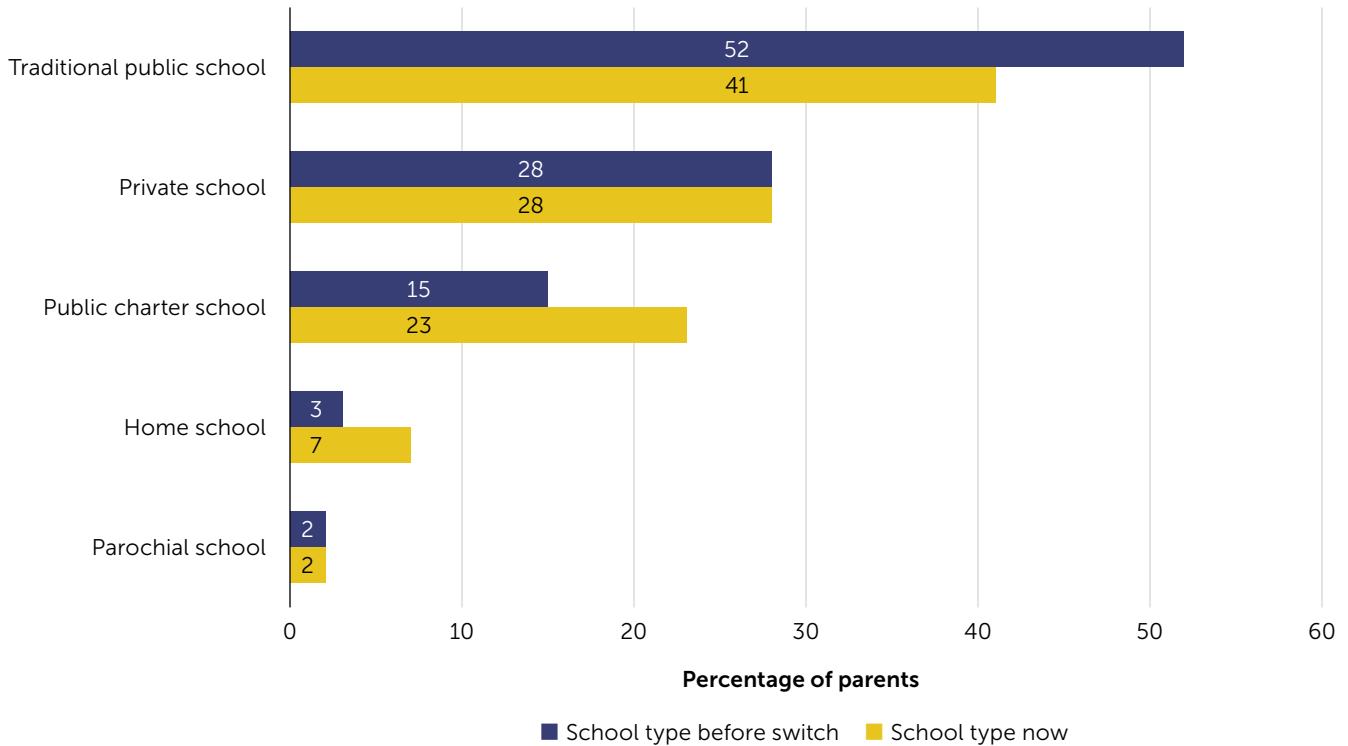


Note. Respondents here include parents of K–12 students who have switched schools during the pandemic.

Many Parents Reported Moving Their Children to Charter Schools

Parents who had reported making a school change were asked to share the types of schools their children attended before and after the switch. Most parents reported their children being previously enrolled in a traditional public school (52 percent), followed by private schools (28 percent) and public charters (15 percent). Figure 16 shows parents’ reports of the types of school their children attended before and after the switch. Parents reported switching out of traditional public schools most, with 52 percent of their children in traditional public schools prior to the switch and only 41 percent in such schools after the switch (a drop of 11 percentage points). The biggest increase was for public charter schools, as 23 percent of parents reported their children in such schools after the switch, compared to only 15 percent before the switch. More parents from the Greater Los Angeles Area reported switching to charter schools (25 percentage point increase compared to 8 percentage points across all parents), followed by the Central Valley (9 percentage points) and the Bay Area (8 percentage points). The poll results also show an increase of 4 percentage points in parents reporting they switched their child to a homeschool setting. More Asian American parents (30 percent) and those who primarily speak English in the home (26 percent) switched their children to private schools.

