
WHAT DO PARENTS WANT?

Information, Choices, and Constraints

Michael Q. McShane, Ph.D.



ABOUT EDCHOICE

EdChoice is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan organization. Our mission is to advance educational freedom and choice for all as a pathway to successful lives and a stronger society. We are committed to understanding and pursuing a K–12 education ecosystem that empowers every family to choose the learning environment that fits their children’s needs best. EdChoice is the intellectual legacy of Milton and Rose D. Friedman, who founded the organization in 1996 as the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. The contents of this publication are intended to provide empirical information and should not be construed as lobbying for any position related to any legislation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Given the huge increase in the number of American families able to choose their child's school, the time is ripe to ask, "What do parents want?" Whereas before, millions of parents were hemmed in by school policies that required their child to attend a residentially assigned traditional public school, now more and more states are supporting more and more choice inside and outside of the public school system.

To understand parental wants, needs, and desires, we partnered with the research firm Morning Consult to survey a nationally representative sample of more than 1,500 American parents in early November 2023.

What did we find?

- When evaluating a potential school, parents' top choices for information were graduation rates, state report cards, class sizes, and test scores.
- Parents overwhelmingly want teachers to keep their politics to themselves. Eighty-four percent of parents agreed "a lot" or "somewhat" with the statement, "I want my child's teacher to keep their politics to themselves."
- Parents are reticent to send their child to a school that takes political stances in conflict with their own. Fifty-six percent of surveyed parents told us that they would not choose a school that took political stances with which they disagreed, even if that school was of high academic quality.

- Parents are willing to choose schools that are farther away. When asked about driving time, more than half of parents said they would drive an additional 20 minutes or more to get their child to a higher quality school. When asked if they would choose a school that was higher quality but required their child to spend 30 additional minutes on a bus, 68% of parents said they would still choose that school.
- Parents appear to prefer schools that use more technology than less; that emphasize STEM over the humanities; that have stricter versus more lenient discipline; and that emphasize national pride over skeptical treatment of American history.
- Parents say they want schools to teach the fullness of American history, both positive and negative; to instill the ability to discuss contentious issues rationally; to avoid sexually explicit material; and to avoid teaching LGBTQ content in the classroom.

Overall, this survey paints a nuanced and at times contradictory picture of what parents want and how they prioritize their various preferences.

That said, people are complicated, and America is a big, diverse country, so it shouldn't surprise us to see disagreements and inconsistencies. Those notwithstanding, this survey offers a fascinating insight into the minds of America's parents. What they have to say is worth listening to.

INTRODUCTION

With the growth of private schools, charter schools, magnet schools, homeschooling, religious schools, and microschoools, there is more opportunity for parents to choose their child's school than ever before.

Across schooling sectors, policymakers have worked to expand the set of choices available to families. Within the traditional public schooling sector, there are some 4,340 magnet schools, designed to draw in students (like magnets) with unique course offerings, advanced academics, or an orientation towards the performing arts or foreign languages. More than 3.5 million students attend them.¹

Other intra- and inter-district programs have been created to give families more choices within their traditional public school district or across district lines into neighboring communities. According to the Reason Foundation, 99,600 students took advantage of inter-district enrollment in Arizona alone, some 13% of the state's student population.²

But choice hasn't been limited to traditional public school districts. Charter schools—autonomous public schools of choice that exist outside of the traditional school bureaucracy and can offer different pedagogical methods or areas of emphasis—more than doubled in enrollment from 2010 to 2021, growing from 1.8 million to 3.7 million students in some 7,800 schools.³

Perhaps most excitingly, and most recently, we have seen massive growth in the number of students eligible to participate in private school choice programs that allow them to attend schools and other educational environments entirely outside of the public system with support from the government. According to the 2024 edition of *The ABCs of School Choice*, 982,000 students used some form of public support to attend a private school in the 2023 school year.⁴

The most recent generation of policies, education savings accounts (ESAs), create flexible use spending accounts that parents can use to purchase educational goods and services and fully customize their child's education. They could spend some portion on private school tuition, some on tutoring, some on educational therapies, some on educational technology or other resources, and on and on in an infinite number of permutations.

As a new market emerges to meet these parent's needs, an important question needs to be asked: "What do parents want?"

It is a tricky question to answer. The best tools we have are surveys where we ask parents some variation of the question. Ideally, we ask it in a couple of different ways to poke and prod their opinions and arrive at what they really think. But ultimately, surveys are limited tools. Parents might tell us things that they think are socially desirable when they are embarrassed by what they actually want (for example, telling us that they want high academic rigor when they really want a school that is close and doesn't have traffic during pickup and drop off). Parents' opinions might differ based on the age of their child. Parents might also have ideals that fall apart when put within constraints. Sure, everyone wants a new school building and lots of extracurriculars and the like, but do they still want it if it means they'd have to drive for an hour to drop their child off there?

We can also observe where parents enroll their child and intuit their preferences from that. If parents have a lot of options and choose a Catholic school, for example, we can reasonably assume that they have a preference for that school. That said, there are lots of places where parents don't have many options, so simply observing where they send their children today and assuming that is because of their preferences might give us a skewed picture. On the other side of the coin, parents may choose what appears to be the "default" option (their child's assigned school based on their location). But for parents sending their kids to these schools, it is difficult to know whether they chose them because

they lack access to other options or because they actively preferred that school. Surveys can help identify the quantity of such parents.

There is no single way to answer the question “What do parents want?” We should use different surveys and survey questions as well as observe enrollment patterns. We should look at programs parents can choose from and what makes them differ from each other. We should look at what public and private supports parents can draw from. From all this, we can get a more accurate answer to the question.

