

Public School Parents On The Value Of Public Education

**Findings from a National Survey of Public
School Parents conducted for the AFT**

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Introduction

One perspective that is heard too rarely in the nation's education debates is that of public school parents. To help strengthen their voice, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) commissioned Hart Research Associates to survey the nation's parents and determine their priorities for education and their ideas for improving it. This national survey consisted of interviews with 1,200 public school parents (parents with children who attend a regular public school and/or a charter public school), and included subsamples of 233 African-American parents, 371 Hispanic parents, and 196 parents in major U.S. cities.¹ The interviews were conducted online from July 24 to August 3, 2017.

This report reviews the survey's key findings. Five central themes emerge clearly and consistently from the survey data:

- 1. Parents say public schools are helping their children achieve their full potential and expanding opportunity for low-income and minority children.**
- 2. Parents want access to a good neighborhood public school much more than increased choice of schools. Their highest priorities for these schools are providing a safe and secure environment, developing their children's knowledge and skills, and ensuring equal opportunity for all kids.**
- 3. Parents worry about several trends in education today, including inadequate funding, excessive standardized testing, class size increases, cutting non-academic subjects, teacher turnover, and shifting resources from regular schools to charters and vouchers.**
- 4. Parents disapprove of Betsy DeVos' performance as Secretary of Education and reject her "choice" agenda. They express little confidence in either DeVos or Donald Trump as education leaders, instead looking to teachers, principals, and parent organizations for the right ideas for public education.**
- 5. Parents' education agenda focuses on investing in traditional public schools, with particular emphasis on expanding access to CTE programs, reducing class size, supporting struggling neighborhood schools, including art and music in curriculums, and providing health and nutrition services. They strongly oppose shifting resources from traditional public schools to fund either charter schools or vouchers.**

¹ Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Antonio, San Diego, and San Francisco

1. Parents' Satisfaction With Their Children's Schools

- **Three-fourths of public school parents give a high performance rating to their children's schools.**

Three in four parents (73%) say that the public school(s) their children attend provide them with an excellent or good quality education. In contrast, just 7% feel the education received by their children is not so good or poor (another 20% say "adequate"). Parents across the demographic spectrum give high marks to public schools, including African Americans (70% excellent or good), Hispanics (74%), parents in major cities (73%), and low-income parents² (71%).

- **Parents are overwhelmingly satisfied with the job public schools are doing to help their children achieve their potential.**

Fully 79% of parents are satisfied with their children's public schools when it comes to helping their child or children achieve their full potential, while only 21% report feeling dissatisfied. This widespread satisfaction includes 82% of parents in major cities, 77% of African-American parents, 80% of Hispanic parents, 79% of low-income parents, and 82% of parents who have a child with a disability.

- **Parents believe that public schools are expanding, not reducing, opportunity for the nation's low-income and minority students.**

By a ratio of almost three-to-one, parents say that public schools today do more to expand (53%) than reduce (19%) opportunities for low-income and minority children to succeed in our country. Strong pluralities or majorities of parents in major cities (59% to 16%), Hispanics (48% to 20%), African Americans (48% to 31%), and low-income parents (52% to 20%) share this belief. As we discuss below, parents of disadvantaged children believe that public schools could—with greater support and investment—do even more to help lift children up. But they reject the notion that public schools are holding their children back.

2. What Do Parents Want From Schools?

- **Parents want a good quality public school in their neighborhood, not greater choice of schools to attend.**

Overwhelmingly, parents tell us that what they want for their children is "a good quality neighborhood public school" (71%) much more than "more choices of which schools I can send my children to" (29%). This preference for good

² Low-income parents are those whose children qualify for a free or reduced meal at school.

neighborhood schools is true even among groups of parents who are often assumed to be the main audience for the choice approach, such as major-city parents (64%) and low-income parents (68%). Majorities of both African-American (60%) and Hispanic (66%) parents concur. Even parents who are dissatisfied with the performance of their current public school say by 67% to 33% that what they want is a good neighborhood school rather than more choice.

Parents Want Quality Neighborhood Public Schools More than Choice

With which statement do you agree more?

