PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools

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# Public School Priorities in a Political Year

PDKPol



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# United and divided in a time of crisis

### By Joshua P. Starr

his year, as usual, we began to design the PDK poll in January, when we convened meetings with the advisory group tasked with helping us define our themes and topics. In February, once we had our topics in hand — including a focus on Americans' current attitudes toward charter schools, testing, and the importance of public education to this year's presidential election — we wrote and revised our survey questions, and in March we took the poll into the field.

And then COVID-19 turned everything upside down.

This is to say that the results of the 2020 PDK poll reveal the public's *pre*-pandemic attitudes and beliefs about the public schools. (To capture more recent opinions about school closures, perspectives on remote learning, and other emerging topics, we conducted a set of brief surveys of PDK and Educators Rising members in April and May; these are available at pdkintl.org.) In keeping with our previous 51 polls, it takes the long view, gauging Americans' gradually shifting views on public education, rather than capturing their immediate responses to the current crisis.

Still, this year's poll can help shed some light on the challenges we now face. For example, 85% of respondents said they want the federal government to focus on attracting and retaining quality teachers. In and of itself, this shouldn't be a surprise. (Who doesn't want kids to be taught by great teachers?) Given that education is largely a local and state issue, though, the desire for federal involvement is noteworthy. We already know from previous data that the nation may soon face a teacher shortage; hence, we may have a real crisis on our hands if, as is likely, a large number of experienced teachers opt to not return to the classroom (due to concerns about their health or dissatisfaction with remote learning). Perhaps, then, respondents' desire for the federal government to do something about teacher shortages should serve as a wake-up call for those in Washington who have threatened to reduce financial support on the basis of local decisions about opening up. Americans want them to play a positive role, not a destructive one.

We also asked — before the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests now sweeping the nation — about whether the administration should focus on protecting students from discrimination. It's no surprise that Americans of different racial backgrounds and political leanings feel differently about this issue, but a majority of all respondents believe it's important to protect students. Ninety percent of Black and 77% of Latinx respondents support the federal government focusing on this issue, compared with 62% of whites. In partisan terms, 85% of Democrats and 84% of liberals want increased focus on this issue, as do roughly 7 in 10 independents and moderates, declining to 5 in 10 Republicans and conservatives. While we don't have data from after the BLM protests, one can only assume that support would be higher today given the results of other polls. Yet, the current administration seems to have little interest in helping schools protect students from discrimination, and the president may even be exacerbating the situation with his public statements. Local school and system leaders will be left to handle it without any leadership from Washington.

Another area we asked about this year is testing. Similar to previous years, Americans tend to believe there's too much emphasis on standardized testing. Because of the pandemic, state standardized tests weren't given this spring and aren't likely to be administered in 2021. Even if they are, their utility will be significantly diminished. This leaves educators with the task of figuring out new approaches to assessing students' progress. No doubt it will be hard to do so, but we should embrace this opportunity to address the concerns of many Americans by using formative and authentic assessments to gauge progress and make decisions.

The American public's support of President Trump's education agenda is starkly divided by party affiliation, as was the case with Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. But regardless of administration, funding is the No. 1 education-related concern of most Americans, as it has been for nearly 20 years. Given the crisis we're in, the public and parents would welcome intervention and support from the federal government.

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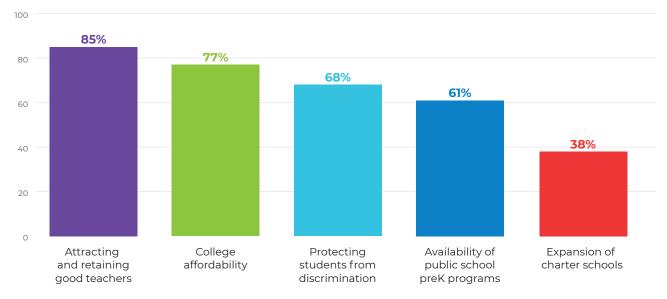
PUBLIC SCHOOL PRIORITIES IN A POLITICAL YEAR

# Introduction

Six in 10 adults and 7 in 10 public school parents call public education highly important in their vote for president this fall. While they express broad support for an increased focus on educational priorities, ranging from teacher retention and college tuition to anti-discrimination efforts and preK programs, support for expanded efforts falls far shorter in one area: charter schools.