This report explains the results of a nationally representative survey of American parents, conducted by the polling firm Morning Consult in partnership with EdChoice. We asked parents a battery of questions, trying to understand their preferences from different angles. First, we asked about where parents get information on school performance, and what information is important in determining if a school is good. Next, we offered oppositional statements, each presenting parents with a choice between two specific policies or priorities: more technology in school or less technology? Stricter discipline or more lenient discipline? A college prep curriculum or one that emphasizes preparing for the workforce?

We also asked questions that impose a constraint or cost on the parent’s preference. These questions usually contained the word “but.” What do parents think about a school with a great academic reputation but has politics they don’t like? What do they think about a school that has a record of high quality but is another 30 minutes away?

Finally, we asked about some hot-button topics in K-12 education. What should schools teach about American history? Should LGBTQ issues be addressed in classrooms? Who or what should regulate the types of books students read?

Before we get to the answers, we should recall previous efforts to understand parents’ preferences and what we have learned from them.

PREVIOUS EFFORTS TO UNCOVER WHAT PARENTS PREFER

The existing research literature paints a confusing and at times contradictory picture. While studies have consistently shown, for example, that parents prize schools that are close to home,⁵ that finding is not universal. Some studies show that academics, safety, or other values ranked higher than convenience.⁶ Similarly, academic quality usually comes in second behind proximity, but other studies reveal other parental priorities.⁷

Most studies are limited either by their geography (and thus school sector) or their methodology. Several large studies explore the “revealed” preferences of parents—what parents do rather than what they tell researchers. But these studies are limited to open-enrollment choice programs, run by public school districts, such as, North Carolina’s Charlotte-Mecklenberg School District.⁸ This approach omits many choices parents have, so it gives a distorted view of what they think.

That said, we can learn much from past studies. Lynn Bossetti of the University of Calgary studied parents in Alberta, Canada, a province with substantial school choice. Bossetti investigated the sources of information parents used to make their decisions and found that conversations with friends, neighbors, and other parents (79%) were the most important ones. Conversations with school faculty and staff (59%) were important, as were visits to the schools themselves (43%).⁹ Economists James Kelly and Benjamin Scafidi found that student teacher ratios and class size were the most important data parents wanted to see. These were followed by school accreditation, curriculum, and the percentage of students who are accepted and attend college.¹⁰

Dara Zeehandelaar and Amber Winkler of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute presented parents with a list of five random educational goals at a time and asked them to choose the most and least critical from the list. They did this repeatedly,

with different, random groups of five goals. Two clear winners emerged: strong core academics and a STEM focus. Other favored goals included the following: instilling good study habits and self-discipline, having a strong education in life skills, and fostering strong critical thinking.¹¹

In looking at the robust set of choices offered to students in New Orleans, economists Doug Harris and Matthew Larsen found that having siblings in a given school strongly increased the likelihood of parents choosing that school. But they also found that for high school students, it was important for a school to have a strong legacy in the community. Offering football and band was important, too. Like others, Harris and Larsen found that longer driving distances decreased the likelihood that a family would enroll at a school, as did required weekend classes.¹²

We at EdChoice have also asked a series of questions related to parent preferences in several of our surveys. In both our annual Schooling in America survey and our monthly Public Opinion Tracker (also conducted with Morning Consult) we have asked parents what they think schools should be teaching, why they chose their child's school, why they prefer some schools over others, and why they switched their child's school. In the December 2023 iteration of our tracker poll, parents told us that the most important thing for their child's school to teach in grades kindergarten through eighth was core academic subjects, followed by the ability to become independent thinkers and then skills for future employment. For students in grades 9-12, parents put skills for future employment at the top, followed by core academic subjects, and then students becoming independent thinkers.¹³

The studies we have just cited influenced the questions that we asked. Sometimes our findings lined up with what those studies found. But not always. In some cases, as we show below, we found similar results. In other cases, though, our results vary.

So, what did we find?

RESULTS

We asked parents where they get information on schools, how they get their child to school every day, and how they weigh the value of various information sources.

We started with a straightforward question: "Where do you look for information on schools?"

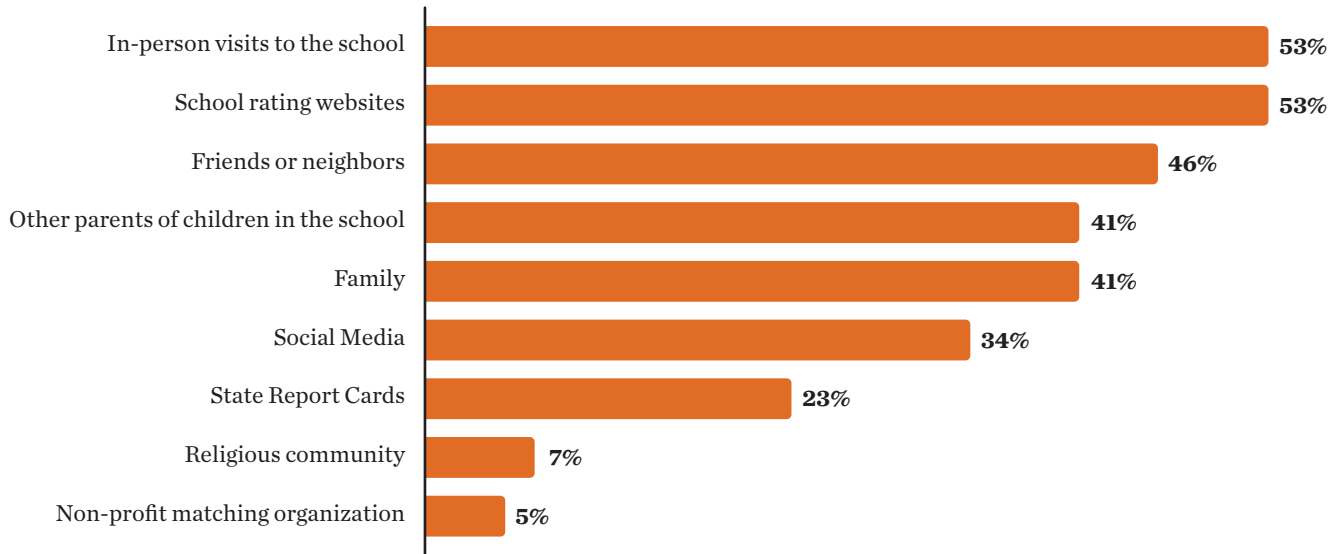
Figure 1 displays the results. Two responses tied for the top spot, with 53% of parents choosing in-person visits to the school and school rating websites. The next most popular sources were friends and neighbors, other parents of children in the school, and then family members. Other sources drop off from there, with social media, state report cards, religious communities, and non-profit school matching organizations rounding out the list.