I want a good quality neighborhood public school I can send my children to



I want to have more choice of which schools I can send my children to



	Good neighborhood school	Choice of schools		Good neighborhood school	Choice of schools
Income under \$40K	67%	33%	Whites	76%	24%
Income \$40K to \$75K	71%	29%	African Americans	60%	40%
Income over \$75K	76%	24%	Hispanics	66%	34%
Major city parents	64%	36%			

- **Parents’ highest priorities for their schools are providing a safe and secure environment, developing their children’s knowledge and skills, and ensuring equal opportunity for all kids.**

Parents believe public schools have critically important roles to play in their children’s development, so that they may go on to succeed in college and/or the workforce. That creates an important set of responsibilities for today’s public schools. The following are selected by parents as the most important goals for public schools (rating of nine or 10 on scale of zero-to-10):

- Providing a safe and secure environment for children (68% extremely important).
- Making sure students graduate with the knowledge and academic skills to succeed in college (63%).
- Ensuring that all children, regardless of background, have the opportunity to succeed (62%, and the top goal for African-American parents and low-income parents).
- Developing students' critical thinking and reasoning abilities (62%).
- Improving students' knowledge in subject areas like English, history, science, and math (61%).

Other priorities for parents include: preparing students to get good jobs and have successful careers (58%), making sure students with disabilities and special needs have equal access to the quality education they need (58%), protecting all students from discrimination in schools, including students of different races, religions, and sexual orientations (58%), and providing access to high-level curriculum, such as advanced placement courses, for students who choose it (57%).

3. Education Problems That Concern Parents

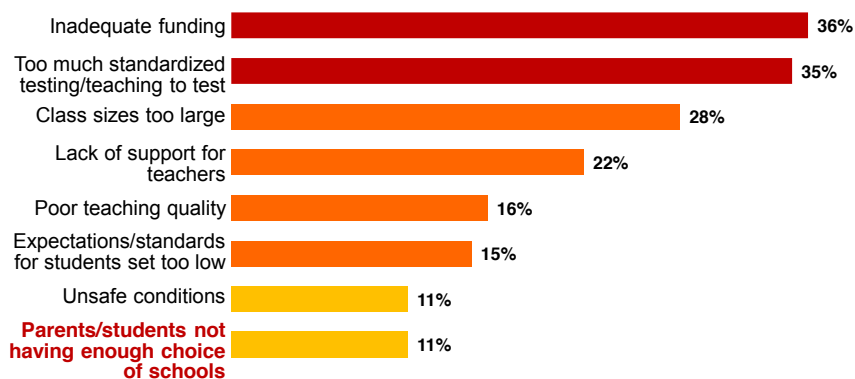
- **While parents generally give their neighborhood schools good marks, they also recognize challenges facing public education, worrying especially about inadequate funding and excessive standardized testing. Notably, lack of school choice does not register as a significant concern.**

By a clear margin, parents identify two central challenges facing public schools today: inadequate funding (36% select as one of the top two problems), and too much standardized testing (35%). Parents also register concern over large class sizes (28%, and the highest concern for Hispanic and major-city parents) and lack of support for teachers (22%). Significantly, the notion of parents and students not having enough choice of schools falls to the bottom of the list at just 11%.

A 61% majority feels there is too much emphasis on standardized testing today, while a mere 11% say there is not enough testing (28% say tests receive the right amount of emphasis). A majority of both African-American parents (55%) and Hispanic parents (52%) agree. Far from being seen as a solution for schools' challenges, standardized testing is increasingly understood as one of the problems to be overcome.

Biggest Problems Facing Schools: Testing (too much) and Funding (too little)–Not Lack of Choice

Two Biggest/Most Important Problems Facing Public Schools Today



- **Parents identify several worrisome trends in education, starting with local and federal budget cuts and the shifting of resources from traditional public schools to charters and vouchers. They also worry about increasing class sizes, staff layoffs, teacher turnover, and cutbacks in non-academic areas such as art, music, libraries, and physical education.**

The survey asks parents how concerned they are about 10 potentially troubling trends in education, and in every case at least 70% of parents feel the trend is a very or fairly serious concern. Consistent with the concern about inadequate funding we saw earlier, parents voice especially deep concern about education budget cuts at both the local (87%) and federal (85%) levels. Eight in 10 (78%) also register concern about shifts in funding away from traditional public schools to vouchers and charter schools.

Other significant concerns among the nation's parents include increased class sizes (80%), layoffs of teachers (75%) and staff (74%), high teacher turnover rates (78%), and cutbacks in art, music, libraries, and physical education to focus more on reading and math (78%).

