



December 20, 2021

Becky Pringle
President, National Education Association

Randi Weingarten
President, American Federation of Teachers

Viola Garcia
President, National School Boards Association

Dear Presidents Pringle, Weingarten, and Garcia:

From Covid to culture wars, the education of students across the United States has been turned upside down over the last two years. While many teachers have gone above and beyond to support their students, the same cannot be said for their union or school board leadership. Even as teachers work tirelessly to meet the real, concrete needs of their students, the so-called professional organizations are instead focused on activism, control, and political influence. The result? Students are falling behind, parents are getting frustrated, and our teachers are caught in the middle. Everyone is exhausted and hungry for normalcy.

After observing this spiral, our organization launched in June to help give parents a voice as they were being increasingly marginalized. We knew we were on to something when within the first two weeks, we had already heard from thousands of parents from all fifty states. Since then, we've been engaging with, and *listening* to parents across the country. This listening prompted us to do some additional research. We asked the questions your organizations failed to ask and now offer perspective where you've failed to lead.

Above all else, our research led us to conclude that K-12 institutional leaders have forgotten their ultimate "customers" are America's students, and no one cares for America's students more than America's parents. While your immediate constituency may be teachers and School Board members, those individuals are public servants. Advising those same public servants to engage with their communities through the lens of activism and politics, while strongarming them to ignore the wishes of those most invested in students' futures, has contributed mightily to the dissatisfaction we see across the country.

Our nationwide survey polled 1,200 respondents from November 29 to December 3 and reached individuals via landline, phone, and internet.

Understanding this data should help you appreciate why millions of families across the nation are turning to homeschooling and exploring private school options. In my home state of Virginia you needn't look further than Fairfax County, which has [reported an enrollment drop](#) of more than 10,000 students from pre-pandemic years, to understand the gravity of this loss of confidence in your leadership.

As schools across the country wind down for the holidays and gear up for the year ahead, we hope you'll take these findings to heart and set your resolutions with intention: please, return the focus of our schools to academics, not activism. We owe that much to the next generation.

Here are our findings.

Virtual learning is failing students.

Of the parents we surveyed, 55% whose children participated in virtual learning said it had a negative impact on their child's academic performance and 60% said it had a negative impact on their child's mental health. [Recent data](#) published in the National Bureau of Economic Research validates these findings, and we also know that pandemic-related school closures are said to be disproportionately [impairing the academic progress](#) of students from low-income areas.

It's no wonder then that 52% of parents surveyed said they became more involved in their children's curriculum because of virtual learning. But of course, not every family has the luxury of flexible work schedules, leaving those students with little to no support.

There are also many families who don't have the necessary infrastructure for successful virtual learning – a quiet corner to focus, reliable internet, or sufficient meals at home.

In other cases where parents have struggled with childcare arrangements resulting from closures, [mothers are leaving the workforce](#) at high rates. As we stare down the highest inflation rates in a generation, that presents a whole new layer of hardship that can influence student success.

While this is the on-the-ground reality for many American families, they see your organizations flexing your power to [keep schools shuttered](#).

Academic achievement matters.

Despite the unending push by your organizations to de-emphasize academic achievement in the name of activism, there was overwhelming consensus in our research that American families are extremely concerned with how K-12 schools are performing. A staggering 81% of respondents said they are concerned with the quality of academic education today, and 48% said they are very concerned.

But it gets worse. After learning that the National Assessment of Educational Progress' most recent data (which was gathered pre-covid) showed not only a decline in math and reading test scores but also that lower-performing students today are struggling more than lower-performing students did nearly a decade ago, more than 81% of respondents said this information made them more concerned with the quality of education students are receiving.

Parents should have a role in education.

Our data related to school curriculum dug deeper into the role of parents in their children's education. 72% of respondents agreed that parents should be able to request the curriculum being taught to their children. Respondents also agreed that parents should retain the ability to opt their children out of curriculum they deem to be harmful or inappropriate, to the tune of 67%.

Unsurprisingly, among respondents who were also parents those numbers were even higher at 74% and 72% respectively. Parents want the ability to assess where schools might not be meeting their child's needs and adjust accordingly.

Other points of interest:

- Based on what they observed in virtual instruction, 59% of parents said they were concerned with what their child was learning.
- 74% of parents say it is inappropriate for schools to survey students and collect data about their sexual experiences, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.
- 66% of respondents said that the school environment has become more political in the last two years.
- 80% of respondents agree that students should be exposed to a range of views and values.

It is my sincere hope that you'll see this polling data not as a threat but as insight that will help focus your efforts to best serve our nation's students. I hope this data helps make clear that those students' parents are not some disembodied, disinterested group to be ignored, nor are they domestic terrorists against which to fight. They are the ones who have the greatest interest in seeing their children succeed and should be treated as full partners as you help America's young people achieve their greatest potential. As advocates for parents across the country my organization will continue to aid them in making their concerns known.

Alleigh Marré

Alleigh Marré
President, Free to Learn Coalition

Attachment:

[Free to Learn National Survey Topline Results](#)