To understand how parents get their children to school (and thus to help us understand the potential constraints on choices) we asked another straightforward question: "How does your child get to school every day?" **Figure 2** displays the results.

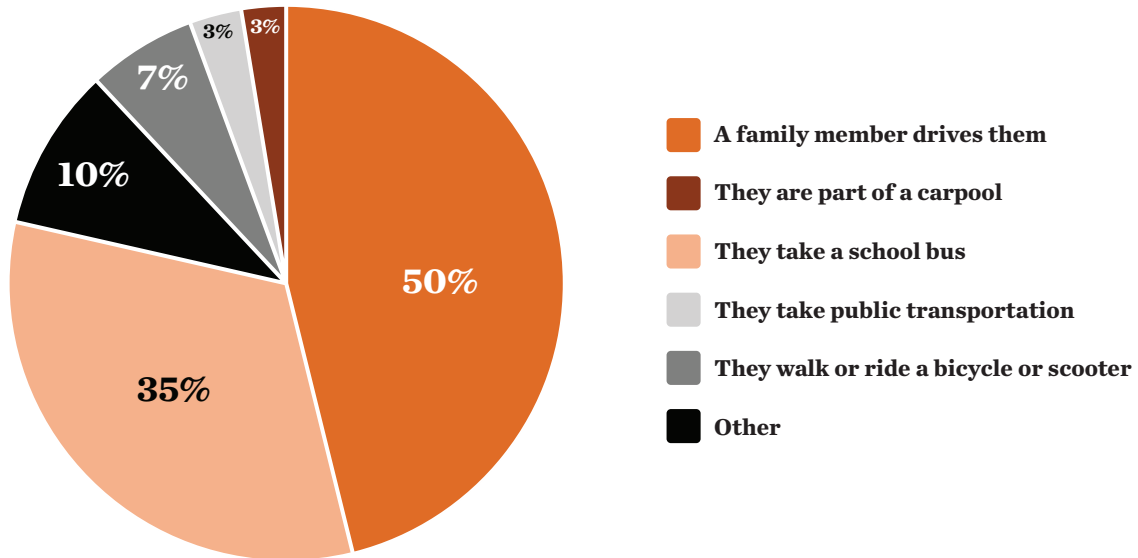
The most popular response, with half of parents selecting it, was that a family member drives the child to school. The next most popular, at just over one-third of respondents, was that the child takes the bus to school. For the rest, we saw a mix of walking or cycling, using public transportation, and carpooling.

These numbers match national data on pupil transportation. "On a typical school day, 54.2% of students were driven in a private vehicle, 33.2% took a school bus, and 10.4% walked," according to the National Household Travel Survey, as reported by the Urban Institute.¹⁴

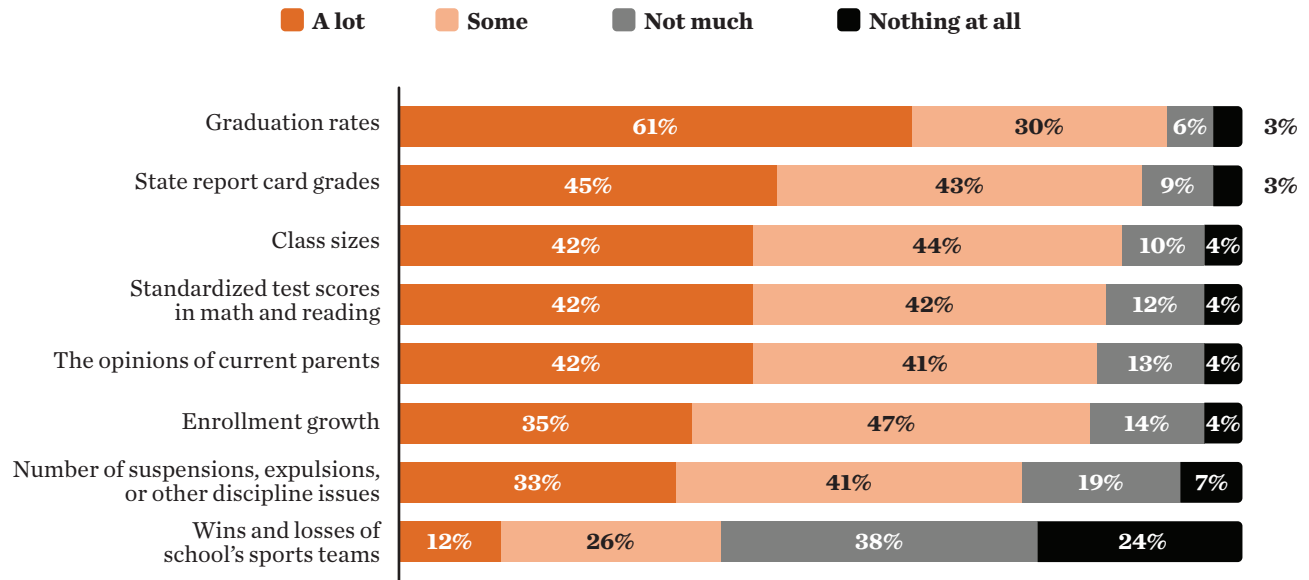
The next topic was how parents evaluate schools. We asked parents to rate how valuable different potential sources of school information were. "How much do you think each of these tells us about school quality?" we asked. **Figure 3** displays the results.