4. Confidence in Betsy DeVos and Other Education Leaders

- **By a two-to-one margin, public school parents disapprove of the job Betsy DeVos is doing as Secretary of Education.**

Three-fourths of parents say they have heard at least a little about Betsy DeVos and her approach to education issues. The survey asks these informed parents to evaluate her job performance, and the verdict is a clear thumbs down. A mere 23% approve of the job DeVos is doing, while 44% disapprove (33% have no opinion). African-American parents disapprove of DeVos' performance by a commanding 60% to 16% margin, as do Hispanic parents by a two-to-one ratio (46% to 23%).

- **Public school parents reject the DeVos agenda, focused on providing more "choice" via vouchers and charter schools, in favor of a focus on investing in traditional community public schools.**

On the fundamental question underlying today's education debate, parents agree to a remarkable degree: they want to invest in improving neighborhood public schools, not expand parental choice. Given the following choice of approaches for improving education, just 20% endorse the DeVos agenda of focusing on vouchers and charter schools, while fully 80% of parents prefer the second approach:

A) *We should open more public charter schools and provide more vouchers that allow parents to send their children to private schools if they make that choice. Children will receive the best education if we give families the freedom to attend the schools that best meet their needs. (20% agree, 13% strongly)*

B) *We should focus on ensuring that every child has access to a good public school in their community. We need to make the investments needed to ensure all schools provide safe conditions, focus on children’s well-being, create powerful learning environments, build teacher capacity, and foster cultures of collaboration. (80% agree, 60% strongly)*

Support for the community schools approach is widespread, even including groups of parents often portrayed in the media as constituencies for choice: African-American parents (76%), lower-income parents (80%), major-city parents (72%), and Republican parents (76%). Even those not satisfied with their current school (78%) and charter-school parents (57%) agree.

Parents Reject the DeVos “Choice” Agenda

Preferred Approach for Improving Education, Key Subgroups

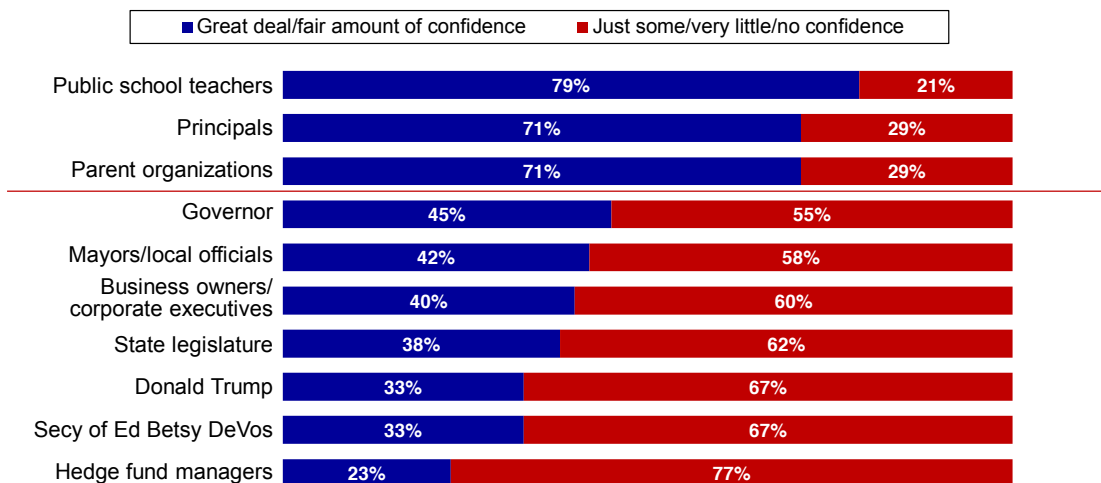
	Invest in neighborhood schools	More charters/ vouchers		Invest in neighborhood schools	More charters/ vouchers
Mothers	84%	16%	Major city	72%	28%
Fathers	76%	24%	Urban	76%	24%
Age 18 to 34	83%	17%	Suburban	81%	19%
Age 35 to 49	79%	21%	Small town/rural	82%	18%
Age 50/older	79%	21%	2016 Clinton voters	84%	16%
Whites	82%	18%	2016 Trump voters	74%	26%
African Americans	76%	24%	2016 nonvoters	82%	18%
Hispanics	78%	22%	Reg. public school parents	81%	19%
Income under \$45K	81%	19%	Charter school parents	57%	43%
Income \$45K to \$75K	79%	21%	Very/fairly satisfied w/schools	81%	19%
Income over \$75K	80%	20%	Less/ not satisfied w/schools	78%	22%
Democrats	84%	16%			
Independents	79%	21%			
Republicans	76%	24%			

- **Parents trust teachers, principals, and parents—much more than Donald Trump or Betsy DeVos—to have the right ideas for their schools.**

Parents express the greatest confidence in educators—both teachers (79% great deal or fair amount) and principals (71%)—and parent organizations (71%) to have the best ideas for public schools. In contrast, relatively low percentages of parents have a great deal or fair amount of confidence in local officials (42%), their governor (45%), business executives (40%), or their state legislature (38%) to have the right education ideas. Coming in at the bottom in terms of parents’ confidence are the leading champions of the “choice” agenda in education: Donald Trump (33%), Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos (33%), and hedge fund managers (23%).