Regardless of who wins the November presidential election, 85% of Americans in the 2020 PDK poll want the administration in Washington to focus more on attracting and retaining good teachers. Seventy-seven percent say the same about college affordability. Somewhat fewer, but still a majority at 68%, favor a greater focus on protecting students from discrimination in their schools, and 61% want more done on the availability of public school preK programs. By contrast, only about 4 in 10 favor more efforts to expand charter schools, while 3 in 10 prefer less focus on that.

Now in its 52nd year, the PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools explores these views as well as those regarding testing, problems facing the public schools, substance abuse, charter schools and school vouchers, diversity, and approaches to reading and literacy. Results on each follow. ■



#### Would like to see the administration in Washington focus more on...

PDK poll, 2020

# Political attitudes and policy priorities

The survey finds divided opinions of President Donald Trump's performance on education policy, with 45% of adults approving but more, 53%, disapproving. That includes a vast partisan divide: Eighty-six percent of Republicans approve, dropping to half as many independents and a mere 11% of Democrats.

For comparison, in the fourth year of their presidencies, approval ratings for handling education were 49% approving/43% disapproving for Barack Obama in a Gallup poll and a similar 50% approving/45% disapproving for George W. Bush in an ABC News/Washington Post poll. In both cases, percentages of people who disapproved were lower than for Trump in our poll.

Public education is a priority for many. Six in 10 call it extremely or very important in their vote for president this fall, including a quarter who call it extremely important. Importance rises among parents, to 7 in 10, with a third calling it extremely important.

There's also a partisan difference on this question, but a smaller one than in attitudes on the president's performance. Seventy percent of Democrats identify education as highly important in their vote, declining to 55% of independents and 51% of Republicans.

The importance of education as a voting issue has a strong racial and ethnic component. Seventy-nine percent of Black respondents say it's highly important, including 46% who say it's extremely important. Seventy-one percent of Latinx

### The Questions

Q Do you approve or disapprove of how Donald Trump is handling education policy?

Q Thinking ahead to the presidential election in November, how important is the issue of public education in your vote for president?

Q Regardless of who wins the presidential election, compared with the current level of focus would you like to see the administration in Washington focus more or focus less on each of these?

a. College affordability

b. Expansion of charter schools, which are public schools that are run without many of the state regulations placed on other public schools

c. Efforts to attract and retain good teachers

d. The availability of public school preK programs

e. Protecting students from discrimination in their schools

respondents also say it's extremely or very important. This drops to 52% among white respondents.

As noted, among the five policy priorities the survey tested, efforts to attract and retain good teachers have the most widespread support for a greater focus in Washington, followed closely by college affordability. Half as many respondents want a greater focus on the expansion of charter schools.

	Adults	Parents
Efforts to attract and retain good teachers	85%	86%
College affordability	<b>77</b> %	80%
Protecting students from discrimination in their schools	68%	65%
The availability of public school preK programs	61%	68%
The expansion of charter schools	38%	<b>46</b> %

#### Would like to see the administration in Washington focus more on...



Among groups, parents are slightly more apt than the general public to want a greater focus on the availability of public-school preK programs (68% vs. 61%) and the expansion of charter schools (46% vs. 38%).

Some sharp differences emerge on whether the administration should focus more on protecting students from discrimination in their schools. Ninety percent of Black and 77% of Latinx respondents say so, compared with 62% of whites. In partisan terms, 85% of Democrats and 84% of liberals want increased focus on this issue, as do roughly 7 in 10 independents and moderates, declining to 5 in 10 Republicans and conservatives.

Similarly, Democrats and liberals are 35 and 34 percentage points more likely than Republicans and conservatives to favor an increased focus on college affordability.