FIGURE 1**Source for Education Information***Where do you look for information on school?*

Source: EdChoice/Morning Consult survey conducted November 3 to 7, 2023, among U.S. K-12 School Parents

FIGURE 2**School Transportation***How does your child usually get to school?*

Source: EdChoice/Morning Consult survey conducted November 3 to 7, 2023, among U.S. K-12 School Parents

FIGURE 3**School Quality***How much do you think each of these tells us about school quality?*

Source: EdChoice/Morning Consult survey conducted November 3 to 7, 2023, among U.S. K-12 School Parents

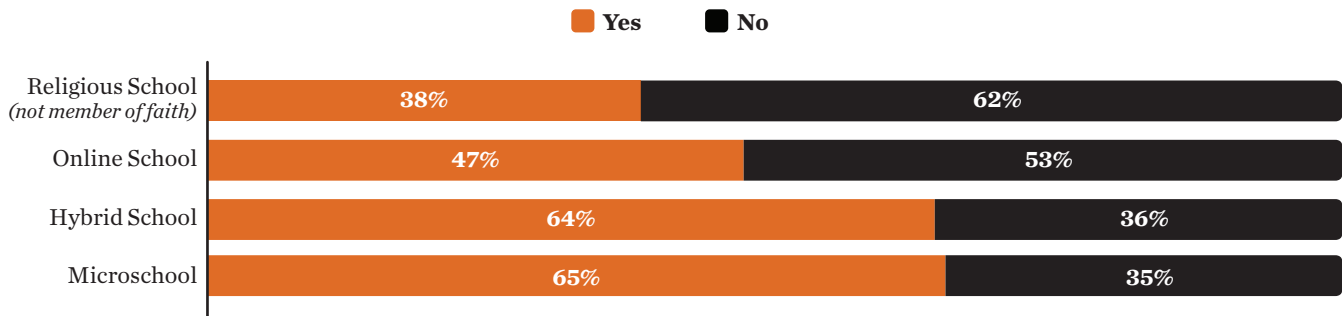
Parents put the most stock in graduation rates, with 61% saying that they tell us “a lot” about school quality and 30% saying “some.” State report card grades were the second-most respected data sources, with 45% of parents saying they told us “a lot” about school quality and 43% saying “some.” After that we see class size (42%, “a lot,” and 44%, “some”), standardized test scores (42%, a lot, and 42%, some), the opinions of current parents (42%, a lot, and 41%, some), and enrollment growth (35%, “a lot,” and 47%, “some”). The numbers drop off a bit from there to the number of discipline issues (33%, “a lot,” and 41%, “some”) and then precipitously to wins and losses of the school’s sports teams (12%, “a lot,” and 26%, “some”).

Next, we turned to parental preferences, as shown in **Figure 4**.

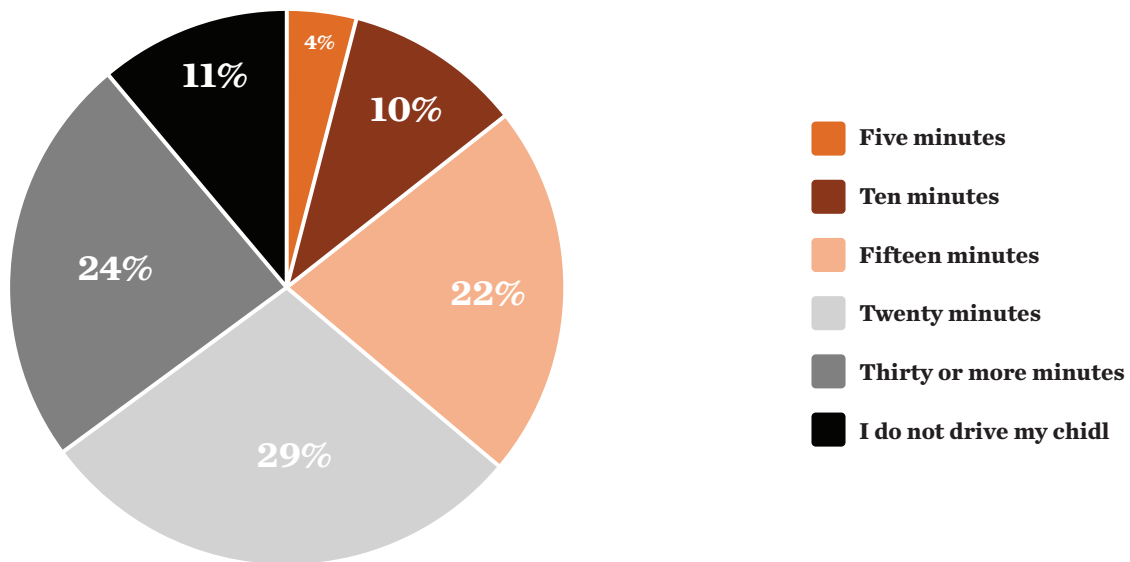
We began with a series of questions about school types, asking parents if they would be interested in enrolling their child in each type of school.

The questions were:

- “If you were looking for a new school for your child, would you enroll them in a religious school for a denomination of which you are not a member?”
- “If you were looking for a new school for your child, would you enroll them in an online school, where they would attend class from home 5 days a week?”
- “If you were looking for a new school for your child, would you send them to a ‘hybrid’ school where they would attend classes for 2 or 3 days a week and complete schoolwork from home the other days?”
- “If you were looking for a new school for your child, would you send them to a microschool, a school with fewer than 20 students total?”

