

Putting parents at the center of school reopening: Highlights from COVID-19 parent surveys

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Remote learning upended schools' long-standing roles as stable sources of childcare, peer interactions, and in-person learning support, and fundamentally altered many families' roles in their children's education.

We set out to understand parents' attitudes about school reopening and the impacts of school closures on their children's well-being, as well as how families are adjusting their plans in response to school closures.

Decisions about whether to reopen schools for in-person instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic have become increasingly politicized; it's not always easy to understand how those most impacted feel about school closures.

In an effort to gauge public opinion of the current state of K-12 education, we scoured the web and survey databases, including lists maintained by [The Evidence Project](#) and [EdChoice](#), for nationally representative survey data. Based on our review of the existing evidence, we found:

- A majority of parents consistently favor some in-person learning, but support for fully in-person learning dropped significantly over the summer amid rising case counts and public health fears.
- Evidence on how parents' attitudes about reopening vary is still emerging but points to gaps along income lines.
- Parents are increasingly worried about their children's academic and social well-being. This is especially true of low-income families and families of color.
- With continued safety concerns and in-person instruction in short supply, many families are seeking alternatives.

These findings add nuance to the debate about school reopening and suggest that parents possess a variety of concerns and priorities around schooling during the pandemic. While many parents continue to support some in-person instruction, attitudes can vary significantly across groups and communities. They are also likely to continue to evolve over time, especially as virus cases continue to mount across the nation. Regardless of whether schools provide instruction virtually or in person, policymakers should act now to address parents' concerns about their children's social, emotional, and physical well-being.

A majority of parents consistently favor some in-person learning, but support for fully in-person learning dropped significantly over the summer

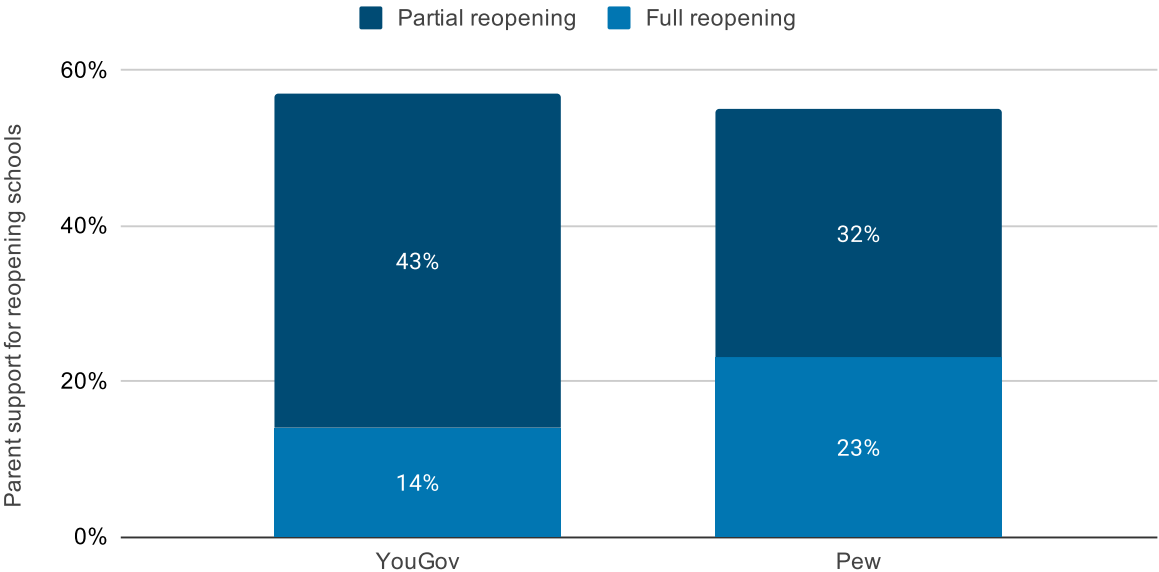
A nationally representative survey conducted by USC’s Understanding American Study in early June found 45 percent of parents supported or strongly supported schools to reopen with safety measures, while 43 percent supported or strongly supported schools to remain closed.