Interest in greater attention on the availability of publicschool preK programs reaches about 8 in 10 among Blacks, compared with 55% of whites. It's 77% among Democrats vs. 57% among independents and 46% among Republicans. And it's 9 points higher among women than men, 65% vs. 56%. Partisan preferences flip when it comes to the expansion of charter schools. About 5 in 10 Republicans and conservatives want a greater focus on the expansion of these schools, compared with 29% of Democrats and 26% of liberals. Interest peaks at 57% among those who strongly approve of Trump's education policy, vs. 24% among strong disapprovers, and 55% of Latinx vs. 35% of Black and 33% of white respondents. Those without four-year college degrees are more likely to support efforts to expand charter schools, 42% vs. 29%.

As noted, efforts to attract and retain good teachers receive broad support, with 8 in 10 or more across demographic and partisan groups favoring an increased focus on this issue. Support is lowest (64%) among those who say education is not an important factor in their vote.

Valuing teachers has been a strong theme in recent years. In 2018, two-thirds of Americans said teacher salaries were too low, the most in PDK polls going back to 1969. That year, and again in 2019, about 7 in 10 said they would support a strike by teachers in their community for higher pay. Public school teachers have expressed broad discontent; last year, 60% said they were unfairly compensated, and half said they'd seriously considered leaving the profession.

# Testing

Adults by a 2-1 margin think the public schools in their community put too much emphasis on achievement testing as opposed to not enough emphasis, 41% vs. 21%. Thirty-six percent think the current level is about right. It's similar among K-12 parents — they're more apt to see too much emphasis than too little, 38-23%, while 39% say it's about right.

Views that there's too much emphasis on testing grew from 19% of adults in 1997 to a high of 43% in the 2007 PDK poll; it's essentially the same now. This sense has eased, however, among parents, from a peak of 52% in 2007 to 38% now.

Liberals (53%) and college graduates (51%) are most apt to say there's too much emphasis on testing, while thinking there's not enough emphasis is highest among Latinx respondents (32%), vs. 17% among white and 25% among Black respondents.

That said, majorities do see testing as appropriate for a variety of purposes, whether as an important factor, the main factor, or even the determining factor.

At the most, three-quarters or more of adults and parents alike say it's appropriate to use tests to determine whether a student should be eligible to enroll in a special academic program, be promoted to the next grade, or to graduate. About two-thirds also say it's appropriate for test results to be used as an important factor in teacher evaluations. Sixtyone percent overall, and 68% of parents, also endorse using tests as the main factor in determining how well one school compares with others.

### The Questions

Q In your opinion, is there too much emphasis on achievement testing in the public schools in your community, not enough emphasis on testing, or about the right amount?

Q Do you think these are appropriate or inappropriate ways to use students' test results?

a. To use as the main factor in determining how well one school compares with others

b. To determine whether a student should be promoted to the next grade or graduate from high school

c. To determine whether a student should be eligible to enroll in a special academic program

d. To use as an important factor in teacher evaluations

e. To use as an important factor in determining how much financial support the district receives from the state

There's less support for another potential use of student test scores, as an important factor in determining how much financial support a district receives from the state. Fifty-five percent of adults think that's inappropriate. Parents are divided, 52%-47%, appropriate-inappropriate.

### Appropriate to use test results...

	Adults
To determine whether a student should be eligible to enroll in a special academic program	83%
To determine whether a student should be promoted to the next grade or graduate from high school	<b>77</b> %
As an important factor in teacher evaluations	64%
As the main factor in determining how well one school compares with others	61%
As an important factor in determining how much financial support the district receives from the state	45%

# Problems facing the public schools

For the 19th straight year in PDK polls, lack of financial support tops the list of the biggest problems facing the public schools. Nineteen percent cite it in an open-ended question, with all other responses in the single digits. (Up to three answers were accepted.) That said, mentions of funding concerns are down from 25% last year to their lowest since 2016, and well off their peak of 36% in recession-hammered 2010 and 2011.