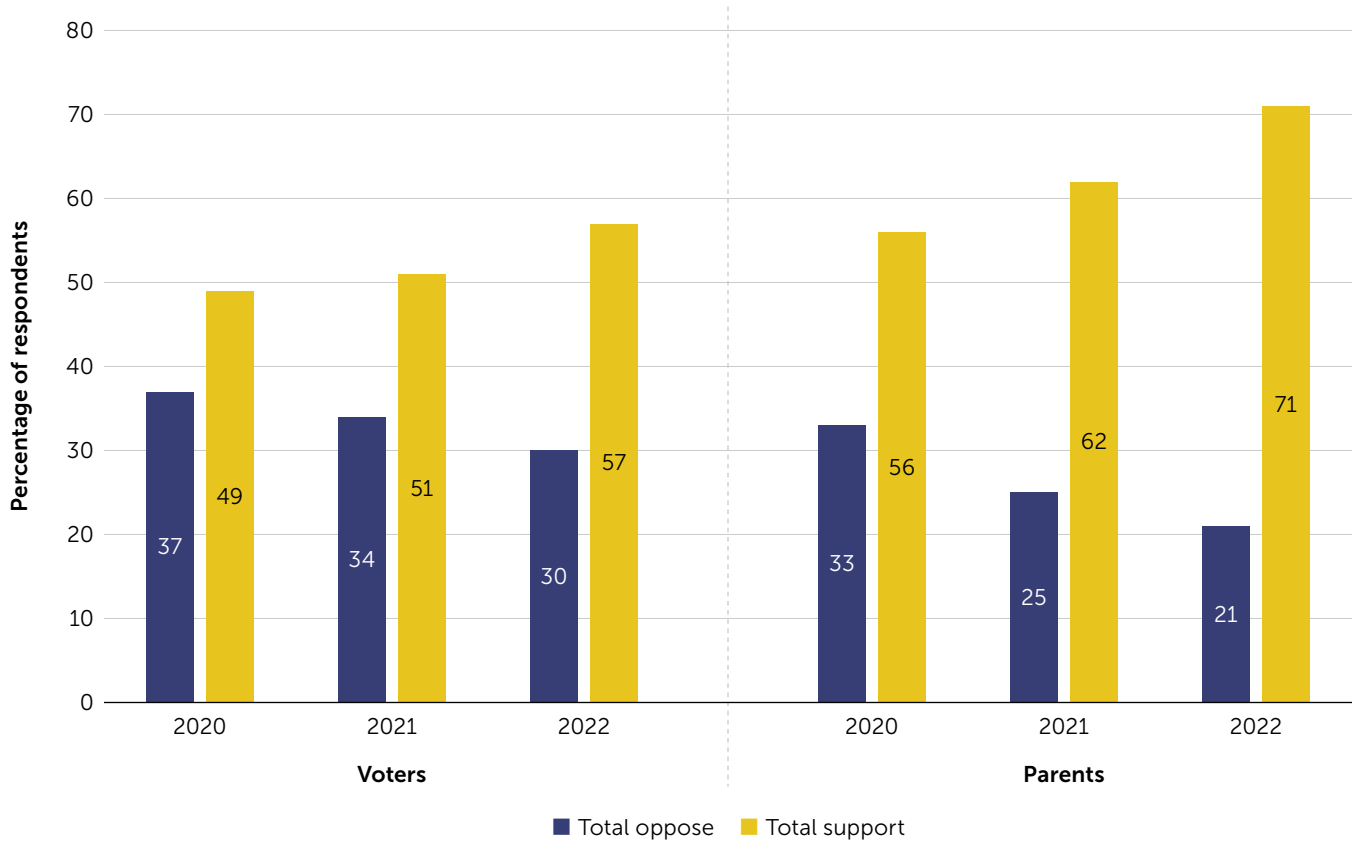
Figure 16. Reporting on School Type Before and After School Switch



Note. Respondents here only include parents of K–12 students who have switched schools.

Although it is difficult to confirm this trend accurately without an analysis of statewide enrollment data, this finding is consistent with reports from our poll of growth in public support for charter schools. As shown in Figure 17, support for public charter schools increased by 8 percentage points among voters from 2020 to 2022. This trend of increased support was much greater among parents, with an increase of 15 percentage points (from 56 percent to 71 percent).