Those attitudes appeared to have shifted as public health concerns mounted over the summer. By late July—when COVID-19 cases started to spike nationally and throughout the sunbelt—a Gallup survey found support for remote learning had quadrupled from 7 percent to 28 percent over a two-month period. Support for in-person learning, on the other hand, plummeted by 20 percentage points, to 36 percent. A similar YouGov survey found that 35 percent of families preferred schools open online.

These trends also are reflected on data about what families said they planned to do for their children’s schooling: a longitudinal survey from EdChoice found an 11 percentage point uptick from May to July in parents who were very likely to choose remote learning over sending their children back to school.

By late summer, parents’ attitudes about school reopening appeared to have stabilized. But even as the number of families supporting remote-only learning grew over the course of the summer, solid majorities of parents continued to favor at least a partial reopening of schools. In August, YouGov found 43 percent of parents favored a partial reopening, while 14 percent favored a full reopening. Pew found that 32 percent of parents favored a partial reopening and 23 percent favored a full reopening.

Figure 1. In late summer, a majority of parents favored at least some in-person instruction



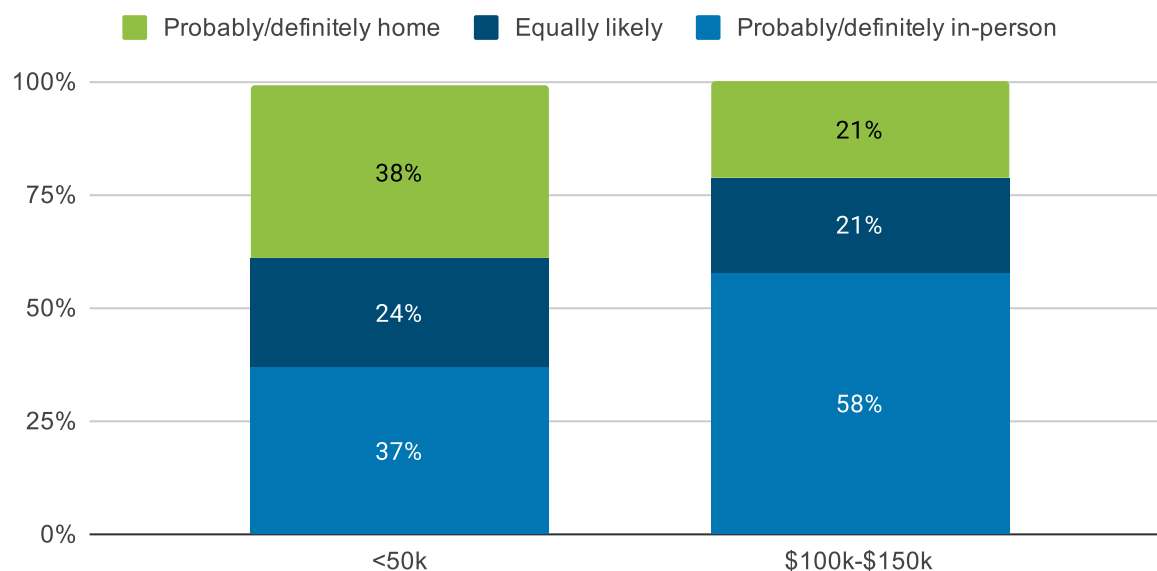
Source: YouGov, Pew

By the fall, the number of parents preferring remote-only instruction remained roughly the same. According to a survey in September by the [Franklin Templeton-Gallup Economics of Recovery Study](#), about one-third of parents would prefer that their school offer full-time remote learning. An [EdChoice/Morning Consult survey](#) in October found that 53 percent of parents were somewhat or very comfortable with their children returning to school.

Evidence on how parents' attitudes about reopening vary is still emerging, but points to gaps along income lines

USC found more than half of lower-income families preferred schools remain closed, compared to just 36 percent of higher-income families. According to a nationally representative survey by [JAMA Network](#), 37 percent of parents with an annual income between \$100,000 and \$150,000 reported that they would definitely send their children to in-person learning, while only 21 percent of parents with an annual income of less than \$50,000 reported the same.