School funding also tops the list among parents, cited by 14% — but that's virtually half of what it was last year (27%). Indeed, another problem — bullying — now runs a close second, at 11%. Further, 8% of parents now mention smoking,

### The Questions

Q What do you think are the biggest problems facing the public schools in your community?

vaping, or drug use, compared with 4% last year. Five percent overall and 6% of parents mentioned COVID-19. (Note that the survey was conducted March 13-23, 2020, in the early days of the pandemic in the United States.)

Again, partisanship colors these views. Twenty-nine percent of liberals and 26% of Democrats say a lack of financial support is one of the biggest problems facing the public schools, compared with 11% of conservatives and 8% of Republicans. (Moderates and independents are in the middle, at 20% alike.) Republicans and conservatives are more apt to see a lack of discipline or poor curriculum as a problem.

Among other differences, adults with a four-year college degree are 11 points more apt than non-college-educated adults to name financial support as one of the biggest problems facing the public schools, while non-college-educated adults are 9 points more likely to cite bullying.



### Substance abuse

The rise in concern about smoking, vaping, and drug use is underscored in other results. Sixty-five percent of adults see the use of e-cigarettes/vaping either as a crisis (22%) or a serious problem (43%). It's essentially the same among parents.

The use of opioids raises broad concerns as well; 54% of parents and adults alike say it's either a crisis or a serious problem. About half see use of alcohol and marijuana as highlevel concerns.

Large majorities across demographic groups see e-cigarettes as a significant problem in their community's public schools, ranging from a high of 70% of Westerners and urbanites to 58% of Blacks.

There are more differences in perceiving marijuana use in the schools as a serious problem or a crisis: It's highest in the West, 58%, compared with 46% in other regions. Six in 10 Latinx respondents say so, compared with 45% of whites and Blacks alike. Fifty-three percent of those older than 50 see marijuana use as at least a serious problem, compared with 44% of those under 50. And it's 60% among conservatives, vs. 45% among moderates and a similar 41% among liberals.

### The Questions

Q As far as you are aware, how big a problem is each of these among students in your community's public schools?

- a. Use of e-cigarettes/vaping
- b. Use of marijuana
- c. Use of alcohol
- d. Use of opioids

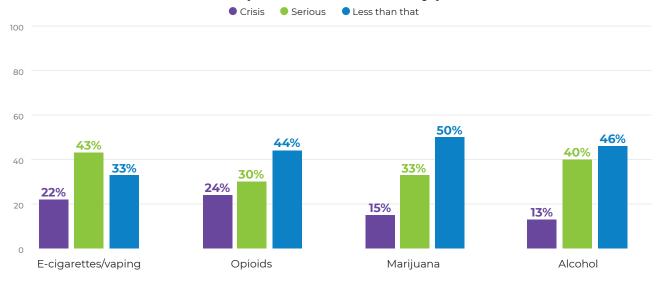
Q How confident are you that your community's public schools are doing a good job teaching students about these?

- a. The risks of e-cigarettes/vaping
- b. The risks of using marijuana
- c. The risks of using alcohol
- d. The risks of using opioids

Q If a child is caught with vaping equipment at school, what should be the school's priority?

Disciplining the student for violating school policy

Referring the student for health counseling



#### Substance abuse problems in community public schools

PDK poll, 2020

Similarly, respondents who are Latinx are more likely than those who are white or Black to see alcohol use among students as a serious problem or worse, 61% vs. 50% alike; as are 6 in 10 conservatives, vs. 47% of moderates. (Liberals fall between the two at 52%.) There's a 9-point gap by income, with 57% among those making less than \$50,000 vs. 48% among those with incomes of \$100,000 or more seeing alcohol use as at least a serious problem.

Opioid use among students is generally seen as a serious problem or a crisis by about half to roughly six 6 in 10 Americans across demographic groups.

Few see these four forms of substance abuse as not a problem in the local schools, ranging from 9% to 19%.

