

53rd Annual

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

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Positive marks, high
hopes for local schools'
pandemic response

PDKPoll



The pandemic and the PDK Poll

By Joshua P. Starr

For 53 years, PDK has polled the American public on their attitudes toward the nation's public schools. Every year until 2020, we asked a variety of questions about how parents and other adults felt about the schools overall (both nationally and in their own neighborhood), the quality of the instruction they provide, their resources and services, campus safety, student discipline, and on and on. But as we all know, the 2020-21 school year was anything but typical. So, we decided to take a different tack, setting aside our usual approach to the survey and, instead, zeroing in on the questions that matter most right now: How have the public schools performed during the pandemic, and what are Americans' main concerns about the coming 2021-22 school year?

The results offer a rare glimmer of hope at a difficult time. Not only have the nation's educators persevered through the hardest school year in memory, but according to our findings, most Americans — especially parents with children in the public schools — remain confident in their local schools' ability to provide effective instruction and leadership.

Today, as the Delta variant wreaks fresh havoc, and as communities debate new mask mandates and vaccine requirements, educators ought to keep in mind just how well-regarded they are by their communities. Over the past 18 months, parents have depended on teachers and school administrators to keep them informed, check in on their

children, and provide a measure of normalcy in an uncertain time. People have valued educators' work and trusted them to do their best.

Only one of this year's poll findings gives me pause: As in previous years, we see a sharp distinction between the public's views on social-emotional learning (SEL) and the views of educators. Parents and other adults tend to place much greater importance on academic learning, while educators view SEL and academics as roughly equal in importance. So when teachers make it a priority to address students' social and emotional needs, will the public perceive them to be giving too little emphasis to academics?

It's doesn't have to be an either-or choice. Educators can create a supportive classroom climate that incorporates SEL even as they provide rigorous academic instruction — but they may need to reassure parents that they can pursue both goals at the same time. We don't know what the 2021-22 school year will bring, but we know that many kids have suffered throughout the pandemic and will bring their fears, anxieties, and traumas with them to school. SEL and academic learning will be equally important in the months ahead. Our poll results show that most Americans trust educators. Let's hope that they will trust them not only to help students catch up in reading, history, math, and other subjects but also to help students recover emotionally from a terrible year.

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

Positive marks, high hopes for local schools' pandemic response

Majorities of Americans give high marks to their community's public schools and public school teachers for their handling of the coronavirus pandemic during the 2020-21 school year. Further, the public is broadly confident in schools' preparedness to handle the challenges ahead in 2021-22.

Teachers fare especially well in these assessments. About two-thirds of adults overall, and as many K-12 public school parents, give their community's public school teachers an A

or B grade for their pandemic response. Parents are almost as positive about their community's public schools more generally, giving 63% A's or B's, though the positive rating slips to 54% among all Americans.

As is customarily the case, public schools nationally — as opposed to schools or teachers in one's own community — fare less well, with about 4 in 10 adults overall, and parents in particular, giving them A or B grades for their pandemic response.



The 2021 PDK poll, now in its 53rd consecutive year, explores these and other views of how schools and teachers responded to the pandemic during the 2020-21 school year and their expectations for the recovery ahead.

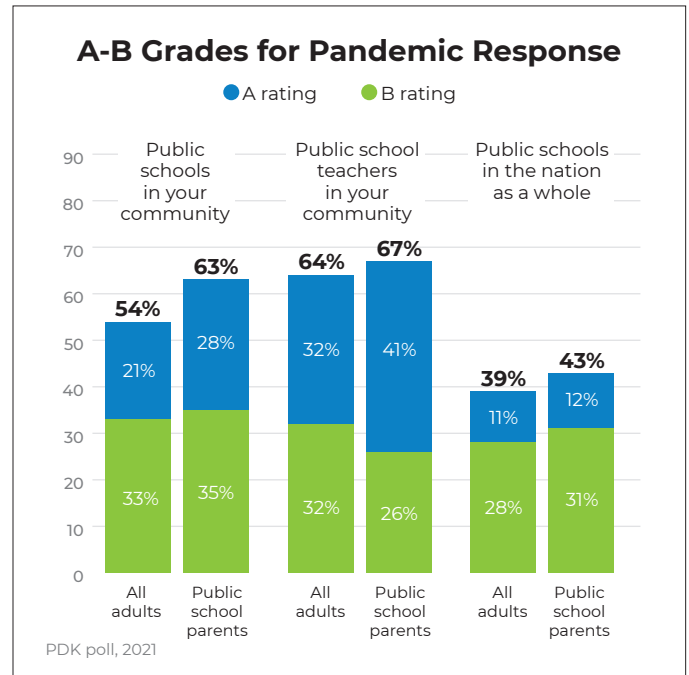
Results show a division of attitudes on what the biggest challenge for public school students will be in the coming school year. While catching up academically tops the list among options offered, substantial shares of respondents choose readjusting to school schedules and responding to social-emotional needs as the biggest challenge.