FIGURE 4**School Type***If you were looking for a new school for your child would you enroll him or her in a/an...*

Source: EdChoice/Morning Consult survey conducted November 3 to 7, 2023, among U.S. K-12 School Parents

FIGURE 5**Driving to School***How far would you be willing to drive for your children to attend a better school?*

Source: EdChoice/Morning Consult survey conducted November 3 to 7, 2023, among U.S. K-12 School Parents

The religious school question has a twist. Rather than simply ask parents if they would want to send their child to a religious school (which we asked about later), we qualified the question by stating that the school would not be of the same religious denomination as their own. Still, 38% of parents said they would send their child to such a school.

The other three questions were straightforward, with a short definition of online, hybrid, and microschools, respectively, and a question about whether parents would want to send their child to one. Online schools were the least popular of the three, and the only one where more parents said no than yes. Still, 47% of parents said that they would send their child to such a school. Hybrid and

microschools were much more popular, with more than two-thirds of parents saying they would send their child to such a school.

We also tested parental preferences by offering tradeoffs. If we present a list of school qualities such as “strong academics,” “positive school spirit,” and the like, parents will say they want all those things. Who wouldn’t? To tease out parents’ true preferences, we tried to impose some constraints. Given some limiting factors, what choices would you make? If some cost was imposed, what would you choose?

The constraint we imposed was distance: “How far would you be willing to drive for your child to attend a better school?” Answers varied, as shown in **Figure 5**.

Just under one-quarter of respondents (24%) selected the longest response offered, 30 minutes. The most popular result was the second-longest

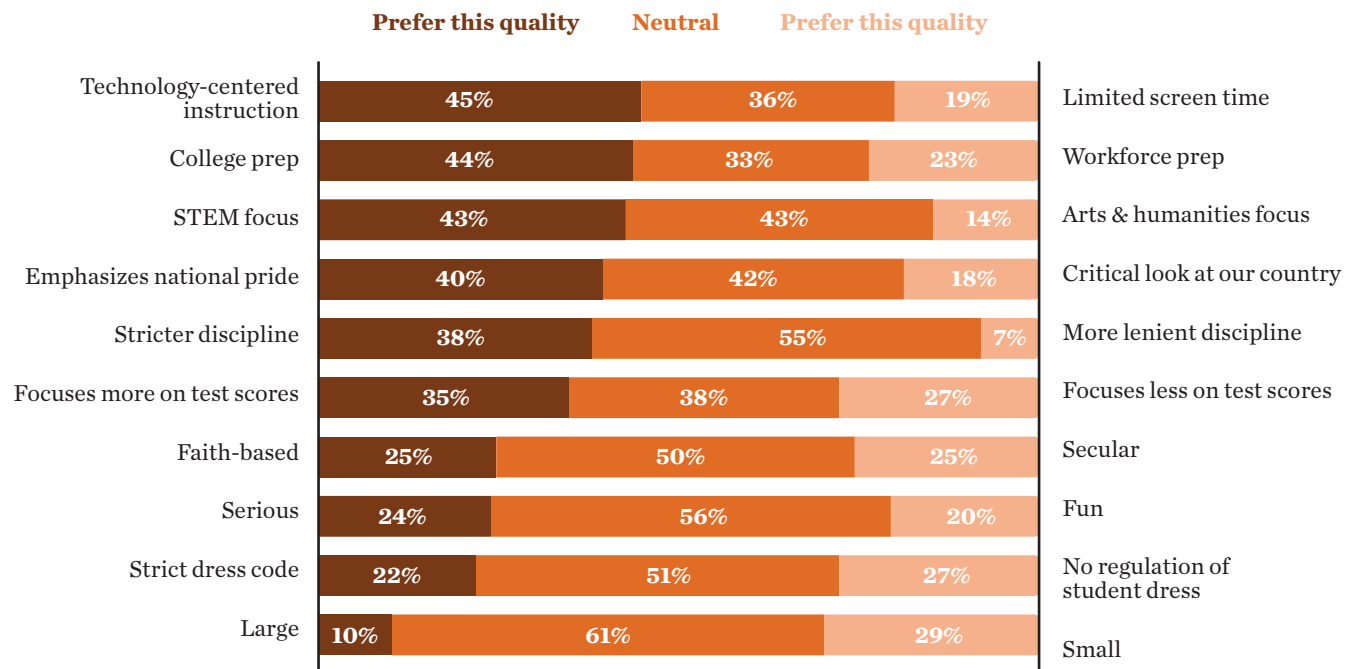
travel time, 20 minutes, selected by 29% of parents. Twenty-two percent of parents said they would drive 15 minutes to take their child to a better school, and the remaining 14% would travel less than that. The rest—11%—said do not drive their child to school.

To give those findings some context, recently my EdChoice colleagues Drew Catt and Nathan Sanders mapped all of the private schools in the state of Georgia and found that 79% of students lived within a 10-minute drive of a private school and 95% live within 20 minutes.¹⁵

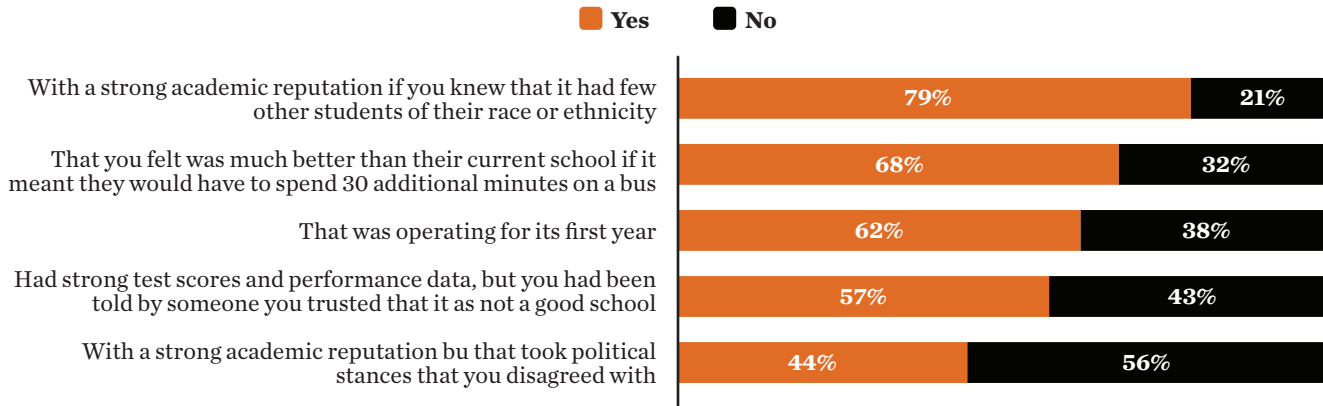
In the next set of questions, we offered parents a set of oppositional questions, asking them to rate which school approach they preferred. More technology or less? A strict dress code or no dress code? Again, the purpose was to impose a constraint. Emphasizing one choice means deemphasizing the other. So, what are parents’ true preferences? **Figure 6** displays the results.