Figure 17. Support for Charter Schools Among Voters and Parents, 2020–2022

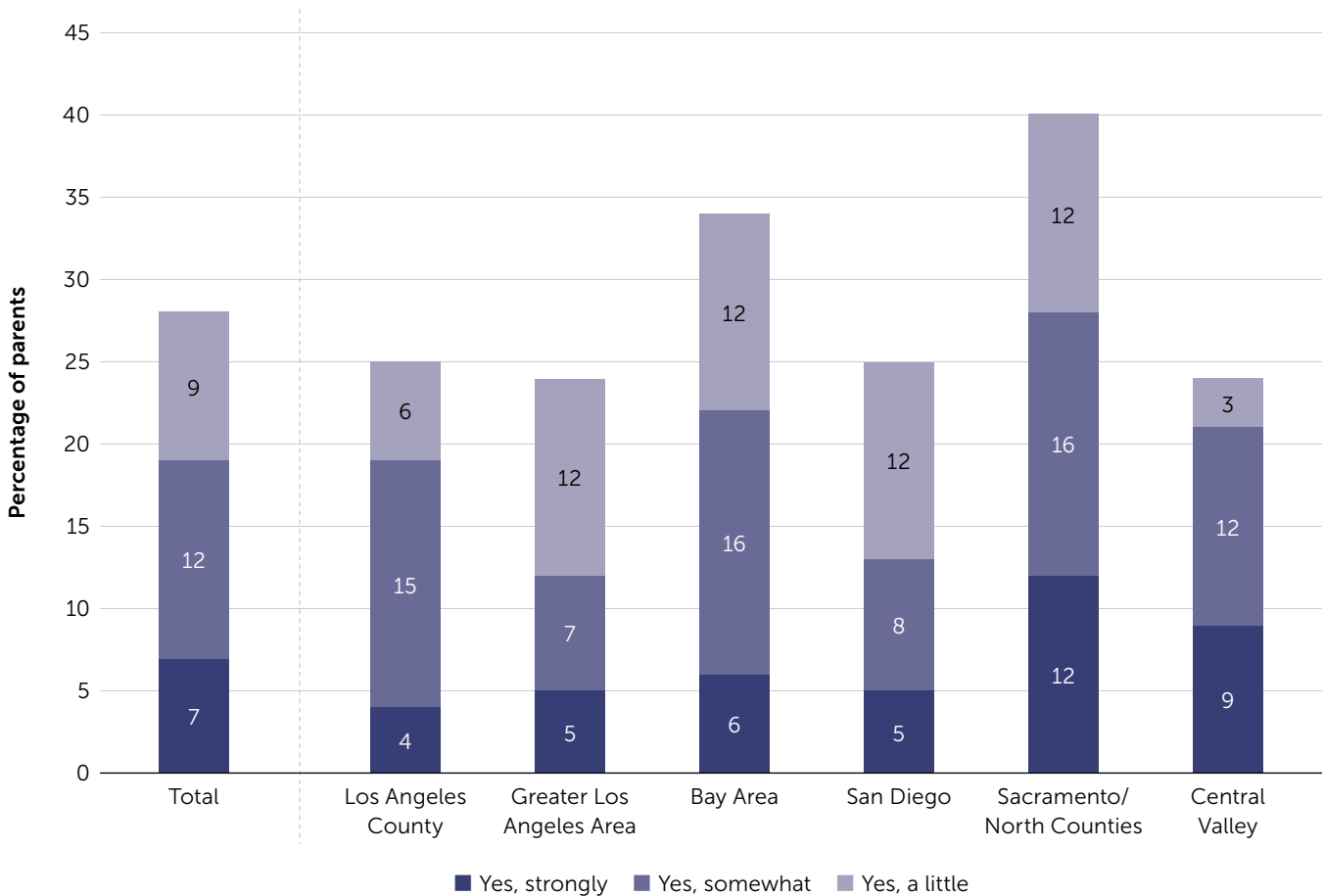


Note. "Parents" refer to respondents with children aged 18 or younger living at home.

An Additional Quarter of Parents Are Considering Switching Their Children’s Schools Soon and Their Reasons Appear to Be Changing

Although a significant number of parents reported having already made a change in schools for their children, a comparable number of additional parents (28 percent) are considering doing the same in the near future. There were no major differences across race/ethnicity or household income, except that fewer Asian American parents (14 percent) reported a potential switch. As shown in Figure 18, there are notable differences by region: The Bay Area and Sacramento/North Counties regions have higher percentages of parents reporting they plan to switch schools soon.

Figure 18. Percentage of Parents Considering Switching Schools (Who Have Not Yet Switched) by Region



Note. Respondents here only include parents of K–12 students who have not yet switched schools. For a list of counties in each region, see the Appendix.

It appears that parents' reasons for moving schools may be changing this year as compared to the last 2 years of the pandemic. While the top response for both why they switched and why they are considering a switch is "wanting a different educational experience for my child" (38 percent and 40 percent, respectively), other top-reported reasons differ. Now the number-two reason why parents are considering a move is "dissatisfaction with the quality of instruction at my child's school"—up to 31 percent, whereas for prior switches only 21 percent of parents reported this as a reason. For prior moves, the number-two reason was dissatisfaction with COVID-19-related safety measures (31 percent), but now only 17 percent report this as a reason for possible future moves.