Modest majorities of parents — and fewer adults overall — are confident that their local public schools do a good job of teaching students about the risks of substance abuse. Anywhere from 52% to 58% of parents are confident across the four types of substances, with 42 to 48% not confident. Few are "very" confident in the schools on this issue; for example, only 15% of parents are very confident the schools are doing a good job teaching the risks of e-cigarettes/vaping.

Confidence among the general population ranges from 48% to 53%.

Parents and all adults alike divide on what the outcome should be for a child caught with vaping equipment at school. About half think the priority should be referring the student for health counseling; the other half prioritize disciplining the student for violating school policy.

Democrats (60%) and independents (54%) are much more likely than Republicans (38%) to prefer health counseling as the response, as are liberals and moderates compared with conservatives. Women (55%) and college graduates (59%) also are more likely to prioritize health counseling over discipline, compared with men and those without college degrees.



### Charter schools and school vouchers

Support for voucher programs relies to some extent on the type of schools for which vouchers are provided. Fifty-three percent of Americans express support for programs in which parents can use tax money that now goes to their local public schools to partly pay for private school tuition; that slips to 48% if the vouchers help fund religious school tuition. (The pattern's the same among parents, but not statistically significant given the smaller sample size.)

Views on vouchers are sensitive to how the issue is framed. This poll asked if people support or oppose "a voucher program in which parents can use tax money that now goes to their local public schools to partly pay for private school tuition." (It also asked about religious school tuition.) Different results, with less support, came in response to this 2017 PDK poll question: "Some people say public funds should be used only to pay for public schools that offer tuition-free education for all students. Others say parents should be able to direct some public funds to any school their child attends, whether public, private or religious. This would cover the full

### The Questions

Q If you could send your oldest child to any school and cost was not a factor, would you send them to the school they now attend or to a different school?

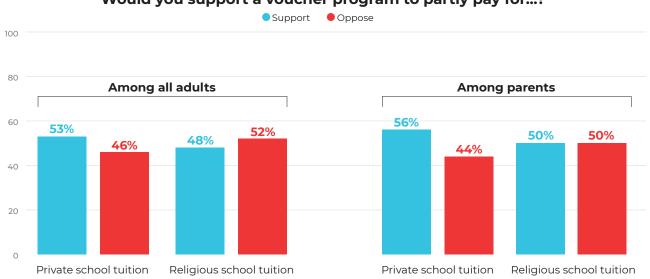
Q Would you support or oppose establishing or adding charter schools in your community if that meant reducing the amount of funds available for the traditional public schools?

Q Do you support or oppose each of these?

a. A voucher program in which parents can use tax money that now goes to their local public schools to partly pay for private school tuition

b. A voucher program in which parents can use tax money that now goes to their local public schools to partly pay for religious school tuition

cost of public school, or the partial cost of private or religious school." Asked their preference, 34% said parents should be able to direct some public funds to any school; 61% said the money should go to public schools only.



#### Would you support a voucher program to partly pay for ...?

PDK poll, 2020



This year's poll also measured views on another "school choice" option, establishing or adding local charter schools. Four in 10 adults support this even if it means reducing the amount of funds available for traditional public schools, as do 45% of parents. That's up from 28% support among all adults in a similar question in 2005.

Nonetheless, 59% oppose establishing or adding charter schools if that means reducing the amount of funds available for traditional public schools. That compares with 52% opposed in a similar 2017 PDK poll question on "allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense."

Opposition to adding charter schools at the expense of traditional public schools is both higher and more intense than support among the general population: Twice as many adults strongly oppose as strongly support the idea, 26% vs. 13%. Parents, however, are equally apt to strongly support or oppose it (20% alike).

Support is highest among Republicans and conservatives (53% alike) and Latinx people (50%), and lowest among Democrats,

liberals, and those with post-graduate degrees (26% in each group).

Those who want the administration in Washington to focus more on the expansion of charter schools are more supportive of either voucher program, as well as establishing charter schools even at the expense of traditional public schools. Twothirds of those who want a greater focus on the expansion of charter schools support adding them even if that means reducing the funds available for traditional public schools, vs. 38% of those who want the same focus as now and just 8% of those who'd like less focus.