Figure 2. Higher-income families are more likely to prefer in-person instruction



Source: [JAMA Network](#). Estimates control for other respondent characteristics.

Some have observed parents' attitudes about school reopening may also differ by race. For example, a [poll conducted by National Parents Union and Echelon Insights in June](#) found white parents were twice as likely as parents of color to feel comfortable sending their children back to school in the fall. But [JAMA Network](#) found race and ethnicity differences disappeared after controlling for other factors, such as income.

Because attitudes about reopening schools are likely to be highly correlated with respondents' political identities and where they live, a better understanding of the role of race in shaping attitudes about reopening will require more systematic analyses that control for the array of factors influencing those attitudes. The coronavirus has had uneven impacts, with densely populated urban areas facing higher levels of community transmission, especially at the start of the pandemic. There is also [growing evidence that people's perceptions of the pandemic are shaped by political identity](#), with liberal, Democratic-leaning households more likely to support

measures designed to reduce the spread of the virus. Unfortunately, few surveys attempt to control for the multiple factors that could shape parents' attitudes on reopening, making it difficult to understand the independent impact of these and other factors.

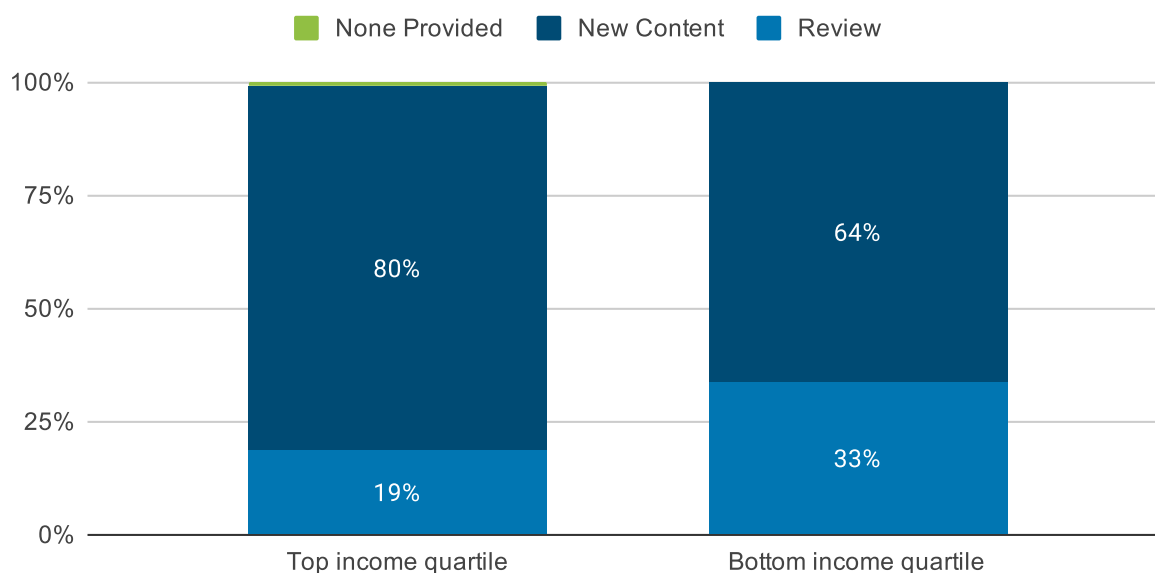
Lost learning is a major concern

Families report school closures have significant impacts on their children's academic well-being. The vast majority of parents describe learning during the pandemic as subpar. A nationally representative survey by Education Next and Ipsos Public Affairs in May indicates that 72 percent of parents believe their children are learning less than they would have if their school had not closed. EdChoice/Morning Consult found that 74 percent of parents are very or somewhat concerned about lost instructional time, an uptick compared to results that the same organizations posted in April. A review of survey evidence by Matt Barnum found parents with children learning remotely or under a hybrid model were less likely to rate the quality of education as "excellent."