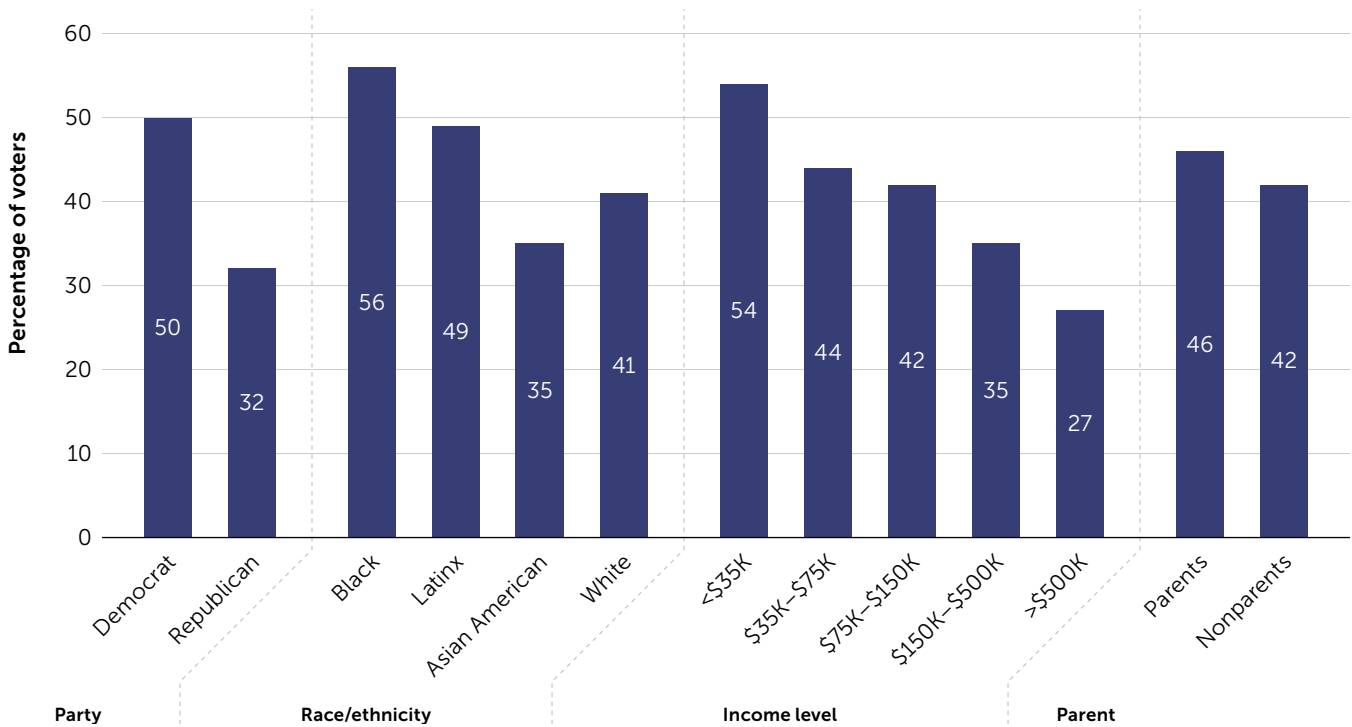
Teacher Shortages

California lawmakers have been explicitly addressing the ongoing issue of an acute teacher shortage in the state since 2016 (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2022). Reported to have worsened following the Great Recession in 2008 (Learning Policy Institute, n.d.), the consistent decrease in the teaching workforce is now experiencing a sharper decline because of COVID-19 and increased pressures on teachers and their profession. Although efforts have been made to address the numbers of teachers entering the California workforce, it is unclear whether these efforts are sufficient to offset the increased retirements and other teacher departures taking place since the start of the pandemic (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2022). We asked voters and parents a number of questions to understand how important the teacher-shortage issue is to them and their perspectives on the state of the teaching profession.

The Teacher Shortage Is a Near-Top Education Priority for Voters

Forty-three percent of voters rated the teacher shortage at the top of their education concerns, which is a significant increase from last year when only 35 percent of voters rated it as a 10 (see Figure 1). As shown in Figure 19, there are substantial differences in how voters in different groups prioritize teacher shortages. More Democrats (50 percent) rated this issue of importance versus Republicans (32 percent), and Black and Latinx voters also rated this as a top priority (56 percent and 49 percent, respectively) more than White and Asian American voters did (41 percent and 35 percent, respectively). Voters in households earning less than \$35,000 were the most likely to report this as a top priority (54 percent), versus voters in the top income bracket (only 27 percent). This pattern reflects decades of research on the teacher workforce, which generally shows that low-income communities and schools serving students of color tend to be most affected by shortages of qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018).

Figure 19. Percentage of Voters Rating the Teacher Shortage as a Very Important Issue by Group



Note. The party categories “Independent/no party preference” and “other party member” and the race/ethnicity category “other/mixed” are excluded here for ease of reporting. “Parents” refer to respondents with children aged 18 or younger living at home.

Voters Generally Support Teachers and Most Would Encourage Entering the Profession

Given the critical teacher shortages that many districts are facing statewide, we wanted to understand the kinds of community support young people might get if they were interested in becoming a teacher. To this end, we asked voters the extent to which they would provide encouragement “if a young person [they] knew was considering becoming a teacher.” A majority of voters (57 percent) would encourage a young person to become a teacher, compared to only 13 percent who would discourage. Among voters who are parents, even more (69 percent) would encourage, versus 9 percent who would discourage. For voters overall, the number who would encourage is down slightly compared to last year (when it was 62 percent), but parents’ reports of encouragement have remained the same.

This positive view generally corresponds with voters' overall perception of teachers. When asked to grade teachers in California and locally, 49 percent of voters gave California teachers a grade of A or B, and 59 percent gave their local teachers these high marks. Voters across all groups consistently ranked their local teachers higher than teachers statewide, although a few groups had more positive ratings of teachers. Parents generally rated teachers much higher than voters overall (58 percent gave grades A and B statewide and 67 percent locally). Democrats reported more favorable perspectives of teachers than Republicans (56 percent and 37 percent, respectively, giving A or B grades to California teachers).

