

Putting fundamentals above fear and factionalism

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As educators and families have grappled with the challenges of teaching, learning and reconnecting during the COVID-19 pandemic, you would hope that elected officials would have done all they could to help educators and families cope, recover and thrive. Instead, over the past three years, legislators in 45 states proposed hundreds of laws making it harder—[laws](#) seeking to ban books from school libraries; restrict what teachers can say about race, racism, LG-BTQIA+ issues and American history; and limit the school activities in which transgender students can participate. After making untold concessions to far-right members of Congress to eke out a victory, one of Kevin McCarthy's first pledges as House speaker was to pass bills to address "woke indoctrination in our schools." These culture wars may be good fodder for right-wing politicians. But when parents and voters of all ideologies prioritize their goals for schools today, they want something very different. They want what educators want—safe and welcoming environments and a focus on essential knowledge and skills.

The American Federation of Teachers commissioned a survey of voters and public school parents in December to examine public education as a 2022 voting issue and the public's education priorities for 2023 and beyond. Their top priorities include developing students' fundamental skills in reading, math and science; ensuring all children, regardless of background, have an opportunity to succeed; developing critical-thinking and reasoning skills; teaching practical life skills; and preparing students to succeed in college or careers.

We asked respondents to prioritize policies for improving public education. Expanding access to career and technical education, addressing staff shortages, reducing class size, and improving literacy skills top the list.

And we asked which approach should be a higher priority for improving education: making sure schools and teachers have the support and resources to meet the needs of all students, or giving parents more say in what children are taught and stopping schools from teaching a "woke, liberal" agenda, as governors like Ron DeSantis and Glenn Youngkin have advocated. Parents and voters strongly supported the first priority. We also

asked about another concept advocated by anti-public school crusaders like billionaire Betsy DeVos: giving parents more choice over which schools their children attend, including taxpayer funding for private schools. By an 80 percent to 20 percent margin, voters and parents want policymakers to focus on improving education in the public schools rather than expanding school choice.

Parents want what educators want—safe schools and a focus on essential knowledge and skills.

Parents and the public are concerned about shortages of teachers, counselors and nurses. They worry about inadequate funding for schools, students falling behind academically during the pandemic, lack of support and respect for teachers, and school safety. And this survey was conducted before a teacher in Newport News, Va., was shot and critically wounded in her classroom, reportedly by a 6-year-old child.

No one has emerged unscathed from the hardships of the past three years. At least 220,000 [children](#) in the United States have lost a parent to COVID-19. Young people

have lost valuable in-person education, school-based support, and connections with their peers and caring adults. Educators have experienced the hardest years of their professional lives, only to be blamed for school closures caused by a pandemic, labeled as "groomers" and accused of teaching "filth."

These accusations can scare teachers away from having important classroom conversations that are necessary to prepare students for their roles in a healthy democracy. And politicizing education and denigrating teachers exacerbates the educator shortages that already are at crisis levels. Countless people have asked me how, in this climate, we can recruit and retain teachers. We must respect, appreciate and pay them more, of course. But we should also give them the tools, time and support they need to do their jobs.

We must trust teachers to teach. And, frankly, parents and voters do. Three-quarters of parents say that teachers in their schools generally stick to teaching appropriate academic content and skills. Voters see the culture wars as a distraction from schools' core mission of educating students, and they believe that politicians who are pushing these issues are doing so for their own political benefit. Not surprisingly, public school teachers top the list of who parents and voters trust to have the right ideas for public education, while politicians rank dead last.



Weingarten reads to students at Buckeye Primary School in Medina, Ohio, on Sept. 13, 2022.

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