When asked where they would send their oldest child if cost were not a factor, 6 in 10 public school parents say they would stick with the school their child now attends, while 4 in 10 would go to a different school — similar to when the question was asked previously, in 2010 and 1996.

There are differences on this question by income and race/ ethnicity: Among parents with household incomes less than \$100,000, and those from minority racial or ethnic groups, about half say they'd change schools if cost were not an object. That falls to about 3 in 10 whites and people in \$100,000-plus households.

# Diversity

Special programs that reduce school diversity are more apt to be opposed than supported, but the difference is small. For example, if a school district uses test scores to select students for a special program, and as a result many Black and Latinx students don't qualify, 53% oppose offering the program because it reduces racial and ethnic diversity, while 46% support it despite its reducing diversity.

Similarly, 54% oppose offering a program in which many lower-income students don't qualify, vs. 44% who support it, despite its reducing economic diversity.

It's a closer call among parents. They divide essentially evenly, 48% supporting and 51% opposing special programs that reduce racial and ethnic diversity, and a similar split of 47% supporting and 52% opposing programs that lower economic diversity.

Groups disadvantaged in either case are less likely to express support:

- A special program that reduces ethnic and racial diversity is supported by 24% of Black and 38% of Latinx respondents, vs. 53% of whites. Further, it's backed by 36% of those with household incomes less than \$50,000, vs. 55% of those with incomes \$100,000 or higher.
- A program that reduces economic diversity results in almost the same gap by incomes, supported by 34% in the lower-income group vs. 53% of those at the top income

### The Questions

Q Say a school district uses test scores to select students for a special academic program, and, as a result, many black and Hispanic students don't qualify. Would you...

Support offering this program, even though it reduces racial and ethnic diversity in the regular school program

Oppose offering this program, because it reduces racial and ethnic diversity in the regular school program

Q Say a school district uses test scores to select students for a special academic program, and, as a result, many lower-income students don't qualify. Would you...

Support offering this program, even though it reduces racial and ethnic diversity in the regular school program

Oppose offering this program, because it reduces racial and ethnic diversity in the regular school program

level. Black (28%) and Latinx (37%) respondents again are less likely than whites (48%) to express support.

There are wide partisan gaps as well; twice as many Republicans as Democrats support each program.



### Approaches to reading and literacy

The survey also looked at preferences for teaching reading and literacy — either using phonics, whole language instruction, or the "balanced approach" combining both. The latter wins far greater preference; 72% of adults think a balanced approach is most effective at teaching young students how to read. Two-thirds think it's most effective in teaching literacy as well.

Support for either phonics or whole language instruction is similar, ranging from 13% to 19% among all adults and parents.

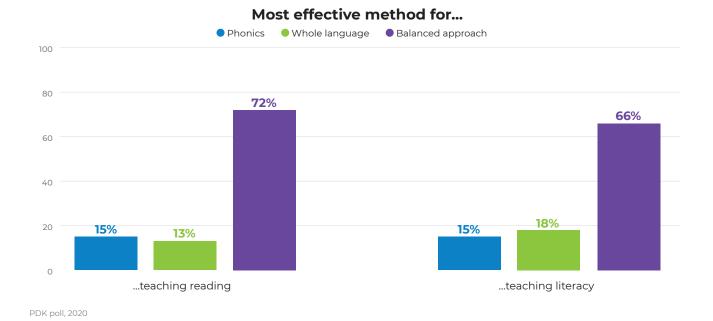
Liberals (79%) and moderates (75%) are more likely than conservatives (62%) to support a balanced approach to teaching reading. Independents (77%) and Democrats (73%) are more supportive of a balanced approach than Republicans (61%). There's a 7-point difference between college graduates and nongraduates, 76% vs. 69%. And 66% of Southerners see the balanced approach as more effective, vs. three-quarters elsewhere. These differences are more muted or absent on the most effective approach to teaching literacy.