Voter support for teachers includes support for teachers unions. We asked voters and parents about their perspective on teachers unions and their right to strike, an important topic to explore given the historic teacher strikes that took place just before the pandemic in Los Angeles and other areas of the state and those that have been held more recently in Sacramento City and Oakland. Voters and parents continued to support teachers unions' impact on K–12 education in the state throughout the pandemic, with 50 percent of voters overall and 69 percent of parents reporting that “California teachers unions have a positive impact on the quality of education in K–12 schools in California.” Most notable is the significant increase in support for teachers unions' impact among parents between 2018 and 2022 (+11 percentage points). Not only are views remaining favorable for teachers unions in a broad sense, but also voters and parents are supportive of their right to strike (67 percent and 75 percent, respectively).

College Affordability

The average cost of college has been rising for decades, but concerns about college affordability are especially troubling for families in 2022 due to several converging factors. For example, the recent steep escalation in inflation is affecting the tuition costs at many universities, including the cost of college at the University of California, where undergraduate tuition and fees are increasing at a rate of 2 percent plus inflation for the 2022–23 academic year. Many students take out loans to cover the cost of college. Awareness of the burden of student-loan debt has already been growing in media, advocacy, and federal politics, and this year, rising interest rates are further increasing the cost of borrowing. Some families have been steadily saving for years to support their students' college aspirations, but concerns about inflation and interest rates, together with global crises and fears of recession, have taken a toll on the stock market, where many families have been investing for college. Even those who have been saving for college may find paying for it to be more challenging than anticipated. In our poll, we asked questions to gauge how voters prioritize this issue in the broader context and whether concerns about affordability have affected the extent to which parents value a college education for their children.

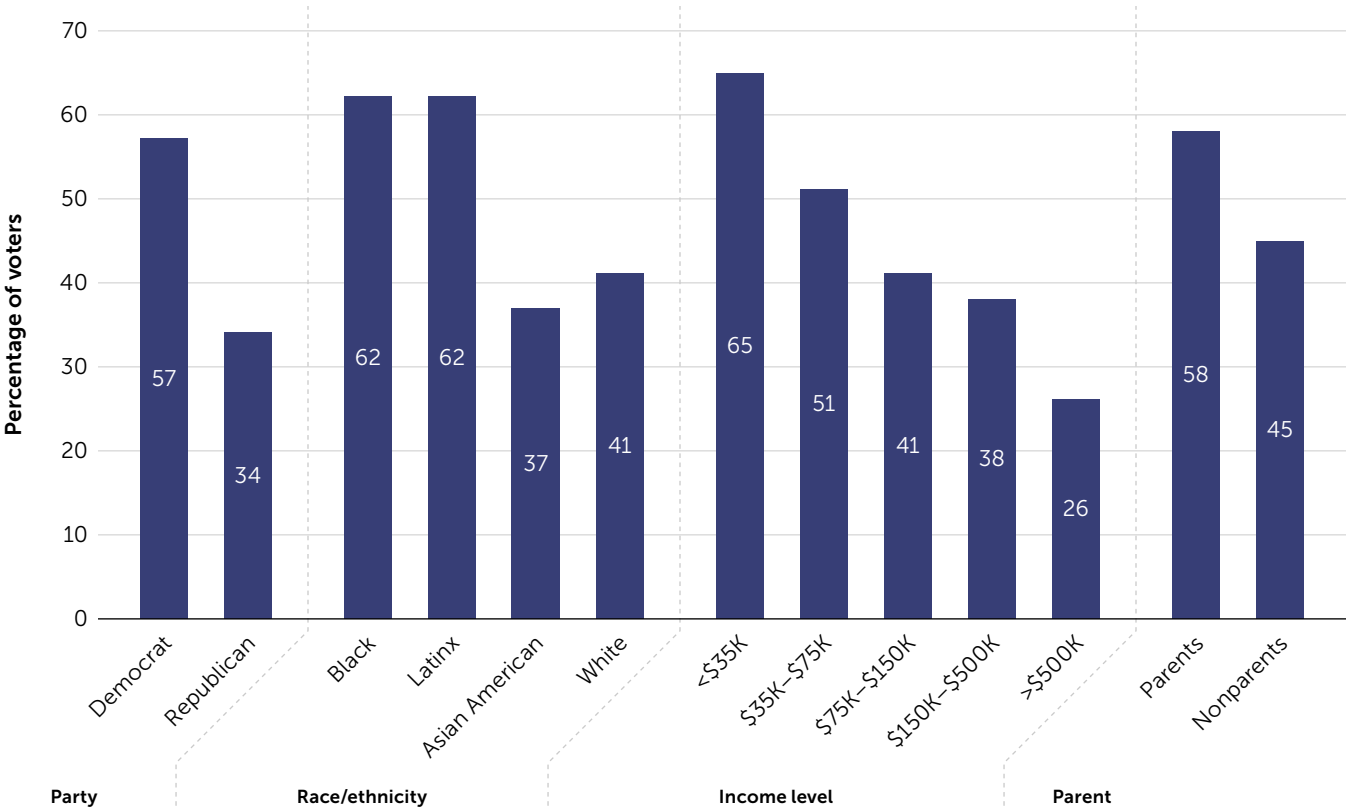
Voters, Especially Parents, Are Concerned About Making College Affordable

California voters ranked college affordability as the second most important educational issue facing the state, after reducing gun violence in schools. As shown in Figure 1, “making college more affordable” was among the top concerns for voters overall, with 48 percent of voters reporting it as a top concern (a score of 10), an increase of 7 percentage points from the previous year, when 41 percent of voters rated making college more affordable to be of highest concern (Martinez et. al, 2021).