FIGURE 6 Preferred School Qualities

When it comes to your child’s school, which of the following qualities do you want in the school that they attend?



Source: EdChoice/Morning Consult survey conducted November 3 to 7, 2023, among U.S. K-12 School Parents

FIGURE 7**Choosing a School***Would you send your child to a school... (the various options complete the sentence)*

Source: EdChoice/Morning Consult survey conducted November 3 to 7, 2023, among U.S. K-12 School Parents

Some clear preferences emerged. Parents preferred technology-centered instruction over limited screen time by a margin of 45% to 19%. They favored a college prep curriculum over a workforce prep curriculum by 44% to 23%. They favored STEM focus to a focus on the arts and humanities by 43% to 14%. They also preferred schools that emphasize national pride over a more critical look at our country (40% to 18%) and stricter discipline over more lenient discipline (38% to 7%).

Parents were more evenly split on other qualities. While 35% of parents wanted to see a greater focus on test scores, 27% wanted to see less focus on them. The 25% of parents who wanted a faith-based education were matched with 25% of parents who wanted a secular one. Seriousness and fun were closely balanced, with 24% of parents wanting to emphasize seriousness and 20% favoring fun. Twenty-two percent of parents wanted a strict dress code and 27% wanted to see no regulation of student dress.

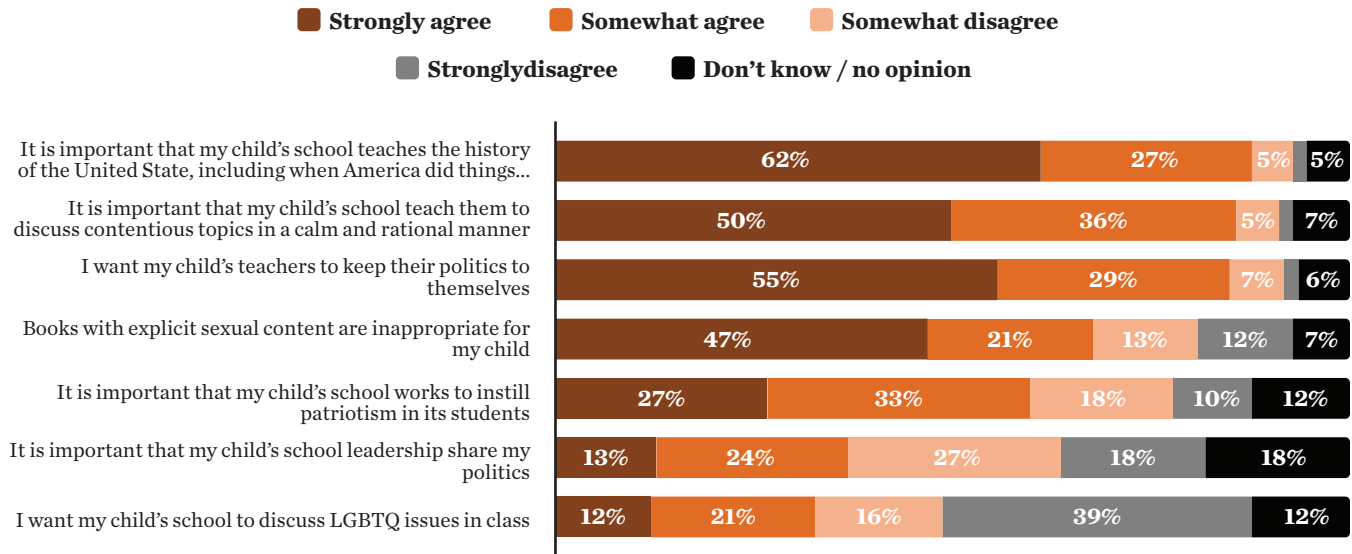
A large number of parents were neutral on the question of school size. While 10% of parents valued a large school, 29% wanted a small one, and 61% ended up in the middle.

In **Figure 7** we present the results of another set of questions that contained a constraint. In each question (bar one) we offer a generally accepted positive school trait (like strong academics) with a trait that parents might not prefer (like having to travel farther to get to it). It was a provocative way to get at what parents truly value.

When we asked parents about enrolling their child in a school with a strong academic reputation but having a student population where their child would be an isolated minority either in race or ethnicity, they overwhelmingly said they would still choose that school. Seventy-nine percent of parents said that they would and only 21% said that they wouldn't.

When asked about a much better school that was 30 minutes farther away on the bus, 68% of parents said they would choose the school anyway. Only 32% said that they wouldn't.

Would parents choose a school that had strong test scores and performance data, even if a trusted source told them it was not a good school? By a relatively slim margin, parents decided to go with the performance data. Fifty-seven percent said they would choose the school, while 43% said they would follow their friend's opinion.