In an encouraging sign, Americans by wide margins are confident that the public schools in their community will be prepared to reopen fully this fall; that it will be safe for students, teachers, and staff to return, and that schools will be ready to confront key challenges in students' pandemic recovery.

The survey was produced by Langer Research Associates for PDK International, with interviews conducted June 25-July 5, 2021, in English and Spanish, among a representative, random national sample of 1,008 adults.

Pandemic response

Educational experiences varied in K-12 public schools during the 2020-21 school year: About half of public school parents report that hybrid instruction — a mix of remote and in-person learning — was the main form of schooling for most students in their local schools. About a quarter say that fully remote, online instruction prevailed, and 17% report that their schools provided chiefly in-person instruction.



Among all adults, somewhat fewer (8%) say instruction was fully in person, and more don't know what the mode of instruction was used. Rural adults are more apt than those in urban areas to report that in-person instruction was the main mode in their schools (12% vs. 4%). Among suburbanites, 8% say so.

The 2021 PDK poll survey was conducted using the nationally representative Ipsos KnowledgePanel®, in which participants are randomly recruited via address-based 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.

Field work was conducted June 25-July 5, 2021. Out of 1,810 panel members invited to participate, completed surveys were provided by 1,018. The sample composition after quality control was 1,008 general population adults, including 190 parents of children in K-12 public schools.

Data were weighted via iterative proportional fitting to the following benchmarks from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey (with metropolitan status from the March 2020 Current Population Survey):

- Gender (male, female) by age (18-29, 30-44, 45-59, 60+)
- Race/ethnicity (white, Black, other or 2+ races, Hispanic)
- Census region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West)
- Education (high school or less, some college, bachelor's degree or higher)
- Household income (less than \$25,000, \$25,000 to less than \$50,000, \$50,000 to less than \$75,000, \$75,000 to less than \$100,000, \$100,000 to less than \$150,000, more than \$150,000).

As noted, 54% of Americans give A or B ratings to the pandemic response efforts of public schools in their community in the past year; this reaches 63% among K-12 public school parents. Fewer respondents in both groups — 39% overall and 43% of parents — give A’s or B’s to the efforts of public schools in the nation as a whole.

Local teachers fare best, with 64% of all adults and 67% of public school parents giving A or B ratings to the public school teachers in their community for their pandemic response. That includes about a third of all adults, and 4 in 10 parents, giving teachers an A rating. (A’s are harder to come by for local public schools and especially for public schools nationally.)

Learning models make a difference. People whose community’s public schools maintained chiefly in-person instruction are more apt than those whose schools went fully remote to give an A or B rating to their schools and teachers alike. Those whose main mode was a hybrid model fall in between.

Political partisanship also informs these views. Democrats are 9 to 17 points more apt than Republicans to give an A or B rating on all three items, with independents falling in between on each. And women are 7 to 9 points more apt than men to grade each highly.