As shown in Figure 20, the pattern of concern reported by voters across the state displays an alarming trend. By ethnicity, 62 percent of Latinx and Black voters ranked making college affordable “very important,” compared to only 41 percent of White voters and 37 percent of Asian American voters. Similarly, we see a clear pattern of decreasing concern about college affordability as household income increases: 65 percent of those making less than \$35,000 per year ranked making college affordable a top concern; the level of concern steadily decreases with income; and in households with annual incomes greater than \$150,000, only 26 percent considered college affordability a very important concern.

Among voters who are parents with children at home, 58 percent were very concerned about making college more affordable, in contrast to 45 percent of voters without children at home. Parents’ concern about college affordability increased with the number of children: 46 percent of parents with one child ranked college affordability a very important concern, while 64 percent of parents with two children and 69 percent with three or more children were concerned about making college affordable.

Figure 20. Percentage of California Voters Reporting “Making College More Affordable” as a Top Issue by Group



Note. The party categories “Independent/no party preference” and “other party member” and the race/ethnicity category “other/mixed” are excluded here for ease of reporting. “Parent” refers to respondents with children aged 18 or younger living at home.

Parents Are Worried About Having Enough Money to Pay for College

When we asked parents, “Are you very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried or not at all worried about having enough money to pay for your child’s college education?” 57 percent overall said they were worried (23 percent very worried and 34 percent somewhat worried), with 25 percent reporting they were not too worried and 16 percent not worried at all.

Among different racial and ethnic groups, Black parents were the most worried about having enough money to pay for their children’s college education, with 75 percent indicating they were at least somewhat worried, compared to 63 percent of Latinx parents, 52 percent of Asian American parents, and 51 percent of White parents. Additionally, worry about having enough money to afford college education decreases as household income increases: 70 percent of families making less than \$35,000 and 67 percent of families making between \$35,000 and \$75,000 are worried about paying for college, compared to only 46 percent of families making more than \$150,000.

Parents Still Believe College Is a Good Investment

Despite the overall level of concern about college affordability, an overwhelming 92 percent of parents still considered college to be a good investment in their child's future, and this support holds across groups. By political affiliation, 94 percent of Democratic parents and 88 percent of Republican parents considered college a good investment. Among racial and ethnic groups, 96 percent of Black parents considered college a good investment, followed by 93 percent of White voters, 92 percent of Asian American voters, and 91 percent of Latinx voters. Taken together, these results show that the vast majority of Californians want their children to attend college and see it as a good investment. However, the pattern of responses we found in our poll also shows that the dream of college is not available to all parents. Lower income parents and parents of color are most worried about college affordability, highlighting serious inequities in college access.

Long-term Funding Inadequacy and Instability

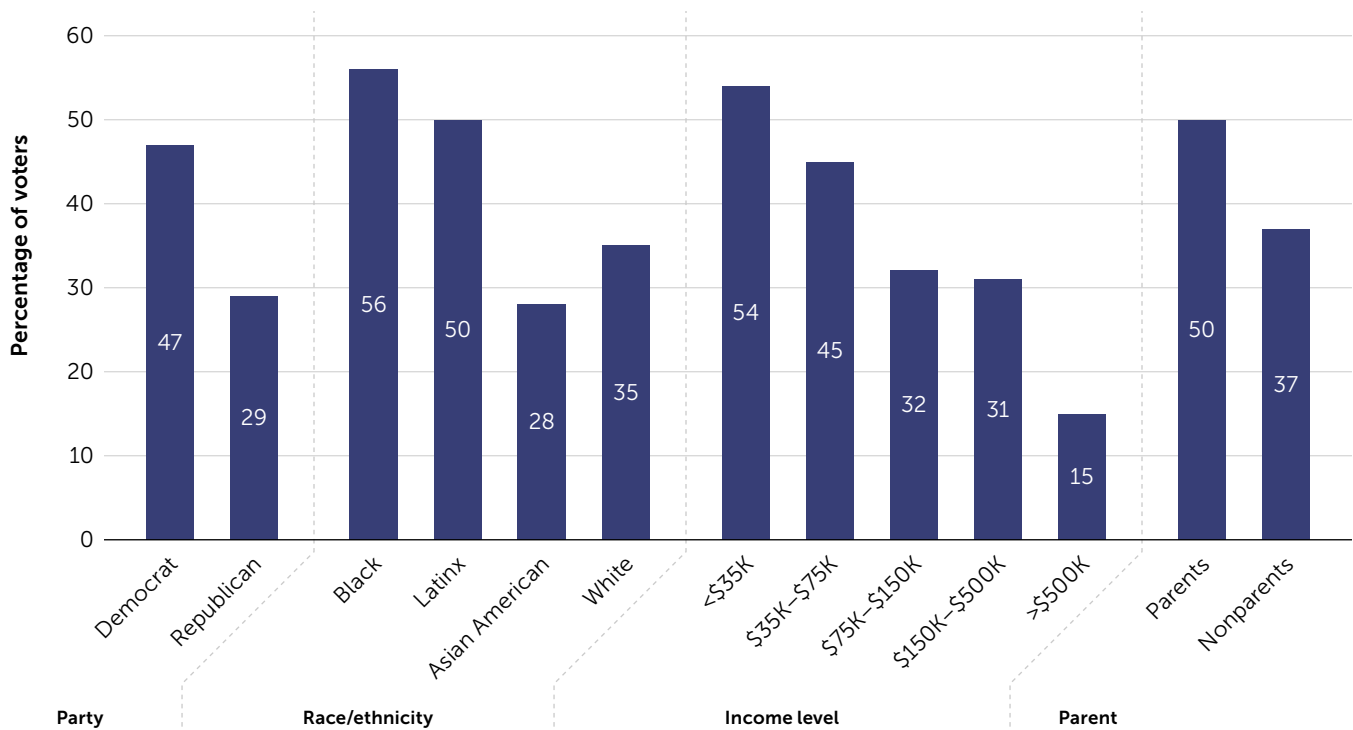
A great deal of attention has been paid to education funding in the media and research in recent years. Heading into the COVID-19 pandemic, education funding in California was well below the national average, with fewer teachers, nurses, social workers, and other school-site staff than in most other states (Hahnel, 2020). As a result, when the pandemic hit in March 2020, California's schools were already underfunded and understaffed, and thus were less well equipped to make the massive shifts required to respond to student need, provide high-quality virtual and hybrid instruction, or (more ambitiously) reimagine our education system in the wake of the pandemic (Myung et al., 2021).