FIGURE 8**Preferences Regarding Classroom Content***To what degree do you agree with the following statements? (the various options are the statements)*

Source: EdChoice/Morning Consult survey conducted November 3 to 7, 2023, among U.S. K-12 School Parents

Interestingly, the only constraint that made parents opt against a strong school was the school's politics. We'll touch more on this in some subsequent questions, but when we phrased the question this way, only 44% of parents would choose the school, and 56% would not.

The final question asked parents what they thought about choosing a school that was operating in its first year. Interestingly, 62% of parents were comfortable choosing the school. Only 38% said they would not choose it.

Finally, we asked a more traditional set of survey questions to measure parents' opinions of classroom content. They were given statements, along with options to "strongly agree," "somewhat agree," "somewhat disagree," or "strongly disagree." (They were also given the option to have no opinion.) **Figure 8** displays the results.

Parents overwhelmingly want their child's school to teach the full history of the United States, with 62% strongly agreeing and 27% of parents somewhat agreeing with the statement "It is important that

my child's school teaches the history of the United States, including when America did things that were wrong." Similarly, 50% of parents strongly agreed and 36% of parents somewhat agreed with the statement "It is important that my child's school teaches them to discuss contentious topics in a calm and rational manner."

Parents were also clear that they wanted teachers to keep their politics to themselves. Fifty-five percent of parents strongly agreed and 29% somewhat agreed with that statement. Most parents also said they wanted to keep sexually explicit content away from their child, with 47% strongly agreeing with that sentiment and 21% somewhat agreeing.

Parents were less interested in their child's school instilling patriotism, with 27% of parents strongly agreeing that schools should and 33% somewhat agreeing. They were even less interested in their child's school sharing their politics, with only 13% of parents strongly agreeing that they wanted their child's school to, and 24% somewhat agreeing with that. Finally, only a minority of parents want their child's school to discuss LGBTQ issues in the

classroom, with 12% strongly agreeing that they wanted their child to see that content and 21% somewhat agreeing with it.

Our findings differ from some other studies in that we did not see meaningful differences between the parents of older and younger children when asking about LGBTQ books. The same was true of books considered sexually explicit.¹⁶ With respect to LGBTQ issues, 32% of K-8 parents and 32% of 9-12 parents either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that they wanted them covered in their child's class while 57% of K-8 and 32% of 9-12 parents somewhat or strongly disagreed. With respect to sexually explicit content, there were some small differences, with 70% of K-8 students and 64% of 9-12 parents stating that they either strongly or somewhat agreed that such content was inappropriate for their child while 23% of K-8 and 28% of 9-12 parents either somewhat or strongly disagreed.

DISCUSSION

So, that is a great deal of information. Like the judge at the county pie-eating contest said, “where should I begin?”

It is worth highlighting four key takeaways from the preceding data. First, it is clear that parents rely on objective data to judge school performance. Second, it is clear parents will make sacrifices for a higher quality school. Third, parents don't care if the school shares their politics, they want teachers to keep their politics to themselves. Finally, parents like STEM curriculum and technology to be used in school, schools that instill national pride, and stricter as opposed to more lenient discipline. Let's look at each in turn.

Parents rely on objective data to judge school performance.

When it comes to judging school quality, the top four responses (graduation rates, state report cards, class sizes, and test scores) are for objective

measures. When parents were asked where they seek out information about schools, rating websites (most of which contain objective information) came in second. Subjective opinions, in the form of other parents' opinions, did not show up until number five. When parents were asked if they would choose a school with strong objective data but an unfavorable evaluation from a trusted individual, they said yes. They did so by a small margin (57% to 43%), but it is clear that data plays a role in school choices.

Parents did not, however, think schools should focus on test scores. When parents were asked whether they would prefer a school with a greater focus on test scores or one with less, only 35% opted for a school that focused more on test scores; 27% preferred one that would focus less. Thirty-eight percent of parents were neutral on the question.

This seems like a reasonable position. Parents want objective metrics on hand when they choose a school. They trust clear and established metrics and even prefer them in many instances. Few parents, however, want them to be overly emphasized in the classroom.

Parents will make sacrifices for a higher quality school.

We can reasonably assume that all parents would choose a higher-quality school over a lower-quality one, all other things equal. (This, of course, elides difficult discussions about how parents define a high-quality school.) But we cannot always hold everything else constant. Higher-quality schools might be farther away or have some other qualities that could make them less desirable.

Are parents willing to put up with a longer commute in exchange for a higher-quality school? It appears that they are. When parents were asked about additional driving time, more than half said they would drive an additional 20 minutes, or longer, to get their child to a higher-quality school. When asked if they would choose a school that was higher quality but required their child to spend 30

additional minutes on a bus, 68% of parents said would still choose that school.

We also asked parents a perhaps more controversial question: Would they enroll their child in a school that they felt was academically stronger even if that meant their child would be in a racial or ethnic minority? We did not specify the demographics of the school. Interestingly, parents overwhelmingly stated that their child being a racial or ethnic minority in the school did not dissuade them from choosing it, with 79% saying they would choose the school regardless.

Most of these data are heartening. Parents are willing to set aside racial or ethnic prejudice to find the best school for their child. Parents want to find the best school for their child, and they will inconvenience themselves (or in the case of bus journeys, their child) to get it.

Parents want schools to keep politics to themselves, except when they don't.

Given the skirmishes that have erupted at school board meetings over the past several years, it would not have been surprising to see parents wanting schools to share their politics. That was not the case. In fact, when asked, only 37% of parents said that they agreed a lot or somewhat with the idea that their child's school should share their politics. In a similar vein, when asked how much they agreed with the statement that teachers should keep their politics to themselves, 84% of parents agreed a lot or somewhat.

That said, when presented with a school with a strong academic reputation but that took political stances with which parents disagreed, only 44% of parents said that they would choose that school, 56% of parents said they would not.