These concerns vary by race and income, with parents of color reporting greater concern than white parents. According to a nationally representative survey of parents by the Kaiser Family Foundation from July, 73 percent of parents of color reported concerns about their child falling behind academically compared to 60 percent of white parents.

Families' concerns are likely driven in part by unequal access to quality instruction during school closures. According to Education Next/Ipsos Public Affairs, four in five parents (80 percent) in the top income quartile reported new concepts being introduced during remote learning, while only 64 percent of parents in the bottom income quartile reported the same. USC's Understanding America Study found that Black and Hispanic parents reported being concerned about the quality of remote learning at higher rates than white parents. These survey results echo what we found in our analysis of a nationally representative sample of district reopening plans, where districts serving higher numbers of students from low-income families were less likely to offer comprehensive remote learning plans.

Figure 3. Black parents are less likely to report new content introduced during remote learning



Source: Education Next/Ipsos Public Affairs.

But concerns about social, emotional and physical well-being abound, especially for parents of color

Parents are also worried about their children’s social-emotional well-being during the pandemic. According to a [nationally representative survey by Echelon Insights](#), 56 percent of parents surveyed reported being concerned about how remote learning is affecting their children’s social and emotional well-being. Kaiser Family Foundation found 67 percent of parents were very or somewhat worried about their children falling behind in their social and emotional development. These concerns varied income as well. According to a [nationally representative survey by USC](#), 13.7 percent of parents with an annual household income less than \$25,000 reported being very concerned about their children’s social-emotional well-being during remote learning, while only 9.4 percent of parents with an annual household income greater than \$150,000 reported the same.

Parents of color and those with low income are also much more likely to report concerns about their children’s access to social services, food, and technology as a result of schools remaining closed. More than half of parents of color [reported](#) being very or somewhat worried about their children’s access to social services they normally get at school, compared to just 32 percent of white parents. Nearly three times as many parents of color (49 percent) worried about their children’s access to technology compared to white parents (17 percent). A startling 44 percent of parents of color reported concerns about their children having enough to eat at home, compared to just 9 percent of white parents.

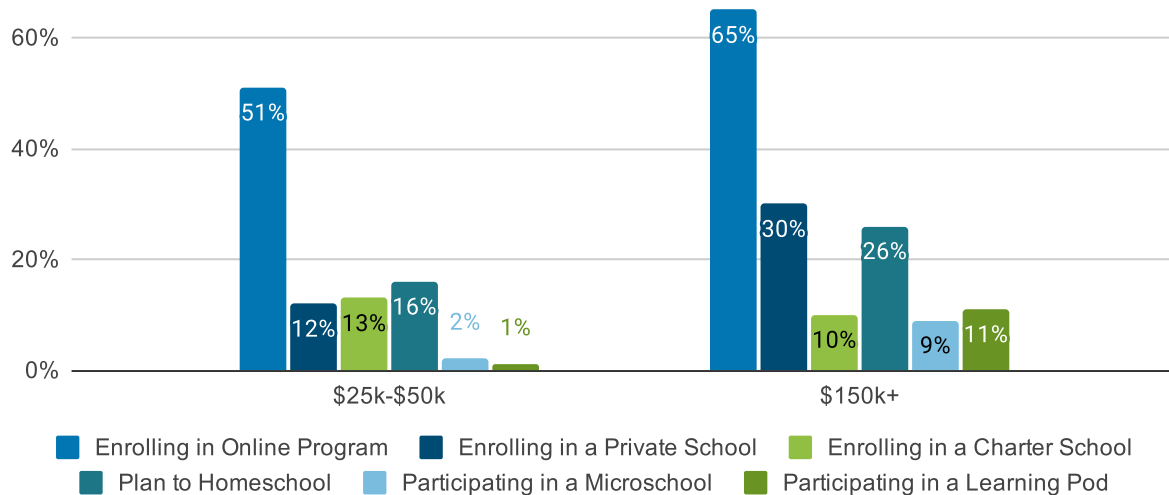
With continued safety concerns and in-person instruction in short supply, families are pursuing alternatives

The disruptions spurred by school closures last spring are having major impacts on families’ decisions about their children’s schooling. In mid-June, 21 percent of parents were considering other schooling options for their children, according to a survey by the National Parents Union/[Echelon Insights](#). Of these parents, over half were concerned about health and safety protocols or the quality of instruction offered.