The massive federal and state investment in schools has provided a much-needed infusion of cash as the pandemic has moved through different phases and educators struggle to meet the growing academic and social-emotional needs of students. Although this infusion of money has been unprecedented, several large concerns about education funding remain. First, most of the funds are one-time dollars, which means they will not provide long-term, sustainable funding for new programs. Second, while federal dollars are very flexible for districts to use as they see fit, new state dollars are earmarked for new programs or policies, which is challenging given the lack of long-term stability in funding. Finally, with the many different challenges and pressures facing districts, there is widespread concern about the ability of district leaders to use the funds effectively and support educational transformation. In our poll, we asked questions to understand how voters and parents perceive the issue of school funding during this unprecedented time, as we look towards school-funding decisions in the future.

Californians Are Concerned About Education Funding Despite Recent Federal and State Investments

As evidenced from our poll, Californians reported a continued concern about education funding, despite the current unprecedented investment. As shown in Figure 1, “improving school funding” was among the top concerns for voters overall, with 40 percent of voters (and 50 percent of parents) reporting it as a top concern (rating it a 10), an increase from last year when 35 percent of voters gave it a 10. As shown in Figure 21, parents see this issue as more important than nonparents (50 percent of parents rating it 10 versus 37 percent of nonparents), and there are substantial differences by income level and race/ethnicity. Latinx and Black voters rated education funding as more important than White and Asian American voters did (50 percent and 56 percent rating it 10, respectively, versus 35 percent and 28 percent, respectively). Concern about education funding is also strongly related to income. The lowest income voters were the most concerned (54 percent of those with annual incomes of less than \$35,000 rating education funding a 10), and the highest income voters were the least concerned (only 31 percent of those with annual incomes of more than \$150,000 and 15 percent of those with annual incomes of more than \$500,000 rating education funding a 10).

Figure 21. Percentage of California Voters Reporting “Improving Education Funding” as a Top Issue by Group



Note. The party categories “Independent/no party preference” and “other party member” and the race/ethnicity category “other/mixed” are excluded here for ease of reporting. “Parent” refers to respondents with children aged 18 or younger living at home.

Despite the massive state and federal investments in education, a slim majority of voters (51 percent) and even more parents (58 percent) reported that “California school districts have not received enough money to address the negative impacts of the pandemic.” Furthermore, voters largely “trust [their] local school district to spend their pandemic recovery money responsibly to address student needs”; overall, 55 percent of voters and 68 percent of parents agree.

However, districts need to do a better job of communicating with the public about their investments and their effectiveness. Only 37 percent of voters and 53 percent of parents reported that their “local school district has communicated well about how they are using their pandemic recovery money to address student needs.” And communication is uneven, with the lowest income parents reporting the lowest levels of communication. Only 47 percent of parents with annual incomes of less than \$35,000 reported good communication versus 68 percent of parents with annual incomes of more than \$150,000.

Conclusion

Surmounting unprecedented challenges to meet rising levels of student need, California’s public school systems have weathered the COVID-19 pandemic, but not unscathed. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated what have long been vulnerabilities and fissures in the state’s public education system. Chronic problems with funding inadequacy, inequitable availability of resources, understaffing in schools, and inequity in opportunity and access (Loeb et al., 2018). Now these problems have escalated to a precarious level. During the 2021–22 school year, we have seen teacher shortages, declining enrollment, widening gaps in student outcomes by subgroup, and discontent among parents and voters alike. These threats are symptoms of the deeper rooted problems that have been ailing California’s school systems for years (Hough et al., 2020).