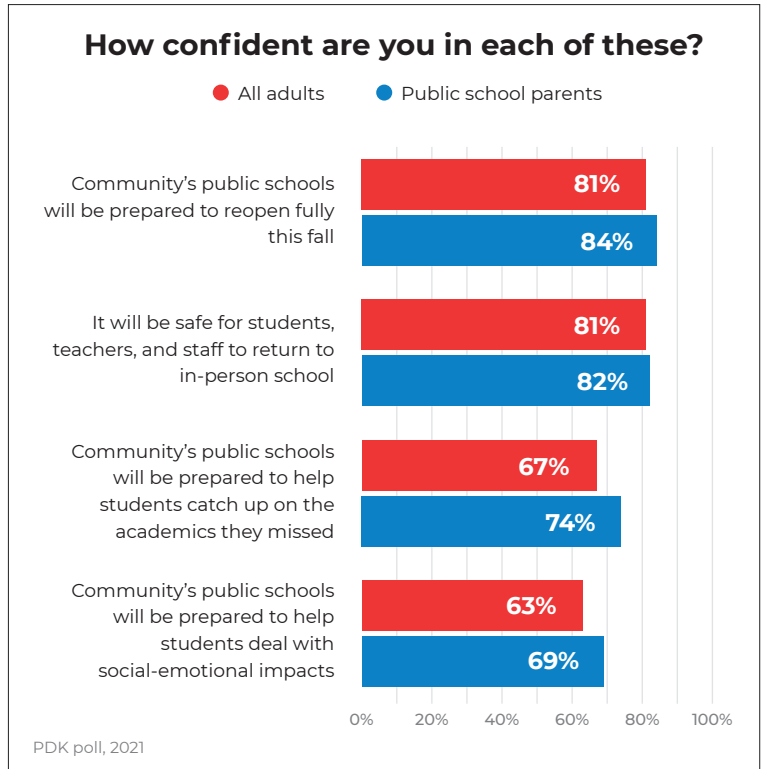
The year ahead

When given three options to select as the biggest challenge for local public school students in the year ahead, a plurality of adults (47%) cite catching up academically. Three in 10 think it’ll be readjusting to regular school schedules and routines, and about 2 in 10 select dealing with social-emotional impacts of the pandemic. Results are similar among public school parents.

Here, too, learning models matter. People whose schools mainly used a hybrid or remote model in 2020-21 are especially apt to think catching up academically will be the biggest challenge. This declines among those whose schools maintained mostly in-person classes.

There are gaps among ideological groups as well. Conservatives (54%) and moderates (49%) are more apt than liberals (38%) to cite catching up academically as the biggest challenge. For their part, liberals (31%) are more likely than conservatives (19%) and moderates (17%) to see social-emotional impacts as the top challenge.

Whatever the obstacles, broad majorities of Americans express confidence in schools’ preparedness for the road ahead. Eight in 10 adults are very or somewhat confident that their community’s public schools will be prepared to reopen fully this fall. Just as many think it will be safe for students, teachers, and staff to return to school in person. Fewer, but still two-thirds, say the same about their local schools being prepared to help students catch up on the academics they



missed during the pandemic. And 63% are highly confident their schools will be prepared to help students deal with social-emotional impacts of the pandemic.

Confidence is higher among K-12 public school parents on some measures. They are a slight 7 points more apt than adults overall to be very or somewhat confident that their community’s public schools will be prepared to help students catch up on academics (74% vs. 67%). They’re 12 points more likely than adults overall to be very confident that their community’s public schools will be prepared to reopen fully (46% vs. 34%). And they’re 9 points more apt to be very confident that their schools will be prepared to help students deal with social-emotional impacts (26% vs. 17%).

Perceptions of past performance shape expectations. Those who give their community’s public schools an A or B rating for their handling of the pandemic in the past year are 15 to 37 points more apt than others to be highly confident in the schools on each of these four measures.

For this question, too, the past year’s main learning model informs respondents’ views. People whose public schools mainly used a hybrid model are 7 to 17 points more apt than those with fully remote schools to be confident in their schools’ preparedness to reopen fully this fall, to help students catch up on academics, and to deal with social-emotional impacts. Confidence on catching up on academics and dealing with social-emotional impacts is higher still among those whose schools mainly used in-person learning. (The sample of those whose schools maintained in-person learning is small,

but these results are statistically significant.)

In other notable differences, rural residents are 9 to 17 points more likely than their urban counterparts to be highly confident in school readiness on each of the four items; suburbanites generally fall in between. And partisan differences emerge on two items: Republicans are 16 points more apt than Democrats to be confident it'll be safe for students, teachers, and staff to return to in-person school this fall (90% vs. 74%), and 7 points more apt to be confident their schools will be prepared to reopen fully. On both, independents fall in between. ■



The Questions

Q Suppose each of the following was graded A, B, C, D, or Fail for its response to the coronavirus pandemic during the past school year. What grade would you give them?

- The public schools in your community
- The public school teachers in your community
- The public schools in the nation as a whole

Q As far as you are aware, what was the main mode of instruction for most students in your community's public schools during the past school year? (The mode may have changed over time. Please select the one that you think was used most during the school year.)

- Fully remote, online instruction
- Fully in-person instruction
- Hybrid — a mix of remote and in-person instruction
- Not aware

Q Which of these do you think will be the biggest challenge for public school students in your community in the next school year?

- Catching up academically
- Dealing with social-emotional impacts of pandemic
- Readjusting to regular school schedules and routines

Q How confident are you in each of these?

- That your community's public schools will be prepared to reopen fully this fall
- That it will be safe for students, teachers, and staff to return to in-person school this fall
- That your community's public schools will be prepared to help students catch up on the academics they missed during the pandemic
- That your community's public schools will be prepared to help students deal with social-emotional impacts of the pandemic

Q Do you have any children who were in grades K-12 in the past school year?