Who Has the Right Ideas for Public Education?

Confidence in People/Organizations to Have Right Ideas for my Public Schools

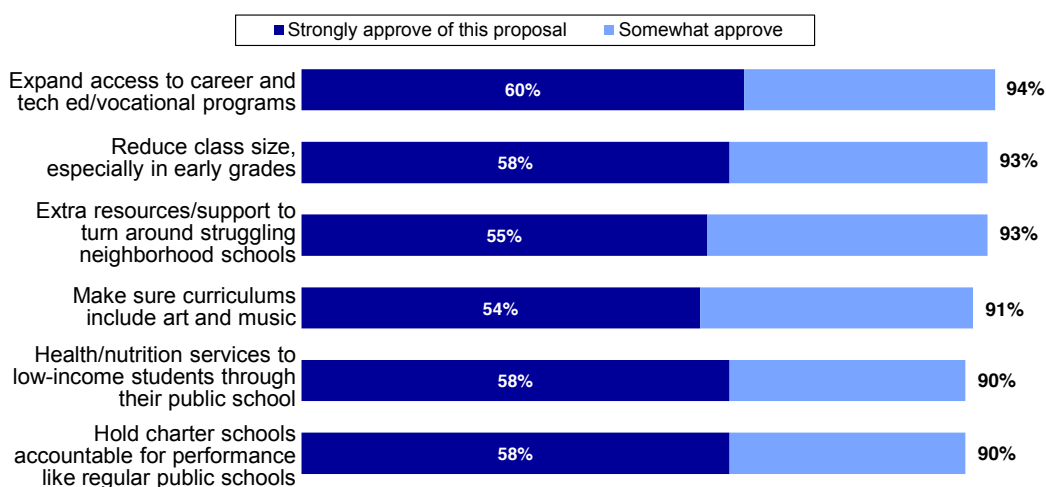


5. Parents' Agenda for Public Education

- **Parents favor a broad investment agenda for public schools, with particular emphasis on expanding access to CTE programs, reducing class size, supporting struggling neighborhood schools, including art and music in curriculums, and providing health and nutrition services.**

Parents favor a wide array of investments designed to improve traditional public schools and expand opportunity for children. They place particular priority on expanding access to career and technical education and other vocational programs that prepare students for jobs (94% approve), reducing class sizes, especially in the early grades (93%), providing extra resources and support to turn around struggling neighborhood schools (93%), making sure school curriculums include art and music (91%), and providing health and nutrition services to low-income children through their public school (90%). Parents also voice strong support for improving mentoring for new or struggling teachers (89%), increasing the number of community schools (87%), and providing high-quality preschool to all three- and four-year-olds (86%).

Parents' Education Policy Agenda



- **Parents reject the idea of shifting funds from regular public schools to pay for either charter school or private school vouchers.**

Fully two-thirds (68%) of parents disapprove of reducing spending on regular public schools and using the funds to increase spending on charter schools, while 32% favor this approach. Significantly, majorities of African-American parents (64%), Hispanic parents (63%), and low-income parents (66%) disapprove of shifting education funds in this manner. Moreover, fully 90% of parents want to

see charter schools held accountable for their performance the way regular public schools are.

By an even more lopsided margin (86% to 14%), parents feel that making investments to improve the quality of education in neighborhood public schools should be a higher priority than helping parents to pay the cost of sending their children to private or religious schools, at taxpayer expense.

- **Parents want to change gears when it comes to teaching quality, by supporting struggling teachers rather than removing them from the classroom.**

By a wide margin, parents want to see a new approach on teacher quality. Just 27% feel that the best way to improve teaching is to regularly remove poorly performing teachers from the classroom and hire new teachers to replace them. In contrast, 73% want to treat teachers like professionals, raise hiring standards, and give new and struggling teachers more support and training.