Adults' own reading habits don't make for big differences on the best approach for teaching reading: Sixty-nine percent of avid readers support a balanced approach, as do 77% of those who are "not much of a reader." Avid readers split 17%-13% between preferring phonics or whole language instruction instead, and nonreaders split 14%-8%. Preferring a balanced approach to teaching literacy is essentially the same among avid readers and nonreaders.

All told, 23% of adults describe themselves as avid readers, 37% as regular readers, 26% as occasional readers, and 13% as not much of a reader.

Postgraduates and adults age 65+ are most likely to consider themselves avid or regular readers; it's about three-quarters in each group, vs. 50% of those with no more than a high school education and 52% of 18- to 29-year-olds. Liberals (67%) and conservatives (61%) also are more apt than moderates (53%) to be avid or regular readers. Women are 9 points more likely than men to be frequent readers, and whites 8 points more likely than those of other racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Avid readers differ attitudinally on some issues. They're more apt than nonreaders to prioritize health counseling over discipline when a student is caught with vaping equipment at school (61% vs. 38%); to oppose adding charter schools if that means reducing the amount of funds for public schools (69% vs. 54%), and to think there's too much emphasis on testing (52% vs. 40%). They're also 14 to 16 points less likely to think it appropriate to use test results in state funding, teacher evaluations, and school comparisons.



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### The Questions

Q "Phonics" teaches reading by showing students how to recognize sounds within words. "Whole language instruction" teaches reading by showing students how to recognize words in the context of sentences and stories that they can understand. The "balanced approach" is a combination of both. Which do you think is most effective in teaching young students how to read?

Phonics

Whole language instruction

Balanced approach

Q Which do you think is most effective in teaching literacy, which is not just reading but a more comprehensive use of language in writing, speaking, and learning?

Phonics

Whole language instruction

Balanced approach

Q Thinking about any reading you do on your own, not for work, would you say you're:

An avid reader

A regular reader

An occasional reader

Not much of a reader



#### WHAT AMERICANS SAID

# Survey methodology

The 2020 Phi Delta Kappa survey was conducted using the nationally representative Ipsos KnowledgePanel®, in which participants are randomly recruited via addressbased sampling to participate in survey research projects by responding to questionnaires online. Households without internet connections are provided with a web-enabled device and free internet service.

The survey was designed to include approximately 1,000 adults in the general population. Field work was conducted March 13-23, 2020. After initial invitations, reminder emails were sent on the third day of the field period. Out of 1,755 panel members invited to participate, completed, qualified surveys were provided by 1,060. Participants completed the survey in a median time of 8 minutes.

In the quality control process, the following were flagged for possible inattention:

- The fastest 2% of respondents in total completion time.
- Those who skipped more than one-quarter of all survey items.
- Those who entered the same response items in three or more grid questions (Q3, Q6, Q12, Q13).

Respondents received 1 point for each of these measures. No points were assigned to 956 respondents, 1 point to 74, 2 points to 23 and 3 points to 7. Those flagged on two or three measures were removed from the dataset (30 cases).

The sample composition after quality control was 1,030 general population adults, including 206 parents of children in K-12 public schools.

Data were weighted via iterative proportional fitting to the following benchmark distributions of general population adults from the U.S. Census Bureau's March 2018 Current Population Survey Supplement and 2017 American Community Survey:

- Gender (male, female) by age (18-29, 30-44, 45-59, 60+)
- Race/ethnicity (white, Black, other or multiple races, Latinx)
- Census region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West)
- Education (less than high school or high school, some college, bachelor or higher)
- Household income (\$0-\$24,999, \$25K-\$49,999, \$50K-\$74,999, \$75K-\$124,999, \$125K+)
- Language proficiency (English-proficient Latinx, bilingual Latinx, Spanish-proficient Latinx, non-Latinx English proficient).

For the open-ended responses in QI, responses were independently coded by two researchers using the same code book; codes were then reconciled.