At the same time, California voters and parents remain committed to public education and supportive of schools and educators. Thus, as students return to school this fall, California’s leaders must redouble the commitment to a “restorative restart”—to work towards a vision of a system of thriving public schools across the state in which all students have the support and opportunities they need to achieve their full potential (Myung et al., 2021). Moving forward amid myriad challenges, education leaders will be tasked with engaging with communities to transform our schools and enact high-quality instruction and services that meet diverse and growing student needs. With the support of the majority of Californians, the work of COVID-19 recovery for public schools will be the work of stewarding resources to implement programs and practices that enable all students to thrive, particularly low-income students, students of color, and students learning English, who have been disproportionately affected by both the pandemic and related education disruptions. While supporting educators and administrators to advance programs and practices in schools and districts that center equity and meet the needs of students and families, California’s leaders must also commit to strengthening *systems* to ensure quality in all schools, in every district, and for every student.

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Appendix A: Methodology for PACE/USC Rossier 2022 Annual Voter Poll

Tulchin Research surveyed 2,000 registered California voters online, including an oversample of 500 parents with children under the age of 18 living at home.

Voters used a variety of preferred internet-connected devices, including desktops, laptops, tablets, and smartphones, to complete the survey. In the case of each device, the layout of question presentation was altered slightly to accommodate screen real estate.

Tulchin Research controlled and weighted the data based on party, age, ethnicity, gender, and geography to obtain percentages for these demographics that matched the population of registered California voters.

The survey was completed in English and Spanish.

The survey was administered July 7–16, 2022.

Tulchin Research used an online panel provider to obtain the sample. Panelists were recruited from a reputable panel provider and invited typically by email notification to complete surveys in exchange for minimal monetary compensation (i.e., \$0.50–\$0.75) in the form of redeemable points. The panel provider ensured panelist identity and that IP addresses were legitimately from people wishing to become panelists. Also, panelists were screened for completing a large number of surveys and showing undesirable behavior like inconsistent responding or “speeding” through surveys.

The margin of error for the entire survey is estimated to be +/-2.53 percent at a 95 percent confidence interval. Table A1 provides the margin of error for key comparisons highlighted in this report.

Some questions in the poll were administered to roughly equal halves of the samples (i.e., split samples), which produce larger margins of error.

Table A1. Margins of Error for Highlighted Demographic Groups

Demographic group	N size	Margin of error (percent)
Children at home		
Parent	801	3.46
Nonparent	1140	2.90
Gender		
Male	702	3.70
Female	790	3.49
Race/ethnicity		
White	750	3.58
Black	75	11.32
Latinx	435	4.70
Asian American	180	7.30
Mixed/other	56	13.10
Education level		
College	794	3.48
Noncollege	704	3.69
Geographic region ^a		
Los Angeles County	388	4.98
Greater Los Angeles Area	330	5.40
Bay Area	295	5.71
San Diego	139	8.31
Sacramento/North Counties	153	7.92
Central Valley	195	7.02

Demographic group	N size	Margin of error (percent)
Age		
18–29	285	5.81
30–39	270	5.96
40–49	225	6.53
50–64	360	5.17
65+	358	5.18
Party		
Democrat	726	3.64
Republican	362	5.15
No political Party/Other	412	4.83
Income		
Under \$35,000	271	5.95
\$35,000–\$75,000	450	4.62
\$75,000–\$150,000	480	4.47
\$150,000–\$500,000	231	6.45
Kids education		
Public schools (traditional and public charter)	566	4.12
Private/parochial	129	8.63
Children currently in K–12 school		
Yes	683	3.75
No	118	9.02
Language		
English primary: yes	1398	2.62
English primary: no	100	9.80

^a The Greater Los Angeles Area encompasses Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, Santa Barbara, and Ventura counties. The Bay Area encompasses Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, and Sonoma counties. San Diego encompasses San Diego and Imperial counties. Central Valley encompasses Calaveras, Fresno, Inyo, Kern, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, Mono, Monterey, San Benito, San Joaquin, San Luis Obispo, Santa Cruz, Stanislaus, Tulare, and Tuolumne counties. The remainder of the counties are part of the Sacramento/North Counties region.

Author Biographies

Heather Hough is the executive director at PACE.

Julie Marsh is a professor of education policy at the USC Rossier School of Education and a PACE faculty director.

Jeimee Estrada-Miller is a doctoral candidate at the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy.

Morgan Polikoff is an associate professor of education at the USC Rossier School of Education.

Jeannie Myung is the director of policy research at PACE.

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Improving education policy and practice and advancing equity through evidence

PACE is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. Founded in 1983, PACE bridges the gap between research, policy, and practice, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local decision makers to achieve improvement in performance and more equitable outcomes at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. We do this through:

- 1 bringing evidence to bear on the most critical issues facing our state;
- 2 making research evidence accessible; and
- 3 leveraging partnership and collaboration to drive system improvement.



Stanford Graduate School of Education
520 Galvez Mall, Suite 444
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: (650) 724-2832 • Fax: (650) 723-9931

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