

[MORNING NEWS](#)
[WAMU 88.5](#)
[LIVE](#)
[NEWSEHOUR](#)
[PLAYLIST](#)



WAMU 88.5
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY RADIO

DONATE

EDUCATION

The education culture war is raging. But for most parents, it's background noise

APRIL 29, 2022 · 5:00 AM ET

HEARD ON MORNING EDITION

By Anya Kamenetz

[7-Minute Listen](#)

[PLAYLIST](#) [Download](#)

[Transcript](#)



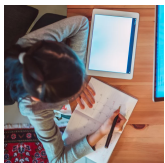
LA Johnson/NPR

Math textbooks axed for their treatment of race; a viral Twitter account directing ire at LGBTQ teachers; a state law forbidding classroom discussion of sexual identity in younger grades; a board book for babies targeted as "pornographic." Lately it seems there's a new controversy erupting every day over how race, gender or history are tackled in public school classrooms.

But for most parents, these concerns seem to be far from top of mind. That's according to a new national poll by NPR and Ipsos. By wide margins – and regardless of their political affiliation – parents express satisfaction with their children's schools and what is being taught in them.

Sponsor Message

The nationally representative poll of 1,007 parents of school-aged children follows up on a similar survey NPR and Ipsos conducted about a year ago. In both polls, parents answered questions about the impact of the pandemic on their children, academically and socially, and about their schools' performance during this time.



THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

NPR/Ipsos Poll: Nearly One-Third Of Parents May Stick With Remote Learning

This year's responses showed positive trends as the nation continues to recover from the worst of the pandemic. Compared to 2021, a growing margin of parents say their child is "ahead" when it comes to math, reading, social skills, and mental

health and well-being. Fewer parents say their child is "behind" in those areas. In fact, in 2022, almost half of parents, 47%, agree with the statement: "the pandemic has not disrupted my child's education." That's up from 38% in 2021, and is a view at odds with that of most education researchers, who see big disruptions in indicators like test scores, college attendance, and preschool enrollment.

Education is a concern, but most parents say their own kids' school is doing well

For decades, voters have expressed concern in polls about the state of K-12 education in the U.S. But when you zoom in closer, parents seem to like their own kids' school, and they like their kids' teachers even more.

Sponsor Message

That's true in the NPR/Ipsos poll as well. Parents named education as their top concern after inflation and crime/gun violence.

However, 88% of respondents agree "my child's teacher(s) have done the best they could, given the circumstances around the pandemic." And 82% agree "my child's school has handled the pandemic well."

Parents feel well-informed about curricula, even when there's controversy

That satisfaction extends to hot-button topics. In the poll, 76% of respondents agree that "my child's school does a good job keeping me informed about the

curriculum, including potentially controversial topics."

“

It really is a pretty vocal minority that is hyper-focused on parental rights and decisions around curriculum.

Mallory Newall, Ipsos

"It really is a pretty vocal minority that is hyper-focused on parental rights and decisions around curriculum," observes Mallory Newall of Ipsos, which conducted the poll.

Just 18% of parents say their child's school taught about gender and sexuality in a way that clashed with their family's values; just 19% say the same about race and racism; and just 14% feel that way about U.S. history.

Christine, a mother in Wisconsin who participated in the poll, is a member of that vocal minority. She asked not to use her last name because she says she's afraid of her child being retaliated against.

Christine, who is white, says her son's teacher has made "snarky comments about white privilege." She also doesn't approve of her son, who is in high school, being asked what pronouns he prefers to use. Switching to a different school or district would be tough for their family, so, Christine says, "hopefully we can do enough countereducation at home to have it not be detrimental to [his] growth and development."

There is a striking lack of partisan divides in the poll responses

As a pollster, Newall at Ipsos says big partisan divides are "all I see on every topic right now." She was struck by the relative lack of them in this poll.

Christine is the type of discontented parent who's most often reflected in the headlines: a cultural conservative. Yet in our poll, the minority of parents who were unhappy with how their school tackled racism and U.S. history were just as likely to identify as Democrats as Republicans. In other words: For every parent who thinks their child's school is too "woke," there may be one who thinks it isn't woke enough.

Jim Ondelacy is a Native American and a Democrat living in North Richland Hills, Texas, outside Fort Worth. He wishes his son's high school went more in depth and taught more about the nation's history of racism and oppression.



NATIONAL

Book bans and the threat of censorship rev up political activism in the suburbs

"It's more of a water-down effect ... [the teachers] kind of whitewash the way that history is taught to their kids," he says.

He wants the school to teach about the French and Indian Wars, the Spanish-American War, and about slavery during the Revolutionary War.

"They understand what's happening with Black Lives Matter ... but they don't really understand where it came from and how it started," he says.

The most partisan issue in our poll was gender and sexuality, but still only a minority expressed any concerns. Republicans are closely divided: 26% say schools are not teaching about gender and sexuality in a way that matches their family's values, while 22% say schools are (the remainder don't know or say schools aren't addressing those topics).

Among Democrats, a third agree with their school's approach to gender and sexuality, while only 11% disagree.

Taryn Chatel, in Belmont, Mich., is the mother of a kindergartner, and has a family friend who is transgender. She's hoping the school will introduce the idea of

gender diversity, so it's not all on her as a parent. "I really hope the district can get behind a way of implementing this," she says.

The silent majority of parents is unconcerned

Republican governors like Ron DeSantis in Florida and Glenn Youngkin in Virginia have helped make parents' rights into a major political talking point, and Republican-aligned groups like No Left Turn In Education and Parents Defending Education have continuously pushed these issues into the spotlight.

“

It's definitely an incredibly small minority that's being amplified with this large, well-funded infrastructure to appear larger and to appear to have more well-founded concerns than they do.

Ralph Wilson, co-founder of the Corporate Genome Project

Ralph Wilson, a researcher who studies how partisan donors back the culture war, says these groups imply that they represent a silent majority of conservative-leaning parents. But that's not necessarily the case, he says.

"It's definitely an incredibly small minority that's being amplified with this large, well-funded infrastructure to appear larger and to appear to have more well-founded concerns than they do."

In fact, in our poll, about a third of parents say they "don't know" how their child's school addresses sexuality, gender identity, racism or patriotism. That's far more than the percentage who express any problem – in some cases, twice as many.

Carmen Shipley, in Grand Junction, Colo., says she "picks her battles" when it comes to her daughter's high school.

"I know there's been some controversy ... but I don't honestly pay much attention to that, as much as some others here."

She and her neighbors tend toward the conservative, and the local school board does as well, so she feels like everyone's on the same page. "I have no issues with any of her teachers ... I'm fairly comfortable with all of that."

Besides, she says, her top priority isn't the culture wars; it's making sure her daughter stays engaged with her studies and is prepared for college.

Taylor Jennings-Brown contributed to this report.



Sign up for NPR's Up First newsletter.

The news you need to start your day. Nothing more, never less.

SUBSCRIBE

[See more subscription options](#)

By subscribing, you acknowledge and agree to NPR's [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).
NPR may share your name and email address with your NPR station. [See Details](#).

More Stories From NPR