Perhaps one way of looking at what parents feel is that a school agreeing with them isn't important, but a school disagreeing with them is. The ideal position might be to try and avoid politics altogether.

Though even that isn't always the case. Parents had strong agreement with the idea that American history should be taught, warts and all (89% of respondents saying that they agreed a lot or some with that statement). When given the oppositional statement between a school focusing on instilling national pride and promoting skepticism of America, parents preferred patriotism at roughly a two to one rate (40% said that they would want a school to promote patriotism while only 18% supported skepticism).

Parents overwhelmingly wanted schools to avoid sexually explicit topics, with 68% of parents agreeing either a lot or somewhat with the statement that sexually explicit material is not appropriate for their child. They also indicated that they did not want their child's school to discuss LGBTQ issues in the classroom, with 55% disagreeing a lot or somewhat with the statement that their child's school should discuss LGBTQ issues.

Parents like a STEM focus and for schools to utilize technology, schools that instill national pride, and stricter as opposed to more lenient discipline.

Figure 6 represents a series of oppositional statements that parents were presented with comparing different potential school emphases. One way to look at the figure is to subtract the percentage of parents who selected one priority from the other. This lets us see the difference a bit more clearly than a graph that is often dominated by those sitting in the middle.

If we look at parents who were presented with the options of a faith-based versus a secular focus, we see 25% choosing religious and 25% choosing secular. Subtract one from the other and we come out with zero, a perfect balance between the two.

Not every result was so evenly distributed. The largest gap came when asked about school discipline, with a 31-point gap in favor of more strict discipline over more lenient discipline. The next largest, at 29 points, was STEM over the humanities, then 26

points preferring technology-focused instruction over limited screen time. The next three cluster pretty closely, with emphasizing patriotism being 22 points more popular than emphasizing a critical look at our country, college prep being preferred by 21 points to workforce prep, and small schools being preferred to large schools by 19 points.

The last set of findings are quite close, with emphasis on test scores edging less focus on them by 8 points, no regulation of student dress besting a strict dress code by 5 points, and serious beating fun by 4 points.

CONCLUSION

These findings can help us understand the priorities and preferences of American school parents. The survey reflects the opinions of a nationally representative sample and asked several of the key questions in multiple ways to elicit the true opinions of those who responded.

For policymakers, and when it comes specifically to questions of school choice, these data might not actually be all that informative. Given the size of the American education system, there is room for even “unpopular” options. Take the example of schools with more lenient discipline. This was preferred by only 7% of parents. At first glance, we might think that to be too unpopular to be a viable option in the school choice marketplace. But now consider that around 6.6% of all students in America attend charter schools, so another way of looking at it is to say the same number of parents want more lenient discipline as enroll their children in charter schools. That is still a lot of people, and more than enough to sustain thousands of schools with that focus.

These findings are perhaps more interesting in trying to understand the nature and contours of the American education system writ large, to see broader trends and priorities that have emerged. Not necessarily the most important information for crafting policy, but hopefully interesting, nonetheless.

That said, policymakers can be swayed by loud, but not representative, opinions. The types of people who call up state legislators or who show up to testify in hearings about topics of interest might only be representing their own opinions. It is important to get representative samples of views. That is what this survey provides.

The same is true for journalists. A feisty school board meeting in one district in a single state can grab headlines and two or three more can start to feel like a trend. But they could be isolated events. Looking at the big picture can help determine if that is the case or not.

And advocates can always benefit from understanding the zeitgeist. Now, they might see it as their job to change people’s opinions or disagree with the opinions that majorities hold. There is nothing wrong with that. But it is good to know if you are swimming with the tide or against it.

As was brought up in the introduction, surveys are not perfect tools. We’re taking people’s word for what they think and believe. Perhaps they were telling us what they thought we wanted to hear or what might make them look like better parents or better people. That is always a risk of doing survey work.

Hopefully we will be able to better match our survey findings to the revealed preferences of parents as more and more have the opportunities to make genuine school choices. In states that have passed universal or near-universal education choice programs that have seen a strong response by different school operators, we will be able to observe what parents actually do. Maybe they will back up our findings. Or maybe they won’t.

For now, though, it is worth taking to heart some of the key insights of this survey related to parent preferences. They want data to help them make their choices. They have certain issues that they care about, but in general want schools to stay apolitical. They are willing to make sacrifices to enroll their child in a better school. And there are clearly leanings in preferences (like STEM over the humanities and stricter discipline over more lenient) though there are still large segments of the population with differing opinions on the topic.

APPENDIX 1

Survey Project and Profile

Dates: November 3-7, 2023

Survey Data Collection &

Quality Control: Morning Consult

Survey Sponsor: EdChoice

Population: Parents (Adults, Age 18+)

Sampling Frame: National sample of adults (age 18+) living in the United States, including the District of Columbia

Sampling Method: Non-Probability, Stratified (based on Age, Gender)

Mode: Online Survey

Language: English

Sample Size: N = 1,503

Quotas: Age, Gender

Weighting: Age, gender, race, educational attainment, region, gender by age, and race by educational attainment

Measure of Precision: \pm 3 percentage points

Project Contact: Michael McShane, McShane@edchoice.org

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Michael Q. McShane is Director of National Research at EdChoice. He is the author, editor, co-author, or co-editor of 12 books on education policy, including *Hybrid Homeschooling: A Guide to the Future of Education* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2021). He is currently an opinion contributor to *Forbes*, and his analyses and commentary have been published widely in the media, including in *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. He has also been featured in education-specific outlets such as *Teachers College Record*, *Education Week*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, and *Education Next*. In addition to authoring numerous white papers, McShane has had academic work published in *Education Finance and Policy*, *The Handbook of Education Politics and Policy*, and the *Journal of School Choice*. A former high school teacher, he earned a Ph.D. in education policy from the University of Arkansas, an M.Ed. from the University of Notre Dame, and a B.A. in English from St. Louis University.

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