More recent data suggest an increase in the number of parents shifting to educational alternatives in the wake of the pandemic. The September survey wave from [Civis Analytics](#) revealed that just over one third (38 percent) of parents reported disenrolling their children from their original schools as a result of their reopening plans. Of these families, the majority—nearly 60 percent—migrated to online programs.

But the alternatives families are pursuing vary based on household income. More affluent families are much more likely to report enrolling their children in a private school, planning to homeschool, or participating in a microschool or learning pod, while lower-income families are more likely to report enrolling their children in a charter school.

Figure 4. For families seeking alternatives, options are plentiful



The number of families participating in “education pods” is hard to pin down. A [National Parents Union survey](#) of public school parents found that 14 percent of families are participating in a pandemic “pod,” where a small group of children meet to do in-person or remote learning supervised by an adult. An [EdChoice/Morning Consult survey](#) found that 35 percent of school parents are currently participating in a pod, and another 18 percent are looking to form or join one. Variability in how surveys define pods may shape whether families identify being a part of one. The National Parents Union survey defined a pod as an arrangement in which “a small group of children meet in-person to do remote learning with an adult who helps them with their schoolwork.” EdChoice/Morning Consult did not define a pod, perhaps resulting in a higher rate of respondents identifying as being a part of a pod.

While these enrollment shifts are noteworthy, how durable they become—and how closely parent surveys reflect actual enrollment patterns as opposed to confusion over how to characterize a shift to fully online education offered by the same public school their children would have attended anyway—remains to be seen. According to Civis, 82 percent of parents who switched schooling options for the year ahead indicated they planned to re-enroll their children in their previous schools once it became safe to do so.

Notably, though, attitudes toward homeschooling are changing. According to a longitudinal study by [EdChoice](#), parents are becoming more favorable toward homeschooling. In August, 40 percent of surveyed parents reported being much more favorable to this option—an increase of 14 percentage points since the start of the pandemic in March.

Engaging families and educators in reopening

In the debate over reopening schools, political fights and missteps have dominated the discussion. But surveys suggest that many parents are forming their own views on what school reopening in the 2020-21 school year should look like. While survey data suggest majorities of parents support at least a partial reopening of public schools, parents are not a homogeneous bloc and existing evidence suggests attitudes vary significantly.

Given evidence of the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on low-income families and families of color, policymakers should engage in outreach to these communities to understand their concerns and implications for school reopening and other needed educational supports. Parents report urgent concerns about their children's learning progress, as well as their social, emotional, and physical well-being. Districts should act now to address these by investing in evidence-based strategies to support students' academic progress and meeting their basic needs for physical and social-emotional well-being. Improvements to remote learning programs will be critical, especially given the prospect of physical school closures that could last for months to come.

These early data suggest that inaction on the issues confronting families could continue to impact school districts as families leverage exit options to meet their children's needs. But these options are not available to all, and as some families pursue the opportunities presented by homeschooling, microschoools, and learning pods, others will be left behind unless policymakers act to provide all students safe and supportive small learning communities that meet families' needs.

As families look toward months of remote learning, policymakers should act now to ensure remote instruction is effective as it can be, and that all students can access learning support in ways that appropriately address both their academic and health concerns. Doing so will likely require a mix of new resources, creativity, and decisive action.

CRPE's Evidence Project will continue to track survey findings as they come in. [Our website](#) has a running list of pandemic-related education polls and surveys, as well as syntheses of other education research findings related to COVID-19.

About the authors

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About the Evidence Project

The Evidence Project is an initiative from the Center on Reinventing Public Education to advance solutions-oriented analysis of the K-12 response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project brings together researchers from around the country under the banner of narrowing the gap between research and policy. Learn more at evidence-project.org.